

Death on the Installment Plan

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BIHALY.** Edited by Anthony Tuttle. Crowell. 228 pp. \$6.95

By **ROBERT COLES**

THE EVIL THAT dictators like Hitler generate unfortunately obtains a life of its own; long after he died those who suffered at his hands have continued to stumble and fall—sometimes to our confusion or annoyance, because if we are young we look upon the 1930s or 1940s as long ago. Andrew Bihaly, whose journal has been edited by Anthony Tuttle, was a young New Yorker in 1966 when he started trying to keep track of his life, then three decades long. He lived in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and he seemed to be a friendly, kind and sensitive man, not without friends, and keenly responsive to elements of the so-called "youth-culture." He had a number of girl friends. He worked as a waiter in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He went to concerts, to be-ins, to peace demonstrations. He was an intelligent and attractive man, and he was interested in people, curious about why they, too, had come to New York.

But he was no ordinary American, drawn to the big city out of ambition or dissatisfaction. His father had died in one of Eichmann's death marches. Every effort was made to conceal his Jewish ancestry. Even so, he was badly hurt by a gang of thugs. For years he believed that any day he would be killed. After the war he came to this country. By 1951, at the age of 16, he was telling his fellow schoolchildren, on the occasion of Flag Week, what America meant to him. He called himself "a new American," and he could not help noticing "continuous wonders": the high standard of living enjoyed by so many people; the religious freedom; and, for him especially important, courts where he felt he saw justice done. He was "impressed that no man here is guilty until he is proven so." It was different, he knew, in central Europe when he was a child.

In the years that followed he tried desperately to forget that Europe. He obtained psychotherapy. He became absorbed in the immediacy and tumult of an absorbing decade, the 1960s. He worked long and hard. And most of all, he paid the closest attention to the world around him.

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His eyes were an artist's; he noticed the smallest gestures, the least significant details of architecture of social custom. His ears were a novelist's; not only what people said registered with him, but the nuances of their speech, the reservations or qualifications they only half asserted, the intentions they concealed outright. Moreover, he wanted to do something with all that he noticed and heard. Like many writers, he saw in words set down on paper a chance: that way he could get a bit of distance on things, achieve some coherence about a world he sometimes gave up on.

The result is a lively, entertaining, humorous diary, which also becomes increasingly sad and grim, as slowly the author's extraordinary intelligence, determination and candor, prove insufficient. An awful childhood will not loosen its grip; eventually, without a job, lonely though not alone, he seeks death by suicide. But before he died Andrew Bihaly wrote entries that are powerful, sardonic, beautifully lean and direct. Kafka is all too glibly summoned these days; his name has become a nondescript adjective that is meant to conjure up the bizarre, the strange and mysterious: Kafkaesque. But Kafka was also a man of sly humor and, as a writer, few pretenses. He had an uncanny ability to mix sadness and hilarity—an antic, amused vein in the midst of the tragedy he never felt removed from. Andrew Bihaly had a similar sensibility; and his writing is indeed Kafkaesque: "My apartment is mine

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again. I erected the wall piece by piece—as I would like to pick myself up again. The wall protects me. The wall shuts out the invaders."

Eventually the wall began to crumble. Behind it was the author, open and earnest, anxious to give and receive love, stubbornly independent—and extremely vulnerable. Toward the end he tried in vain to find work. He reached out to the many friends he was capable of making, and he struggled hard with the demons inside himself. He wrote poignant and at times eloquent observations: philosophical speculation; psychological analysis; social comment. But Hitler and Eichmann had done their work well, and for all the joy Andrew Bihaly had found in the United States, the madness of central Europe, of the Third Reich, would not be deterred. It would last a thousand years, that particular Reich, said its Fuhrer. He was wrong, thank God; but today, decades after 1945, it is still not possible to declare Nazism gone. Andrew Bihaly fought it bravely and lost—but his book is testimony to man's capacity to exert courage, to find dignity, no matter how persistently threatening and overwhelming various devils turn out to be. □

