

ÁGNES HUSZÁR VÁRDY, *Mimi*. Chicago: Atlantis-Centaur Publishers, 1999, pp. 384.

For many readers the title of this novel implies so-called «women's fiction» that is allegedly of greater interest to members of the fairer sex than to men in general. In reality, however, *Mimi* is much more than a women's novel. It is social and historical fiction of the best kind, offering both entertainment and powerful social analysis, and consequently has much to offer to every reader regardless of gender. In addition to presenting a well-drawn portrait of interwar Hungary's class-conscious society, the novel is an outstanding depiction of the life of the Hungarian rural aristocracy as well as the gentry class that surrounded it. At the same time it also offers a glimpse into urban middle class existence, presenting a startlingly penetrating critique of contemporary Hungarian society. The author's roots reach back to the very same social circles which are portrayed in the novel and from which she drew her heroes and heroines. Although she had no personal experiences in the neo-Baroque world of interwar Hungary, she was fortunate enough to be able to rely on a number of informants who did so. Along with meticulous research, these bits of information enabled her to sense instinctively the inner reality of the world that used to surround her parents, grandparents and other relatives. Based on these second-hand «experiences» she successfully recreated that bygone age, and at the same time drew a number of realistic, and at times harsh conclusions about it.

The novel describes the life of a Hungarian aristocratic family - the Galánffy's - but with particular attention to the family's youngest member, Baroness Mimi. Through her actions, trials and tribulations, we can follow the process that has led to the disintegration of the social class from which she stemmed. The violent storms of our century have swept away the world into which Mimi was born, and wherein she has lived and matured. At the end of the novel she is forced to flee her beloved homeland, and has to face the reality that she may never be able to return, and that she may have to spend her entire life in exile.

The last two chapters of the novel make it into a roman á clef, where historical personalities under various pseudonyms alternate with others under their real names. At that point, Mimi and her husband Péter experience the exact same agony that the author's parents and many thousands of other Hungarian families were forced to experience in consequence of

the final «struggle between two barbarians» - the German Nazis and Soviet Communists. In this clash of two «infidels» the Hungarian upper and upper-middle classes were crushed to pieces with the realization that there was no more room for them in their own native country. They were forced to find refuge in various foreign lands so as to escape incarceration or extermination. The author's parents have lived through those critical months, when they were compelled to make fateful decisions concerning their future and the future of their newborn daughter. Thereafter, the author's life was determined by her parents' decision to leave Hungary and later emigrate to America. She was born a Hungarian in Hungary, she grew up as a Hungarian in the United States, and while she became an American, she still managed to preserve her Hungarian emotional, intellectual, and cultural identity. This fact is reflected in virtually every line of her novel. The author is able to identify with the bygone world of her parents with its many social problems, the predicaments and joys of her extended family, as well as with the plight of the Hungarian people to such an extent that one would think that she had spent her childhood and youth in Hungary during the 1930s and early 1940s. But that is not the case, for she could have learned about that era only through the experiences of others. She displays an unusual capacity to identify with the world of pre-World War II Hungary, and to narrate the history of Baroness Mimi's family. Equally commendable is her ability to connect the historical and political background to the tribulations of the Galánffy family, and at the same time to make it comprehensible to Americans and other English speaking readers. This is all the more a great achievement, since most of the latter have only a vague idea about Central Europe and about the small country that is the homeland of Ágnes Huszár Várdy's ancestors. Although the novel has also appeared in Hungarian translation, (Debrecen, Csokonai Kiadó, 1997) it was written in English, intended for the Anglo-Saxon world).

I am convinced that the author had two distinct goals in writing this novel. She wanted to write fiction that everyone, regardless of national origin, could enjoy. At the same time, however, she also wished to inform her readers about the vicissitudes of World War II and their impact on the world that her parents left behind, a world she did not personally experience, but still holds dear to her heart. She has achieved both of these goals. For this reason I can truly recommend Mimi to every reader, but in particular to those who have a desire to learn about the bygone age of interwar Hungary. It was a country, which - notwithstanding its many social shortcomings - still represented a world of decency, honesty, and stability. The two strongest features of the novel include the authentic portrait of the era in its historical setting and the vivid characterization of the major characters. Every character in the novel comes alive, and each has a sufficiently exciting story to make the reader want to read on. Particularly successful are the author's descriptions of the last few peaceful

years of the age characterized by Admiral Miklós Horthy's regency, the euphoria connected with the return of Northern Transylvania to Hungary, the country's unfortunate slide into the war on the wrong side of the political fence, the search for an escape from that destructive war, the growth of anti-Semitism, the country's German occupation in the early part of 1944, the resulting cruelty of the Holocaust, the country's occupation by the destructive Soviet Red Army, the people's flight from Hungary, and finally the emigrant existence the young couple, Mimi and Péter have to face in the spring of 1945.

The action of the novel is fast-moving, and grows more exciting with every page, until it reaches a point where one cannot put it down without having read it to the end. Once finished, the novel leaves the reader with the craving for more, a desire to learn more about the fate of Mimi, her husband, and their unborn child. We on our part also hope that the author will not leave us waiting for too long, that she will soon come forth with the second installment of her promised trilogy.

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