INTRODUCTION

Iván Mándy, now seventy, belongs to that generation of Hungarian authors who came into prominence in the years immediately following the Second World War. Like many writers of that time, he participated vigorously in the liberal literary atmosphere that prevailed from 1945 to 1949 only to be deprived of the opportunity to publish his works when the Rákosi government came to power and, despite the Thaw forced on the regime from 1953–1956 by an increasingly restless intelligentsia, was compelled, because of his rejection of official literary dicta, to wait until after the revolt of 1956 and the time of consolidation that ensued for the ban to be lifted. He first gained national recognition in 1948 when he received the Baumgarten Prize, the most distinguished literary award at the time. He did not receive his next award until twenty years later when he was presented with the prestigious Attila József Prize. This was followed by the Tibor Déry Award in 1986 and the Kossuth Prize in 1988, which is considered by many to be the highest honor the Hungarian nation bestows an author.

Throughout his long career Mándy has based his writings exclusively on his life in Budapest, his birthplace: "In fact, that in itself contains my biography. I got everything from this city. My own world as well as the way I perceive the world of others." He depends on the physical objects of Budapest to convey his perception of the general condition of humankind. He writes about the suburbs, the hotels, the fleamarket that once existed on Teleki Square—where he lived until recently—the cafés, the soccer fields, and the world of radio and journalism to which his father, a journalist, introduced him, journalism being a profession which Mándy himself served as a sportswriter for a time in his early years. These places are peopled mainly by drifters, derelicts, and social castoffs struggling to survive in an underworld of established society and by failed, unfulfilled professionals and intellectuals doomed by the capriciousness of human relations and the vicissitudes of contemporary conditions to make their way through each day as best they can. His deep concern with such "insignificant human beings" led some of his critics in the 1950s to accuse him of being interested in trivial

subjects, wastrels, and useless persons and of failing to promote in his works the "successes of socialism and the new opportunities for development that it proffers to humanity." He has also evoked the fantasy world of the films and movie stars of the twenties and thirties in two books of fictionalized accounts of the old silents and the early talkies. Most recently, he has written about life in Hungary from 1949 through the Thaw, particularly the conditions that affected the creative life of writers, and about events occurring during the revolt of 1956, especially their impact on the private lives of common people. And lately, he has begun to write about himself as well, about his development as a writer and his views of life.

In presenting the world of Budapest that he knows so intimately, Mándy uses narrative techniques as distinctive in Hungarian literature as his "insignificant" characters are. Though a deeply involved observer of the life around him, he does not lapse into omniscience; instead, he projects details of sight and sound that depict objectively the inner life of his characters, always quite realistically but often suggestively. His techniques reveal, not only a departure from conventional formulations of plot and character long dominant in Hungarian fiction but also the influence of his life-long love affair with the cinema. Even the structure of most of his novels attests, not only to his commitment to the short story but also to his use of film techniques, in the sense that they are, in their effect, short stories strung together as "garlands" rather than knit together by "logically" developed plots. He is a painstaking craftsman who increasingly distills and compresses details into short, often fragmentary sentences, to express with lyrical symbolism the psychological conflicts of his characters. And scenes roll by as if flashed on the silver screen, sometimes as glimpses to be instantly melded into the flow of images. Individual scenes often evolve as if they were being viewed through the lens of a moving camera, and the frequent use of the dream technique of surrealism, though in a realistic manner, clearly marks his break with conventional narration and probably best indicates the individuality of his style.

His stories contain no basic philosophic view; such speculation is, he claims, alien to his temperament. He sees his characters as struggling, suffering beings who, despite their unhappiness, preserve a measure of optimism, though not, he says, "the monotonous optimism of imbeciles." Certainly, his

works reflect some influence of existentialism, but he is probably correct when he states that his concept of reality is closer to Dostoevsky's than Sartre's or Camus's. He emphasizes the need for individuals to discover their distinctive traits and then to live by them without extending themselves to the point of worsening their personal plight. His unrelenting, merciless observations of human beings have sometimes given rise to the criticism that he has little love for mankind. The contrary is the case. His compassion for the troubled, the trapped, the abandoned, the lonely, however ignoble they are—this compassion, often ironically and grotesquely expressed, is omnipresent in the tone of his stories to bind his lifework ultimately into a unified whole.

The selections included in this anthology supply only glimpses of Mándy's world and art. Still, it is hoped, they will give the reader a sense of his imaginative power, his compassionate vision of humanity, and his stylistic characteristics. The opening story presents the effect of Second World War on two children playing house in a bombed-out ruin. The next story is an expressionistic portrayal of the social underworld that engaged his attention early in his career. "Rank-and-File Member" deals with the relations between a former member of the Arrow Cross Party, which was a fascist organization in Hungary during the war, and a lonely woman forced by circumstances to share the same flat, and "A Summer Holiday" with the generational gap between a mother and her son rooted in politically different times. "In the Spotlight" depicts a frequent character in his stories, the intellectual who is never quite able to hold on to anything firmly or nurture a fulfilling relationship with any human being. The next four pieces are representative of the important role old-time movies play in his work. The autobiographical "At the Movies with Father" is followed by an usherette's night encounter with King Kong, a boy's fanciful account of Greta Garbo and her relations with her leading men, and an old projectionist's recounting of the relations between Zoro and Huru, the Hungarian names of the world-famous Danish comedians, whose popularity peaked in the 1920s and who were known as Fy and By in Denmark, Pat and Patachon in Italy and Germany, and Long and Short in the British Isles.

The remaining writings indicate Mándy's increased involvement in the simple objects of his world, a turning to recent historical events, and a readiness to write directly about himself. The several short pieces from "Furniture" evoke the physical and

social milieu he knows so well through bits and remnants of furniture. "Lecturer Goes Home," "Lecturer on Castle Hill," and "On the Balcony" reveal some of the uncreative ways in which many intellectuals and authors were forced, by political circumstances, to make a living during the Rákosi period. Next comes "Cemeteries," a story about the effect of the 1956 uprising on the personal life of a married couple who are swept up by the events around them. The last four pieces, more autobiographical and essayistic in nature, touch upon literary topics and personal associations.

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