

LITTON

JUNE 20 1963

book, has no moral to preach, no ideology to proclaim, beyond what is implicit in the characterization; hence its appeal to readers on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

Hence, also, the fact that most of the authors here suffered to a greater or lesser extent under the Rakosi regime. Among the best known of these writers is Tihor Dery, who spent years in prison, was freed in 1960, but has only recently been allowed to publish again. Two of his stories, 'Odysseus' and 'A Mess of Potatoes', reveal the talent that has made him a leading figure in European literature. Through 'Odysseus' we get a glimpse of a communist society, and the ordinary people who are merely cogs in it, that has a profound ring of truth about it. Indeed, it was Dery's inability to lie, to dissemble as the party dictated its writers to do, that was the heresy that landed him in gaol. In the words of Peter Kuczka, one of the younger poets included in the book:

Naked through all the streets I'd rather go,
but never dress up in a suit of lies.

RAOUL ENGEL

The Plough and the Pen

Edited by Ilona Duczyńska and Karl Polanyi.
Peter Owen. 30s.

The term Socialist Realism, so conditioned have we become by Soviet examples of it, instantly conjures up that most dismal of modern perversions—art deformed by, and made to serve the aims of, a political dogma; the hero of the labour front, the hero of the collective farm functioning not as a human being, in a setting of other human beings, but like a puppet on strings, banal, didactic, and wholly implausible. The present collection of stories, sketches, and poems of Hungarian life between 1930 and 1956, by some of that country's foremost writers, though clearly socialist in spirit, and often graphically realistic in style, certainly doesn't add up to the dreary old party line. Indeed, if any single thread can be said to link them all, it is idealism—a pure, in many cases lyrical, commitment to ideals of justice, truth, and beauty.

But this is no mere ensemble of gipsy violins. There is no sweet and easy sentimentality, no superficial appeal to nostalgia or romanticism. Each piece in its own way, whatever the subject matter, is deeply felt and conveyed with a commendable absence of frills. The stories range widely. The majority deal with the lives of the peasants of the villages on the sweeping, steppe-like plains of the Hungarian *pussta*—a people who for centuries were little more than serfs, poverty stricken and indentured, generation after generation, to the great feudal landlords. The early sketches, such as 'To Eat One's Fill', delineate this world with a bleak austerity, a starkness, that does more than any amount of orthodox communist propaganda to make its point. The later stories, written after 1945, show a radically altered countryside; the Russian armies from the East had swept over it, had done their looting and raping, but had also broken up the vast estates and given the land to the peasants. 'Spring of '45', for instance, tells of the astonishment and confusion—as well as the deep, mean, secret twinges of envy—of the men of one village faced with the task of dividing one such estate among themselves: who shall have this desirable strip by the canal?—why am I allotted this stony piece with the tree root in the middle?—how typical of that fat, corrupt rogue to draw the most fertile acre!

But stony or fertile, the peasants' autonomy was to be brief. Forced collectivization soon followed, with the state replacing the feudal aristocracy as the unrelenting landlord. In 'The Test' we meet the men of one collective, not revolutionary heroes but ordinary mortals, harvesting a field of grain; as they move in ranks through the wheat, scythes swinging, the relationship of the reapers, one to another, is gradually revealed—jealousy, humour, compassion, hate, the sense of brotherhood as well as frustration, all are acutely observed and have a place in the mosaic. The story, like all the others in the