Book Review and Commentary

Will to Freedom: A Perilous Journey Through Fascism and Communism.

Can a psychoanalytic book reviewer reflect anything but awe about a memoir that recounts how a Jewish youth resisted fascist torture, cheated Nazi exterminators by a daring escape, and then endured two more years of imprisonment by the very Communists he had joined in that struggle, yet never relinquished his integrity? Egon Balas achieved this and more. He went on to develop himself without formal training into a creative economist and world-class mathematician using these skills to solve problems for the system that rejected him.

The problems for the analytic reviewer, is that unlike those in Arthur Koestler’s Darkness at Noon, the lines of conflict set down in this volume are entirely external. Yet Balas’ unadorned writing is so forthright that one may consider if the writer’s possibly unrecognized internal conflicts also contributed to his ability to endure his hardships of guilt induction, threats, tortures, and inducements without a single betrayal of his comrades. Balas, at the setting down of his memoir and nearing eighty, is still endowed with that rare intelligence that allows him to look backward with precision as it allowed him then, to look forward with life-saving anticipation. This book not only chronicles his survival but also records the names and events of his fellow resisters who did not survive. All this is set in the larger historical context. The style of his account is deliberately flat, yet the story is so compelling and the historical events so tragically grotesque that at times a sense of irony emerges. Consider the following, which took place in a Hungarian political prison shortly before the end of the war:

On another occasion Csonka called out from the list of names the name of Friedmann, the German miner who had given me his pullover. Friedmann was a big, well-built man with a wide face, flat nose, blue eyes, and blond hair. He looked like a textbook German, and Csonka did not select him, but after calling a few other names, he then called Friedmann’s younger brother. The list did not contain the information that they were brothers, and the younger Friedmann, to his misfortune, did not have the
Teutonic looks of his brother. He was somewhat slender, not so tall, with reddish hair, a slightly curved nose, and plenty of freckles on his face. So Csonka decided to select him: “Step out, Jew.” The younger Friedmann quietly asserted that he was not Jewish, but Csonka remained unimpressed. Several others spoke up and said that Friedmann was not Jewish. Then Csonka got mad at being contradicted and started yelling: “I know who is a Jew. Don’t try to teach me!” He ordered the younger Friedmann to join the group of those selected for transport. There was a moment of silence as the young man took his place in the group, after which the older Friedmann stepped out from amongst us and walked over to join his brother. We were seeing them both for the last time. I do not know where the group was taken, but I found out after the war that they both perished. (p. 119)

Shortly after the quoted event, Balas makes a risky escape avoiding a similar fate. But herein lies another irony. The possibility of escape was so improbable that after one liberation, his Communist interrogators insisted that he must have collaborated with the pro-Nazi regime, and the price for collaboration was death.

How did a young man, barely twenty, isolated from external supports, maintain his identity and sense of reality while others relinquished theirs, only to perish? Balas writes without modesty and emerges heroically. What developmental factors contributed to his character? Some direction in this search may be found in Otto Rank’s idea and Freud’s elaboration, which is the myth of the birth of the hero. Moses’ mother “found” him floating in the Nile, implying an illegitimate birth. Christ’s mother was a virgin, impregnated by the Holy Spirit. And Laius, Oedipus’ father, can be seen as intending his infanticide because of questioned fatherhood. This, while the shadow of questioned paternity hangs over the hero on the one hand, on the other, there is the mother’s special affinity, born as he was, of his mother’s true love. As it turns out, this held for Egon Balas.

When Balas was about twelve years old, his mother revealed to him that although she respected his father, she had loved another man. He happened to have been her husband’s brother. He had died when Egon was six months old. When the boy asked her directly what impact this should have on him, she answered that she would not mind if he thought himself to be the child of her lover. He never betrayed her secret in her lifetime, tragically shortened by Nazi extermination, as were the lives of her husband and of Egon’s younger brother.

Perhaps it is because of her murder that Balas’ unquestioned idealization of her remains to this day. Certainly an identification with the best of her values contributed to his survival. In the larger scheme, she was on the side of the angels. Balas drew strength from both parents. Balas writes for a general audience, and a lay reviewer would not likely dwell on a matter that is not central to this memoir, internal conflict.

Yet, his mother had betrayed her son repeatedly. Balas reports that at age three, his father locked him in the cellar for interfering with the