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Book Review

The Third Woman, a novel by Aloyzas Baronas, authorized translation from Lithuanian by Nola M. Zobarskas. Maryland Books, Inc. 1986 [1968?].

The longest, most dreadful, most unforgettable via dolorosa in all human history has been that of the Jews. Creators of a sublime ethic, of a glorious literature, progenitors of two major religions, Christianity and Mohamedanism, they have been bullied, sneered at, discriminated against and massacred down the ages, often, alas, with the imprimatur of this or that Religious Establishment, yet they have always come out standing erect, proud, and defiant. Their triumphant emergence — in the form of the revival of all their ancient homeland, Israel — is one of the miracles of all time.

Aloyzas Baronas, the eminent Lithuanian author, treats of the heroism of this magical people, among other subjects, in his latest novel, *The Third Woman*. He says, as a point of fact, that in Lithuania during Hitler's day — as, indeed, in every other European country he over-ran—"The Jewish population was the softest part..., for it was being jabbed again and again. Yet it was the most enduring part, too, having survived thousands of years of persecution, during which many of its enemies had completely disappeared from the pages of history." This remark is made by Juozas, husband of Aldona, whose one agony is her childlessness. The sister of a friend is trudging off to a concentration camp, and her little Jewish boy is smuggled, at tremendous risk of life to the smuggler and to both Aldona and her husband, to the home of the two who are eager to serve as parents to the young life the Nazis are eager to snuff out.

Aldona is thrilled at the opportunity to be a mother, even by proxy, and the thought of danger hardly even enters her mind. Like many other Lithuanians, like thousands upon thousands of other European "Aryans," she had only contempt for the evil Nazi philosophy, especially its anti-Semitism. Juozas is equally delighted and equally fearless, but his attitude is compounded with some philosophizing: "There was a certain amount of pleasure in contemplating that his household would be enriched by the presence of a representative of this elect as well as condemned people."

The story revolves about what went on in the Aldona-Juozas home — the joy that suffused their lives as little Michael grew and poured out the delight of his innocent soul in the haven provided for him by kind hearts; the horror that gripped the two foster parents whenever a German officer or soldier entered to partake of hospitality; and the abiding fear that in the future Michael would be taken away by his natural parents.

Mr. Baronas handles these matters with consummate skill, so that while the story mounts in tension it also grows in depth of characterization. He employs a slightly unorthodox form of narration. He shuttles between the past and the present, interlacing his tale with apposite observation on the horror that was Europe then. And he also has much to say about American life as it presents itself to two people deeply steeped in the European mores. Aldona and Juozas eventually come to America, but they still carry the essence of their homeland with them. Lithuania, like Israel, is not only a place in time; it is also a place in the heart and in the mind. Like Israel, too, it is a portable homeland.

Vietnam, with all its doubts and horrors and divisiveness, enters into the story. Indeed, it is behind the final act in the drama of *The Third Woman*. Michael is finally lost to his foster parents, as they feared he would be, but he still cannot forget his "aunt" Aldona, and she, of course, can never forget him. But life takes its toll of human affections here, as everywhere else. A new beloved enters Michael's life — and so joy mingles with heartache, and inevitability cuts deep into the heart's desire.

The third woman of the title is more than a lovely young girl ordained by fate to share the life of a waif of history. She is also a symbol of the Other Person who is the eventual victor in all plans and in all the proposals of man. (In truth, the third woman always wins. Death is the third woman. She deprives wives as well as mothers. She is patient and ever waiting. You can rely on her."

Thus speaks Tadas-with-the-hat, a philosopher bachelor and a cynic, but like so many cynics, profoundly sentimental. He is one of the subsidiary characters, but he is real and wise and most appealing. There are other subsidiary characters, There is Joana, a friend of Aldona's. She represents "the sensible" woman, who thinks little of having an abortion performed on her, who plays the "merry widow" when she learns that her husband has been lost on the battlefield — but her innermost dishonesty catches up with her. She, too, is memorable

And there is the statue of the Evangelist Luke, forever reading his book — a perfect symbol of the even flow of eternity.

It is astonishing how much Mr. Baronas says in so little space. Like all fine works of literary art, *The Third Woman* can be enjoyed on many levels: as sheer story, as history, as philosophical commentary, and as prose poetry. Both pleasure and insight will be the reward of all who read the novel.

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Aloyzas Baronas was born in Lithuania in 1917. He first studied technology, then turned his attention to literature and philosophy. In later years in Frankfurt, Germany, he continued his studies at the University of Goethe. In 1949 he came to USA and established his residence in Chicago, Ill. At present he is editor of the Lithuanian daily newspaper, "Draugas."

His literary works consist of novels, short stories, stairical poems and children's stories. Some of his titles are: *Žvaigždės ir vėjai* (The Stars and the Winds), *Debesys plaukia pažemiu* (The Low Floting Clouds), *Antrasis krantas* (The Second Coast), *Sodas už horizonto* (The Orchard Behind the Horizon), *Mėnesiena* (Moonlight), *Valandos ir amžiai* (Hours and Centuries), and *Mėlyni karveliai* (The Blue Pigeons) for children, *Pavasario lietus* (Spring Rain).

His novel *Lieptai ir bedugnes* (Footbridges and Abysses) won the ('Draugas" literary award in 1961, and *Trecioji moteris* (The Third Woman) in 1966.

Footbridges and Abysses — the first of Baronas' novels to be translated into English — was favorably received by such outstanding magazines as the *Saturday Review*.