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REVIEWS

TITLE INFORMATION

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Cardinal Mindszenty to 4 US Presidents and State Secretaries 1956-1971 as Conserved in American Archives and Commented by American Diplomats

Somorjai, Adam and Tibor Zinner

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BOOK REVIEW

A collection of Cardinal Jozsef Mindszenty's letters showcases a Christian voice crying for freedom and liberation from behind the Iron Curtain at the height of the Cold War.

Although he's a controversial figure both at home and abroad, Mindszenty—the leader of the Hungarian Catholic Church for nearly three decades following World War II—is remembered as a staunch opponent of communism, fascism and totalitarianism and as a hero to many of his countrymen. Jailed in 1944 by pro-Nazi forces and later tortured and sentenced to life in prison by the Communists (and later freed), Mindszenty sought refuge in the U.S. embassy in Budapest during the unsuccessful 1956 Hungarian Revolution. He would stay there for roughly 15 years—a political dissident who refused to leave his home nation. This new volume collects dozens of letters he wrote to sundry diplomats and four U.S. presidents—Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon—during his decade and a half as a resident of the embassy. During that time, he received only two presidential responses (from Kennedy and Nixon); as the editors admit, the collection is more monologue than correspondence, but its one-sidedness doesn't decrease its value. In these letters, Mindszenty rails against the puppet government of Hungary and bewails the plight of his fellow citizens stuck in the Soviet Union's increasing gravitational pull; as such, the collection offers a unique perspective on the Cold War from within the Soviet sphere. Mindszenty also exhibits an admirable unwillingness to succumb to the politics of the moment; he frequently contextualizes Hungarian efforts for freedom as part of humanity's broader pursuit of peace, justice and human dignity. Mindszenty wasn't a native English speaker, so his prose often comes off as stilted—one diplomat called it “incredibly broken”—but it's not the polish that matters here, but the heart. Although Somorjai and Zinner deserve plaudits for making the collection available to the public, real credit goes to Judit Zinner, whose helpful, crisp prose leads readers between the letters and provides useful context.

An inspiring account of one man's quixotic efforts to be heard by the leaders of the free world.