

# Talent for survival

by Emanuel Litvinoff

**P**ERHAPS nothing has exasperated anti-Semites more than the astonishing Jewish talent for survival. Through more than two millennia one man-made cataclysm after another has swept over this small, gifted, provocative, and obstinate people. They have been conquered, dispersed, expelled, forcibly converted, massacred; fear and contempt have pursued them in all their wanderings; but each decimation strengthened their will to live, and soon they were as ubiquitous and venturesome as ever. Small wonder that men have believed them protected by a Divine, or evil, destiny: a people whom dispersion could not divide, and who could regard 2,000 years of exile as but a temporary divorce from their homeland.

But in this, the worst century in Jewish history, the myth of the indestructible Jew was almost broken. Exterminated in Europe, ground by the millstone of the Russian Revolution, fleeing from an Arabia they had inhabited since the days of Babylon, even submitting to the gentle suicide of assimilation in the kindly West, it seemed that soon—a century or so—they would have virtually disappeared except for the isolated ghetto of Israel, and that only awaiting a modern Saladin to sweep it into the sea. But if this has been the worst century for the Jews, it has also been a time when the Jewish technique for survival has been seen magnificently at work, and something of this story is told by Herbert Agar in *The Saving Remnant* (Rupert Hart-Davis, 18s).

Mr Agar tells the story through the activities of the American relief and rescue organisation, the Joint Distribution Committee, better known

as the "Joint," which collected the money of American Jews, combined it with the courage, intelligence, and selflessness of Jewish volunteers, and in 47 years helped to save up to two million people from death. Is it not a commentary upon the times that the great Powers of the world, when they did not actually obstruct, stood by and left the rescue of survivors of the worst holocaust in history to a few voluntary Jewish organisations and a handful of resolute men? It is not altogether surprising that when the last Jewish survivors left a DP camp to begin the illegal, hazardous journey to Palestine, they wrote in the final issue of their mimeographed camp newspaper: "We have given the world the will and testament of those who perished: 'Do not put your faith into European civilisation. In the Stygian chambers of inhuman persecution we signed the divorce. We are handing the divorce papers over to you. Return to the sources of Jewish morality!'"

"The Saving Remnant" is not an easy book: it stings the nerves again and again. But it is an encouraging book. It should sweep away once and for all the idea that Jewish survival is an enactment of some supernatural providence. It shows that Jews have survived because of sheer human solidarity; because in a national disaster, wherever it may occur, the Jews remember that they are brothers. The rich give their money, the poor their shelter, the young their strength, even their lives. It shows that love can take a creature, broken by cruelty and turn him into a farmer in Galilee. There is, surely, a lesson in that, and not for the Jews alone.