

Nazi soldiers rounding up Jewish families in the Warsaw ghetto

Death factories

by Emanuel Litvinoff

THE HOLOCAUST KINGDOM,
by Alexander Donat (Secker
and Warburg, 30s).

DIARY OF A NIGHTMARE:
Berlin 1942-1945, by Ursula
von Kardorff, translation Ewan
Butler (Hart-Davis, 30s).

NO human experience has so exhausted the resources of language with as little lasting effect as the literature of the Nazi ghettos and concentration camps. A callus has thickened our sensibilities and we trivialise the horrors of Auschwitz in a whole genre of second-rate novels, movies, and television thrillers while the scalding testimony of victims goes unread. "It's so long ago," someone told a friend of mine. "Why can't you people learn to forget?" This raw book, *The Holocaust Kingdom*, annihilates that banality. To read it is like having pieces of flesh torn from one's body; to feel grief, rage, fear, exhaustion, and bitterness: to become, for a brief space, one of those millions whose very multiplicity insulates us from their pain.

It is the story of a man, his wife, and his child who passed through several death factories and survived to be together again. The author was a prosperous publisher of a popular Warsaw daily newspaper before the Nazis drove him and his family into the ghetto. That abrupt descent into Gehenna is chronicled with painstaking veracity—the disintegration of social distinctions, hunger, beat-

ings, the bartering first for small privileges then for life itself, gas-chamber selections. The Nazis specialised in breaking down human personality into gross components. That they succeeded in brutalising their victims, in setting the weak against the weak, even mothers against their own infants, sometimes arouses shocked comment. Mr Donat, who only sets out to describe, has much to teach the philosophers and psychologists who have speculated on these difficult matters. It was a miracle that most of the victims retained their decency, and it is about time this was recognised as a victory greater in its way than any won on the battlefield.

On the eve of the ghetto rising, when the starving Jews of Warsaw fought the German army with home-made petrol bombs and small arms while the world at large looked on, Mr Donat's infant son was smuggled to safety by the wife of a former employee, one of the few Polish Christians who risked their lives to help Jews. There is a harshly sardonic description of the last days of the ghetto when crowds of worshippers on the "Aryan" side of Warsaw, dressed in their best clothes, came from celebrating Easter mass to watch the crucifixion of the Jews. The act of resistance transfigured the victims. "Although we were all doomed to a terrible death, we were gripped by a strange ecstasy. We embraced and congratu-



lated one another; women cried and laughed; people began to sing psalms in a low voice; and one grey-haired man spoke the blessings aloud: How wonderful it was to have seen such times!"

But while the young fighters of the ghetto battled against German tanks and artillery, rejecting at last their passive martyrdom, the Donats were seized and sent to Maidanek death-camp. They again survived miraculously. Alexander was shunted to Radom ghetto, to Auschwitz, to slave labour in Germany itself, and, finally, joined that death march of emaciated prisoners as the Allies closed in on Hitler's Reich. Liberated by Patton's Third Army, he returned to Warsaw without any hope of finding his wife alive, but she had also survived Auschwitz, a death march to Breslau, Ravensbrück, and Neustadt-Glöwen, and was already in Warsaw, reunited with their child. But this marvellous reprieve only intensifies grief; it cannot purge it. Mr Donat has written

a book that will not be lived down or forgotten.

It is unfortunate for Miss von Kardorff to be reviewed in this company. Her sufferings, those of an upper-class anti-Nazi German reduced to distress by her country's defeat, were real enough. Her diary tells us something of the comfortable illusions that prevailed in Germany, where some were divided between their dislike of Hitler and their feeling that good Germans should fight even an unpopular war for their country. Reflecting on the circumstances of a Russian domestic servant employed in a friend's house, she wonders if Germans would be as well treated if conditions were reversed. There is also something about friends who were hiding Jews, and the cruelties of the occupying Allied forces are half-apologetically, half-resentfully recorded. It was a pretty bad experience for a gently nurtured German girl, but one day in Auschwitz would have shown her a kind of nightmare from which no one ever awakened.