

# Sociology of the damned

by Emanuel Litvinoff

**WALTER** Poller was a member of the anti-Nazi German Workers' Movement and in 1935 was sent to prison for four years on a charge of attempted high treason. On his release at the end of 1938 he was transferred to "a camp for re-education," a place that the world now knows as Buchenwald. He was there for about eighteen months, a relatively "privileged" inmate as he was a non-Jewish political prisoner, working as secretary to the camp doctor, SS Untersturmführer Dr Ding, and his experiences are embodied in *Medical Block, Buchenwald* (Souvenir Press, 21s). At a moment when the trial in Jerusalem is rehearsing the dreadful history of Nazi Germany, it is important to be reminded that Germans like Mr Poller existed and suffered for their resistance to the evil rampant in their country. The atrocities and perversions carried out by Nazi doctors are sickeningly familiar, but "Medical Block, Buchenwald" also has a great deal to say about the psychology of the brute and his victim. Why did men almost eagerly submit to "voluntary" castration? Why did the concentration camp produce so few people prepared to make one gesture of defiance and die rather than endure beatings, humiliations and starvation? How can highly intelligent, friendly, even agreeable, people treat other human beings as raw material for frivolous medical experiments? And so one is finally led to the questions that are now being asked by young Jews in Israel as they listen to the testimony in the Eichmann trial: how could millions of people queue docilely to enter the gas-chambers? Why did they not tear at the machine-guns with their emaciated hands?

torture, aggravated by lack of food and sleep and by hard labour. "The guards also forced prisoners to hit one another and to defile what the SS considered the prisoners' most cherished values. They were forced to curse their God, to accuse themselves and one another of vile actions, and their wives of adultery and prostitution." Gradually they reduce their victims to a condition of infantilism with an obsessive regulation of anal functions, punishment for being "dirty," inculcation of self-contempt and with the denial of any form of intelligent activity. "Heroism" was discouraged by imposing punishment upon the whole group for any assertion of individuality, so that group preservation made prisoners fear and despise the hero. This process of physical and mental destruction, in most cases, produced a condition of numb automatism in which people were reduced to walking corpses incapable of any positive mental or emotional response to their environment.

In the dreadful history of the concentration camps there are only a few pitiful examples of open resistance, notably, perhaps, the revolt of a Jewish *Sonderkommando* which killed 70 SS and destroyed a crematoria before being wiped out. Dr Bettelheim makes us under-

stand why. In one vivid example, he tells of a group of naked Jews lined up to enter a gas-chamber. The SS commandant learned that one of the women had been a dancer. He ordered her to dance for him. As she did so, she temporarily recovered her sense of identity and, therefore, her power of individual decision. She danced toward the officer, seized his gun and shot him dead.

The concentration camp was a factory for processing people into un-persons. There is in existence a record of a correspondence between the I. G. Farben chemical trust and Auschwitz. It goes as follows:

"In contemplation of experiments with a new soporific drug, we would appreciate your procuring for us a number of women." "We received your answer but consider the price of 200 marks a woman as excessive. We propose to pay not more than 170 marks a head. If agreeable, we will take possession of the women. We need approximately 150." "Received the order of 150 women. Despite their emaciated condition, they were found satisfactory." "The tests were made. All subjects died. We shall contact you shortly on the subject of a new load."

Truly the concentration camp was a microcosm of Nazi Germany.