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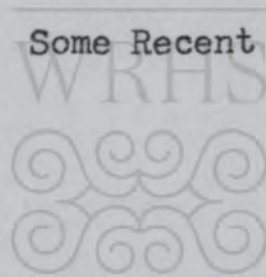
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The Echo of the War in Books, 1948.

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THE ECHO OF THE WAR IN BOOKS

Some Recent War Books: "The Naked and the Dead"
"The Young Lions"
"Stalingrad"



Dr. Abba Hillel Silver

Sunday, November 21, 1948, 10:30 a.m.

The last war, like the preceding one, is now being distilled in literature. Quite a number of important books have appeared recently, each in its own way a record of men in war and what war does to men and to society, how men react to their uprooting, to army discipline, to the strains, terrors and fatigues of combat, and what motivates their conduct, their secret fears, ambitions and frustrations. And ⁱⁿ hardly any one of the books which have appeared recently does one come upon war in dress parade, so to speak, with the fictitious glamor and the synthetic heroics, the public relations account of war for home consumption. Rather, it is the bloody muck of war and how men sink into it that is the recurrent theme of these books. There is a hard, brutal realism which characterizes all of them. It is war as the story of "The Naked and the Dead" - the naked and the dead both of the victor and of the vanquished. These books are not intended to be anti-war tracts; they are not at all pacifist propaganda. They are even critical, as a rule, of the declared objectives for which the war was fought. It is rather the vagueness of purpose, the failure to grasp what it is all about as far as many of the fighting men are concerned; and even more, the manifestations of Fascist leanings, racial intolerance, cruelty and brutality among the very men who are supposed to be fighting these evils. It is these things which point up the inherent tragedy and futility of war. Here and there strength of character, personality and purpose do reveal themselves in the war system and in these war ordeals as depicted in these books, and they are flashes of light, but by and large the canvass is sombre and the figures, as a rule, in the throes of pain and misery of death.

Three such books appeared recently - two by Americans and one by a German. One tells the story of war in the Pacific, the other in Africa and Europe, and the third, of war in Russia. Two of the books are written by authors who come from the side of the victors, the third from the side of the defeated. The book from the side of the defeated is called "Stalingrad". The author is Theodor Plievier, a German.

"Stalingrad" is a story of the disintegration and destruction of the German Sixth Army before Stalingrad, which pushed its way to the Volga and was in turn surrounded by a Russian counter-attack and was trapped and finally forced to surrender. "Stalingrad" is the story of the Nazis greatest defeat in the Second World War and marked the beginning of the end of the Hitler regime. It reads like Dante's "Inferno". It is an unrelieved horror story of frozen death which in a few short weeks killed a quarter of a million soldiers and forced the remainder, half naked, starved and half dead, to surrender.

While many characters pass across the pages of this book, and some are unforgettable, the story is not so much that of a few people which in themselves reveal the impact of the war, but it is really a story of a whole army, a vast organism which is suddenly struck a mortal blow which leads to its inescapable and horrible death.

The German armies swept across the Steppes of the Soviet Union and victoriously reached Stalingrad, and there the Russians determined to take their stand. The Germans had over-reached themselves, and a Russian counter-attack finally cut them off from any possibility of being supplied except by air which proved utterly inadequate. And soon the icy Russian winter struck the German Sixth Army, and it became apparent that their situation was hopeless, and logically the commanders of that army should have surrendered to save the lives of their men because it was senseless to continue resistance, but the Nazi home in Berlin could not stand such a shock to their prestige and with their concept for human life, they ordered the army to resist to the end. The Nazis intended to make propaganda capital of the death of this army. The military heads of the Sixth Army in Stalingrad from General Von Pankes down fully understood the hopelessness of their situation. There could be no rescue - there was no escape for such was their cowardice, their submissiveness to authority that their military conscience gave way to the insane orders of that mad man in Berlin, and they

shared in the useless slaughter of tens of thousands of men.

Now "Stalingrad" reveals the most startling immorality of the Nazi system, and it also reveals how men - human beings - perish in that frozen death trap - the uncared for soldiers, the typhus and the lacerated bodies and souls of men, all are etched with terrible details in this book, "Stalingrad". Only two redeeming characters stand out in this book. One is a tank commander, Colonel Vilshofen, and the other is a plain private and grave digger, Snotke. Vilshofen understands the calamity of the useless sacrifice of these struggles, and he appeals to his superiors to do what decency as well as military requirements call for - to surrender, but he goes in vain. And this humble private, Gnotke, he, too, understands the nature of the crime that is being committed; he, too, knows what atonement will have to be made for it, but he expresses himself not in terms of protests to his superiors, but in terms of simple acts of human kindness to other unfortunate soldiers around him.

The suggestion is that it is in spirits like Vilshofen and Gnotke that the hope of salvation of the new Germany lies.

The other two books, "The Naked and the Dead" and "The Young Lions" were written by two young American, Jews, by the way - both born in Brooklyn. Other things besides trees grow in Brooklyn. Norman Mailer and Irwin Shaw. Both of these books are quite extraordinary, forceful, penetrating with a deep insight and great comprehension. I am inclined to criticize the rawness of these books - a rawness which is beyond the requirements of reality. One questions the purpose of so much foul-mouthed vocabulary, so much clinical and anatomical preoccupation in a novel. An author might properly assume that his reader is a mature person and might leave certain things to his imagination. Once having suggested that the speech of soldiers is heavily larded with short little words, the author need not smear them on every page. It is certainly a violation of good taste, and one suspects that the authors and many like them resort quite

deliberately to these patent vulgarities because these things increase the sale of their books. It is not art but salesmanship, and a special kind of salesmanship.

Now "Stalingrad" is also a brutally frank and realistic book, and you get the full horror of war and what it does to men, but it does not reek with sex obsessions and foul-mouthed speech. This lack of decent restraint is a form of decadence, I am afraid, and I hope a reaction will set in.

But this rawness apart, these novels are important and significant - in a sense, very great. "The Naked and the Dead" is the story of a platoon which took part in the invasion of a Japanese Island in the Pacific and the men who make up this platoon, very skillfully drawn. Through flashbacks we learn their story before they joined the army as motives which tell you why these men act in this way, what makes them tick. It is an illuminating psychological study. The plot of rather simple. It is a mission of reconnaissance under conditions so hard and so difficult and so testing as to reveal the strength and weakness of every member of the platoon. The platoon is made up of all kinds of men - Irish, Swedish, Jewish, Italian, Mexican - an American composite from all walks of life and different backgrounds.

Now, there is no lift to the story and no particular moral any more than there is to war generally. The story is a faithful record of life under the heightening tensions of war, and some interesting characters are brought to the fore. There is the head of the whole invading force, General Edward Cummings, an American Fascist, very capable, cultured, but a man who inherited from his father an attitude towards life which is summarized by his father: "If they don't like you, they still can lick your boots." This General Cummings has superimposed on a rather feminine quality in his nature a compensating masculine dominance in later life, but he never stopped fighting within himself. He

was convinced that this was going to be the reactionaries' century, that man's deepest urge is power and that the only morality of the future is a power morality, and that power can flow only from the top down.

The consignment of fresh meat comes to the forces and half of it he orders sent to the 180 enlisted men and the other half to the 38 officers, and this shocks some of the people around him, especially Lt. Hearn, his aide, and the General gives an explanation for this order - he says "we have the highest standard of living in the world and, as one would expect, the worst individual fighting soldiers of any big power. They are comparatively wealthy, they're spoiled, and as Americans they share most of them the peculiar manifestation of our democracy. They have an exaggerated idea of the rights due themselves as individuals and no idea at all of the rights due others. It's the reverse of the peasant, and I'll tell you right now it's the peasant who makes the soldier."

"So what you've got to do is break them down," Hearn said.

"Exactly. Break them down. Every time an enlisted man sees an officer get an extra privilege, it breaks him down a little more."

"I don't see that. It seems to me they'd hate you more."

"They do. But they also fear us more. I don't care what kind of man you give me, if I have him long enough, I'll make him afraid. Every time there's what you call an Army injustice, the enlisted man involved is confirmed a little more in the idea of his own inferiority. The Army functions best when you're frightened of the man above you, and contemptuous of your subordinates."

Now this is the man who is leading the invasion and fighting for democracy. Against him the author pits his aide, Lt. Hearn, born of an aristocratic family who, in his college days, took on a leftist coloration. Intellectually he expressed the injustices of war, but they were not quite genuine. He talks about liberalism, is a dilettante, but really does not care enough about the evils

which he criticizes. He was a member of a fast set, became bored, and finally enlisted in the army. This General Cummins nevertheless subjects the liberalism of this young Lieut. to a ruthless searching critique until the Lieut. comes to hate him, and in order to demonstrate his own integrity, the Lieut. defies the General by deliberately throwing a cigarette on the scrupulously clean floor of the General's tent. The General understood what took place and summons the Lieut. into the tent and throws a cigarette on the floor and orders him to pick it up. It is a struggle in the heart of this phony rebel, the Lieut. yields and under the impact, he does not stand up.

A similar struggle occurs between some other characters in the book - between Sergeant Croft, "the best and meanest platoon sergeant in the army", and Private Red Valsen. Sgt. Croft hails from Western Texas. As a child he could not stand to have anyone beat him in anything. He was a sadist, a man for whom there is no limit to his hunger. He spent his youth hunting, fighting, and busting horses. He almost brings death to his entire platoon, and maneuvers the death of its commander, Lt. Hearn, by his obsession to climb an almost inaccessible mountain which challenged him - driven by that unlimited hunger to conquer everything and he is challenged by the mountain. Red Valsen leads the rebellion against Croft, but when Croft threatens to shoot him, this rebel, too, collapses and takes orders.

There is a Jew in this book by the name of Joey Goldstein, and his story is the story of the simple immigrant, of the poor Jew born on the East Side. He sold newspapers early in the morning. He is eager to learn, to go to high school and to college. He begins as a shipping clerk, then into a shoe factory and finally his ambition is to become a businessman, to run a welding shop. He meets a pretty dark-haired girl, becomes engaged and works harder in order to marry her. Finally he graduates from night school and marries, and a boy is

born, and he and his wife live quietly in the center of friends. They are generally liked, and then war comes and Joey does not ask for any exemption. He enlists and joins the army and then finds that his little world has collapsed all around him. His security is gone, the army discipline is something he does not understand nor is he able to find himself in the maelstrom of war. As a boy on the East Side he was frequently attacked by other children who called him "Jew" and he would come home to his grandfather, an old man who had been a pedler but during his life had accumulated a certain amount of wisdom and he would try to set Joey straight on what was happening to him.

"He talks in Yiddish. 'They beat you because you're a Jew,' he says. 'Do you know what a Jew is?'

"What is it, then? Yehudah Halevy said Israel is the heart of all nations. What attacks the body attacks the heart. And the heart is also the conscience, which suffers for the sins of the nations. He shrugs once more, does not differentiate between saying aloud what he thinks or merely moving his lips. It's an interesting problem, but personally I think a Jew is a Jew because he suffers. Olla Juden suffer.

"Why?

"So we will deserve the Messiah? The old man no longer knows. It makes us better and worse than the goyim, he thinks.

"But the child must always be given an answer. He rouses himself, concentrates and says without certainty, It is so we will last. He speaks again, wholly lucid for a moment. We are a harried people, beset by oppressors. We must always journey from disaster to disaster, and it makes us stronger and weaker than other men, makes us love and hate the other Juden more than other men. We have suffered so much that we know how to endure. We will always endure.

"The boy understand almost nothing of this, but he has heard the words, and they engrave a memory which perhaps he will exhume later."

And Loey does exhume it later on the island when he is forced to carry back one of the members of the platoon and through days in the jungle and in the midst of inhuman difficulties that would break the spirit of any man, he remembers that he belongs to a people who are the heart of the world, his duty to carry this dying man to his destination is realized and he passes through the great ordeal and is one of the few who comes out whole and wholesome.

"The Young Lions" is a story of three men - one, an Austrian Nazi, another, an American very much like the type of Lt. Hearn, Michael Whitacre, and the third is an American Jew, Noah Ackerman. Irwin Shaw likewise traces the early lives of these characters and sends them through the ordeal of war. War strengthens Whitacre and Ackerman and completely disintegrates the personality of the Nazi.

I have time only to say a word about Noah. We meet him first in a hotel in Santa Monica before the war waiting for his father to die - a man who had been a failure, but nevertheless there is something charming about him. Noah goes to N.Y., he meets a girl by the name of Hope, a non-Jew of New England stock and she comes to mean very much in his life. Noah volunteers when war breaks out but is rejected by the army because of scarred tissues on both lungs. Hope takes Noah to see her family in Vermont who at first are unhappy about the idea of their child's marrying a Jew, but Noah is finally accepted by the family and Noah and Hope are married. He tried again to enlist and this time, is successful. He is sent to a camp in Florida and there he gets into an anti-Semitic regiment with an anti-Semitic captain and sergeant who make life miserable for him.

There is the incident when an unwashed cup is found on Ackerman's window and the entire company is punished and no passes are issued to anyone over the weekend. All of them blame the Jew-boy and begin to badger and harrass him. He is called out and is beaten into unconsciousness. Lager on his bag is rifled and his money taken away. Hope comes to visit him and they rent a room, and the next day they are told to move because they are Jews. Noah feels bitterly all this and upon his return to camp, he puts up a notice on the bulletin addressed to the personality of Company C: "To the Personnel of Company C . . . Ten dollars has been stolen from the barracks bag of Private Noah Ackerman, 2nd Platoon. I am not interested in the return of the money and will press no charges. I wish to take my satisfaction, in person, with my own hands. Will the soldier or soldiers involved please communicate with me immediately.

WRHS
AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES
Signed, Private Noah Ackerman"

And ten members of the platoon signed this notice. "We took it, Jew-Boy. We're waiting for you." Noah takes on these ten men over a period of weeks and is beaten by every one of them, but he comes back again and again to meet the next one. There is another Jew in the camp by the name of Fein who says to him one day, "Listen, Pal, I didn't want to interfere here, but enough's enough. You're going at this all wrong. You can't start swinging every time you hear somebody say Jew."

"Why hot?" Noah grimaced painfully at him.

"Because it ain't practical," Fein said. "That's why. First of all, you ain't big enough. Second of all, even if you was as big as a house and you had a right hand like Joe Louis, it wouldn't do no good. There's a certain number of people in this world that say Jew automatically, and nothing you do or I do or any Jew does will ever change 'em. And this way, you make the rest of the guys in the outfit think all Jews're crazy. Listen, they're not so bad, most

of 'em. They sound a lot worse than they are, because they don't know no better. They started out feeling sorry for you, but now, after all these damn fights, they're beginning to think Jews are some kind of wild animal. They're beginning to look at me queer now...."

"Good," Noah said hoarsely. "Delighted."

"Listen," Fein said patiently, "I'm older than you and I'm a peaceful man. I'll kill Germans if they ask me to, but I want to live in peace with the guys around me in the Army. The best equipment a Jew can have is one deaf ear. When some of them start to shoot their mouths off about the Jews that's the ear you turn that way, the deaf one.... You let them live and maybe they'll let you live. Listen, the war ain't going to last forever, and then you can pick your company. Right now, the government says you got to live with these miserable Ku Kluxers, O.K., what're you going to do about it? Listen, Son, if all the Jews'd been like you we'd've all been wiped out 2000 years ago..."

"Good," Noah said.

"Ah," Fein said disgustedly, maybe they're right, maybe you are cracked. Listen, I weigh 200 pounds, I could beat anyone in this Company with one hand tied behind me. But you ain't noticed me fightin', do you? I ain't had a fight since I put on the uniform. I'm a practical man!"

Noah sighed. "The patient is tired, Fein," he said. He's in no condition to listen to the advice of practical men."

Fein stared at him heavily, groping despairingly with the problem. "The question I ask myself," he said, "is what do you want, what in hell do you want?"

"Noah grinned painfully. "I want every Jew," he said, "to be treated as though he weighed 200 pounds."

Well, the tenth man Noah knocks out and he hopes that the men of his company would now give him some indication of respect for the man who stood up and took it, but when they turned their backs on him, Noah deserts. He goes to New York,

but he relents in his desertion and sends a letter asking to be reinstated. "I believe that I must fight for my country. I did not think so when I left camp, but I realize now that I was wrong then, that I did not see the issues clearly because of my preoccupation with my own troubles and a sense of bitterness toward the men around me, a sense of bitterness which was suddenly made unbearably strong by something that happened on my last night in the camp. The hostility of the Company had crystallized into a series of fist-fights with me. I had been called upon to fight by ten of the largest men in the Company. I felt that I had to accept that challenge.

"I had gone through nine of the fights, however, fighting honorably, and asking for no quarter. In the last fight I managed to beat the man who was opposing me. He knocked me down several times, but in the end, I knocked him out, as a culmination of many weeks of fighting. The Company, which had watched all the fights, had before this left me on the ground, full of congratulations for the winner. In this instance, when I faced them, looking, perhaps foolishly, for some spark of admiration or grudging respect for what I had done, they merely turned, as one man, and walked away. It seemed to me as I stood there that I could not bear the fact that all I had done, all I had gone through to gain a place in the Company, had been absolutely wasted.

"At that moment, looking at the backs of the men at whose side I was expected to fight and perhaps die, I decided to desert.

"I realize now that I was wrong. I realize now that I believe in this country and in this war, and an individual act like this is not possible. I must fight. But I think I have the right to ask for a transfer to another division, where I can be among men who are more anxious to kill the enemy than they are to kill me.

Respectfully,

Noah Ackerman, Private, US Army"

But he was not allowed to be transferred to another company, but by this time he had become toughened and on the next attempt he pulls a knife and then the very fact of his challenge to authority wins respect from the fighting men. He is sent overseas, makes an excellent fighting man. Along with a victorious American army he reaches Germany. He comes to a concentration camp in Bavaria at which concentration camp the author has brought his three main characters, and all the horrors of this camp and the treatment of the Jews begin to fill the soul of Noah with thoughts of suicide, but there, too, something happens which rebuilds his morale.

The American commander put in charge of this camp, Captain Green, represents all that is finest and noblest in what we choose to call the American tradition.

"When they got back to the Commandant's office, an old man was being led in before the Captain. He was bent over, and his long yellow hands were translucently thin. You couldn't really tell, of course, because almost everyone in the camp looked old, or ageless.

"My name," the old man was saying in slow English, "is Joseph Silverson. I am a Rabbi. I am the only Rabbi in the camp...."

"Yes," Captain Green said briskly. He did not look up from a paper on which he was writing a request for medical materials.

"I do not wish to annoy the officer," the Rabbi said. "But I would like to make a request."

"Yes?" Still, Captain Green did not look up.

"Many thousand Jews," said the Rabbi slowly and carefully, "have died in this camp, and several hundred more out there...." the Rabbi waved his translucent hand gently toward the window, "will die today, tonight, tomorrow..."

"I'm sorry, Rabbi," Captain Green said. "I'm doing all I can."

"Of course." The Rabbi nodded hastily. "I know that. There is nothing to be done for them. Nothing for their bodies. I understand. We all understand. Nothing material. Even they understand. They are in the shadow and all efforts must be concentrated on the living. They are not even unhappy. They are dying free and there is a great pleasure in that. I am asking for a luxury." Michael understood that the Rabbi was attempting to smile. He had enormous, sunken, green eyes that glamed steadily in his narrow face, under his high ridged forehead. "I am asking to be permitted to collect all of us, the living, the ones without hope, out there, in the square there...." again the translucent wave of the hand, "and conduct a religious service. A service for the dead who have come to their end in this place."

"Michael stared at Noah. Noah was looking coolly and soberly at Captain Green, his face calm, remote.

"Captain Green had not looked up. He had stopped writing, but he was sitting with his head bent over wearily, as though he had fallen asleep.

"There has never been a religious service for us in this place," the Rabbi said softly, "and so many thousands have gone...."

"Permit me." It was the Albanian diplomat who had been so helpful in carrying out Green's orders. He had moved to the side of the Rabbi, and was standing before the Captain's desk, bent over, speaking rapidly, diplomatically, and clearly. "I do not like to intrude, Captain. I understand why the Rabbi has made this request. But this is not the time for it. I am a European, I have been in this place a long time, I understand things perhaps the Captain doesn't understand. I do not like to intrude, as I said, but I think it would be inadvisable to give permission to conduct publicly a Hebrew religious service in this place." The Albanian stopped, waiting for Green to say something. But Green didn't say anything. He sat at the desk, nodding a little, looking as though he were on the verge of waking up from sleep.

"The Captain perhaps does not understand the feeling,' the Albanian went on rapidly. 'The feeling in Europe. In a camp like this. Whatever the reasons,' the Albanian said smoothly, 'good or bad, the feeling exists. It is a fact. If you allow this gentleman to hold his services, I do not guarantee the consequences. I feel I must warn you. There will be riots, there will be violence, bloodshed. The other prisoners will not stand for it...'

"The other prisoners will not stand for it,' Green repeated quietly, without any tone in his voice.

"No, Sir,' said the Albanian briskly, 'I guarantee the other prisoners will not stand for it.'

Michael looked at Noah. The expensive expression was sliding off his face, melting, slowly and violently exposing a grimace of horror and despair.

Green stood up. 'I am going to guarantee something myself,' he said to the Rabbi. 'I am going to guarantee that you will hold your services in one hour in the square down there. I am also going to guarantee that there will be machine guns set up on the roof of this building. And I will further guarantee that anybody who attempts to interfere with your services will be fired on by those machine guns.' He turned to the Albanian. 'And finally, I guarantee,' he said, 'that if you ever try to come into this room again you will be locked up. That is all.'

The Albanian backed swiftly out of the room. Michael heard his footsteps disappearing down the corridor.

The Rabbi bowed gravely. 'Thank you very much, Sir', he said to Green.

Green put out his hand. The Rabbi shook it and turned and followed the Albanian. Green stood staring at the window."

Noah and Whitacre left the room and as they walked, Noah says to Whitacre:

"Remember, back in the replacement depot, what you said: 'Five years after the war is over we're all liable to look back with regret to every bullet that missed us.'

"'Yes,' said Michael, 'I remember.'

"'What do you feel now?'

"Michael hesitated. 'I don't know,' he said honestly.

"'This afternoon,' Noah said, walking in his deliberate, correct pace, 'I agreed with you. When that Albanian started talking I agreed with you. Not because I'm a Jew. At least, I don't think that was the reason. As a human being....When that Albanian started talking I was ready to go out into the hall and shoot myself through the head.'

"'I know, Michael said softly. 'I felt the same way.'

"'Then Green said what he had to say.' Noah stopped and looked up to the tops of the trees, golden-green in the golden sun. 'I guarantee...I guarantee..' He sighed. 'I don't know what you think,' Noah said, 'but I have a lot of hope for Captain Green.'

"'So do I,' said Michael.

"'When the war is over,' Noah said, and his voice was growing loud, 'Green is going to run the world, not that damned Albanian...'

"'Sure,' said Michael.

"'The human beings are going to be running the world!' Noah was shouting by now, standing in the middle of the shadowed road, shouting at the sun-tipped branches of the German forest. 'The human beings! There's a lot of Captain Greens! He's not extraordinary! They're millions of them!' Noah stood, very erect, his head back, shouting crazily, as though all the things he had coldly pushed down deep within him and fanatically repressed for so many months were now finally bursting forth. 'Human beings!' he shouted thickly, as though the two

words were a magic incantation against death and sorrow, a subtle and impregnable shield for his son and his wife, a rich payment for the agony of the recent years, a promise and a guarantee for the future.....'The world is full of them !'

"It was then that the shots rang out."

Well, it will repay you, I believe, to read these books - all three or any one of them. War in the raw - in the muck - here and there flashes of bright light which are restorative to faith.

