

A Thirty-Sixth Part of Suffering

"The Last of the Just," by **André Schwarz-Bart**; translated from the French by Stephen Becker (*Atheneum*, 374 pp. \$4.95), threads an ancient Hebrew myth into this story of Nazi persecution. Meyer Levin, author of "Compulsion" and "Eva," is in Israel at work on a new novel.

By Meyer Levin

JUST as there are deep fissures in the earth attesting to some remote cataclysm in our physical world, so there exists a deep gash, a psychological rift in the consciousness of modern man. We know what catastrophe caused it. We know and we do not want to know, but we must know, for humanity to survive. Only by works of art can the wound be closed.

After the war, army officers dealing with displaced persons were wont to say, "Don't throw the six million at me," meaning the mass-murdered Jews. It has taken a generation for mankind to absorb this guilt feeling to the point where we can begin to work through the monstrous human capabilities it disclosed. Confronted today with the possibilities of nuclear war, against which our sole defense seems to be the thought that human beings could never really go that far, we must indeed understand what happened to the six million.

They are best remembered as one. Only when the six million become a single individual does the mass fate take meaning. So it was in "The Wall," "The Diary of Anne Frank," "The House of Dolls"; so it is in "The Last of the Just." Only, Schwarz-Bart's book is a monumental masterpiece towering above all literary memorials to the catastrophe. Written with passionate irony, this Prix Goncourt winner has the heartrending poetic illumination of "The House of Dolls," it has the homely universality of "The Diary of Anne Frank," it has the epic quality of "The Wall," but beyond all these it has a unity with the timeless legendry of the Jewish faith. In the continuum of Jewish culture, this story partakes of the inner, essential truth that takes form in myth.

"The Last of the Just" is a projection of the Jewish myth of thirty-six saintly

men, who by the Hebrew words for their number are called Lamed Vav-nicks. When one dies, another is born, but only rarely is the identity of a Lamed Vavnick discovered, and usually he remains unknown even to himself. In a translation that has the eloquence of an original work, the key term has been the most difficult to convey; the Just Man is not exactly the *Juste* of the French title. "You see," explains the Polish peddler, Mordecai Levy, to his wife, "when a Lamed Vavnick weeps, or whatever he does, even when he's in bed as I am, with the wife he loves, he takes upon himself a thirty-sixth part of the suffering of the earth. But he doesn't know it, and his wife doesn't know it, and half his heart cries out while the other half sings."

Mordecai comes from a family of Lamed Vav-nicks, for in Schwarz-Bart's variation of the legend it is known that there will always be one of the Thirty-Six amongst the descendants of Rabbi Yom Tov Levy, martyred in particular pain in York, in 1185. The first part of the book, then, is a fascinating chronology, a condensation of centuries of Jewish history, Jewish wanderings, through the gallery of the Levys.

Then comes Ernie Levy, the birdlike child born in the German town of Stillenstadt, and in him his grandfather Mordecai recognizes the continuation.



André Schwarz-Bart—"heartrending, poetic illumination."

Ernie's childhood is the heart of the novel. One of the many haunting scenes is the crucifixion game, in which Ernie's adored little girlfriend, Ilse, plays Christ, while Ernie, as the only Jew present, is required to order the crucifixion. Unable to bring out the command, he himself becomes the victim.

From here on the brutalization of the German children through the Hitler youth movement, the Pimfe, is portrayed with ascending horror and poignancy, to the culminating episode in which Ernie, beaten up under the calm gaze of Ilse, wanders off to destroy himself.

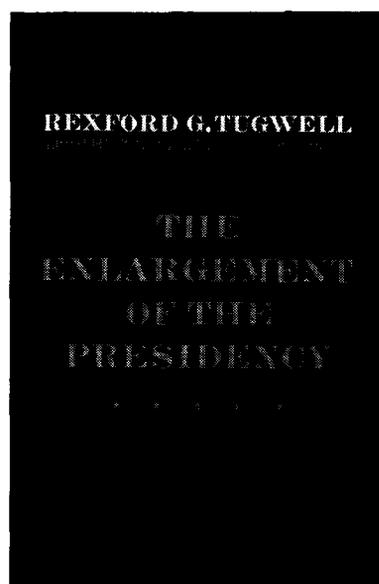
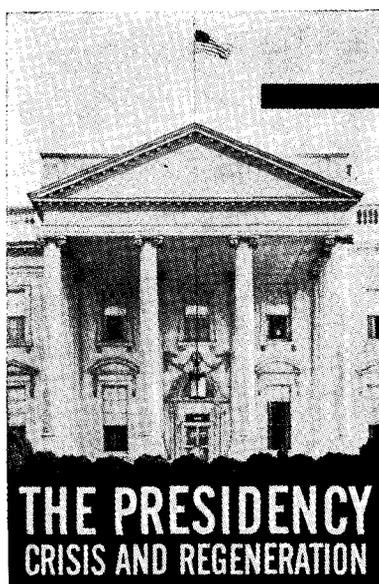
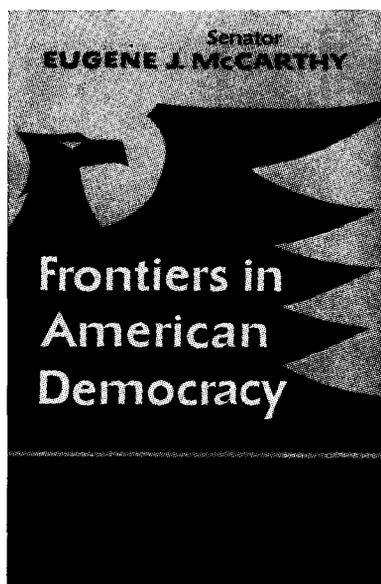
IN a scene whose tenderness recalls Jakob Wassermann—the child fails at suicide. Years later, having fled with his family to France, he tries it in another form: he tries to become a dog. Ernie has survived the debacle of the French army only to learn that his entire family has been swept away to the extermination camps. With the traditional descent of the saintly into the depths of degradation, Ernie now lives, literally, as a dog—until he becomes the consort of a French farm wife whose husband is a war prisoner. One day the lady tells him that though she has always known, by a certain physical detail, that he is an Israelite, she has only just now learned, in town, that "every Israelite is automatically a Jew!" And in that case he must of course leave her bed for the stable, to approach only on call.

Instead, Ernie returns to reality, and to occupied Paris, where he seeks out the remnant of the Jews. He meets Golda, a girl slightly lamed in the course of her many flights. The day they decide to take off their yellow stars and risk wandering around Paris as an ordinary young couple is unforgettable.

Golda is deported. Then Ernie Levy commits the unbelievable act of trying to get into the deportation center in Drancy. When the Nazis have finished questioning him, he is a whimpering animal curled into a ball against the door. But he finds Golda, and together they accompany a transport of children in the sealed boxcars that roll to the gas chambers of Auschwitz. There Ernie voluntarily leaves the line of those selected to live, and goes with Golda and the children to his transfiguration.

Ernie Levy leaves no descendant. He is the Last of the Just. Faced with this book one must indeed wonder whether humanity has become unredeemable. Yet all good art purifies, and to a vast readership in America, as it has in Europe, this story should bring a cleansing catharsis.

Books in the News



Politics and Policy

By **WALTER JOHNSON**, *author of "1600 Pennsylvania Avenue."*

THROUGH the clouds of stale oratory at the 1960 Democratic convention one speaker shone with a brilliance rare for such gatherings. As Senator Eugene McCarthy placed Adlai Stevenson in nomination, his speech combined eloquence with perceptiveness and warmth. The youthful Democratic-Farmer-Labor Senator, a former teacher, has long been one of the exceptionally capable leaders in Minnesota's public life. "Frontiers in American Democracy" (World, \$3.75) combines the richness of his academic background with the experience derived from twelve years of service in the House of Representatives and in the Senate.

Much of what he writes has an immediate bearing on the Presidential election. The Democratic Party in this century, he observes, "has been the party of innovation and decision in both domestic and foreign affairs." The Republican Party, on the other hand, has been "slow to accept change or innovation. It has been suspicious of the novel and fearful of the uncertain and untried." While the author does not ignore the many weaknesses in his own party, he is convinced that the Democrats offer the nation the greatest promise of a successful administration of the government. He contends that not only is his party more ready to accept change and deal with it, but

that it is willing "to risk political defeat in the attempt to persuade its members and a majority of the citizens of the United States of the existence of new responsibilities and of the necessity for new and decisive action to meet these responsibilities."

It would be misleading, however, to consider this book as just another campaign document. There is a widely ranging discussion of such questions as the theoretical basis of democracy, religion in politics, politics and politicians, morality in government, the role of the state in economic matters, civil liberties, and the imaginative foreign policy that he believes is vital in the next decade.

Senator McCarthy's analysis of the tensions and trends in the Federal Government is stimulating and highly suggestive. To achieve a more balanced and responsible Congress he suggests that the Senate might concentrate on foreign policy and, in addition, give special attention to the quality and conduct of civil servants and appointed officials. The House of Representatives, meanwhile, would concentrate on general legislation and regain some of the power it has lost to the Senate, particularly on revenue and appropriation bills. While McCarthy is aware of the necessity of reasonable secrecy on the part of the Executive branch, he, like many others, feels that the Eisenhower Administration has extended the barrier of secrecy so far that Congress cannot legislate intelligently. Historic difficulties on this question have been accentuated during the past seven

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World's Toughest Job

By **RICHARD L. STROUT**, *a veteran Washington correspondent for The Christian Science Monitor.*

WITH Messrs. Nixon and Kennedy crisscrossing the nation in the climax of the 1960 Presidential campaign, here are two books—"The Enlargement of the Presidency," by Rexford G. Tugwell (Doubleday, \$6.95), and "The Presidency: Crisis and Regeneration," by Herman Finer (University of Chicago, \$5)—which declare that neither candidate, if elected, can possibly fulfill the job. The institution of the American Presidency has become impossible for any one man. The United States must collectivize the function, these authors warn, or face dire peril.

It is fascinating to note how two such dissimilar authorities, starting from two such dissimilar approaches, arrive at such similar conclusions. Stated succinctly, the Tugwell-Finer thesis is that the danger of the times and the gradual extension of the Presidential office have resulted in an enlargement of function that demands a group of men, not a single, lonely individual. No matter how much the supporting staff is enlarged of America's most novel political invention (Hoover had forty-two to help him; Eisenhower 1,200) this won't meet the problem.

The two books complement but do not overlap: Mr. Finer tells what the problem is, and Mr. Tugwell tells how

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