

The Fires Last Time

Slaughterhouse Five, by Kurt Vonnegut Jr. *New York: Delacorte Press, 1969.* 186 pp. \$5.95.

The Destruction of the Dutch Jews, by Jacob Presser, translated by Arnold Pomerans. *New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1969.* 545 pp. \$10.00.

TWO OF THE enduring horrors of World War II have been the destruction of civilian populations by air attack and their slaughter in the extermination camps of the Third Reich. The wholesale killing of hundreds of thousands of people in Hamburg, Dresden, Berlin, and Tokyo, not to mention Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and innumerable other centers of human habitation was not as protracted as the beltline murders in the extermination camps and it had certain other advantages as well; not only were more people killed in a shorter time by the bombing, but the tiresome bookkeeping of the deaths was left to the enemy instead of, as in the case of the exterminations, being carried out by the executioners. Also bombing was more impersonal, its victims instantly became statistics.

Dresden in 1945 was not only one of the most enchanting of the cities of Europe, it had seemed for a long time to be one of the safest. No bombs had been dropped on the inner city, although in the autumn of 1944 a suburb had been hit by a raid, which the

Dresdeners thought had come about through a mistake in navigation. Again in January 1945 an oil refinery and marshalling yards were attacked and the crews of the bombers were surprised that no German flak was fired at them. Dresden was in fact undefended, without any important war industries and a lot of people thought an unwritten agreement kept the Allies from bombing it in return for some *quid pro quo* on the part of the Germans. But there was no agreement, and on February 13 the first of three air attacks by British and American bombers began the levelling of the city first with high explosive bombs and then with incendiaries. The latter caused a fire storm that sucked the oxygen even from the cellars and underground hideouts to which the population had fled and its tornado winds hurled anyone in its path into its center; 135,000 people were killed in the attack and the author of *Slaughterhouse Five* was one of the few survivors. Kurt Vonnegut had been taken prisoner by the Germans and he and his fellow American captives had been brought to a former *abbatoir* with the ironic designation "Slaughterhouse Five," ironic because the American prisoners were among the few who crept out of their cellars when the bombing had stopped to look upon the dead city, a city with almost its entire population buried under it. Even then they had to be lucky to stay alive for some American planes returned to the scene machine gunning anyone who moved, and among the few people who could move were the American prisoners who this time, too, were lucky and escaped the bullets as they had the bombs.

Ever since then, the author tells us, he has been intending to write a famous book about the death of Dresden and now at last he has done it. Since Vonnegut is a science fiction writer of uncommon talent his book is a novel, a novel in which the author appears in various guises, making his way through a number of characters and cosmic time schemes to draw his haunted portraits of human desolation and abasement. Like

Guenther Grass, he attacks his subject obliquely, he is relaxed, witty, merciless in his characterizations of the stupidity and sadism of both friend and foe. His pity has no nationality or his contempt either, and what he writes is a slice of the history of human brutality and compassion of which he and his generation have witnessed some crowded chapters.

Science fiction writers are a gifted lot. They deal with the incredible and the bizarre but they often deal too, as did Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, George Orwell, and for that matter Franz Kafka, with the shape of things to come as well as the faintly recognized, only partly hidden forces of evil that lie just below the technological precision and glitter that are said to have taken so much of the drudgery and pain from life in the developed societies. The world of these men with its marvellous travel devices, pulsating machines, and psychological horrors seems very remote from the friendly skies of *United*, even from the aerial highjackings or the occasional bombs planted in ordinary passenger conveyances, or from the chronicles or ordinary daily crime in the media. But when a man like Vonnegut is confronted with the massacre of Dresden he must relate it because of the habits of his *métier* to his other environment which includes Tralfamador, a planet trillions of miles away with an atmosphere of cyanide where little green creatures put an earthling couple, one of whom is a main character in the book, on display in a zoo under a bell of oxygen. In this zoo the strange customs, behavior, mental and physical habits of the earthlings may bring pleasure to the reasonable inhabitants of Tralfamador, who have furnished them with the best of furniture stolen from Sears Roebuck. Daily life on earth in a time of peace is as remote from the bombing of Dresden as it is from Vonnegut's planet far out in space. As Anne Frank's father wrote when he was describing the Gestapo man who came to arrest the Franks, he seemed to be an ordinary man of the kind who in ordinary times might be delivering the mail

or the milk, only now he was making his deliveries to the gas chambers. Both the airmen and the Gestapo men were often sustained in their terrible assignments by the conviction that what they had to do was aimed at a higher purpose, the survival of their country, a quicker end to the war, the removal of active and potential enemies. The inhabitants of Tralfamadore cannot understand this.

Mr. Presser's book is of a very different kind from Mr. Vonnegut's novel. *The Destruction of the Dutch Jews* is a history, a history on which the author spent fifteen years examining every trace of evidence he could lay his hands on—books, letters, the underground press, interviews, his own experiences. He has talked with some of the survivors, of which he is one, of the 140,000 Jews who before the invasion lived in Holland. Of these 110,000 were deported to the concentration and extermination camps outside Holland and only some 5,450 returned when the war was over. Hundreds committed suicide, other hundreds died in the camps in Holland, some few hundreds escaped or went into hiding, and approximately 106,000 perished. Mr. Presser is a careful historian and he cannot always be sure of the exact figures, but the ones he gives are likely to be as close to the truth as we shall ever come.

Many books have been published on the roundups and massacres of the Jews for they were sent to the extermination camps from almost everywhere in Europe: Germany, Denmark, Poland, the Balkans, France, Russia, the Baltic countries. The account of the fate of the Dutch Jews and of the Jews from other countries who found themselves in Holland when hostilities broke out is only a fraction of the larger chronicle. And the *Leitmotive* are the same; heroism and cowardice, tales of self-servers and self-sacrificers among the Jews as well as among their Dutch compatriots some of whom hide them and some of whom reveal their hiding places to the police. Like Vonnegut, Presser has an eye for the moral frailties of human beings of

whatever race or nationality and he dutifully records the mixed emotions of the Dutch who had come into possession of Jewish goods and then at the end of the war saw the Jewish owners return to reclaim their property.

The noose drew in slowly on the necks of the Jews in Holland and here as elsewhere in Europe, although there were alarming rumors, no one knew exactly what would happen as the next step. The camps in Holland at first permitted some leaves from among the men and women sent there, but these privileges did not last long and the threat of deportation for work in Germany or in the East soon began to darken the lives of all the people wearing the compulsory yellow star. Raids and demands for larger deliveries of Jews for the work camps constantly increased and all this time the Jewish Council toiled mightily carrying out the orders of the Seyss-Inquarts, the Rauters and the lesser fry who ruled the Netherlands on behalf of National Socialist Germany. Here as elsewhere, the Jews had to cooperate in their own destruction and some of Mr. Presser's sharpest barbs are aimed at the pompous figures of Jewish leaders who strutted in their high office and used all their influence to save their own families and their own hides as long as they could. For others, for those who worked exhausting hours day and night on behalf of their people, he has only praise, as he has for the anonymous thousands who did whatever they could to protect their families and their fellow sufferers on the circuitous journey to their extermination.

But it was a world in a reserved section of Hell. People might live well in some of the camps if they had money or were of some use to the prison guards. Good things for the table were at hand, drinks, even delicacies for people of means or influence. Many things were negotiable. Young and attractive girls could win the attention of the SS men and many of them did and thus survived a few days or weeks longer until they were shipped off out of their

turn. Family ties, the author tells us, could easily disintegrate under the mounting terror of the deportations, and in the Dutch transit camps it was by no means rare for husbands and wives to find solace with other husbands and wives and after a time couples no longer bothered to seclude themselves in their lovemaking when in any event there was no place they could go. The Jews were exposed to every degradation; they had no rights, no privacy, none of the accepted means of defending themselves from others or from their own worst instincts. People stole from those who had as little as they, a crust of bread, a hidden morsel of sugar, anything they could lay their hands on and this was done by the most respectable as well as the least favored among the inmates of the camps. There was self-sacrifice too, one transport of sick and crippled children brought out the hidden treasures of the adult inmates who gave whatever they had to give.

And so it goes, as Vonnegut a little too often keeps telling us. The best and the worst, the heels and the angels and the common man become heel, become angel. It is no wonder the books about these events keep coming from the press. In these concentrated killings contemporary man gets a new look at himself, the masks off and only shreds of his culture covering small areas of his flesh. It is possible, even likely, that the vast majority of all the people concerned, of all the nationalities and faiths and social siftings who faced their moments of truth during World War II were decent people who were opposed to senseless pain and suffering either for their own kind or for others, but another generation will need to get the close look provided by such books as these to make sure. Dresden was an undefended city, the war was very near its end, the Russians were sweeping ahead with diminishing resistance in their path and they were bringing their own special brand of terror with them. The destruction of Dresden served no military purpose for the Russians, who have since denounced it, or for their Allies who have never been able

to explain it and keep their self portrait intact. Its purpose if any was to break the back of German civilian morale, to kill defenseless people so the killing would be over more quickly. The purpose of the destruction of the Dutch and the other Jews, the Nazis said, was to cleanse Europe of the Asian *Untermenschen*, the Jewish bolsheviks and capitalists who secretly held the reins of the world. Mr. Presser keeps telling the reader that he will have to decide the meaning of such and such an event, the guilt or innocence of such and such a person. The reader will have to do that and more if he ponders the meanings of these books. For both of them deal with matters only seemingly as far removed as Tralfamador.

Reviewed by EUGENE DAVIDSON

The German Heritage

The German-Americans, by Richard O'Connor. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1968. 484 pp. \$8.95.

A MORE self-defeating exercise cannot be imagined than trying to define German character and traits. German blood, according to the mystique of kaisers and fuehrers, was supposed to be concentrated in *Ein Volk*, but instead is one of the most diffused in all the world. One-sixth of American citizens have a fraction of German ancestry.

Stephen Leacock once tried to characterize the assumed humorless German passion for method and order by depicting Germans as a people dedicated to gathering fallen oak leaves in the Black Forest and sorting them out by size. Yet it was Ossie Schreckengost, the battery-mate and roommate of the great Teutonic pitcher and fellow eccentric, Rube Waddell, who once insisted that their manager, Connie Mack,