

# To Pity and to Love

VIRGILIA PETERSON

**A** *SQUARE OF SKY*, by Janina David.  
Norton. \$4.50.

One definition of a literary classic is that nothing of its kind can be written after it without taking it into consideration. In this sense, Anne Frank's diary has become the yardstick against which any account of a child's experience of persecution must inevitably be measured. Such a story is *A Square of Sky*. Written now, a quarter of a century later, by a Polish Jewish woman who was nine years old when the Nazis invaded Poland and put into full swing the action that destroyed six million Jews, the book consists of Janina David's recollections of the family she once had and lost, and of what and how she survived. Though Janina David, miraculously enough, is still alive, while Anne Frank died in Nazi hands long before her diary was published, *A Square of Sky* is no less tragic. Both books have a special poignancy. Both are more concerned with the effect of the Nazi horrors on human beings than with the horrors themselves. Both put their stress on the growth, within nightmare circumstances, of the heart.

**J**ANINA DAVID, who gives herself the anglicized nickname of Janie in the book, was the only child of comfortably situated parents living in western Poland not far from the German frontier. In that last normal summer of her childhood in 1939 when the book begins, Janie had over her head not just a square of sky but the whole of it. Next to the country cottage in which she was vacationing with her nurse were an orchard full of butterflies and frogs to catch and woods full of mushrooms to pick. She had no lessons to do, and right there on the place were the ten little daughters of the caretaker for built-in companions. A year later, from the dark, bug-infested room she was sharing by then with her parents in the Warsaw ghetto, those summer days must have seemed halcyon indeed.

But even then her sky was not al-

together cloudless. Aware, as of course she had to be, of the difference between herself and the Catholic children she played with, it came all the same as a shock to Janie when, one Sunday morning, a playmate who was receiving congratulatory kisses after her confirmation refused to let Janie touch her. Several times Janie had been taken by her nurse, against her parents' wishes, to the Catholic church, and she knew that her nurse only got permission from the priest to look after a Jewish child upon the promise to convert her. In Janie's house, except for the Friday-night ritual of lighting candles, there was no religion. Secretly, she rebelled against the gap between "Them" and "Us," and sometimes her desire to be



Christian in order to be one of "Them" was quite violent.

Being Jewish, however, was still in that summer before the Nazis' onslaught a cloud no bigger than a man's hand on Janie's horizon. Far closer and more ominous was the fear that her parents, who often quarreled openly before her, would be divorced. Then she would have to live, her nurse told her, with her mother. But at that time she hated her pretty, rich, hasty-tempered, patronizing mother. It was her aloof yet deeply devoted father whom she loved. How the relationship between Janie and her mother, and between her mother and father, changed under the whiplash of Nazi persecution and became, instead of less human, more human than ever before, is the most memorable and moving development in Janina David's story.

**F**OR THOSE who have read Hersey's novel about the Jews who lived and died behind the wall the Nazis erected around the Warsaw ghetto, as also for the handful who have

read Emmanuel Ringelblum's *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, Janina David's account of ghetto life, with its terrible crowding, its dirt and disease, its hunger, its spiraling death rate, and the relentless fear that exhausted all but the stoutest hearts, will seem familiar. What is unique in her book is the reflection of this dance of death in the eyes of a child whose whole concept of the adult world had been blasted into rubble before she was ten and who, by the time she was twelve, had learned more about the depths and the heights of human nature than most people learn in a lifetime.

Like Anne Frank's diary, *A Square of Sky* is stamped with unquestionable honesty. But unlike Anne Frank, Janina David did not have much sense of humor at the start. Delicate, cosseted, vain, easily offended, eager to show off, and cocky without the saving grace of self-doubt, Janie, as revealed by the thirty-five-year-old woman she has since become, was a rather arrogant child, ready to pronounce judgment on the many relatives—with the exception, of course, of her father—who surrounded her. She had to brush with death before she changed. She had to see the terrible courage of her grandfather under the bombings; of her uncle, an officer in the Polish Army who refused to hide after the defeat and gave himself up "for honor's sake"; of her father, who became a Jewish policeman in the ghetto, risking his neck every hour of every day to bring food to his family from beyond the wall; of her mother, bending and withering with unaccustomed toil and starving to keep her child alive; she had to see friends snatch food from passersby and beggars swell up and die on the pavements, before she could learn to pity and to love.

**J**ANINA DAVID is not a novelist; yet she tells her story with professional skill and taste, never intruding upon it with generalities or interpretations. Each scene speaks for itself. From among all the people whose faces must have imprinted themselves on her vulnerable young mind, she has known precisely which to resurrect. The strangest, without a doubt, is Lydia, a Gentile whose

husband had once been her mother's hairdresser. Lydia, the author gently hints, had been her father's friend. Lydia's immensely successful cosmetic business, together with her equally successful liaisons with Nazi officers, enabled her to keep the David family supplied with food for many months and to arrange, on a snowy January night in 1943, just before the beginning of the end

of the ghetto, for Janie to be smuggled out from behind the wall. It is to the ambiguous Lydia that Janina David owes her life. But the hero and heroine of *A Square of Sky* are her unhappy father and mother, whose only common bond lay in the sacrifices for their child. More about them than about herself, this book, written in faithful memory, is their cenotaph.

*believable characters* (my italics this time); he also falls in love with Shirley Essex, a typist sent by an old enemy to destroy him. For although she is only eighteen and was raised in a loathsome suburb, Shirley is also a "princess of a lost race, awaiting discovery among cyclopean ruins in the jungle, some troll king's daughter, some nereid floating towards a drowned sailor . . .," or, in short, "one of those rare young women who suggest to the eyes of sensitive men an *anima* figure, a soul image."

Unobtainable? Not at all. Unbeknownst to Sir Michael, Shirley returns his passion. However, for reasons not explained, she chooses to disappear, and goes off to work for an attractive Eastern Potentate. Horrors. But wait. Act III: Lady Drake returns from Paris and to her husband, for reasons not explained, and he is subsequently appointed head of the Department of Organic Molecular Chemistry, where he finds happiness. Sir Michael also comes out splendidly. He is appointed head of a new arts foundation—a sensible one this time; no more supporting tours of religious plays in verse through the mining towns of Yorkshire and Durham. And what's more he marries Shirley, who proves to be "not just another babbling, moaning, scratching, biting . . . prisoner of feminine sexuality" (and this time, by God, off I go to the doctor) but, though "responsive, ardent, eager to learn [and] refusing nothing," yet someone "who could not be taken finally." For "whenever they met nakedly as man and woman, she would remain this magically desirable and tantalizing being."

WHEN I was a boy, I used to read stuff of this caliber in a weekly woman's magazine called *Red Letter*, which both I and our maids devoured with ecstasy and believed with passion; and I dare say it helped to wreck their lives. But *Red Letter* cost twopence. And it was not further contaminated with Purpose. For Mr. Priestley also has a few serious thoughts he wants to communicate:

¶ Life is not all a fairy tale, as he reveals through two case histories of women who briefly stret and frut



## Signifying Nothing

SAREL EIMERL

SIR MICHAEL AND SIR GEORGE, by J. B. Priestley. *Atlantic-Little, Brown*. \$4.95. Imagine yourself to be a reviewer who receives through the mails an English novel subtitled *A Comedy of the New Elizabethans*. Opening it, you find on the first page that an American, Franklin Bacon, on a grant from the Lincoln Applebaum Foundation, is trying to ascertain the difference between Sir George Drake's Department of Information and Cultural Services ("We call it DISCUS, Mr. Bacon. Saves time") and Sir Michael Stratherrick's National Commission for Scholarship and the Arts ("COMSA it's known as, Mr. Bacon"). The reviewer knows immediately that he is headed for a stern dose of overweight satire, and that his best policy is to close the book forthwith. But then, there is the challenge. . . .

Well, anyway, I can't say I enjoyed reading Mr. Priestley's latest or that anyone else should try it, but it did provoke a few reflections about the writing of comedy and the ghastly catastrophe that awaits him who fails to remember the classic rules. But first, the book.

It reduces to three acts. Act I: Sir George is a stuffy but well-meaning

civil servant. He has no taste for the arts but loves his wife. His deadly rival, Sir Michael, is a non-stuffy non-civil servant, with a real taste for the arts, who spends his afternoons seducing women, including, alas, Lady Drake. She, like all the women in this book, and in modern fiction for that matter, is a passionate and noisy lovmaker. I often wonder, to digress for a moment, where modern novelists get their ideas about women always moaning, gasping, and screaming in bed. From other novelists, I suppose. Or maybe they slap the moans in to make the rest of us feel we ought to go to the doctor for a shot of something.

But, to return. Act II: Sir George and his fellow bureaucrats are petrified by the rumor that there's going to be a *Question in the House* (Mr. Priestley's italics). To make his situation utterly intolerable, Sir George, at a party, hears his wife making "those muffled ecstatic noises," provoked by a drunken artist with whom she then goes off to Paris. Meanwhile, back at COMSA, Sir Michael is also in dire straits. He is not only dragged off by the head of his drama section to see an *avant-garde play without a plot or any*