

# The Life Of the Junkie

**THE ADDICT IN THE STREET.** Edited and with an introduction by Jeremy Lerner from tape recordings collected by Ralph Tefferteller. 288 pp. New York: Grove Press. \$5.50.

**THE TUNNEL BACK:** Synanon. By Lewis Yablonsky. 403 pp. New York: The Macmillan Company. \$6.95.

By NAT HENTOFF

**“W**E find it very difficult to raise money,” an administrator of the National Association for Prevention of Addiction to Narcotics said recently. “You see, most people don’t regard addicts as being fully human—the way they do victims of multiple sclerosis, for instance. But,” he added wryly, “we may do better now that more and more youngsters in ‘good’ neighborhoods in the suburbs are becoming junkies.”

As addiction and its concomitant rise in crime persist, moreover, there has yet to be any significant change in official methods of coping with addicts. The prevailing approach remains punitive despite the fact that long jail sentences or compulsory civil commitment have produced galloping recidivism rather than cures.

Among all the recent books explaining addiction or proselytizing for a particular road to salvation from narcotics, the singular, abrasive value of “The Addict in the Street” is that it allows a cross-section of addicts to speak for themselves. Edited by novelist, Jeremy Lerner (“Drive, He Said”) from more than 100 hours of tape recordings of Ralph Tefferteller of the Henry Street Settlement on New York’s lower East Side, these raw chunks of autobiography both annihilate any pseudo-hip myths of romanticism concerning the life of the junkie and also emphasize how divers and agonized human drug addicts are.

**T**HE book makes vivid such familiar data of addiction as methods of getting drugs, characteristic family backgrounds of addicts and the built-in, circular guarantees of failure in current hospital and prison methods of “rehabilitating” the junkie. But “The Addict in the Street” is most compelling in its evocation of the cave of fear in which the junkie lives—fear of arrest, of death by overdose, of the horrifying likelihood that all his tomorrows will be composed of the same quicksand as his present. Each of these addicts has been given an indeterminate sentence of exile by society; and

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Mr. Hentoff wrote “The Jazz Life” and “The New Equality.”

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though it is the addict who suffers viscerally, society pays its dues in this mutually destructive contract through the price of crime and of useless incarceration.

"The Tunnel Back: Synanon" is an unabashedly partisan but convincing analysis by sociologist Lewis Yablonsky of the most successful way so far by which a growing number of American addicts have helped themselves. Since 1958, some 500 former junkies have stayed clean through voluntarily undergoing the Synanon life experience. This route back to society is based, to begin with, on total abstinence from drugs or chemicals of any kind. Alcohol is also forbidden. The setting is one of several Synanon houses in which the addict lives as part of an ex-



*Photograph by Sande R. Jones from jacket of "The Addict in the Street."*

tended family of former junkies who are both "patients" and therapists.

He may leave at any time, but so long as he stays, he must remain off drugs and behave responsibly by participating in the work of Synanon — from kitchen detail at the start to gradually more important staff assignments as he gains in self-assurance. Synanon opens his treatment by reversing the usual assumption in professional therapy that, as Yablonsky notes, "if a person's inner problems are somehow adjusted, he will stop 'acting out' his bad behavior. Synanon starts with an attack on the reality of overt bad behavior."

As an apprentice starts acting as a productive member of the Synanon community, he simultaneously begins getting at his inner problems through participation in regular synanons. (The word "synanon" in lower case describes the group therapy

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session, a fundamental element in the long process of self-realization at a Synanon house.) In large part, the synanons consist of relentless, probing attacks by the members on each other's self-evasions, rationalizations and manifestations of plain dishonesty. There is no "we-they" caste system in these sessions because the Synanist (moderator) is himself a former addict and often brings his own problems into the exchange.

If he stays, the ex-addict not only achieves an increasingly secure knowledge of himself but he also acquires—often for the first time in his life—the fulfilling sense of belonging to a primary group which grows in strength as he grows. The Synanon approach, incidentally, has also shown positive results when applied in the Nevada State Prison at Reno to a variety of hard-core criminals as well as to former addicts; and, in passing, Yablonsky points out the intriguing possibilities of adapting this kind of group "attack therapy" to such other areas of conflict as marriages, parent-children relationships and businesses and industries. (I would add teaching faculties, both in lower schools and colleges).

**I**N any case, the method seems to have worked so far for certain kinds of addicts, and Yablonsky, through this exhaustive exploration of the history and methods of Synanon, has made a formidable case for its extension throughout the country. The only flaw in his argument comes from the totality of his commitment. Nowhere in the book does he indicate what is to be done with those addicts who, because of different psychological or physiological imperatives, are not able to function in the Synanon situation.

Yet there are other possibilities of real and durable aid. Among them could be American adaptations of the "British system" by which doctors, unharassed by law enforcement officials, would decide methods of treatment fitted to each case of addiction. And if a doctor, under the check of a board of his colleagues, were to prescribe a maintenance dosage (not necessarily of heroin) for those addicts who cannot as yet get off drugs, we would at least have that many less criminals and that degree smaller a profit for large-scale, illicit drug sellers.

Yablonsky dismisses this possibility with moralistic arbitrariness—and with no substantial evidence that a British-styled approach cannot work. It is unfortunate that he has become so rigid a convert to Synanon that he will not also explore other ways of bringing addicts back into society; but he has certainly served Synanon well in this book.