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HIS 314: From the Cold War to EU

02 February 2020

Reading Response-Under A Cruel Star: Life in Prague 1941-1968

The voice of Heda Margolius Kovály is carried heavily through each page of *Under A Cruel Star* as if the words from her memoir were of a grim conversation with a long time friend. Carrying weight is the lived experience of a Holocaust survivor encountering hardship having already met the greatest tragedy in European history. However, Kovály is not simply writing a Holocaust memoir, rather she writes a distinct, forward looking story of post-war integration-one where she is faced with grave daily realities that bare no less of a burden as time advances Prague toward Stalinism.

It would be erroneous to limit this narrative to serving a single purpose. In fact, the multipurpose nature of Kovály's story adds layers of complexity to understanding the altered perspective of life for those who came so close to death in Nazi concentration camps. Primarily, the book purposefully brings to light the struggle for acceptance and normalcy in a society that once tried to expel those deemed inferior under Reich German authority. An idea of established normalcy leads into a second purpose, which is to explain the transition from the end of WWII into the growth of the Communist party in Eastern Europe. Kovály writes, "For many people in Czechoslovakia after the war, the Communist revolution was just another attempt to find the way home, to fight their way back to humanity," (Kovály 25). As the story progresses, the author witnesses the search for belonging in Czechoslovakia stray from ideal communism to one that parallels Nazism. She writes, "It seems beyond belief that in Czechoslovakia after the

Communist coup in 1948, people were once again beaten and tortured by the police, that prison camps existed and we did not know, and that if anyone had told us the truth we would have refused to believe it,” (Kovály 11). Taken from the introduction of the memoir, this quote foreshadows the death of Rudolf Margolius, Heda’s husband, who was executed following the Slansky trials among others who were unjustly imprisoned under accusations that they were working against what the party believed, a situation similar to times of Nazi occupation.

The story is told from Heda’s point of view as an outsider who seems to understand the cause of the calamities that face her, yet she is unable to change the systemic issues herself. For example, when returning to Prague having escaped the death march, the author was met by fear from many of her friends who uttered phrases such as, “And am I justified in risking my or anyone else’s life for something I consider a lost cause? What sense does it make anyway to risk one life for another?” (Kovály 29). This ostracized the author from the community in Prague she once knew, establishing an understanding among readers that the author is a stranger in her own home. As the Czechoslovakian state turned more totalitarian, it appeared as if Heda had more consciousness of the Party’s manipulative power, and as a stranger could think beyond the Stalinist propaganda. The author writes, “It is not hard for a totalitarian regime to keep people ignorant. Once you relinquish your freedom for the sake of ‘understood necessity,’ for Party discipline, for conformity with the regime, for the greatness and glory of the Fatherland, or for any of the substitutes that are so convincingly offered, you cede your claim to the truth,” (Kovály 11).

In conclusion, the greatest value the book has added to my academic career is an understanding of factors that laid a foundation for the rise of the Communist party in Eastern Europe. I specifically recall moments in the book where Kovály regards how the shared

experience of torture and near death built ideas of collectivism. From her experience in the death march, the author writes, “As long as we marched together we had the comfort of belonging,” (Kovály 17). In a time where people were ripped away and harmed for their individual identity, the survival for all was greater than that of oneself. This Communist understanding of humanity is different than how Communism is portrayed in a western academic context. I pay respect to this work for enlightening my perspective on how ideological communism values the betterment of all and the building of stronger relationships with your fellow man. As Kovály says, “The only bright side of our life at the time was that it forged such extraordinary human relationships, friendships of a kind that are rarely possible under free, untroubled people,” (Kovály 118).

Work Cited

Kovály Heda. *Under a Cruel Star: a Life in Prague 1941-1968*. Granta, 2012.