

Book Review

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Wagnerová, Alena. 2008. In 1945 They Were Children: Flight and Expulsion in the Life of a Generation. (Julie Winter, trans and ed). Picton Press.

In contrast to the typical depiction of Germans in the context of World War II (WW II) as Nazis, perpetrators, and at best, as guilty bystanders, Alena Wagnerová extends empathetic understanding to her narrators whose experiences and perspectives she captures. She acknowledges their humanity although they are from opposite sides: she is Czech -- they are Germans. But they share the same cohort, born during the decade of 1930-1940. The author invites her subjects to recount their experiences as very young people, at the end of WW II, including expulsion, deportation in cattle cars, critical injury, exposure, pain, illness, starvation, bombing raids, air raid bunkers, burning cities, forced labor, abduction, witnessing murder and death, rapes, forced separation from parents, lack of sanitation and privacy – in short, absolute deprivation, uncertainty and terror. Most of them were Germans from Moravia and Bohemia in the former Czechoslovakia, two were Carpathian Germans from Slovakia, and two from Silesia. They represent about 450,000 people of similar fates – and a total of 14.5 million Germans from East-Central Europe.

The narratives include recollecting their journeys toward eventual resettlement. Re-rooting is seemingly problematic – and connecting with random people they meet, displaced from the same area, appears to follow a natural law. Some express surprise when they realize they actually rooted in a new place they never really considered home. Going “back home” even to visit, reminds them that “you can’t go home again.” They have changed, even if the place appears unchanged. The outlook and behavior of their parents apparently colored the younger or “second” generation’s adjustment and consciousness. The parents’ silence regarding war and expulsion generates distance to the old homeland in the second generation. And of course, there is the political pressure over what is defined and legitimated as “acceptable” personal and collective memory.

Simple as it may appear, Alena Wagnerová’s book represents painstaking, honest work that adds to a growing body of scholarship. It provides another

moving antidote to the intellectual position that history is larger than the individual lives caught up in it. This book reminds us that history is all about these individual lives – they deserve our respect, empathy, understanding, and extension of human rights.