Under a Cruel Star: A Life in Prague 1941-1968 Study Guide

Under a Cruel Star: A Life in Prague 1941-1968 by Heda Margolius Kovaly

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

AHeda Margolius Kovály née Bloch, a Jew, and her family were forcibly evacuated from their home in Prague to the Lodz Ghetto during October 1941. They remained there as conditions deteriorated and the family lost at least one cousin during this period of incarceration. The family otherwise remained more or less intact for three years until about September 1944 when they were forcibly evacuated to Auschwitz concentration camp. There, Kováły's mother was immediately gassed and burned and her father was separated from her. Kováły reports that none of her relations survived the holocaust. Kováły survived the initial selection at Auschwitz and was sent into forced labor. She performed various tasks for about two months, including one prolonged period doing backbreaking labor at a brick factory. In October, 1944, Auschwitz was evacuated in the face of the Russian advance. Kováły and other girls were force-marched west. With several friends, Kováły escaped and returned to Prague where she was effectively sheltered by partisans until the end of the war.

After the war Kováły was reunited with Margolius and they were soon married. Their son Ivan was born 1947. Both joined the Communist Party and Margolius worked in government throughout the change-over to Communist rule c. 1948. Margolius was arrested in 1951 and executed in 1952 during a party purge. In 1953, following a prolonged bout of serious illness, Kováły remarried Pavel Kováły. The Kováły family was ostracized and hazed until c. 1956 when Margolius was officially rehabilitated. Ivan, reared with an assumed name to avoid political persecution, relocated to Great Britain as a young man, and Kováły then lived a relatively productive and peaceful life until 1968 when the Soviet military occupied Czechoslovakia. After a brief period of turmoil, she fled the country and subsequently published her memoirs.

1 and 2

1 and 2 Summary and Analysis

Heda Margolius Kovály, the author, relates her autobiographical memoire in an accessible and open format. She relates most events chronologically and opens with a statement that her life has been shaped by two evil tyrants—Adolf Hitler and Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin—and by her own heart, symbolized by moments of love and hope. As a young Jew, Kovály grew up in Prague. She does not offer her date of birth in the narrative but as she was old enough to accompany a physician on rounds during 1941 it may be surmised that she was born perhaps c. 1920.

In 1941, Prague was occupied by Nazi Germany and Jews and Roma living there were, in October, forcibly evacuated to the Lodz Ghetto—she refers to it as a concentration camp. Kovály recalls the galling transportation and the horrible living conditions encountered in the ghetto. There, she established herself as well as possible, living with her family and accompanying a Jewish physician on rounds. She recalls scenes of starvation and violence, and on one occasion discovers the maggot-infested body of a personal acquaintance. On one occasion she rescues her invalid cousin from a burning tenement—a few days later he lapses into a coma and dies. Kovály recalls the hopelessness and savagery of the situation.

Later, the Lodz ghetto is liquidated and the residents sent to various concentration camps. Kovály and her family are sent to Auschwitz where she and her mother are separated from her father and, moments later, her she is separated from her mother who is immediately gassed and burned. Young, healthy, and strong, Kovály is selected out by Dr. Mengele and spends the remaining years of the war performing slave labor for various industries—at one point in a brick factory. She states that many industrialists were initially at least partially unaware that the labor forces they utilized were composed not of convicted criminals but of state slaves. The working conditions were scarcely survivable—food was insufficient and often withheld, clothing was scavenged, and the work was backbreaking and dangerous. Typically, work days started and ended with hours-long roll calls and hours-long marching to work sites. Thus, the ten or twelve hour labor shifts equated to sixteen or more hours of work every day. Kovály recalls the hopelessness and nearly lethal crushing despair encountered as a slave laborer for Nazi Germany.

The opening chapters of the book are incredibly well written and emotionally powerful. Indeed, they are among the most compelling holocaust writing extant. Several brief anecdotes are offered but it is clear that Kovály does not care to dwell upon the past of the holocaust, insisting, in fact, that to do so is destructive to soul and hope and—also—impossible ("You cannot describe hammer blows that crush your brain" p. 15). By this point in the autobiography, the author is entirely alone in the world, having lost her entire family to the holocaust.

3, 4, and 5

3, 4, and 5 Summary and Analysis

In late 1944 the Nazi war effort begins a final collapse and the Russian armies rapidly advance westward; Auschwitz is evacuated and partially dismantled. Kováły and hundreds of other Jews are force-marched westward through winter and without adequate clothing or food. Stragglers are shot. Kováły recounts how one of the Nazi guards, Franz, frequently acted as executioner while simultaneously protecting a particularly young and frail inmate named Eva with fatherly concern. Although the exact route is not described, it is likely that the inmates were force-marched about 350 miles. Kováły and some of her friends discuss escape and decide to seize any opportunity; they reason that it is better to run and be executed as free people than to remain and be executed as slaves. One night the prisoners are sheltered in a barn. Several gather their meager belongings and sneak away; Kováły is accompanied by Hanka, Zuzka, Mana and Andula. Andula is shot early in their flight and Mana vacillates, momentarily pleading with the others to go back to the known conditions of imprisonment. The four escapees flee to a nearby town where they are briefly sheltered, fed, and assisted by a local Czech woman. In the first hours and days, Kováły exults at the feeling of freedom.

The women continue to another town and again receive assistance from a resident. Fed and encouraged, the women continue to a border checkpoint and sneak across, leaving Nazi Germany and entering the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia where there are somewhat safer though still fugitives. The next day the four women reach the hometown of Zuzka and the party dissolves. Hanka and Kováły are given an automobile ride into the outskirts of Prague by one of Zuzka's relatives. The two women then ride a streetcar into the city and separate on their own paths. Kováły knows that if she is apprehended she will be shot on the spot, and seeks protection from former friends. Some, such as Jenda, had long promised absolute assistance under any circumstances while others are only casual acquaintances. Kováły soon discovers that Jenda and the rest are terrified of harboring her—in fact, of even being seen with her. She spends several days walking the city and calling on a vast number of pre-war associates and friends; without exception, they turn her out. Jenda, Auntie, Franta, Vlada and Marta, Zdena, and Mrs. Machova all offer minor, transient assistance but refuse to substantively help. Prague is gripped by terror. Kováły spends a few days wandering and seeking assistance, then ends up in a church listening to a sermon and doubting her faith and God's goodness. She leaves the sermon and walks to a bridge over the Vltava, contemplating suicide.

Kováły finally calls on her final acquaintance, a man named Ruda. She has already heard that he is rarely home, travelling outside of Prague nearly continuously. Nevertheless, she knocks on the door and it is opened by Marta. Marta explains that her significant other, Vlada, has claimed to have been a resistance partisan for years, but now she has discovered he is full of boasting lies. Marta has contacted Ruda who is in fact a partisan; Ruda has offered his vacant apartment for Kováły's use. Kováły spends the next two weeks in the apartment, first collapsing with a fever and then slowly

convalescing. Eventually a note from Ruda arrives and Kovály officially contacts the local resistance. The note informs her of an exchange of passwords to be used as a recognition symbol, but in the event she need not use it—her appearance is so pronounced that the resistance contact immediately knows who she is.

It is especially interesting to note how ordinary citizens have succumbed so entirely to the terror and tyranny of the Nazi occupiers. The author notes that entire families harboring a single fugitive are all executed if caught. Faced with an old acquaintance, most offer a slice of bread and jam but then insist that she leave and not call again—in effect, they do not call the Gestapo but they certainly consign her to death nonetheless. Fortunately, Kovály hooks up with Ruda who is in a position to offer meaningful assistance. The author will further develop the concept of the collective guilt—and guilty conscience—of the non-deported survivors in subsequent chapters.

6 and 7

6 and 7 Summary and Analysis

For five months Kovály is hidden by the resistance, moving from one locale to another. She spends the time being bored, listening to the radio, and wishing it was safe to go outside and enjoy the springtime. On May 5, 1945, the Czechoslovakian resistance rises up and expels the Nazi occupation as the Russian army reaches the city. Germans are shot down in the streets as the barricades are erected. Kovály assists in the next several days by hauling ammunition while disguised as a Red Cross worker. Kovály acidly observes that in the final hours of the fight self-preserving Czechs appeared from out of the woodwork to establish themselves as resistance fighters.

One day the war comes to a personal conclusion for Kovály as she walks by a river and sees a dead SS soldier lying in a pool of blood—the war is over because she is alive and he is dead. In the next weeks, many pre-war residents return home from the concentration camps. They returned to homes now occupied by others and, devoid of family and assistance, were usually simply turned into the streets. Nobody had documentation and the civil authorities were entirely incapable of dealing with the massive confusion. Kovály visits many friends over the next weeks—they all want to offer meals and company, but none want her to stay with them. Like many, Kovály spends much time trying to locate pre-war Jewish associates who have also survived. False hope abounds but is gradually crushed. Nearly the only person Kovály knew from before the war who has survived the concentration camps is Rudolf Margolius. Kovály does not describe their pre-war relationship in detail though it was obviously close and probably somewhat romantic. They learn of each others' survival long before meeting in person. It is likely that Margolius is several years older than Kovály though the book does not discuss vital statistics in any detail.

After a few months of goodwill, the reality of the new economy causes most people to hoard everything. The black market arises and thrives, and war profiteers seek to hold on to what they've acquired. Returning Jews are turned away from their one-time homes and rejected by their one-time, pre-war friends. Organization is slow and difficult but proceeds. After months of seeking an apartment, Kovály only succeeds by moving bodily into the offices of the housing authority and announcing that as she has no other place to go she will commence living there. Soon enough she receives a tiny apartment —little more than a closet, but still a private home. Margolius moves in and at some point Kovály and Margolius are married. They begin to establish themselves and some old friends—Zdenek and Franta—return.

Franta, having turned Kovály away in her hour of need, now seeks her forgiveness. Without work, most people spend their days arguing about politics. The country must be and will be rebuilt, but along what lines? Franta is a proponent of democracy, but he is nearly alone in his beliefs. Zdenek and, eventually, Margolius join with the overwhelming opinion that Communism provides the only credible solution to the post-war situation.

Kovály provides a lengthy consideration of why Communism was so appealing to the masses of the time. In brief, they concentrated on the theory and idealism without realizing the brutal reality of Communist rule in Russia. This segment of the book presents a very credible sociological analysis of the post-war appeal of Communism. Russia is portrayed as a paradise while in fact it was ruled with terror. Margolius secures a job in government, working as a Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade, and joins the Communist Party. The country slowly rebuilds and turns toward Communism as a rational form of government. Kovály also refutes many of the motives various individuals held for looking toward a solution in Communism.

8 and 9

8 and 9 Summary and Analysis

Kovály vacillates about joining the Communist Party and wants to focus on having children, founding a family life, and pursuing a career. She dislikes meetings, propaganda and politics, but Margolius' involvement deepens. Finally she signs, only somewhat convinced that Communism is a credible system. She attends meetings and is aware of the vastly disparate opinions of the real working class and the Communist intelligentsia. Some of her experiences point to a bleak future—some important Communist officers live in luxurious apartments stuffed with valuables and exotic foods. Others utilize their party position to extort money or favors. Although tangentially involved, through 1948 Kovály focuses on her work and her family and leaves most of the politicking to Margolius. As expected, she is still haunted by fear of imprisonment, torture, and murder. Almost daily, news of some friend's or family member's war-time demise arrives.

In 1946 Kovály secures a job as an art editor for a local publisher. The owner is an older gentleman of education who spends many hours instructing Kovály about Prague, history, and art. As she becomes focused on her profession, Margolius focuses on politics and begins to work at a government post. In the fall of 1946 Kovály becomes pregnant; in February, 1947, she delivers Ivan Margolius, her son. She afterwards recalls the moment as the best of her life. For the remainder of 1947 and the beginning of 1948, Kovály works from home and prefers near-total isolation from the outside world. A neighbor and friend, Mrs. Machova, tends Ivan while Kovály shops and goes out. One day in February, 1948, Kovály walks across St. Wenceslas Square and sees a mass demonstration. Arriving at work, her aged confidant the publisher sadly predicts that Czechoslovakian democracy has died. As predicted, Kovály's observation of the mass street meetings are a witness of the final days of democracy. Throughout the changeover in government, Margolius continues to work as a government official and spends many, many hours at work. To this point in the text, post-war Czechoslovakia has been a tumultuous but essentially safe place—going forward, the country will descend once again into political totalitarianism and terror.

Spring 1948 sees the death—many believe suicide—of Jan Masaryk. Margolius initially declines a high-ranking government position but subsequently is informed that he must accept. He works furiously and attempts to create a perfect work record. Kovály depicts him as entirely devoted, selfless, and somewhat paranoid of making mistakes. Upon Margolius' appointment, Kovály is immediately treated with great deference and reticence by her one-time friends. The Margolius family relocated to a better apartment in a better part of the city and Margolius' income increases. Kovály is frequently offered various gifts and the couple is invited to an endless number of functions. Kovály quickly discovers that all of the politician's wives are afraid of making any comment, gesture, or small talk that could be construed as disloyal to the party. Because of this, the various dinners and gatherings are artificial, constrained, and tedious. Kovály becomes aware

of widespread graft and corruption in the government. While part officials publicly extol the virtues of proletariat work, they simultaneously amass private fortunes and exult in showy excess.

As 1948 draws to a close, the national borders are closed and many large and medium companies are nationalized, smaller establishments are collectivized. The economy surges, but it is to be short-lived. Throughout it all, Margolius continues to work with a frenzied devotion, refusing to admit that anything might be wrong with Communism. Even as Kovály witnesses the corruption and falsity of Communism, Margolius refuses to entertain thoughts of having made a mistake. Margolius insists that Czechoslovakian Communism will never be indistinguishable from Russian Communism, but by the end of 1949 any pretense of being independent of Russia has evaporated.

Margolius continues to submerge himself in government work and brokers several important trade concessions with other countries. Kovály fights off premonitions of impending disaster. On a rare vacation the couple visits an old friend in the country. The man is an old partisan resistance fighter and he takes the occasion of the visit to warn Kovály that Margolius should leave his government post and return to private life as something like a factory worker. Kovály agrees and urges, but Margolius will have nothing of it.

10 and 11

10 and 11 Summary and Analysis

The Iron Curtain descends on Czechoslovakia. The media is entirely controlled by the state. Throughout 1950 and 1951 Communism continued to centralize power and spread terror. Various arrests are noted in the news, and Kováły wonders why so many people are arrested—some few are eventually released c. 1956, but not many. Most issue lengthy confessions laden with stilted party verbiage. The economy slows to a crawl and official propaganda favors the working poor while the party elite consumes with abandon. Going shopping means waiting in long lines to pay exorbitant prices. Kováły secures another job and meets Pavel Kováły whom she will later marry; she describes him as a misfit because he is not interest in party politics. At this point, their relationship is merely that of friendly co-workers.

Margolius and Kováły attend the 1950 anniversary celebration of Victorious February and they are greeted by Klement Gottwald, so intoxicated that he must be supported. Gottwald is flabbergasted to find Kováły sober and insists that she drink. The incident shakes Margolius' convictions about the essential rightness of the Communist cause. By mid-1951, the pall of fear and terror over Prague makes the city feel as hostile as it did during the Nazi occupation. By late 1951 a few close associates of Margolius have been arrested—in effect, they simply disappear. Then, in November 1951, Rudolf Slánský is arrested. Margolius has virtually no connection with Slánský, but the arrest finally causes him to question his years-long devotion to the now-Communist government. Many arrests follow—Kováły notices that nearly everyone arrested is a Jew.

In January 1952 Kováły notices that she and Margolius are being constantly watched and tailed. Their relationship has suffered and they are nearly estranged. For several weeks they do not speak, and then Kováły determines that she must set things right. She vows to change and arranges for a special evening at home. However, as usual Margolius works late into the night. Early the next morning, state police arrive at Kováły's apartment and announce that Margolius has been arrested. Kováły feels her world falling apart, even as the police minutely search the entire apartment. Marenka, a live-in assistant, is enraged that they search her room, too. Kováły, having lived through Nazi deportation and concentration camps, is resigned to the inevitability of the state apparatus of terror. One searcher is particularly aggressive and demeaning, but also deliberately puts aside most of Kováły's currency instead of confiscating it. The police seize a small stack of documents and cash, make out a receipt, and then depart. For the few days after the arrest, Kováły attempts to make contact with government officials but receives only a bureaucratic runaround. With only a few exceptions, when family associates and friends hear about Margolius' arrest they immediately sever all relations with Kováły. Her co-workers become grimly detached and then openly antagonistic; finally she is fired. Her neighbors ignore her and then begin to casually insult her and, finally, to openly revile her. Early on, Kováły discusses her situation with Pavel Eisler and he suggests her apartment must be bugged and then outlines a course of action

which, he warns, is probably fruitless. She calls on other sympathetic associates but, within weeks, most of them have been arrested also.

Kovály contacts Dr. Bartos, an attorney, and he agrees to take her case though he frankly admits there is little he can do. The months drag by and Kovály receives and responds to one letter from Margolius every month. They are prohibited from discussing anything substantive and the letters are mostly conveyances of hope. Eventually Kováły learns that Margolius' case file cryptically is stamped with the letter 'S'—though it will be many, many months before she learns that this means his arrest is associated with Slánský's arrest. She tries to move into cheaper lodging but the party refuses to allow her to leave her expensive apartment. Her landlady begins to steal things in compensation for delinquent rent payments.

12, 13, and 14

12, 13, and 14 Summary and Analysis

By the time of Margolius' arrest, some 50,000 citizens had been arrested for political reasons, a disproportionately high number of them being Jews. The families of arrested persons were subjected to official hazing and, worse, spontaneous exclusion by neighborhoods and associations. Kovály struggles to support herself and Ivan, her child, securing a job working a machine in a small factory and taking on every odd job she can locate. For months, she exchanges a single monthly letter with Margolius. She is informed that he has been expelled from the Communist Party—a bad sign—but hears no other official information. She continues to write many letters and make many telephone calls regarding Margolius' arrest, but they are all to no avail.

Eventually, the Communist Party sends a team to her apartment to survey and catalogue her belongings so that they will know what to seize once Margolius is officially convicted. Machova intervenes by secreting some portable belongings in the tenement's basement. By this time, Kovály has survived the Nazi concentration camps for some six years. Ivan is sent to the country for intermittent periods to gain weight and allow Kovály some time to recover her strength.

The ceaseless physical labor, poor food, and nearly-constant sleep deprivation eventually tell on Kovály's health and she begins to sicken, lose weight, and fret. She develops an intermittent but intense pain. Barely subsisting on her income, she is afraid to take time off work to seek medical attention and determines to ignore the pain. At one point Bartos achieves a minor miracle by gaining official permission for Kovály to access her pre-arrest savings accounts. She uses the funds to pay her attorney and then to enter medical treatments. For several days she is shuttled around by various incompetent doctors until she completely collapses with a high fever. She is diagnosed with influenza, even though she has been running a high fever for over six weeks. Marenka finally causes a public scene and thereby secures a hospitalization for her friend. Ivan is again sent into the country. Kovály is eventually diagnosed with nephritis and peritonitis, among other ailments, and is confined to hospital for several weeks. Kovály receives good attention and care until the staff realizes her husband has been arrested for supposed treason. Thereafter she receives care only from a single older doctor until he is eventually forced into discharging her.

During her hospital stay, the trial of Margolius begins. It is broadcast over the radio and Kovály listens to it with despair; it is reprinted in the newspapers and Kovály reviews the trial transcripts with resignation. Nearly one year after his arrest, Margolius is featured on the radio broadcasts. His voice is flat and halting—Kovály realizes he is repeating a memorized speech. Margolius defames himself and confesses to various crimes including treason; he denigrates his own parents, murdered at Auschwitz, and vilifies his behavior and career. Kovály returns home still serious ill, and her friend Machova is

herself seriously ill in another hospital. One week later, Kovály hears the verdicts read over the radio: "Rudolf Margolius, death penalty" (p. 143).

Kovály spends a week in a delirium of fever. Pavel Eisler arranges for Ivan to say in the country and helps as he can. Kovály receives official visitors who transport her to a prison where she has her last meeting with Margolius, separated by heavy steel-mesh screens. He is thirty-nine and she contemplates his life of hardship. They talk to each other; he tells her he has enjoyed reading a good book—Men of Clear Conscience—a thinly-veiled assertion of innocence. He begs her to remarry, change her name, and provide for Ivan. Then, he is hauled away. Kovály is returned home and again collapses. For the rest of her life she remembers the dreadful day—Margolius is executed by hanging the next morning. Kovály spends about a month in bed recovering, until she can eventually once again walk about. She learns that she, too, has been expelled from the Communist Party. Only the determination to provide for Ivan keeps her alive. When she can finally go outside she dies all her clothing black and dresses in mourning—her refusal to condemn Margolius touches many who eventually come to believe he must have been innocent. Ivan eventually returns from the country and promises to support his mother.

15, 16, and 17

15, 16, and 17 Summary and Analysis

After recovering, Kováły realizes she will need a death certificate to arrange her life. She receives a bureaucratic runaround—she cannot receive a death certificate without a coroner's report; she cannot receive a coroner's report without party permission. She briefly takes their refusal to mean Margolius has not been executed—such false hope is fruitless, however. Two years later a death certificate is finally issued—date of death December 3, 1952; date of issue January 5, 1955; cause of death suffocation by hanging; place of burial none. Some years later she learns that the bodies of all the men had been cremated and their ashes had been dumped onto an icy roadway on the outskirts of Prague to provide traction for the automobile carrying the men charged with their disposal.

Now associated with a convicted traitor, Kováły is evicted from her apartment. Her belongings are seized and she is relocated to a tiny, insufficient, and dilapidated tenement. Pavel Kováły, her future second husband, helps her relocate and finds a stove to heat the new apartment. Seriously ill, out of work, and depressed, Kováły worries that she will soon be arrested for being a parasite on society—in other words, for being unemployed. Fortunately, she finds a sort of part-time, work-at-home job weaving scarves from cotton waste. Just six months after Margolius is executed, Stalin dies and within a few weeks Gottwald dies. Fairly rapidly, many trials are suspended and the accused are released.

In the spring of 1953 currency devaluation occurs and Kováły's savings are virtually wiped out in the fifty-to-one reduction. Kováły responds by volunteering for summer work during the harvest—seen as very patriotic service. She works for a few weeks before physically collapsing under the difficult work. When she returns to Prague she learns she has been fired from her part-time job. Desperate and depressed, Kováły considers suicide but holds on for Ivan. Pavel Kováły obtains some work for her as a freelance artist, the work being published under his name. Finally, Pavel Kováły and Kováły are married; he is immediately fired and the hapless couple move in with his mother. Kováły eventually begins to translate English-language books and continues in that profession for the remainder of her life.

In 1956 Nikita Khruschchev gains power and begins to criticize the reign of Stalin. Fairly quickly, soviet satellite nations begin to release political prisoners and declare them to be rehabilitated. In Czechoslovakia Slánský, Margolius, and others are officially—but secretly—rehabilitated. The party admits that confessions were forced through drugs, torture, and psychological manipulation. Although not officially circulated, the news travels rapidly through the grapevine. Kováły finally tells Ivan, now a teenager, the truth about his father.

18 and 19

18 and 19 Summary and Analysis

In mid-1963 Kovály is summoned before a party committee and is told of her late husband's secret rehabilitation. She reacts with fury and demands an official inquiry. Minor party officials decline to pursue the matter further and imply that she should be grateful for even this small acknowledgment. She is allowed to read a small portion of an official transcript that exonerates her husband, but is told that the information will not be made public. Subsequently, Kovály writes letters and requests official inquiries. Some action follows but in general Kovály is expected to toe the party line. Eventually, after years, the party publishes a minor notice that the men have been rehabilitated.

Through 1967, public sentiments shift away from the Communist party. Kovály attends one mass meeting where various party officials make statements and then accept questions from attendees. Many of the questions are penetrating and highly critical of the government. One man wants to know the full truth about the many political trials—show trials—of the past. In the spring of 1968 Communist rule temporarily crumbles as the people reject the system. Government officials resign and mass meetings are common. A feeling of political victory and freedom pervades the city. However, the Soviet Union responds negatively and masses military forces along the borders. For months, talks are conducted and compromises made. However, the new Czechoslovakian leadership is then effectively kidnapped and Soviet bloc troops occupy the country.

On the morning of the occupation, Pavel Kovály is in the United States for a period of work and Ivan has permanently relocated to Great Britain. Kovály is alone and reacts by immediately attempting flight. She is stopped at the border by Czech soldiers. They refuse to let her leave because she does not have appropriate paperwork. She returns to Prague and is caught up in the pervasive spirit of resistance. For several weeks she puts up posters, distributes leaflets, and participates in various forms of nonviolent resistance. The news the comes over the radio that the Soviet occupation is irresistible and the new government has acceded to demands. Kovály packs a few belongings and bids farewell to her country, leaving by train with many others just before, once again, the borders are sealed by the Communists.

Characters

Heda Margolius Kovály

Heda Margolius Kovály is the author of the autobiographical text. She does not provide demographic data regarding her life, though she was probably born c. 1923. She notes she was still a child while her first husband, Rudolf Margolius, was already an adult—his birth being during 1913—and she notes being old enough to accompany a physician on rounds in the Lodz Ghetto during c. 1941 but being young enough to be forced into slave labor by the Nazi regime during her incarceration at Auschwitz and elsewhere.

Kovály, a Jew, and her family were forcibly evacuated to the Lodz Ghetto during October 1941. They remained there as conditions deteriorated and the family lost at least one cousin during this period of incarceration. Lodz is estimated to have housed about 204,000 Jews and Kovály is one of only about 10,000 survivors. The family remained more or less intact for three years until about September 1944 when they were forcibly evacuated to Auschwitz concentration camp. There, Kovály's mother was immediately gassed and burned and her father was separated from her. Kovály reports that none of her relations survived the holocaust. Kovály survived the initial selection at Auschwitz and was sent into forced labor. She performed various tasks for about two months, including one prolonged period doing backbreaking labor at a brick making factory. In October, 1944, Auschwitz was evacuated in the face of the Russian advance. Kovály and other girls were force-marched west. With several friends, Kovály escaped and returned to Prague where she was sheltered by partisans until the end of the war.

After the war Kovály was reunited with Margolius and they were soon married. Their son, Ivan was born 1947. Both joined the Communist Party and Margolius worked in government. He was arrested in 1951 and executed in 1952 during a party purge. In 1953 she remarried Pavel Kovály. The Kovály family was ostracized and hazed until c. 1956 when Margolius was officially rehabilitated. Ivan moved to Great Britain as a young man, and Kovály lived a relatively productive and peaceful life until 1968 when the Soviet military occupied Czechoslovakia. After a brief period of turmoil, she fled the country and subsequently published her memoirs.

Rudolf Margolius

Rudolf Margolius (1913 - 1952), was the first husband of the author of the book. He receives a fair amount of biographical attention through the middle section of the text, with an emphasis on his professional role as Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade for Czechoslovakia from 1949 through 1952. Margolius survived incarceration in Auschwitz and Dachau from 1941 through 1945. In 1945 he was made a leader of a war refugee camp. He joined the Czechoslovakian Communist Party in late 1945 and worked until 1948 as a minor party functionary. He worked with the ministry of Foreign Trade from 1948 through 1952, successfully negotiating an important trade treaty with England in

1949. He was arrested in 1952 on vague charges and was accused of having participated in a conspiracy. Coerced into signing confessions, Margolius was executed December, 1952.

Margolius and Kovály married c. 1945 after being reunited. Their prior relationship is not fully explained in the book, but was obviously romantic. They had met when she was 12 and he was an older man, probably about 20. He had determined early to marry her and they had developed a lengthy relationship. They had one child—Ivan Margolius—together. Margolius is portrayed in the book as a devoted but often absent husband and father. Somewhat divorced from the realities of socialism, Margolius preferred to rely upon official reports instead of his own observations. Kovály reports that none of Margolius' relations survived the holocaust.

Ivan Margolius

Ivan Margolius, born 1947, is the only child of Rudolf Margolius and Heda Margolius Kovály. Too young to remember his father's arrest, Ivan is raised by Heda and spends many months with distant relatives in the country. He is usually described as too thin and often sickly, though his stints in the countryside cause him to become healthy.

During Kovály's medical collapse following her husband's arrest and conviction, Ivan stays with relatives for nearly one year. Returning home in 1952, Ivan is told that his father has died in a far-away country; he responds by determining to help support his mother. Ivan is Kovály's only substantive tie to life and the determination to care for him doubtlessly keeps her alive throughout several difficult periods. Ivan grows up ignorant of his father's conviction—Kovály tells him the truth when he is about fifteen. Ivan, characteristically, adapts. As an adult Ivan published at least one book on art and made his profession as an architect. He lives in London with his wife and two children.

Hanka, Zuzka, Mana, and Andula

The four named women are friends of Kovály during her final days at Auschwitz, and together the five are forcibly evacuated westward to avoid liberation by the approaching Russian army. When the evacuation detail nears Prague, the five women decide to attempt escape and one night they flee. Andula is shot in the escape process; the other four women make good their escape. Mana initially argues that they should return to captivity rather than face an uncertain future. Zuzka's home town is nearest and the three other women are cared for briefly by Zuzka's relatives. Mana is ill and remains with Zuzka while Hanka and Kovály proceed to Prague where they, too, separate. The ultimate fates of Hanka, Zuzka, and Mana are not related in the book.

Jenda, Auntie, Franta, Vlada and Marta, and Zdena

The seven named individuals are pre-war acquaintances of Kovály who remain living in Prague during late 1944. After escaping from Nazi imprisonment, Kovály calls on them

each, requesting assistance. Jenda had often professed a willingness to help under any circumstances but in the event offers little more than a cup of tea and bad advice. Auntie, an acquaintance of Kovály's parents, likewise offers some food but little else. Franta, another friend, is afraid to even be seen with Kovály.

After the war, Franta remains a friend, however, and is involved in politics. Vlada and Marta are a couple—Vlada has spent the war boasting to Marta of his connections with the local resistance, so when Kovály appears Marta is happy to offer assistance only to discover that Vlada's declamations have all been lies—he has passed his time away from home at the pub, drinking. Zdena offers food and one night's shelter, but that is all. Fortunately, Marta is able to contact Ruda, a real partisan, and secure long-term assistance for Kovály. It is interesting to note that all of those who refuse to offer substantive help justify their personal terror through some appeal to common sense.

Mrs. Machova

Machova is an older woman who is apparently a friend of the family prior to World War II. During the war, Machova remains in Prague and retains some few belongings of the Bloch family which she subsequently returns to Kovály upon her return. While Kovály seeks shelter in Prague prior to the end of the war, Machova offers some food and occasional shelter. After the war, Machova remains a friend and often assists Kovály with domestic tasks and serves as a babysitter. After Margolius' arrest, Machova remains a close and devoted confidant and is always there for Kovály in the hour of need. Indeed, Machova is the sole non-related person in the book who is always dependable and reliable.

Ruda

Ruda is an acquaintance of Kovály though they were apparently not very close before the war. Ruda's wartime job is not described other than to say it keeps him away from home for all but a few days each year. Ruda is connected with the resistance and, when informed of Kovály's plight, immediately offers his usually-vacant apartment as a temporary hiding place. He then arranges for Kovály to contact local resistance elements and thereby ensures her ultimate survival. Unlike many other associates, Ruda is selfless and brave.

Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk

Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850 - 1937) was a Czechoslovakian statesman and became the first president of Czechoslovakia subsequent to World War I. Masaryk was highly influential and ideological and was held in the highest esteem by Czechoslovakians. The author refers to Masaryk in glowing terms in several minor passages in the book. Masaryk died of natural causes. His son, Jan Masaryk, served as the Foreign Minister of the Czechoslovakian government-in-exile during World War II.

Klement Gottwald

Klement Gottwald (1896 - 1953) was a Czechoslovakian Communist politician and leader of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Later, he was prime minister and president of Czechoslovakia. In early 1921 Gottwald helped found the Czechoslovakian Communist Party and by 1945 he was the Secretary-General of the party (he spend the war years as a political exile in Moscow). In 1948 Gottwald was propelled to the political spotlight through a series of major victories in national elections. After the February 1958 coup d'état, Gottwald became the new president of Czechoslovakia. Most Czechoslovakians—even devoted Communists—resisted Russian influence which led to Gottwald pursuing a series of political purges; Margolius is a victim of one such purge. He died of natural causes shortly after Stalin.

Rudolf Slánský

Rudolf Slánský (1901-1952) was a Czechoslovakia Communist politician and, briefly, the party's General Secretary. He fell out of favor with the party leadership in the early 1950s and was arrested in November, 1951, along with about a dozen so-called co-conspirators. The men, including Margolius, were eventually executed. Slánský and Margolius had little real connection; instead, they were lumped together with others into a fabricated conspiracy. Like Margolius, Slánský formally confessed to a laundry-list of fabricated charges. Other than being the putative ringleader of the supposed conspiracy, Slánský has virtually no appearance in the book.

Pavel Kovály

Pavel Kovály is Kovály's second husband; the book offers virtually no biographical data about the man. Pavel Kovály and Kovály meet c. 1947 at work and become distant friends. After Margolius' arrest, Pavel Kovály assists Kovály with some domestic chores but maintains a respectful distance from the still-married woman. After Margolius is executed, Pavel Kovály remains a good friend and takes serious risks in assisting Kovály on several occasions. They are married in 1953 and Pavel Kovály is immediately fired from his job. He thereafter makes somewhat of a living doing menial labor. The married couple is apparently happy though Kovály little discusses her personal life after Margolius.

Objects/Places

Czechoslovakia

Czechoslovakia was a sovereign European state established October 1918 and persisting until 1992. During World War II, most of Czechoslovakia was occupied by Nazi Germany (the remainder was annexed by Hungary). After World War II, many Czechoslovakian citizens embraced Communism and in February 1948 the Communist Part seized power. Czechoslovakia remained in Communist control until 1968 when it became a federation of the Czech Socialist Republic and the Slovak Socialist Republic.

Lodz Ghetto

Kovály and here family were initially deported to what she calls the Lodz Ghetto (officially, the Ghetto Litzmannstadt). After the Warsaw Ghetto, the Lodz Ghetto was the largest forced concentration of Jews and Roma in German-occupied Poland. The Lodz Ghetto was the last ghetto in Poland to be liquidated. From the Lodz Ghetto, Kovály and her family, with all the remaining residents, were deported to Auschwitz.

Auschwitz

Auschwitz is the name given to a system of execution and forced labor compounds located in Upper Silesia and operated by the Nazis during World War II. Kovály, along with hundreds of thousands of other Jews, was forcibly deported to Auschwitz where she was assigned to perform forced labor. Most Jews, including Kovály's mother, were not so 'fortunate' and were instead quickly murdered, their remains being cremated and their ashes frequently incorporated into paving material. Auschwitz is today remembered as the site of the most horrific aspects of the Holocaust.

Prague

Prague is the capital and largest city of the Czech Republic and was, during the time of the book, also the capital and largest city of Czechoslovakia. It is widely considered to be among the most beautiful cities in the world and the author certainly esteems the city as a vibrant and organic location. Prague was occupied by Nazi Germany during World War II and from 1948 through 1968 Prague was under the military and political control of the Soviet Union.

Communism

Communism is a political theory first codified by Lenin and later championed in modified form by Stalin. In general theory, Communism seeks to establish a classless, stateless

society through the destruction of the bourgeoisie and the ascendancy of a universal proletariat. In Czechoslovakian practice, Communism was little more than a tyrannical police state.

Victorious February

Victorious February is the name given to the soviet-backed Czechoslovakian coup d'état of 1948 resulting in a Communist takeover of the formerly-democratic state. Victorious February was on early indicator of the forthcoming Cold War and was officially celebrated with organized national pride.

Ruzyn Prison

Ruzyn Prison, formally Prague Ruzyně Remand Prison, is a prison in Prague. It is the site of Margolius' lengthy imprisonment, torture, forced confession, and execution. Portions of the prison are somewhat described in latter chapters of the book.

Party Committees

The Communist Party is organized around various affiliations known as committees. Nothing in Communist Prague can happen without approval from the appropriate committee. Issues too controversial for the local committees are referred to the national committees. In general, the entire fabulous bureaucratic nightmare of Communism is embodies in the system of committees. Kovály is endlessly interacting with this or that committee.

Secret Reports

Margolius' eventual rehabilitation is first reported in a few secret reports. These documents represent official Communist Party policy but are not publicly circulated. This puts Kovály in a difficult situation because she is allowed to read portions of some secret reports but cannot subsequently demonstrate that her information is valid. Secret reports complement various committees as the nightmare backdrop of Communist tyranny presented in the book.

Prague Spring, 1968

The Prague Spring of 1968 was a period of political liberalization in Czechoslovakia and marked the temporary end of Soviet domination and the beginning of a brief period democracy. The Soviet Union responded by military conquest of Czechoslovakia and subsequent violent suppression until 1990. The book was published after the Prague Spring and concludes with end of that event.

Themes

Ostracism

The author, a Jew, spends most of her adult life ostracized from society. This forcible separation takes many forms in the novel. First, the author and her natal family are separated into the Lodz ghetto; they are then deported to Auschwitz where they are all murdered, except the author. The author subsequently escapes from Nazi imprisonment and returns to her non-Jewish friends living in her hometown of Prague. There, she is stunned to discover that nearly without exception they do not want to associate with her and are afraid of being known to have seen her. Their fear of social reprisal is so great that they drive her from their homes. She manages to survive by obtaining shelter from local partisans until the end of the war. She then begins a period of a few years of belonging, but notes that anti-Semitism was still prevalent throughout Czechoslovakian society.

After a few years of relative freedom, the author's husband falsely is accused of political crimes, imprisoned, tortured, and executed. Once again, the author faces the familiarity of utter rejection from society. She records how people would spit at her, how others like her were stoned, and how she was officially hazed and socially ostracized at all levels of existence. This hatred is so pervasive that after she remarries even her new husband is subjected to it. It is so pervasive that she raises her son with an assumed surname and does not tell him the truth about his father until a regime change allows official rehabilitation. Indeed, the theme of ostracism runs throughout the narrative and forms one of the basic frameworks of the book.

Survival

The author was one of about 10,000 people believed to have survived incarceration in the Lodz ghetto. She and Rudolf Margolius were two survivors of Auschwitz and the Nazi holocaust. She survived prolonged periods of serious infection and illness. She survived years of being hazed by the Communist party and ostracized socially. She survived the execution of her first husband. Indeed, the theme of survival forms a major portion of the book, and is also the framework upon which the text's fundamental message of home is constructed.

The author argues that survival alone is insufficient; one must not only survive, but one must thrive with the spirit of life. This theme is developed in the book by several means; one of the most interesting being the relatively frequent literary device of positioning personal crisis against the larger backdrop of natural processes. Thus, the author recalls various springtime events, landscapes, and the beauty of the city of Prague alongside of calamitous personal events. The book demonstrates convincingly and conclusively that the spark of life—the author refers to it as a fluttering little bird in the opening paragraph of the text—is inexhaustible.

Politics

By any measure the book contains a vast amount of politics and political commentary. This is unavoidable to some degree, as the author directly participated in many of the seminal events of modern history. The author lives through the Nazi occupation, through genocide and the holocaust, and on to Communist takeover in Czechoslovakia. Even so, the author's younger years of survival through the Nazi holocaust appear to have been fairly apolitical. Her world-view appears to have been, quite understandably, forged in the inferno of Lodz and Auschwitz, and extends beyond the mere accumulation of wealth or the exercise of power for power's sake. Indeed, the author and her first husband, Rudolf Margolius, become involved in Communist politics precisely because it was idealistic and Utopian.

The author then chronicles the divergence of ideological Communism and applied Soviet-style Communism during the early 1950s. Naturally, a fair amount of insightful commentary is included but the fundamental concept is that tyranny, in whatever form, is evil and destructive. The book ends with a prolonged political commentary on the Prague Spring of 1968 and the immediate results of that transient upheaval.

Style

Perspective

The text is presented as a personal memoir of a political refugee who participated in many of the seminal political events of modern history. It is written in the first-person point of view which is appropriate and ensures an engaging and accessible text. Kovály, the author, is also the primary participant in most aspects of the narrative—as expected for a book of this type. Kovály is clearly qualified to deliver the book. She is a survivor of the Lodz Ghetto, a survivor of Auschwitz, an escapee from the Nazi death camps, and the wife of a political figure who was executed during a Stalinesque purge. Thus, as an eye-witness and participant her narrative is credible, accessible, and highly engaging. Kováły's focus is on personal experiences during historic events—thus, she relates living under trying times, working under Communist rule, and facing down a vast governmental bureaucracy.

Kovály clearly intended the work to be more than an intimate memoir, however. It contains a large amount of political commentary and presents a foundational rationale against governmental tyranny in whatever guise it adapts. The book is far more philosophical than autobiographical, and this is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the nearly complete lack of personal details of the type commonly found in works of this type—the author does not even note her own birth day, for example. Instead, the material focuses on the processes whereby populaces are led into slavery by tyrannical governments.

Tone

By any measure the book's tone is bleak—but not hopeless. The author's story begins with the Nazi holocaust, moves through slave labor at Auschwitz, and then settles down into the Soviet reign of terror during the early 1950s. The author loses literally every relation during the Nazi genocide only to find her one personal tie with the past in Rudolf Margolius, whom she marries. After only a few years of marriage, however, he is swept up in a sham trial for political reasons and after spending a year under torture in prison, he—also a survivor of Auschwitz—is hanged for treason. The author is left destitute with a young child and faces a long period of forced unemployment, official hazing, social ostracism, and collapsing health. Managing to survive this period, she remarries and muddles through Communist rule and tyranny in Czechoslovakia until the political uprising of 1968. Her adult life of about twenty-seven years thus includes perhaps six years of relative peace and perhaps twenty-one years of torture, forced labor, incarceration, and persecution.

This tone is balanced, however, by the author's fundamentally optimistic outlook and her insistent demand that most people are essentially good. One might suppose this world-

view to be highly peculiar for an Auschwitz survivor, but the author notes that many such survivors are convinced of the positive aspect of humanity's essential character.

Structure

The 192-page book is divided into 19 unnamed and un-enumerated chapters, or brief segments. Each chapter is presented in a more-or-less chronological fashion though notable exceptions exist. In general, it is quite easy to follow the chronology of the book, especially as many referenced events are well-established historical facts. The author does not provide demographic or biographic data for most participants beyond what can be incidentally gleaned from her personal accounts. For example, she neglects to offer her birth date and other vital statistics.

The book has a complicated publishing history, being originally published in the Czech language in Canada. It was first published in English c. 1973 and has been subsequently published under a variety of titles and bound with additional materials—frequently with a political essay by Erazim Kohak. When republished as Under a Cruel Star the book was revised and retranslated. Thus, several English-language versions of the text exist.

The book is an autobiographical memoire about a restricted period of time and focuses quite heavily on political developments in Prague from 1941 through 1968, though there is almost no material covering the years 1954, 1955, and 1957 through 1967. The book presents the holocaust only briefly, and by the end of the third chapter the author has escaped from Nazi imprisonment. Thus, most of the book deals with the Soviet reign of terror in Prague. The book's excellent translation powerfully presents the author's exceptional writing, and the material is intelligible and easily accessible.

Quotes

Three forces carved the landscape of my life. Two of them crushed half the world. The third was very small and weak and, actually, invisible. It was a shy little bird hidden in my rib cage an inch or two above my stomach. Sometimes in the most unexpected moments the bird would wake up, lift its head, and flutter its wings in rapture. Then I too would life my head because, for that short moment, I would know for certain that love and hope are infinitely more powerful than hate and fury, and that somewhere beyond the line of my horizon there was life indestructible, always triumphant.
The first force was Adolf Hitler; the second, Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin. They made my life a microcosm in which the history of a small country in the heart of Europe was condensed. The little bird, the third force, kept me alive to tell the story. (p. 5)

Two days later, we boarded the train. Even though in the following years I would experience infinitely more grueling transports, this one seemed to be the worst because it was the first. If every beginning is hard, the beginning of hardship is the hardest. We were not yet inured to sounds of gunshots followed by agonizing screams, to unendurable thirst, nor to the suffocating air in the crammed cattle cars.
Upon our arrival in Lodz, we were greeted by a snowstorm. It was only October, but in the three years I spent there I never again saw such a blizzard. We left the railroad station, plodding with difficulty against the wind and, for the first time, saw people who were dying of hunger, little children almost naked and barefoot in the snow.
A few days later, I wandered into a basement. The young people from our transport were sitting on the floor around a kerosene lamp and someone was playing Czech folk songs on a harmonica. There was an arched ceiling on which the lamp cast long strangely shaped shadows, making it look like the vault of a cathedral. I stood in the doorway and thought: now an angel should appear and leave a mark of blood on the forehead of everyone who will die here. (p. 7)

When the Germans finally withdrew, I could go outside for the first time in years without fear. The day before, a bullet had grazed my leg, and I could not walk without difficulty. Slowly I limped out of the house down along a narrow footpath we called the "mouse hole" that had been worn down through the lilac bushes to the riverbank. The air was quiet, sweet with the scent of lilac, and only now and then did a shot ring out as people combing parks and attics discovered the last Germans in hiding.
I walked out onto Klarov, into the open space before the bridge. There was not a living soul anywhere, only Prague spread out above and around me in an embrace. It was that moment just before sunset, when outlines briefly become sharp and clear and colors more brilliant, reminding us that the night is short, that darkness comes and then goes again. I walked a few steps farther and saw, down by the bridge, a man in the black uniform of the SS, lying in a puddle of black blood. Prague glowed and arched above that black puddle and the black, now harmless, thing lying in it and I said to myself, "Now, at this moment and on this spot, the war is over, because he is dead and I am alive." (pp. 44-45)

Ervin Bloch was my father's name. His emaciated white face flashed before my eyes as I had seen him last, after we got off the train at the railway station in Auschwitz, among a group of people destined to die. His eyes said: Good-bye, take care of your mother. But my mother had been torn away from me a few minutes later and, when I ran after her, a soldier with a submachine gun grabbed my shoulder and knocked me to the ground. By that time the handsome Dr. Mengele had already beckoned, and my mother was swallowed up by the thousand-headed serpent which was disappearing into a windowless building in the distance. I rose from the dirt, stunned. I glimpsed only my mother's arms reaching out toward me as if she were drowning. That soldier with the submachine gun was still standing there and I shouted at him, "What's going to happen to them? What are you going to do with them?" But he only grinned derisively. "Shut up! Nothing's happening. You'll see them again in a few hours." Then a girl in a striped shift who had a shaven head brushed against me and whispered, "Don't believe him. You'll never see them again. They burn them all." At that moment, the whole world exploded in fire and smoke and the fire burned my brain to ashes so that only one cell was left. That one cell flickered on and off like a signal light for weeks on end and, each time it lit up, it shone on my mother and father as they fell with outstretched arms into the flames. (p. 48)

When the war finally ended, our joy soon changed into a sense of anticlimax and a yearning to fill the void that this intensity of expectation and exertion of will had left behind. A strong sense of solidarity had evolved in the concentration camps, the idea that one individual's fate was in every way tied to the fate of the group, whether that meant the group of one's fellow prisoners, the whole nation, or even all of humanity. For many people, the desire for material goods largely disappeared. As much as we longed for the comforts of life, for good food, clothing, and homes, it was clear to us that these things were secondary, and that our happiness and the meaning of our lives lay elsewhere. I remember how some of our fellow citizens for whom the war years had been a time of acquisition and hoarding, stared when we did not try to retrieve stolen property, to apply for restitution, to seek inheritances from relatives. This was true not only to Rudolf and myself, but of any number of people who had come to identify their own well-being with the common good and who, rather logically, ended up in the most ideologically alluring political party—that of the Communists. (p. 60)

What I remember most vividly from this period following the coup is a feeling of bewilderment, of groping in the dark that was doubly oppressive because the darkness was not only outside but inside me as well. How could we have been so credulous? So ignorant? It seems that once you decide to believe, your faith becomes more precious than truth, more real than reality. (p. 80)

At about the same time, Prague wits were beginning to define socialism as a system designed to successfully resolve problems that could never arise under any other political system. (p. 86)

Day after day, the newspapers carried detailed testimony from the accused, who not only made no attempt to defend themselves, confessing to all crimes as charged, but

even kept introducing new accusations against themselves, heaping one on top of another.
Is this all or is there more you did to betray your country? Did you sell out your people to the enemy in other ways?
There is more. In my limitless hatred for the popular democratic order, I also committed the crime of...
Aside from the official record of the courtroom proceedings, there was other reading matter, often more shocking than the trial itself. There was the letter-to-the-editor from Lisa London, the wife of one of the three men tried who would be sentenced to life imprisonment. She wrote about a man with whom she had lived for sixteen years, with whom she had raised children and fought against the Nazis in the French Resistance, and the authenticity of her sorrow and despair was clear, "I lived with a traitor..."
Another letter-to-the-editor came from a child, from Ludvik Frejka's sixteen-year-old son Thomas: "I demand that my father receive the highest penalty, the death sentence...and it is my wish that this letter be read to him." (p. 139)

More than thirty years have now passed and that night is still not over. It remains to this day as a screen onto which my present life is projected. I measure all my happiness and all my misfortunes against it, in the way that the height of mountains and the depth of valleys are measured against the level of the sea.
I have asked myself more than once: What if Rudolf had died of some protracted illness? What if he had been suffering for months on end from intolerable physical pain with both of us knowing, as we knew then, that he had to die? Would it have been any easier? I think so. We all can bear the pain that comes from being flesh and blood, transients, doomed to die. But it is impossible to be reconciled to suffering that man inflicts in cold blood on his fellow man. (p. 148)

I received the death certificate two years later. It is a unique document.
Date of death: December 3, 1952
Date of issue: January 5, 1955
Occupation of deceased: Deputy Minister
Cause of death: Suffocation by hanging
Place of Burial:
This last point would be clarified twenty years later. (pp. 152-153)

Groups of students would sit around the Jan Hus monument in the Old Town Square playing their guitars and singing till dawn. Tourists from abroad and our own people would join them, listening, and pondering those beautiful, deceitful words carved into the stone: Truth Prevails.
Does it? Truth alone does not prevail. When it clashes with power, truth often loses. It prevails only when people are strong enough to defend it. (p. 182)

The train did not stop long at the border and, when it began to move, I leaned out the

window as far as I could, looking back. The last thing I saw was a Russian soldier, standing guard with a fixed bayonet. (p. 192)

Topics for Discussion

During a daring escape from Nazi incarceration, one of the author's friends states "there's just one thing about this situation that bothers me: the fact that, right now, we exist totally outside of the law" (p. 21). Most citizens in most nations ruled by law consider conformance with the law to be a basic tenet of civilization. Yet in Nazi Germany and Communist Czechoslovakia, the laws demanded impossible things. Discuss your probably reaction to laws which would legalize and subsequently authorize genocide or political executions.

While performing forced labor as an inmate of Auschwitz, Kovály speaks with her 'employer' at some length on one occasion, and informs him of the reality of the workers' lives. He seems simultaneously incredulous and crushed. Do you think it likely, or even possible, that the typical German citizen knew next to nothing about the holocaust? Discuss.

Do you think you would have survived Auschwitz?

Do modern developments in Communist nations such as Czechoslovakia definitively discredit the theory of Communism? Or are modern Communist governments Communist only in name? Is an example of a 'pure' Communist government extant in history? If the Soviet military had not occupied Czechoslovakia during 1968, do you think that country could have been a successful demonstration of Communism?

Having survived the holocaust, Kovály and Margolius, like many thousands of other Jews, faced persecution because of their culture and religion. Why do you think that anti-Semitism is such an entrenched and horrific bias?

In order to shield Ivan from the facts, Kovály raised him ignorant of his father's demise—he was told he had died abroad while on business. Ivan was raised with a fake surname to sever the tie to his father's political legacy. Do you think Kovály's approach to raising Ivan was essentially correct? Why or why not?

How would you characterize the book? It is a concise autobiography or a personal statement of politics? Discuss.