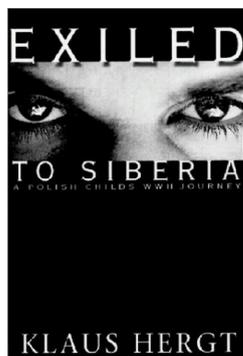


Exiled to Siberia: A Polish Child's World War II Journey by Klaus Hergt (2000), 235 pages.



This book is the life story of Henryk (Hank) Birecki whom the author met in Michigan 25 years ago and then waited patiently all this time to be allowed to write about it. Klaus Hergt is a physician but evidently also a man of many talents. Here he proves himself an ideal listener and relates the memorable experience of his American friend. Hank was a Polish boy born in a small town of Krasne, thirty miles east of Lwów. His handsome father was a local policeman performing routine duties in a tranquil countryside; his mother was of Ukrainian extraction, deeply devoted to her family, which included Hank, a 5-year younger daughter Romana, and an energetic grandmother. They also owned a small farm and were truly a happy household. From the start, Hergt follows Hank's recollections in great detail as a third-person narrator. There are no fictitious dialogues, no invented scenes, which might create doubts as to their veracity, and no trace of annoying ghost-writing. It is in effect a very authentic and deeply moving story of what happened half a century ago.

Hank was only ten years old when World War II started. On the very first day German bombers attacked his hometown, for it had a strategic rail importance. His happy childhood instantly ended. It is amazing how many fond memories remained with Hank as he recalls them, including his friend Rex, the faithful dog. Soon thereafter dramatic events took place, some of them caused by different ethnic origins of his parents. For American readers it may be incomprehensible, but in that part of Eastern Europe it was often a common problem. The father became a fugitive from his family. If apprehended, his fate would have been sealed as it was indeed for 20,000 officers, policemen, or other Poles who ended up in Katyń or similar places. Yet his going into hiding did not protect the family; Krasne was annexed by the Soviet Union. A short time later they were shipped to Siberia in a cattle car along with 70 other local residents of whom only twenty survived. They were found to be "in need of correctional labor" otherwise known as anti-Soviet elements. They were given 30 minutes to pack; fortunately, grandmother remembered to take along a tea kettle, which proved to be an invaluable treasure.

Regarding the family's stay in Siberia, suffice it to say that they were transported north of Tobolsk, behind the Ural Mountains. The author spares us horror stories; rather, he repeats the narrative of Hank and his little sister, who was only five-year-old at the time. These little children were completely helpless, particularly after their mother suddenly died. A year and a half later the war between Nazi Germany and the Soviets broke out, and a modest Polish rescue unit appeared, searching for orphans and other people in distress. There came a parting of the children from their grandmother, who wisely allowed them to leave. Again the author refrains from expressing agonizing thoughts while remaining a sympathetic but impartial narrator.

The last part of this sorrowful odyssey relates the travels of Hank and Romana from Siberia via Samarkand, Krasnovodsk, and across the Caspian Sea to Persia, a seemingly endless voyage through deserts, never knowing where the next stop will be. This trek continued via Karachi and Bombay, where an American ship took 700 wounded U.S. soldiers and 200 Polish orphans on a six-week trip via Australia and the South Pacific to California. For political reasons (the Soviets were America's allies at that time), the children were promptly re-shipped to Mexico; they proved to be an unwanted human cargo. Their misery ended in 1946, when this sorry group arrived at their ultimate destination, the United States. Finally, they had reached the end of the tunnel, and the sun of hope came over the horizon. From here on the story is cheerful, but the end will-not be revealed.

The author includes an extensive bibliography and a long introduction by Dr. Piotrowski of the University of New Hampshire. Let it be stated that two thousands Polish orphans were brought out of Siberia in this manner to safe locations elsewhere in the world.

George Suboczewski