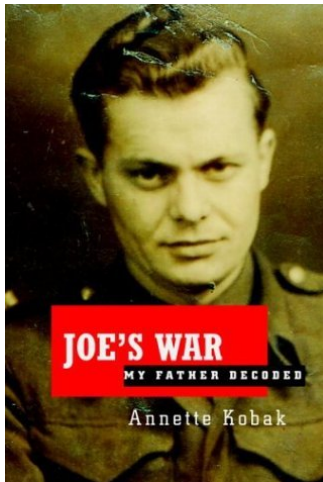

Joe's War: My Father Decoded by Annette Kobak, Knopf, 2004, 444 pages, 20 photos, 2 maps.



The only facts Annette Kobak knew about her father as she was growing up in London were that he had been a soldier with the Polish army in World War II and had ended up in London where he met and married the author's English mother. Joe Kobak never talked about his life before or during the war. He was moody and taciturn, sleeping with a hammer under his pillow. As the author reached middle age she felt a need to "decode" her father's life and thus come to a better understanding of her own. The result is this unusual book - part memoir, part Joe's first-person narrative, part history, part travel adventure story.

The absorbing first chapter gives us a portrait of the family's life in grim post-war London. Joe worked as a civil servant and got a physics diploma through correspondence courses. He became a British citizen. Through it all the "iron curtain" of his silence remained in place. In 1971 the author's parents emigrated to Australia and it is on her visits there that Annette was finally successful in getting her father to talk about his past. She found out that Joe was born of Polish parents in Czechoslovakia and always felt that he had two homelands. The family moved when he was thirteen across the border to the Polish village of Baligród in the Carpathians. When war broke out he was a student in Lwów. On November 1, 1939 Lwów, as part of western Ukraine, was "incorporated" into the USSR. Arbitrarily arrested by the Russians, Joe escaped and made his perilous journey home to Nazi occupied Baligród. He was an expert skier and helped to take some refugees across the border to Slovakia. The Gestapo put a death warrant out for him and Joe escaped on skis to Slovakia, then on to France where he fought with the Polish forces. He was evacuated to Britain when France fell. For the last four years of the war Kobak was assigned to a unit with a top-secret duty to listen to and decode Russian signals. He lived in fear of possible Soviet reprisals against him and his family until the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Thus protective silence became entrenched in his nature.

Through Joe Kobak's wartime odyssey his daughter examines the history of Poland and Czechoslovakia in World War II and the many betrayals endured by these countries at the hands of the Allies. The author is a writer, not a historian - but the book is well researched and documented. Joe's narrative and the history chapters are interspersed with Kobak's commentary as she retraced some of Joe's wartime travels in 2001.

There are extensive chapters about Czechoslovakia's prewar history and its heroes, Masaryk and Benes. Kobak's writing is perceptive and her observations enliven the historical texts. The recounting in some detail of the sellout of Czechoslovakia at Munich in 1938 reads almost like a thriller, as she describes how Hitler "drew circles" around Chamberlain and easily outmaneuvered him.

Kobak writes about the Nazi Blitzkrieg against Poland in September 1939 and covers the major events of the war and postwar periods. The chapter on General Władysław Anders is particularly effective, describing the formation and exploits of the Polish Second Corps, including the Battle of Monte Casino in 1944. The author quotes extensively from Anders's diaries and memoirs so one glimpses the personality behind the myth.

In 2001 Kobak traveled by train and by foot from Lwów to Baligród, retracing the journey her father had taken in 1939. She provides a vivid description of this harrowing trip during the course of which she discovered some traces of the genocidal war fought between Ukrainian and Polish partisans in 1944. Kobak discusses the roots of the enmity between Poland and the Ukraine.

At the end of her "odyssey" into Joe's past, Annette Kobak comes to understand the Czech and Polish experience of the war. The result is an often engrossing, informative work. The extensive historical accounts will satisfy some readers while others might wish for more of Joe's personal story. Kobak's broad focus, nevertheless, will attract many readers.

Monika Mieroszewska