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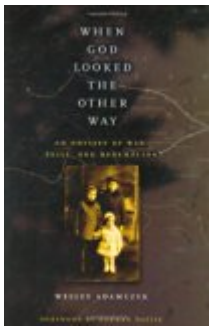

Wesley Adamczyk. *When God Looked the Other Way. An Odyssey of War, Exile, and Redemption.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004. xvii + 264 pp. $19.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-226-00444-0.

Reviewed by Douglas Peifer

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A little over two weeks after the Germans attacked Poland from the West, Red Army troops overran eastern Poland.[1] Their occupation and annexation of eastern Poland, negotiated with the Germans as part of the August 1939 German-Soviet Treaty of Non-Aggression and its subsequent September revision, resulted in the capture of over 180,000 Polish military personnel. Officers were separated from ordinary soldiers, and held at three special officer camps under NKVD control. The following year, Stalin took advantage of Germany's assault on the West to cement his grip, ordering the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (the NKVD) to deport hundreds of thousands of Polish civilians from the newly acquired territories now incorporated into White Russia and the Ukraine. The NKVD cast a wide net, sending the families of Polish officers, the Polish intelligentsia, Catholic priests, Polish landowners, or others suspected of bourgeois or nationalist tendencies, deep into the heart of the Soviet Union. Around the same period, Stalin ordered his security forces to execute Polish officers held at the POW camps in Kozelsk, Starobelsk, and Ostashkov. The Soviet Union, in short, proved as ruthless as the German occupiers in its initial treatment of captured Polish military personnel and elites. Yet once Germany turned on the Soviet Union, Stalin's attitude changed. A little over a week after Barbarossa, the Soviet Union and the Polish government-in-exile signed a treaty paving the way for reconciliation. As part of the treaty, Polish POWs within the Soviet Union were allowed to join a newly established Polish army under General Wladyslaw Anders, while interned Polish civilians received amnesty and travel rights. Stalin never fully embraced the prospect of an independent Polish Army operating alongside the Red Army, barely furnishing the minimum in food, equipment, or clothing. The Soviets, rather than equip Anders's Army, allowed its units to cross over into Persia accompanied by thousands of Polish civilians who had somehow found the way to its encampments. Anders's Army became the 2nd Polish Corps, which played an important part in the Italian campaign. The fate of the displaced civilian Poles who escaped from the Soviet Union faded from public interest.

Wesley Adamczyk's memoir provides a fascinating, heartrending account of these developments as witnessed from the perspective of a young Polish boy. Wesley (Wieslaw) Adamczyk's memoir enables the reader to put a human face on the tragedy of Poles deported to the Soviet Union in 1940, detained under the most primitive conditions, and eventually allowed to leave only after overcoming the most dreadful adversity. His vivid writing facilitates empathy, and the clear prose conveys how the Hitler-Stalin pact, war, and occupation tragically affected one Polish family. As a six-year-old, Wiesu (the diminutive of Wieslaw) remembers being wakened by his father Jan Franciszek Adamczyk, a reservist officer, for one last hug and kiss as Jan left for war. Wiesu never saw his father again. Only later, after years of hoping for a reunion, did Adamczyk discover that his father had been one of the 15,000 Polish officers executed in the Katyn forest. Adamczyk describes how one night in May 1940, the Soviets rousted his 43-year-old mother Anna, his 17-year-old brother Jerzy, his 13-year-old sister Zofia, and him, barking at them that the family had one hour to pack and vacate the premises. The Adamczyks soon found themselves on the way to Kazakhstan. The author paints the tale of their exile in painful, vivid images.

One of the quandaries of using memoirs in the classroom or as a historical reference is assessing how much of the material conveys the realities of the period and how much is shaped by remembrance, the construction of memory, and later insights and experiences. Those memoirs that meticulously record exact dates, verbatim conversations, and political-military developments far from the experience of the writer have always struck this reviewer as suspect. Adamczyk's memoir avoids these pitfalls and has an air of authenticity and experience difficult to find elsewhere. His account is filled with the sights, smells, and sounds that would lodge in the memory of a young boy. He describes how the lack of sanitary facilities and basic goods such as toilet paper and clothing affected daily life on the Russian steppes. He recalls how his mother sought to keep him out of school because of her concern that the Soviets would indoctrinate and manipulate her young boy. He recollects how starvation rations forced his brother to risk execution by stealing from the state slaughterhouse where he had been put to work. He recounts how he and other boys played with deadly scorpions and abandoned ordinance as refugees in Iran. In short, Adamczyk is careful to use those dates and conversations that would stick in one's mind, acknowledging in the text that certain periods and episodes have faded from memory and blurred in detail. The reader shares in Adamczyk's experience, sensing how time and space blurred in the steppes of Kazakhstan yet came into sharp focus as sudden news, altered policies, and the shifting tides of war affected the life of the exiles.

The memoir is divided into eight parts, each providing a glimpse into a very different world. In part 1, Adamczyk describes his early childhood in pre-war Poland. As the child of a reserve Polish officer, Adamczyk's early years were comfortable and sheltered, revolving around family, festivities, and the home. Part 2 tells how this idyll was destroyed by war and deportation. The rushed packing in the night while Red Army troops surrounded the house, the cramped and primitive rail passage to the East, and the sense of confusion about ultimate destination and fate are all movingly conveyed. Part 3, the longest section of the book, describes the Adamczyks' experience in "the Inhuman Land" as the Poles termed the Soviet Union. This section is filled with images and descriptions that help the reader understand what deportation meant. The hunger, the alternating periods of intense surveillance and brutal neglect, and the barren conditions confronting deportees and Soviets alike are recounted in authentic, moving terms. Parts 4 and 5 describe the initial elation that accompanied Stalin's about-face toward his Polish captives following Barbarossa, and the subsequent frustration and tribulations that faced ex-

iles seeking to translate the promise of free movement into the reality of freedom. The Adamczyk family, minus the elder brother who had departed to join Anders's army, managed to struggle to the Persian border only for his mother to die of disease and exhaustion in the receiving camp that the British had set up for the desperate Polish refugees. Parts 6 and 7 describe the exile experience of two young Polish orphans, as Adamczyk and his sister were shunted from refugee camps from Persia to Lebanon to post-war Great Britain. Adamczyk's memoir of exile concludes with an account of how relatives in Chicago reached out and arranged for him to join them in Chicago. Adamczyk's sense of wonder at the material plenty, the generosity of relatives and strangers, and the sense of optimism and hope that prevailed in the New World transforms his memoir from a tale of despair, anguish, and anger to one of hope and survival. The final section of the book completes his tale of odyssey, recounting how in 1998 Adamczyk and his son visited the mass graves of Polish officers executed in the Katyn forest as honored guests of the Polish and Ukrainian governments. Jan Franciszek Adamczyk, who had kissed his six-year-old son goodbye in September 1939, presumably lay buried in one of the graves.

This powerful memoir transforms the faceless statistics of exile, death, and suffering into a narrative of one family's experience. Well written, carefully researched yet restricting itself to the experience and perspective of the writer, this memoir is highly recommended.

Note

[1]. The views expressed in this review are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Air Force, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

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