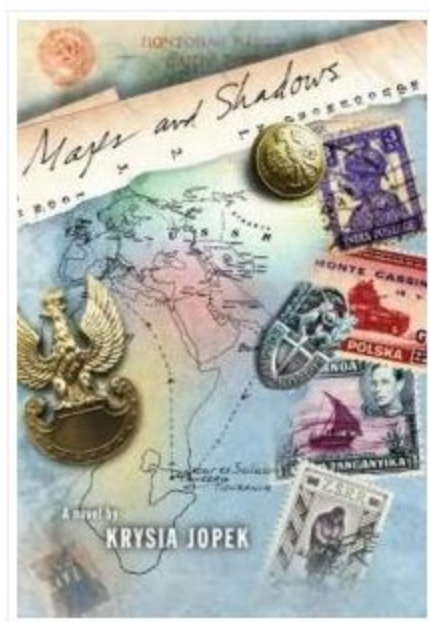


Review: *Maps and Shadows* by Kryisia Jopek

December 7, 2010 by Anna



Our fathers would have praised our bravery (had they lived) as would our sons if we would ever tell them. But to speak of war diminishes its magnitude. Language cannot accurately describe the terror of enemy fire, tanks approaching, grenades, land mines. Words tarnish the already-clouded moments, unreal.

Single file to the train after being tied helpless in front of one's wife and children, the ultimate purloining: of a man's stance, ability for action. Cut those moments out and bury them — to be excavated and relived only privately.

Rip the pages out of Helcia's dictionary and set them on fire. The way books claim certain

atrocities never happened.

(from *Maps and Shadows*, pages 103-104 in the uncorrected galley)

Maps and Shadows is a soon-to-be released novel by poet Kryisia Jopek that tells the story of a Polish family living on land that once was part of Russia, which was given to the father, Andrzej, by the Polish government as a reward for serving in the Polish-Bolshevik War. The Soviets invaded the eastern part of the country shortly after World War II began in September 1939, and in early 1940, the family was ordered out of their home and deported to a labor camp in Siberia. More than 1.5 million Polish civilians made the journey described in *Maps and Shadows*, and Jopek aims to bring this little known piece of history to life.

Each chapter is told from a different point of view, and Jopek gives voice to Andrzej, his wife Zofia, their daughter Helcia, and their eldest son, Henryk. (Their youngest, Józef, was only four when the family was deported and too young to remember the details.) Before each

chapter, there is a passage of lyrical prose that emphasizes the internal thoughts and emotions of the characters (see the passage quoted above), and each chapter concludes with poems written by Helcia in the labor camp on scraps of paper torn from a beloved dictionary, which she brought with her even though she was told to grab only the necessities.

Maps and Shadows is not a traditional novel, as Jopek draws heavily on her family's history. There is no author note, but there are black and white photographs of the family, and she thanks her father, Henryk, and her Aunt Helen (Helcia) in the acknowledgements for recalling the horrible details of their experiences during the war. Moreover, despite the use of poetical language here and there, the book reads like a memoir. There are no descriptions to set the scene, no real character development. It reads as though you are sitting down with the family and listening to their stories; it's all telling and no showing.

However, the message of the book is an important one and made it easy for me to overlook any issues with the structure and writing. Jews were not the only ones deported during World War II, and the Nazis were not the only ones committing atrocities. The Siberian labor camps were brutal because of the back-breaking labor, the lack of food, and the severe cold. The family endured this and much more, and Jopek makes you feel their desperation as they join the military or travel to Africa for shelter and education. By writing the family's story from four different points of view, the deportees are no longer seen in the abstract, but as real people who suffered horribly and survived.

Disclosure: I received a copy of [Maps and Shadows](#) from Aquila Polonica for review purposes. I am an Amazon associate.

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