



The Ice Road by Stefan Waydenfeld

The amazing escape

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"The Ice Road: An Epic Journey From the Stalinist Labor Camps to Freedom" is an extraordinary memoir. On one level, it is the story of a 14-year-old Polish lad from a comfortable middle-class family whose idyllic life is suddenly shattered by the German invasion in 1939. Beyond that, however, it is testament to the resiliency of the human spirit in the midst of a nation's death throes.

When author Stefan Waydenfeld's father, a physician, is called up by the army, his mother, a bacteriologist, is left to hold the little family together. With German bombs raining everywhere, Stefan sets out to find his dad. He heads east -- into the maw of the advancing Red Army, which Stalin, in alliance with Hitler, has unleashed on Poland.

Miraculously, the family is reunited, but as detainees in the Soviet zone, they are first, "undesirables," then "enemies of the people" awaiting the dreaded knock on the door. When it comes, they are packed into cattle cars and shipped West, or so they are told, to the Nazi zone. But Stefan realizes that "the sun is on the wrong side" of the train, and that the family actually is heading east -- to Siberia.

Dumped into a logging camp, where the order "He who does not work does not eat" is rigorously enforced, the family barely keeps life and limb together in subzero temperatures. In a herculean effort, they build a log raft and escape, traveling by any means, mostly foot, to join fellow Poles in Soviet Central Asia. There, the Allies attempted to raise an army to fight the Germans from among displaced Poles, many in Stalin's slave-labor camps.

Like all stories of exceptional heroism and grit, this one is textured with fascinating personalities and subplots. Waydenfeld relates events with equanimity and grace, content to let the story speak for itself. It is a facet of World War II that has largely gone unnoticed in the West -- until now.

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