

Foreword

MOST PEOPLE in Britain and America cherish a simple view of the Second World War in Europe. They remember a struggle of Good against Evil, where the Allied powers gained a famous victory over the malign forces of fascism. Stories of survivors and heroic adventurers are all concerned with people who pitted their wits against the fascist enemy. Such, after all, was the Western experience. Yet it is a view of the war which ignores events in the larger, eastern half of Europe. There, in the East, the scale of the fighting was much larger and the ideological struggle more ruthless. Individuals did not count. Millions of Europeans were faced not with one totalitarian enemy, but with two. They saw their homelands invaded and destroyed by Stalin's communists as well as by Hitler's Nazis. In the case of the Poles, they saw their country overrun first by Hitler and Stalin acting in unison, then by Hitler's legions triumphant over Stalin and finally by a resurgent Red Army victorious over the Nazis. To survive in the successive waves of that maelstrom required rather more complicated strategies than anything encountered in Western Europe.

The memoirs of Stefan Waydenfeld, therefore, grip the imagination not only as a stirring tale of human endurance, but also as an illustration of wartime conditions in very unfamiliar parts of Europe. Born near Warsaw in 1925, he witnessed the brutal German onslaught on Poland as a fourteen-year-old boy, hiding from the Stukas and the stormtroopers, swept along in a tide of helpless refugees. Fleeing to the Soviet-occupied East, he embarked on a dangerous and exotic odyssey that took him from Arctic Russia to Central Asia and thence to Persia and Palestine and eventually to service with the British Eighth Army in Italy. On the way, he is able to compare the Nazi and Soviet occupations, to watch the NKVD at work alongside the Gestapo, and to witness the

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mass deportations. Forcibly deported to the Arctic, he sees life and death in cattle wagons, in Soviet schools, camps and collective farms. He works on an ice road, escapes by raft towards the White Sea, sails down the Volga on a luxury steamer, sees Stalingrad, crosses a high mountain chain in Kazakhstan and finally leaves Stalin's paradise by boat on the Caspian. At every stage, he is surrounded by hunger, disease, poverty and political repression.

Dr Waydenfeld has a keen sense of the everyday suffering that underlies great political events. His vivid picture of family solidarity, civilian struggles and raw courage, often in settings of great natural grandeur, throws light on unusual aspects of the Second World War. Above all, it portrays a thrilling adventure, all the more remarkable for being true.

Norman Davies
University of London
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