RETROVIEW

# A Shy Little Bird

*Michael McDonald*

Here's a test: You now have thirty seconds to recommend a single book that might start a serious student on the hard road to understanding the political tragedies of the 20th century. What book would you choose? Of course, half a minute doesn't leave much room for reflection—once you've arrived at the end of this sentence, your time is all but up.

Still, I doubt that most readers of *The American Interest* will have had much difficulty coming up with several classic works before the clock ran out. Czeslaw Milosz's *The Captive Mind* and Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* would be prime candidates to capture the Soviet side of the horror; Victor Klemperer's secret diaries published in two volumes as *I Will Bear Witness* document in deep detail the Nazi side of the totalitarian coin. For those more inclined to political theory there is always Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. No doubt works of the literary imagination would be high on the list as well—perhaps Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* and, of course, George Orwell's *1984*, which Philip Rahv once called "the best antidote to the totalitarian disease that any writer has so far produced."

Perhaps the true difficulty with this test is the embarrassment of riches from which to choose in the wake of a cruel and bloody century that was itself a colossal embarrassment to the human race. Indeed, one is tempted to say that the more well-read the person, the less likely he or she will be to single out any one book as being substantial enough, in itself, to adequately cover each long mile on this particularly hard road.

But to say such a thing is to ignore the existence of the Anglo-Australian literary critic Clive James. James is one of the world's most staggeringly well-read men—witness his 2007 masterpiece *Cultural Amnesia*, a compendium of essays on important writers, thinkers and artists, which J.M. Coetzee has described as "a crash course in civilization." And yet James's response to the above test, which he himself devised in *Cultural Amnesia*, is firm and unambiguous: He chose Heda Margolius Kovály's *Under a Cruel Star: A Life in Prague 1941–1968*.[1]

I confess that I had never read, or even heard of, *Under a Cruel Star* before coming across James's recommendation. I now share his opinion of the book. James lauds Kovály's memoir as a work that "dramatize[s], for our edification, the two great contending totalitarian forces [Nazism and Communism], because they both chose her for a victim." In addition, James notes the "exemplary amalgam of psychological penetration and terse style" that marks her narration of events and draws the reader in much like a novel by Raymond Chandler (a writer whom Kovály translated into Czech). But the book is interesting in other ways and surprisingly relevant to current debates over the supposed moral equivalence of the past century's two totalitarianisms. It also has much to say about East European history and modern memory.

**Under a Cruel Star:**
**A Life in Prague 1941–1968 (1973)**
***Heda Margolius Kovály***

Heda Kovály was born Heda Bloch to a well-to-do Czech-Jewish family in Prague in 1919. A fragile Czechoslovakian democracy had been inaugurated in her homeland the prior year, and Heda, whose family was non-religious and

[1] Kovály's memoir was first published in 1973 under the title *The Victors and the Vanquished*. In 1986, a retranslation by Helen Epstein was published in Great Britain as *Prague Farewell* and in the United States as *Under a Cruel Star*. This review refers to the latest printing (Holmes & Meier, 1997).

assimilated, lived a carefree life until the German invasion and occupation in 1939. That same year, with Nazi Germany already occupying Czechoslovakia, Heda married her childhood sweetheart, Rudolf Margolius, a law student from a middle-class background. Her memoir recounts the events that followed in the next quarter century and is divided into three distinct periods: the horror of life under the Nazi occupation; a brief period of postwar hopefulness; and the horror of life under Czechoslovakian totalitarianism.

The book opens in October 1941 with the mass deportation of Jews from Prague to the Łódź Ghetto in Poland. Kovály's family had received an order to report to the Exposition Hall in Prague, and in her memoir she recalls the scene as being akin to "a medieval madhouse": Children wail, terror-stricken men and women lose their minds, and the seriously ill, who had been removed there on stretchers, die. She also meets a professor of classical philology, who sits calm and erect amidst the madness, wearing a black suit, a white shirt, a gray tie and a black overcoat topped by a black homburg. The professor cites to her a line from Horace about the need to maintain equanimity in hardship ("*aequeam memento rebus in arduis servare mentem*") and helps allay her fear by telling her about classical literature and ancient Rome.

Several weeks afterwards, now in the Łódź Ghetto, Kovály assists her family doctor, who had also been deported there, on his rounds and recalls discovering the body of a dead man,

> his body swarming with a myriad of fat white lice. They also crawled over the face of the Venus de Milo, who smiled serenely from a page of the open book on the man's chest. The book had dropped from his hand as he lay dying.

Kovály leans over him and discovers that it is her professor from the Prague Exhibition Hall.

We know from the history books that some 100,000 people were murdered or died of deliberate starvation in the Łódź Ghetto before the survivors were transported to Auschwitz in August 1944. But Kovály records only what she herself witnesses, opting for a portrayal of actual experience over any type of abstract analysis. The absence of complex prose or interpretive elaboration keeps her narration simple but also symbolically compelling, much like a story by her compatriot Franz Kafka.

Upon arrival at Auschwitz, Kovály's parents were sent immediately to the gas chambers. Heda was commanded to work as a forced laborer in a brickyard. Thanks to the courage she displays in standing up for herself, the owner of the brickyard allows her to work indoors where it is warm, perhaps saving her life. She talks to him about what she witnesses at Auschwitz but spares the reader all that she saw. As she writes: "Human speech can only express what the mind can hold. You cannot describe hammer blows that crush your brain." The one scene she does recount is horrific enough. When the guards discover that one of the girls in her dormitory has attempted to escape, all of the girls are forced to kneel all night on the parade ground until the escaped girl is captured. Any of the kneeling girls who fainted was taken off and immediately gassed, so they had to prop each other up. Finally the captured girl has her arms and legs broken, as the kneeling assembly watches, before being dragged off to the gas.

As Russian troops close in, the Germans evacuate Auschwitz in early 1945. Heda joins a column of women prisoners who are forced

> There is no hope unmingled with fear, and no fear unmingled with hope.
>
> **—Baruch Spinoza**

to trudge on foot out of Poland to Germany. The destination was Bergen-Belsen, but Heda escapes *en route* with a few other prisoners and makes her way back to Prague, which is awaiting the arrival of the Red Army to "liberate" it.

At the time of her return, the Nazis still occupy Prague. She lacks papers and knows that if the Gestapo were to catch her, it would mean death for her and for anyone who helped her. She visits friends hoping for a place to hide but is typically greeted with words such as: "For God's sake, what brings you here?", or "So you've come back! Oh no! That's all we needed!" Kovály finally makes contact with partisans who hide her. She falls ill but recovers enough to take part in the fight to drive the Germans out of Prague.

In the wake of her "leap into freedom", as she stands outside the Nazi system of death, Heda writes that she "was no longer a camp inmate, a victim destined for destruction, but a human being." Paradoxically, though, she observes how the road to freedom would lead to another disaster in but a few years' time, since, "for many people in Czechoslovakia after the war, the Communist revolution was just another attempt to find the way . . . back to humanity."

After the war, Heda is reunited with her husband Rudolf, and they have a son. In 1941, Rudolf, too, had been deported to the Łódź Ghetto and subsequently to Auschwitz and Dachau. Influenced by his war experiences and the murder of his parents and relatives in Nazi concentration camps, Rudolf joins the Communist Party in December 1945. He and others joined, Heda recounts, "not so much in revolt against the existing political system but out of sheer despair over human nature." Heda joins too—for Rudolf's sake—but refuses to succumb to the lure of ideology.

According to Kovály there were many Czechoslovaks who, like her, subscribed to the "principles on which the prewar Czechoslovak Republic had been founded, the humanistic, democratic ideals of Tomas G. Masaryk." But they were guilt-ridden over how the interwar democrats had allowed the growth of the fascists and Nazi parties that had, in the end, destroyed it.

Rudolf studies economics and works for an organization dedicated to rebuilding the country's industry. He takes a job in the Ministry of Foreign Trade after the Communists seize power in 1948 and rises to become a Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade under President Klement Gottwald. In that position he eventually negotiated and signed several important economic agreements with the British Government.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Communist parties in Eastern Europe, at Stalin's direction, began a series of purges. Although he was an economist and, as such, not involved in Party politics, the Czechoslovak secret police arrested him on January 10, 1952. The next time Heda saw him was nearly one year later on the eve of his execution. Rudolf was one of 14 government officials, 11 of them Jewish, who were convicted, after repeated torture, of "anti-state conspiracy" as part of the notorious Slánský show trials. The Communist state had Rudolf hanged and his body cremated. As the secret police were transferring his ashes, the car they were in began to swerve on an icy road. They threw his ashes under the car's wheels for traction.

Kovály devotes roughly the last third of her book to the persecution she and her son as, respectively, the widow and child of a "Zionist capitalist Jew" suffered in the wake of Rudolf's execution. She is expelled from the Party, forced out of her apartment and sees her belongings confiscated. She finds herself placed under surveillance, shunned by former friends, denied employment and then hounded for being a "parasite." She is compelled to change her son's family name before he begins school since "children are forbidden to play with the son of a traitor." Kovály takes on all types of work to eke out a living, from weaving scarves to working in a machine shop to designing book covers at a publishing house. She eventually finds a modicum of success doing translations under an assumed name.

In 1955, Heda married Pavel Kovály and, the following year, after Khrushchev delivered his famous "secret speech" condemning Stalin at the 20th Party Congress, the

© Margolius Family Archive

**Heda and Rudolf Margolius in 1949**

as a law librarian at Harvard. She returned to live in Prague after the Velvet Revolution.

Kovály describes in *Under a Cruel Star* what it was like to live under Nazism and under Communism. The process of dehumanization leads to ashes in both instances. She demonstrates how the worst elements under the Nazis became, after 1948, the most "patriotic" Communists by concealing their wartime activities "under loud proclamations of loyalty to progress and socialism." The only difference between the two totalitarianisms is that the Communists vaunted their good motives and their adherence to a common progressive heritage.

This, of course, is also the cover that enabled party members and fellow travelers in Western Europe to accept the purges of veteran Communists once praised for their loyalty. Stalinist society was founded on a universe of camps engaged in a cascade of mutual suspicion and serial displacement. While this moral Ponzi scheme degraded all who were a part of it, innocent victims subjected to arbitrary arrest and disappearance constituted the vast majority of the collateral damage produced by the system. As the late Martin Malia pointed out, it takes a great ideal to produce a great crime.

Should those in power in Czechoslovakia who crushed the Prague Spring of 1968 be arrested for that crime? Many thought they should following the 1989 revolution. Yet there was neither a Nuremberg trial nor anything like it when Communism ended in Czechoslovakia. There is today no stigma attached to being an ex-Communist

Czechoslovak state's persecution lessened. In 1963, the Czechoslovak Communists decided to quietly rehabilitate their victims. As she tells it in the book, when the Ministry of Justice invites her to fill in a form reporting the losses she sustained as a result of Rudolf's arrest and execution, she composes a list that included "loss of honor", "loss of health", and "loss of faith in the Party and in justice." "Loss of property" comes at the very end. Her courage was remarkable, yet in the end "accountability" came only in the form of a small newspaper notice to the effect that Rudolf Margolius and the other men put to death in the Slánský show trials had all been posthumously rehabilitated.

The book ends in 1969, after the Red Army has come once more, with troops from other Warsaw Pact nations, to "liberate" Prague from its brief "spring." Heda relies on "long-rusted scraps of Polish" that she had picked up in Auschwitz to negotiate with Polish troops occupying one part of the country. Finally, she uses the opportunity to flee Czechoslovakia. She eventually immigrated to the United States where she ended up working

Party member as there is to being an ex-Nazi. Communism has somehow preserved its international legitimacy in amber, nearly unimpaired. How did this come to be so?

Raymond Aron once said that "there is a difference between a philosophy whose logic is monstrous and one which can be given a monstrous interpretation." But should the goals of the murders matter? Both the Communist and the Nazi systems killed people not because of what they did but because of who they were. Genocide can be racial, but, as the French historian Stéphane Courtois has argued, it can also target social groups. It is a point that Kovály makes incisively in her memoir about life in Communist-controlled Czechoslovakia:

> What a person knew, what kind of work he could do and how well, became irrelevant. The things that mattered were class-consciousness and class origin, attitude to the New Order, and, most of all, devotion to the Soviet Union.

The UN Convention on Genocide defines the crime this way: "Acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group." As definitions go, it is narrow. It excluded social, economic and political groups. If these categories had been included, it would have been possible to prosecute Communist politicians through the convention. It wasn't politically feasible to do this at the end of the World War II, given the nature of Nazi crimes. Perhaps it is now.

During the past decade many in Eastern Europe have used the word genocide to describe Communist crimes. Public discussion of the equivalency between Communism and Nazism is rising. The debate swirling around Timothy Snyder's recent book, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, is a case in point. Snyder details how the two totalitarian systems committed the same kinds of crimes at the same times and in the same places. Action is proceeding in European political circles, too, as well as intellectual ones. The European Commission in Brussels recently issued a report in response to calls from the Czech Republic and other East European states to consider adopting penalties across the European Union for denying or downplaying the crimes committed by Communist regimes.

Some would argue that deliberate amnesia is the appropriate response to the crimes of Communism. When justice and social peace cannot be reconciled, it sometimes makes sense, as with South Africa's post-apartheid truth and reconciliation commission, to privilege the future over the past. But that approach does not always make sense. Consider that it wasn't until the French genuinely came to terms with Vichy that they could move beyond it. It is a process that has taken no little amount of time. Public discussion began in France in the 1970s with films such as Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien* (1974), the appearance of Michael Marrus's *Vichy France and the Jews* (1981) and Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985). After World War I, virtually every town in France had a street named after Marshal Philippe Pétain. But for his role in heading the Vichy regime, which collaborated with Nazi Germany in eliminating its enemies, notably Jews, the streets bearing his name began to be renamed. It was only in January of this year that the last street in France bearing his name disappeared. Thirty years after the Velvet Revolution, we are seeing the beginning of a similar coming to terms—and not a moment too soon.

**The only difference between the two totalitarianisms is that the Communists vaunted their good motives and their adherence to a common progressive heritage.**

The timing of the release of the aforementioned EU report on Communist crimes was a little off. It appeared on December 22, 2010, a little more than two weeks after Heda Margolius Kovály died, on December 5, 2010. Her death was duly reported in the *New York Times* and in many other obituaries that appeared soon afterward in newspapers around the world. Several of the obituaries quoted what James had

© Margolius Family Archive

**Heda and son, Ivan Margolius, in Prague in 1992**

to say about the value of *Under a Cruel Star* for educating serious students about the great political tragedies of the 20th century. It is, as James further remarked, a book that "should never have had to be written; but, since it had, we are lucky that it was done so well."

It is worth elaborating briefly on what James means by "done so well." It is certainly a book full of harrowing subject matter. It also contains flashes of the dark humor one finds in the memoirs of Soviet dissidents, such as when Kovály quotes Prague wits who define socialism as "a system designed to successfully resolve problems that could never arise under any other political system." Yet above all, and somewhat remarkably, it is also a book not unduly given over to pessimism or despair. Consider the book's opening lines:

> Three forces carved the landscape of my life. Two of them crushed half the world. The third was very small and, actually, invisible. It was a shy little bird hidden inside my rib cage an inch or two above my stomach. Sometimes in the most unexpected moments the bird would wake up, lift its head, and flutter its wing in rapture. Then I too would lift my head because, for that short moment, I would know for certain that love and hope are infinitely more powerful than hate and fury, and that somewhere beyond the line of my horizon there was life indestructible, always triumphant.

In the center of Prague is a statue of the early 15th-century Czech church reformer Jan Hus that bears the motto: "Truth will prevail." Thanks to Kovály's memoir that motto, at least as it pertains to the 20th century, is being borne out.

---

**Michael McDonald** *is a Washington, DC, writer. His work is archived at www.michaelmcdonaldweb.com.*