



Under a Cruel Star: A Life in Prague, 1941-1968

By Heda Margolius Kovaly

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Heda Margolius Kovaly's steady gaze at the lives caught up in Czechoslovakia's tragic fate under the Nazis and then during the Stalin era illuminates the chaotic life of a nation. Kovaly was deported to concentration camps, escaped from a death march, nearly starved in the post-war years, only to be shattered by her husband's conviction (in the infamous 1952 Slansky trial) and his execution. Resonant with lyricism, this gripping memoir is uplifting even in the midst of horror.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

A Jew in Czechoslovakia under the Nazis, Kovaly spent the war years in the Lodz ghetto and several concentration camps, losing her family and barely surviving herself. Returning to Prague at the end of the war, she married an old friend, a bright, enthusiastic young Jewish economist named Rudolf Margolius, who saw the country's only hope for the future in the Communist Party. Thereafter, Rudolf became deputy minister for foreign trade. For a time, the Margoliuses lived like royalty, albeit reluctantly, but then, in a replay of the Stalinist purges of the 1930s, Rudolf and others, mostly of Jewish background, were arrested and hung in the infamous Slansky Trial of 1952. Kovaly's memoir of these years that end with her emigration to the West after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 are a tragic story told with aplomb, humor and tenderness. The reader alternately laughs and cries as Kovaly describes her mother being sent to death by Dr. Mengele, Czech Communist Party leader Klement Gottwald drunk at a reception, the last sight of her husband, the feverish happiness of the Prague Spring. Highly recommended.

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From Library Journal

An exceptionally intimate and poignant memoir by a Czechoslovakian exile. Kovaly, a Jew, was forcibly deported to a Nazi labor camp in the early days of German occupation. A spirited woman, she not only survived the camp but returned to Prague to wed her childhood sweetheart, Rudolf Margolius. Though their fortunes rose in the postwar era, Rudolf eventually lost his life in the Stalinist purges of the early Fifties, leaving Heda to face life as a nonperson. Kovaly's recollections of her life during the purges form the core of the book and convey with brutal clarity the magnitude of suffering inflicted on thousands of Czechs. Her brief impressions of the famous "Prague Spring" of 1968 are also illuminating. Recommended for libraries with large Eastern European collections. Joseph W. Constance, Jr., Georgia State Univ. Lib., Atlanta
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Review

"Once in a while we read a book that puts the urgencies of our time and ourselves in perspective, making us confront the darker realities of human nature." **Anthony Lewis**, New York Times

"A story of human spirit at its most indomitable ... one of the outstanding autobiographies of the century."
San Francisco Chronicle-Examiner

"An extraordinary memoir...written with so much quiet respect for the minutiae of justice and truth that one does not know where and how to specify Heda Kovály's splendor as a human being ... It is impossible to read her book without the deepest admiration for her quiet, fierce documentation of the ordeal of the Czech people in our time." **Alfred Kazin**

"Under A Cruel Star is the most remarkable book for a variety of reasons: because Kovály has such a keen street sense for individual motivations; because her writing is so precise and beautiful: and, most of all, because she conveys such a ferocious and visceral sense that an individual life is just as important - and just as powerful - as governments, militaries, and political might." **E. J. Graff**, Brandeis Women's Studies Research Center, Columbia Journalism Review May / June 2005

"Given thirty seconds to recommend a single book that might start a serious young student on the hard road to

understanding the political tragedies of the twentieth century, I would choose this one ... All this is recounted in an exemplary amalgam of psychological penetration and terse style ... A Google search reveals that the book is on the course in several colleges, but it deserves to be more famous than that." **Clive James**, *Cultural Amnesia: Necessary Memories from History and the Arts*, W. W. Norton, New York 2007

"I used to teach it in what was for many years my favorite course, a survey of essays and novels from Central and Eastern Europe that included the writings of Milan Kundera, Václav Havel, Ivo Andrić, Heda Kovaly, Paul Goma, and others." **Tony Judt**, 'Captive Minds, Then and Now', *The New York Review of Books*

Users Review

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Lisa Mercado:

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