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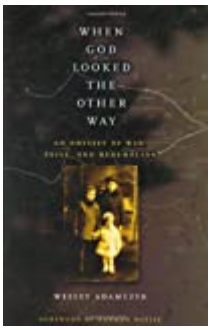

Wesley Adamczyk. *When God Looked the Other Way. An Odyssey of War, Exile, and Redemption.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004. xvii + 264 pp. $25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-00443-3; $19.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-00444-0.

Wesley Adamczyk. *When God Looked the Other Way: An Odyssey of War, Exile, and Redemption.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. 288 pp.

Reviewed by Doron Ben-Atar (Department of History, Fordham University)

Published on H-Genocide (April, 2007)

Revisiting the Polish Narrative of World War II

Wieslaw (Wesley) Adamczyk's narrative, *When God Looked the Other Way: An Odyssey of War, Exile, and Redemption*, recounts the struggle of his Polish Catholic family as they learned to survive under Soviet rule, and their escape first to British-controlled Iran and then to Chicago. Born in 1933 into an upper-middle class traditional Polish Catholic family, his father, Jan Franciszek Adamczyk, served as an officer in the Polish-Russian war of 1920 and was rewarded with a commission and an estate in Sarny in eastern Poland. In the 1930s, Jan left active service and turned to finance, but patriotism continued to define the household. Jan Adamczyk decorated his office at home with symbols of Polish nationalism, and prominently displayed, in his office, a large portrait of Jozef Pilsudski, who was viewed as Poland's greatest twentieth-century military leader and who fought against the Soviets.

Wieslaw was six years old when the Nazis and Soviets divided Poland in September 1939. Jan Adamczyk rejoined the Polish army and was captured by the Soviet troops that took over eastern Poland. A few letters arrived informing the family that he was safe in a prison camp, but then there was silence. The Soviet occupation launched Jan's wife Anna and their children (Jurek, fifteen; Zosia, twelve; and Wieslaw) onto their torturous journey. Their prewar status defined them in the Soviet eyes as enemies of the people. Their bank accounts were seized and they were designated for expulsion to the Soviet Union. They longed to reunite with Jan, but unbeknownst to them, he was among the fifteen thousand Polish POWs murdered by Josef Stalin's men in the Katyn massacre of 1940.

With their expulsion, the family was put on a crowded train that slowly made its way east. The cramped passengers ran out of food and hoped to resupply during rest stops. Alas, the exiled Poles discovered that the locals had nothing to trade and that many approached the incoming train to beg for food. The fam-

ily, after their arrival in a new home, was first assigned to a collective Kazakh farm, where they shared a small hut. They moved from place to place, but hunger accompanied them at every turn. Years of starvation, Adamczyk writes, were not only "physically debilitating, but also emotionally exhausting" (p. 95).

Life in the Workers' Republic offered a steady diet of hunger, fear, and humiliation. Party officials and their spies created an intimidating atmosphere and a culture of deception. Starvation drove workers on collective farms to steal "slop from the pigs to survive" (p. 78). The communist establishment bullied millions into submission, but could not provide even the most basic elements of hygiene. "Human excrement lay all over the floor of and wooden seats of public toilets and the walls were covered with dried and fresh feces, the result of using fingers to wipe oneself, because toilet paper was unavailable" (p. 57). At home, the Adamczyks often had nowhere to empty their waste buckets and had to live in unbearable stench. In the aftermath of devastating military defeats in the spring and summer of 1941, and in desperate need of help to stop the onslaught of the Wehrmacht, Stalin changed course and allowed the Polish exiles to form a separate division to fight Adolph Hitler. The Kremlin, however, did not want an autonomous military force on its soil. The Polish army, led by General Wladyslaw Anders, assembled in Soviet Turkmenistan and left the Soviet Union via Iran, Iraq, and Palestine to fight under the British High Command in the Middle East. Family members of those who joined the force were allowed to leave the Soviet Union via the same route. Since Wieslaw's brother Jurek enlisted to serve in Anders's army, his mother and siblings joined the exodus and escaped to Iran.

The unquestioned heroine of this narrative is the author's mother Anna. The Warsaw-born daughter of a teacher and a lawyer was accustomed to a life of comfort and plenty. But under the direst of conditions, Anna protected and fed her children with resolve, dedication, courage, and wisdom that measures up even to overhyped legendary myths of Polish motherhood. When the Soviets began to ship Poles east, Anna hid her extensive collection of jewelry in specially baked loafs of bread. The Soviets confiscated all that they could get their hands on, but they allowed the Adamczyks to take their bread with them. Anna skillfully traded the valuables for food and spared her children from starving. She persuaded officials in the dreaded Soviet Secret police (NKVD) to allow the family to move from one location to another as she searched for slightly less oppressive living conditions for her children. She found ways to get food on the table even during the worst days of hunger. And when the opportunity to escape to Iran appeared, she devised ingenious ways of sneaking out of town undetected and to board trains and ships without paying. Through it all, Anna struggled to remind her family of their ancestral home and culture. She hired Polish tutors so that Wieslaw could continue his education in Polish rather than Russian. And she repeatedly warned her children not to let the circumstances compromise their values. The author recalls an exchange his mother had with his older brother when the latter brought home a piece of stolen meat. She reminded Jurek of the teachings of his youth, to which he replied: "I am not in Jesuit school, nor in Poland with civilized people. We are in a godless Communist country against our will. We are starving and you are in failing health. Mortal sin or not, I will do whatever is necessary for our survival. God should understand" (p. 81). Anna relented and cooked the meat. But the lesson was not lost on her children who internalized her values. Sadly, after leading her children to safety, Anna Adamczyk succumbed to illness and was buried in Tehran.

In the popular imagination of World War II, the extermination of the Jews has pushed all other narratives of suffering and atrocities to the margins. The chimneys of the crematoria at Birkenau and Treblinka have eclipsed all suffering. Other narratives of pain and suffering overreach and employ the rhetoric of the Final Solution to claim a seat at the table of victims. Unnecessary overstatement and polemics follow. Such is the case with this memoir. Adamczyk sets to chronicle the "forgotten holocaust the Polish people endured at the hands of Soviet Communists" (p. xi). The expulsion of the Poles was terrible, but hardly Auschwitz. Similarly, the author writes that the "NKVD was equivalent to the Gestapo" (p. 25). The Soviet secret police committed terrible crimes against defenseless innocent people, but they did not match the Gestapo in cruelty and murderous zeal.

Whereas memorialists of the Nazi atrocities, as victims of German nationalism, generally eschew flag-waving patriotism, memorialists of the Soviet atrocities are more susceptible to mythical nationalism. *When God Looked the Other Way* exemplifies this genre.[1] Adamczyk's prewar Poland was a happy homogeneous Christian paradise: no pogroms; no ethnic conflict between Germans, Ukranians, Lithuanians, Jews, and Poles; no virulent xenophobia and antisemitism; no mention of Pilsudski's fascism and alliance with Hitler. The book is riddled with Polish jingoism. For example, Adamczyk describes the moment the Soviet train crossed the Russian-

Polish border in the following manner: "Mothers began to hug their children. Other people caressed each other. We all cried. We cried for our country and our homes, for the land we loved so much" (p. 35). Throughout the book, Adamczyk associates Polish identity and culture with ethics, sophistication, and class, and toward the end of his memoir rehashes the worn-out mythical complaint that Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill betrayed Poland in Yalta.

Catholicism has been a mode of expressing Polish nationalism during the Cold War and since, and Adamczyk echoes this sentiment in the memoir. Young Wieslaw underwent a pre-adolescent religious crisis–he stopped believing in God for the duration of the war. His family, however, remained loyal Catholics through thick and thin. His mother, for example, divided Soviets citizens into bad secularists and good believers. Wesley rediscovered God on his first day in Saint Bonaventure High School in Chicago. He entered the chapel, crossed himself, and, upon meditating for a few minutes, "realized that throughout my ten-year odyssey, God had been looking out for me after all" (p. 222). That God forgot to look after his parents and the other tens of millions who perished in World War II stopped being relevant.

When God Looked the Other Way is a moving addition to the growing literature that documents Soviet World War II atrocities. Adamczyk is particularly effective in conveying the powerful hold his experiences had on life since the war. He often thought of his last conversation with his father and admits, "Even today, when I recall that moment, I am filled with a boyish wish that I could have stopped the clock and given father another chance at life"(p. 24). On the other hand, the immodest claim to documenting exact feelings and conversations five decades after they took place undermines the memoir's usefulness as an accurate primary source. Adamczyk pretends to recall exact conversations he had as a six-year-old with his father and siblings. In the early years of the twenty-first century, he claims to document faithfully the wording of philosophical exchanges with his mother in the early 1940s, when he was between six and nine years old. His recollections are phony. Mother and son converse in adult language and tones and with pathos that make the quoted passages simply unbelievable. Moreover, Adamczyk is not shy about adding a little background drama to the telling, such as wolves howling and bombs exploding as mother and son discuss the meaning of existence.

Note

[1]. The best-known memoir of a nationalist genre is Slavomir Rawicz's *The Long Walk: The True Story of a Trek to Freedom* (London: Verso, 1956).

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Citation: Doron Ben-Atar. Review of Adamczyk, Wesley, *When God Looked the Other Way. An Odyssey of War, Exile, and Redemption* and Wesley Adamczyk, *When God Looked the Other Way: An Odyssey of War, Exile, and Redemption.* H-Genocide, H-Net Reviews. April, 2007.

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