ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Against the Wind
Tatyana Shimlec
CreateSpace
978-1-4783-1529-2
Three Stars (out of Five)

Memoirs dealing with immigration and the prevailing belief that people can better their lives and the lives of their children are often sentimental and hold the sympathy of the reader with vivid, emotional descriptions of events. However, Tatyana Shimlec's writing is spare, mirroring the physical coldness of her surroundings growing up in Siberia and the Ukraine as well as the cold shoulder she encounters when she finally reaches America.

Against the Wind begins in present-day America with Tonya (a character based on the author) driving to work and remembering her sister and mother. The story flashes back and forth from past to present without purpose, making it difficult to follow at times. When the narrator digs into an event or a relationship, however, readers will be invested. Unfortunately, the challenge of maintaining that investment is not always met.

Tonya's childhood and adolescence are explained quickly at the beginning of the book; by page twenty-seven, she is already leaving for college. Readers are given only a cursory view of the incredible pain and grief that have shaped Tonya's young life. As Tonya ages and she navigates love, career, marriage, and motherhood in a climate of political and economic hardship, the book's pace changes, and the quality of the narrative voice improves. Tonya struggles between her need for help and the pride that keeps her from asking for it. Even when her son is in the hospital, she struggles to ask a doctor for help. That pride may explain why the narrator has difficulty giving voice to so many of the emotions Tonya must be feeling.

When Tonya decides to move to America with her youngest son, she risks forging a passport. In doing so, she creates a bureaucratic nightmare for herself. She travels for hours to appear in court, only to be told to return another day. She asks for asylum, but the changing laws don't protect her. The hope that Tonya will find community, employment, and a home of her own propel the reader through a thick forest of new hardships that, frankly, don't seem like an improvement over her life in the Ukraine.

As she settles into her life as a caregiver, at the same time dodging red tape and worrying

about her sons, there is one last story Tonya has to tell. This is probably the most heartfelt and well-written chapter in the book. Tonya has had a lifelong love affair with the piano, and when she becomes caregiver to the aging musician John Leiberman, the two forge a unique and beautiful friendship.

Unfortunately, the sun doesn't stay out long for Tonya. With so little power and position in her new country, it seems that she is fated to always be struggling against the wind.

Shimlec clearly has a powerful story to tell, and the book's cover makes the protagonist's lonely struggle evident from the start. Readers would better connect emotionally with Tonya's hardships had the author written at a more even pace and with a less disjointed chronology.

Sara Budzik