

★ **Gerta**

Kateřna Tuřková

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Kateřna Tuřková's *Gerta* is a startling, significant historical novel set during and after the violent postwar expulsion of Germans from Czechoslovakia.

At the end of WWII, Gerta—the daughter of a disrespected Czech mother whom she loves, and a German Nazi father whom she despises—is shocked by the fervor with which ordinary Czech citizens decide to go after anyone with German blood. Her approach to politics has always been “live and let live”; nonetheless, she and her infant daughter are marched out of Brno with tens of thousands of others considered anathema to the newly reestablished Czechoslovakia, soon to become a communist state.

During the days-long march, many of the expelled citizens are beaten, starved, raped, and murdered. A diminished number reaches an abandoned concentration camp, where disease and deprivations further cut into their numbers. Gerta is among the few selected for farmwork. She has a few years of peace with a kind Catholic host. When she is finally allowed to return to Brno, it is a changed city. She realizes that she will always be punished for her paternity. When the subject of reconciliation arises in the 1980s, it sounds like a dream. Can the past be forgiven so easily?

Gerta is an unflinching story that gathers the brutalities of the postwar years with a sense of purpose. It avoids overt moral declarations. Instead, the abominable acts that Gerta and others are subjected to whisper, then shout, what officials won't consider: that blind retributive acts should never be allowed to take the place of discerning justice. The book's quiet exposure of the ironies of the Eastern communist states, which traded outside oppressions for their own forms of violence, is striking.

Written with empathy for the unsung innocents who suffer under the mechanizations of nationalist projects, *Gerta* is a powerful historical novel.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (March / April 2021)

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