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War Children: A Memoir

Michael Tradowsky
iUniverse (Dec 12, 2012)
Softcover $21.24 (440pp)
978-1-4759-5427-2

Michael Tradowsky understands that the unusual trajectory of his adult life has been strongly influenced by his childhood in wartime Germany. His new memoir, *War Children*, is written from the perspective of the boy he was, born in Berlin in 1935.

Tradowsky examines World War II through the eyes of that child, living within a family that despises everything about the Nazi regime. He scrutinizes his youth, from everyday life with parents who try to keep his childhood normal to the traumatic horrors experienced in bombings and ongoing displacement, and he explores the effects all of it has had on the rest of his life. Tradowsky's story is touching, frightening, and profound, and he presents it beautifully. His book is one to ponder, for its message relates to the children of any war—past, present, or future.

Parts of Tradowsky's tale would be sweetly funny were they not so deadly serious. Young Michael is a victim of the war, even while ignorant of what any of it means. To him, Adolph Hitler is one word, Adolfitler, a word he hears again and again, whispered by his parents and other relatives and spoken on the radio. It is just a word, yet it somehow feels dangerous. His consternation is nearly palpable as he tries to understand what is being said around him. Tradowsky perfectly summarizes the boy's confusion as he compares a bedtime prayer taught to him by his mother to a poem he must learn at school: "Imagining how Jesus could live in my heart was difficult enough," he says, "But Adolfitler also or instead?" This is but an introduction to the attempted indoctrination that is to follow, and Tradowsky goes on to reveal much more of it.

As the war intensifies, young Michael experiences loss at every turn. People die or simply disappear, his father is drafted, and he, his mother, and his younger sister must leave their home in an ongoing quest to find someplace safer. At nine years of age, he has no concept of the long-term effects of his displacement and sees only the immediate. "Somewhere in the deep layers of my mind, I sensed I would never see my apartment again. I would never see again my bed." He focuses on trying to be "the man of the house, responsible for taking care of [his] mother and [sister] Monika," never realizing that it is a role he cannot fill.

Progressively worse bombing raids decimate every neighborhood where the family seeks shelter, and Michael begins to retreat into himself, unable to cope with the constant fear. Tradowsky describes the worst night of all: "The trauma of waiting to die in the night … halted my maturation." So severely traumatized that he remains "stuck" in the isolation of his terrified nine-year-old self, he enters adulthood never quite able to comprehend the grown-up world around him. This lasting, lifelong effect of the war is at the very core of Tradowsky's story, and he conveys his message with heartbreaking clarity.

Insightful and fully conscious of the damage he has suffered, Tradowsky offers his own testimony as a somber illustration of a less visible consequence of war: its effect on the children who have nothing to do with it but must live through it. He vividly and very capably depicts the destruction and the terror of war, but it is his understanding of the impossibility of forging a normal childhood in wartime along with his ability to demonstrate war's calamitous victimization of youth that renders *War Children* much more than simply a well-written memoir.
CHERYL HIBBARD (April 16, 2013)

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