

## SECOND READ

## RECKLESSNESS AND ARROGANCE

E.J. GRAFF ON HEDA KOVÁLY'S *UNDER A CRUEL STAR*  
AND THE NEED FOR MORE 'INTIMATE POLITICAL REPORTAGE'

Rudolf and Heda in the Krkonose mountains in 1950, two years before his execution

In 1986 my favorite bookseller handed me *Under A Cruel Star: A Life in Prague 1941-1968*, telling me I must read it. I did, and I've since given copies of it to at least a dozen people and recommended it to dozens more. I can't be alone in this. Originally published by Helen Epstein, who invented Plunkett Lake Press just to deliver this book, *Under A Cruel Star* became a word-of-mouth success, garnering praise from such luminaries as Anthony Lewis of *The New York Times*. In 1989, Penguin brought out an edition in the U.S. and U.K. The book has remained in print ever since.

In *Under A Cruel Star*, Heda Kovály tells of having escaped Auschwitz during a forced march at the age of fifteen; meeting and later

marrying her childhood sweetheart, Rudolf Margolius; seeing him prosecuted and killed in Czechoslovakia's first Stalinist show trial; and thus of living through two of the most barbaric episodes of a barbaric century. Kovály's keenly observed, politically astute memoir offers intimate insight into how people behave under totalitarianism, how the human psyche can surrender to absolutism in the pursuit of beautiful ideals, how idealism can result in genuine evil (a

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**We talk of books standing the test of time. SECOND READ is an exploration of that maxim — journalists reflecting on books that shaped their own work, or whose lessons remain relevant.**

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noun I use advisedly) — and yet how civilization can restore itself, even after such horror. *Under A Cruel Star* has helped me think about the motivations and distortions of a vast range of political and social movements — McCarthyism, the Iranian revolution and its aftermath, Al Qaeda, any "radicalism" (left or right), and any movement that claims the word "liberation." Strangely enough, it has even taught me about the virtues of both skepticism and optimism.

Kovály's memoir is not, strictly speaking, what we usually label journalism. But the essential gumshoe questions of who, what, where, when, and how have always interested me primarily as ways to answer the umbrella question: why? That's the question Kovály pursues, with great particularity and clarity. Why did people behave as they did — whether with cruelty or kindness, cravenness or courage? What kept a totalitarian government afloat for so long, and what brought it down? And so let me posit that *Under A Cruel Star* belongs to a genre I call "intimate political reportage": first-hand reporting that focuses on the personal emotions and experiences that roil behind (and ultimately create) the headlines about political turmoil. Intimate political reportage is a necessary counterpart to the kind of parachute journalism in which reporters land in a war zone and relay news about weapons, warriors, and body

counts, and to the sort of insider journalism in which reporters work the capital to send back word on which political factions are up or down. These approaches need to be supplemented with reporting that shows what happened not just from the outside in, but also from the inside out.

My bookshelves are peppered with books from this genre: Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Pumla Goboda-Madikizela's *A Human Being Died That Night*, Michael Patrick MacDonald's *All Souls*, Anchee Min's *Red Azalea*, Lillian Faderman's *Naked in the Promised Land*, Rian Malan's *My Traitor's Heart*, Gregory Howard Williams's *Life on the Color Line*. Of these, *Under A Cruel Star* is the most remarkable, for a variety of reasons: because Kovály has such a keen street sense for individuals' 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. The book begins:

Three forces carved the landscape of my life. Two of them crushed half the world. The third was very small and weak and, actually, invisible. It was a shy little bird hidden in my rib cage an inch or two above my stomach . . .

The first force was Adolf Hitler; the second, Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin. They made my life a microcosm in which the history of a small country in the heart of Europe was condensed. The little bird, the third force, kept me alive to tell the story.

This opening reveals the genre's subversive, albeit rarely stated, contention: by reporting on the stubborn human heart's peculiar movements during major world events, intimate political reportage explains not just what happened, but also what *could* happen the next time around.

Most of us are familiar with the

Holocaust's unspeakable brutalities and degradations. But imagine a former camp prisoner who could begin a reflection on the daily hour-long train trip from Auschwitz to a work site in subfreezing temperatures by stating, as Kovály does, "I loved those trips":

The tracks crossed an area under which an entire industrial complex had been built. Clouds of steam issued out from the earth in many places; mysterious iron constructions and fantastic twisted pipes rose from the moss-covered ground of the woods. The sun was already rising and, since there was always a thick fog hugging the ground, the sun's rays broke through it and colored the mist a variety of deep pinks, an orange, gold, and blue. Out of this shimmering vapor, dark shapes of trees and bushes emerged, drifted toward us, and vanished again.

**'Never again' is shown to be a dangerous sentiment. It allows a vision of a perfect eternity to eclipse everyday reality.**

Kovály's attention to the world's beauty, even while in hell, is so brazen as to take my breath away. Or consider an episode in which Kovály impulsively screams at her overseer — a business person who had paid for Auschwitz labor — that she and the other girls could not be expected to work well while starving. Terrified, the other girls try to silence her, certain she will be shot. Instead, he pulls her aside and asks her to explain. She does, and he is visibly stunned. As she says later: "That man lived in Nazi Germany and had daily contact with a concentration camp and its inmates, yet he knew nothing. I am quite sure he did not. He had simply thought that we were convicts, sentenced by a regular court of law for proven crimes." When we ask ourselves the

important question — How can citizens let their government do such things, in their names? — it's essential to know that the answer is, at least in part: they didn't always know.

After spending only twenty pages on the Holocaust, *Under A Cruel Star* moves on to what Kovály finds to be the greater puzzle: "It seems beyond belief that in Czechoslovakia after the Communist coup in 1948, people were once again beaten and tortured by the police, that prison camps existed and we did not know, and that if anyone had told us the truth we would have refused to believe it." And yet it happened.

Today we think of Communism as an outstanding example of how humanity's best and most high-minded intentions can be perverted into the worst actions. Kovály explores how and why that occurred, with an emotional nuance and intellectual curiosity that ought to awaken even the most hopeless utopian or deadline-driven journalist. She can be mordantly funny and exactly precise in recounting her friends' and her own credulity. She paints a picture of her and her husband's crowd — serious, thoughtful people, all — hungrily gathering at informal parties in Prague to debate which political system could best rebuild their society. Communist Party pamphlets and writings "offered such clear and simple answers to the most complicated questions that I kept feeling there had to be a mistake somewhere," she writes. Injustice, discrimination, misery, war: they all happened because a powerful few exploited the rest. But the party would overthrow that handful of evildoers and divide the riches of the world equally.

How could they have swallowed such nonsense? Because, she explains, the war had beaten the confidence out of Czechoslovaks of all stripes. They had been forced to live as slaves, terrorized paupers, outlaws, or humiliated subjects of a brutal occupation, scrambling to make it from one day to the next.

Nowhere else have I read such a vivid parsing of how national shame, personal humiliation, defeat, deprivation, and perpetual fear can lead the thoughtful to abandon their senses and yearn to be perfect — while the craven cloak themselves in the language of the good.

Kovály is especially good at examining the mentality of the camp survivors. "It is hardly possible for people to live for so many years as slaves in everyday contact with fascists and fascism without becoming somewhat twisted," she writes. She and her fellow prisoners were tormented by having survived while everyone and everything they loved had been turned into lampshades and ash. They were too devastated even to stand up for themselves and insist that their former neighbors return stolen apartments, paintings, china, carpets. Living for the small everyday pleasures — home, family, friends, music, theater — seemed petty after such loss. To redeem their lost lives, they wanted to sacrifice themselves for a noble effort: creating a perfect future "in which this could never happen again." And so they joined the party.

"Never again," in this book, is shown to be a dangerous sentiment, a fundamentally religious belief, because it allows a vision of a perfect eternity to eclipse everyday reality. With the promise of a perfect future, who could be so petty as to complain about a few bread lines and shoe shortages, or a few moments of a hideously kitschy state-sponsored film? Silence was easier than enduring the endless self-critique sessions that spontaneous honesty could have engendered. But silence was the problem. "It is not hard for a totalitarian regime to keep people ignorant," Kovály writes. "Once you relinquish your freedom for the sake of 'understood necessity,' for Party discipline, for conformity with the regime, for the greatness and glory of the Fatherland, or for any of the substitutes that are so convincingly offered, you cede your claim to the truth."

After I read *Under A Cruel Star*, I had to meet its remarkable author. Since Kovály was then a librarian at the Harvard Law School, just a couple of miles away, I scraped together an honorarium to bring her to read at my local library. Tough and scrappy, she brushed away my questions about communism and spoke entirely about Auschwitz. Like every Jewish child of my generation, I had grown up secretly preoccupied with whether I would have survived or been slaughtered. And so I asked: What was the difference between those who lived and those who died? "Recklessness

**In Kovály's world, what she calls 'the spontaneous solidarity of the decent' can shake off tyranny.**

and arrogance," Kovály said without hesitation. She went on to describe a remarkable thing. Even when she and the other girls were shaved, starved, and stripped down into nearly identical skeletons, she could still tell them apart easily: each girl's personality showed vividly through her eyes. Some had a burning love of life, impulsively grabbing hope where they could find it. They were the ones who survived.

Has any American girl ever been taught that recklessness and arrogance are healthy survival skills? Those twin qualities shine through *Under A Cruel Star*. Kovály was in a hospital being treated for peritonitis when she learned that her husband, then thirty-nine and a minister of trade, was one of fourteen officials (eleven of them Jews) being "tried" as traitors in what is known as the Slansky affair. In short order, though barely able to sit up, she was thrown out of the hospital, fired from her job (thus making her a "parasite" subject to arrest), evicted from her apartment, and ordered to

move into an unheated mousetrap shack with no running water, miles from anyone she knew. She had to scramble desperately to keep herself and her son alive. Her reckless arrogance came to her aid. As soon as she was well enough to walk, she dyed her clothes black and staggered out onto the street. "I knew that I might be assaulted, that a stone might come hurtling toward me, because that had already happened to some of the widows and children of the executed." To her surprise, some people were visibly sympathetic. Years later, she reports, a friend explained their reaction to her:

You know, people aren't all that mean. It's just that they don't think. To gang up on a public enemy is a deep-rooted custom of the country, almost a national tradition. But people have a completely different reaction to a widow in mourning, especially if she looks as wretched as you did then. And once they start opening their minds, there's no stopping the process. It began to dawn on some people that had you not been absolutely sure of your husband's innocence, you wouldn't have had the guts to challenge the Party by wearing mourning for him.

Because of Kovály and others like her, people started to doubt the official story. That was the beginning of the end — the end of the government's moral credibility, and eventually, the end of Communist totalitarian rule.

When I first read *Under A Cruel Star*, it illuminated Pol Pot's and Pinochet's reign of terror. Rereading it last year, I kept thinking of more recent events: The American government manipulating fear and idealism to justify torture camps in Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib. The Iranian revolution forcing grown women to walk around in large black bags for the sake of a pure society. The Israeli government using historical evils to justify a barbaric occupation. If you're temperamentally a pessimist, as I am, you could

react to these situations by locking yourself in your room for the rest of your life.

But the great challenge and joy of Kovály's book is that she refuses you that option. Yes, she shows that human beings can be petty and fearful herd animals, manipulated by power, idealism, greed, or fear into condoning the most shocking atrocities. Nevertheless, hers is far from a Hobbesian world. Rather, it is a world in which what she calls "the spontaneous solidarity of the decent" can shake off tyranny, in which ordinary neighborliness and troubled middle-class consciences can undo the grand political machinations described in our newspapers and history books. For Kovály, respect for ordinary folks' modest goals for daily happiness — good food, a nice home, time with family and friends — offers the most trustworthy path to a good society and a reliable political system. This may be common sense to others. But this testimony, offered from Europe's

heart of darkness, changed how I view the world.

Kovály's intimate reportage shrugs off several popular journalistic theories of history: the mad leader (how did Hitler and Stalin become monsters?); "national character" or "ancient hatreds" (authoritarian Germans always hate Jews, the Balkans are always balkanized); and military strategy ("How many divisions does the Pope have?"). Kovály concentrates on personal decency. For her the key questions are not about what politics or religion you follow, but rather, how you treat the starving deportee who unexpectedly knocks at your door, the social pariah who desperately needs medical care, the widow who demands that her dead husband's good name be restored. Is your response honest and sensible, or fearful and full of excuses? From that, all else follows — including the fate of governments.

*Under A Cruel Star* cured me of my own youthful utopianism, and taught me to be suspicious of polit-

ical theologies that do not respect what people say they want from their lives. It taught me to beware of anyone who tries bullying others into wanting the "right" thing: queer theorists who sneer that marriage is too assimilationist a goal for "their" movement; politicians who want to bomb other countries into freedom; TV and radio hosts who humiliate rather than debate their guests. It taught me to be less interested in competing labels — Democrat or Republican, black or white, gay or straight, Christian or Jew, Muslim or Hindu — than in a far more essential pairing: humane or inhumane. *Under A Cruel Star* taught me that the good — those who act out of compassion, decency, kindness, consideration, and even a recklessly arrogant love of life — are better than the great. ■

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