A Book Review

"The Will to Live: A German Family's Flight from Soviet Rule"

By Erika Vora. (This book is available in the Museum store.)

Reviewed by Brendan D. King

"Does Djilas, who is himself a writer, not know what human suffering and the human heart are? Can't he understand it if a soldier who has crossed thousands of kilometers through blood and fire and death has fun with a woman or takes some trifle?"[1]

--Joseph Stalin, in response to complaints about the mass rapes and looting committed by the Soviet Army during World War II.

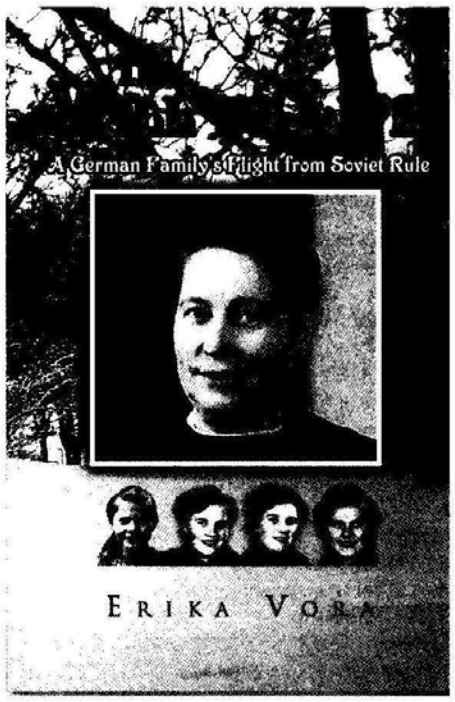
More than six decades have now passed since the end of the Second World War. Despite the current insistence on political correctness, German equals Nazi remains only one of the insulting stereotypes which remains frozen in time. Fortunately, signs of change are beginning to appear on the horizon.

Films such as "Valkyrie," "Downfall," and "Sophie School: The Last Days" have explored both the history of Germany's Anti-Nazi movements and the brutality which Hitler's enforcers routinely used against their own countrymen. However, most Americans are still unaware of how, as 12 years of Nazism ended in chaos, the Fuhrer's racist Nuremberg Laws were turned on their head throughout Eastern Europe.

Professor Erika Vora has long been known as an expert on race relations both at home and abroad. In her recent book, "The Will to Live," Dr. Vora has at last told the story which matters most to her.

During the aftermath of World War II, millions of ethnic Germans were stripped of their property, enslaved, or forced to flee west with little more than the clothes on their backs. "The Will to Live" relates a microcosm of this post-war exodus. The focus is upon the suffering of a single family – Dr. Vora's own.

In January 1945, Leokadia Wenzel, the wife of a farmer from Poland's Warthegau region, witnessed her village descending into anarchy. As ethnic Poles looted the farms of ethnic Germans, Leokadia elected to flee the advancing Soviet Army with her daughters Edith, Lilli, Sophie and the infant Erika. Accompanying them was Anton, a mentally disabled farm hand who had volunteered to be their male protector. Unfortunately, safety would prove elusive.



After the refugee column was repeatedly assaulted by Polish looters the Soviet Army finally caught up with the Wenzel family. While Leokadia pleaded for his life, Stalin's soldiers repeatedly beat Anton, calling him "a child of Hitler." Then, as the Wenzels watched in horror, the soldiers summarily executed Anton and pointed to his body screaming, "There, German woman, is your husband!"

Then, likely viewing them as a food source, the Russians also requisitioned the two horses that were driving the Wenzel's cart. What is more, they also confiscated the family's food and meager belongings.

Although none of the Wenzels realized it at the time, they were still very fortunate that the Soviet Army did not treat them in a far more brutal fashion. According to Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a Red Army officer during World War II, it was well known among Soviet soldiers that, if a woman was German, she could be gang raped and then shot in the head. According to Solzhenitsyn, "It was almost a combat distinction."

Meanwhile, the Wenzels continued their journey on foot. Little Edith later recalled, "Now, looking back, I am in awe of Mutti's courage. We couldn't linger, we had to go on."[2]

After walking until they could go no farther, the Wenzels were taken in by the Tumczoks, a family of farmers who lived near Gniezno, Poland. At first, Mrs. Tumczok expressed a desire to kill every ethnic German she

1 Milovan Djilas, *"Conversations with Stalin," page 95.*

2 Erika Vora, *"The Will to Live," page 82.*

Book review cont.

encountered. Then, however, a neighbor persuaded her to take in the Wenzels as slave labor on her husband's farm. Ultimately, three other enslaved "Hitler women" would join Leokadia at the Tumczok's estate.

Determined to escape with her children, Leokadia Wenzel discretely reached out to the wife of a Major in the Communist People's Army of Poland. Living on a massive estate confiscated from a German family, the Major's wife drove up to the Tumczok's farm in "an impressive carriage" drawn by six horses. The Tumczoks, however, had no intention of giving up their slaves.

After a massive argument, the Major's wife snarled, "Mr. Tumczok, not only can I take these Germans away from you, but I can take this entire farm away from you!"[3] Terrified, the Tumczoks agreed. If Leokadia had been hoping for better treatment, however, she was in for a surprise.

Not only were the Major and his wife far more demanding slave-masters, but even Leokadia's children were forced to work like plough horses. When Leokadia asked the Major that her daughters be relieved of their duties the Major was enraged. He shouted that if Leokadia didn't like their treatment he could have her shipped off to the Soviet GULAG system. He further declared that, if that happened, he would continue using Leokadia's daughters as slave labor and that she would never see them again.

In addition to hard labor, the enslaved Germans on the Major's estate were also forced to endure frequent beatings. In an especially horrifying incident, Leokadia was horsewhipped into unconsciousness after refusing to let the Major and his wife adopt Erika, her youngest daughter. Then, in the fall of 1947, they found a means to escape.

In exchange for advice in how to seize her farm, Leokadia's mother arranged for a Polish man to help the Wenzel family escape and drive them to Stettin, along Poland's border with East Germany. From Stettin, the Wenzels secretly boarded a cattle train, which brought them close to the border. After leaving the cattle train they took a passenger train to Dessau, in East Germany.

Although she was very grateful to be able to speak German again, Leokadia swiftly realized that there was no future for her children in the so-called German Democratic Republic. Every day, more and more people attempting to defect were shot at the western border. The political police, or Stasi, was present everywhere and, according to John Koehler, possessed a larger number of voluntary informers than the Nazi Gestapo.

Eventually, Leokadia developed a connection, through her Lutheran parish, with Herr Demann, a one-eyed World War II veteran engaged in smuggling East Germans across the western border. After making her daughter Edith promise to seek out a Pastor for her confirmation, Leokadia sent her with Herr Demann.

After her escape, Edith settled with her relatives in the West German province of Nordrhein-Westfalen. In 1950 she was informed that her father, who had been imprisoned in the GULAG since the end of the war, had been released. In July of 1950, Leokadia also managed to escape with her mother and three youngest daughters. After settling in a farm laborer's cottage in the village of Gohfeld, it was said of the Wenzels, "In the ugliest hut live the prettiest girls."[4]

In closing, this reviewer could not help but recall both the tragedy and triumph of the post-war German refugees from Eastern Europe. Although contemptuously referred to as "Polacken" by native West Germans, the millions of refugees from the east helped rebuild a shattered nation from the ground up. They are one of the main reasons for West Germany's economic miracle.

Unfortunately, this story has continued to be played out in other parts of the world. For this reason alone, this book has much to teach us.

3 *"The Will to Live," page 48.*

4 *"The Will to Live," page 97.*