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Ada

summary

The plot of *Ada* takes inspiration from the fate of the author's great-great-grandmother Heda Müller, who was expelled from Olomouc in 1946. The Sudeten German's husband died in the May of 1945 in an infamous internment camp for Germans in Nové Hodolany nicknamed the Hodolany Hell. After World War II, several thousand Germans were imprisoned and kept there under disastrous conditions, with at least 235 of them, including women and children, dying there according to documented death certificates. A commemorative plaque in Olomouc lists five hundred dead. Those interned at the camp faced elaborate methods of torture. According to witnesses, camp authorities allegedly shot down, among others, the residents of a German home for the elderly.

Among those interned were German anti-fascists and Jews returning from concentration camps. This fact was hardly talked about then and the former regime in Czechoslovakia tried to cover up the existence of the camp altogether along with all the atrocities committed there. *Ada* revives this part of history so that it does not go forgotten.

Two timelines, the present and the past, intertwine in the book, logically coming together and complementing one another. The chapters kick off with contemporary texts, official decrees, and authentic recollections of Germans who were deported from the Olomouc region as well as other documents that further help illustrate this period in history. They are mostly the memories and texts of those associated with *Olmützer Blätter*, a monthly periodical published in Germany by Olomouc expellees.

The story begins in the May of 1945. We are introduced to Ada, a local German woman, and her son Willi, whose life has taken a dramatic turn: he and Ingrid, his coworker from the factory who is in love with him, find themselves on the run from Russian soldiers. They get separated along the way and he loses all contact with her, but she reappears later in the story. Meanwhile, at Ada's house, her husband Franz comes home from the pub, where he went after work as usual, upset about what Russian soldiers have done to the area. He convinces his wife they should go and stay with their eldest daughter Adelheid, who is married to a Czech man and, unlike them, speaks Czech well. The pair leaves their house but, in the rush, they forget about a neighbor they have taken into hiding in their attic and leave her behind.

When the two arrive at the safety of their daughter Adelheid's house, the family discovers that Aduška, Ada's granddaughter, has gone missing. Because the little girl has a habit of occasionally skipping school and running away to her beloved grandmother, both Ada and Adelheid are frantic. Fear spreads through the village. When evening rolls around, their patience has run thin and they send Novák, Adelheid's husband, to go look for Aduška at Ada's house. There, he finds not only the little girl hiding in a closet, but also the neighbor from the attic, who has been paid a visit by Russian soldiers. Later, Willi returns home as well after a Czech neighbor finds him in the woods and takes him into hiding.

What follows the May 1945 episode is a series of disturbing events. A decree is issued stating all Germans have to reside in their homes. At the same time, the houses of Germans are marked with signs reading "National Property" and they become a frequent target of

looters. Ada is forced to be of service to Russian soldiers and subsequently learns of additional restrictions on public life imposed on local Germans.

Franz and Willi are soon conscripted into community service along with most other Germans. Ada is over 60, so the regulation does not apply to her. Willi ends up at a farm outside Olomouc. Ada's husband Franz refuses to fulfill his clean-up duty as assigned, and one evening, members of the newly appointed National Committee come and take him away. He is sent to the Hodolany internment camp as punishment. While originally intended exclusively for Nazi criminals, the camp ends up claiming the lives of many innocents.

Ada learns of the disastrous conditions in the camp. Out of desperation, she gives money to committee official and neighbor Jiří Dostál in an attempt to secure better treatment for her husband. Dostál is a Czech man married to a German woman and while he worked for German authorities during the war, now he carries strong anti-German sentiments and forbids his children from speaking the language. Dostál forges a plan to get ownership of Ada's house and arrange for Willi to end up at the internment camp as well. He keeps the money Ada gives him in good faith for himself.

Willi's coworker Ingrid finds herself at the Hodolany camp as a nurse, witnessing the appalling conditions there for herself. Among others, two whole German villages in the Olomouc region are taken to the camp, including women, children, and toddlers, who are fed the same food as adults—bread and water. Both Willi and Franz have a difficult time at the camp. The practices at Hodolany Hell are kept secret, but news of what is happening there continues to spread among the people.

Ada, like other Germans, has to wear the letter N on her coat. Little Aduška steals her letter and wears it herself to protest what is happening to her grandmother. At school, she switches to German and refuses to speak Czech, which gets her father, a Czech teacher, in trouble. One evening, Adelheid visits Ada along with her daughter and they hear a sentence little Aduška will go on to remember all her life: "Opapa ist tod." Her grandfather has become another victim of the conditions in Hodolany. The circumstances of his death stay shrouded in mystery.

There is talk of expulsion, the furniture in Ada's house is marked with stickers and confiscated. Novák, her son-in-law, devises a plan to get the house back and rescue Willi, who has survived this long in the camp partly thanks to Ingrid's help. Using threats and the offer of a quid pro quo, Novák finally manages to convince Dostál to get Willi out of Hodolany. Willi initially ends up in the care of his sister Adelheid, but soon his mother Ada takes him in and he slowly recovers. Later, Ada and Willi have to relocate to a reception camp in Slavonín, but the conditions there are better than in Hodolany.

Adelheid's family moves into Ada's house, with Novák as its new owner.

In the spring of 1946, Ada and Willi prepare to be moved to the Lutín expulsion center and subsequently deported. The two conceal these developments from little Aduška. Ingrid gets ready to follow suit as part of one of the later groups, but the Hodolany internment camp gets a new administrative authority—the Ministry of the Interior—and the camp gradually ceases to exist.

The book follows the fate of both parts of the family after the 1946 expulsion. In Germany, Willi and Ada first go from camp to camp until they finally settle down in Munich. There, Willi gets a job in a BMW factory, where he gradually works his way up to a designer position. Coincidentally, Ingrid also ends up in Munich, where she begins a new life after the horror of what she experienced in Hodolany. Willi, who has now come out of the closet to his mother, is treated in Munich for his lung problems and when he seeks out a renowned lung specialist, he bumps into Ingrid, who got a job at the doctor's office. He and Ingrid gradually get together and enter into a marriage of convenience.

Adelheid, as the daughter, is the only Czech member of the family allowed to visit Ada in Germany. Over the years, the social differences between the German and the Czech part of the family grow bigger. Moreover, Czechoslovakia finds itself behind the Iron Curtain and this further complicates any form of contact between the two parts of the family. From abroad, Ada and Willi regularly provide financial support to the Czech part of the family.

Following in her father's footsteps, little Aduška grows up to become a teacher. After getting married, she gives birth to her firstborn son Leoš in 1960. She continues to live with her mother in Slavonín and is unable to visit her grandmother Ada in West Germany for many years—she doesn't see her again until 1967. By that time, Ada is sickly and weak, dying shortly after the visit.

After Ada's death, the Czech part of the family remains in contact with Willi, who is well off and doing well thanks to his successful career at the BMW factory. At the beginning of the 1980s, Aduška finally receives her long-coveted exit permit, allowing her a second opportunity to go to West Germany. Willi is set on persuading her to emigrate. He tries to dazzle her, showing her through a fully stocked department store and telling her to buy anything she wants using his credit card. He tells her about the local education system and about how well-equipped the schools are. Aduška is blown away by it all—this is nothing like what she is used to—but she doesn't let anything on. She declines Willi's offer to emigrate and shops for luxury onesies, as her first granddaughter, Anastasia, is about to be born.

Little Anastasia is born to Leoš and his girlfriend Alena: both are still in school and get married in a hurry because of the pregnancy. The family decides to entrust the baby in the care of great-grandmother Adelaid and grandmother Aduška, who live in Slavonín. Adelheid teaches her German songs and poems. When Adelheid gets ready to celebrate her eightieth birthday, she invites Willi, who visits Czechoslovakia for the first time since the end of the war along with his wife Ingrid. They are greeted on the stairs of the house by three-year-old Anastasia, whom Adelheid has managed to teach the German phrase: "Grüss Gott Onkel und Tante."

Shortly after the visit, Willi dies due to his long-term health problems. Ingrid burns all her bridges and leaves for the USA, where the rest of her family now live. Thus end the German roots of one expelled family.

We are guided through the present by Anastasia, Ada's great-great-granddaughter. She is a TV presenter and journalist, and she is currently going through an existential crisis. Her boyfriend just left her, and she was humiliated at work. She needs to find herself, so she decides to visit her grandmother in Olomouc. It is only there that, much to her surprise, she gradually discovers her Sudeten-German roots.

She embarks on a journey into a past much more distant than her own childhood, uncovering a past filled with events that are an inseparable part of Czech history—events we must remember and mustn't overlook.

– Veronika Jonášová