



East of the Storm: outrunning the Holocaust in Russia

Hanna Davidson Pankowsky

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On September 27, 1939, less than four weeks after the Nazi invasion, Poland ceased to exist as a nation. Only three weeks had passed since ten-year-old Hanna Davidson had said goodbye to her father, Simon, and older brother, Kazik, who had been drafted and sent to defend Warsaw. Now she believed she would never see them again. Hanna and her mother, Sophia, an artist and intellectual, found themselves subjected to Hitler's efforts to dehumanize Poland's Jewish population. There seemed no choice but to cling to what shreds of stability they could by submitting to a ruthless tyranny. But when they got word that Simon and Kazik were alive in Bialystok in the Soviet-occupied zone of Poland, Hanna and her mother made a fearful decision—they would risk a harrowing escape from Nazi Poland into relatively safer Soviet territory. After a few hasty good-byes to family and with only the clothes on their backs, they left their apartment—just one hour before soldiers would come for Sophia. If the two-percent chance of surviving the crossing were not daunting enough, then the Davidsons' prospects in the Soviet Union should have been. For Simon Davidson's past as a prominent businessman (and capitalist) and political activism in the socialist Bund (an organization banned by the communists) branded him as undesirable. Moreover, he had been born in Russia—escaping years before by fooling Soviet authorities into presuming him dead—and his presence could place those members of his family who remained behind in danger. So for the sake of their very lives—and those of relatives they could never publicly acknowledge—the Davidsons would be compelled to invent and memorize not only their own new identities but also an extended family history. Moreover, avoiding persecution by the Soviet regime would entail struggling virtually every day to maintain a pretense of allegiance to Stalin. As recounted by Hanna, the Davidsons' journey into the Soviet interior makes for an extraordinary story. More than a memoir of survival, the Davidsons' story is clearly one of a family whose spirit could not be destroyed by persecution, war, famine, or political oppression. "A singular and engaging story . . . More than just another memoir of survival" —Bookwatch



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