



## READING GROUP GUIDE

### Hitler, Stalin and I: An Oral History

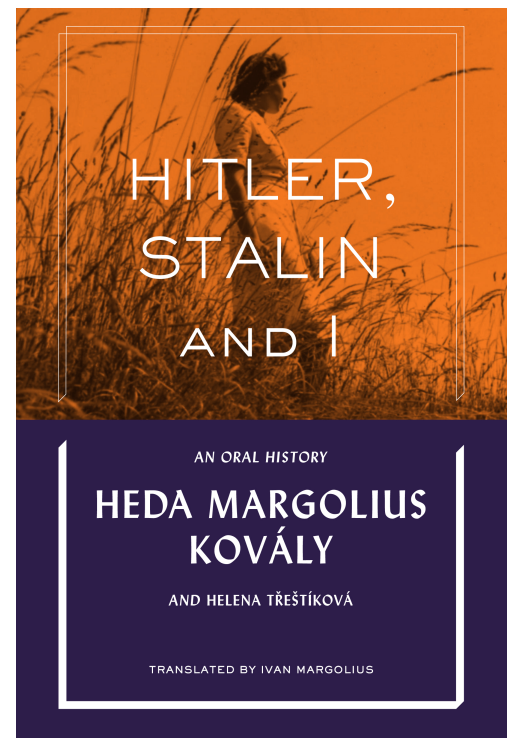
Heda Margolius Kovály and Helena Třeštíková

Translated by Ivan Margolius

#### Introduction

Heda Margolius Kovály (1919–2010) was a renowned Czech writer and translator born to Jewish parents. Her best-selling memoir, *Under a Cruel Star: A Life in Prague, 1941–1968* has been translated into more than a dozen languages. Her crime novel *Innocence; or, Murder on Steep Street* – based on her own experiences living under Communist oppression – was named an NPR Best Book in 2015.

In the tradition of Studs Terkel, *Hitler, Stalin and I* is an oral history based on interviews between Kovály and award-winning filmmaker Helena Třeštíková. In it, Kovály recounts her family history in Czechoslovakia, starving in the deprivations of the Łódź Ghetto, how she miraculously left Auschwitz, fled from a death march, failed to find sanctuary amongst former friends in Prague as a concentration camp escapee, and participated in the liberation of Prague. Later under Communist rule, she suffered extreme social isolation as a pariah after her first husband Rudolf Margolius was unjustly accused in the infamous Slánský Trial and executed for treason. Remarkably, Kovály, exiled in the United States after the Warsaw Pact invasion in 1968, only had love for her country and continued to believe in its people. She returned to Prague in 1996.



"The story is so engrossing and filled with such immediacy and realism that the narrator, speaking from the soul, instantly wins the hearts of readers."

— Jan Hofírek, *Kniha.cz*

"This emotionally charged story, realistic and without embellishment, will not leave you in peace."

– Kamila Pětrašová, *Kultura 21*



## REVIEWS

[Třeštíková's] interview and chilling newsreel footage of atrocities bring Margolius-Kovály's story to life: Her combination of determination and luck renders her almost matter-of-factly told tale extraordinary. [...] In Margolius-Kovály (who penned the 1997 memoir *Under a Cruel Star: Life in Prague 1941–1968*), she's found a composed, eloquent yet spunky subject whose quietly upbeat nature is inspirational and infectious.

– Eddie Cockrell, *Variety*

Based on an interview with the late writer and memoirist Heda Margolius Kovály and the basis for a film shown on Czech television, this book stands out as one of the best examples of memoir literature. [...] It has extraordinary momentum, reads in 'one sitting' and, were it not a depiction of real life events, could be described as a suspense thriller. [...] The story is so engrossing and filled with such immediacy and realism that the narrator, speaking from the soul, instantly wins the hearts of readers. [...] Stories of people with admirable fortitude struggling even in the most hopeless situations with a cruel fate will always find their audience.

– Jan Hofírek, *An Exceptional Life Wandering Through the Century of Horrors*,  
Kniha.cz

A story written by life itself. [...] After all the hardships, Ms. Kovály remained someone with an open mind and many truths echo in her life story. The book is difficult to tear yourself away from until you finish the last page. This emotionally charged story, realistic and without embellishment, will not leave you in peace.

– Kamila Pětrašová, *Kultura 21*

Heda had an enormous talent for expressing herself. She spoke with precision and was descriptive and witty in places. I admired her attitude and composure, even after she had such extremely difficult experiences. Nazism and Communism afflicted Heda's life directly with maximum intensity. Nevertheless, she remained an optimist.

– From the Introduction by Helena Třeštíková



## READING GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Heda calls her father "the old patriot" (p. 27) before the German occupation of Czechoslovakia had begun. How does his attachment to his homeland mirror his daughter's? How is her patriotism after World War II similar or different than her father's patriotism at the beginning of it?
2. Heda claims to have a strong sense of "monumental detail" (p. 34) that often hinders her ability to remember larger events. How did this become a coping mechanism for her during trying moments in her life? Is this a show of humanity in a time where it seemed lost? Give some specific examples.
3. Following the death of her cousin Jindřišek, Heda despondently observes that the past is always lost. What is the significance of longing for the past in moments where one feels the complete and specific loss of something (like Heda's examples of her mother and father losing their homeland)? When confronted with "moving on" as the only option forward, should the past still be memorialized even if it carries with it pain?
4. People living relatively nearby to labor camps and extermination camps did not know about the atrocities happening there; for example, the boss at the brick factory outside Auschwitz. Do you think this kind of lack of information or ignorance of facts is possible today? What are some contemporary examples of camps, prisons, or detention centers where revelations about abuses come to light later only to shock the world? And what justice was done? What should happen to those places?
5. How does ideology play a role in changing the way people perceive what is going on around them? What are some examples from Heda's years in the camps? From her experiences in Czechoslovakia before the Prague Spring?
6. In the years following WWII, when Czechoslovakia was Communist, Heda notes the many ways in which the people's lives were dictated by the Kremlin. Give some examples up through and after Heda's husband Rudolf was unjustly accused and put on trial.



7. Throughout the book, Heda condemns the passive attitude of her countrymen toward seeking freedom and justice, but does not entirely blame them. Why do you think it was difficult for the population to have a significant voice during periods of occupation? Describe the various ways that oppressive governments can deny people their rights? Consider both overt and subtle mechanisms.
8. In 1966, Heda sent her son Ivan away from Czechoslovakia because she wanted him to grow up being free, but she herself decided to stay in her home country. How did her own experience growing up in Masaryk's Republic influence this choice? And in what ways did her perspective on emigration reflect a negative view of the the political climate of her country, despite her sense of pride in national identity?
9. Describe the events of 1968 that modified her decisions about where she wanted to live. What needed to change before she could return to Czechoslovakia? Give some examples of ways she kept Czechoslovakia "with her" during her years in exile.
10. Heda writes that, unlike so many others who focused on trivial things during difficult times, she always had to "see life as it was and endure it as such" (p. 151). How does experiencing reality this way encapsulate her story of survival? Give some examples of how she remained in the present even when it was painful for her, and other examples of when she "broke" from that idea.
11. What do you understand about Czechoslovakia that you didn't before you read the book?
12. What aspects of Heda impress you most? What can you learn from her?



Helena Třeštíková and Heda Margolius Kovály, 2000, photo: Vlastimil Hamernik

**Heda Margolius Kovály** is the author of several books including the acclaimed memoir *Under a Cruel Star: A Life in Prague 1941–1968* (Holmes & Meier, 1997) and the mystery thriller *Innocence; or, Murder on Steep Street* (Soho Press, 2015).

**Helena Třeštíková** has made over forty documentary films. The film *Hitler, Stalin and I*, based on her interview with Heda Margolius Kovály, was first shown on Czech television in 2001 and subsequently received the Festival Award Special Commendation at the 2002 Japan Film Festival; the ELSA award for the best Czech TV documentary film by the Czech Film and Television Academy in 2002, and the Gold Kingfisher award for the best documentary film at the Festival of Czech Films, Plzeň in 2003.

**Ivan Margolius** is the son of Rudolf and Heda Margolius. He is an architect, translator and author of memoirs, books and articles on art, architecture, engineering, design and automobile history.



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