eview of Wendelgard von taden's Darkness over the Valley: Growing Up in Nazi Germany Y

I have been unable to discover whether this review, written in about 1981, has been published. This draft degenerates into notes at the end, but before that it is a connected and polished piece of writing. CPH?1981d.

Wendelgard von taden's *Darkness Over The Valley: Growing Up in Nazi Germany* ew York Ticknor and ields is a memento of those terrible years that struck at the lives of millions and millions of uropeans with the power of an elemental force. They were like and earthquake that distorted the landscape in the twinkling of an eye and opened up a huge chasm between the years 'before' and 'after'

n a different way the same could be said and has been said about the irst World War in personal retrospect The social memory of the ritish in particular has never got over the ghastly slaughter the decimation of the whole generation of the young men who died between and With them as aul ussell told us in The Great War and Modern Memory died innocence the redeeming power of personal sacrifice the personal force of patriotism The very character of the language as an instrument of social and literary communication came to be changed dmittedly there is something almost artificial if not fallacious about trying to compare the quality of the personal memory reflecting on the first and second wars nd yet one comes across some differences again and again. There was the sense of unbelieving surprise an you tell me how this came about 'the erman hancellor ethmann ollweg asked a visitor at the time othing like that in Von taden can write

lowly and relentlessly the war approached. The tension increased from crisis to crisis and the expectation that something irrevocable would happen hung over us like a storm cloud. Thus when the war finally did start it brought almost a feeling of relief. ven rau irebs my co worker in the onion fields put down her pitchfork suddenly one day and surmised 't would be better if they started the war now till come anyway."

There is no need to touch on the contrast between elevated jubilation in and the depressed weariness of in every participant country conflagrations. William hirer and others have testified how amazed they were by the lack of jubilation in the heavily indoctrinated azi capital even after the rapid victory in the olish campaign that all

ut in so much of the personal literature there is one noticeable thread distinctive of the second war that of having been touched by an almost personal evil the malevolence of a daemonic will that had the power of unleashing fury but had no staying power that could destroy but never build The image of the *bad dream* is a recurrent one and therefore also of incredulity at the events and at oneself in them the sense of having to come to terms with them but also the sense of tentativeness because it simply doesn't make sense ne can't explain but one must come to terms. We have the image of the bad dream at least once in Von taden's book in the words of a atholic priest from whom the author's mother seeks comfort during the latter months of the war

didn't believe him as he explained quietly that we would put these times behind us like a bad dream and that afterwards the world would be a different place

nd yet in retrospect she writes as though to confirm just what she didn't believe at the time e turned out to have been right twas a bad dream it was the conversion of nightmare into reality and after six years it was over as suddenly as it had started verything had been changed but it had all been done by a force that had simply evaporated. There was you will recall nobody in ermany after who had ever been a azi knew exactly one man who admitted it and it was startling.

The force of the present book which has stirred up considerable attention in the author's native land is that it evokes the seductive power of that dream its penetration into its intermingling with the daily round of ordinary life and the gradual realization of the horror of the captivity once the evil had taken firm hold of reality and nothing could be done to is an astonishingly successful evocation done with great verbal and pictorial economy and precision of the way mammoth events and small scale personal life converged to form the same world so that there was not even an escape from public into a private sphere and finally it is a memorial to the author's mother who even though herself mesmerized by the force of that repellent and yet magnetic dream and even though herself regarding it as having something of the quality of fatedness nonetheless refused to be paralyzed morally by it and because of that refusal the book is a personal testimony to the always all but lost and yet enduring strength of humaneness in the presence of evil. To see something ghastly

coming with all too great a clarity and yet to defy it not so much on political as on moral grounds is one way to be truly human

The author Wendelgard von taden whose husband was to become ambassador to the U between and ' and who had a diplomatic career in her own right was born in er parents owned a small farm not far from tuttgart. They were in a word impoverished aristocracy who had to work the land with their own hands They were deeply in debt and the mother would get up at am to drive to market and sell their vegetables The consciousness of class structure and social differentiation is at once present and yet not important. They were nobles but they worked like ordinary poor farmers and lived among them They were on the land in a firmly traditional small rural setting yet the city and the bureaucratic organization that made ermany such a formidable power were only minutes away t was in a way then a family that embodied or at least was in touch with much of the variety of the erman population except the industrial proletariat not typical who is but something of a social microcosm nonetheless xcept in one respect her father's brother was onstantin von eurath one of those conservatives who had agreed to join the azi government in and was itler's foreign minister until and later became governor of occupied ohemia and oravia and was sentenced to a long prison term at the uremberg trials

arly life was poor yet idyllic the depiction has those overtones of rural romanticism and closeness to land village and tradition that has played so heavy a part in the ideology of the erman past and certainly in the ideology of the erman past which the azis exploited ne can almost sense the devotion to the soil though indeed not to the myth embodied in the azi slogan 'lood and oil' This heady mixture is vividly portrayed in an early chapter which nglish speaking readers may find slightly off putting he describes the youth culture of the s and early s whose romanticism was so successfully co opted by the azis. Those hiking organizations with their guitars and their erman mythology and their mournful songs were ideal grist for the itler Youth rganization a stupendously successful bureaucratic and political invention of enormous importance in building the azi war machine n a conversation had with rs von taden about the translation her very first question was whether it conveyed the spirit of those poems and songs with their curious Wagnerian infatuation with mourning and death nd indeed the spirit of that folk ideology mixed with the image of soldiers riding away toward death and the slow sweet sadness of it all that mood of mesmerizing dream like unreality was the most difficult to convey - though the capable translator did her best ut it is easy to see why it was so important to the or if one senses that one can also understand how she could as a young girl go to hear the ührer speak in tuttgart and be absolutely frozen into speechlessness by the figure with the almost fluorescent blue eyes gazing at something far away which no one else could see and how she a twelve year old could swear in her heart that she would die for the ührer if that is what he wanted

ne is struck in the description of this as in virtually every other small vignette by the extraordinary and extraordinarily effective linguistic economy t takes very few strokes of the pen to render with powerful vividness and one judges faithfulness a scene or the nub of a conversation and in every case there is that startling and persuasive coincidence of the small scale intimate report and its simultaneously paradigmatic character. Two weeping girls their heads shaved are led through jeering crowds the placards on their backs reading slept with a ewish pig and one remembers endless scenes like it from every side of the conflict together with the social forces and conflicts the transiences n the preface to the nglish edition the author stressed that she had not written a novel or a short story but simply an account - a report The verbal economy goes hand in hand with what for want of a better expression can only call a lowering of the special voice a deliberate self removal of the author's guiding hand There is nothing impersonal in this book nothing that is not strained through her personal experience and yet her style and mood combine to force the reader to be directly engaged with the texture of the described persons and events friend of mine aptly said on reading the book that 'this seemingly straightforward "documentary" style masks a fine literary sensibility' t is perhaps a paradox but it is nonetheless the case that the form of the book forces on into a personal engagement with its substance precisely by the powerful understatement of the interior life that underwent these experiences t was perhaps for that reason that the editor of the major erman publication Die Zeit a contemporary of the author now in her mid fifties said that no other book evoked the atmosphere of that time so vividly or the ordinary erman's experience of it so reliably

t is well to remember that millions of non azi ermans greeted the advent of itler to power as a time of national renewal that to an extent reluctantly temporarily and confusedly — even the author's strong politically conscious ocial emocratic mother is caught up in the appeal of it—ut then one sees with the curious mixture of inevitability and persuasiveness of a tragic drama how the seeds of evil flower how the romantic illusions are dispelled—the dawning recognition that the dream had been a nightmare all along—t is striking that there is not a word about the ews until well into the book but then when the moment of recognition comes it comes with the sense that this was the heart of the matter all along—even though one had not seen it or seen it only fragmentarily in a variety of separate instances up till then—ut now the whole of—azism is laid bare and is of a piece—n his last book on the

Ibert peer details some of the internal conflicts of the organization especially the cold blooded arguments whether the policy of racial

extermination was to be carried out consistently or whether able bodied ews were at least temporarily to be used for slave labor. Von taden describes how after her return to the family farm in part of the land is expropriated a hidden valley on which after a rocket factory has been started on adjacent territory a 'special camp' is constructed in what will for most readers be the climactic part of the book the family discovers the meaning of the term 'special camp'. They have been ordered to supply some beans and straw to the camp and the mother had said that since they didn't have enough workers some of the prisoners would have to come and collect the stuff

There is a terrible scene in which rs von eurath orders potatoes to be cooked for the prisoners and they in crazed starvation fight each other for the contents of the boiling pot that had been spilled on the ground 'They are ews' says one of the guards 'subhumans You can see that for yourself'

The rescue of the prisoners — ews but others also — becomes an obsession with the mother and she plots at once unsuccessfully and at considerable risk to herself not only how to supply them but how to save them from the once the inevitable retreat from the advancing allied armies will set in

t is perhaps something of a betrayal of a commentator's job simply to summarize the book he is supposed to introduce but in this case it is inevitable since the sheer stark descriptive power of the book is its strength together with the fact that it is utterly bereft of all individual or collective self glorification excuse making or even explanation and of all inquiry into the subtleties terror and ambiguity of one's own internal reaction escription is all yet only because the passion of moral accuracy controls the whole and all the details

We are witnessing a whole raft of such remembrances published right now by people in their fifties and sixties of that there has not been a steady trickle of them right along but in the last few years it seems to have widened into a river. Why now one asks sit in part that this is the time when enough psychic distance has been gained of that one can now confront better than before the fact that one *must* come to terms with the chasm between before that time and since then the chasm made so specially deep by the dream like absurd quality of those days that demand an accounting even or especially if it is true that one cannot find an adequate explanation

nd what part does guilt play Will we ever know – survivors guilt is after all a notorious phenomenon Yet think that in this case this latter type of question may finally be fruitless

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fter this the manuscript dissolves into notes

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