



STARRED REVIEW

Near the Danube Bridge: A Story of Faith, Courage, and Endurance

Catherine Allen-Walters; concept and research by Elisabeth Hartig Lentulo

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Catherine Allen-Walters and Elisabeth Hartig Lentulo joined forces, as author and researcher respectively, to tell the story of Lentulo's family in Yugoslavia over the course of the 20th century. The result is a fascinating, heartfelt work of personal history.

Both Lentulo's father, Kalman Hartig, and mother, Hermina nee Kirchner, belonged to the Danube Swabians, an ethnically German population within the then-ethnic patchwork quilt of southeastern Europe. Even more important as a bond between them was their shared Seventh-day Adventist faith.

At the start of the 1950s, Kalman was a church youth leader avidly courting Hermina after meeting her at an Adventist assembly. Meanwhile, he hoped to honor his pacifist principles and avoid combat duty by registering as a conscientious objector. Instead, the unsympathetic Communist authorities arrested, tortured, and sentenced him to two years hard labor.

His letters and later recollections record a hellish odyssey through labor camps. They also testify to his steadfastness—refusing to work on Adventism's Sabbath day of Saturday, for instance, despite incurring further punishment—and to the grudging respect he won from his persecutors.

The narrative also traces the Hartigs' and Kirchners' harrowing WWII experiences and Kalman and Hermina's marriage, the path that eventually took them to the U.S., and their efforts to overcome past traumas and repair sometimes fractious relations with their families, as Kalman's righteousness and attempts to convert his siblings could be hard to bear.

Allen-Walters makes skillful use of Lentulo's obviously extensive research, deftly handling a story that sprawls over almost a century and numerous countries and historical events, while juggling the primary story of Kalman and Hermina with those of their families. Tastefully reconstructed dialogue brings the characters and their experiences alive, as does well-chosen period detail, such as a particularly vivid description of how Kalman experienced the Christmas season growing up.

This sweeping chronicle ultimately leaves readers with an inspiring sense of hard-won endurance, while bearing eloquent witness to some of 20th-century Europe's greatest historical tragedies.

Also available as an ebook.