

Microcosm, Portrait of a Central European City by Norman Davies and Roger Moorhouse. Jonathan Cape, 2002. £20.00

Biographies of people may be the norm but today the genre of 'biography' probably covers a wider field than ever before; animals, foodstuffs, and cities have all come under the biographer's scrutiny.

Microcosm, by the eminent historian Norman Davies and his chief researcher Roger Moorhouse is a fascinating example of the city biography, tracing as it does the history of the city of Breslau, traditional capital of Silesia. The title of the biography gives the clue to the authors' principle impetus, to tell the story of Central Europe through the centuries through the microcosm of one of its important cities.

Davies traces the city's various metamorphoses, its name changes, and the fate of its citizens with commendable detail, but the story is so fascinating that the detail never weighs heavily on the reader.

Breslau's Jews also serve as a microcosm of the Jewish experience in Central Europe; from tiny beginnings to a major community, producing scholars of Jewish and other subjects whose contribution to the world went far beyond that of their own community, but who were nevertheless prey to prejudice, separation, torture, pogrom and ultimately, deportation and murder by the Nazis.

This is a fine work of history, and especially the ebbs and flows of Central European history; it sets the European Jewish experience in a broader context and brings to life many characters and incidents from the past. Warmly recommended.

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