

Almost a Childhood – Growing up among the Nazis by Hans-Georg Behr.
Granta 2005.

This is a deeply disturbing book: not because it is the childhood memoir of the son of a leading Nazi who was executed by the Allies but because it details, painfully and horribly, the trauma inflicted on a boy by his up tight aristocratic upbringing and his cruel and heartless mother.

As the decades have passed after the ending of the Second World War, more and more personal memoirs are published: those by the Jewish victims of Nazi persecution have come to be accepted and expected, those by 'Aryan' Germans much less so. Nevertheless the latter are appearing more frequently now, and the picture they paint while frequently chilling is ultimately suffused with a different sort of horror to that inflicted by Germans on Jews, but a horror nevertheless. The horror that comes from the collapse of dreams, the waste of lives, the devastating revelation that perceived truths are actually lies, and ultimately from the invasion of one's country by enemies who are vicious and unforgiving.

Behr depicts his childhood and adolescence in an admirably detached way – he never uses the 1st person singular – and the decline of his family's fortunes and the breakdown in societal standards brought about by the war emerges almost by the by. There are details of child abuse by paedophile Russian prisoners that chill the blood and evidence of abiding anti-Semitism in the words of those who survived the war in an Ostmark that had become Austria again.

This is not a comfortable book to read, but it is nevertheless a very important one.

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