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REVIEWS

Writer creates word artistry

By Karen Berg Douglas

There are times in a civilized society that we seem to forget the horrendous imprint that the ravages of war can leave on the hearts and minds of innocent victims – especially our children.

Author Michael Maryk has given us good reason to remember why we should not allow ourselves to let that happen. In his new book “Sunpath,” the Washington author stepped back into the pages of Finland’s history and has written of a dramatic situation that occurred in the tiny Baltic Sea country 67 years ago.

Few may remember it now, but in the summer of 1943, Finland was fearful of its defenseless position in an impending war with Russia, its ancient archenemy. Believing that only a miracle could save their race, the Finns welcomed a plan proposed by Sweden to temporarily adopt their children until the end of the war. Within three months, an operation called “Finska Krigsbarn” (*Finnish War Children*), was in place. More than 100,000 children would be transported to the neutral country in what would become the greatest exodus of children in the history of mankind.

Unfortunately, while it may have been a brilliant plan, it was far from perfect. And therein lies the story.

It should be immediately noted that Sunpath is a novel, but it is based on factual research by the author who went to Sweden and interviewed numerous survivors who lived through this tempestuous time in Finland’s history.

The story begins on a winter evening in the Kekkanen home in eastern Finland. Ten –year old Aimo Kekkanen, his sister Anna, age 6, and cousin Pehr, age 8, suddenly find themselves being transported from their home by sled to the train station. There is little time to talk, say Aimo’s parents. The Russians have reached their small community. There will be war. They will be safe in Sweden. There is no time for ‘goodbyes’, as they are hustled onto a train with hundreds of other children. Sobbing

children. Screams of fear. The journey to their new home across the frigid, wintry Nordic landscape will take ten long days.

Nurses, doctors and volunteers try to provide care for their young charges, some of which are babies, but the task is daunting. Burdened with the mental and emotional loss of their past, one is left to wonder if any one of the children will ever be able to forge another relationship – even with a more promising future.

Maryk is a gifted writer and talented “word” artist. He needs no photographs or pen and ink drawings. He has the unique ability to “paint pictures” by illustrating his story with words. From the beginning of the book, the reader is there with the character, experiencing the bone-chilling physical and emotional pain associated with loss of family and separation anxiety. This continues throughout the book, as the reader is drawn into every scene and situation as an integral part of the story.

Upon their arrival in Sweden, there are lessons to be learned, new directions to adhere to, and obstacles to overcome – especially by Aimo, the central character. Some of the children adjust well with their adoptive parents in this new, strange land. Some have been placed in an orphanage. But, Aimo’s temporary home away from home with the local Lutheran minister and his wife proves to be challenging.

“Sunpath” is a powerful story about the tragedy of war. Some parts are graphic, frightening and sad. Yet the story moves well in page-turner fashion, bringing unexpected solutions to difficult situations.

But more importantly, it should also be noted that this is also a story about love, friendship and the strength of the human spirit.

I found this book to be most enlightening in many different ways, and I commend Michael Maryk for his efforts. I only hope that one day we will have the privilege of reading more by this talented writer.

Editor’s note: Karen Berg Douglas is a professional journalist and is of Finnish and Swedish-Finn heritage. She resides in Lansing, Michigan.