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A Winter's Day in 1939 – Melinda Szymanik

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New Zealand became 'home' for Polish refugees during World War II. More followed after the war, including author Melinda Szymanik's father. She draws on his story plus additional research to create this story of twelve year old Polish boy Adam from August 1939 till Christmas 1942. Divided into three chronological parts and 24 chapters, the story is told in the first person by Adam, second son of a Polish family who have been settled on a farm in what had been the Ukraine.

We see farm and family life through Adam's eyes. Adam's pride in his father when he and Zorka win their race conflicts with the embarrassment he feels when neighbours smirk at their odd looking ploughing combination. Adam cannot understand why his father will not let him keep the baby rabbit. These pre-war irritations fade as the German army moves through Poland in readiness to attack Russia.

We follow his hopes and fears as first a sister dies, the family are forcibly evicted from the farm then are relocated east across Russia then north then south-east to Tashkent and finally to Tehran. Along the way hunger and the constant search for food and clean water, for shelter and for information take their toll.

Separation from friends, within families, illnesses and death - Adam grows up fast as he faces many challenges and learns that death by weapons is not the only horror of war.

The Opening Note from the Author and the Postscript help round out this story for the young reader who may or may not know anything of the Great War, the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Bolshevik War or World War Two. The Glossary of Polish, Russian and Turkish words plus the Polish Pronunciation Guide all assist, as does the map showing the forced movements of the family.

Author Melinda Szymanik has done well to transform this harrowing tale into one the Intermediate age reader (10 - 13 is the recommended age) can be caught up with, empathize with and come to a greater understanding of the trials of refugees. A must for school libraries.

Reviewed for Bookrapt by Chris Wright

