

The Broken House

Horst Krüger

The Broken House by Horst Krüger is an autobiographical book which was published in 1966. It describes the author's life as a child growing up in Eichkamp, an eastern suburb of Berlin, during the 1930's and into the early 1940's. At the time of publication, most Germans were still trying to come to terms with their involvement in the rise of Adolph Hitler and the horrors of World War II, in particular the Holocaust. The general feeling was that people were forced into acceptance of Nazism, but this book denies this and portrays a population that was supportive almost to the point of idolisation.

Eichkamp could be described as a lower middle-class district where the men had lower to middle ranking Civil Service careers and their wives tended to stay at home as housewives and mothers. Horst's father was a Protestant while his mother was a much more devout Catholic. Their marriage was not close, but the family probably appeared little different from their neighbours. In an Afterword at the end of the book, Krüger feels that he was rather hard on his parents but he considers that the *biological self-dissolution* of his family, largely caused by his sister Ursula's suicide, can be considered symbolic of Germany as a whole. Germany had suffered badly after World War I and there was a sense of national humiliation. The Nazis promised that Germany would be Great Again and people became caught up in this emotion as new concert halls, museums and autobahns were built, even though living standards actually fell. The stadium for the 1936 Olympics was, and still is, a spectacular affair. People felt more positive about the future and didn't appreciate the significance of events such as Reichskristallnacht, although such events created a sense of unease. There was also an apparent unwillingness of the people in places like Eichkamp to be aware of and to question the wider political developments. Only Wanja, a student from the 'rougher' end of town, appeared more enlightened about what was going on.

Krüger's writing is almost conversational and he describes events philosophically. His descriptions of certain events, such as Ursula's death from mercury poisoning, are detailed and almost brutal. He makes little reference to his war service, apart from mentions of France in 1940, the action around Monte Cassino in Italy and the Russian Front. His war ended on the German frontier where he surrendered to the Americans in a farcical scene in which the Americans nearly surrendered to him and his companion until informed of their intention. Krüger felt a great sense of freedom and release from the weight of Hitler's influence when he learned of his death.

Immediately following the War, Germany concentrated on economic recovery and tried to avoid facing up to the enormity of the crimes committed by the Nazi Regime. Many of the Camp guards, SS soldiers and those in the Gestapo were able to merge back into German society, and it was only in the early to mid-1960s that a series of war-crimes trials began, with a concentration on the extermination camps. Krüger attended some of these as a reporter and was struck by the ordinariness of the accused; the banality of evil. Camp guards returned to their occupations as shopkeepers, businessmen or civil servants. It was mentioned in the Group that there were similarities to *The Reader*. Krüger felt that everyone was a victim in some way; even the perpetrators, who were victims of Hitler and Nazism.