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Gottland: Mostly True Stories From Half Of Czechoslovakia



Synopsis

Winner of the Europe Book Prize One of Europe's most preeminent investigative journalists travels to the Czech Republic—the Czech half of the former Czechoslovakia, the land that brought us Kafka—to explore the surreal fictions and the extraordinary reality of its twentieth century. For example, there's the story of the small businessman who adopted Henry Ford's ideas on productivity to create the world's largest shoe company—and hired modernist giants such as Le Corbusier to design his company towns (which were also the birthplaces of Ivana Trump and Tom Stoppard). Or the story of Kafka's niece, who loaned her name to writers blacklisted under the Communist regime so they could keep publishing. Or the story of the singer Karel Gott, winner of the country's Best Male Vocalist Award thirty-six years in a row, whose summer home, Gottland, is the Czech Dollywood. Based on meticulous research and hundreds of interviews with everyone from filmmakers to writers to pop stars to ordinary citizens, Gottland is a kaleidoscopic portrait of a resilient people living through difficult and often bizarre times—equally funny, disturbing, stirring and absurd. In a word, Kafkaesque.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Praise for Gottland "Gottland offers an indelible account of the ravages of 20th-century totalitarianism and the way it continues to pollute human thought and behavior in the 21st century." —New York Times "Amazingly surreal vignettes...these stories are presented with plenty of breathing room for the reader to make inferences. I love that kind of

writing." **NPR, Best Books of 2014** "The absurd details of the stories in this collection are presented with such wry insouciance that it's easy to forget (even with the book's explicit subtitle) that this is a work of non-fiction... It could be a work of dark comedy if it weren't, but as it stands, *Szczygiel* is something altogether more devastating." **Daily Beast** "Gottland is so new and inventive, it feels like a milestone of both journalism and creative nonfiction | A fascinating portrait of a people whose silence seems to speak louder than any words could." **NPR** "One of those delightfully unclassifiable books... *Szczygiel* is strange and funny, constantly off at jaunty tangents." **Julian Barnes' Book of the Year, The Guardian (UK)** "The relationship between art and politics is a running theme, with due reverence for those who kept their integrity. *Szczygiel* is absorbing, offbeat history celebrates the truths they defended against oppression." **Financial Times** "Non-fiction stories from Czechoslovakia, which show a country more fantastical than even its wildest literature led us to believe." **The Guardian (UK)** "Extraordinary... *Gottland* is one of the funniest books I have read and one of the shrewdest about what it was like to live under fascism and communism, the experience of so much of Europe in the last century. It is not about Czechoslovakia or Poland or even limited to Mitteleuropa, but about how one copes with tyranny and corruption and preserves a conscience | Important and enjoyable." **The Spectator (UK)** "*Szczygie*...'s great accomplishment is to have illuminated these Czech stories with such insight and humor that we end up laughing in spite of ourselves, laughing in outrage and disbelief... *Gottland* represents not only admirable storytelling but admirable history, too. For all its humor, the book takes its subjects and their sufferings seriously, compassionately." **Quarterly Conversation** "*Szczygiel* offers true stories that capture the contours of history through specificity. Trained as an investigative reporter, he's interested in the wide-angle view of the Czech political identity and finds stories of individuals during key points in the timeline to reflect it." **Biographile** "Snappy, moving, inquisitive, and ethical | Assembling in-depth profiles, which wind and turn on themselves as if fables, and interspersing wry vignettes, these vivid reports compel one's attention." **PopMatters** "[*Szczygiel*] is a true master of his craft and brilliantly combines personal insight with an in-depth research and facts." **Prague Post** "Impassioned, insightful snapshots of life in pre- Velvet Revolution Czechoslovakia | Whether chronicling the sculpting of Prague's monument to Joseph Stalin or the dubious allegiances of writer Jan Prochazka, the atmosphere *Szczygiel* evokes

is glumly foreboding yet intensely interesting. A controversial, insightful work from Poland's 2013 journalist of the year.

- Kirkus Reviews "An intelligent, captivating, and much-needed book."
- Adam Michnik "A great book. Mariusz Szczygieł... is well versed in the Polish school of reportage writing and he applies his method to this specific Czech ambiguity. Original and surprising."
- Agnieszka Holland "Extraordinary, hypnotizing, and disturbing tales."
- Libération (France) "If you want to understand the Czech Republic in the twentieth century, read Gottland."
- Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (Germany) "One of the most valuable and eloquent testimonies about the Czech people."
- Právo (Czech Republic)

Mariusz Szczygieł is one of Europe's most celebrated journalists. A reporter for *Gazeta Wyborcza*, he is the author of a number of books of reportage about the Czech Republic and Poland. His books are published in sixteen countries and have been awarded the Europe Book Prize and the Prix Amphi, among other honors. From 1995 to 2001, he hosted the popular talk show *Na każdy temat* ("On Any Topic") on Polish television. Together with Wojciech Tochman and Paweł Gościński, Szczygieł runs the Institute of Reportage in Warsaw. In 2013, he was named "Journalist of the Year" in Poland. Antonia Lloyd-Jones is the pre-eminent translator of Polish reportage: the authors she has translated included Wojciech Tochman, Wojciech Jagielski, Jacek Hugo-Bader, and Witold Szabowski. She has received the Found in Translation Award for translation from Polish twice, in 2008 and 2012.

It took me some time to get into *Gottland*, but in the end I loved it. It paints an incredible picture of Czechoslovakia throughout the 20th century, and the struggles of people against political forces that stopped at nothing to crush their spirit. It is a series of shocking tales and put together in a way that feels relentless. Ultimately the Czech and Slovak people triumph, but *Gottland* is timely, it is so easy for fear to destroy freedom and creativity.

Really entertaining series of somewhat unconnected stories about Czechoslovakia, shoes, music, writers and politics, how the country was shaped through the 20th Century, especially by communism. The first section about Bata shoes was almost surreal and doesn't seem like it could be non-fiction

As someone born in 1982 in Ukraine this book explains so much about my parents. It was a fascinating read.

Prague is one of my favorite cities and this book makes me wish that I could go back. Also it makes me wish that I could see more of Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

Very readable

The first story about Batya is the best and fascinating

Fascinating book, a real turn pager, immediately ordered author's other book and am reading it now.

I picked up this book knowing relatively little about Czech history and culture and knowing nothing about the author. In spite of my ignorance I found Szczygiel's series of vignettes about life in Czechoslovakia during World War Two and under Communism very accessible, entertaining, and informative. One really does not need much prior knowledge of the subject to appreciate this book; a quick perusal of the Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic Wikipedia page giving particular attention to the German occupation, the Prague Spring of 1968, and the fall of communism will probably suffice. A basic understanding of who the writers Milan Kundera, Vaclav Havel, and Franz Kafka are is also helpful. This book does not have a single narrative but is instead arranged into a series of 17 vignettes that range in length from 1 to over 40 pages. Each vignette focuses on one or more noteworthy Czech figures - including businessmen, actresses, sculptors, writers, singers, politicians, and a relative of Franz Kafka - and their experience living and working under German occupation, the Communist regime, and/or the post-communist transition to democracy. Most of the subjects of these vignettes are or were very prominent in Czech society but are largely unknown in the United States, so I personally found this book to be a very useful introductory survey of Czech cultural life in the 20th century. A recurrent theme in the vignettes is how very fine the line is that separates acquiescence from collaboration. At what point does living and working under an oppressive, totalitarian regime turn into participation in that regime? The people in these vignettes provide a wide array of answers to this question; all of them very thought-provoking. The moral ambiguity and Kafkaesque plights of these individuals are also reflected in the book's portrayal of the Czechoslovakian state and society, particularly when it comes to the Communist regime. It was

interesting to read about the regime's attempt to liberalize itself in 1968 and to discern in what ways the Czechoslovakian experience of Communism was both similar and dissimilar to the Orwellian picture of a Communist dystopia that people in the West (myself included) tend to project onto any and all Communist states, thinking that all Communist regimes and the experiences of living under them are pretty much the same. This book shows how over-simplified such a notion is and illuminates how historical, geographical, and cultural factors made the Czechoslovakian experience distinct. The subject matter of this book is therefore somewhat weighty, but surprisingly its prose style and its tone are quite the opposite. Each vignette is usually further subdivided into very short, self-contained paragraphs that often are almost little vignettes in themselves. This style of writing makes for prose that is very epigrammatic and light, which in turn makes for reading that is brisk and pleasurable. The mixture of tragic pathos and comic absurdity that typifies many of the vignettes is comparable (deliberately so, I think) with the kind of mood one finds in a Kafka story, and I certainly found myself both amused and disturbed by many of the vignettes. The only quibble I have with the book is that it is often difficult to tell the difference between history and invention, fact and fiction in what the author writes. There are footnotes and a bibliography, but it is worth noting that this book is fundamentally a work of journalism/literary non-fiction rather than a work of scholarship. On the whole, I think this is a good thing, but there were times that I wanted a bit more clarification and source information than was provided in the book's breezy treatment. This is a relatively minor criticism, though, and I would certainly stress again that in spite of this book's unfamiliar subject matter and somewhat off-putting, cartoonish cover that it proved to be a highly entertaining, informative, and accessible read.

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