



## **Forty Autumns: A Family's Story of Courage and Survival on Both Sides of the Berlin Wall**

*Nina Willner*

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## **Forty Autumns: A Family's Story of Courage and Survival on Both Sides of the Berlin Wall** Nina Willner

In this illuminating and deeply moving memoir, a former American military intelligence officer goes beyond traditional Cold War espionage tales to tell the true story of her family—of five women separated by the Iron Curtain for more than forty years, and their miraculous reunion after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

*Forty Autumns* makes visceral the pain and longing of one family forced to live apart in a world divided by two. At twenty, Hanna escaped from East to West Germany. But the price of freedom—leaving behind her parents, eight siblings, and family home—was heartbreaking. Uprooted, Hanna eventually moved to America, where she settled down with her husband and had children of her own.

Growing up near Washington, D.C., Hanna's daughter, Nina Willner became the first female Army Intelligence Officer to lead sensitive intelligence operations in East Berlin at the height of the Cold War. Though only a few miles separated American Nina and her German relatives—grandmother Oma, Aunt Heidi, and cousin, Cordula, a member of the East German Olympic training team—a bitter political war kept them apart.

In *Forty Autumns*, Nina recounts her family's story—five ordinary lives buffeted by circumstances beyond their control. She takes us deep into the tumultuous and terrifying world of East Germany under Communist rule, revealing both the cruel reality her relatives endured and her own experiences as an intelligence officer, running secret operations behind the Berlin Wall that put her life at risk.

A personal look at a tenuous era that divided a city and a nation, and continues to haunt us, *Forty Autumns* is an intimate and beautifully written story of courage, resilience, and love—of five women whose spirits could not be broken, and who fought to preserve what matters most: family.

*Forty Autumns* is illustrated with dozens of black-and-white and color photographs.

## **Forty Autumns: A Family's Story of Courage and Survival on Both Sides of the Berlin Wall Details**

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# From Reader Review Forty Autumns: A Family's Story of Courage and Survival on Both Sides of the Berlin Wall for online ebook

## Dem says

*"Our story started when one war ended and another began"*

*Every now and then a book comes along that ticks all the boxes for me and Forty Autumns was everything I love in a book. A beautifully written memoir that is historically informative and a moving story of courage and estrangement.*

Nina Willner seamlessly weaves a narrative history of her family torn apart by a divided Germany and Berlin, separated by the Iron Curtain for forty years we learn of their struggles, trials and reunions.

The author is a former U.S Army Intelligence officer who served in Berlin during the cold War. She became the first female U.S Army intelligence officer to lead sensitive intelligence.

She shares her family story in Forty Autumns and manages to convey a vivid and real account of what life was like for more than 40 years as a result of living on opposite sides of the Berlin Wall.

This for me was an excellent read as the author starts her story with the handover of East Germany by the Americans to the Soviets and she recounts the overwhelming courage of three strong women and a family torn apart. She takes us on a journey through her family history and if you are not familiar or need a little refreshing on the history of East Germany then this book may interest you.

*The Red Army descended on the eastern territory with a plan to reshape the face of the East. The first challenge the soviets faced was to change the mind-set of the almost 19 million German citizens who, long before World War II, had been led to believe that communism was the greatest threat to the Western World. Stalin demanded the transition be swift and the approach uncompromising* (excerpt from Forty Autums)

This is an extremely well written memoir and an excellent historical account for readers who like their non fiction to read like fiction and readers who enjoy memoirs and history.

I was able to obtain this book in whispersync and while the narration is excellent by Cassandra Cambell, the book does have extra and important material like, maps, photos, family historical chronology, Glossary and Bibliography, all which I felt added greatly to the reading experience.

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## Eve says

**"What will become of a country when a mother cannot even trust her own children, and they, in turn cannot trust their own families?"**—Oma

Apart from a documentary I saw a few years ago about East Germany doping innocent athletes in the 80s, I knew relatively nothing about East Germany or about how the infamous wall came into existence. This book was so enlightening! On quite a few occasions I was moved to tears at the utter waste associated with the 40 year regime. Overnight freedom didn't necessarily quell the feelings of disappointment and loss.

"East Germans emerged to face and adjust to a new life. While some embraced freedom, others remained melancholy, feeling a sense of loss, and some were fearful of the uncertainty that lay ahead. Most would agree, however, that they were bewildered at the extent to which their government had betrayed them."

In her book, Willner pieces together her mother, Hanna's, story of escape from East Germany two years after Soviet occupation initially began. Separated from her family, she eventually finds her way to America. Because of the oppressive regime, Willner grows up without her family, the eight uncles and aunts, and her rosy cheeked grandparents that she only knows by pictures, live in a dismal world behind a daunting wall. There, Opa and Oma (Hanna's parents) create a *family wall*, that not even the craftiest of Stasi can penetrate, where love and trust keep the family tightly knit.

Not long before her death, Oma predicts the following to her youngest daughter, Heidi:

***"No one can say what will happen or if things will change, but all I know is, justice will win. Truth will prevail and justice will win...There will come a day when you will see her again. I may not live to see the day, but you will be reunited with Hanna."***

How right her words turn out to be. I highly recommend this book. It was an eye opening but lovely reading experience.

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### **Cheryl says**

In the waning days of World War II, Germany was invaded by the British, French, and American armies on the west and by the Russian army in the east. It quickly became clear that the Russians did not intend to leave. Author Nina Willner's mother, Hanna, and her family were trapped in the East. Fear, suspicion, and hardship that existed under the Nazi regime were not eliminated but continued under the Russians and their authoritarian East German Communist counterpart leaders once the Allies withdrew.

Hanna's parents and eight siblings did their best to survive and tried to keep a low profile. Hanna felt stifled and, after numerous attempts, finally succeeded in fleeing to West Germany along with thousands of others. She married a U.S. army officer whose German Jewish family had been killed in the Holocaust. They eventually moved to the United States where they raised their own family. For forty years Hanna attempted to keep communicating with her family and worried about their fate.

Nina Willner details her family's story of perseverance and hope for freedom while the Cold War began and continued until 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down and the two Germanys were reunited.

Forty Autumns was named one of the 15 Best Nonfiction Books of 2016 by The Christian Science Monitor.

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### **Iris P says**

## Forty Autumns: A Family's Story of Courage and Survival on Both Sides of the Berlin Wall

A compelling account of how a family found itself divided by the ruthless geopolitics of the Cold War. Full review to follow.

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### **Esil says**

4 high stars. I listened to Forty Autumns as an audiobook. I loved listening to this mix of memoir and history about East Germany. Author Nina Willner's mother Hannah defected from East Germany when she was 20 years old, leaving behind her parents and seven siblings. Willner recounts the story of her family on both sides of the wall, adding in a heavy dose of historical information. I loved the mix of personal and political history. Willner really conveys the emotional and personal impact that the repressive communist East German regime had on her family. Willner also writes about her family with so much love and respect, that it's hard not to feel a connection to them. I happily listened to Forty Autumns, getting caught up in Willner's love for her family and thoughtful perspective on the history of East Germany. Highly recommended to anyone interested in this time period.

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### **Diane S ? says**

I almost didn't read this one, almost. It was due back at the library and quite lengthy, didn't know if I could fit it in, but three of my trusted friends on here rated it highly, so I thought I would just start it and see if I connected with the story. Obviously I did, finished in a few days, and was so glad I opened the cover.

I was so young, during the Cold War, remember the fear of my parents, vaguely remember duck and cover, do vividly remember the air raids sirens and having to leave my desk to line up in the hallway, quietly, for some reason, the good sisters thought if we were quiet and in a perfect line, we would be saved. I remember watching the Berlin Wall coming down and the people rushing through. But those were pictures on television, this book is an actual telling of what it was like to live in East Germany, to have to watch everything one said and did. Centered on a large family, one whose daughter at the age of 17, escapes to, West Germany. From then on they would be a family divided, with little contact, always wondering and hoping when they would get word, meet again.

I learned more from this book, not just about country but other things that were going on in the world, communism and how it eventually ended, than I ever did in school. It is however, the personal perspective, this book written by a granddaughter in the family, a woman who was in Army intelligence that made this a five star read for me. For the Oma and Opa in the story, the family's matriarch and patriarch, I have the utmost respect. Making a family a port in the storm, family first, in a country that stressed loyalty to the state first, was an amazing and enviable accomplishment.

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### **Manchester Military History Society (MMHS) says**

**The story of East Germany through one family.**

Nina Willner tells the moving and powerful story of her mother and her family from the end of World War 2 to the unification of Germany.

Using the story of her mother's immediate family Willner creates a compelling story of life in East Germany. Her extended family have all the ingredients, the loyal party member, the strong headed daughter, and those that kept their heads down. She paints a tale of oppression and ordinary life that ultimately leads to the implosion of the first 'workers and peasants' state on German soil'.

Peppered with photos of the family she makes you care for her family and it really brings home how unbearable life was for some in the GDR. It's a really good read and a must for anyone interested in the former East Germany.

I received this book for free from the publisher in exchange for an honest review. This does not affect my opinion of the book or the content of my review.

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### **Chrissie says**

Those interested in how it was to live in East Germany during the Cold War will enjoy this book. It is both biography and history lesson.

The author writes of her family, with the greatest emphasis upon her maternal grandparents, great-grandparents, mother along with her mother's eight siblings and the author's cousin named Cordula. It is a large family. By observing the whole family we come to understand the earnings and sorrows and triumphs of not just one but people of different personalities. The author was the first female Army Intelligence Officer to lead sensitive intelligence operations in East Berlin. This was during the 80s. Her mother, Hanna, had finally escaped from East Germany in 1948, after several previous attempts. These sections keep you at the edge of your seat. Hanna later married an American officer in Germany and moved to the US. We come to understand Hanna's parents' behavior and that of her siblings. Her mother and father do not react similarly, and the siblings too all have different temperaments. We watch how each reacts to the takeover by the Russians and the totalitarian regime under Erich Honecker. World and German events that stand out from the Cold War era are clearly and concisely presented. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the arms race, even the exalted importance of sports in East Germany during the 70s and 80s is covered. Cordula was a member of the East German Olympic bicycle team. Cordula's mother, Heidi, had at the age of five been allowed to travel with her mother to Heidelberg. For two days the three met, the youngest and the oldest sisters and their mother, six years after Hanna had fled. The book reviews historical events through the lives of people living these events.

The story moves forward chronologically. Each chapter has both a title and a clear specification of the years the events take place in. The title "Forty Autumns" refers to the forty years of the East German state, from its conception after the war in 1948 to 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell. The book doesn't stop there, but continues to 2013 detailing the lives of the family members and the progression from a communist state to a western democracy. An author's note specifies where and how she carried out her thorough research.

The audiobook narration by Cassandra Campbell is very good. It is clear, easy to follow and read with feeling, but never over-dramatized. Her voice intones both the personal and the historical events well.

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If this book interests you, these will probably too:

Stasiland: Stories from Behind the Berlin Wall 4 stars

Revolution 1989: The Fall of the Soviet Empire 4 stars

The House by the Lake: A Story of Germany 3 stars

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### **Jennifer says**

Utterly compelling look at a German family's efforts to survive in the communist days of East Germany. I could not put this one down. Nina tells her family members' stories so well that it reads like fiction...what blows your mind is knowing that it's all true. If you ever thought communism might be a good idea, just read this book. This story is both heartbreakingly and hope-making. It was an unforgettable journey.

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### **Steve says**

An extraordinary family history, superimposed upon one of the most profound historical anomalies (a divided Germany), well researched and beautifully told, all seamlessly combining and contrasting the warmth of one sister's hand in another's with the icy, relentless sweep of strident communism and the mind-numbing repression exerted throughout East Germany throughout the Cold War. So much ground covered, so many lives lived and intertwined and severed and ended ... and remembered. I'm so glad I read the book ... I just wish I'd found it sooner.

Despite having lived in Germany and read a fair amount of history, general nonfiction, and fiction on related topics, I was intrigued by how unique and fresh the book felt describing the story arc of a Germany defeated, divided, and ultimately reunited over the better part of a half-century. (That's no small achievement.) There's a tremendous amount of history sprinkled throughout, but it's not a dry, impersonal historical tome.... The history is juxtaposed with the slow, careful, intimate retelling of family's evolution, disaggregation, and, ultimately, reunification, all of which permits this to rumble along like a made-for-movies memoir. I could easily see myself recommending this as a sequel to, I dunno, Cornelius Ryan's *The Last Battle: The Classic History of the Battle for Berlin*, after reading Erik Larson's *In the Garden of Beasts: Love, Terror, and an American Family in Hitler's Berlin*. Obviously, each is different, but all paint on a broad canvas with loving detail devoted to the individual players in an all-too-real drama, just as each is well worth reading, and memorable, and inexplicable ... and, well... you get the idea.

*Full disclosure:* Growing up in the Army makes the world a much smaller place, and I met the author when we were kids, and our paths have (briefly, ever so tangentially) crossed over the decades since. The book only reinforced how little I knew about the author's family way back when, but, at the same time, that surely heightened my interest. Having said that, a quick surf through other reviews (and ratings) will confirm I'm not an outlier on this one, nor that a personal connection is necessary to make the book worthwhile.

It's a unique, informative book that makes a semester's worth of history easily digestible alongside a touching, fascinating, and ultimately satisfying family memoir.

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## Elyse says

As soon as I finished reading this 'wonderful' epic family memoir .....I wanted to know a little more about the author: \*Nina Willner\*. I wasn't expecting her to be absolutely gorgeous ... physically stunning!

Gifted author --and beautiful -- I'm trying to imagine what it 'feels' like for Nina Willner to have written this book --for the world to read -- about HER MOTHER.... a very personal story. What a gift she is passing to 'her' children.

Oh... and speaking of children: there are several photos of Nina's family, adorable children... .... soooo beautiful: and of her mother Hanna, her grandparents, Oma and Opa, and Hanna's eight siblings, extended family ... historical buildings- 'lots' of great photos included.

note: The 'women' in this family are powerhouses!!!

Nina's mother, Hanna grew up in East Germany in the village of Schwaneberg. We learn early that Hanna - at age 17, is adventurous, has boundless energy, is playful, a 'rabble-rouser'.....and is a girl who likes to make her own rules in life. Her brother Roland, just a year apart in age, is a parents dream: Smart, obedient, and a natural born leader.

The younger siblings -- Helga, Tutti, Tiele, Manni, Klemens, and Kai....each had special qualities of their own. Hanna knew she would miss them all -- but especially her brother Roland, her closest sibling. Hanna was planning to leave her family without saying goodbye-- knowing it would be easier.

She believed Roland would find his way under the communists. She didn't fully think it through as to how her parents would be as time went on with her gone.

Hanna was making her get-a-way [Hanna's earlier failed attempts - and conflicts with her parents early in the book are 'nail biting'].... but.....

"The next morning, just before sunrise, with cool easterly winds biding farewell to what had been a long and painful year, Hanna picked up her suitcase and left the house before she thought anyone had awakened.

Oma, ( HER MOTHER), however, had risen and stood in the upstairs window, watching her daughter walk away with a determined gait, her long dark braids falling down his back, looking more like a schoolgirl than a woman. She wondered if she would ever see her again."

My heart sank. How does a mother watch her daughter walk away? .... Oma wasn't stupid .... she knew her daughter was planning to cross the border -- escape to West Germany. Soldiers were 'at' those borders - with rifles. More people 'didn't' make it out - than did. They were either killed or thrown in prison if caught. Hanna had no idea how lucky she was. However, it wasn't smooth sailing into freedom either.

Hanna was not 21 yet. She couldn't become 'legal' until she was: a dangerous risk to be underage. If caught - not only would she go to prison, but her family would be severely punished as well.

While we are reading about how Hanna is 'getting on' in the west.... her parents have no idea if she made it out alive. No phone calls - no letters.

More nail biting - edge of the seat frightening situations, ( so many close calls could have gotten Hanna killed).

I was dying - on both sides of Germany: in the east worried sick with Hanna's parents - and in the West... petrified for Hanna -- especially that first year.

Later.....Hanna moves to Heidelberg. She meets Eddie, a Auschwitz survivor, and U. S. Army Officer. She marries him and moves to the United States. Nina Willner was born in the

United States. They soon have a second child....then another .... another..... Hanna and Eddie raised 6 children.

FOR FORTY AUTUMNS Hanna was separated from her family. We see what Hanna went through during those years .... and what her parents and siblings each did. Hanna's separation from the family left a permanent mark on EVERYONE. The individual stories of each sibling - and the difference in the way Oma and Opa are thought provoking. SUCH DIFFERENT PERSONALITIES AND DISPOSITIONS!!!

After the Berlin Wall was torn down in 1989, .... a reunion took place. PREPARE TO CRY! The SIZE OF THE FAMILY PHOTO REUNION WILL BLOW YOUR MIND.... ( husbands - wives- children - cousins - aunts - uncles- friends--- mostly JUST BIG FAMILIES FROM A BIG FAMILY! There was deaths too... not everyone was alive at the end...

NOTE: I found this book BY ACCIDENT. I didn't know anyone who had read it. I bought it on Amazon for \$1.99. ( me with my \$1.99 specials)... haha!

SOON to DISCOVER.... several of my good friends here on Goodreads, have already read it. I'm so happy to share this with them!!!!

This is a very powerful -memorable story. It's another non-fiction book that reads like fiction!!! Besides the family story we get a history lesson about the different leaders of the day....Erich Honecker--The Stasi Officers --The East German Police - The Body Guards- East German Army - and the Communist Control of the spots world from East Germany... and the athletes.

General Secretary of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev -- a hero in Germany today--won the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to end the Cold War..... he was also awarded the first time ever "Freedom Award" by Ronald Reagan

WHAT A STORY!!!!

5 STRONG STARS FROM ME!!! I enjoyed it FULLY!!!

\*\* Nina Willner:..... THIS BOOK IS OUTSTANDING!

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### **Gina \*loves sunshine\* says**

Gosh...I just wanted so much more life and vibrancy from this book. Maybe I went in with a really high expectation given all the good ratings. Having been to Berlin a year and a half ago I was really looking forward to reading this interpretation of a family literally separated by a brick wall!! I've read a lot of holocaust, but nothing really along this storyline.

The setting and the details are all good, you get a small feel for the emotions involved within this family that was separated. You have great characters and so much to work with. It just comes up dry and factual. It lacked the depth and connection I like from my characters..but I have a feeling I'm in the minority. Historical fiction readers will probably love this!

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### **Susu says**

I don't remember the beginning of the Cold War; I was very young, but I vividly remember the tearing down of the Berlin Wall. Thus, I found this novel intriguing. I can't imagine a forty year separation from family, or the confusion they felt not knowing if freedom was truly at hand or if it was all a political ruse to expose those unfaithful to the regime. Oma, the glue that held the family together and kept everyone going. I could never have fared so well. Opa, who finally broke from the psychological torture of his superiors. I enjoyed this memoir, but would like to have known more of the narrators thoughts and feelings (getting inside her head a bit more) . But, all in all, it was a nice read.

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### **Wendy says**

Wow! This book really blew me away with the historic events that took place at this time period and the very personal struggle of the author's family. It was all so seamlessly woven together to give the reader a deeper understanding of what life was like in East Germany during the Cold War both before and after the Berlin Wall. Growing up in the 1980's, I remember hearing President Reagan and Gorbachev on the news. After reading this memoir, I realized that there was so much more that I did not understand about what was happening in the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries. Read it for the personal story of Hanna, Heidi, Opa and Oma; read it for the 40+ years of history full of leaders and events that shaped the world. This book will appeal to a wide group of readers. \*The pictures were just fantastic and totally added to the story.

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### **Ren says**

Nina Willner's Forty Autumns is a remarkable achievement. Blending personal memoir, contemporary history, and beautifully readable narrative nonfiction, she has chronicled the lives of several generations of her family as they live in East and West Germany and America. The book begins at the end of the Second World War, with Germany being divided, and she tells the stories of how that affected her family, most of whom remained trapped in the East, but one lucky daughter, her mother, eventually managed an escape to a very different life in the West.

The family serves as a microcosm of what took place in divided Germany as it formed and progressed through the Cold War. Told alongside their personal history is the greater historical story, providing the bigger context for what was happening to determine the course of these lives. They lived through and were very directly affected by some of the most momentous world events of the second half of the 20th century, and the book gives a perfect juxtaposition between the personal and the public. Not that the public events are impersonal or hard to connect with by themselves. But the deeply personal and emotionally recounted stories of the family's lives and their triumphs, disappointments, and heartbreaks, which they can't even fully share with their separated loved ones, are driven home so powerfully in this book.

It's jarring to feel so strongly their pain and heartbreak as they're separated from each other, often not even able to communicate by letter and almost never by phone, with only a couple of in-person visits allowed by the East German government in exchange for promises of spying or conversion. And then to consider that this is just one family, and the rest of the country was similarly separated and affected.

I loved that there's such a strong focus on the fortitude and ability of the women in this family. She

highlights the struggles and strengths of these very determined women so effectively. Willner herself was a rare female American Army Intelligence Officer, and the first to lead intelligence operations in East Berlin. Her mother, Hanna, the oldest of eight children, is the only sibling able to escape East Germany, eventually marrying and settling near Washington, D.C. and raising Nina and her siblings. Nina is later stationed in Berlin in her army capacity, experiencing firsthand the stark national division and the fear and oppression that her mother ran away from decades before. At the same time, the longing is so palpable, for the unknown and wondered about or painfully remembered family separated by a wall and a misguided ideology.

In addition to having an amazing generational story to tell, Willner is a fantastic writer. She writes in a novelist's rich, descriptive voice in the segments about her family, but so naturally. I'm not a big fiction reader anymore, but this reads like excellent fiction. On the other hand, she writes a very readable account of the major historical milestones of the Cold War and actions and decisions of the Soviet Union and East German Communist governments. I've read a lot on the topic but this was by far the most accessible without having a talking-down or textbook tone. I learned so much and was impressed by her writing throughout.

I received an advance reader's copy courtesy of the publisher via Edelweiss for review.

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