



Alles umsonst (German Edition)

Walter Kempowski

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No one is more talented in portraying, in an extraordinary novel, the drama of the exodus from East Prussia than Walter Kempowski. In *All for Nothing* [Alles umsonst] he tells the story of a family in the final winter of the war. A farm estate in East Prussia, in the hinterland of the Frisches Haff. Here lives the family Globig, second-generation Wilhelmian bureaucratic aristocracy. The old Globig acquired the land and began farming it. His son Eberhard sold most of the land and invested the money in English steel stocks and certificates of a Romanian rice-mill factory. The small family - Eberhard, his pretty wife Katharina and his son Peter - were for a time able to lead a life of luxury. Now, in the sixth winter of the war, much has changed. The Eastern Front is being pushed westward, and the Red Army is on the heels of a steadily increasing flood of refugees. Yet the inhabitants of the Georgenhof estate still feel insulated from that reality. Katharina, lady of the estate, is a dreamer from whom life has thus far demanded little. Her husband Eberhard, whose total investments have become worthless in the war, is a supply officer stationed in Italy. Trapped in her loneliness and the boredom of her life, Katharina seeks refuge in books, music and idle indulgences. The aunt, a spinster relative, in charge of the household, packs away some silver spoons just in case. Something is in the air; even the self-absorbed family members can no longer deny it. Rail service is continually suspended, enemy planes are spotted flying overhead, and the electricity is often cut off. Armoured columns pass by. And then odd strangers ask to be taken in: an economist, a young and pretty violin player, a Baltic baron with wife and parrot. The members of this peculiar society appear as if they have arrived from some other time period, existing in their own absurd illusions of reality. The pastor asks Katharina to hide a fugitive from the local authorities for a night and a day at her house. Katharina, never having been entrusted with anything by anyone, agrees. The stranger takes over Katharina's refuge. He tells her his story of escape and then disappears. For Katharina, this crazed interlude awakens yearning memories of the one day she truly loved and lived. For just a moment, the stranger is like a dream of un-lived possibilities. But then the surreal idyll is once and for all over. For her actions, Katharina is betrayed and arrested. A short time later she receives the news that her husband has committed suicide in Italy: a wife who aids an enemy of the state is too much of a disgrace to him. The departure from Georgenhof is a scene of frozen bleakness, of an icy, black sky and crunching snow. The aunt takes command, driving the horse herself. The great trek west will engulf everything, and only Peter manages to survive and look forward to the future. In no place in *All for Nothing* has Walter Kempowski allowed himself to be carried away by the heavy emotions connected with the theme of the disintegration of East Prussia and the flight of its civilian population. He possesses a completely non-ideological perspective free of hate and revenge maintaining a wonderfully light balance between good and evil, friend and foe. But this remarkable book, rich in perspective, is a chronicle of loss as well - the loss of homeland, tradition, culture and a sense of civilisation. Press "Kempowski is not aiming for sympathy. ... He makes no accusations; it is the things themselves that indict." *Die Zeit* "In the German literary landscape, Walter Kempowski is something extraordinary and unique." *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* "As is always the case with this intellectual master of storytelling, a remorseless precision shuns any slanted symmetries and atonements, and above all every sort of sentimentality." *Bild* "Walter Kempowski's novel *All for Nothing* shows as well the futility of a particular culture having become empty idealistic phrases. His neutral

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