

## Forty Autumns: A Family's Story

*Forty Autumns* is the story of a family divided during the Cold War by the “Iron Curtain”. It is author Nina Willner’s story about her own family.

I liked the way the author constructed the layout of her book. Both the inside front and back pages show maps of the Iron Curtain and of East and West Berlin. There is a table of contents, Family and Historical Chronology, an Index, Glossary, and Historical notes. This made it very easy to read and follow all the happenings in the story. And she told her family's story within the framework of history. I loved that.

We meet Nina when she is five years old and her mother Hanna, who tells Nina that all the relatives on her mother's side live behind “The Iron Curtain”. Of course at the time the little girl had no idea what that meant except that her grandparents could not come to Grandparents Day at her school.

At age 20 her mother Hanna, who is the oldest daughter of a School Principal in Schwaneberg, escapes from East Germany to the West. She leaves behind her parents, eight brothers and sisters and one more sister Heidi, who was born after she had left. Her escape leaves the family under constant suspicion and scrutiny from the Russian Secret Police for decades.

Hanna joins the US Military and is trained in the Army Airborne Division. She marries an American army intelligence officer and moves to the United States. Communication becomes very difficult for Hanna and her family when the Berlin Wall goes up. Letters between Hanna and her family are censored and any real news never gets to either side.

Hanna’s father, Opa, speaks out against the Regime and is harassed by Communist Party officials. Eventually he loses his job and the family is sent to the town of Klein Apenburg. Here Opa and Oma, Hanna’s mother, live out their lives as best they can under the circumstances. When Oma is dying she tells Heidi, the youngest daughter “Someday you will see your sister Hanna again. You will be reunited again, I am sure”.

When Hanna's daughter Nina grows up she becomes the first female US Army Intelligence Officer. She leads a team of agents across the “Bridge of Spies” trying to find evidence of military activity at the height of the Cold War in 1982. Nina is only a few miles apart from her German relatives yet a bitter political war keeps them apart.

As history tells us the Cold War ended and the Wall came down 1989 after US President Reagan had urged Mikhail Gorbachev “to tear down that wall”. East and West Germany were again united into one country and all of Nina's family were finally reunited after Forty years of being separated.

*Forty Autumns* by Nina Willner is a beautifully written story of courage, resilience and love for one’s family. This book is one of our new arrivals and can be checked out at the library.