

By Mercy Bolo

In Allen Walker's *The Strength of Wills*, he takes the reader on a fictitious historical journey through Poland, Germany, and France at the height of WWII. The book's events span a period of 3 years, from 1939 to 1941. The protagonist is Jedrek, a Polish teenager who finds himself in a precarious position after a bomb destroys the only home he's ever known, taking his dear mother's life in the explosion. With nothing left, Jedrek has no time to grieve as he's injured and has to flee to save his young life. He teams up with Viktor, a much older ex-military officer with whom he journeys into the unknown. Although an unusual pair, the two form a bond that's as close as that of father and son. They learn from each other, with Jedrek doing most of the learning, they risk their lives for each other, and they look out for each other. Their resilience and ingenuity shine through, helping them overcome the challenges that life hurls at them.

*The Strength of Wills* being Walker's first novel, I was impressed by its quality of writing. He presents the story in the form of journal entries, which made it possible to put the events into perspective. Sprinkled throughout the book are hand-drawn maps detailing Jedrek and Viktor's journey. These add a personal touch to the book, and even those with limited knowledge about Europe's geography will smoothly sail through. The author's mastery of language will captivate any keen reader, especially when the naive Jedrek hears Viktor use "big" words and can't comprehend them. The book also contains phrases in German and French, but these need not be a deterrent to anyone who isn't proficient in these languages because the author provides translations. I also found the many footnotes useful as they provided valuable additional information.

Outside the cocoon of Jedrek and Viktor's individual lives, the author paints a realistic picture of the events of wartime. Death and destruction are rampant; lawlessness prevails, and it all boils down to every man for himself. The author doesn't shy away from narrating the horrors that the Nazis rained on perceived enemies, even giving insight into what went down inside the concentration camps. The psychological torture that these events have on a young mind is also evident, and I couldn't help but feel sorry for the many who remained scarred for life after their innocence was ripped away by these harrowing events. Also explored is sexuality and how it manifests in times of war. On this topic, the author hits the nail on the head, telling of soldiers whose perversion led them to prey on young boys.