

By Lucy Bryson

The true story behind the true story of *The Strength of Wills*, Allen Walker's stunning new novel, is worth telling. In the early 1980s Walker, a motor mechanic in his youth, met a shy Polish immigrant whose car needed fixing. Over the course of several meetings, Walker gained the man's trust and friendship – and his poignant life story.

Bringing that story to life, through the medium of historical fiction, took Walker longer than most – over 30 years to be exact. But his meticulously-researched book reflects the blood, sweat and tears of his friend who, we learn, is forced to make an extraordinary 2,500-mile journey across war-torn Europe to escape the invading German army. *The Strength of Wills* recounts that three-year journey in all its unflinching, desperate, bloody glory.

The book follows Jedrek, a lively teenager, and Viktor, a cantankerous older man some 50 years his senior, who meet in unimaginably horrible circumstances: both are fleeing from advancing Nazi soldiers in fear for their lives. Jedrek is covered in human filth, having escaped brutal army officers by crawling through raw sewage.

The pair are polar opposites: Jedrek is sociable and street savvy but struggles with the “big words” used by Viktor – a “striking and distinguished man in the autumn of his life” – who shuns company and has a particular dislike for young people. Despite their differences, the pair form a bond of necessity and rely on each other to escape Hitler's invading troops.

The book's engrossing, fast-paced narrative is cleverly split between the perspectives of Jedrek and Viktor as they flee first into Germany and then into France. They face violence, danger and the threat of death – or worse – at every turn. Maps of their route, in addition to detailed footnotes to explain historical events, bring their terrible ordeal to life.

Walker writes with warmth and with candour. In places, he's even funny and playful: Jedrek reluctantly agreeing to pass himself off as Viktor's niece in a bid to enter Germany. A final, touching twist brings a welcome, uplifting end to this deeply moving story.

But while his account may be fictionalised, it doesn't shy away from the graphic horrors of war (or, indeed, from the physical and sexual abuses suffered by innocent people at the hands of Nazi soldiers). It begins, in fact, with Hitler's 1939 address, as Chancellor of the Reich, in which he describes the Polish situation ‘intolerable’ and declared: “Danzig was and is a German city. The Corridor was and is German.” His words pre-empted the brutal invasion of Poland that saw six million people tortured, killed and enslaved.

In *The Strength of Wills*, Allen Walker has done his friend's story justice – and done him proud.