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**The Fly Swatter: How My Grandfather Made His Way in the World**

by Nicholas Dawidoff

Pantheon, 353 pp., \$26

Born in Odessa in 1904, Alexander Gerschenkron was just a boy when revolution gripped the streets of Russia with fear and danger. One hopeless night he slipped quietly away to Vienna. There, the Gerschenkron family reassembled and prospered, until Hitler annexed Austria and political fanaticism visited them again. Survival required another breathless escape. This time Alexander landed in the United States, where he overcame his beleaguered adolescence and "made his way" to Harvard. By the 1960s, Gerschenkron had won a reputation as one of the world's leading economists. Cambridge honored "The Great Gerschenkron" as much for his vivid personality as for his immense learning, and he was forever amusing, instructing, challenging, and charming his colleagues. But he also left a trail of frustrated admirers who never came to know him, in part because, like so many immigrants, he never really overcame his adolescent traumas. "He was prematurely seasoned in disappointment, an ebullient person made watchful when he was still a boy," explains Nicholas Dawidoff, whose balance of sympathy and scrutiny more than matches his grandfather's "skill at resisting observation." *The Fly Swatter* is a terrific book for many reasons. Amateur students of Soviet industrialism, Gerschenkron's specialty, will appreciate Dawidoff's discussion of economic theory. Historians will likewise enjoy his chronicle of a human character moving through world events, struggling with the personal consequences of political tyranny. Dawidoff's unusual perspective as a grandson might be most compelling for another set of readers: When mental illness deprived Dawidoff of a father, it was Gerschenkron who extended the youthful "Nicky boy" the saving embrace: "Nobody treated me with more uncomplicated warmth and good humor than he did."

—John H. Summers

