

The Endless Steppe: Growing Up in Siberia Short Guide

The Endless Steppe: Growing Up in Siberia by Esther Hautzig

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Overview

The Endless Steppe is, first of all, an excellent history lesson. It spells out some of the consequences of the NaziSoviet Pact of 1939: the deportation of Polish citizens, the wartime separation of families, and the hardship of labor camps. Although the Rudomins' Judaism is not a major theme of the book, The Endless Steppe also provides glimpses of anti-Semitism and bitter class-consciousness. Behind the engrossing story of Esther Rudomin and her family lies a sense of the tragedy and paradox of political conflicts: the Rudomins live a cultivated and gracious life in Vilna while all over Russia people live under the most difficult conditions.

The question that arises is whether it is possible to house, clothe, and feed everyone properly without tearing down the social and economic structures of such people as the Rudomins, who earned their privileged life by talent and effort.

Although it raises important political questions, The Endless Steppe is also notable for its inspirational value. Esther and her family exhibit courage, strength, and resourcefulness under the most trying physical, social, and economic conditions. Esther's ingenuity, her valiant coping with illness and a hostile climate, her struggles with school, teachers, and friends make her a heroine to admire and emulate.

About the Author

Esther Hautzig was born Esther Rudomin in 1930 in the old city of Vilna, Poland. Russia annexed Vilna and surrounding portions in the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact, and it is now the city of Vilnius in the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. The Rudomins were prosperous Jews, and Esther's father, Samuel Rudomin, was an engineer. In 1941 Esther, her parents, and her paternal grandmother were deported to the Siberian village of Rubtsovsk in the Altai region north of Semipalatinsk. Though Rubtsovsk is only slightly farther north than London, its isolation and fierce winters created harsh living conditions, especially for the deportees, who had lost their homes and livelihoods.

Esther's father was conscripted into the military during the war and was reunited with Esther, her mother, and her grandmother when the women returned to Poland in March 1946. They lived briefly in Lodz before going on to Stockholm. Esther soon left for the United States, where she lived with her mother's brother and his family. Her parents soon joined her in the United States, and her grandmother went to Israel to live. Esther Hautzig attended schools in New York City, where she later lived with her husband, who is a concert pianist, and their two children.

Hautzig wrote *The Endless Steppe* at the suggestion of American statesman Adlai Stevenson, who had visited Rubtsovsk.

Setting

Esther begins her story on a sunny morning in June 1941, at her spacious home in Vilna, Poland, where she lives with her parents, grandparents, and other relatives. Her life is busy with family activities, school work and lessons in music and dance, but on this particular summer morning, she looks forward to a quiet day of reading and tending her garden. These plans change dramatically when Russian soldiers arrive and arrest her with her parents and paternal grandparents on the charges of being "capitalist enemies of the people."

Separated from Esther's paternal grandfather, the rest of the family is transported from Vilna, Poland, in filthy, crowded railway cattle cars, to the remote Siberian village of Rubtsovsk, where they live from 1941 until 1946.

Initially, the family stays in the barracks outside of town. During the day, Esther works in a potato field, her mother dynamites in a gypsum mine (gypsum is a grayish-white powder that was used to make plaster casts for soldiers), and her father drives a cart at the mine. For their labors, each receives a daily ration of bread and salty sheep cheese known as brinza.

After the Polish deportees are granted amnesty in early September, Esther and her family move into the village, where Esther attends school and even earns a little money through her knitting and sewing skills. She and her family live in several different homes over the next few years, and life in the village is extremely difficult, though a distinct improvement over the barracks.

Historically, the story takes place during World War II, after Germany's invasion of Poland and annexation of Danzig in September 1939. Following the German occupation of western Poland, the U.S.S.R. invaded Poland from the east. Although Esther, her parents, and grandparents were victims of the Russian government, all of their relatives, except for two cousins and an aunt, were killed in the German massacre of the Jews.

Social Sensitivity

Although Hautzig lived through a time of fierce oppression by both the Russians and the Nazis, her autobiography focuses more on childhood memories of life with her parents in Siberia than on descriptions of wartime brutality. Physical and emotional violence for example, are downplayed, as the reader only learns in a brief passage toward the end of the book that most of Esther's relatives in Poland were killed by the Nazis.

But this focus allows Hautzig to subtly raise questions about the inhumanity of war. Esther and her family are considered "enemies of the state" because of their economic status, and they are also the targets of anti-Semitic sentiments, but they combat this oppression by relying on their traditional family structure and faith. Hautzig's presentation of these issues is never offensive and instead encourages further research and discussion.



Literary Qualities

Hautzig's fluid narrative style makes *The Endless Steppe* an extremely readable book. She carefully paces the story of her five years in Siberia, vividly recreating significant characters through dramatic dialogue and description. Condensing her experience into a series of exciting, moving incidents, Hautzig forgoes depth of characterization or complex analysis of issues. Emphatic one-line paragraphs—such as, "But in 1939 Hitler's armies marched on Poland."—and brief, cliff-hanger chapters quickly draw the reader into the story and propel the action forward.

Despite its deceptively simple and straightforward style, *The Endless Steppe* uses understatement and symbolism that deepen the meaning of the story. The book opens with a statement that demands further explanation and therefore immediately piques the reader's interest: "The morning it happened—the end of my lovely world—I did not water the lilac bush outside my father's study." In this typically dramatic opening sentence, Hautzig jumps into the primary action of her tale by letting the reader know that a very sudden, jarring incident irreparably changed her life in the course of a morning; but at the same time, she sets up the subplot and underlying theme of the story by referring, in the same sentence, to the seemingly trivial, personal recollection that she neglected to water a bush that morning. The overriding plot is about war and its consequences for a deported Polish family living in Siberia, but the story Hautzig emphasizes concerns the observations and memories of Esther as she grows up in unfamiliar, harsh surroundings.

The lilac bush that stands outside her father's study thus seems to symbolize Esther as "Lalinka," her father's pet, who, until the soldiers' intrusion, lives a life of beauty, security, and order. At the same time that ten-year-old Esther worries about missing her morning routine of watering the growing, fragrant lilac bush, the chaotic forces of war threaten her very existence. Uprooted from the life of leisure and education represented by her father's study by the garden, Esther, like the lilac bush, must struggle to survive without the sustenance of her home.

Hautzig also presents the Siberian steppe as a symbol of oppression, an often personified "accomplice" of the Russians. The vast, barren landscape of the "endless" steppe represents the overwhelming emptiness experienced by deportees who have been forced from their families and homes and who have no idea of when their exile will end.

Throughout the story, the steppe looms as a cruel and fickle presence with its sudden, blinding snowstorms and unyielding, fruitless land.



Themes and Characters

The grim historical circumstances of war, deportation, and racial prejudice provide the context for the human dramas in *The Endless Steppe*, but Hautzig does not dwell on the intense moral questions raised by the atrocities of the war. Instead, the characters in her story accept the tragic aspects of existence and, though often sad, sick, and demoralized, go about the business of coping with the many challenges to their bodies and their spirits. Hautzig also refrains from explicitly stating the importance of religious faith as a defense against adversity. The strength of character that Esther and her family convey grows out of the story itself rather than from any commentary on its significance; the narrative is its own best testimony to Hautzig's theme that human beings must look within themselves for the strength to persevere against evil.

Although the Rudomins seem resilient and courageous, Esther's struggle gives *The Endless Steppe* its form and makes it a genuine bildungsroman—a story of a young person's growth and initiation—and Hautzig's theme develops as Esther grows up in the story.

In the course of a few short weeks, ten-year-old Esther is torn from her childhood home of sunshine, flowers, and family; endures a long, grueling journey to an unknown destination with her uncharacteristically shaken parents and grandparents; witnesses the forced separation of her grandfather from his wife and family; and arrives, along with other "capitalist enemies," in a barren village in Siberia.

Esther does not understand what she and her family have done to deserve arrest and punishment, and because she is an intelligent and inquisitive child, she constantly questions their situation. When the Russian soldiers come to her home and order her parents to the ground, she disregards her mother's warning and asks for an explanation of the arrest; when she is being shipped to Siberia in the cattle car she innocently asks her mother where the bathroom is; similarly, at Rubtsovsk she asks the hateful Comrade Popravka, a soldier from the gypsum mine who supervises the barracks, where she can get a drink of water. After the initial shock of her sudden departure, Esther accepts her situation and fearlessly asks questions that will help her adjust. As she grows older, Esther's spirited curiosity remains a strong character trait. Although she lives during a time of war, under harsh conditions in a foreign land, she remains a little girl who grows up wondering about the world around her.

At school, she confronts the impatience of her stern instructor, Raisa Nikitovna, and meets Svetlana, who eventually becomes her best friend.

Retaining great pride in her Jewish-Polish heritage, Esther still wants to be accepted by the other children. She tries to live as normal a life as possible and delights in making new friends, editing her school paper, and pursuing a crush on a handsome classmate, Yuri Shurik.



She also reads voraciously, inspired in part by her literature teacher, Anna Semyonovna.

At the same time, however, Esther worries about her father, who after almost two years in Siberia, is ordered to work near the front lines. She tries to comfort her mother and grandmother in her father's absence and uses her knitting skills to earn extra money for the family. Esther copes with these worries by tirelessly fulfilling the stabilizing, but difficult, demands of a normal schoolgirl's life in Siberia.

Esther's father, Samuel Rudomin, whom Esther calls "Tata" ("Papa" in Polish), dotes on Esther, whom he affectionately nicknames "Lalinka." Although he is an electrical engineer, he works in Siberia driving a horse and cart at the gypsum mine. Frustrated by his inability to protect his family from what he calls the "insanity" of the war, he continually tries to lift their spirits through his humorous stories and optimistic outlook.

Raya Rudomin, Esther's mother, is a stalwart woman who provides a strict upbringing for Esther, even after their deportation. After dynamiting in the gypsum mine for several months, a radical departure from her daily activities in Vilna, Raya takes a job in a bakery, where she works long hours. She strives to maintain her dignity by not accepting charity. Like Anna Rudomin, Esther's grandmother who grieves privately for her husband, Solomon, she teaches Esther self-discipline by her example.

During her five years in Siberia, Esther encounters a variety of people who teach her to be adaptable, creative, and even happy in the face of adversity. Mrs. Marshak and her son Boris are acquaintances from Poland who become close friends to the Rudomins in Siberia.

Boris, in particular, looks to Samuel Rudomin for a father figure, and Esther becomes a surrogate sister to him. Nina and Nikita Alexandrovich, a peasant couple who share their lodgings with the Rudomins, are alternately kind and callous in their treatment of the family; Nina cannot believe that the Rudomins are Jews because they do not have the "crooked noses" or "long beards" that her prejudice leads her to expect. Marya Nikolayevna, a woman of high social status before the German invasion forced her flight to Siberia, tries Esther's patience when she grows too fat to fit into a sweater Esther painstakingly makes at her request and then blames the ill fit on Esther. Despite the horrible circumstances under which Esther and her family came to Siberia, Esther finds a diverse community there that challenges her to grow up with hope and pride.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why is Raisa Nikitovna so spiteful with Esther?
2. What happens to the food that disappears in chapter 8? How does everyone respond to the problem?
3. Discuss the remark, "But, I thought, if you are supposed to be generous, who are you supposed to be generous to?"

Only those who don't need it? It was very confusing."

4. Who becomes Esther's best friend at school? What does Esther do to win her friendship?
5. Who is the boy whom Esther likes best romantically? Who is the boy who likes Esther best? Why do things work out this way?
6. What is the attitude of Uncle Yozia and Aunt Zaya toward the Rudomins?

How do they help the Rudomins?

7. How would you describe the personality and the character of Marya Nikolayevna?
8. What evidence do you see in this book that adversity bonds people together?
9. Which people treat the Rudomins best? Which ones treat them worst?

What factors influence the way people treat them?

10. Why were sapogy and a fufaika so important to Esther?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Read the passage about Tatyana's dream in Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and summarize it. Why do you think Esther likes it so much?
2. Read about the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 and find out what it provided for.
3. Try to find Adlai Stevenson's articles on Rubtsovsk and report on what he said about it.
4. Look up Vilna (Vilnius) in a historical atlas and trace its history over the last one hundred years.
5. Choose three characters from *The Endless Steppe* and discuss how they contribute to Esther's development.

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