

The Endless Steppe; Growing Up in Siberia Study Guide

The Endless Steppe; Growing Up in Siberia by Esther Hautzig

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Plot Summary

The Endless Steppe is the story of a young girl named Esther Rudomin and her family who are exiled to Siberia from Poland at the start of World War II. They are a prominent Jewish family and it is determined that they are Capitalists and must be exiled for punishment to Siberia in order to learn the lesson of hard work and labor. Although Esther's troubles in Siberia are immense, she comes to realize that in the end, her fate was far luckier than many other members of her family who will be killed in concentration camps during the war.

Esther is nine when her family consisting of her mother, father and paternal grandmother are taken by the Russian soldiers and put on a cattle train. For three weeks, they travel slowly, boxed in with many other families in very tight, inhospitable conditions. When they finally arrive, they are shocked to find themselves in Siberia with many other prisoners who were deemed capitalists and threats to society. They are immediately assigned to work in various places. Esther's mother is in charge of the dynamite used in the gypsum mine with other women, while her father drives a horse and cart. Esther accompanies the rest of the children in weeding around the potatoes in order to ensure a better harvest so they do not starve that winter.

The work is long and hard and the family joins the rest of the exiles in a large, converted schoolhouse where they sleep together. After weeks of hard labor, they are given the option to move into town towards a village in order to prepare for the winter and its harsh environment. Initially, they live in some barracks, but find private housing with another couple. They will live in a variety of different housing huts with other inhabitants during their years in Siberia, even having their own hut for a short period of time. Esther grows up in the village of Rubtsovsk, becoming a mixture of Polish deportee and Siberian girl by the time she leaves at age 13. She will attend school here and develop a strong love of Russian literature. She will learn how to work hard as a knitter and learn creative ways to help her family, especially after her father is sent to the front lines of the war.

Esther, her mother, and grandmother are eventually allowed to return to Poland. They meet Samuel in Lodz and their new life out of exile will finally begin. However, they suffer a great loss as they learn their entire family has been killed during World War II in the concentration camps. They cannot return to their beloved Vilna and must try to etch out a new life in Lodz.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The morning that the Russian soldiers come for Esther, she has the day off from school and has planned to read a mystery novel in bed. Instead, her mother quickly tells her to hand a matchbox to her maternal grandmother. Although Esther questions her mother, she runs as fast as she can once she hears that her father has gone to his father's apartment in his pajamas and has not returned, as it was swarmed with Russian soldiers. This news terrifies Esther and she relays the information to her maternal grandmother before seeing that the matchbox contains all of her mother's jewelry. Her grandmother is scared, but Esther has to run back to her house before she can hear what she says.

Esther returns to the house through the side garden entrance and hears the front doorbell ringing. She sees her mother at the dining table, resting her chin in her hands. She hears the doorbell, but is extremely hesitant to open the door. When they do, they see Tata in handcuffs with two Russian soldiers who have bayonets. They are demanded to get on the floor and when Esther asks what they have done, the soldiers tell them their charge of being capitalists. Esther is told to get her clothes together, which surprises her; what should she pack? She tries to take a little of everything, including the family albums, which her mother will soon hide away rather than take with them.

Her parents are allowed to dress and pack a suitcase as well before they are all loaded on trucks. Just before they exit the house, there is a knock at the door and a man is standing there. The soldiers ask who the man is and Raya tells them that she has never seen the man in her life. It is a statement she will regret deeply in the future. Esther sees that the rest of her relatives are gone, but as they are getting on the truck, she hears her maternal grandmother yelling their names. Esther sees her paternal grandparents on the truck with them.

At the train station, they are all put on the same train save her paternal grandfather, Solomon. Upon hearing this, Anna Rudomin wails and begs the soldiers to reconsider. They are refused. Ahead, they are shoved into cattle cars with their luggage.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Esther gives the background that bombs have fallen on Poland at the time that the Russian soldiers come to their town of Vilna. Although her Tata leaves and his entire unit is demolished, her Mama has psychic powers that allow her to see that Tata is on his way back home to them. Although everyone thinks she is mad, she predicts the day correctly. This story is a shining example of how close her parents and family unit are.



In addition to this story, Esther's entire world are her relatives. They all live in the same house that is broken up in segments with each family having a separate apartment. One of the most terrifying things to Esther on the day the Russian soldiers come to get them is the quiet of the house. She realizes that her relatives have all left in advance of the soldiers.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

The Rudomins are loaded into the cattle car with other families, all of which mirror the look of mutual shock. She watches as her happy, majestic grandmother begins to wilt and age overnight with her grandfather by her side. When the car stops in the morning, the soldiers address them and Esther needs to use the toilet. She is told that there will not be one for some time. Perhaps to get her mind off using the toilet and to improve their situation a little bit, her mother lets her wear some expensive French perfume. Esther would have been thrilled to wear it at home, but now, she is less than excited about it. Her family did not pack food and she watches the other families around her begin to eat. Her mother does not allow her to take food from anyone else. When they finally stop, the soldiers hand them rationed food and it makes her very nauseous. She is also finally given use of a toilet, which is a V-shaped opening in the floor of the cattle car.

They continue to live this way for weeks. The car will stop along the way and the exiles will attempt to purchase food and water from the peasants outside the car at exorbitant prices. Nonetheless, no peasants ever take the money and walk away, which they could have easily done. Finally, after six weeks, the forty exiles reach their destination, which is Rubtsovsk in the Altai Territory of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic. No one cheers getting off the cattle car.

Chapter 2 Analysis

How the Rudomins handle their trip to Siberia is a foreshadowing of how they will conduct themselves throughout their exile. Raya finds expensive perfume and despite their hunger, does not allow Esther to have any food from other exiles. She wants to be wholly self-reliant, although she will later admit she isn't sure why she behaves the way she does when they are starving in the future. It will be a constant battle between pride and hunger for the Rudomins, but pride will always win out in the end.

It is also a testament to the peasants outside the cattle car that they never stole money from the exiles. As the exiles return to Poland, they will not be greeted as fairly after the brutal war has passed, but for now, it is a fortunate thing for the exiles to be able to purchase food during the six weeks of their travels.



Chapter 3 and Chapter 4

Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 Summary

The exiles get off the cattle car, but they are not used to the steady ground and the bright sunlight. They are told to walk in sets of four towards the village, which they can barely make out. After walking a mile, they start to make out small, whitewashed buildings of the town of Rubtsovsk. They march into the town's square and told not to move, which confuses Esther because there is nowhere to go to. A man named Popravka begins to ask what they did in Vilna. Samuel, or Tata, tells the man that he was an electrical engineer by training back in Vilna. He then tells the group that they will be working 12 kilometers outside the town in a gypsum mine.

As they walk towards the mine together as a family, Esther asks her father why the Earth is so flat where they are. He tells her that they are at the Steppes. She is confused; aren't the Steppes in Siberia? That's where they are, he tells her. Now she is shocked and wishes she had prayed to God to deliver her from a gypsum mine in Siberia.

Gypsum is a grayish-white powder that the soldiers will use to make casts for the broken limbs of soldiers during the war. They come to a converted schoolhouse, which will become their living quarters for the time being. They are lucky and manage to secure a spot near the corner, giving them additional privacy. They are instructed to call the other people comrades and Esther realizes there are no other children in the room that are her age.

Shortly after settling in, a young boy appears with a bucket for fresh water. Despite the fact that they are all thirsty, the boy is not mobbed thanks to Esther's grandmother Anna who begins to control who receives a glass first. In this way, everyone receives water in a timely and organized manner. At six the next morning, they are all awakened to get ready for their new jobs at the mine. Raya will go to the mine to be in charge of the dynamite with the rest of the women, while Samuel drives the mule cart. Esther, on the other hand, is left behind with roughly a dozen other children and brought to a desolate potato field. They spend the day weeding at the potato field in order to produce a better harvest for the upcoming winter. Since Esther loves gardening and has been taught by her grandfather that anyone who loves flowers has some good in them, she actually enjoys the work.

Each day, the work continues and the adults are worked harder and harder. When the ground shakes after a dynamite blast, Esther worries for her mother, but they all appear back in the schoolhouse later that day for lunch. They all work hard with little food and difficult living conditions, but they are together.



Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 Analysis

Again, the pride and dignity of the Rudomin family are demonstrated in this chapter. Although a riot could have broken out, resulting in not one person receiving water, Esther's grandmother exudes the same poise and control as Samuel does when he organizes where the exiles will sleep in the cattle car. By quickly arranging that older persons and then children should receive the water first, followed by adults, she gives a logical reason to the limited water supply and each person receives a glass.

Since Esther is familiar with plants, she feels at home with her job in the potato fields, despite the fact that she is in Siberia, so far from Vilna. In addition, she is a cheerful and enjoys the hard work, which must have been a great relief to her parents. Each person works tirelessly during their first weeks in Rubtsovsk and the efforts will pay off well for them.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

After a few weeks working at the gypsum mines, life begins to settle down. The exiles even get used to waking up in the converted schoolhouse, slipping from sleep to wakefulness barely noticing the difference. When Esther develops a fever, Samuel finds her a straw mattress, but when Popravka finds it, he rips it out from under her. Soon after, they are told to meet at the front of the building for a meeting. They are told that every Sunday, six people would be allowed to go to the village at the permission of Makrinin, another one of the commanders at the mine.

Esther is immediately excited by the news and after working on her parents, she asks and receives permission to go the village in two weeks with her grandmother. The time comes and the two set off, walking for about three hours without seeing anything or meeting another person. They finally see the village on the horizon and make their way to the baracholka or marketplace. Here, they barter their goods, including Raya's lace slip for a piece of meat and a bag of flour. As a special treat, her grandmother allows her to have a glass vial of sunflower seeds, a unique treat among the Siberian people. They make their way back to the schoolhouse that evening.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The visit to the baracholka has a huge impact on Esther and on their family in general. It gives them a break from the monotony of the gypsum mine and allows Esther to have another experience other than the hard work. The rest of the family benefits from the meat and flour, which they will combine with water to make little cakes to help them fight hunger. More importantly, the trip to the marketplace shows off the bartering skills that Esther and her grandmother have, helping them to feel more normal and like a small part of society for however limited a period of time. These two exiles are in their ideal element bartering for goods here.



Chapter 6 and Chapter 7

Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 Summary

Fall arrives in Siberia and announces itself with a loud, screeching wind that terrifies Esther. A pact has been made between Poland and the Soviet Union, granting all exiles amnesty. Esther isn't sure what that means, but judges that it is positive based on the reactions of the other exiles. Because of this news, Makrinin tells them that they can leave the mines and be assigned jobs in the village for a small stipend. It is a huge improvement from the mine work.

The move to the village of Rubtsovsk is a welcome one and the family enters the barracks, or their new home. There, they find old friends from Vilna and their grandmother prays fervently that their grandfather will find a way to make it to Rubtsovsk to find them. The next morning, all of the adults are told to meet to learn what their new jobs will be. Raya will work in a bakery, Samuel will work on a construction job, and their grandmother will work in a flour mill. For the first time in her life, Esther is left alone and grows increasingly bored.

Raya's job at the bakery has the fringe benefit of bringing home more bread, but the family still lingers at starvation. For this reason, they return to the baracholka to sell their items in exchange for goods.

Shortly thereafter, Esther's parents discover they can gain permission to live in the village if they can find suitable living quarters. They find a couple named Nikita Alexandrovich and Nina Ivanovna to move in; they are permitted to stay only until the couple gets pregnant. The house is neat and they live contently together, although they do not share food amongst the families. Sometimes, Nina will share some of her food with one of them, typically Esther or her grandmother. However, oddly enough, some of their food goes missing from time to time.

The first snowfall occurs and Raya is terrified because Esther does not have any boots. For Esther, however, she falls in love with the endless landscape of space. She is also told she will be allowed to enter school, which thrills her immensely. She has to share books with another student since they are low on books, but she doesn't mind.

She enters school and meets her teacher Raisa Nikitovna. She is assigned to share her books and work with a pretty girl named Svetlana. Svetlana, on the other hand, is not warm or kind to Esther at all.

Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 Analysis

The family is improving their situation, thanks to the amnesty agreement. The move to the village will have positive consequences for the family. The three families that remained at the mine during the Siberian winter suffered greatly, while the ones that left



for the village survived. The parents will work hard during this time, but at least the family is still together, which is a miracle in and of itself during this time.

Esther's schooling will have long-term effects on her, including a love of Russian literature later in life. For now, however, she has to deal with being an outsider who does not speak Russian well and has to conquer the cold personalities of both her teacher Raisa and her fellow student Svetlana. Both will play important roles in her life in the village in the future.



Chapter 8 and Chapter 9

Chapter 8 and Chapter 9 Summary

Now that she is in school, Esther's world is focused on more everyday things like algebra versus the hard labor of an exile. She wants more than anything to fit in with the other schoolchildren. At random times, the food continues to go missing but no one can determine the culprit. Esther develops a cough that persists and she is forced to stay away from school. The news crushes her, but shortly after, she encounters a real terror.

A man comes to their door, another deportee from another labor camp. He tells them that their grandfather Solomon has passed away. Her grandmother screams and their family enters into the mourning period. They start to have the ritual mourning services and are interrupted by the police. They are accused of conducting synagogue services in their home, which is against the law. When Samuel tries to explain they are mourning the death of his father, they are questioned further. How do they know he is dead? Do they have proof?

Samuel is allowed to leave, but understands that there will be no more mourning services for his father. For the next week, only sick Esther, Mrs. Kaftal, a friend from Vilna, and their grandmother sit shivah to pay respect to their late family member. Other people stop by to pay their respects. Since they do not have a candle to light, her grandmother keeps a kerosene lamp on low despite the shortage of fuel. When the eight days of mourning are over, her grandmother disappears for hours. That night, the first winter Siberian storms come and they learn new ways to protect themselves against the harsh and brutal climate. Esther has nothing to do during the storms and certainly cannot go outside. She lies bored next to her grandmother, who is also unable to leave to mourn for her late husband and both lie on the bed day after day.

Nina announces that she is going to have a baby; good news for their family, but bad news for the Rudomins. They are forced to ask permission to move into a small, cramped place. There are seven of them now since they move with the Kaftals, friends from Vilna. One evening, Samuel does not return from work. Hours pass and when he does not appear the next morning, Raya tells work that she is sick and will not be coming in. Finally, in the late afternoon, he arrives, immediately asking for sugar, which was only reserved for unique occasions. He was picked up by the secret police and asked to spy on his neighbors. He refused, but that does not mean they will not return.

Chapter 8 and Chapter 9 Analysis

The usual routines are changed for the Rudomins, but they will later realize that their situation is nothing compared to what is going on in the rest of Eastern Europe within the Jewish community. They cannot properly mourn Solomon, although Anna does it the best way she can. When Samuel is picked up by the secret police, they ask him to spy



on his neighbors. He talks back to them, telling them he cannot imagine anyone else is doing much more than keeping their body, soul and family together in these harsh conditions.

Since the story is told from the point of view of a child, much of the horror and potential terror of the family's situation is kept at bay. However, when her Tata nearly disappears forever, the terror enters Esther's world at full force. From here on after, she will worry that her father might be taken from them at any time. Although she is aware that their situation is not ideal, this situation is one that will make Esther mature faster than most children her age.



Chapter 10 and Chapter 11

Chapter 10 and Chapter 11 Summary

After her Tata is taken, Esther constantly worries that he might disappear again. With spring on its way, however, Esther is finally allowed to return to school where she is surrounded by children who want to know what happened to her, all except Svetlana.

An American movie comes to the cinema and Esther is asked to go by two girls. It costs a great deal of money for the poor family, but Samuel determines that she must go. For months afterwards, she and the other children will sing and imitate what they have seen during the movie, helping her to fit in.

Still, however, Svetlana will have nothing to do with Esther and it troubles her. Finally, another girl tells her that the huge secret is that Svetlana is actually jealous of Esther because she has such long, beautiful braids. Immediately, Esther runs home and begs her mother to cut them off. Her mother is horrified, but the next day after much convincing, she allows her to cut them off. Esther hates the look, but it wins her the friendship of Svetlana so she is in heaven.

Spring is in full bloom and the mud comes with it. It is extremely difficult to walk anywhere due to the thick, heavy mud everywhere. The Rudomins are allocated a small piece of land in order to help plant their vegetables to get through the harsh winter. It is a small piece of land, but they work diligently at it and despite the fact that everyone is hungry, Esther remarks that no one ever steals from each other's land. The Rudomins work hard at making some potatoes grow, but their best efforts yield little results.

New factories are being built in Rubtsovsk and the unbearable heat has increased the bugs and vermin in the small, cramped hut they live in. Also, the Kaftals are wearing on their nerves. They are given permission to move into one of the dilapidated, empty huts on the north side of the village. Although they are dirty and have no glass on the windows, the Rudomins are finally living on their own again and it is a huge relief to them. They dig a cold cellar and try to clean the place as much as possible.

Raya finds out there is a public bath and they save their money to go. Hot water is a luxury for them and they wait in a line for hours before they can enter. Afterwards, they are finally clean.

Shortly after, the village housing chief visits to tell them they will be taking in a new housing tenant — Vanya the bum. Esther is horrified, but she is urged by her parents to remember that everyone is a human being and should be treated with respect. They learn that his real name is Ivan Petrovich and after a few weeks, he eats with them and begins to wash. He was once a shoemaker and is a well read man, but talked too much and ended up being an exile in Siberia. One day, he leaves and never returns to their home.



Chapter 10 and Chapter 11 Analysis

Spring warms the village and thanks to various changes at school, Esther's life in general warms up as well. She is allowed to return to school, breaking the dull monotony of the hut, and gains new friends, including Svetlana. The family moving to their own hut has a huge psychological impact on them and they can finally claim a piece of property to be their own. In addition, they go to the public bath and are clean for the first time since they were exiled. It is a rare and luxurious feeling.

When Vanya the bum is assigned to live with them, most of the family reacts with horror. However, Raya reminds each of them that every human being must be treated with respect and thanks to this behavior, they are rewarded with a man who cleans and eventually eats with them. He tells them pieces of his story and disappears one day, but the true lesson from this is how important it is for the Rudomins to have pride and respect in their fellow man. Despite their harsh situation, they remember and teach Esther the importance of treating everyone fairly, no matter their consequences.



Chapter 12 and Chapter 13

Chapter 12 and Chapter 13 Summary

The summer heat of Siberia scorches the potatoes in their garden, making them nearly worthless. Esther goes to see 100 Men and a Girl with Deanna Durbin, who becomes their new super-heroine. All of the girls sing and dream to be like her. The children are also all made to do odd jobs on Sundays at various points during the summer. Sometimes it's construction work or helping nearby collective farms. They complain together, but they are spending time together so they don't mind it too much.

The Rudomins dig up their potato patch in September before the freeze begins. Their pull is very small and they wonder how they will survive. They receive a letter from an uncle in America, who sends them \$50. They are grateful and use it to purchase food at the market, but Raya writes him in return telling him to keep his money since it will go much farther over there, while in their village inflation makes it nearly worthless.

Another letter comes, telling them that Samuel will be put on the front lines of the war. Everyone bursts into tears; it is the worst news possible. He is sent to training before going to the front lines and the day before he leaves, her parents spend the night together on a patch of earth. The morning that he leaves, her mother walks with him while her grandmother goes off to the fields to weep, as she often will do to mourn her late husband. Esther, meanwhile, stays in the hut and sobs.

After her father leaves, fuel becomes in short supply. Esther learns how to go with the other children and pick up scrap coal and wood in order to burn the stoves at night. She hates doing it and yet continues to do so since they all desperately need it. A terrible sickness goes around and when Esther catches a fever, it throws her mother into a panic. It is a severe epidemic and now Esther fears that she will lose her mother and grandmother to the sickness, while her father is on the front lines.

In late October, Raya decides to have a birthday party for Esther. Compared to her opulent birthdays of the past, her twelfth birthday was spent in a dung hut in the middle of Siberia, but it was a great party nonetheless. Members of the Polish exile community come over, bringing gifts and her mother uses far too much of their allocated food to celebrate. They stay up late gossiping and chatting. Afterwards, Raya and Anna stay up talking about it long into the night. Esther misses her father, however; her mother tells her that life will be better and to take whatever immediate blessings they can enjoy.

Chapter 12 and Chapter 13 Analysis

Samuel's departure from the family causes them to lose their strongest family member, but it also sets Esther adrift. While her father was nearby, life was not too terrible. With him gone, however, she is terrified and sad.



Perhaps to counterbalance the extreme sadness the family is facing, Raya brilliantly decides to have a birthday party for Esther. She needs to prove to her daughter that life is still good and to see the good when the overall situation seems hopeless. It is a positive move for the three women in general.

Raya and Anna do not steal nor take any items from strangers or even friends. Yet, they allow Esther to continue finding scrap fuel when she does not exactly tell them where she has gotten it. They recognize that they need the goods and their code of ethics allow her to continue since it is not expressly known where she gets it. This will be one of the few exceptions the Rudomins make to their stance on pride, respect and overall decency throughout their exile. It also demonstrates just how desperate they are for fuel and food.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

The first letter from Samuel arrives and despite waiting for it constantly, Esther misses it and finds it on their front stoop. Throughout the letter, he tries to be optimistic and happy. Both her mother and grandmother spend much of their time now trying to get scraps of news about the war, and neither tries to hide their worry about the state of the rest of the family from Esther.

There is only one week's supply of potatoes left and a thirty-ruble note. The monthly five rubles for Esther's lunch are required and Esther is given the 30-ruble note with strict instructions not to lose it. Of course, she misplaces it. When she arrives home, she is in hysterics, but her mother calmly tells her that they will sell something on the black market for money. It is highly illegal to do this and Esther ends up taking some bread to sell there, making 20 rubles.

After this incident, Esther decides she wants to market herself locally as a seamstress who can knit. Her mother fights the idea, but eventually caves in. Her first job is a success and she comes home with milk and potatoes, feeling rich and successful. They continue to freeze and they find a saw to take off part of the edges on their house in order to stay warm.

Uncle Yozia and Zaya are Jewish exiles who make up an elite part of the community. They rarely associate with outsiders and actually have a beautiful apartment to themselves. Although they are well connected, Raya refuses to let Esther ask them for help because she does not want their friendship to be a burden to these people.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Despite the severity of the situation, Raya keeps her honor and respect, but at what cost? Esther questions her mother and her lack of a desire to take advantage of their connections in order that they might not starve. Raya herself does not know why she has so much pride in the face of their extreme adversity, but it is her code.

Meanwhile, Esther is trying to do everything she can to save her family. Since both women are already working, they can do no more than they already are. However, at the age of 12, Esther must try to go out and find additional income for the three women so that they will survive the harsh winter without her father.



Chapter 15 and 16

Chapter 15 and 16 Summary

A woman named Marya Nikolayevna shows up at the baracholka now and all heads turn when she arrives. An escapee of the German invasion at Leningrad, her husband is a high officer in the army and she is well connected and rich. Esther goes to the baracholka with the express intention of offering her knitting services to her. Initially rejected, the woman finds a bad skirt and asks if she could make something out of it. Esther is thrilled. She takes the woman's measurements twice and runs home to start working.

She washes the skirt and miraculously, a beautiful red shows through. Then she starts to tear out the fabric so she can re-knit a beautiful sweater. She works hard at the sweater and finally sends her grandmother to tell Marya that the sweater is ready. Marya says she will stop by their hut to receive it. When she arrives, the worst possible situation has occurred where Marya has gained weight. The sweater does not fit and Esther is forced to try all over again. She is exhausted and frustrated that she has worked so hard with no results.

The worst part of winter now sets in and the children must go to school in a pack, using each other for warmth and defense against the strong wind. The library becomes Esther's greatest refuge. Esther gets another job and is paid for making two sweaters with a chifforobe. Although her mother is initially reluctant, it is a gorgeous piece of furniture that they will enjoy in the future.

One night, the hut gets too cold for Raya when she sees her glass of water frozen by her bedside again. She decides to finally ask Uncle Yozia for some help finding another place. Esther and Raya can move into Yosif Isayevich's home while his wife and children are away. The house is clean and there will be eggs to eat but Anna cannot come with them. After debating it, they agree to allow Raya and Esther to move there and Anna stays behind in the dilapidated hut, visiting frequently to enjoy the extra food and warmth. The chiffonrobe immediately becomes essential as it divides the sleeping room of Yosif with the sleeping area of Esther and Raya, giving them some privacy.

Chapter 15 and 16 Analysis

The trouble with Marya demonstrates Esther's eagerness to work and help her family in any way she can. She learns the importance of working and contributing as well as just how difficult a job can be. However, in addition to the food and goods that Esther makes, the chiffon robe she acquires immediately provides a use as a room divider. Throughout their exile, they will all learn how a single item can be manipulated and used in a variety of manners to help them with their survival.

The situation with Yosif could potentially be a dangerous one for Esther and Raya as they are in a house alone with a man they do not know but Yosif will have a positive impact on their life during the harsh winter.



Chapter 17 and 18

Chapter 17 and 18 Summary

An announcement is made at school that there will be a declamation contest. Esther decides to sign up, despite the fact that she is a political exile accused of being a capitalist. Their teacher Raisa gives them a list of suitable choices, including Pushkin's Eugene Onegin. This particular poem is a favorite of Esther's and she wants to perform it in front of everyone. She practices continuously and makes everyone in her life listen to her as she practices over and over again.

Unfortunately, Yosif's wife returns home far earlier than predicted. They are forced to move again, this time in with a young couple named Natasha and Nikolay. Their baby becomes Esther's greatest person to practice with. By now it is August and the small new hut feels suffocating, so Esther will often awake early to escape outside into the fresh air. The day of the declamation contest arrives and Esther worries what to wear. She asks her mother to listen to her practice one more time before all of the adults leave for the day. After everyone leaves, Esther becomes nervous and hurries off to school early.

When she arrives, Raisa acts as though she has no recollection of Esther being on the list to participate. She finally sees her name, but tells her she cannot go on stage in her current condition: she has to have shoes.

Esther is panicked and races home. She finds her mother's slippers, which are far too big on her and using string, straps them to her feet. She then climbs the stage, barely making it in time for her performance. She is so winded and exhausted from finding shoes that her performance goes poorly and without any passion.

After her performance, Esther is obsessed with getting a new pair of shoes. She finds a man who regularly receives "packages from the Red Cross" and asks him to help her find a new pair of shoes. They arrive and she immediately feels much more elegant and rich; she nearly feels the equal of everyone else in town now.

Attempting to improve her school, Uncle YoZIA gets her into a better school nearby. Esther once again feels like an outsider to a group of students who all have known each other for a long time. However, she develops a much stronger appreciation and love of literature and learning in this school, thanks to the superior teachers. These teachers are more cultured and previously taught in some of the biggest universities.

Still needing food, Esther meets a woman through Uncle YoZIA and Aunt Zaya named Alexandra Lvovna. She tells Alexandra that she can pay her after she submits her knitting to her. Esther works very hard and finishes her work early so that she can be paid to help buy food. Despite an approaching snowstorm, Esther rushes to Alexandra's house, but the seamstress tells her that she will not be paid until she herself is paid.



Esther is furious and walks home in such a rage she doesn't notice the snowstorm until it is upon her. Since many people die in Siberia mere feet from their house due to the overwhelming snow, Esther's life is now in danger.

The world goes black and Esther cannot see anything. However, she knows that to stop for just one second could mean death, so she pushes on. She prays fervently to God and suddenly hears her name being called over and over again. She follows the sound and falls into her mother's arms. Her mother has just saved her life.

Chapter 17 and 18 Analysis

The impact of the schooling Esther receives during her time in Siberia fosters a lifelong love of Russian literature. She will cherish learning for the rest of her life, thanks in no small part to the superior instructors she enjoys while in exile. In this way, exile has a positive impact on her life as she would not have been exposed to these superior professors and culture such as the theater and ballet.

Again, Esther learns hard life lessons about having a job and the potential drawbacks. Despite working hard, she is not aptly rewarded and in this way, she matures and becomes more like an adult. However, unlike an adult, she does not pay enough attention to her surroundings and nearly dies in a snowstorm. Thanks to her mother's strong love and intuition that she would follow her voice, Esther is saved and brought into her warm house.



Chapter 19 and Chapter 20

Chapter 19 and Chapter 20 Summary

Esther is now thirteen and sees herself both as a Polish deportee and Siberian girl. She is very comfortable in the small hut with Natasha and Nikolay and learns how to take care of the baby in exchange for food. She also learns how to spin wool. She is finally paid very little by Alexandra, but can no longer find any work. Uncle Yoziya comes to the rescue again, asking her to trade at the baracholka every Sunday various items that they own. When he has multiple copies of the same book, she goes to market to trade it. She thinks the reactions of the villagers are unusual and realizes they are looking at the book not to read it for entertainment, but to burn it as fuel. To Esther, it is a sacrilege.

Anna Semyonovna is one of the teachers who develops the strongest love of learning in Esther. She singles her out in the class to write a very difficult paper. Esther also decides she wants to become the editor of the Russian school paper, strictly to catch the eye of her crush, Yuri.

Despite their situation, Esther longs for Yuri. She is madly in love with him, but he is already dating the most beautiful girl in school. She becomes the editor of the paper, but soon learns that Yuri will have no part of the writing process. It seems Yuri prefers math to writing, so Esther tries desperately to improve her math skills. It fails, but her efforts attract the attention of another boy named Shurik, who falls for her. She will instead pretend that Shurik is Yuri.

The school plans a masquerade party. Esther has nothing to wear, but she knows that a touring theater company is in their village. She hopes to ask them for a costume. The woman from the company bursts out laughing at her request and rejects it outright. Her mother is proud of her from attempting the idea in the first place. The night of the party, Shurik picks her up instead of her beloved Yuri and when she arrives, she sees him with his beautiful girlfriend dancing in one of the costumes from the touring theater company that she had requested. Apparently, it was simply because she had asked that her request was refused.

Chapter 19 and Chapter 20 Analysis

Esther is growing up and along with the changes, she experiences love for the first time in this exiled country. She longs for a boy, but she is an outsider and he does not even know that she exists. Instead, another boy has a crush on her, but since he is not her dream, she tolerates him.

She is shown yet again her position in the town when she asks for the company's costume and is rejected, as if it were a ludicrous thing to suggest. Meanwhile, another more prestigious and beautiful girl is gladly given the outfit for the masquerade ball.



Chapter 21 and Chapter 22

Chapter 21 and Chapter 22 Summary

That spring, the cattle train cars arrive again, but this time, they are carrying German prisoners. Since everyone in town is well aware of the atrocities of the war and concentration camps, the prisoners are not treated well. They are put in the barracks, but disease kills many of them quickly; not that the exiles mind. Every morning and evening, they are marched single file down the center of town and the inhabitants throw garbage and stones at them, screaming that they have killed their fathers and family members. These prisoners are treated very poorly.

On May 8, 1945, there is a formal surrender. The war is over. Only weeks earlier, news of President Roosevelt's death reaches Esther and her family and they wonder what will happen. There is a lot of tumult and anxiety during these weeks.

News comes in from the concentration camps that Esther's entire family has perished. They were saved due to their exile, but the guilt of their survival eats at Raya and Anna. They enter into the mourning period again for their relatives. Esther writes the caretaker Stanislav in Vilna to see if any of the family photo albums were saved, but there is no trace of them.

They finally receive a letter from Samuel, who says he will not return to the village, but will meet them somewhere in Poland. Esther, on the other hand, has gotten used to life in Siberia and thinks her father should meet them back there. Raya is shocked, but Esther does not want to leave her school and her friends where she finally feels safe and content. She writes her father, insinuating that he should meet them in Siberia.

Esther and Raya receive a letter that all three of them will be returning to Poland. They are overjoyed. They also receive a letter from Samuel saying that he returned to Vilna to see their old house, but it had been taken over by another family and they were not welcomed there. He visits the cemetery to pray for the souls of all their departed family members.

Esther's reaction to the return from exile is to obsess about getting a sapogy (boots) and fufaika (green, lined jacket). Her mother eventually caves in to let her have them after they learn of their final days before returning to Poland. Esther finds work and works furiously to get the money to buy these items. She wanders the steppe, thinking about the friends and life she will leave behind. That December, Anna Semyonovna announces there will be another declamation contest. Esther wants to do Eugene Onegin again to redeem herself. She practices fervently, but is never allowed to return to stage since their departure date is mere days before the contest. However, Esther asks her mother to delay their departure so she can be in the contest, a request that stuns Raya and she rejects outright.



They board the trains for Poland again. One night, during a stop, she jumps out of the car to get fresh air. She waits too long and the train begins to move without her, possibly leaving her to die in the wilderness. Fortunately, a boy named Reiner sees her, throws himself from the train, scoops her up and tosses her back on board. He races to catch up with the train himself, but the door closes and nobody knows if he makes it. It is a long stretch of hours, but on the next stop, he appears, having grabbed the stairway on the last car and ridden in the freezing night until the train stopped again. Not a word is spoken, but Esther feels horrible about the incident.

The train arrives in Lodz and Esther sees her father. They are out of exile. He sees her in her sapogy and fufaika and immediately tells her she will need new clothes. Her new life is ready to begin.

Chapter 21 and Chapter 22 Analysis

The departure from Siberia is a complex one for Esther. She has grown up in this village and while her parents feel strong ties to their homeland, Esther has adapted to her new surroundings, just as many children do. Although she is thirteen at the time of departure, she is an odd mix. Part Polish girl, part Siberian she has friends she must leave behind. She is also part adult and part child, as evidenced by her mistake and near fatal loss at missing the train as it departed again while returning to Poland.



Characters

Esther Rudomin

Esther Rudomin is a young child of 8 when her family is exiled from Vilna, Poland into the steppes of Siberia. She grows up quite a bit while World War II rages on in the background. She learns how to weed in potato fields when she arrives to help get food for the upcoming winter. She learns how to go without much food and survive by being creative with her family. Her family is more fortunate than many others as their exile will ultimately save them from the horrors of the concentration camps, which the rest of her family will be subjected to and perish. Instead, Esther learns a deep appreciation for Russian literature and learning, while attending school in Siberia. She matures while in exile, impacting her for the rest of her life.

One of the biggest juxtapositions in the book is the typical adolescent changes that Esther goes through all while a major world war is taking place. She is a deportee in a foreign land, and yet she still has crushes on boys, longs to have a best friend and tries to make friends with the rest of the kids in her school. Although she is perpetually on the outside socially and is often hungry and lacking in basic supplies like shoes, she strives forward to live and adapt with her family.

When the Rudomins are told that they can leave their exiled home, Esther is 13. She has mixed feelings about leaving the village where she has grown up and spent many important years of her life. It shocks her mother that she wouldn't be anything less than enthused to return, but for Esther, she has adapted so well to her new environment that she has grown attached to it. She has made friends, learned a great deal and grown to be a part of the Siberian community. However, she is filled with anxious excitement when they board the cattle train cars that brought them to Siberia to return back to Poland. Although they cannot return to their beloved hometown of Vilna, they will resettle in Lodz instead.

Samuel Rudomin

This is Esther's father and a former electrical engineer in Vilna, Samuel survives the front lines of the war before his family is exiled to Siberia. Once he arrives, he works as the cart driver in the gypsum mine for a time. When the family is granted permission to move into the village after amnesty is granted to them by the Russian government, Samuel will work at a construction job. Before their exile, Samuel was sent to fight on the front lines with the Polish army. After a horrific loss to the Germans, most of his division was destroyed, but due to his intelligence and wit, he manages to not only survive, but make his way back to the family in Vilna.

He will stay with the family throughout their exile, helping to keep spirits high with his optimism. When he is instructed to fight on the front lines again at the end of the war,



the family is devastated. However, he will miraculously survive again and meet the family in Lodz at the end of the war. Before meeting everyone in Lodz, he returns to Vilna to pay respects for their family that died during the war and see their old home, which can no longer be theirs.

Samuel's impact on the family is tremendous and he is a beloved father. Although they are poor, he insists that Esther go to see a movie despite its high cost so that she can make friends and feel accepted in her Siberian school. He recognizes how important that is for her and her happiness.

Raya Rudomin

This is Esther's mother who is a somewhat distant character at the beginning of the novel. Towards the end of their exile, however, she loosens up a bit and develops a much closer bond with Esther. Raya is stingy with compliments and lives by a hard code of ethics. However, it is she and Anna who will teach Esther to be proud and strong throughout their exile. She does not allow Esther to take any handouts from strangers, no matter how desperate they might be, explaining only that she doesn't want her friendship with someone to be a burden.

Esther and her mother Raya will survive the end of the exile without Samuel, becoming even stronger women to survive. They cut the edges of their house off in order to have fuel for the winter and work hard to find food to eat. After Samuel leaves, Raya gives Esther a beautiful birthday party in a dung hut in the middle of Siberia in order to lift their spirits, which is something her father might have once done. Raya is a passionate woman and has semi-psychic abilities. She saves Esther from a horrible snowstorm, saving her life, and predicts Samuel's return from the front lines against all odds.

Anna Rudomin

Esther's paternal grandmother, Anna rules the Rudomin household in Vilna with a majestic touch. When the family is exiled to Siberia, she is fully dressed, complete with her hat. She wilts slowly over time on the cattle car and loses some of her importance when they arrive in Vilna. Over time, she will work hard like the rest of the family, but when she hears that her husband Solomon perishes in a camp, she loses much of her will to live. She will continue on, but often visit the fields in Rubtsovsk to weep for Solomon and mourn him as they had a very close relationship. She will survive the exile and return to Lodz with the rest of the family.

Popravka

This is the man in charge of the exiles when they first arrive to Rubtsovsk and their first commander.



Raisa Nikitovna

Esther's first teacher in school, Raisa is harsh and never kind to Esther.

Nina Ivanovna

This is the wife of the couple whose house the Rudomins move into from the barracks into town. She asks Raya for a Christian cross and will occasionally give pieces of her food to Esther.

Svetlana

When Esther attends school for the first time, there are not enough books for all of the children, so she is assigned to Svetlana to share books. Svetlana, however, is not kind to her and will not be until it is revealed that she is jealous of Esther's braids. After Esther cuts her hair, the two become good friends.

Vanya the bum

This individual's real name is Ivan Petrovich. He is assigned to live with the Rudomins for a little while. Originally from the Ukraine, he was a shoemaker and well read. However, he had talked too much or too carelessly or been misunderstood and had been sent to this prison in Siberia. One day, he disappears and never returns to the Rudomins again.

Marya Nikolayevna

This is the rich woman whose husband is a high officer in the army. She asks Esther to make her a sweater out of a torn, dirty skirt. Esther takes her measurements, but Marya gains a lot of weight thanks to a new cow and cannot fit into the sweater when Esther is finished.



Objects/Places

Vilna

The hometown of Esther and her family, it is one of the oldest Jewish establishments in Eastern Europe. The Russian soldiers will take her, her mother, her family and grandparents from their home in Vilna to the outskirts of Siberia in exile.

The Cattle Car

When the Russian Soldiers come to take the Rudomins away, they are loaded along with a number of other Jewish families into a cattle car that travels for three weeks before letting them exit in Siberia.

The Gypsum Mine

When the exiles first exit the car, they are assigned tasks. Their initial labor will be at a gypsum mine where each family member will contribute to the work.

Esther's Grandfather's garden

To Esther, her entire world is the garden that lies in the center of their home. Her grandfather tells her that there is some good in anyone who loves flowers and this garden epitomizes the happiness in Esther's life

Siberia

The steppes of Siberia are where the Rudomins are exiled after they are considered capitalists by the Russians.

Rubtsovsk

This is the village in Siberia where the cattle car drops off the forty exiles and where the Rudmonis will stay.

baracholka

This is the village in Rubtsovsk where Esther and Anna barter for goods, including a glass vial of sunflower seeds, while at the gypsum mine.



Lodz

This is where the family returns after the war is over since they cannot move back to Vilna.

sapogy

These are black, expensive, and well-made boots that Siberian inhabitants wear during the winter and spring in order to combat the fierce weather conditions.

fufaika

The green, padded jacket that is popular in Rubtsovsk and what Esther obsesses about purchasing before leaving Siberia to meet her father in Lodz.



Themes

Pride

The Rudomin family are a prestigious and well-connected family living in Vilna, Poland at the time of their exile. Although they lose everything during the exile except each other, they remember to hold onto their personal beliefs and values. Despite the harsh conditions, they do not falter from their code of ethics.

Early in their exile, the Rudomins are hungry while on the cattle car. Yet, when another family offers Esther some food, Raya does not allow her to take any. It will be an example of how she will be throughout their exile. Despite the fact that they have friends and connections like Uncle Yozia more well off than them, Raya does not ask them for any help. When she is truly desperate, she will ask for their help with a new housing situation and allow Esther to attend their more prestigious school, but not take in food or ask for any work. Just as they would never ask for help or a handout in Vilna, they will not take one here. The extraordinary circumstances do not permit Raya to deviate from her rule. It is how she wants to live and what she will teach her daughter, no matter what happens or what circumstances they are faced with.

Even their friends and neighbors remark that the Rudomins do not walk or act like deportees. Throughout their exile, they walk with their head held high, despite the fact their stomachs are empty and Esther does not have shoes on her feet. Although they do not have much food or goods, they have their pride and their code of ethics. When Esther comes home with wood and bits of coal to keep Raya and Anna warmer after Samuel leaves, she knows to not tell the two women where the items came from. They would never accept any charity in Vilna and barely can stand it when Esther attains these items, despite the fact they are in desperate need. They allow her to keep them and use them since Esther never explicitly tells them how to attain them.

Raya's persistence to remain strong and proud despite their exile frustrates Esther. She asks her mother why she acts like this and says that she doesn't want their friendship with other people to be a burden, that they want to be seen as self-sufficient even when the odds are stacked against them. Although Esther will disagree with her mother on this, she learns to live by this same code. It is remarkable how much and how often their code of ethics is tested throughout their exile, how easy it would have been for Raya and Anna to cave, and yet none of these women ever did, keeping their heads held high in the streets of Rubtsovsk.

Adolescence

When Esther is exiled to Rubtsovsk in Siberia, she is only eight years old. She spends five years in Siberia and grows into adolescence there. She is a child asking too many questions when the Russian soldiers come to take the Rudomins away. She is not



mature and perceptive enough then to realize that they are in great danger and her questions are only making a bad situation much worse. However, over the course of their exile, Esther will learn more about when to be quiet and when to ask questions. She will grow up and be able to better perceive her environment.

Esther arrives in Siberia, anxious with herself for having stepped out of the front door with her left foot and not praying to God to protect her family against a gypsum mine. Her viewpoint on their situation is more immature and innocent. When she is permitted to attend school, Esther has to deal with the troubles of learning new skills in school, such as algebra, with her everyday troubles. In this way, she must grow up in extraordinary circumstances, dealing with not only what most children must contend with, but also develop in an area that is not her hometown as an exile.

As the years pass, Esther realizes how much she needs to help contribute. After her father is ordered to the front lines to fight in the war, Esther creates work for herself as a knitter. Although she doesn't have a huge number of clients, every bit of food she earns helps her mother and grandmother. She learns what it is like to have a job for the first time. She is treated as an adult and not as a child. When a sweater doesn't fit right for a customer, she is asked to redo it. When she finishes work, she is not promptly paid. Esther is treated as an adult and learns the hardships of work.

Esther matures in other ways as well. She has a crush on a boy for the first time. Despite her surroundings, Esther says a young girl's heart is indestructible. She might be an outsider living in Siberia, but she still longs for a boy she cannot have who is dating the most beautiful girl in school. She daydreams that she will attend the masquerade ball in a gorgeous costume from the local touring theatre company. However, she is rejected and the costume is instead given to the other beautiful, popular girl. It instills in Esther that she is an outsider, teaching her that she will never completely fit in with this community. In this way, Esther's story could be compared to any other coming-of-age girl in a normal circumstance. However, Esther's situation makes her adolescence extraordinary because of her deportee status.

Loss of Control

When Russian soldiers arrive to take the Rudomins away, Esther and her family will experience a total loss of control over their lives that will continue for the next five years. Their free agency over their lives is taken away and they must do what the Russian government demands of them.

They are condemned as capitalists and forced to live in barracks among a number of other Polish deportees. There is no freedom or ability to choose where they will live or even who they will live with. They must share their living quarters and work at the facilities to which they are assigned, regardless of their talents or interests. In addition, Esther's grandfather Solomon will not be allowed to travel with them and he will ultimately perish while apart from the family.



For a child like Esther, the biggest impact that this loss of control in her daily life will have is that she must continue to feel like an outsider in her life. She does not speak Russian as well as the other children and will strive to be accepted among the other children in her school. Even her schoolteacher, Raisa, will treat her differently because she is a deportee and for no other reason.

Her parents will have to work exceptionally difficult hours at the bakery and her father will be forced to work at a construction site even though he is an electrical engineer by trade. The family will work hard hours and barely have enough money to have food and fuel for their fire. They will have to ask permission to move from one sub-par living area to another, forced to live with strangers again and again. For a family that once owned an entire block and had living quarters only with other family members, this change is monumental for them.

Despite this change, the Rudomins must make the best of their situation, eking out a survival and life in Siberia to the best of their ability, which is no small task when they are commanded to do every thing in their lives by the government.

Style

Point of View

The entire book is told from the perspective of Esther. This perspective is important because essentially a coming-of-age story for a girl growing up in Siberia. Had her parents or other relatives contributed to this story, they would have had an entirely different viewpoint. One of the most interesting things of the story is the juxtaposition between the family's exile and consequent hardships with Esther's typical struggles of fitting in with her schoolmates, making friends, and learning her studies like algebra and Russian literature.

There are times when it would be interesting to hear Esther's parents' reaction to different changes in their exile, including the amnesty that leads to their move from the gypsum mine or what happens after Samuel leaves and the three women's situations really seem dire. Since we do not have Samuel's perspective after he leaves Siberia, the reader is held in the same suspense as the rest of the family as to whether he will survive the war.

Setting

Most of the novel is set in the village of Rubtsovsk, a remote village on the steppes of Siberia in Russia. The landscape mirrors the desperation and emptiness that the deportees experience while separated from their homeland in World War II. Since they have been deemed capitalists, the Russian government sends them to a distant location typically reserved for offending criminals and political dissidents. When Esther hears that she has landed in the steppes, she immediately recognizes the horror of their situation.

However, the exile of the location also has a positive benefit that the Rudomins will not recognize until the end of the war. Due to their extreme location, they effectively avoid much of the war, allowing them to survive one of the most brutal experiences for Jews living in Poland ever seen before. While the rest of their family will perish in a concentration camp, the remoteness of their exile keeps the family away from the other atrocities of war, including the bombing, combat and being taken away to the camps.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is typically the common descriptions a young girl would have for her new setting. There are limited descriptions, but the ones that do exist are highly relevant in order to better describe a place or person who will impact Esther's life significantly.



There is a great deal of conversation in the novel, which keeps the story strictly from Esther's perspective. However, thanks to the dialogue, we can learn more about the characters in a way that Esther would not be able to convey. The conversations and the language therein help to show the reader what Esther battles as a young girl on a regular basis. Her conversations with Marya concerning the new knitted sweater, for example, demonstrate how she is spoken to by the locals.

Structure

The novel consists of 22 chapters, which are typically about 8 pages long. The story also follows a linear pattern, which means that the reader does not know if certain family members will survive some of the most harrowing instances of the story. In this way, the reader is just as nervous as to whether Solomon will survive, Samuel will make it back from the front lines, and if the family will have enough food and fuel to fight the constant hunger and cold.

The pace of the novel is consistent throughout the novel as Esther jumps from one struggle to the next. There are no subplots in the novel. The only flashback is in the very beginning of the novel, where Esther tells a story about Raya's psychic abilities when she predicts Samuel's return from the front lines.



Quotes

"The morning it happened - the end of my lovely world - I did not water the lilac bush outside my father's study" (pg.1.)

"My mother was sitting in the dining room, at the empty dining table, resting her chin in her hand" (pg. 10.)

"She became impatient and finally very stern: the albums were not to go. Looking over her shoulder first, she whispered that someone was bound to question us about the people in these albums" (pg. 17.)

"Siberia! Siberia was the end of the world, a point of no return. Siberia was for criminals and political enemies, where the punishment was unbelievably cruel, and where people died like flies" (pg. 42.)

"The smell was ravishing. 'Come on, Grandmother.' I nudged her. "Let's begin to trade" (pg. 68.)

"Out of the confusion of the day, three giants emerged to be slain: Svetlana, Raisa Nikitovna, and Krylov in Cyrillic letters. In that order" (pg. 105.)

"But Mama — asking for work is not asking for pity. You said so yourself, your very own self. Isn't work something to be proud of?" (pg.165.)

"Every night Mother set a glass of water down beside her bed; the night she awakened with a thirst to find that the water had turned to ice was the last straw" (pg. 180.)

"The past, World War II, and exile were of far less consequence to me than the problem of x: if y = such and such, and z = such and such, everyone but me would know what x equaled" (pg. 106.)

"Incongruously, as I had sometimes been in the school in Vilna, here too I was the pariah poor little rich girl, the outsider. To be one of them became my greatest ambition; my next greatest ambition was to do well at my work" (pg. 107.)

"When Mother opened her eyes...she said: 'We laughed today. We were happy over an apple and a piece of meat ... Life goes on. Someday it will be better. It will, Esther, it will'" (pg. 152.)

"Look at yourself. Whatever made you think you could go up on that stage in front of your teachers, judges, visitors that way" (pg. 193.)

"That winter when I was thirteen years old...the line between Polish deportee and Siberian girl sometimes appeared dangerously close to being extinguished" (pg. 206.)



Topics for Discussion

Name three major ways that demonstrate how much Esther matures over the course of their exile in Siberia.

Esther narrowly escapes death at various points in the novel. Choose two examples and describe how she survives, attributing her survival to any appropriate persons.

Why do you think Samuel tells the family that Esther must go to the movie with her classmates when invited, despite its expensive price. What impact does the movie have on her life in Siberia?

Every culture has particular items that are important to its members. What items are essential in Rubtsovsk that would not be relevant in Vilna? Think about fashion items and political ideas.

Esther often views herself as an outsider in her life. Describe instances that reinforce Esther's feelings of feeling like an outsider in Rubtsovsk.

Describe the political environment in Siberia while Esther lives there with her family. How does the political ideology of the village affect how the family lives? Be sure to use examples, such as their living conditions, assigned work commands, food, and other necessity survival items.

Name three ways that Esther acts like a normal adolescent girl while in Siberia.