

# **Mischling Study Guide**

## **Mischling by Affinity Konar**

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# Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Konar, *Affinity*. Mischling. Lee Boredeaux Books, 2016.

Twin sisters Pearl and Stasha Zamorski are 12 years old when they arrive on the station platform at Auschwitz with their mother and grandfather. They are swiftly placed into the care of Dr. Josef Mengele, the sinister Nazi who calls himself "Uncle Doctor" (12). Mengele runs an area of the camp known as "the Zoo" where he experiments upon anyone he perceives as different, including a brash albino, a family of little people, and numerous sets of twins and triplets (13).

Pearl and Stasha have a deep connection; they frequently read each others' minds and feel each others' pain, though the connection is frayed as their ordeal unfolds. Wise-cracking Stasha, who dreams of a future where her sister is a famous movie star, is given an injection that, Mengele claims, has made her immortal. Pearl does not know what she has been injected with, only that she is growing ever weaker and death seems likely. In addition to each other, Stasha has a friend named Feliks, a boy whose twin has died as a result of Mengele's experiments, and Pearl has a moment of romance with a resourceful messenger boy. Suddenly, their worlds are thrown further into chaos when Pearl disappears from an orchestral concert organized by Mengele.

Shattered by this loss, Stasha resorts to living in a sauerkraut barrel, inside of which she carves letters to her sister. When she is forced to emerge by Mengele's malevolent nurse to have her portrait painted, she is stunned to find her mother, whom she had not seen since their arrival at Auschwitz, is the artist. She learns that her grandfather is dead and she begins to plot Mengele's murder. A month passes while she awaits her opportunity. One day, he arrives in a car and tells her to get in. As they drive around the camp, Stasha sees her mother's body in the back of a truck. Her mission for vengeance takes on added urgency, particularly as she believes Pearl to be dead as well. Shortly after this, the camp erupts into anarchy. The Russians are at the gate, and the resistance movement within the camp clashes with the Nazis who have not yet fled. In the chaos, Feliks and Stasha witness the death of their friend Bruna, the albino teenager. They leave camp as part of the infamous "death march," but they are left behind, lying in the snow.

Pearl, meanwhile, is not dead. She has been confined to a cage in one of Mengele's labs where she is discovered by the Russians. Though badly injured, Pearl flees Auschwitz with two of Mengele's staff who were prisoners themselves, the beautiful and tortured Dr. Miri and a kind former Czech Soldier the children call "Twins' Father." They make their way to Krakow where the Red Cross steps in to organize an escape to Palestine. The transport is hijacked en route by Nazi soldiers and Pearl must flee.

Feliks and Stasha travel the war-torn countryside with Warsaw as their destination, as Feliks has told Stasha he believes this is where Mengele would hide out, and they have both sworn vengeance against him. On their journey, they are rescued from a murder



attempt by heroic Jewish resistance leaders, explore the ruins of a museum, and barely escape an encounter with a group of Nazi deserters. When they arrive in Warsaw, Mengele is not there, and Feliks tells Stasha she is not immortal, Mengele told all of the children this same lie. Stasha plans to kill herself, but before she can, she runs into a man on the street who turns out to be her father, whom she thought dead. He had actually been captured by the Nazis as a member of the Jewish resistance and sent to Dachau. Her father has a newspaper with a photograph of Pearl on the cover. They try to find her through all of the relief organizations established for refugees, but have no luck.

Just as Stasha has begun to accept that she will never see her again, Pearl suddenly appears in Warsaw. They sit back-to-back and play a game they have always played in which they draw the same thing at the same time, using their twin telepathy. They commit themselves to remembering those they lost and learning to love the world again.



# “World after World”

## Summary

Stasha, one half of a set of 12-year-old Polish Jewish twins, begins the novel by recalling her own birth, and how she had followed her sister Pearl out of the womb so they would not be separated. Stasha then narrates her arrival at Auschwitz with Pearl, their mother, and their grandfather (Zayde). Their father is not present because he has been missing for some time. The family plays a game called “the Classification of Living Things” on the train, a form of charades where one person acts out a representation of a “living thing” and the others must identify it (4). The twins' mother occupies herself by drawing a poppy on the wall of the train car. Once on the platform, a guard asks Zayde if he is a spider, referring to Stasha and Pearl hiding behind him, giving the appearance of extra legs. There is an incongruously upbeat orchestra playing music.

Seeing special attention being shown to a set of triplets, the girls' mother alerts a guard to Pearl and Stasha. Dr. Josef Mengele examines them and asks if they are “mischlinge” - of mixed blood – because of their light hair (9). Stasha recalls her grandfather telling her to think of the Classification of Living Things whenever she hears that word. When Mengele addresses Pearl by name, Stasha claims that he has it wrong, it is she who is Pearl, but the twins' mother corrects her. Mengele orders them remanded to the “Zoo” where he keeps the subjects of his experiments (13). While this is going on, Zayde and the girls' mother are taken away. As they are lead to the Zoo, Stasha sees a cart piled with dead bodies, one of which is not quite dead and reaching their hand out. Stasha comes closer and sings to try to comfort the individual, though she knows this is pointless.

In the barracks, the prisoners are packed in tightly. A large, unsympathetic woman they call “Ox” is in charge of the bunk. The other girls assure the twins that they are treated better than the rest of the camp because of Mengele's favor, and that their families are protected. Stasha is upset about the tattoos the Nazis have given them. While trying to comfort her sister with another “game,” Stasha asks Pearl, “Would you rather be the key to a place that will save us or the weapon that will destroy our enemies (17)?” During the night, Stasha is calmed by a shadow puppet show someone is putting on against the wall while lighting matches, though eventually the shadows become warped and frightening to her.

## Analysis

Opening the book with Stasha's memory of the twins' birth creates an immediate element of foreshadowing. Stasha came out of the womb because she did not want to be separated from her sister, and their separation is the major obstacle of the book's second part. This opening also establishes Stasha as an unusual, whimsical character, as most people do not claim to remember their own birth. When Pearl is approached by



Mengele, Stasha tries to claim that she is the one called Pearl, because she thinks she can protect her sister somehow by assuming her identity. The notion that the twins are one entity, split apart by circumstances is a major theme, in both literal and metaphorical manifestations. They are both the same and different, single and double, split apart in multiple ways. Stasha hates the tattoos they have been given because they are an indication of them being two separate people.

The poppy that the twins' mother draws on the train car will become a symbol of death or separation in the novel. Stasha later fixates on this image and tells Pearl that she will know that something has happened to one of her loved ones if she sees a field of poppies in her mind. When she is separated from Pearl, this premonition comes true. The author characterizes the twins' mother as bereft at the loss of her missing husband, "Once the primmest of women, she was undone; dust streaked her cheek, her lace collar lay limp (9)." This passage, with its alliteration and rhyme, exhibits the author's poetic use of language.

The "Classification of Living Things" game that Zayde taught the twins is a major symbol of the novel as well, representing the natural order of the world, something systematic that the twins look to for comfort in their increasingly chaotic surroundings. When Zayde is asked if he is a spider, Stasha remarks that the guard "had no real understanding of living things at all" (5). Stasha is referring to the fact that a spider is not technically an insect, but the metaphorical purpose of this comment is the indication that the Nazi guards are breaking apart the system, destroying the natural order of things, and that they have a complete and total lack of humanity.

When Stasha mentions the music played by the orchestra on the platform, she explains that she would later come to realize it was used to keep the prisoners calm and compliant. This is an example of the Nazis perversion of something beautiful for their own twisted purposes. Music is often used as a symbol in the novel, most often to highlight the endurance of beauty despite the ugliness of the Holocaust. Pearl says, "I don't believe in music anymore" (16) after what she has seen in their short time so far at Auschwitz, but this is not entirely true, her faith is just being tested.

The shadow puppets are an extension of the Classification of Living Things game, Stasha is briefly calmed by identifying the animals on the wall, before they become distorted and frightening, an indication that the effectiveness of the game will be challenged by the trials ahead.

Stasha's question about the key and the weapon foreshadows the twins' future destinies. Stasha will be consumed by her need for revenge, while Pearl represents the high road, forgiveness, which is the key to the salvation for the survivors.

## Discussion Question 1

What is odd about the music playing when the twins arrive at Auschwitz? What purpose does Stasha say the music serves?



## Discussion Question 2

Why does Stasha pretend to be Pearl when Josef Mengele tries to identify them?

## Discussion Question 3

What deeper meaning is there in Pearl's assertion that the Nazi guard does not understand living things after he asks Zayde if he is a spider?

## Vocabulary

embossed, ivoried, premature, genus, amoeba, semblance, crematoria, ghetto, appraised, clamor, prodigious, scarcity



# "Zugangen, or Newcomers"

## Summary

Pearl is now the narrator, and she notes that Stasha left something out from that first night. There had been a third girl in the bunk with the two of them who died. Another set of twins remove the girl's body, stripping her of her clothes first, which they appropriate for themselves. Stasha and Pearl are referred to as "Zugange" by the other prisoners, meaning "New Numbers" (20). The girls divide up the duties of their new world to try to shoulder an equal burden. Stasha is in charge of "the funny, the future, the bad," Pearl is in charge of "the sad, the past, the good" (21). Ox brings the girl's body back into the bunk, claiming that Mengele will be upset if anyone is missing for morning count, even if they are dead. Stasha begs Pearl to take responsibility for the future instead, but she will not.

Pearl outlines the geography of the zoo. There is a nearby field of dead bodies, and another where Zoo prisoners sometimes see their mothers. There are warehouses referred to as "Canada" (because the prisoners imagine this as a place of abundance) where all of the Jews' stolen possessions are stored. As the twins go through the prisoner intake process, they meet "Twins Father," a former Czech soldier who fills out their paperwork, and Dr. Miri, a female Jewish doctor who works for Mengele. Dr. Miri had two sisters, one of whom Mengele tortured, the other of whom was sent to work at the camp's brothel. Dr. Miri is understandably haunted by this. Twins' Father is visibly pained and exhausted and he tells the girls they must remember the names of the other children.

At breakfast, Stasha accidentally spits on the oldest boy of a family of "Lilliput" (little people) performers named Mirko Rabinowitz. The two of them spar verbally for a moment, before a young woman steps in and starts beating Mirko. She is a Ukrainian albino thief named Bruna. Bruna teaches the girls how to steal, mostly scraps of food.

Stasha begs Pearl to show Bruna her dancing skills, and as soon as she does, a cruel guard named Taube shows up and belittles them all, claiming he has a family friend who is an actress, and that she will surely come and whisk Pearl away and put her in the movies. Bruna taunts Taube and runs away, successfully drawing his attention from the twins. Pearl claims that when her feet hurt from dancing, Stasha's do too. Pearl and Stasha play a game where they sit back-to-back and draw in the dirt. They instinctively draw the same thing until suddenly Pearl's mind goes blank, she can no longer read Stasha's thoughts. A woman called Nurse Elma arrives to take the twins to Mengele's laboratories.





## Analysis

Pearl's note that Stasha left out an important detail from her description of their first night creates an element of unreliability to Stasha's narrative, but more importantly it shows the reader how the story will operate, switching perspectives, with one twin often filling in information the other was not aware of, omitted, or experienced differently.

When the twins are referred to as “Zugange” - new numbers – this is a new “classification” system, the veteran prisoners sneer at the newcomers who may still have a semblance of pride or dignity. The Zoo is further divided by its species of misfits, including the Lilliputs, Bruna the albino, Romanies, the twins and triplets, etc. Bruna's word for stealing is “organize,” which is a synonym for classify (36). The paths taken by Dr. Miri's sisters, Pearl explains, are the only possible destinations for beautiful women under Dr. Mengele's charge, even this is designated a form of classification – the “Ibi path” or the “Orli path,” named for the two sisters (27).

The twins also develop a system for coping with their ordeal moving forward. Stasha is in charge of the future, and Pearl the past, in her words, “the keeper of time and memory” (23). These distinctions are important for the characters' development going forward, they define the girls' separate paths.

When Stasha begs Pearl to practice her dancing, she claims it is vital for their future, that Pearl could be famous, and this could be a way to improve their lives. This is a fantasy she clings to many times throughout the novel, despite the fact that Taube comes along and tries to squash it right away. Most of Stasha's hope dissolves in the face of the atrocities at Auschwitz, but she clings to this one for as long as she believes Pearl to be alive. The author provides a hint at the full scope of the twins' connection when Pearl mentions that, while she is dancing, she knows Stasha's feet are hurting as much as her own. Then, more overtly, they play the game where they sit back-to-back and intuitively draw the same picture, though there is a moment where the connection fractures.

When Twins' Father tells Stasha and Pearl to remember the names of all of the children, the implication is that he means for them to remember the dead. One of the major themes of the novel concerns memory and bearing witness for the victims. Though the prisoners may not be able to do much to help each other, they can revere each other through memories, the stories of those who do not survive can be shared with others in the future. In this way, the victims were real, and they mattered.

The author exhibits her gift for descriptive language when Pearl claims the blonde, over-lipsticked Nurse Elma looks “like a drop of blood in the snow” (45).

## Discussion Question 1

What is so unique about Dr. Miri's position in the camp?



## Discussion Question 2

Why is it important to Twins' Father that the girls remember the names of the other children?

## Discussion Question 3

What does it mean when Pearl has to steal a glance at Stasha's drawing while they are playing their back-to-back game?

## Vocabulary

meager, exodus, sprightliness, enlivened, misgivings, resurrected, concave, patriarch, pompadoured, voile, impromptu, incandescent, proprietary, visage, subterfuge



# "Little Deathless"

## Summary

Stasha explains that at the laboratories, the prisoners of the Zoo are tested, photographed, x-rayed, and experimented upon. Dr. Miri is there, looking haggard, and so is Nurse Elma. Stasha tries to decide where the two of them would fall in the Classification of Living Things, making the former a starfish, the latter a crab. When a hail storm begins, Stasha ducks into a side room and discovers it has a wall covered with disembodied eyes that have been pinned in place. She recalls a Nazi guard coming to their home to talk to their mother about their father's disappearance and kicking her, and a time Zayde had come home with a bloody nose. Nurse Elma arrives and warns Stasha to tell no one about the eyes.

Stasha takes note of the other twins in the lab. It is rumored that one pair are not twins at all, that Twins' Father lies on the paperwork to protect children close in age who look alike. There is one boy who is alone, the implication being that his twin has recently died. He is visibly ill, blue in color, and still addressing comments to his brother who is no longer occupying the empty chair beside him. Stasha calls him "Patient Number Blue." Mengele whistles while working and tells the girls he is going to organize a concert at the camp. He also promises special treatment for their mother and Zayde. He asks Stasha about her father. She tells him that he left one night to help a neighbor's sick child and never returned, that his body had been found in a nearby river, and his death declared a suicide.

Stasha thinks of the eyes again as Mengele takes her into another room and injects her with something. Mengele tells her he has made her immortal, or "deathless" (65). Stasha says the injection has made her a true "mischling" - of two parts (67). One part is despair, the other is hope. She feels guilty that she will endure when so many will not. She asks Mengele if he plans to make Pearl immortal as well, and he says he does. In her mind, she vows to kill him when the moment is right.

## Analysis

Right before Stasha mentions Dr. Miri, she wonders about the specimens that the lab techs collect from the prisoners, do these inanimate bits of matter feel guilty for being a party to this experimentation? It is not their fault, she knows, because "the collaboration wasn't a willing one" (47). This is an oblique reference to Dr. Miri, a Jewish doctor, who should not feel guilty for assisting the Nazis in the lab (because she has no choice), but she does feel guilty, and this guilt is devastating. Always classifying, Stasha declares Nurse Elma a crab because she is all hard edges, whereas Dr. Miri is a starfish, hard in a different way, possessing resilience - "gifted at regeneration" (48).



The wall of eyes is a powerful reoccurring image in the novel. Its obvious purpose is to show the inhumanity of Mengele, that he would collect such things is barbaric, but metaphorically it works as a symbol of bearing witness. When Stasha remembers a Nazi coming to their home regarding their father's disappearance and kicking their mother, she says she had tried to look away, but Pearl made her watch. If nothing else, the powerless can be the witness of another's pain, the survivors must tell the victims' stories. Stasha says she will never forget the stare of the wall of eyes, that it would haunt her forever.

Mengele is habitual whistler, but Stasha notes that his whistle is monotone, “a hollowed thing that couldn't know a feeling” (57). Music is symbolic of beauty in the novel, something that can lift the spirit of mankind in the worst of circumstances, so it is a pointed comment on Mengele's lack of humanity that he tries to imitate it, but fails.

The author makes exceptional use of simile when Stasha thinks of her “Papa” and declares the two syllables of that word, “like a footstep that begins on a stair and ends in the sand” (59).

Halves and doubles are a reoccurring theme in the novel, shown here in Stasha's reinterpretation of the word “mischling” (67). Mengele has divided her – creating a half-despairing, half-hopeful hybrid, but he has also split her from Pearl, who has not been given the injection yet. The hopeful half of her is buoyed by the strength she feels bubbling up, the will to kill Mengele. Stasha imagines she can feel this process happening inside of her, her cells “branch and unfurl in their deathlessness, like blooms” (69) - a reference to the poppy the girls' mother had painted on the wall of the cattle car, symbolic of death.

## Discussion Question 1

What animal does Stasha compare Dr. Miri to and why?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Stasha feel guilty after the injection?

## Discussion Question 3

How does Stasha reinterpret the connotation of “mischling”?

## Vocabulary

resuscitating, ocher, periphery, iota, brevity, monotone, ferret, singularity, bovine, infernal, unfettered, blasphemous, aloof, sham, adept, inferior, partitioned



# “War Materials, Urgent,” “The Red Clouds”

## Summary

Pearl notes Stasha's growing distance. She is always taking notes in her “medical diary” and examining Patient Number Blue (70). Stasha confesses her immortality guilt, but Pearl thinks she is just making things up. She does, however, believe in her sister's sincerity in regards to killing Mengele and freeing the Zoo, and it scares her.

Patient Number Blue explains that he must persevere and have a life worthy of his dead brother's sacrifice. He and Stasha bond over their mutual plans to kill Mengele. Pearl reflects on the fact that Patient Number Blue's time is limited, once a twin is no longer a twin, he ceases to be useful for Mengele's experiments.

Back at the lab, the twins are separated, and Pearl knows that they are pouring scalding water into Stasha's ear in the other room because she can feel it. While this is happening, Pearl looks out the window and sees some guards pushing a piano through the courtyard, which she is convinced is their piano from home.

Pearl sneaks a look at Stasha's medical book and finds notes about Mengele. She tells Stasha to stop pretending she could do anything about Mengele, and also to stop pretending that Zayde and their mother are alive and well. Stasha says she is certain they are alive and transmits the image of a poppy into Pearl's mind with her own. Stasha claims that if anything happened to any one of them, she would see a whole field of poppies instead of just one. She asks Pearl if she is practicing her dancing and Pearl says yes, though the truth is that when she tried, she had to stop because she coughed up blood.

In Chapter 5, a now partially-deaf Stasha attends a soccer game that pits guards against prisoners with Patient Number Blue, while Pearl is taken to Mengele's lab. Patient gives Stasha an ear horn that Mengele's messenger Peter appropriated from “Canada” (88). Meanwhile, Patient and Stasha play the common children's game of identifying shapes in the clouds, but Patient is unable to maintain the illusion, claiming all of the clouds look like Nazis. A guard kicks a loaf of bread out onto the field. Suddenly, angry about the guards winning the match, Patient suffers a seizure. When the goalie for the prisoners' team runs over to help him, he is shot in the stomach by a guard, and then again in the back as he tries to crawl away. Patient is whisked away by Mengele.

## Analysis

Pearl says Stasha's medical study is particularly concerned with the paired parts of the body, a nod to the theme of doubles and halves. When Pearl feels Stasha's pain from



her scalded ear, it serves as a reminder that the twins can feel each other's pain – they are doubles of each other and/or halves of one whole being. Stasha's transmission of the poppy into Pearl's mind is another indication of this, as well as further foreshadowing of their coming separation. Pearl notes that it would take a “doubled” miracle for her to survive Mengele's experiments, and Stasha says she hears an echo as a result of the ear experiment – a doubling of sound.

The author frequently injects moments of humor into the narrative. Patient Number Blue's life plan, in honor of his brother, includes being able to “satisfy a Russian woman,” and if she is not satisfied, to be given a second chance (74).

The author also skillfully creates a darkly ironic scene at the soccer match. The guards' families are visiting to watch, eating picnic lunches and taking photographs of the “curiosities” of Auschwitz like they are at a literal zoo (89). Stasha and Patient look at the clouds. It could be any ordinary day at the park except that half the people there are starving, and being held against their will. When the guard kicks the bread onto the field, Stasha notices that even the birds will not go near it, an indication that something very unnatural is going on here. When the goalie is shot, the blood creates a “cloud” on his uniform, a perversion of the children's game of identifying the shapes in the clouds (a game which is similar in function and form to the Classification of Living Things).

It is important to note that Patient and Stasha are growing closer. By indulging her fantasy for killing Mengele, a fantasy he shares, he provides her with something Pearl cannot, or will not. Later, when the twins have been separated, Patient (then called Feliks) will be a vital support system for Stasha.

## Discussion Question 1

What do Stasha and Patient Number Blue have in common?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does the author choose the image of a “red cloud” for the dying goalie's blood?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Patient see only Nazis in the shapes of the clouds?

## Vocabulary

listless, tutelage, morbid, forays, redundant, nascent, insignia, figment, enraptured, enlivened, dissipate, beleaguered



# "Messengers"

## Summary

It is October 1944, and Russian planes are flying over Auschwitz. Pearl describes Stasha's increasingly withdrawn behavior, sitting on the infirmary steps waiting for news of Patient. Pearl, believing herself gravely ill as a result of Mengele's experiments, feels she must prepare Stasha for her inevitable death. She goes to meet Peter, Mengele's "Aryan"-looking teenage messenger, and asks him to get her something (96). He has a reputation for being able to find anything in camp. She finds him handsome and thinks about touching the scar on his ear, the remnant of a run-in with a guard. Pearl recalls the story of a pair of lovers, Rozamund and Luca, who had been shot and killed while trying to escape. Despite this, she kisses Peter and tells him she loves him, and they dance to the sound of the orchestra rehearsing in the distance. He does not believe she loves him, but he agrees to get her what she asked for – a piano key.

When Pearl gives her the piano key, Stasha understands that it is meant as a "goodbye" and she is furious. She sobs and tries to hold onto Pearl, but Pearl pushes her away, as she is trying to ready her sister for being on her own. Stasha falls to the ground and refuses to get up. Pearl tells her that a part of her will always with her, which is no consolation to Stasha.

## Analysis

The author provides another touch of dark humor, noting Stasha's withdrawn disinterest in playing any of the children's usual games like "Tickle the Corpse," or starring in a "Kill Hitler play" (95). Pearl compliments Stasha's usual Hitler impression for being "less dependent on mustache than most" (95).

We get an excellent picture of Peter in just a few pages. We learn Mengele likes him for his "Aryan good looks" (96), that he is resourceful, takes care with his appearance, and does push-ups and other exercises in the camp, an absurd indication of his pride. He does not mind that he was whipped by a guard because Mengele had the guard punished for hurting him. Peter would, in fact, be pleased to have this happen again if it meant more punishments – he has a deep-seated need for justice. When Pearl says she loves him, he is savvy enough to know this for what it is, she is trying to experience romantic attachment while she can, because she does not think she will live long enough for another opportunity.

During Pearl and Peter's meeting, they can hear the orchestra practicing. Music is used throughout the novel as a symbol of the Nazis subversion of beauty – they play it to keep the prisoners docile and productive, so the prisoners come to associate the sound of music with their captivity. But the beauty of music, like the human spirit, cannot be entirely subverted. Pearl and Peter have a moment of serenity while they are dancing,



and Pearl is glad to have the reminder of something that made her happy in the past (music and dancing). The author expresses this rather poetically, “Night—it had forgotten that it shouldn’t be beautiful in Auschwitz” (106). When Pearl recalls the story of Rozamund and Luca, she is reminding herself not to get too attached to Peter, that the consequences could be disastrous.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why does Pearl push Stasha away when she is crying?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What is significant about the story of the lovers, Rozamund and Luca?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why is Peter proud of having been whipped by the guard?

## **Vocabulary**

matriarchy, traversing, illusory, initiation, anticipatory





# "Come Make Me Happy," "She Said She Would Never Leave Me But"

## Summary

Stasha is playing cards with Bruna, who has colored her white hair with coal to look less conspicuous. When Bruna accuses her of cheating, Stasha thinks she is talking about her immortality, her cheating of death. She tells Bruna that she misses Patient, and Bruna admits that she does too, and then she gives Stasha a sweater she stole.

There is to be a concert by the women's orchestra, and Pearl is cleaning up the younger girls and fixing their hair because she is worried there will be a selection (this is the Nazis' term for taking the ill and injured prisoners to the crematorium). Stasha can sense Pearl's ongoing pain, but cannot navigate it exactly as she could have once done, which she finds troubling. She thinks perhaps someone will be at the concert who could take Pearl away to America to star in the movies.

At the concert, the musicians look as distraught as everyone else. Stasha remembers Anika the pianist's earlier attempt to throw herself into the electric fence out of grief over her son, and her friends' insistence that she must carry on. Mengele arrives with Nurse Elma. Anika suddenly cries out. She has noticed the missing key on the piano, which is in Stasha's pocket. The cruel guard Taube tells her to play anyway, and that it better sound perfect. She tries, but when she makes a mistake, Taube takes off his belt to whip her, and Stasha screams. Mengele tells Taube to leave the pianist alone because he is "upsetting the children" (131). He asks the children to sing for him, and they do.

The twins remember their father's disappearance, how their mother's only comfort was music. They finish each others' sentences while they have this conversation, which has not happened in a while. The music continues, and Stasha fantasizes about the future, about Pearl starring in a movie about their experience at the camp. Suddenly, she has a fainting spell. When she wakes, Pearl is gone, only her muddy shoe prints remain, "the marks of a stolen person" (135).

Chapter 8 is simply a drawing of a field of poppies, titled "She Said She Would Never Leave Me But" (137).

## Analysis

Stasha's conversation with Bruna allows for an enlightening moment of characterization. Bruna pretends that she is very tough, but she is shown here in a moment of tenderness, missing Patient and giving Stasha a sweater as an act of comfort.

Stasha's "mischling" hope is waning, being snuffed out by the overwhelming sensation of Pearl's pain, and her own awareness that there is nothing she can do to save her



sister. Describing a moment of despair, she says, "I sat watching the snow fall, watched it erase me. Surely my captives envied the snow this talent" (119). This is a great use of figurative language, as Stasha is covered with snow, she becomes part of the landscape and she is metaphorically excised, just as the Nazis would prefer the Jews to be excised.

Stasha is also moved by the level of distress displayed by the orchestra. This is another instance where the Nazis are destroying the beauty of music. By forcing the musicians to play, threatening them with bodily harm if they err, they have sucked any potential joy out of the event for everyone but themselves. It is a similar scene to that of the soccer game, a deranged gesture towards entertainment that is really just an exercise in sadism. As she listens, Stasha picks up on a "hidden meaning, a doubled message about beauty and its opposite" - the beauty is still there, underneath the surface (125). She thinks that perhaps "beauty might see us past the gates" (130) of Auschwitz, a succinct summation of one of the novel's major themes. Note also that the word "doubled" appears in this statement, a gesture toward the theme of halves and doubles.

The theme of bearing witness is reiterated when Stasha recalls Anika the pianist's suicidal grief. Her friends convinced her to go on living by telling her she must bear witness to the tragedy of what was done to her son. This is similar to the way Patient feels about the need to carry on in memory of his brother.

As if the entire concert were not artifice enough, there is a sick irony to Mengele telling Taube to release the pianist because he is "upsetting the children" (131), seeing as how Mengele quite regularly tortures and murders the children in his care. There is also a parallel between this scene and the soccer match – both ended with someone losing consciousness, as if the horror of unfolding events was too much to bear. The twins are once more able to finish each others' sentence, an indication that, though their bond is frayed, it is not broken. It is stronger when they are thinking of the past, and of their mother. When Pearl disappears, the drawing of the field of poppies represents Stasha's worst nightmare coming true, part of her instantly believes that Pearl is dead, as she said in Chapter 4 that she would know something terrible had happened if she saw this image.

## Discussion Question 1

What does the scene at the concert have in common with the soccer match scene?

## Discussion Question 2

Why is Stasha so distraught about the treatment of the pianist?

## Discussion Question 3

How does music mean different things to different people in the book so far?



## Vocabulary

pirouettes, thwarting, epiphany, chortle, abasement, finagle, voluminously, solidified, luminescence, resplendent, pillage, funereal, agape, impromptu, maestro, crescendoed, chastened, steadfast



# "Million After Million"

## Summary

After Pearl's disappearance, a lice-ridden Stasha is living in a sauerkraut barrel, peering at the world through a peephole. She scratches notes to Pearl on the interior of the barrel with her claw-like fingernails. Peter tries to get her to eat, asking her if she wants to die, but Stasha believes she cannot die. In Mengele's lab, Stasha notices signs of disarray. Mengele himself has mud on his shoes and he is drinking heavily. Bruna tells her that the Russian planes have returned. Stasha considers the possibility that Mengele will leave and take all of their specimens with him, and how awful it is that a part of her would be with him, against her will.

The next day, Peter comes back, pushing a wheelbarrow with a blanketed figure inside. Stasha thinks it is Pearl, but it is actually Patient, looking gaunt and toothless. She is disappointed, and asks if he saw Pearl in the infirmary, but he had not. He wishes to be called "Feliks" now, which is not his real name but his brother's. She asks why he supposes Mengele has allowed him to live for so long after his brother died. He has another abnormality, which he shows her, the stub of a tail.

Nurse Elma brings Stasha to have her portrait painted for Mengele. Stasha looks out the window and wishes she could see birds, but there are none. Nurse Elma is reading a celebrity magazine, and Stasha briefly fantasizes about Pearl becoming a movie star again. When Nurse Elma leaves the room, the portrait painter reveals herself to be Pearl and Stasha's mother. Stasha can tell just by looking at her mother that Zayde is dead and she tells her about seeing the field of poppies and her concern that Pearl is dead too. Her mother insists this cannot be true because she has been painting portraits in pairs.

Days pass as Stasha and Feliks continue to plan for Mengele's murder. One day she is sitting outside the infirmary when Mengele approaches in a car. He tells her to get in and they drive around while he tells a disturbing story about torturing a pregnant woman. He says they will look for Pearl, though Stasha feels certain by now that she is dead. Mengele makes a negative comment about Stasha's brown eyes. Suddenly she sees a truck with bodies stacked in the back of it, and one of them is her mother. She is about to stab Mengele in the back with her bread knife when he turns, grabs her face, and drops something into her eye, saying "it will be blue by tomorrow" (175). She begins to lose her sight.

Shortly thereafter, Mengele flees Auschwitz. Stasha continues to search for Pearl in the infirmary. She carves "Dear Pearl" into the wall (178). There is smoke and gunfire in the distance, she thinks these phenomena are a message from her mother and Zade, but actually the Russians are approaching. The SS guards set fires, burn evidence, and murder people haphazardly. Stasha finds Bruna and Feliks, the latter of whom is wearing a bear fur coat, pillaged from Canada. Bruna gives Stasha a coat of her own –



a jackal fur. Bruna tells Stasha and Feliks to go hide in the barracks, but Feliks does not want to leave her. He makes her promise that they will rendezvous in the future at a museum, though it is not specified where or when. Stasha is about to ask for clarification when Taube the guard appears behind Bruna and snaps her neck. Taube corrals the children with the other prisoners, marching them out of Auschwitz. Feliks pulls a distraught and half-blind Stasha on a blanket behind him like a sled as guards shoot anyone who falls behind. When Feliks can go no further, they both collapse in the snow and are left for dead. Feliks wonders if they are in heaven and comments that people in the future will never believe all that they have endured. Stasha assures him they are not in heaven, because his brother is not there.

## Analysis

“Living Things” continue to serve symbolic purposes in the novel, Stasha notes that her lice have an attraction to Nurse Elma, the implication being that Nurse Elma is also a scourge. Stasha has gone feral with the loss of Pearl, she is snarling and growing out her fingernails like claws, a nod to the “jackal” she will become by the end of the chapter. Stasha’s wish to see a bird on the windowsill foreshadows an image from the next chapter, when Pearl sees this very thing in the laboratory. Stasha mentions that “animal life had become increasingly rare at Auschwitz” (155), a statement that brings to mind the birds who would not eat the bread kicked about the soccer field by the guards. What is happening there is so unnatural, no living thing wants anything to do with it.

Stasha's survivor's guilt, which is an extension of her belief in her own immortality, has been exacerbated by the loss of her twin. She knows it is her duty to carry on and be a witness for the victims, and she finds this a terrible burden. In the car, Mengele reminds Stasha of a horrible incident she had witnessed in which he cut the baby from a woman's womb and then drowned it in front of her. She says, “my memory of this—I did not want it” (167).

After seeing her mother's body, Stasha feels like “a divided person” (173) – another reference to doubles and halves, and a precursor to what Pearl will say in Chapter 16 about Mengele wanting to tear people apart because he is incapable of being bonded to another person himself. Stasha must also be the witness of Bruna's death, an image that we are told reappears in her mind throughout her life. When they fall behind on the death march, Feliks' remarks about people not believing the events at Auschwitz really occurred is a pointed comment about Holocaust deniers and an important reminder of the critical role of the witness.

When Stasha worries about Mengele taking the specimens with him, what she is really worried about is that a piece of HIM will always be with HER metaphorically, that she will never be able to forget or move on, especially if she is unable to get the justice she so desperately wants.

Stasha's fixation on Pearl's movie star destiny is consistent with the twins' original division of duties – Stasha is in charge of the future. As the chapter closes she laments



the difficulty of this assignment, wishing she had not put Pearl in charge of the past because she “cannot endure this future” (189).

The twins' mother insists that Pearl cannot be dead because she has been painting only pairs of portraits. This shows that their mother also believes in the magical relationship of twins/doubles that is so prevalent in the novel. She thinks that if she paints in pairs, she is somehow protecting her daughters.

As Auschwitz burns, Stasha notes that the orchestra room is on fire, the flames are “eating all the instruments” (180) – a symbolically fitting end to the Nazis perversion of the beauty of music.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Stasha care about where the specimens from the lab end up?

## Discussion Question 2

How has Stasha and Pearl's mother been trying to protect them, and what does this say about her character?

## Discussion Question 3

What does Stasha mean when she says she wishes she had not put Pearl in charge of the past?

## Vocabulary

temerity, louse, epistolary, poultices, vestige, acrid, sojourn, impostor, rapture, erasure, subterfuge, lamentation, contraband, harried, magisterially, vicinity, sundered, pyres, tundra



# “The Keeper of Time and Memory,” “Bear and Jackal,” “My Other Birth”

## Summary

The novel returns to Pearl's perspective, but she is vastly altered. She is in a cage in Mengele's lab. She does not remember who she is, but she heard the sounds of Auschwitz being liberated, and then the voices of her mother and Zayde telling her to play the Classification of Living Things game and take on the qualities of different animals, including an ant and a chimp, which she attempts to do. She sees a carrier pigeon outside on the windowsill, an animal she relates to because of its prior captivity.

In Chapter 11, Stasha and Feliks are making their way through a forest. They continue to fantasize about killing Mengele. Feliks claims to have heard Mengele say something about the Warsaw Zoo, so they decide to make that their destination.

Chapter 12 begins with Pearl reflecting on her captivity. Someone in a nearby cage would frequently recite poetry. She has the impression that her feet and ankles are broken. Then the Russians come, shining flashlights. When they see her, they assume that she is dead, but she is able to make a sound, and they quickly rescue her from the cage. One of the soldiers is weeping as he holds her and she tries to lick his tears away. She does not remember her sister, but she knows that something is missing.

## Analysis

The symbolism of the Classification of Living Things game returns, as Pearl imagines her mother and Zayde trying to give her strength. When the pigeon alights on the window, Zayde tells her that pigeons have good memories, which is a perfect choice for Pearl, who was put in charge of the past in the original assignment of duties between her and Stasha in Chapter 2.

Meanwhile, in the next chapter, Feliks must become the “fearsome” bear, and Stasha the “clever, stealthy” jackal in order to survive, their identities based on the fur coats they are wearing (196, 197).

Stasha thinks that the Warsaw Zoo will be an ideal place to kill Mengele because the animals will “rejoice” at the “triumph of Bear and Jackal” (203). The constant planning for Mengele's demise serves a similar purpose to the fur coats, both allow for the tough and confident posturing Stasha and Feliks need to keep up in order to go on. In the absence of any real plan or destination after Auschwitz, the idea of killing Mengele keeps them moving forward, rather than collapsing into their grief.

Pearl's rescue by the Russians is described in terms of a rebirth, she is a new person, no longer Pearl, but unsure of what she is exactly. She knows that something is missing,



something big and important, “the equal of a whole other person” (208). As the twins are metaphorically two halves of a whole, their bond can never be broken, Pearl can still sense her sister, even if it is only a perceived absence.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What does the pigeon that lands on the windowsill in the laboratory symbolize?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What is the significance of the title of Chapter 12, “My Other Birth”?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why are Feliks and Stasha fixated on killing Mengele to the exclusion of all other future plans?

## **Vocabulary**

daven, penitent, fissured, villainy, mimicry, grotesque





# “The Straw Temple,” The Russians Make a Movie,” “Our Marching Steps Will Thunder”

## Summary

As Feliks and Stasha continue to make their way through the countryside, they happen upon a haystack. They climb inside only to find it is already occupied by the Rabinowitzes, the “Lilliputs” from Mengele's Zoo. The Rabinowitzes are on their way to Prague, and they tell Stasha and Feliks they must leave, there is not enough room in the haystack for everyone to hide. Stasha asks Mirko Rabinowitz if he saw Pearl before they fled Auschwitz. He says no, and then recites some poetry by Ovid. He later admits he did think he heard Pearl's voice once, while he was caged in a laboratory. He writes down what he thought he heard her say, the words “Tell my sister that I” (220). Stasha keeps the note with these words written on it, and she is ready to set out again in search of Mengele.

Chapter 14 shifts to Pearl's perspective as she tries to recover from the injuries inflicted in Mengele's lab. The Russians are making a film of the prisoners they have just liberated from Auschwitz. Observing many sets of twins cements the notion in Pearl's mind that she is incomplete. She finds the “Dear Pearl” note that Stasha scratched into the infirmary wall. Miri (who no longer wishes to be called “Doctor” because of the connotations of this place), Twins' Father, Pearl, Peter, and the other children depart Auschwitz, with Pearl riding in a wheelbarrow. Pearl still cannot quite remember who her companions are. Peter turns back to throw a stone at the camp's gate.

In Chapter 15, Stasha and Feliks have just been kicked out of a train at the station in Kolo. There are names written on the walls, those of survivors seeking their loved ones. They continue on foot, seeking shelter for the night in a barn. In the morning, an old woman wakes them. She tells them that her own children have gone missing and Stasha offers to help her find them, in exchange for food and shelter. Inside her cottage, Stasha cannot eat, and suddenly gets sick all over the table. The old woman is furious, and begins beating Stasha and Feliks with a broom. There is a knock at the door – two Nazis are there, a man and a woman. Their names are Heinrich and Fritz. The old woman explains that she was just about to kill these Jewish children, as she has killed many more before. The “Nazis” reveal themselves to be Jewish resistance operatives in disguise, and shoot the old woman. They show Feliks and Stasha how to shoot, and leave them with a gun and a cyanide pill. Feliks and Stasha burn the woman's cottage down and flee with a horse they find in the barn.



## Analysis

As Feliks argues with the Rabinowitzes over occupancy of the haystack, Stasha remarks that he is truly becoming the bear represented by his pelt “in the tradition of the Classification of Living Things” (212), which gives her something safe and familiar to cling to while she is frightened.

When Mirko admits that he thinks he heard Pearl, we know he is correct because of the author's shifts in point-of-view. In Chapter 12, Pearl recalls hearing someone in a nearby cage reciting poetry, as Mirko has just done for Stasha and Feliks. Mirko also declares that when the Rabinowitzes get to Prague, he'll forget all of the horrible things that happened to him, “You will be amazed, all of you, how much I won't remember!” (219). This represents an alternative path to that of the witnesses, those who keep the dead alive within their memories, and, given what the victims have gone through, it is no less valid. Similarly, when Pearl's group leaves Auschwitz, Twins' Father tells Peter to hurry, and “not to waste another minute looking back,” the Nazis have already robbed them of so much time (229).

When the Russians make their movie, Pearl is fascinated by the camera, a tool employed to facilitate witnessing – a major theme in the novel. There is an element of irony to the filming, Stasha has fantasized about Pearl starring in movies, and the fantasy has come true, in a way she could not have predicted. As Pearl describes the film, she notes the appearance of a set of twins named Eva and Miriam Mozes. These real life twins were the author's inspiration for the Pearl and Stasha, as noted in her acknowledgments.

At the train station, Stasha notices the wall of names, a parallel to the previous chapter when Pearl had discovered the message carved into the wall of the infirmary. Stasha says she feels like “a broken half afloat in a great nowhere” without Pearl, mirroring her description of the twins in the womb from the beginning of the book, “we were afloat in amniotic snowfall,” (231, 3).

When Feliks and Stasha leave the cabin burning with the old woman's body inside, it is noted that they “fled without looking back” (244). She does not deserve to have her final destruction witnessed, as the victims of the Holocaust do.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of Pearl starring in the Russians' film of the survivors?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Mirko Rabinowitz vow to forget what has happened to him?



## Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of Mirko's poetry recitation?

## Vocabulary

azure, empathy, periphery, amorphous, stoically, discordant, valiance, atmospheric, acquiescent, engulfed, grandeur, bucolic, eradications, remediable, boutonniere, ampule, cyanide, bereft



# “Our Migration,” “The Ruins Watch Over Us,” “Partings”

## Summary

Pearl, Miri, Twins' Father, and the others are en route to Krakow. Peter and Miri try to explain things to Pearl that she has forgotten, but they are hesitant to give her the whole story of what has happened to her. They come across a mutilated body in the road, and they sleep in an empty tomb. Next, they encounter a Russian soldier in the road, shouting “Pigs!” at them, which they mistake for an epithet, but there are actually two wild hogs behind them (254). The Russian shoots the pigs and they eat them, having received permission from a farmer to stay in his barn. The meat makes a boy named David Herschlag very ill, and he dies the following day. The farmer's wife sprinkles poppy seeds over his grave. Twins' Father takes it very hard, and wishes he himself had died back at the camp, rather than having to suffer through watching his charges die. It is mentioned that he saved 19 children at Auschwitz by falsely declaring them twins.

In Chapter 17, Feliks and Stasha go through Posnan on their way to Warsaw. Thinking of Bruna's final moments, they enter the crumbling ruins of a museum. They pick their way through the artifacts, and then ride off on their horse, with Stasha repeating her vow for vengeance.

In Chapter 18, Pearl and the others arrive in Krakow and meet Jakub, a Jewish resistance leader who sets them up in an abandoned house next to his own. Pearl overhears Jakub and Twins' Father talking about Miri, who is clearly suffering, and giving the children over to the Red Cross. In the house, Pearl sees an empty birdcage and conceives of her need for crutches so she can move about. Pearl and Miri go to the train station and look for Miri's sister's name on the wall of survivors, and then to the local brothel. At the brothel, a surly teenager knows Miri from Auschwitz and blames her for helping Mengele. The brothel owner has not seen Miri's sister, but she has a pair of crutches, which she gives to Pearl. She asks if Pearl or Miri saw her nieces, and Pearl lies to her, inventing a story about how these nieces died executing a heroic plan to kill Mengele.

As she witnesses Miri increasingly torn apart by guilt, Pearl vows to devote herself to forgiving her tormentors. The children are to go to the Red Cross, except for Peter who is going to live with a family friend. Pearl remarks that she would see him many years later, at the trial of Nurse Elma, where she speaks the names of the victims of Auschwitz that Twins' Father had asked her to remember and offers Nurse Elma forgiveness.



## Analysis

The symbolic poppy makes its way back into the novel with David's death. When the farmer's wife throws poppy seeds onto the grave, she remarks that it is "To feed the dead that come back disguised as birds" (259).

When Pearl and the others see the dead body in the road, she demands to be taken nearer so that she can determine for herself that the dead person is not her "Someone," which is what she calls the sister she cannot remember (252). When she is brought to the body, she refuses to look away – Pearl is in charge of the past, the "Keeper of Time and Memory" and it is her duty to witness everything (193). After they eat the pig meat, she is haunted by the panicked look she saw in the animals' eyes right before they were killed, a look she knows well from Auschwitz, and she remarks, "I did not want to have a memory at all, not then" (255).

After David's death, Pearl is enlivened by a new mission, she wants to forgive. This is in direct contrast to Stasha's mission of revenge. She later remarks on the success of this mission when she saw Nurse Elma in prison years later and was able to forgive her.

When Pearl sees the bird cage in the house in Krakow, she wishes to be freed from the metaphorical cage of her handicap. This is similar to the moment in the lab when she saw the pigeon on the windowsill and it bolstered her resolve to survive and escape her confinement. The crutches become a symbol of freedom for Pearl. If she can become mobile, she can have a future, and perhaps save Miri from her worrisome mental state.

The details of Pearl's story about the brothel owner's nieces, that they lulled him into a false sense of security, and stabbed him with their bread knives inside his car, all match up with exactly what Stasha has done or thought of doing, though Pearl does not know this. She knows only that it is her bond with her "Someone" that has brought this story to her.

### Discussion Question 1

How is Pearl's mission different from Stasha's at this point in the novel?

### Discussion Question 2

What is happening to Miri? Why is Pearl so desperate to stay with her?

### Discussion Question 3

What do the crutches symbolize for Pearl?

## Vocabulary

tumult, snippet, indecipherable, desecrating, finery, fissure, fallow, statuary, mercenary, pilfered, hussars, tipple, askance, jovially, dubious, abate, environs, lout, kibbutz



# “The Sacred Curtain,” “The Flights”

## Summary

Feliks and Stasha are in Wieliczka, near Krakow. They take shelter overnight in a synagogue. Stasha lies awake, staring at the stars. In the morning, they discover their horse is missing. They follow a trail of blood into a salt mine, where a group of Nazi soldiers are eating the horse. Stasha angrily confronts them. When the Nazis take their coats and weapons away, Stasha tries to negotiate, if they are released without harm, she will tell them where to find Josef Mengele, they can take him prisoner and trade him to the Allies to get leniency for themselves. When the Nazis point a gun at them, Stasha steps in front of Feliks. There is a scuffle and Feliks is shot in the shoulder. They escape and see parachutists dropping from the sky.

Meanwhile, as Chapter 20 begins, Pearl sees the parachutists as well, and a wedding taking place in the street. Miri is in the hospital suffering from a nervous breakdown. Pearl eavesdrops as she discusses her past with Jakub. In addition to her sisters, she had lost a husband as well, and two children. She recalls performing clandestine abortions on women in Auschwitz to save them the pain of bearing more children for the Nazis to murder. Pearl also understands, finding herself unable to relax, even in the safe confines of the hospital.

The Red Cross are planning to smuggle the children into Palestine in crates. When they are prepared to leave, Miri gives Pearl a gift, a pair of mismatched tap shoes, and a note containing every detail she can remember about Stasha. Pearl recalls meeting Miri in America a decade later, when she was undergoing medical tests and Miri was a practicing OB-GYN.

While the children's transport is en route, it is hijacked by Nazi deserters. Jakub is killed, but Pearl is prepared to make an escape.

## Analysis

Stasha is still counting on the immortality given to her by Mengele, but when the Nazis in the salt mine take their bear and jackal coats, she feels the loss of the protective symbols, lamenting, “The bravado on loan from these predators—now it was gone” (291).

When Pearl witnesses the wedding procession in Krakow, she sees a bride walking down the street, her dress fashioned out of a parachute. She is shocked that anything as celebratory as a wedding could occur at a time like this. It is a moment for appreciating the endurance of the human spirit. People are carrying on, repurposing a war time tool, the parachute, into a symbol of lasting love.



As Miri recounts those she has lost, Jakub understands, and hits directly upon the worst aspect of her suffering, one he can relate to – when one is in the business of saving lives, choices must be made about who is saved and who is not. This is the deep trauma of survivor's guilt, where the efforts one has made seem never to be enough. Pearl is undergoing her own post-traumatic symptoms as she can not enjoy the comforts of the hospital, the warmth, food, etc., because she knows how swiftly it could all be taken away from her. She sums these feelings up astutely, “What work there was, I thought, in being a real person after death” (301).

Stasha continues to struggle with being in charge of the future in the twins' delegation of duties from Chapter 2. Lying awake at night, she counts the stars, and assigns them futures. She then takes them away, because it is not fair for stars to have futures if Pearl does not.

## Discussion Question 1

Why is Stasha so upset about the loss of the bear and jackal coats?

## Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of the wedding Pearl and Miri witness in Krakow?

## Discussion Question 3

What does Jakub say is the downside to saving others' lives?

## Vocabulary

circuitous, balsam, protrusions, lattice, throes, bravado, ambiguity, specters, stupor, accursed, rucked, grotesque, haven, memoriam, waylaid





# “Not the End,” “Never the End”

## Summary

Feliks and Stasha arrive in Warsaw, and the city is in ruins, but people are making repairs. The Warsaw Zoo is abandoned of animals and Mengele is, of course, not there. Stasha finds a jar in the dirt filled with names of children who have been rescued by the Jewish Resistance. Feliks tells Stasha that she is not immortal, that this was a lie Mengele told all of the children. He is surprised that she had actually believed it.

They find a house Feliks used to live in with his family, and inside is a pregnant Roma woman in the throes of labor. She is in distress and Stasha must cut her open to get the baby out. Stasha plans to take the baby to the orphanage and then end her own life with the cyanide pill, hoping to be reunited with Pearl in death. Instead she bumps into a man holding a newspaper. The man is her father, and the paper bears a photograph of Pearl.

Her father had not committed suicide, he had been taken to Dachau as a member of the Jewish resistance. He tells her a story about being marched through the countryside by the Nazis. A Jewish man in disguise threw potatoes at him and the other prisoners, pretending to jeer at them, but really providing them with vital sustenance. They vow to find Pearl. Stasha asks her father to bury the cyanide pill so she will not be tempted by it. Time passes, and one day, Pearl simply shows up, and there is a joyous reunion. The girls sit back to back to play the drawing game mentioned in Chapter 2.

In Chapter 22, we are told that they draw poppies, a train, a piano, and a horse, (but not Mengele) and Stasha announces that she is prepared to “try again” to live in the world (339).

## Analysis

The state of the city of Warsaw is symbolic of the state of the survivors, battered down and in ruins, but the citizens are all pitching in to rebuild and repair, which is what Feliks and Stasha (and all the others) must do to their own shattered lives. The Zoo is in a similar state of destruction, and it is therefore a fitting place for Stasha's fantasies to die – Mengele is not there, and she is not immortal after all. Though performing the Cesarean on the Roma woman takes Stasha back to the horrors of Mengele's lab, the arrival of the baby represents the birth of new beginnings. The baby could have a life that would “know nothing of the suffering” the Holocaust victims endured (322). Furthermore, when Stasha is reunited with her father she declares herself “newly born” (326).

The story Stasha's father tells her about the prisoner march is meant to help her put her belief in her immortality into perspective. Just as the potatoes were disguised as a curse, Stasha took up the so-called curse bestowed upon her by Mengele and used it to



persevere. Her belief that she could not die gave her the courage to get through the dangers she encountered on her journey with Feliks.

When Stasha and Pearl are reunited, Stasha asks the reader, “Have you ever seen the best part of yourself stationed at a measurable distance?” (338). This language is an echo of a similar question posed on the first page, which Stasha invoked to describe her and Pearl's birth, “Have you ever had to live with the best part of yourself adrift, stationed at some unknowable distance?” (3). This is an indication that the novel has come full circle, and harmony has been restored. Finally, when the girls are drawing the various objects that symbolize their journeys, Pearl notes that they do not draw anything representing Mengele or the torture they have endured. This is because he has no power over them anymore, and they must leave the past behind in order to make the best of the future.

## Discussion Question 1

Why is it significant for her character development that Stasha learns the truth about her immortality at this point in the novel?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Stasha's father tell her about the man throwing potatoes at him?

## Discussion Question 3

What is significant about Pearl noting that she and Stasha did not draw a needle, or anything related to Mengele?

## Vocabulary

meek, nonchalant, pantomimed, cormorants, aviary, camouflage, indigent, crockery, tulle, prostrate, bereft, capricious, bleat, gamboled



# Characters

## Pearl Zamorski

Pearl is one of the two twin narrators, she is the “Keeper of Time and Memory,” in charge of “the sad, the past, the good” in the twins' delegation of duties (193, 21). Pearl is a good dancer, and Stasha hopes that she will be in American movies one day. While in Auschwitz, Pearl is convinced that she is dying from the experiments Mengele is performing on her, and she tries to prepare Stasha for her death by giving her the piano key as a memento.

Peal is sentimental, but realistic. She kisses Peter Abraham and tells him that she loves him because she does not expect to live long enough to have any genuine romantic relationships. During the concert at Auschwitz, she is abducted and taken to a lab, where she is tortured and experimented on, and loses her memory. She is rescued by Russian soldiers when Auschwitz is liberated.

After Auschwitz, Pearl is seeking her sister, though she does not quite remember her, and trying to help Dr. Miri recover from her feelings of guilt. She is selfless and caring, she does not want to go with the Red Cross because she thinks that Dr. Miri needs her. Pearl is more hopeful than Stasha; she is not driven by vengeance, but by forgiveness.

## Stasha Zamorski

Stasha is Pearl's twin, and one of the two narrators of Mischling. In the twins' delegation of duties, Stasha is in charge of “the funny, the future, the bad” (21). She would have preferred not to be in charge of the future, and asks Pearl to take this duty from her, but Pearl declines. Stuck with her responsibility for the future, Stasha fantasizes about the prospect of Pearl becoming a famous movie star one day, and the whole family reuniting to watch her on film.

Mengele tells Stasha that she is immortal, and she believes this for most of the novel. She suffers from terrible survivor's guilt as a result, and commits reckless acts (like confronting the Nazis in the salt mine) because she believes she cannot die. Stasha also suffers from poor hearing and partial blindness as a result of Mengele's experiments.

When Pearl is abducted, Stasha is utterly broken, and she hides in a sauerkraut barrel. When she is convinced that Pearl is dead, her vows for vengeance against Mengele become more resolute. This need for revenge drives Stasha for most of the second half of the novel, though she is also a loyal friend and fiercely protective of Feliks as they roam the countryside en route to Warsaw.



## Patient Number Blue/Feliks

Feliks is called "Patient Number Blue" by Stasha when she first sees him in Mengele's lab, so named because of his sickly skin color. Feliks is not his real name, which we never learn. He has taken the name Feliks in memory of his twin brother who was murdered by Mengele. He feels he must survive Auschwitz and live a rich, fulfilling life because his brother cannot.

Stasha and Feliks become close, and they share a common mission - to exact their revenge on Mengele. During the soccer match between prisoners and guards, Feliks suffers a seizure and Mengele takes him away. Stasha does not see him again until Chapter 9, when she asks why Mengele continues to allow him to live, despite his brother being dead, he shows her his other abnormality - he has a tail.

After Auschwitz is liberated, Feliks and Stasha roam the countryside seeking Warsaw, where they hope to find Mengele and murder him. Feliks is shot in the shoulder by the Nazis in the salt mine.

## Dr. Miri

Dr. Miri is a beautiful and sensitive Jewish doctor forced by Josef Mengele to work in his lab. Stasha compares her to a starfish, "gifted at regeneration" (48), meaning she is able to withstand a great deal of suffering and carry on. Dr. Miri was separated from her two sisters, Orli and Ibi, by Mengele. He sent Orli to work in the Auschwitz brothel, and experimented upon Ibi, disfiguring her.

After Dr. Miri and Twins' Father flee from Auschwitz with the group of children, including Pearl, she is haunted by the things she has seen and done. Pearl tries to rescue her from her grief, but there is nothing she can do. The two visit a Krakow brothel in hopes of finding Dr. Miri's sisters, but they are not there. Dr. Miri is hospitalized because of her distress, and Pearl attempts to hide from the Red Cross volunteers to stay with her, but she is eventually convinced to flee to Palestine, leaving Dr. Miri behind.

From her perspective in the future, Pearl tells us that Dr. Miri emigrated to America where they were reunited many years later, and Dr. Miri was like a surrogate mother to her, holding her hand while she underwent medical testing.

## Zvi Singer/"Twins Father"

Twins' Father is a 29-year-old former Czech army soldier, in charge of the boys' barracks and responsible for prisoner intake at the Zoo. He protects children at Auschwitz by passing off siblings as twins so they will be given special treatment by Mengele. After liberation, he and Dr. Miri guide a group of children, including Pearl, safely to the Red Cross in Krakow. He is haunted by what he has seen and his inability



to do more for the children, especially after the death of David in the farmhouse in Chapter 16.

Twins Father, along with Dr. Miri, is responsible for getting a group of 19 children from Auschwitz to Krakow, including Pearl and Peter, and helps convince Pearl that she must leave Dr. Miri behind to make her escape to Palestine with the others.

## Josef "Uncle Doctor" Mengele

Mengele is the charismatic, fastidious Nazi who maintains the "Zoo," his collection of oddities including twins, triplets, little people, albinos, etc. whom he performs experiments on. He injects Stasha with something that he claims will make her immortal, pours hot water in her ear, and blinds her. He locks Pearl in a cage and tortures her. He believes in the Nazi Aryan ideology, making negative comments about Stasha's brown eyes. When the Russians are nearing Auschwitz and liberation is at hand, Mengele flees to the countryside, and later to South America. He is never apprehended.

## The Twins' Mother

The twins' mother is a shy, easily frightened woman torn apart by the loss of their father. She draws a poppy on the wall of the train car on the way to Auschwitz in an attempt to calm herself and her children. When they arrive, she gives them over to Josef Mengele, hoping they will be given special treatment. The twins' mother manages to survive captivity for quite some time, appearing in Chapter 9 for a brief reunion with Stasha when she paints her portrait, but shortly thereafter, Stasha sees her body in the back of a truck, an event that shores up her resolve for vengeance.

## Peter Abraham

Peter is Mengele's messenger, chosen for his "Aryan good looks" (96). He is resourceful and knows how to find anything in the camp, which is why Pearl approaches him about acquiring the piano key for Stasha. He is proud, he does push-ups and weightlifting exercises and looks after his appearance. He has a scar on his ear from when he was whipped by a guard, but he is proud of this, particularly because the guard who hurt him was punished by Mengele, and he wishes he could be the cause of further such punishments.

When Pearl tells him about her need for the piano key, they waltz to the orchestra playing in the distance, and Pearl tells him she loves him. Peter is intelligent enough to know that she does not mean it, she just wants to say the words to someone, but he says it back anyway. After liberation, Peter accompanies Pearl, Dr. Miri, Twins' Father, and the others, to Krakow, and then he goes on to live with a friend of his aunt. Narrating from the future, Pearl tells us that she saw him again at the trial of Nurse Elma.



## **Bruna**

Bruna is a Ukrainian teenager and an albino residing with the twins in Josef Mengele's Zoo. She is an unrepentant thief and bruiser. When she first meets the twins, she tells them about stealing a swan from the Odessa Zoo and strangling it, just to keep it out of the hands of the encroaching Nazis. She cares for the twins, and for Feliks, though she expresses her feelings indirectly by stealing things for them, or drawing a guard's attention away from them.

In Chapter 9, Brunna supplies Feliks and Stasha with the bear and jackal fur coats, and warns them to go back to the safety of the barracks while she helps Dr. Miri organize the children in the infirmary. She is carrying a pistol that marks her as a member of the underground resistance movement. Taube, the cruelest of the Nazi guards, sneaks up behind her amid the chaos and breaks her neck.

## **Tadeusz “Zayde” Zamorski**

The twins grandfather, a former biology professor and creator of the “Classification of Living Things” game. He came to stay with the family after his son, the twins' father, disappeared. Tadeusz dies at Auschwitz.

## **Jakub**

Jakub is a Jewish resistance movement leader who helps Miri and Twins' Father organize the transfer of the children into the care of the Red Cross.

## **Nurse Elma**

Nurse Elma works in Mengele's lab at the Zoo, she is an unpleasant woman who Stasha compares to a crab because of her hardened exterior. When Stasha discovers Mengele's room full of eye specimens, Nurse Elma tells her to forget what she saw and tell no one. With her icy blonde hair and red lipstick, Pearl describes her as looking “like a drop of blood in the snow” (45).

## **Mirko Rabinowitz**

Mirko is the oldest son in the Rabinowtiz family. They are a clan of little people or “Lilliput” performers who live in the Zoo and receive special treatment from Mengele. Stasha accidentally spits on Mirko in Chapter 2. Then, while the twins are talking to him, Brunna arrives and attacks him because the two have a longstanding feud.

Mirko reappears in Chapter 13, hiding with his family in the haystack that Stasha and Feliks come upon right after they escape the death march. Mirko tells Stasha that he



believes he heard Pearl's voice while he was in one of Mengele's labs. Pearl remembers him as well, as a disembodied voice reciting poetry, though she is unsure if she imagined this.

## Janusz Zamorski

Janusz is Pearl and Stasha's father. In the beginning of the novel, they believe that he is dead. After he disappeared one night, Nazi soldiers came to the Zamorskis' home and told the family he had committed suicide, and his body had been found in the river. In reality, he had been sent to Dachau because he was smuggling weapons for the Jewish resistance movement. He is reunited with his daughters in Warsaw in Chapter 21.

## Heinrich and Fritzi

Heinrich and Fritzi are the Jewish resistance fighters disguised as Nazis who save Stasha and Feliks from the murderous old lady in the cottage. Fritzi gives Stasha the cyanide pill, which she later asks her father to bury.

## Taube

Taube is a malevolent Nazi guard at Auschwitz. In Chapter 2, when Pearl is exhibiting her dancing skills, he mocks her by suggesting a famous actress and family friend of his will surely come rescue her and put her in the movies. He murders Bruna by breaking her neck as the Russians are approaching to liberate the camp. On the death march out of Auschwitz, he finds Stasha and Feliks lying in the snow, but does not kill them. Stasha asserts that this was not a moment of mercy, merely an example of his capricious nature.

## Anika

Anika is a Dutch pianist who performs with the orchestra the night of the concert at Auschwitz. We are told she attempted suicide after being separated from her son. She is nearly beaten by Taube when she cannot play the piano adequately with the missing key that Peter took for Pearl.

## David Herschlag

David is the child that dies on the journey to Krakow. Twins' Father had ensured David's safety in Auschwitz by passing him and his brother off as twins to Josef Mengele.

## Ox

Ox is the cruel woman in charge of the girls' barracks at the Zoo in Auschwitz. When a girl dies in the twins' bunk on their first night, Ox demands that the body be left there so the next morning's prisoner count will be accurate. Stasha describes her as having “the appearance of a wardrobe with a toupee” (15).





# Symbols and Symbolism

## The Classification of Living Things

The Classification of Living Things is symbolic of safety and family tradition and it gives rise to a host of other symbols and metaphors related to animals in the book. The game was taught to Pearl and Stasha by their grandfather, a former biology professor. It is a form of charades where the participants must guess what sort of animal is being acted out through gestures, and then name its genus, family, species, and kingdom. Zayde has used it as a distraction in the past, when the girls were questioned about being “mischling” and they play it on the cattle car en route to Auschwitz in order to remain calm. When Pearl wakes up in the cage and cannot remember who she is or what has happened to her, she hears Zayde and her mother's voices, and she remembers the classification system, reciting the order of living things as a coping mechanism.

## The Poppy

The poppy is most commonly used as a symbol of death and/or separation in the book. It originates from the transport to Auschwitz, when the twins' mother drew a poppy on the wall of the cattle car - just before the family is separated. Stasha later says she will know if something has happened to Pearl or their mother because she will see a field of poppies in her mind, and she does see the field of poppies in Chapter 8, when Pearl is taken. When David dies in Chapter 16, the farmer's wife spreads poppy seeds on the ground for the “dead that come back disguised as birds” (259).

## The Piano

The piano represents the past, the family, and the girls' happy childhood that the Nazis wrenched away from them. When Pearl sees a piano being pushed across the courtyard from the window of Mengele's lab, she is sure it is the Zamorskis' piano from home, so she has Peter steal one of its keys to give to Stasha. This is meant as a memento of herself for her sister, because she is sure her death is imminent. Stasha holds onto the key throughout their separation as a reminder of Pearl, and the vengeance she has sworn to carry out in her honor.

## Eyes

The wall of eyes Stasha sees on her first visit to Mengele's lab symbolizes violence and the need to be a witness for the victims, particularly the dead, as a means of preserving their memory. When she discovers the wall, it immediately brings to mind episodes of violence from the past, including a Nazi guard visiting the Zamorskis' home and kicking her mother. Stasha says she knows she will remember the wall of eyes forever, “whenever I heard of someone being born or wed or found,” because this is the image



she will hold of those who never would do such things (51). It is also an indication of Mengele's cruelty, he twice makes negative comments about the twins' brown eyes, and he tries to color Stasha's blue just before he flees Auschwitz. When Stasha and Feliks encounter the old woman who tries to kill them near Kolo, Stasha knows she cannot trust her when she looks into her eyes.

## Birds

Birds serve several symbolic functions in the novel: First, they fall under the category of "living things," so they serve to remind the reader of the Classification game played by Zayde, Pearl, and Stasha. Birds are also symbols of survival and endurance. When Pearl wakes up in the lab in her cage, she sees a messenger pigeon on the windowsill, and she identifies with this, another creature the Nazis experimented on. She hears Zayde tell her that pigeons are known for their excellent memories, and this suits Pearl, as she is the "Keeper of Time and Memory" (193). When the birds come for the poppy seeds after David dies, they are a reminder to Pearl that she must endure and remember.

## Music

For Stasha and Pearl, music is symbolic of beauty and the eternal human spirit that cannot be extinguished, though the Nazis try to pervert musical expression for their own twisted ends. They play music to keep the prisoners calm upon arrival at the train station in Auschwitz, and to encourage productivity while they are forced to work. They throw a concert where the musicians are terrified; the pianist, in particular, is threatened with a beating if she does not perform adequately. For the prisoners, however, music is a beacon in the dark. This is especially evident in the scene where Pearl and Peter waltz together. During the dance, she thinks of how Auschwitz has made her hate music, but that, "I didn't hate the music then, as I stood with Peter" (104). The author is saying that music should be appreciated for its beauty, not its precision or utility.

## The Womb

The womb is used as a symbol of wholeness, safety, and reversion to a time before the Nazis polluted the world and destroyed the lives of their victims. The book opens with Stasha describing herself and Pearl "afloat in amniotic snowfall" (3). She is telling us that this how they belong, together. When Stasha sees her mother's body in the back of the truck, a vital link is severed, the "floating world" (womb) where it all began is irretrievably gone (172). When Pearl is rescued from her cage, she wonders if it is the same feeling as being born, and in a way, she is being reborn, to a new life, outside of captivity. Stasha's delivery of the Roma woman's baby represents a chance at rebirth as well, and the author uses the same imagery, stating that Stasha "wiped the membrane of the floating world from the baby's skin" (323).



## The Movies

Stasha's reoccurring fantasy that Pearl will have a career in the American movies is a symbol of future possibility she clings to desperately as she endures the nightmarish conditions of Auschwitz. This fantasy plays out in an interlude during the concert in Chapter 7, she envisions Pearl "onscreen with all the greats," acting in a movie about their experience, and killing Josef Mengele (134). Stasha is in charge of the future in the twins' division of duties from Chapter 2, but she is largely concerned with Pearl's future, not her own. Pearl is always the most important thing. In Chapter 14, Pearl does star in a movie, just not as Stasha imagined, when the Russian army films the survivors after liberating the camp.

## The Bear/The Jackal

The bear and jackal coats given to Feliks and Stasha before they leave Auschwitz symbolize the courage their journey requires of them. They wear these coats and embody their previous owners on the death march and on toward Warsaw, until they are taken by the Nazis in the salt mine. Wearing the coats of predators, they can become predators themselves, or at least feel like predators, on the hunt for Josef Mengele (and their own survival). Stasha declares that the coats "vaunted us into the Classification of Living Things," rescuing them from their near death in Auschwitz, and giving them new life (294).

## The Crutch

The crutch Pearl seeks, and ultimately finds, in Krakow is a symbol of freedom. When she was rescued from her cage by the Russians, she was still captive, confined to a wheelbarrow, unable to walk. The crutch is also a symbol of hope, as she believes that she will be able to help Dr. Miri once she is mobile again. When they find the crutch, in the unlikeliest of places (the brothel), it is a symbolic reward of that hope. The universe provides.



# Settings

## Auschwitz/the Zoo

The Zamorskis arrive at the Auschwitz concentration camp at the beginning of the novel, and this is the location of all of the events in Part one. Upon arrival, Pearl and Stasha are selected by Dr. Josef Mengele to reside in his "Zoo," a special area of the camp where he performs experiments on individuals he considers odd. The barracks here are still overcrowded and unpleasant, like those in the rest of the camp, and their direct view is a field of corpses that "filled and emptied in terrible repetition" (25). The smoke from the crematorium is a constant presence, described as a "flame-licked wind" and "scorched scent" (9). The Nazis play music constantly to encourage the prisoners to work and remain docile. There are warehouses storing all of the prisoners' personal items that were taken from them upon arrival, which the prisoners call "Canada." The camp is the site of the surreal soccer match and orchestral concert, Mengele's laboratory experiments, and Bruna's death, as she is murdered by Taube in the chaos just before liberation. Stasha and Pearl's mother and grandfather die here as well, though their deaths are not described.

## Warsaw

The city of Warsaw is destroyed when Stasha and Feliks finally reach it, though everywhere people are busily trying to put things right again. This is symbolic of how Stasha and Feliks feel at this moment, broken down and injured, but with the possibility of renewal. It is, in her description, "little more than a cellar, a tomb, a waiting room with a telephone that said only good-bye" (311). The Warsaw Zoo, where they expect to find Mengele, is wrecked and abandoned. Feliks finds a list of names in a jar representing children who had been relocated by the Jewish resistance movement. Stasha learns that she is not, in fact immortal. She delivers the Roma woman's baby and discovers her father right before she is about to commit suicide. They learn that the resistance movement was operating out of the zoo, hiding refugees there. This is another thing the survivors and the zoo have in common - there is more to them than meets the eye.

## Krakow

Krakow is the destination of Pearl, Peter, Twins' Father, and Miri (along with a group of other children) when they leave Auschwitz. Pearl notes that she can see the flutter of curtains as citizens look out their windows at the survivors and then quickly look away, either out of guilt, or simply wishing to be spared an unpleasant sight. They quickly find Jakub, who establishes them in the abandoned house next to his (it is abandoned because the Jews who lived there were forced to flee). The trolley drivers allow the children to ride for free when they flash their number tattoos. In Krakow, Pearl gets her



crutches from the brothel owner and sets out on the journey to Palestine organized by the Red Cross.

## Kolo

In the Kolo train station, Feliks and Stasha find the walls covered in names, those of survivors seeking their loved ones. Pearl's name is not among them. Like most of the villages along the war-torn countryside, Kolo is bombed-out. Stasha recalls that some people her father knew from the ghetto in Lodz were from Kolo. Nearby, they find the old woman's barn and cottage, where they are rescued by the Jewish resistance fighters and flee the scene with the old woman's horse.

## Julianka

Stasha and Feliks have been left for dead by the Auschwitz death march and are near the village of Julianka when they seek shelter in a haystack. They discover that the Rabinowitzes from Mengele's Zoo are already inside. This is where Stasha learns that Mirko Rabinowitz believes he had been in the lab with Pearl and gives her the note with Pearl's supposed last words, "Tell my sister I" (220). There is not enough space for everyone to stay in the haystack, so Stasha and Feliks leave the next morning to continue their journey to Warsaw.

## Posnan

After Stasha and Feliks flee Kolo, they arrive in Poznan. It has also been bombed and they must be careful to avoid Nazi soldiers present in the streets. Stasha notes that this is where Zayde lived when he was a university professor. They visit the ruined site of a museum, where Stasha remembers visiting with Pearl and her grandfather and Feliks reflects on Bruna, who had fantasized about coming to such a place. As they leave Poznan, Russian tanks are arriving on the scene.

## Wieliczka

Wieliczka is near Krakow. This is where Feliks and Stasha wake to find their horse missing and follow a trail of blood to find the Nazis in the salt mine. There is smoke over the city and abandoned personal items litter the streets, and the synagogue they sleep in is nearly unrecognizable as such. In the salt mine, they lose the bear and jackal furs, plus their weapons to the Nazis, and Feliks is shot. The Nazis fail to pursue them and they manage to escape with their lives.



# Themes and Motifs

## Doubles

The author weaves the theme of doubles throughout the book to demonstrate the way two contradictory feelings can exist inside a person simultaneously. The title of the book, “mischling,” is the German word for “mixed blood,” put another way, of two races. The first direct reference to this comes from Josef Mengele as he notes the girls' blonde hair on the platform at Auschwitz. Shortly thereafter, upon receiving the injection that she thinks has made her immortal, Stasha reclaims the term, declaring it to mean “of two parts,” one of “loss and despair,” the other “wild hope” (68). The two can go together, and indeed they must, as they inform each other. Without hope, the despair would be intolerable, and without the despair, the hope would be less meaningful.

The symbolic references to this duality are everywhere in the book, first and foremost, Pearl and Stasha are twins, visibly the same, but different. They are so inextricably linked, they can feel each others' pain and read each other's minds. The central conflict of Part two, the girls' separation is the acting out of the necessity for the “mischling” harmony. Only with hope can they survive and be reunited. Even though Pearl cannot remember her sister in Part two, she knows that something is missing - her other half. When she tells the brothel owner the false story of her nieces' attempt to murder Mengele, she is able to access these details directly from Stasha's mind.

At the concert, Stasha hears something in the music - “a hidden meaning, a doubled message about beauty and its opposite” (125). This is a nod to the power of music to generate hope, operating under the surface, secretly, to maintain the spirits of the prisoners. This quote comes right after she mentions Anika the pianist's attempt at suicide. Anika had momentarily let despair overtake her hope.

When Stasha sees her mother and tells her she fears that Pearl is dead, her mother says that this is impossible, she has been painting a series of paintings, all in pairs. She understands the magic of “doubles” instinctively, and has been attempting to use her paintings as talismans to protect her girls.

At the end of Part one, left behind by the death march, Stasha considers telling Feliks that they are definitely not dead because if they were in heaven, his brother would be present, as “all such systems depend on symmetry” (189). Stasha does not share Feliks' religious belief system, but she has her own, the “mischling” system, and in this way they intersect.

## Bearing Witness

As the characters make their way through the trauma of Auschwitz and its aftermath, the sacred duty of honoring the dead by bearing witness to their stories becomes a major theme and a mission. Indeed, sometimes there is very little else the survivors can



do. But if they remember those who died, and how, they can carry that knowledge out into the world, as a way of enshrining the victims' legacies. By bearing witness, and telling these stories, the survivors are asserting that these people lived and mattered, despite what the Nazis thought. Though Stasha dreams of exacting her revenge by killing Mengele, this is just a fantasy to keep her going while she does the real work of carrying on, and remembering those she has lost. For Pearl, the "Keeper of Time and Memory," this mission comes a little more naturally. Feliks must stride forth into the world without his other half, and be the voice of his dead twin brother, even adopting his name in the spirit of bearing witness.

The matter of names comes up the first time Pearl and Stasha are instructed to be witnesses, during prisoner intake when Twins' Father tells them, "When a new child comes, learn that name too. When a child leaves us, remember that name" (30). In Mengele's lab, Stasha sees the horrible wall of disembodied eyes, which is an effective symbol of the need for vigilance. Shortly thereafter, Stasha wishes that she would lose her sight so that she "could no longer witness the continued torture" of Pearl (87).

When Stasha recalls the attempted suicide of the Dutch pianist, she says that the woman's friends only stopped her from the act by telling her she must bear witness for her son, a victim of the Nazis, and live to tell his story. Feliks highlights the importance of this later, when he and Stasha are lying on the ground, having been abandoned by the death march. He asserts that no one in the future will believe the genocide really happened, and indeed, some people do deny that it happened, which makes the survivors' stories all that much more important.

On Pearl's journey to Krakow with Miri and Twins' Father, they encounter a dead body on the road, and Pearl makes Peter Abraham bring her close to it. She refuses to look away, despite the corpse's mutilated state. It is interesting to note that this occurs right after the scene with Stasha, Feliks, and the Jewish resistance fighters in the murderous old woman's cottage. They set fire to the cottage and abscond with the horse, leaving the old woman's body to incinerate, "we fled without looking back," Stasha recalls, because this death is not worthy of a witness (244).

When Pearl is still caged, but she can hear the sounds of liberation in the distance, she senses the momentary resurrection of all of Auschwitz's victims, the afterlife having granted "a permission to witness the ruin of what had ended them" (194). Shortly after liberation, the Russians make a film to document the state of the living victims - an act of witness in itself - and Pearl mentions two twins by name, Eva and Miriam Mozes, who "would not let the world forget" (224). These are the real life twins the author used as inspiration for creating the Zamorskis, and they both devoted their lives to speaking out against the atrocities they witnessed.

Pearl also recalls attending Nurse Elma's trial years later, and being permitted to see the prisoner, where she recited the names of the children that Twins' Father had exhorted her to remember. This is an opportunity for closure, and a way to honor the victims who could not be there to see justice done.



## Forgiveness

The author uses the theme of forgiveness to impart a moral or lesson in the novel – that it is better to seek forgiveness than to seek revenge. This is largely accomplished through the comparison of the twins' differing goals after they are separated. Stasha, believing her sister to be dead, wants to find Josef Mengele and exact vengeance. Pearl, however, is on a mission to reunite with her “Someone” and leave the past behind. While Stasha's revenge would have been satisfying, it is Pearl's forgiveness that is truly meaningful.

Pearl's quest for forgiveness begins when she is metaphorically reborn, after she is rescued from her cage in Mengele's lab at Auschwitz by the Russians. On the journey from the camp to Krakow, Miri and Peter try to remind Pearl of the things she has forgotten without telling her the precise details of what has been done to her. When she feels frightened during the night, she remembers her “Someone,” which is what she calls Stasha (249, 252). Shortly thereafter, when David Herschlag dies, Pearl declares that to forgive “might be the only true power I had left” in a world “obsessed with revenge” (260). This is an effective summation of Pearl's value system. For Stasha, on the other hand, getting revenge on Mengele is everything.

Years later, when Pearl travels to Frankfurt to witness the trial of Nurse Elma, she is not there for the satisfaction of seeing justice done, but to speak the names of the children from Auschwitz that Twins' Father called upon her to remember. She does this, and tells Nurse Elma that she forgives her, after which, “[Elma] spat in disgust. I forgave her for that too” (282). We are also told at this time that Mengele escaped justice forever, but this is not important to Pearl, “this is not about that man,” she says, “as much as he would have liked it to be” (281). All of Mengele's power lies in being able to inflict damage. With Pearl's refusal to give any consideration to him and his cruelty, that power is gone.

In the final chapter, the twins sit back-to-back to play the telepathic drawing game and they draw the many objects of their shared and separate journeys, the poppies, a train, a horse, and a piano. She notes that they “did not draw a needle...much less the man who had undone us” (337). The reunion is the important thing. The separation inflicted by Mengele is over. The only way Mengele can still harm them in the future is by continuing to be a source of inner turmoil. With forgiveness comes closure, and a mitigation of suffering. Fortunately, when Stasha is reunited with Pearl, she is able to truly abandon her need for revenge and try to move forward with love, as evidenced by her final declaration to her sister, “Let's try again” (339).

## Heroic Misfits

Mischling is an inspirational story due largely in part to the theme of heroic misfits, it is a world where underdogs are given the opportunity to triumph. Josef Mengele has assembled his “Zoo” out of those he deems strange or different in some way, the twins and triplets, but also “the giants, the Lilliputs, the limbless, the Jews he'd deemed





curiously Aryan in appearance” (31). Feliks is both a twin and a medical marvel, being in possession of a tail. Mengele's staff, the beautiful, Jewish Dr. Miri (these factors are sufficient to make her an oddity to Mengele) and Twins' Father both seem irredeemably broken when we meet them at the beginning of the novel, yet even they will have their victories.

Pearl is perhaps the greatest example of someone overcoming insurmountable odds in the novel. She is already suffering from the likelihood of her impending death when she is abducted, taken from her sister's side and locked in a cage in Mengele's lab where she is brutally tortured, and loses the use of her legs and her memory. Still, she perseveres. Something inside of her knows that she must find Stasha, and somehow save Miri from her overwhelming guilt. While she accomplishes the former (Miri must save herself), her greatest achievement is the cultivation of forgiveness. This is the ultimate goal that drives her, and she is capable of it to an immense degree, to the point that Mengele becomes meaningless to her.

Stasha also achieves only half of what she means to do (her goals are to be reunited with Pearl and murder Mengele), but her steadfastness is inspirational. Even when she believes Pearl to be dead, even when she realizes she is not immortal and she could end her own life with the cyanide capsule, she endures. She protects Feliks from the Nazis in the salt mine, and saves the Roma woman's baby in the abandoned house in Warsaw by performing a gruesome Cesarean. These acts are, in effect, greater than the achievement of Mengele's murder would be.

The Rabinowitzes, Mengele's troupe of little people performers, escape Auschwitz and are en route to Prague when we last see them. Feliks is courageous in his own right, he carries Stasha through the death march when she is incapacitated and he is determined to have a life worthy of his dead brother. Bruna, of course, died while helping to orchestrate the rebellion that resulted in Auschwitz's liberation. Jewish resistance fighters like Heinrich and Fritz and Jakub roam the countryside rescuing anyone they can. Stasha and Pearl's father was sent to Dachau for taking part in the resistance movement. Twins' Father saved the lives of 19 children by passing them off as sets of twins, and led the children on the exodus from the camp to the safety of the Red Cross in Krakow. Miri helped in this task as well, though she was virtually crippled by her own grief and post-traumatic stress symptoms. In a more complicated act of bravery, she performed abortions on pregnant women in Auschwitz who did not wish to bring a baby into such a world of deprivation. We learn from Pearl's description of her later years that Miri emigrated to America where she became an OB-GYN, refusing to allow her spirit to be extinguished by the horrible things she witnessed.

None of these people are willing to be told by Mengele and the Nazis that they are worthless, none of them are willing to lay down and die unless it is in the service of saving the lives of others. Their strength and heroism in the face of such adversity is profound.



## The Redemptive Power of Beauty

The redemptive power of beauty is a theme used in the novel as a focus of hope for the prisoners and a symbol of their resilience. It is a frequent element in discussions about music in particular. When the Zamorskis arrive at Auschwitz, Stasha mentions that an orchestra is playing and that she would later learn that the Nazis played music to lure the prisoners into a false sense of security to make them compliant. The musicians were forced “to use their talents to ensnare the unwitting, to convince them that where they had arrived was not a place without an appreciation for the humane and the beautiful” (8). Music has always been something special to Pearl, as she is a dancer, but she tells Stasha shortly after they arrive in Auschwitz that she no longer believes in it. The beautiful thing she loved has been ruined for her.

In Chapter 6, this changes. Pearl has gone to Peter Abraham with her request for the piano key. They can hear the orchestra rehearsing in the distance and Pearl is charmed by Peter and his scar, and also aware of what she believes is her own impending death. “I didn’t hate music then,” she says, “because it was the sound of what we’d lost” (104-5). She dances with Peter, and kisses him, and the moment represents the futures that they have been robbed of by the Nazis, all of the experiences that Pearl believes she will never get to have. It is a bittersweet moment, but a beautiful one, she is as close to happy as one could be under the circumstances. As Peter leaves her, she poetically remarks, “Night—it had forgotten that it shouldn’t be beautiful in Auschwitz” (106).

At the concert Mengele organized in Chapter 7, the battle of beauty and ugliness is on full display, as the musicians are forced to play against their will, even threatened with a beating if they make mistakes. However, Stasha senses that the beauty is there, under the surface, trying to make itself known to the prisoners and provide them with hope. Then, when Mengele demands that the children sing for him, Stasha can sense all of their combined strength and resilience enhancing their voices. She wonders if this could be enough to achieve freedom. She reconfigures the words on the sign on the camp’s gates, “Work would never set us free,” she declares, however, “beauty might see us past the gates” (130). When Stasha and Feliks visit the museum in Poznan in Chapter 17, it is not a crumbling ruin that Stasha sees, but the site of a memory she has of her sister and grandfather, another example of reconfiguring the ugly to make something beautiful.

The theme is stated most directly in Chapter 9, when Stasha is sitting for the portrait artist who turns out to be her mother. She says she wishes she were more beautiful so that the artist had something more “redemptive” to paint, before recalling “beauty redeems the world, that’s what Papa always said” (154).

# Styles

## Point of View

Mischling is narrated in the first person by a set of twins, Pearl and Stasha Zamorski, and the point-of-view alternates between them from chapter to chapter. The story is told in the past tense, both narrators are telling it from some point in the future that allows them to fill in details that would come later. For example, Stasha remarks that the sight of Bruna's murder would continue to haunt her over the years, and that "history would say" that 7,000 prisoners stayed behind at Auschwitz as the death marches began (185). When Pearl is rescued, she sets the scene as, "What I'd later learn was January 27, 1945" (205). These instances are helpful to orient the reader in the scope and magnitude of what occurred, as well as the time frame. In later scenes, the author describes Peter and Pearl meeting after the war at the trial of Nurse Elma, and Pearl's reunion with Dr. Miri in America. This provides an element of the after effects for the victims, as these crimes would continue to reverberate through their lives.

The dual narrations also allow for the twins to fill in gaps and create an element of unreliability. Memory is imperfect, and the stress and strain of the unfolding events was severe. For example, Pearl mentions the girl who died in their bunk on the first night in the barracks, "Did Stasha mention the dying girl?" she asks (19). No, she did not. Then, at the concert, Stasha sees the piano that Pearl had described as identical to their own back home, and it looks nothing at all like their piano, "an error so severe that I had to wonder after her mind-set" (127). Then there is the author's choice to end Part One with a long account of Stasha's experiences, leaving the reader unsure if Pearl is dead until Part two begins and her point-of-view returns.

Occasionally, one twin's story provides a detail that verifies something from the other's. For example, Pearl remembers being in the cage, and thinking she hears someone reciting poetry, so when Stasha finds Mirko Rabinowitz and he recites poetry, we know that his story about being in Mengele's lab with Pearl is true.

## Language and Meaning

The main characters of Mischling are Eastern European and frequently express themselves in the idiosyncratic dialects and parlance of this region. Their language also allows for some insight into their individual personalities. For example, upon first arriving at the barracks in Auschwitz, Stasha reflects on the twins' past, "there were things we loved: pianos, Judy Garland, Mama weeping less" (14). The phrasing is darkly comical, first, because things were bleak enough that she could only hope for "less" weeping, and secondly because she has placed this last on her list of things they loved, after Judy Garland. When Stasha gets sick in the cottage just before the rescue by the Jewish resistance, she laments the perceived loss of her sister before remarking



absurdly, “What I am saying is this—I had no choice but to vomit on the table” (235). These moments of humor are very effective in a narrative that is often grim.

Bruna is a hard-boiled person, and expressions of fondness do not come easy for her, so when she implores Stasha to snap out of her misery after Pearl's disappearance, she couches her comments in abuse, “Fool! Barrel-dweller! How I miss you! You lousy coward!” (146). Feliks' speech is full of clever idioms and phrases that make him seem wise beyond his years, appropriate given that the experiments have given him the appearance of an old man. He tells Stasha that Russian “is a good language for hating Nazis” and brings a touch of philosophy to their plans to kill Mengele, asking, “isn't evil a form of stupidity?” a very astute judgment in this case (161, 162). When Pearl is rescued from her cage by the Russians, their pronouncements tell us what she cannot, “Look at it!” he said; he wept. “It is drinking my tears!” (208). Her appearance is so altered that the word “it” is deemed appropriate.

## Structure

The novel is divided into two parts. Part one is composed of the twins' arrival at Auschwitz and the duration of their time as prisoners, terminating with Stasha and Feliks in the snow, left behind by the death march. Part two consists of the twins' separate journeys along the war-torn countryside in search of safety. The author builds suspense into the structure by writing the last three chapters of Part one from Stasha's perspective. The reader, like Stasha, knows that Pearl is gone, but not where she has been taken or if she is even still alive. The middle chapter of these three, Chapter 8, is simply a picture of a field of poppies with no text. Because Stasha has told Pearl that she fears seeing this image in her mind as proof that something terrible is happened, it is an effective emotional moment in the novel. Then, when Part two opens with a chapter from Pearl's perspective, it is a moment of relief, an indication that she is, in fact, still alive.

Throughout Part two, as the author continues to shift between the twins' perspectives in alternating chapters, the reader can take note of the similarities in their journeys, as Pearl, Dr. Miri, and Twins' Father, head for Krakow, and Stasha and Feliks make for Warsaw. Both groups visit farmhouses (with entirely different results), both travel by train and note the names scrawled on the walls of survivors seeking each other out, and both take note of the parachuting resistance fighters. In Chapter 19, we are told that Stasha and Feliks are just outside of Krakow, with no idea they are so near to Pearl and the others. As this plays out, the reader has information that neither twin has – Stasha believes Pearl to be dead, and Pearl does not even fully remember her sister.



## Quotes

Have you ever had to live with the best part of yourself adrift, stationed at some unknowable distance?

-- Stasha (chapter 1 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Stasha is describing her and Pearl's birth. She is saying that Pearl left the womb first, and she followed because she could not bear to be without her other half. The quote is an effective introduction to their close relationship, and a nod to the plot of Part Two of the novel, when the twins have been separated and neither knows quite how to go on without the other.

But something about her false expression made me acknowledge what Mama had become: a pretty but sleepless semi-widow, faded in her personhood. Once the primmest of women, she was undone; dust streaked her cheek, her lace collar lay limp.

-- Stasha (chapter 1 paragraph 6)

**Importance:** This is a very evocative and precise description of the twins' mother. On the platform at Auschwitz, Stasha and Pearl feel they must obey Mengele's orders to please their mother, who has been a shell of a person since the disappearance of their father. She is a "semi-widow" because it is unclear if he is still alive or not. It is also a remarkably poetic passage, with some clever rhyming and alliteration.

I had always believed in the world's ability to right itself, just like that, with a single kindness. And when kindness is not around, you invent new orders and systems to believe in...

-- Stasha (chapter 1 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** Stasha is explaining her attempt to revive a dying person by singing to him/her shortly after arriving in Auschwitz. When she says that new orders and systems will be required in this place (as there is not much kindness in Auschwitz), the author is foreshadowing the delegation of duties that comes in the following chapter, when Stasha is assigned "the funny, the future, the bad," and Pearl "the sad, the past, the good" (21).

I want you to know the eyes. The hundreds of them in a constant stare. They could look at you without ever seeing you and when you met their gaze, it felt as if the sky were tapping at your back in warning.

-- Stasha (chapter 3 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** This is the first description of the wall of eyes that Stasha stumbles upon in Mengele's lab. The disembodied eyes serve as a major symbol in the novel, representing the importance of vigilance and being a witness to the Nazis crimes for the victims who did not survive them. Stasha says that the image of the wall of eyes stayed with her forever, particularly each time she "heard of someone being born or wed or found" (51) because the eyes signify those who never would do those things.



It must have been like stringing a harp for someone who played his harp with a knife, or binding a book for someone whose idea of reading was feeding pages to a fire.

-- Stasha (chapter 3 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** Stasha considers what it must have been like for Dr. Miri working in Josef Mengele's lab. She is doing her best to look after the children, but all the while the threat of torture hangs over their heads, and there is nothing she can do about it. She feels as though any comfort she could provide is empty, because it would be fleeting. The reader learns how devastatingly true this is later in the novel, after they have left Auschwitz and Miri is suffering profoundly with her feelings of guilt.

It was the boy and his empty chair that moved me to decide: I would be more than an experiment in this world.

-- Stasha (chapter 3 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** The first time Stasha sees Patient Number Blue/Feliks he is talking to an empty chair, presumably where his dead twin used to sit. She sympathizes with him, but he also represents her worst fear - losing Pearl. She vows that she will make something of herself and be more than the mere subject of an experiment, as Mengele sees her.

...while the Zoo had changed many things for us, its most severe alteration might have been the very damage it did to our notions of what it meant to be close to another living being.

-- Pearl (chapter 6 paragraph 13)

**Importance:** Pearl says this shortly before giving Stasha the piano key, when she has already started to push her sister away by refusing to take part in their old games. Pearl feels that it will be easier for Stasha to handle her death if she can sever their natural closeness. This quote is also relevant to a scene just before, when Pearl had danced with Peter Abraham. The dance took on added significance because she feels that she will die soon and lose any chance at romantic relationships in the future. Thus closeness is either manufactured where it may not naturally be, or it is shunned altogether.

My blood was thick with the thwarted survival of masses; it carried the words they'd never say, the loves they'd never know, the poems they'd never make.

-- Stasha (chapter 7 paragraph 6)

**Importance:** Stasha believes that her immortality is somehow at the expense of others' lives. This is a symbolic manifestation of survivor's guilt. She feels that, since she will survive, she must bear witness for the victims and somehow be worthy of having all that they will never have, the romances, the artistic expressions, the families, etc. It is a tremendous burden to her, especially when she must think of doing these things without Pearl.

Did the clouds flee when I spoke? Did the horizon march off to the sea while the layers of earth and dust came undone, each peeling itself back to reveal a lake?



-- Stasha (chapter 9 paragraph 10)

**Importance:** Stasha is sitting outside of the infirmary when Mengele pulls up in a car and asks her to get in, suggesting they go looking for Pearl. She tells Mengele that Pearl is dead, and then expresses surprise that saying these words aloud did not instantly spawn an apocalypse. For her, Pearl's death is the most shattering event imaginable, so it seems inconceivable that it should not be so for everyone, even for the earth itself.

I remained, a tribute to their underestimations of what a girl can endure. In my forgiveness, their failure to obliterate me was made clear.

-- Pearl (chapter 18 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** As Pearl narrates Chapter 18, she jumps forward in time two decades to the trial and conviction of Nurse Elma for her crimes. When given the opportunity to see the prisoner, Pearl offers her forgiveness. For Pearl, her ability to forgive her tormentors is her greatest strength. The act of forgiveness is proof of her success (survival) and the Nazis' failure (the extermination of the Jews).

...the survivor's hour is different from any other; its every minute answers to a history that won't be changed or restored or made bearable.

-- Pearl (chapter 20 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** As Miri's battle with her own ghosts seems at its most perilous, Jakub tries to comfort her by simply being near her. In the silence, time seems to stand still as the terrible memories weigh the survivors down. They all share this feeling and understand it intuitively. It is a powerful statement that serves as an introduction to Miri expressing her most tragic losses and regrets, including the necessity of performing abortions on the pregnant women of Auschwitz.

I'd believed that the years of children and mothers were in me, the minutes of violinists and farmers and professors, every refugee who never managed to return from the seething country that war had put them in.

-- Stasha (chapter 21 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** This is an echo of Stasha's prior statement about her immortality somehow being at the expense of the victims and her need to persevere in order to honor their sacrifice and memory, the mothers, the children, the violinists, etc. When Feliks tells her that she is not immortal, that Mengele told all of the children this same story, she feels suddenly without a purpose, angry and adrift.