

A Replacement Life Study Guide

A Replacement Life by Boris Fishman

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Plot Summary

Slava Gelman, a young Russian immigrant, struggles with the technicality of right and wrong in the novel "A Replacement Life" by Boris Fishman. Slava found himself hooked after he wrote a fictitious letter to the Conference on Material Claims Against Germany requesting restitution for his grandfather. When Slava's letters raise suspicions, he came to the conclusion that there was sometimes no way to be both honest and just.

Slava agreed to write a letter for his grandfather shortly after his grandmother's death. His grandmother, who had been in the Minsk ghetto during World War II and whose parents were killed in that ghetto, had received a letter informing her she might be eligible for restitution just days before her death. Slava's grandfather pointed out that she had lived 60 years since her time in the ghetto with no one trying to get her the restitution she deserved. Believing the German government had intentionally delayed the letter, Slava's grandfather suggested he could get what had been due his wife by pretending that he, also, had been held in the ghetto. Slava at first wouldn't go along with his grandfather because he didn't want to lie to the German government and was afraid he'd get in trouble.

Slava changed his mind, however, when he thought he could get to know his grandmother better by trying to write her story, even if it were a false story on his grandfather's behalf. Slava had once tried to get his grandmother to tell him about her time in the ghetto but had changed the subject when he saw how difficult it was for her. With each of the letters that Slava wrote, he tried to get in touch with his grandmother and understand what she went through.

Although Slava had once distanced himself from Brooklyn where the other immigrants lived he began to feel himself drawn to the people as they told him their stories. He was especially close to one man named Israel Abramson. Israel was very poor and very alone. His wife had died and his son had left America when he joined a sect of Orthodox Jews. He saw more and more how much the Jewish people who had been forced to leave their home country desperately needed help.

When Slava was called to talk to Otto Barber, a man who worked with the Conference on Material Claims against Germany, he had to make a decision about what he would do. Otto suspected that Slava had faked many letters that had been turned into the conference. He told Slava he could either tell him the names of the people who had lied about their circumstances during World War II and save those who actually qualified for the restitution or he could keep quiet and risk keeping all of the people from getting restitution. Slava challenged Otto to do the right thing and pay all of the people. He reasoned at that point that all the Jews had suffered terribly during the time of World War II even if they hadn't been confined in a ghetto or concentration camp. Otto refused to do so because he didn't believe it would be morally right. Otto also didn't see his offer to cover up Slava's possible transgression as an act of fraud on his part even though Slava pointed out to the man that was what he was offering. In the end, Slava told Otto his own grandfather's letter was the only one that he knew for sure was fictitious.



Chapter 1

Summary

In Chapter 1, on Sunday, July 17, Slava was woken by the phone ringing just after 5 a.m. It was his mother telling him that his grandmother was dead. He had not seen or spoken to his parents in weeks if not a month. He agreed he'd come for the funeral, planned for that day. Even though Slava felt his grandmother had raised him, he'd seen her only once in the past year.

Slava went from his apartment in Manhattan to his grandfather's in Brooklyn. Slava learned his mother was at Grusheff's Funeral Home making funeral arrangements with a man his grandfather believed was a rabbi but Slava knew was only a man who could provide a Torah compliant funeral. Grandfather introduced Slava to his new home attendant, Berta. She was busy cooking food for after the funeral.

Because Slava had not gotten published by "Century" magazine after working there for two years he felt that he needed to move from the neighborhood of immigrants where he parents and grandparents lived. It was for that reason he stopped calling and visiting his family. He thought that on the last day that his grandmother had lived, he had been on his first assignment for "Century."

The funeral was at Grusheff Funeral Home. A man called Grandfather out of the line of mourners greeting the family. Grandfather motioned for Slava to come also. Grandfather and the man, Rudolf Kozlovich, went to an office where they haggled over the price of two gravesites. Grandfather made a deal with Rudolf he would pay fifteen thousand for the plots that would generally cost twenty-thousand. Grandfather told Rudolf he could also get him a phone he could use to talk to his son in Madrid.

Analysis

Right away it is apparent to the reader that Slava had distanced himself from his family in order to follow his dream of being a writer for the New York magazine "Century." His family had recently, probably within his generation, immigrated to America from Minsk. Although Slava spoke English fluently, he also spoke Russian just as fluently. Also notice that when Slava's mother spoke to her son on the phone she noted that her mother's death was their first death in America. The family could not have been in the country long if this was the first family member who had died.

Notice that Slava seemed eager to distance himself from his family. He believed that in order to excel at his job as a writer he needed to distance himself from the impact the pollution he believed they added to his writing he had to get away and make a clean start. He'd seen his grandmother only once in the past year. He'd talked to his family only three or four times. He'd asked them not to call his home. Slava even seemed uncomfortable around the immigrants who worked as doormen in his building. Not only



had he been raised to treat his elders with respect and believed he should be opening the door for them, not vice versa, he also sensed an attitude of resentful admiration when he was around them. He admired him for making good for himself but resented his good fortune both at the same time.

Note also Slava's comment to himself about Berta, the Slav who was working in his grandfather's kitchen. He pointed out that even though the Slavs had at one time terrorized the Jews, the situation had been turned on its head with the Slav woman working as help in his grandfather's kitchen.

The desire for money, also referred to in this section as the demand of the market, is another theme addressed in this section of the novel. Slava made mention of the men who would loiter in hospital waiting rooms waiting for immigrants to die so they could offer a Torah compliant burial for a fee. Slava felt these people were disgraceful when in reality they were just supplying a service the immigrant people needed.

It is also in the chapter that the reader gets a taste of how good Slava's grandfather was at wheeling and dealing. He managed to talk down the price of a pair of cemetery plots with the promise of a phone so the man selling the plots could talk to his son in Madrid. He was the type of man who was able to find things at a bargain and barter with others for the things he needed.

Writing is a theme in the novel. Slava was a writer who aspired to write for a prestigious American magazine. He believed the only way he could achieve the success he desired was by separating himself from the influences of his immigrant family. Note also that the author presents his story in a way that is full of personification and literary devices like simile and metaphor. In one instance, the sun is personified, or given the characteristics of a person. The "sun was looking for a way up" (p. 1) with "the humidity waiting outside like a thief" (p. 3). The author even personifies parts of speech as he tries to give Slava words to describe his grandmother's death: "the English preposition, stunned by the assignment, came up short" (p. 4).

Notice also the author's use of simile. A simile is a comparison where the writer uses the words like or as in the description. For Berta, she is described as being "like a Soviet high-rise, each floor of Berta was stuffed beyond capacity" (p. 9). The author also makes good use of metaphor, a comparison where a thing or idea is described as being an unrelated thing or idea. For example. "Our great realizations are slow dishes, but once they're ready, they announce themselves as suddenly as an oven timer" (p. 10). In this sentence Slava's desire to write and his belief he won't be able to do so successfully if he stays in Brooklyn are compared to a cooking meal.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Slava's decision to separate himself from his family. Do you think he made the right decision? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 2

Discuss Grandfather's ability to make bargains and barter with others to get what he wanted.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss how the immigrants are portrayed in this opening chapter of the novel.

Vocabulary

unconscionably, verbiage, savagery, ambassador, punting, formidable, fathom, inept, largesse, aghast, diabolical, ingratiate, treacherous, placating, dialyze, paragon, deranged, credibly, paltry, flaccid



Chapter 2

Summary

In Chapter 2, Grandmother's coffin had been left open despite the Jewish ritual that the mourners were to remember the deceased as living. At the burial plot, the members of the family shoveled dirt onto Grandmother's casket. The family went home to Bertha's meal after the funeral. Among the relatives were two Rudinskys. Although the Gelmans and Rudinskys had come through immigration together the families had parted ways when Garik Rudinsky asked Slava's Grandfather for money to invest in a fleet of limousines. Slava and the Rudinsky's daughter, Vera, had played together as children. The fact the Vera and her grandfather, Lazar, had attended the funeral wasn't enough to please Slava's Grandfather.

As Slava looked at Vera he tried to find the girl who had played with him as a child. The girl his parents, and her parents, had thought he would marry. Grandfather stood with his glass. He told how he and Grandmother had been in a car accident in Crimea twenty-five years prior. He blamed her death on the bad blood she'd been given after that wreck. They challenged their children to continue the work of the old people but hoped they wouldn't have to go through the things that they went through. They also requested their children remember their past. Uncle Pasha told Slava his story, talking until Slava lied and said he had to go to the bathroom.

Slava stopped in the kitchen and turned on the water. Vera followed him. She cried on his shoulder about his grandmother. He asked if she still spoke Italian and she admitted she'd visited Italy last year but preferred to go to Las Vegas. Vera asked Slava to come over some time. She believed the two of them working together could fix the division between their families.

Later, Slava's Grandfather told Slava he had something he wanted Slava to look at. It was a letter for his wife from the Conference on Material Claims Against Germany. Holocaust victims were being given restitution for what they had gone through. Grandfather was angry because Grandmother had lived 60 years since the Holocaust but the conference had only notified she could get money just before she died. He asked Slava to write a letter on his behalf. When Slava tried to refuse, Grandfather reminded Slava that his great-uncle Aaron was in a mass grave in Latvia. He explained why he'd fled to Uzbekistan. He didn't want his mother to grieve any more than she already had. Slava continued to refuse and Grandfather angrily told him he didn't need his services. He walked out of the room where they were talking.

Analysis

It is in this chapter of the novel that the situation that will become central to the novel is introduced. Grandfather has learned that some Jews — those who were confined in



ghettos or concentration camps — were being offered restitution by the German government. Grandfather tried to get Slava to agree to write the story of his grandmother's experience in the Minsk ghetto but to say that it had happened to his grandfather. Slava first refused because he believed lying was morally wrong. He pointed out to his grandfather that he had not suffered in the way that was required by the German government in order to get restitution. He argued he could be put in jail for writing a fictitious letter. On grandfather's side of the argument, however, the old man said it was unfair for the government to pick and choose who was eligible for restitution when all Jews had suffered. His brother was buried in an unmarked grave. His father had been sentenced to a hard labor camp, when he came home, grandfather hadn't even recognized him. To add fuel to grandfather's fire, his wife had been on a registry of people who had survived the Minsk ghetto for 60 years. He felt the people in charge had waited until she was at the point of death before they sent her an application for the funds for which she was eligible.

Money is an issue in several instances in this section of the novel. When grandfather tried to get Slava to write a fictional letter for him Slava asked if grandfather really needed more money. His grandfather's response was that money never hurt anyone. Also note that when Vera and Slava were living near one another in Italy they would play together. Their parents talked about the money the children might make together. In the end, however, it was a disagreement about money that separated the two families.

This discussion of money leads to the reason why the Gelmans and the Rudinskys parted ways once they reached America. At his grandmother's funeral, Slava was surprised to see Vera and Lazar Rudinsky at the funeral. The history between the two families is described. They had gone through immigrations together and have lived near each other in both Austria and Italy. Once in America, however, Garik Rudinsky had started the division by asking Slava's grandfather for seed money with which he could start a limo business. Grandfather wouldn't give him the money because he didn't like to loan money if he couldn't charge interest. After that the families had drifted apart. Vera believed it was up to she and Slava to try to mend fences between their families.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think Grandfather was right in his argument that he was due restitution for what he'd been through during the war? Do you think it was right for him to use his wife's story to try to get that compensation?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Vera's idea that the children had to help mend the feud that had parted their parents. Discuss Slava's desire to stay out of the fight.



Discussion Question 3

Discuss the role of money as it is described in this section of the novel.

Vocabulary

petulant, condiments, docile, litheness, ambrosial, perverse, translucent, interlopers, felicitous, macabre, lurid, elliptical, lissome, restitution, plinth, conscripted, sentry, deviancy



Chapter 3

Summary

In Chapter 3, the story of how Slava's grandmother and grandfather met is told. His grandmother, Sofia, had gone to dance at the Spartak Dance Club. She danced with Captain Tereshkin whom she was afraid would want to walk her home. She didn't trust him so she approached Zhenya Gelman who was a childhood acquaintance. Zhenya arranged to discourage the captain and escort Sofia home. Several years later as they were walking home from another dance Zhenya had cut up a guy for calling him a "kike," a derogatory name for Jews. He had to serve a year in jail. She waited for him and they were married.

Slava had bought a notebook intending to write down details about his grandmother's life. When he was in school Slava had invented an assignment hoping his grandmother would tell him about her past if it was necessary for school. When he asked, he could tell she didn't want to talk about it so he asked instead how she and his grandfather fell in love.

Analysis

The majority of this chapter of the story is filled with the story of how Slava's grandmother and grandfather met. It also includes the story of how Slava tried to trick his grandmother into telling him the story of her experiences during the Holocaust. This story shows that Slava has lied before in order to get what he wanted. Slava had told his grandmother he had an assignment for school that required he write about her experiences in the Holocaust. When Slava saw how difficult it was for his grandmother to talk about what had happened to her, he asked her to tell him instead about how she and grandfather met.

The reader learns a bit more about Slava's grandfather in this section of the novel. They learn that he once went to jail because he cut up a man for calling him a kike, a derogatory name for the Jews. He is also described as "a child of other people's gardens." Even as a child and young man, Slava's grandfather already was getting the things he wanted, regardless of who he had to take it from. A point is also made about the attitudes of the immigrants about their move to America. On page 46 the author writes of Slava's grandmother: "they left the place that was soaked with the blood of her family for a place that meant nothing to her except what it would do for her grandson." This shows that the immigrants, like Slava's family, had in mind the futures of the young people in their families in mind.



Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast Slava's grandmother and grandfather as they are described in this section of the novel.

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think that Slava's grandmother would not talk to him about her experiences in the Holocaust?

Discussion Question 3

What does it say about Slava that he made up a fictional school assignment in order to get his grandmother to talk about her past?

Vocabulary

collaborator, finagled, liquidate, impermeable, ruse, pastiche, acquiesced, hectoring, feigning



Chapter 4

Summary

In Chapter 4, on Monday the Junior Staff at “Century” were on edge. Arianna the girl in the cubicle next to him told him his article was great. She had helped him get the opportunity to write the article. Peter Devicki had also written an article that would compete with Slava’s. Arianna challenged Slava to do something as if he’d already been told he would be published. Slava called his grandfather and told him to buy a copy of the magazine. He’d been desperately trying to get published in the magazine since he’d been hired there. None of his submissions had been accepted and Slava couldn’t understand why. He’d even studied and tried to copy the subjects and style of other “Century” articles. He’d even given out gifts in an effort to get noticed. Nothing had done any good.

In the conference room Slava studied the other people there. He remembered trying to copy the editor’s style of dress in an attempt to get noticed. He’d only embarrassed himself. For this article, Slava and Peter had been sent to interview Fred Duncan who was planning to scale the Grant mausoleum. Thirty-two voted in favor of using Peter’s article while three, including Peter, voted for Slava’s. Afterward Arianna told Slava she wanted to take him out to make him feel better. When he refused, she wrote down the name of the bar at which she would be before she left. He changed his mind and tried to catch up with her but was unable to do so.

Analysis

Slava’s writing is the major topic of this chapter of the novel. The reader has already learned that Slava wanted to write for “Century” so badly that he had distanced himself from his family. He’d finally been one of two writers invited to write an article for the magazine and thought it was his big chance. A polling of the other workers at the newspaper revealed an overwhelming majority of people believed the story written by Peter, another writer who had also been selected to write an article for that particular assignment. To make matters worse, Peter was one of the three people who voted in favor of Slava’s article.

Slava had written articles in the past for the magazine and submitted them voluntarily. These articles had never been published even though Slava had studied the type and style of articles that the magazine ran. Slava had even worked through the style of one particular article, trying to learn how to copy the style the editors of the magazine wanted. These activities on Slava’s part show how much he wanted to write for “Century.”



Discussion Question 1

What did Slava do in his attempt to try to write an article that would be published in "Century"?

Discussion Question 2

If you were Slava, how would you have felt about the way the vote went concerning the article he had written? Would it have discouraged you from trying again? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the relationship between Arianna and Slava up to this point. How did Arianna help Slava to get an offer to write an article?

Vocabulary

constitutional, oblivion, perpetual, hermetically, clavicle, leonine, eviscerating, incandescently, chagrined, hieroglyphic, melancholy, disapprobations, consternation, semiotics, procure, ergonomic, eccentric, picayune, latitudinally, sinuous, diffident, negligibly, plausible, firmament, solidarity, salacious, impugned, fetish, exoneration, sartorial, heretical, irradiating, exegesis, hale



Chapter 5

Summary

In Chapter 5, Slava changed and went to Bar Kabul. He looked through the window to pick Arianna out of the crowd before he went inside. They danced and talked. After Arianna asked him to show her how his picked up a girl, she asked him to take her to a different bar. On the way to Straight Shooters, the two talked. Adrianna pointed out landmarks. At the new bar Slava told Adrianna about his grandmother's death. Adrianna understood that she was a Holocaust survivor when Slava told her simply that his grandmother was a survivor. He mentioned the restitution letter as well as his grandfather's request that they turn in a story anyway. Adrianna told him they couldn't do that. He told her about the reasons he'd decided he wanted to write for "Century." He wanted people to recognize him for what he had written. Adrianna challenged him to write something and send it in to a different publication other than "Century." They went back to Slava's apartment. When he returned from the bathroom, she was in his bed, asleep. He called his grandfather. He asked the old man to tell him anything he knew about his grandmother and the ghetto. Grandfather told Slava what little he knew. With the few details he got, Slava sat down and created a story about his grandmother's experience, substituting his grandfather for the main character. When he woke up the next morning Arianna was gone but had left a note on the bathroom mirror telling him they should have sex.

Analysis

Because she also had a Jewish background Arianna understood what Slava meant when he said that his grandmother was a survivor. Notice that when he mentioned to Arianna that his grandfather wanted him to write about his grandmother's experiences in the ghetto as if they had happened to him Arianna told him that he couldn't. Arianna's character seems to represent the part of Slava's belief system that saw a strict divide between right and wrong. Because the things he would write in the letter would not have happened to his grandfather the letter would be a work of fiction. Arianna told Slava he could not participate in that type of activity. At this point in the novel, Slava agreed that doing as his grandfather asked would constitute immoral behavior.

For the first time the reader sees Slava argue with himself about this topic as he discussed it with Arianna. When he talked with his grandfather, Slava was of the same mindset as Arianna. He could not write the letter because it would be untrue. It was Slava's grandfather who brought the issue of morality into play. He argued he'd suffered just as his wife had suffered in the war but under different circumstances. As Slava discussed with Arianna the things that his grandfather went through because of the war it appeared almost as if he were reconsidering the idea of writing the letter. Notice that after Arianna told Slava the story of the Russians who had sold the memberships to the synagogue that her family had purchased for them Slava picked up on fact that



Arianna's father had bent the rules to get the Russians into the synagogue. Arianna excused her father's actions as she said they were for a good cause. Slava poses the question: Who gets to decide what is a good cause?

In terms of Slava's writing, Arianna saw Slava's talent but knew he wouldn't make it at "Century." He knew Slava's style wasn't what the editors there liked. She suggested that if he wanted to be read and recognized as an author he needed to send his writing to magazines or newspapers other than "Century."

Continue to notice the literary techniques the author uses to enliven his story. When giving the "rundown" of his dating life Slava describes it is this way: "The rundown ran downhill" (p. 73). The sentence not only includes alliteration but also a rhythm that seems choppy and final, like the love life Slava described. Another jewel in the writing in this chapter is the sentence: "Drunkenness had left him, as if he were an inhospitable host" (p. 85). The metaphor leaves the reader with the sense that Slava's sense of being drunk had left in a rude and abrupt manner leaving him feeling as if he had done something wrong.

Discussion Question 1

What is the purpose of the story that Arianna told Slava about the Russian immigrants that her parents attempted to provide with memberships to the synagogue?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think that Slava agreed to write the letter for his grandfather even after he'd told the old man he wouldn't write it and Arianna advised him that he shouldn't write it?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the story that Slava wrote for his grandfather. Do you think it was believable? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

ignominious, panoply, celibate, flotsam, liaison, escarpment, dilettante, magnanimity, dispensation, abate, stridency, miscegenating, assimilating, imposition, carbine, ambushed, liquidated, deluge



Chapter 6

Summary

In Chapter 6, Slava's family was tearful in its appreciation of the history he wrote for grandfather. It was at work that day that Slava first had the idea he could invent one of the newspaper flubs that he supplied for the column "The Hoot." His thoughts were interrupted when Beau Reasons headed toward the Junior Staff. Trying to make a joke, Beau told them readers had complained about the magazine having too many ads and said they'd have to cut the ads out manually. While Beau was still there Slava's phone rang, an unfamiliar number so Slava didn't answer it. When it rang again Beau was walking away. Slava answered and found himself talking to a man named Israel Abramson. He'd heard that Slava had written a letter for his grandfather and wanted him to write a letter for him. Slava told Israel he'd call him back and phoned Grandfather. He was angry with his grandfather and asked if he hoped to make a family tradition of going to jail. When he hung up he researched fraud in Holocaust restitution claims. He contacted Professor Andrew Morton, pretending to be Peter, asking what the punishment might be if someone were sending fraudulent claims. Morton said the person would probably be charged with theft and perhaps even extradited to Germany for punishment.

Arianna was standing in the doorway to the library when Slava finished his call. He decided to go for a walk with her so he could question her about fact checking. They talked about the grieving process for a while before Slava maneuvered the conversation to fact checking. She defined a fact as anything that could make someone angry if it were wrong. She told him there was no way to check things like personal impressions or opinions.

Analysis

In this section of the novel another immigrant from Minsk called Slava for a letter. Slava's grandfather had told his friend from his home country about the letter that Slava had written even though Slava had requested that he tell no on what he had done. After Israel called, Slava began researching what might happen to him if he were to get caught. He called Professor Andrew Morton at Stanford Law School pretending to be Peter and was told that someone responsible for sending in fake claims would be guilty of theft or fraud. He also mentioned the person would be indicted for the crimes and possibly extradited to Germany for his crimes there as well. Remember Slava's phone call to the professor as it will become important later in the novel.

In his quest to determine how wrong he was in writing a fictional letter for his grandfather and what his punishment might be, Slava discussed with Arianna, who was a fact checker for "Century," the things that might raise a red flag to her that a fact was wrong. Note that he wouldn't give her a straight answer about why he was questioning



her so closely. Notice also it was in this section that Slava first began making up the flubs he was supposed to search other newspapers and send in for the column “The Hoot.” He considered the idea that he could make up these goofs and even the newspapers from which they came without anyone noticing he’d fabricated the information.

In terms of his writing, notice that Slava compared himself to a suppressed writer from the Soviet Union in that he wrote rejoinders for the newspaper bloopers he found but did not share them with anyone. He described himself as writing these comebacks “for the drawer” just as those Soviet writers had done. At one time Slava had sent the quips he made up with the newspaper flubs but after the editor had used one of his rejoinders without asking permission Slava felt “like he had been slept with but not called the next day” (p. 93).

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Slava pretend to be Peter when he called Professor Morton about the consequences of a person who sent in fraudulent requests for restitution funds? What did he learn from the professor?

Discussion Question 2

Based on the information in this section of the novel do you think there would be any way for a restitution verification committee to decide if a story was factually correct or not? Give reasons to defend your answer.

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think that Slava’s grandfather told Israel about his letter even though Slava had asked him not to tell anyone about the letter? Do you think it was just pride or do you think there was something else going on?

Vocabulary

rejoinder, provincial, strident, sonorously, entourage, patronymic, acumen, fabulist, advocate, pinioned, alliterationist, proprietary, hypothetical, despondently, demented, conjecture



Chapters 7 and 8

Summary

In Chapter 7, Slava went to visit Israel the following Friday. He'd decided to write the letter for Israel because he wanted to see if he could meet with his grandmother again in the writing of that letter as he had with the one for his grandfather. Israel told Slava that his wife had died eighteen months ago and that his son had gotten mixed up with Orthodox Jews and moved back to Israel. Slava mentioned it was good to know someone who grew up with his grandfather. Israel told Slava how Slava's grandfather had gotten a twenty-four hour nurse by bribing the nurse and pretending to be unable to care for himself. Israel told Slava his grandfather was the type of man who could get the things he wanted for himself. He went on to tell about grandfather stealing and distributing fifteen sticks of salami as bribes when they were still in Minsk. He also pointed out that while others had fought in the war, Slava's grandfather had been in Uzbekistan where there was no war being fought.

Before Slava left, Israel asked him why he thought the people at the commission would believe that an immigrant had written the letter that Slava would write for him. He suggested Slava needed to incorporate some facts to give his stories grounding. He also warned Slava not to pretend he was writing the letters to be a good grandson. On the way home, Slava called his grandfather. He begged the old man to tell him something else about his grandmother. His grandfather could tell him only that there were programs in the ghetto for thinning the herds.

In Chapter 8, when Slava woke up in Arianna's apartment on Saturday morning she asked him to make breakfast. He told her he had things to do. Before he left, he asked her again about fact checking, why the facts really mattered. She told him it was because she didn't want to give a reader a reason to lose trust. He told her the story of his grandfather avoiding fighting in World War II and asked if he were a hero or a coward. When he left Arianna he went home for a shower and then to the Yorkville branch of the New York Public Library where he researched the Holocaust. Later that day he called Israel telling him he was wrong about Slava's need to incorporate facts into this stories. Instead of giving facts, which could be checked, Slava reasoned they needed to steer the reader away from the facts. Even after he got Israel to agree with him, Slava couldn't find a way to incorporate his grandmother into the history. He thought of Arianna and wondered if she would have objected to his grandmother's story being transferred to his grandfather if it had been she who had lived through the Holocaust. Despite his struggles, Slava wrote a story for Israel. The story included a mother who smothered her baby because it was crying when she and others were trying to hide from the Germans.



Analysis

One of the ideas presented in this novel is the pathetic way that the people who immigrated to America lived. Israel Abramson's poor living conditions seem to be common for people who immigrated to America. He lived in a tiny apartment and depended upon charity for food. When Slava met with Israel, Israel described to Slava how Slava's grandfather had always been the person who could get things. Israel said he envied Yevgeny's life style but didn't have his willingness to steal, cheat and barter to get it. One of the stories Israel told about Yevgeny was the story of how he had gotten a full time nurse to care for his wife. Israel said Yevgeny had bragged at the doctor's office about how he had pretended to have been reduced to a vegetative state because of the toll his wife's care was taking on him.

Although he hadn't thought he would at first, Slava decided to go ahead and write a letter for Israel because it was while writing these letters that he felt close to his grandmother. He also felt he had not portrayed her correctly in the letter that he'd written for his grandfather and hoped to do her better justice in the one he wrote for Israel.

Notice in this chapter that Slava didn't call his grandfather to find out where Israel lived. Instead he called the doctor's office where both Israel and his grandfather went for medical care and lied about being Israel's grandson. As the relationship between Israel and Slava develops, Slava's impersonation as Israel's grandson will become more significant.

Israel does try to change Slava's writing style by telling him that he needed to add facts into his stories. Israel, who claimed to be a fellow writer, said he thought these facts would make the stories more believable. Slava considered his input but discarded it because he believed that giving facts in a story like a historian or encyclopedia might do would only give the verification committee ammunition in the form of facts they could use against Slava if he were ever caught.

As Arianna and Slava discussed the grey area between right and wrong, Slava told her about his grandfather and how he'd gotten out of fighting in World War II. His grandfather had basically lied about his age and then ran away to keep from being drafted. Slava's grandfather had given Slava the reasons why he ran away from the fighting. His brother had already been killed in the war and his father had been in a hard work camp. Slava didn't tell Arianna why his grandfather had avoided the draft. He did ask her if she thought he was a hero or a coward based on his behavior.

In the theme of writing, Slava connected with Israel because he read and because he quoted what he had read. Israel's reference to himself as a writer irritated Slava because he wondered why Israel wasn't writing his own letter if he was the writer he said he was. In the same token, however, Slava wondered what sort of writer he was if he had to call his grandfather for information about his grandmother every time he needed a prompt on which to start a story. Slava didn't believe he was much of a writer if he couldn't invent a story on his own. A quote of note in this section is one by Israel in



which he compared writing to a woman. “Nice sentences is like a beautiful woman who doesn’t know how to cook” (p. 117) Israel said of Slava’s writing. The intention, of course, is that a sentence can be well written but not convey any important information just like a woman might be beautiful but not good as a wife because she couldn’t cook.

Discussion Question 1

Consider Israel’s words to Slava that Slava’s grandfather didn’t give just to give but so that others could see that he had given. What do you think Israel meant by this statement?

Discussion Question 2

In this section Slava asked Arianna if the actions his grandfather took to keep from being involved in the fighting in World War II were heroic or cowardly. What is your opinion of the grandfather’s actions?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the conditions in which Israel lived. How were his living conditions and his poverty similar to those of other immigrants? As their lives in America have been described so far, do you think they were better off in America than their home countries?

Vocabulary

dreck, topographical, banished, cavaliness, arabesque, pious, mediocre, braggart, conjure, waif, degenerates, collaborated, conscription, levity, cantilevered, pyrrhic, sacrilege, protagonist, sadistic, sentient



Chapter 9

Summary

In Chapter 9, Slava didn't talk to Arianna again until Monday morning. He'd spent Sunday translating Israel's letter into Russian. Israel recognized it was Slava's grandmother whom he'd used as the model for the girl who was Israel's sister. He told her he'd always admired Slava's grandmother and that he hoped Slava got a woman like her. Israel described her as being opposite Slava's grandfather as she was one who could hold a grudge but also was a woman with a big heart.

Slava called his grandfather. He learned his grandfather had begun talking in his sleep since his wife's death. Grandfather said he'd heard that Slava had written a letter for Israel. Slava tried to point out to his grandfather how much better his living conditions were than Israel's. His grandfather changed the subject and told him that Vera wanted Slava to meet with her and some friends. He told Slava if he'd meet with Vera that night, he would give him the name of another person for whom he could write a letter the next day. Grandfather told Slava that Vera was the same type of girl his grandmother was, one who would do anything for him. Grandfather got angry when Slava asked if he was too proud to make peace himself.

Vova the taxi driver came to pick up Slava and Vera at her apartment. At the party Vera introduced Slava to her friends as a writer. Just before they sat down to eat, Adrianna called. He lied and said he was at a funeral. At dinner Vera told a story how Slava had saved his family during their immigration interview. Later, Leonard told Slava he thought he was a prick, but that he was all right. The young people danced until midnight. As they waited for the taxi Vera told Slava she had an idea how to get his family and her family back together.

Analysis

In the theme of Immigration, when Slava spoke to his grandfather on the phone, he pointed out the differences between the way Israel lived and the way that his grandfather lived. His grandfather agreed that Israel had a rough life but also said he'd tried to help Israel but Israel had refused his help. Also notice in this same theme that when Vera's friends met Slava they assumed he'd be a prick because he worked for an American magazine. Like the doormen, it appeared Vera's friends thought that Slava would somehow think he was better than they were because he was working for an American magazine. Even though these people had immigrated to America and were American citizens, it is clear they did not consider themselves part of American culture. The dividing lines between us (the immigrants) and them (the Americans) are very clear. For instance, Vova asked if Slava was working for one of their newspapers, meaning a Russian one. When Slava's grandfather talked to Slava about Vera he told Slava that Vera would be good for him because she was one of them.



Notice in this section the differences between Vera and Slava. Even though they arrived in America at the same time they developed into different types of adults. Slava had abandoned his family in order to try to make a living at an American magazine. Vera, however, still lived in the Brooklyn neighborhood with the other immigrants. Slava spoke English like a native but Vera did not because she had stayed in Brooklyn and spent most of her days speaking Russian. Vera pointed out to Slava that even though Slava had moved away to the American portion of New York, Vera's parents had always told her how good Slava was and had asked why she wasn't more like him. Notice that Vera accused Slava of running away, making it seem as if he had absconded, just as his grandfather had done from World War II.

While they were together, Vera once again mentioned to Slava that she had an idea how they could get their parents to reconcile. Slava said again that he thought since their parents were grown ups, they should handle their own reconciliation. Notice, however, that it was Slava's grandfather who told Slava that Vera wanted him to meet some friends. He would only give Slava the name of another Jew who wanted a letter written if Slava agreed to meet with Vera.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the way the people of Slava's generation seem to view their status as immigrants. How is it different from the way the people of Slava's grandfather's age see it?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Vera was so insistent that she and Slava try to help their families reconcile?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Israel's description of Slava's grandmother. How was she different from his grandfather?

Vocabulary

disparaged, disabuse, insolently, purview, dissipate, impose, synonymous, bourgeois, proletariat, aptitude, demurely, paramour, imperceptibly



Chapter 10

Summary

In Chapter 10, Slava took almost all of the requests for letters that he got through his grandfather. He turned down one who wanted to send a letter to the president requesting a larger apartment while one gentleman wanted a letter written requesting a ride to the grocery store. He imagined his grandmother in each of the letters. As he met the families and worked with them he wished each time that his grandfather would give him Vera's name. He was confused in his feelings for her. He wished his grandfather would give him her name as a person who needed a letter written. He didn't dare just take her to bed.

One night when walking home after a meeting with one of his families, Slava felt he was being followed. It turned out to be a teenaged boy named Oleg Smeshko. He asked if Slava was the one who wrote letters and handed him a story to read. Slava read the boy's story and talked to him about writing. When the boy said he couldn't go to college because he had no money for it Slava suggested he write a letter of his own for the money to get a start in school. When the boy said his family weren't even Jews, Slava told him they could be anything they wanted in the letter. He felt the boy would have done anything he suggested, like having a younger brother.

Slava continued to stay at Arianna's apartment. He envied that she loved New York. He didn't love or feel an attachment for any place. He wondered once how his life might be different if his family hadn't left Minsk. Adrianna asked him once what he was working on every night. Instead of lying to her, he told her he preferred not to talk about it. One night when he was at her house she invited him to go with her on her nightly walk. They went to Central Park where they could see the stars.

Analysis

Slava had once tried to distance himself from Brooklyn where the immigrants lived. When he began writing the letters, he began immersing himself in the culture in the name of research. For each family he visited he would buy a gift at a Russian bakery or grocery store. When he listened to the immigrants talk he could recognize the part of Russia they'd come from by their pronunciation. Note that Slava describes the people as having in common the language that they spoke and their dislike for Americans. He says that for these people who immigrated to America, time has stopped. While in Russia, life has moved on past the war and the time of Soviet rule, the immigrants in America however are stuck in time and base their future only on what their children might do. When he considers Vera and her lifestyle, Slava doesn't believe the children will do much beyond what their parents have done.



Slava briefly considers how his life might be different if he and his family had stayed in Minsk. He regrets that he doesn't really feel connected to New York, or to any place, for that matter. He wasn't in Minsk the city of his birth for very long. He remembers only feeling dread there because he was afraid he'd be physically hurt because he was a Jew. He wonders if in his life in Minsk if his grandmother would still be alive. Note that he called the life that might have been had the family stayed in Minsk his replacement life, a reference to the title of the novel.

Adding to the theme of Money in this section of the novel, Slava is surprised how easily the older Jews tell their stories once they had the promise these stories would bring them a reward in the form of cash. The families, like Slava with his grandmother, had been too considerate to force their loved ones to tell their stories. Now, the families are learning the stories and situations that forced their families to move to America. Note that Slava thought of himself as a middleman in the story telling as he worked between the elders and their families to get for them the knowledge about their forebears, and the elders and the restitution service to get the elders money.

In the theme of Writing Slava was creating a name for himself, at least in the Russian neighborhoods. One night he was followed by a teenaged boy, Oleg Smeshko, who wanted tips on writing from Slava. The boy let Slava read some of the stories he had written. Slava, in turn, gave the boy suggestions on how to improve his metaphors and simile. He also suggested the boy could write a letter of his own in order to get money to pay for school.

Also note a few of the catchy quotes in this chapter of the novel. The clock is personified in this chapter so the writer gives the time by writing: "When the clock hands agreed on six P.M." (p. 158). He also describes the immigrants who lived in America as being "unlike people had been tossed together like salad" (p. 159).

Discussion Question 1

It is in this section of the novel that the phrase "replacement life" a reference to the title of the novel is mentioned. In this mention the replacement life refers to the one Slava might have had if his family had stayed in Russia. What life do you think is being referred to in the title of the novel? Is Slava living his replacement life?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the way the elderly Jews were more willing to tell their stories when there was the promise of money involved. What does this say about the power of money?

Discussion Question 3

How was Slava's willingness to write the letters for these unfamiliar Jews connected to the grief he felt because he missed his grandmother?

Vocabulary

procurement, pensioner, sedition, cupidity, temerity, demotic, pillage, cuckolding, diffidently, congenitally, irrefutable, ostensibly, agrarian



Chapter 11

Summary

In Chapter 11, Vera answered when Slava knocked on the Rudinskys' door. Vera had called and asked him to come but she handed him off to Aunt Lyuba, her mother. After Aunt Lyuba caught him up on her family's situation, she called Vera to get dressed and sent Slava upstairs to talk to her. Upstairs she sat on her bed. Slava asked her about a binder of Halloween costumes at which she was looking. She said it was for work as they had a big event coming up on Monday. After she finished dressing they went downstairs where her father, Garik, and grandfather, Lazar, had come home. Garik exclaimed that Slava's presence in the house was cause for celebration.

Slava's grandfather called. Slava told him he was with a woman, Vera. His grandfather said he'd gotten bad news. A distant relative had sent in a letter for restitution but had been denied because he was said to be ineligible. His grandfather had heard at the Jewish Center that they were trying to get the deadline for restitution extended and the rules expanded concerning who was eligible. Slava again reminded his grandfather what could happen to him if he were caught as the one writing fictitious restitution requests. Grandfather told Slava families who hadn't even come to see him after grandmother's funeral had come to see him after Slava wrote a letter for him.

After Slava got off the phone he talked to the family as the women finished preparing dinner. Over dinner Aunt Lyuba told him that Vera worked for a fashion boutique and made more than \$50,000 a year. Even though they weren't finished eating yet Lazar ordered the table cleared so the men could talk. Lazar had been in an infantry battalion where he'd lost his hearing. He'd never been in a ghetto. He did tell a story about his brother taking an eyeball from a man who had called him a kike. Lazar and his friend pretended to be policeman and went to the home of the injured man to try to settle things without Lazar's brother going to jail. He had been able to help his brother when he gave the judge in the case a bribe. Lazar explained to Slava he was telling him the story so he could understand the difference between his own people and everyone else. His own people would kill for him, just as Vera would kill for him. Slava said it was time for him to go home and Lazar handed him an envelope. Lazar told Slava his grandfather had told him not to give it to Slava. Lyuba chided Lazar for not waiting until "they" came. At that time the doorbell rang.

Slava felt he knew who was at the door but hoped he was wrong. When the door was opened it was Slava's mother, father and grandfather. Vera called him to her in the kitchen where she was looking for china. She asked if he were going to help her or not. He was angry and confused. In the living room with the others, Slava gave the envelope of money to his grandfather. Vera snagged the envelope and tried to change the subject. As the adults talked Slava figured that if his grandfather had charged for all of the letters he would have made about at least \$5,500. He suddenly felt that Vera had set up the meeting, that she was using him. She felt him staring at her and handed the



envelope back to him. When Slava excused himself to write the letter they got upset but he left anyway.

Analysis

This chapter is a major turning point in the novel because it is in this chapter that Slava learned his grandfather had been charging people for the letters Slava was writing. He also realized he was being used as a pawn by both his grandfather and by Vera. Notice Slava's grandfather timed a call just as Slava had arrived at the Rudinskys' home. He foreshadows that he will see Slava that day "I guess we'll see each other" (p. 178). Of special importance in this section is Lazar's conversation with Slava. He told Slava a story about the loyalty of his friends and then asked Slava if his friends were as loyal as the friends in his story were. He was trying to make the point to Slava that if he expected loyalty, he needed to stay with his own people. Lazar encouraged Slava to seek a relationship with Vera. He said that Vera would stand behind him even if he was turned in for writing the fictitious letters. Even as Lazar tried to encourage Slava to pay more attention to Vera he also pointed out a difference between the two. He said that Vera didn't expect the world to be something it was not while Slava had always expected too much. He pointed out that even as a boy Slava had demanded they all buy tickets when riding the trolley. No one was allowed on the car if they hadn't bought a ticket. "Even as a boy, you wanted, above all, justice" (p. 184) Lazar said of Slava. He commented he would have made a good Communist.

Several points are made in this chapter of the novel that add to the theme of Immigration. During his conversation with Lazar, for example, Slava questioned why Lazar continued to consider himself a foreigner and set himself apart from Americans. Lazar tried to explain to Slava that it would take time for the family to be completely acclimated to the American culture. He said it was a process that would take place on its own time schedule. Also notice the hidden statement that Aunt Lyuba made when she talked to Slava about her husband's job. In America, he worked long hours as a taxi driver. In Russia, however, he had been the chief geologist at the State Institute of Earth Materials in Minsk. Imagine what a blow it must have been for Garik to go from a position as a geologist, one that probably required special schooling if not a college degree, to driving a taxi and singing in Russian for extra money.

In the theme of Money, even though he was an old man, Lazar knew exactly what was going on. He knew that Slava was committing a crime by falsifying the letters he was writing for people. He knew that Slava would be writing one of these false letters with his name on it. By the way he discussed it with Slava, he also didn't think the eligibility guidelines were fair. As Lazar said, "If you were in the ghetto, you get funds. If you had three limbs amputated at the front, you get nothing" (p. 185). Notice also that although Lazar had been instructed by Slava's grandfather to give the letter writing fee to him, Lazar decided instead to give it to Slava. Lazar knew Slava wasn't aware his grandfather was charging for the letters and wanted him to know what was happening.



During his conversation with Slava on the telephone, Slava's grandfather gave him the bad news that a distant relative had told the truth about his experiences in Red Army and was turned down for restitution. It made sense to Slava that the person who told the truth about his experiences even though he knew what he had experienced didn't qualify for restitution would be turned down. Slava's grandfather was confused. It is this issue that haunts Slava through the remainder of the novel. He was telling lies to help save his people from their poverty. The poverty they faced because they had been run out of their homes and their jobs because they were Jewish. Was it right that the German government felt that only those who had been in ghettos and concentration camps were due restitution? As someone in the novel pointed out most of those people weren't even alive any more. They hadn't survived their imprisonment. Grandfather's call made Slava mad because once he'd been out in the homes of other immigrants, he realized how good his grandfather's life was compared to theirs. He used Israel as an example of a man with truly poor living conditions as a comparison to his grandfather who still had the benefit of a free house servant. Slava described Israel's life as being like that of a political prisoner. At this point Grandfather turned the conversation and pointed out to Slava that people who hadn't even come after grandmother's funeral were coming to visit because Slava was writing such good letters.

There are also movements made toward healing the bad feelings that divided the Rudinskys and Gelmans when they first came to America. Notice the descriptions of how the Rudinsky men were feeling when they heard the doorbell and knew it was the Gelmans. Garik felt both responsible for the feud because he'd asked Yevengy for money but also felt he had the biggest reason to still be angry with that man. Lazar had gotten so old he felt the continued separation of the families was silly. As Slava realized what was happening, he felt as if he had been played by both his grandfather and by Vera.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Slava get so upset when he realized his grandfather was charging people for the letters Slava was writing for them?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think Lazar had an ulterior motive in his discussion with Slava? Why did Lazar give Slava the envelope of money when he was supposed to have given it to Slava's grandfather?

Discussion Question 3

Why was Slava upset with Vera? How did she use him to jumpstart a reconciliation? Why do you think Slava so badly did not want to be part of a reconciliation of the families?



Vocabulary

disheveled, gabardine, striations, obsidian, coercing, historic, affidavit, dervish, solidarity, decimated, agnostic, avenge, valorous, estrangement, imbecility, progeny



Chapters 12 and 13

Summary

In Chapter 12, as he left the Rudinskys' home, Slava realized he was back at the point at which he'd started when he tried to distance himself from his family and his culture. On his way to the subway station he spotted Israel Abramson walking, wearing his Red Army uniform. Slava followed him to a Jewish temple. Slava watched from the back as Israel lit a candle, said some words and then left. The rabbi called to Slava. Slava claimed to be Israel's grandson. The rabbi asked if he'd ever been inside a synagogue before. Slava remembered the time he had visited the synagogue in Vienna with his grandfather. His grandfather had indicated to Slava that the worshippers were crazy, and then they snuck off for ice cream. Before he left, Slava asked the rabbi's advice on the proper amount of time for mourning a death. The rabbi told him that while the rituals were finished in a set amount of time, there was no set amount of time after which he had to stop thinking about his deceased loved one.

Israel was waiting for Slava outside. He'd known Slava was following him. The rabbi joined them outside and Slava was surprised when Israel referred to him as his grandson. Although Israel complained, they sat at the bottom of the steps to the temple and rested. Slava handed Israel the envelope of money and told him there had been a misunderstanding. Israel, however, told Slava he wanted him to have a good time and handed him the envelope back.

In Chapter 13, on the subway Slava tried to come up with thoughts for Lazar's story. He suddenly noticed a cyclist staring at him and worried he was being followed. He slipped off the subway at the last minute before the doors closed. The cyclist didn't seem to notice. He called his grandfather and asked how long he'd been charging people for the letters. He asked again if he had any idea how his grandmother had gotten out of the ghetto. Slava told his grandfather that he wished he'd made his grandmother tell her story. Grandfather reminded that Slava hadn't forced her because he loved her. Slava wrote Lazar's story with part of it loosely based on the story of how his grandparents met.

As he thought about the story he'd just written, Slava was surprised to hear the phone ring. The man introduced himself as Otto Barber from the Conference on Material Claims Against Germany. Otto told Slava some of the letters they were receiving were false and asked for Slava's help. Although he was afraid he had been caught, Slava agreed to meet the man at a bar at 7 p.m. on Monday.

Analysis

This section of the novel is significant because it is during this section that Otto Barber from the Conference on Material Claims against Germany contacted Slava. It was the



first sign that anyone had noticed that the letters were fictional. Notice that Otto didn't make it clear why he wanted to talk to Slava. He said only that he'd gotten a report that some of the letters were false. Slava assumed that Otto knew Slava had written the fictional letters.

Although he hadn't intended to Slava spent some time with Israel after he left the Rudiskys' home. He saw the elderly man walking and decided to follow him just to be sure he stayed safe. Notice Israel's habit of speaking in Russian is discussed in this section of the novel. While the rabbi, Slava and Israel were talking, Israel suddenly jumped into the conversation with a string of foreign words. His interruption was interpreted as being proof of the Soviet's "indifference to comprehension as the primary objective of dialogue" (p. 201). Notice also the issue of immigration comes up when Israel talked with Slava about his son. Israel wondered if it were something about America that made his son convert and move away.

In the theme of Money, notice that Slava gave the money that Lazar had given to him to Israel. Slava knew Israel didn't have the money to pay for a letter. Despite this fact, Israel gave the money back to Slava. He told Slava he wanted him to use the money to go out and have a good time.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the conversation between Israel and Slava.

Discussion Question 2

What do you think Otto has on Slava? How do you think he learned Slava's name?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the story that Slava wrote for Lazar.

Vocabulary

aesthetically, epileptically, apiary, fabricated, bulwarking, accursed, conspiratorially



Chapter 14

Summary

In Chapter 14, Slava got up early Saturday unable to sleep. He wondered what his grandmother would think of him. He called his mother knowing she would be up even though it was early. He asked his mother if she thought his grandmother would have gone along with what he was doing. His mother told him that his grandmother loved him but didn't know what else to say. He went back to bed and went to sleep but had a nightmare. When he woke from the nightmare, he hit his head on the shelf above Arianna's bed. She woke up and could feel his anger. He followed her to the bathroom. He knew it was the letters that was coming between them. She recognized there was something between them and mentioned the distance but he didn't share with her what it was.

They decided to go for a walk. They first went to the Museum of Natural History. Slava told her he wanted to show her something. He took her to Brooklyn. They walked, Slava sharing his memories with Arianna. She told him it was the first time she'd seen the ocean since she'd been in New York. They played in the ocean and then fell asleep in the sand.

Analysis

Now that he believed that he had been caught in the writing of the fictitious letters, Slava wondered what his grandmother would think of him. He wondered if she had gone along with grandfather's plans. He called his mother to talk to her about his grandmother. She told him only that his grandmother would have loved his regardless of what he had done.

Meanwhile, Slava took Ariana to tour Brooklyn. It was not until Slava realized he was walking through neighborhoods where he had written letters for people that he became nervous with the idea of her being in Brooklyn with him. He didn't want her to find out what he was doing, especially since she had told him that he shouldn't write false letters.

One of the most significant quotes in this section of the novel deals with the conversation that Slava had with Otto. In it, the author describes the conversation between the two as: "...writing itself in his mind like a false letter" (p. 220). The author uses the idea of a false letter in comparison to his conversation with Otto to keep the idea that Slava did write false letters in the mind of the reader without directly mentioning these letters.



Discussion Question 1

Discuss the dream that Slava had. What do you think it meant?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think it was so important to Slava that his grandmother approve of what he was doing?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Slava's trip to Brooklyn with Arianna. Why did he think he might have made a mistake in taking her there?

Vocabulary

subterfuges, paradox, soiree, entendres, perfidious, levity, pallid, euphoric, choleric, sacerdotal, rancid, machinations



Chapters 15 and 16

Summary

In Chapter 15, on Monday a story broke in the “Times” about a lawyer, Howard Settledecker, who was appealing for the eligibility requirements to be expanded for Holocaust survivors. Beau sent Peter and Slava to cover a press conference at the Museum of Jewish History. As they rode in a cab together downtown, Slava asked Peter what his secret was. Peter said Slava didn’t write in the style “Century” wanted.

Despite the heat the press conference was being held outside the museum. Peter commented on Settledecker’s ill fitting suit and unkept look. Slava knew he was trying to look like a poor Jew. Slava noticed the people in the audience were Russian Jews, and that they were wearing prison costumes with numbers and yellow stars under their jackets. The press conference started. Settledecker started talking them stopped. An assistant went down to remind the Jews in the audience to walk across the platform. He set the stage of his conference by having the people imagine America was attacked the same way Russia had been. He singled out a cameraman whom Slava realized had been staged. Settledecker told a story about the man and his family saying that his wife and children were able to escape from the ghetto but he was unable to do so. His wife worked in a factory while his children were in the military. After the war, the entire family has survived, but only the husband is eligible for restitution because he was in a ghetto. Settledecker asked if all the members of the family had not suffered and were due restitution.

Settledecker decided to let the survivors speak for themselves but the first woman he called to the stage spoke no English. Slava recognized the assistant who came to the stage to translate for the woman. It was Vera. After the conference, the two talked. Slava asked why she hadn’t mentioned it. She also told him the museum wouldn’t allow them to hold the conference inside because they didn’t like the idea of the survivors dressing as prisoners. He learned from Vera that the conference was her idea. Vera said she wanted the old people who were in a place they didn’t understand to have comfort. Slava asked her why he thought their parents wanted them to be together, especially since he had tried to separate himself from the family. Vera told him that even though he was strange, he was still one of them and that was better than an American. Before they parted, Vera told him she’d see him tomorrow as the family was getting together at his Grandfather’s to mail the letters.

In Chapter 16, at his meeting with Otto Barber, Otto started by telling a story. Then he told Slava his job was to make it so the survivors got their money more quickly. He told Slava if he couldn’t find who was writing the false letters the possibility of expanded eligibility would probably go away. If he were able to identify which claims were false, however, the situation could be handled internally. The person writing the letters could give up the false claims and allow those with real claims to get their money. Slava pushed the man, asking how he found about some of the claims were false. Otto told



him he'd gotten a call. Slava asked why Otto was talking to him as there were probably people who studied fraud. Otto agreed there was and said he'd talked to Professor Andrew Morton. Morton had told him about the call he'd received from Peter at "Century." Otto said he knew it wasn't Peter writing the letters because they weren't in his style. Otto pulled out a folder of the letters Slava had written and pointed out the similarities. Even though he claimed it was Slava's style, Slava told the man he couldn't be paid to do that type of writing. Otto finally told Slava he had to choose and that he would be waiting for him.

Analysis

Slava and Otto discuss a new issue in the grey area that exists between truth and lies. Although some reason that one lie can make up for another but Otto told Slava he didn't subscribe to that line of thinking. "I do not believe in the sin of collection" (p. 257) Otto told Slava. He said that while the Jews had been treated terribly during the war, there were also Red Army soldiers who had raped German women. He argued it was not acceptable to break the law or lie even if that illegal activity were being done to make up for a past injustice.

Meanwhile, a group calling itself the Advocates for Historical Justice held a press conference about their desire to have the eligibility requirements for the restitution expanded. The head of the group pointed out how unfair it was for just a few people to get restitution when the country as a whole had suffered. They, like Slava, were trying to right a wrong but were going about it in a more commonly accepted way. Instead of lying outright, they tried to argue their point that the Jews were due restitution beyond just those who had been in concentration camps or ghettos.

Important to this story is the different way that Slava saw the press conference and the activities that went on during the conference and the way he believed Peter saw it. At the end of the conference Slava had already decided he would not even try to write an article. He knew the elderly people there would stand a better chance of getting the eligibility requirements expanded if it were Peter who wrote the story and introduced the idea to the general public. Slava had in the back of his mind his grandfather's behavior and his questions about the morality of his grandfather's behavior as he watched the conference. He saw the people dressed up in their prisoner costumes as a way to elicit pity for what the people had gone through. He saw the lawyer dressed in a suit that was too small for him because he thought that appearance would make him more approachable to the poor Jews. He saw the people loading up their bags with the free food after the conference because they wanted to take advantage of everything they could get. He saw the faults of the people as well as their suffering.

When Slava spoke with Vera after the conference, she pointed out to him the cool way that he treated the elderly Jews. She told him that he'd always acted as if he were better than his Jewish friends and relatives. She accused Slava of enjoying putting his fellow immigrants down. When Slava tried to understand why his family still continued to pull him in even after he'd tried to break away from them in his desire to fit in with American



culture Vera told him that it was because even though he was odd, he was still an immigrant, the same as they were. They could understand him, Vera explained. Vera also told Slava she was trying to help the elderly Jewish immigrants because they were lonely. They had come to a place they didn't understand and didn't like in the hopes of giving their children a better future. Vera wanted these older people who were stuck in a sort of time lapse since they'd come to America to have some comfort.

Notice in this section of the novel that Otto admitted to Slava that it was impossible for him to have proof that Slava had written falsified letters. However, he said that he had enough coincidences that he believed it would kill the hopes of expanding eligibility. He teased Slava with the idea that he could just not mention the faked letters to his boss, Slava accused him of covering up a fraud with another fraud. Slava made a good point because Otto was technically breaking the law in coming to Slava face-to-face about the letters and then promising to cover up his misdeeds if Slava would tell him what he wanted to know.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think Otto had an ulterior motive in approaching Slava? Do you think he stood to get some reward if he were able to stop the fake claims?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think that Slava did not even write a story about the press conference? What do you think it meant when he said it would be better for the elderly if Peter were to write the story?

Discussion Question 3

In his conversation with Vera, Vera was able to tell Slava very plainly why she fighting for the eligibility requirements to be expanded. Was Slava about to explain to her why he was writing the letters? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

fastidious, clandestine, postcoital, transliteration, demurely, metastasized, petulant, colloquial



Chapter 17

Summary

In Chapter 17, Slava awoke from another nightmare. He was in his grandfather's bed. Everyone who had not yet mailed their applications were at his grandfather's house having their packets checked before sending them out. Slava wondered to himself who had called Otto Barber and alerted him about the fraud. Slava looked for Israel but he did not come. As he listened to his grandfather talk, Slava wondered what his grandfather would say to Otto if he were in Slava's position. He wondered again how his grandmother would have responded if her husband was in Slava's position. It suddenly occurred to him that his grandfather might not have had friends in his life because of the way he got out of serving in the war. Slava wondered if his grandfather was still lying to his friends about his age and why he wasn't drafted in 1943 and killed with all the others who were drafted that year. As they people began to leave, Lazar approached Slava. He kissed him on the cheek and gave him an identification patch his great-grandmother had been forced to wear in the Minsk ghetto. Slava and Vera agreed to meet later in a bar.

Vera and Slava were the only ones at the bar. They danced and talked, and then walked to Vera's apartment. As they walked, Slava remembered his family had been allowed to leave Russia because it was agreed they would lie and say they were going to Israel. Slava understood those lies. He believed that in America, people could afford to be decent and not lie. He told Vera that the people at the Conference on Material Claims against Germany knew the letters were frauds. He told her the consequences of each option he had. She advised him to lie and say he knew nothing about the letters. She believed Otto was bluffing when he said the expansion of the eligibility requirements would be stopped if Slava didn't tell. She undressed. As he looked at her, Slava said he couldn't. Vera looked at Slava with loathing. He left and went to Arianna's apartment where he persuaded the doorman to let him in even though it was late. He told Arianna the whole story. Arianna told him that he had to tell the truth.

Analysis

Most interesting in this section is the new suspicion that Slava has about the reason why his grandfather had separated himself from so many of his friends. Slava knew his grandfather had his draft card altered to keep from having to go into the military the year he was supposed to sign up. After that he'd basically run away. Slava wondered if his grandfather had kept his friends at a distance because he didn't want them to find out about the lies he'd told that had kept him alive and free from injuries. He was using Slava and Slava's writing talents as a way to get his friends money for the things they'd suffered that he hadn't. Slava wondered if his grandfather believed this money made things even between himself and his friends.



Also in this section Slava remembers that his family was allowed to leave soviet Russia only because they lied and said they were going to Israel. His family members knew they weren't going to Israel. The people to whom they told they were going to Israel knew the family wasn't really going to Israel. People had written false letters claiming the family had relatives in Israel even though these relatives were often manufactured. Slava realized that all these lies had been what had allowed his family to finally be free and finally be able to tell the truth about themselves, that they'd been abused in Soviet Russia.

It is in this chapter that Slava has to choose between the ideals of the two females in his life. Vera, who was representative of Slava's childhood and his immigrant roots, wanted him to lie so that as many people could get restitution as possible. She believed he could tell Otto that all of the letters were real and that Otto would not be able to do anything about it because he didn't really have any evidence to the contrary. Arianna, who was representative of the American ways that Slava wanted to adopt, told Slava he had to tell the truth. She wanted him to tell Otto that all of the letters were false.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the dream that Slava had about his grandfather and great-uncle Aaron. What do you think the dream symbolized?

Discussion Question 2

Who do you think might have called Otto about the fraud? Explain the motivation that person might have had for turning Slava in.

Discussion Question 3

In this chapter the author indicates that a lie meant something different in America than it had in Russia. What do you think he meant by this statement?

Vocabulary

adjutants, affectation, talisman, inauspicious, desultory, servile



Chapter 18

Summary

In Chapter 18, on Wednesday Arianna made Slava promise that he would go to talk to Otto soon. He went first to visit Israel. His door was locked and he learned from a neighbor that Israel was in the hospital. Slava called Vova to take him to the hospital. In Israel's hospital room, the man was asleep. Slava thought to himself that it didn't make sense that Israel had been able to write out a note with instructions as his neighbor had said he had. The nurse told Slava there was really nothing wrong with Israel other than he was old and lonely. When Israel woke up he told Slava he envied Slava's grandfather because he had a grandson one borough away. Israel said he'd decided that if Yuri, his son, would allow it he would go with him back to Israel. Israel asked if Yuri was coming. Slava said he was sure that he was.

Slava asked Israel if he would do as he asked. Slava asked the old man to get up and get dressed. He assured Israel they'd be back before Yuri came. Slava called Vova again, this time asking him to come in a different car. Vova agreed. Slava managed to sneak Israel out of the hospital into the limo that Vova had waiting. In the car, Slava told Israel he was taking him to see Manhattan. They drank champagne as they rode and put their heads up through the sunroof at stoplights. They walked on the grass in Riverside Park and sat on a bench until they attracted the attention of a police officer. Back at the hospital the nurse was angry with Slava when they returned. She threatened to have him barred. Before Slava left, Israel kissed him on the forehead. Slava confirmed that Israel had sent out his letter.

Analysis

It is in this section of the novel that Slava finally reaches out to Israel. Up to this point, the two have played a charade. Slava had called places and talked to people to check up on Israel. He'd lied and told them he was Israel's grandson. In their discussion with the priest, Israel told the priest that Slava was his grandson. Israel is lonely because his wife had died and his son moved to Israel to join a group of Orthodox Jews. Slava related to Israel because he saw his own life mirrored in the lives of the old man and his son. In Slava's life, he was the son who left his family. Since his grandmother's death, Slava had realized how much he'd missed out on when he abandoned his family for his own ambitions. The same situation was happening between Israel and his son. The nurse even told Slava that there was really nothing wrong with Israel, he was just old and lonely. He hoped that by pretending to be sick, his son would come and visit him. In his son's absence, Slava took his friend to tour Manhattan. He was able to show Israel the affection that he'd never really show to his grandmother especially since he'd been to see her only once in the year before her death. Perhaps the most touching part of this chapter is when Israel admitted to Slava that he was not jealous of the material



possessions that Slava's grandfather had but was jealous that he had a grandson one borough away.

Discussion Question 1

What did it mean to Slava when he learned Israel had been taken to the hospital?

Discussion Question 2

Why did Slava sneak Israel out of the hospital to go to Manhattan?

Discussion Question 3

Why did Vova approach Slava with the hurricane scam? What difference would there have been in Slava writing letters for that scam and the letters he wrote for the Jewish immigrants?

Vocabulary

monomial, enfilade, blanched, pharaonic, vagrancy



Chapters 19 and 20

Summary

In Chapter 19, Otto was excited to see Slava. Slava told him the story of a set of German china that his father brought with him from Russia. Then he challenged Otto to do the right thing and pay all of the claims. Slava asked Otto if it was one of the Jews who called and reported the forgeries. Otto said it was though he would not identify the person any further. Slava told Otto, who had become suddenly serious, that he was going to tell him everything. Slava explained how his grandfather had made everyone angry with his bragging about how he managed to get things for his family and himself when others had little or nothing. He told Otto he'd faked only his grandfather's letter but that his grandfather had begun calling people who requested letters of their own. Slava told Otto how he'd lost his girlfriend because of the letters. He was so busy that he agreed to teach the people how to write the letters, but did not write them himself. Slava said he wished he had written the letters as it would have helped those people. Otto told Slava his grandfather's application would be denied. He thanked Slava for his honesty.

Slava went directly to his grandfather's apartment where the old man was sorting pills. He asked about Slava's date with Vera. Slava told him nothing happened. Because grandfather was so upset because nothing happened, Slava finally told him he'd had sex with Vera. When grandfather yelled the news to Berta, Slava looked away. Grandfather realized he'd done something to make Slava unhappy. Grandfather seemed to be afraid that his mouth would keep Slava from coming back even though he didn't understand what had upset him. Slava walked to his grandfather and embraced him. His grandfather told Slava he loved him.

Slava next went to Arianna's apartment. He told Arianna he hadn't exactly told Otto the truth. She was angry because he hadn't done as they had agreed he should. Even though Slava tried to convince Arianna that it had nothing to do with her, Arianna wouldn't accept that. She believed she'd been drawn into the fraud because he'd told her about it. She asked him to leave. Even though the letter writing was over, she didn't want to see him any more. Before he left, she gave him an old issue of "Century." She had stolen it from the archive.

In Chapter 20, a month and a half later Slava goes to his grandmother's gravesite. He is carrying a notebook. He hopes to be able to write his own stories about how he and his family lived both in Russia and in America. He sits on the pavement next to his grandmother's grave and tries to communicate with her. He writes down questions and answers in his notebook. He knows he isn't answering his questions as she would have but knows she'd have to deal with the way he imagines her. She will have to live as a combination of Slava and Grandmother. He picks a flower he recognizes from Russia near his grandmother's grave. He knows it only by its Russian name. He decides not to look up the English translation.



Analysis

In this section of the novel Slava lied to Otto. His lies save not only himself but also the people for whom he wrote letters seeking restitution. Slava told Otto the truth only about the letter he had written for his grandfather. That was the only part of the discussion in which Slava told the truth. His grandfather was like the one piece of china that was broken. Slava was willing to sacrifice that piece because he knew the others were safe. He knew Otto would not go to each family and demand to know if the letters were falsified. He also knew the story he'd told was believable enough that he would be under no penalty because he'd done what Otto had asked him to do. He'd given up the name of the person for whom he'd written the false letter. The fact that it was Yevgeny's own grandson who got his request for restitution thrown out is perhaps poetic justice. Yevgeny's ability to lie and play act had gotten him out of military service. For that reason he'd survived the war unscathed and was able to have children and grandchildren. In turn it was Yevgeny's grandson who helped his grandfather finally pay the price to the others who had not run away from the war. He had kept his grandfather from any possibility that he might get restitution from the German government while he managed to keep the others, who were needier than Yevgeny, in the restitution program. Notice also that Slava didn't technically tell Otto that the rest of the letters were or weren't truthful. He left that question unanswered by telling Otto only that the people had written them themselves.

Notice in this section that Arianna, who represented Slava's desire to become a part of American society, turned away from him in this part of the novel. She believed he had drug her into the situation by telling her about it and then had not done what they agreed should be done. Because he had not told the whole truth about the letters, Arianna no longer trusted him. Remember in the previous section that it was Slava who turned away from Vera, who represented Slava's immigrant roots, when she suggested he lie about all of the letters and say they were truthful. Just as Slava was at a place in his life where he was halfway between being an immigrant and an American, he came to a point halfway between lying about the letters and telling the whole truth about them.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the story that Slava told Otto about the letters. Was it the truth, or a lie?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Slava's attempt to contact with his grandmother at the gravesite. With what does he hope to come away from his visit?



Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Slava wanted to be watched over by his descendants rather than his ancestors? What does this say about what he had learned about his past?

Vocabulary

promontory, triumvirate, adversarial, abberation, collaboration, penumbra, abridged, diversionary, barbarously, fervidly



Characters

Vyacheslav “Slava” Gelman

Slava is a junior employee of the New York magazine “Century.” Believing it would help his writing, Slava separated himself from his family of Russian immigrants. He thought they were a bad influence on his writing. During the time he had asked his family not to call, Slava’s grandmother died. Even though he’d asked his family not to call him, his mother called to tell Slava that his grandmother was dead and that her funeral was planned for that day.

A pair of circumstances got Slava reconnected with his family. First, he felt guilty that he’d been out of touch with his family when his grandmother died. He’d visited her only one time in the past year. Second, Slava’s grandfather approached him with a letter he’d received in the mail a few days prior to tell Slava’s grandmother that she might qualify for restitution from the German government because she was held in a ghetto in the family’s home city of Minsk. Grandfather was upset because the letter had arrived so close to his wife’s death. He suggested to Slava that Slava could write a letter that would request restitution on his behalf. Because his grandfather had not been in a ghetto, Slava at first refused because his grandfather did not meet the eligibility requirements for restitution. Later, Slava changed his mind and agreed to write the letter because he believed it would help him better know his grandmother.

Even though Slava had asked his grandfather not to tell anyone about the letter Slava had written his grandfather bragged on him and Slava got requests to write more and more letters. Even though his girlfriend, Arianna, told Slava he couldn’t write the letters, Slava wrote them anyway because he was still struggling to understand what his grandmother’s life had been like. After Slava was brought in for questioning by Otto Barber with the Conference on Material Claims Against Germany a girl with whom Slava had grown up advised him that he should lie again and tell the man that all of the letters were true stories. Slava, however, told Otto that the only letter he knew of that was falsified was his grandfather’s. He said he’d taught the other Jewish people to how write their letters as a way to explain why Otto was able to find similar devices in all of the letters.

Yevgeny Gelman

Yevgeny Gelman is Slava’s grandfather. As a child growing up in Soviet Russia he was called a child of other people’s gardens because he had a way of getting the things that he and his family needed to survive even though he didn’t make much money. When Yevgeny’s older brother, Aaron, got old enough to fight in the war Yevgeny went after him with a butcher knife. Aaron could have been disqualified for armed services if Yevgeny had managed to cut off even a pinkie. Instead of letting his brother disfigure him, Aaron went to war and was killed in the fight. He was buried in a mass grave in



Latvia. When it was time for Yevgeny to go to war, he had his draft card altered by one year. The year that he should have entered the service, 1943, all of the men that were drafted that year died in action. When the war was still being fought in 1944, Yevgeny evacuated to Uzbekistan where he pretended to be retarded so he wouldn't have to serve in the military at all. Yevgeny told his grandson, Slava, that he'd stayed out of the war so that his mother wouldn't lose another of her men to the fighting.

When Yevgeny's wife, Sofia, died just a few days after a letter arrived informing her she was eligible for restitution from the German government, Yevgeny asked Slava to write a letter on his behalf. He wanted Slava to lie and say that what had happened to Sofia actually happened to Yevgeny. Yevgeny reasoned that he had suffered as well, just not in the same way that his wife had. Although Slava asked Yevgeny not to tell anyone about the letter, Yevgeny did tell and connected Slava with at least two dozen more people who wanted letters written. Slava wondered later if his grandfather had not used Slava's ability to write the letters and get Yevgeny's friends and acquaintances money as a way to make up for the fact that Yevgeny had betrayed his people in a way by lying and play acting in order to get out of fighting in the war.

Israel Abramson

Israel Abramson was the elderly Jew to whom Slava became especially endeared during his process of writing the letters. Slava liked Israel because he read and quoted books to him. Israel claimed to be a writer and tried to give Slava advice on how to improve his letters. When Slava explained to Israel why his suggestions wouldn't work, Israel accepted Slava's advice. Even compared to some of the other immigrants around him, Israel was very poor. He was jealous of Slava's grandfather and told Slava how his grandfather acted deceptively in order to get 24-hour home care for his wife. Israel was very poor. He depended on charity for his food. His wife was dead and his son had joined a sect of Orthodox Jews and moved back to Israel. Israel asked Slava once why he thought his son had moved away, if it was something about America that he did not like. Slava was unable to answer. Israel later told Slava he was most jealous of Yevgeny because he had family members, especially a grandson, living so close. Near the end of the novel Israel faked an illness believing that his son would come to America to visit him. In the hospital the nurse told Slava the only thing that was wrong with Israel was that he was old and lonely. Knowing the older man wasn't really sick, Slava snuck him out of the hospital for a limo tour of Manhattan, a place that Israel told Slava he'd always wanted to see.

Vera Rudinsky

Vera Rudinsky is the daughter of Lyuba and Garik Rudinsky. Vera and Slava were children when the Rudinsky and Gelman families immigrated to America. The two had played together as children and the families had always hoped that one day Vera and Slava would get married. Vera and Slava reconnected at the funeral for Slava's grandmother. Vera tried to get him involved in her plan to reunite their families. The



families had become estranged over money once they reached the United States. Vera was also the one who put together the press conference sponsored by the Advocates for Historical Justice intended to call for an extension of the deadline for Jews to apply for restitution funds and the expansion of qualifications. Vera represented Slava's Jewish roots. When Slava was approached by Otto Barber and accused of falsifying restitution request letters Vera encouraged Slava to tell Otto that all of the requests for restitution were true stories. She believed Otto had no proof against Slava that would hold up in court and wanted as many people to get restitution as possible, even if they didn't meet the eligibility requirements. She was most interested with giving the elderly people who were in a country they did not like or understand the physical comfort that this money could afford for them.

Sofia Dreitser Gelman

Sofia Dreitser Gelman is Slava's grandmother. It was after she died that Slava reconnected with his family. Slava regretted having never learned the story of his grandmother's time in the Minsk ghetto. He knew only that she had an opportunity to leave the ghetto and had taken it. Her parents, who were left behind, were killed. Only she and her sister survived. Slava had once told his grandmother he had a school assignment for which he needed her to talk to him about her experiences in the Holocaust. When he saw how painful the idea of talking about the Holocaust was, he decided not to push her and asked her to tell him how she met his grandfather instead. Although Sofia had died before the beginning of the novel, she is an important character because it was Slava's belief he could get to know and understand his grandmother better if he could learn about the things others faced during the Holocaust. He imagined the things he wrote about as having happened to her. At the end of the novel and his letter writing, Slava realized he still didn't have a better grasp on his grandmother's personality than he did before. He came to the decision that he would have to be satisfied with the image of her that he kept in his own mind.

Otto Barber

Otto Barber is the worker from the Conference on Material Claims Against Germany who contacted Slava about the letters he believed were fictitious. As Otto was reading the letters he began to realize the style and circumstances in several of the letters were similar. He seemed to enjoy putting Slava under pressure to determine if Slava was really falsifying the letters or not. Beyond the circumstantial evidence, Otto really didn't have anything conclusive of which he could accuse Slava. Slava asked Otto to do the right thing and approve all the letters but Otto refused. The only letter that Slava would tell him was fictional was the one that Slava had written for his grandfather. Otto seemed angered by Slava's response and he quickly lost the jovial nature with which he'd dealt with Slava in the past.



Vova

Vova is the taxi driver to whom Vera introduced Slava. She told Slava that Vova took care of her. Vova tried to get Slava to show more of an interest in Vera and told Slava he had no interest in Vera, that they were on the same side. When he learned that Slava had been writing fictitious restitution letters for Holocaust survivors, he tried to get Slava to work with him about making false claims after Hurricane Katrina but Slava refused to do so. When Slava learned Israel had been taken to the hospital, he called Vova to take him to the hospital quickly. Slava again called Vova to bring a limo so he could take Israel on a tour of Manhattan.

Arianna Bock

Arianna Bock was the fact checker at “Century” magazine who worked in the cubicle next to Slava’s. Arianna helped Slava get an opportunity to write an article for “Century.” The article that Slava wrote was not published. Arianna invited Slava to a bar to drink and forget his embarrassment afterward. The two began dating at that point. Arianna was one of two women in Slava’s life. Arianna represented the American way of life and encouraged Slava to tell the truth about the letters he had written when he talked to Otto Barber.

Howard Settledecker

Howard Settledecker is the Australian attorney who represented the Advocates for Historical Justice in its lawsuit against the German government. He spoke at a press conference arranged by Vera at the Museum of Jewish Heritage. Settledecker appeared for the press conference wearing an ill fitting suit and an uncharacteristically badly kept physical appearance. Slava realized Settledecker was trying to give a visual image of a poor Jew.

Lazar Timofeyevich

Lazar Timofeyevich is Vera’s grandfather. He attended the funeral for Slava’s grandmother with his granddaughter. Lazar was the one who let Slava know that his grandfather was charging people for the letters that Slava was writing for them. He also gave Slava a lecture about how Slava could trust other Jewish immigrants but not necessarily those from America. He hoped Slava would understand that Vera would support him, even if Slava were found guilty of the fake letter writing.

Professor Andrew Morton

Andrew Morton was the professor at Stanford Law School who Slava asked about the punishments that might be handed down to a person found guilty of writing fake letters



requesting restitution. Otto Barber later called Morton as well and learned that the professor had gotten a call from someone at “Century” pretending to be Peter. Otto was able to put together the clues and realized that it was Slava who had called the professor.

Peter Devicki

Peter Devicki is another junior employee at “Century.” He was the reporter with whom Slava was paired during two different assignments at the magazine. For the first assignment Peter’s article was approved for publication by an overwhelming majority. Peter added to Slava’s humiliation by being one of the three people who voted in favor of Slava’s article.

Beau Reasons

Beau Reasons is an editor who worked at the “Century.” He was the one who decided to give Slava the assignment finding newspaper flubs for the column “The Hoot.” Beau was also the one who assigned Slava and Peter to jointly cover the press conference at the Museum of Jewish Heritage.

Berta

Berta is the Slav that Slava’s grandfather got as a twenty-four hour home aid to cook his meals and help out with his wife when she was sick.

Oleg Smeshko

Oleg Smeshko was the teenager who approached Slava for advice about writing.



Symbols and Symbolism

Mirrors

The mirrors in the novel are important because they are symbols of grief. The covering of mirrors was a tradition for Jews in mourning. Slava covered mirrors in hopes that it would make him feel the grief he believed he should after his grandmother's death.

A Small Notebook

This small notebook was a symbol of the memories that Slava had of his grandmother. He had intended to write down stories about her in the notebook but all he had was the story about how his grandparents met. At the end of the novel the notebook appeared again when Slava went to his grandmother's grave in an attempt to communicate with her.

Maps on the Lampposts

During their walk in Central Park Arianna complained about the maps that had been put on the lampposts. To her the maps symbolized a sense of location when she wanted to be lost in the park. Although she didn't like the maps, Arianna got angry with Slava when he tried to remove one.

White Envelope of Money

This envelope of money first appeared when Slava agreed to write a fictitious letter for Lazar Rudinsky. The envelope and the money it contained symbolized that Slava's grandfather was making a profit on Slava's writing. The envelope was given by Lazar to Slava. Slava tried to give it to his grandfather in front of Lazar but Vera intercepted it. It was given back to Slava by Vera. Slava gave the money to Israel because he knew how poor Israel was but Israel gave it back to him hoping that Slava would use it to have a good time. Slava used the money to rent a limo and take Israel for a ride in Manhattan.

Rectangle of White Cloth

Lazar gave this rectangle of white cloth embroidered with his great-grandmother's prisoner number and her address. It was the patch that ghetto prisoners were forced to wear. Lazar gave it to Slava as a symbol of his appreciation for the letter that Slava wrote.



Construction Paper Vegetables

The construction paper vegetables that Slava and Vera made as children to sell in their pretend market symbolized the hope that the immigrants had for their lives in America. As the adults watched the children make and sell these vegetables they imagined the money their children would be able to make as American citizens.

Prisoner Costumes

It was because Vera had arranged for the Holocaust survivors to wear prisoner costumes that the Museum of Jewish History had not allowed the press conference to be held inside the museum. Although the survivors were prisoners while they were being held in the ghettos or concentration camps, it was apparently too strong a statement to have these people appear wearing the actual garb of the prisoners along with the yellow star that the Jews had to wear to identify themselves as being Jewish.

Asti Spumante

This bottle of champagne that Slava and Israel drank during their limo ride through Manhattan was a symbol of the luxurious way that Slava treated Israel once he realized how lonely the old man really was. It was noted in the novel that a true Russian preferred this champagne even to more pricey brands.

A Set of German China

A set of German china was one of grandfather's prized possessions that he was able to take to America with the family. The German china represented grandfather's love of expensive, quality things. The fact that one piece of the china set was broken when they arrived in America was a sign of loss. Everyone in the story had suffered some loss regardless of how minute it was.

First Issue of "Century"

Arianna gave Slava a copy of the first issue of "Century" magazine that she had stolen from the magazine's archive. Although Arianna was the character who represented the law abiding side of Slava, she had stolen the magazine.



Settings

Upper East Side

The Upper East Side was where Slava lived in his own apartment. It was in this apartment that he wrote the first letter, the one for his grandfather, while Arianna slept in his bed. For the 45 minutes he was writing the article, Slava felt as if he were with his grandmother again.

“Century” Office

The offices of the New York magazine “Century” was where Slava worked as a junior staff member. It was at the magazine’s office that Slava met Arianna. It was also there that he called Professor Andrew Morton seeking information about what might happen to a person if he were caught manufacturing false letters seeking restitution.

Grusheff Funeral Home

It was at the Grusheff Funeral Home that the funeral for Slava’s grandmother was held. It was also at this funeral home that Slava witnessed his grandfather bartering for a pair of burial plots.

Bar Kabul

Bar Kabul was the bar to which Slava went to meet Arianna after his story was turned down for publication in “Century.”

Israel’s Apartment

When Slava went to visit Israel, he compared the way that Israel lived in his tiny apartment to the way that his grandfather lived. Later, Slava went to Israel’s apartment to talk to him but discovered that Israel had been taken to the hospital.

Arianna’s Apartment

Although he had his own apartment, Slava stayed with Arianna in her apartment a good deal of the time the two were dating.



Temple Beth-EI

When Slava saw Israel out walking, he followed the old man to Temple Beth-EI because he was afraid he might need help. After a conversation with the priest in which Israel told the priest that Slava was his grandson, Slava tried to give Israel the money Lazar had given him to write his letter. He knew Israel didn't have that kind of money to spend on a letter. Israel gave the money back, however, and told Slava he wanted him to use it to go out and have a good time.

Museum of Jewish History

It was in front of the Museum of Jewish History where Howard Settledecker held a press conference seeking revision of the restitution eligibility requirements for Jews. Vera, who had organized the press conference, told Slava off the record that the conference had to be held outside because the museum people didn't like the idea that the Jewish survivors would show up wearing prison costumes.

Maimonides

Maimonides was the hospital to which Israel was taken. When Slava arrived to see the old man he learned that his friend was not really sick, just very lonely.



Themes and Motifs

Truth versus Lies

The theme of truth versus lies is a very important theme in this novel. This question of morality focuses on the German government's decision to award restitution to Jewish people who had been confined in concentration camps or ghettos during World War II. Slava, the main character of the novel, was asked to write false stories for Jews who believed they were due restitution but did not meet the qualifications outlined by the German government.

When Slava decided to write the first false restitution letter for his grandfather and then later after he'd been accused of writing false letters by Otto Barber, a man who worked with the Conference on Material Claims Against Germany he struggled with the implications of his lies. Views on lying expressed in the novel run the gamut from Arianna's idea that Slava's lies are wrong even if he was helping others by lying to Vera's belief that Slava was indebted to lie because he could bring comfort to the elderly Jews with the help of the restitution money. In the end, Slava told Otto both a lie and the truth. He also realized that while Otto was acting as a judge of Slava's morality, Otto was committing a fraud, just like Slava, by being so willing to cover up Slava's possible misdeeds.

The idea of truth versus lies also presents itself in an interesting way between the two women in Slava's life. Arianna, who was an American girl and for that reason represented the America that Slava so much wanted to be a part of, encouraged Slava to tell the truth at all costs. Slava once wondered if she would have advised him differently if it had been her grandmother who had escaped from a ghetto to a live where she was forced to herd cows while her parents were murdered. Vera, on the other hand, was a friend to Slava during the time their families were immigrating from Russia to America. Vera represents Slava's roots and his background. Vera encouraged Slava to lie so that as many of the elderly Jews could get restitution as possible.

Immigrants

The way that immigrants, particularly those from Soviet Russia, lived once they immigrated to America is a significant theme in the novel. Although these people had fled Russia to escape inhumane treatment, the lifestyle they had in America was inhumane in its own way. Even though Slava was himself an immigrant he was often accused of putting the other immigrants down. The novel focuses not only on the lifestyles of the immigrants but also the way Slava judged his fellow immigrants because they didn't try harder to be part of American society.

Vera is the character in the novel who seemed to have the most compassion for the immigrants. Her parents had come to America at the same time as Slava's. In Russia,



her father had been a geologist, in America he was reduced to driving a taxi and singing in Russian for extra tips. When she and Slava discussed why they were trying to help the older Jews with restitution, Vera said she had chosen to help them because she wanted them to have some comfort. She knew the elderly Jews were in a place they didn't understand and didn't like. Many were not even able to communicate because they didn't speak English well.

It is noted in one section of the novel that for the Russian Jews who lived in Brooklyn, time had stood still. Even though even the people of Russia had moved on after Soviet Russia was overthrown, the Russian immigrants had not moved beyond their mindset as Russian Jews. Information in the novel notes that the immigrants came to America hoping that their children would find better lives. As Slava saw what the children of some of the immigrants were doing with the opportunities they had been given he wondered if even their lives were an improvement.

During a conversation with Lazar, Vera's grandfather, Slava criticized the older man for wanting to be separate from American culture. Lazar had told Slava he had to be patient, that Americanization of the people wouldn't happen overnight. He said that by the time Slava's children had children they wouldn't even remember what their ancestors had gone through, they would be completely Americanized.

Demand of the Market/Money

Money is an important theme in this novel as it is the motivating factor for many of the characters in the novel. One of the most significant instances in which money was a motivating factor was when it came time for the immigrant Jews to tell their stories. Although their families might have asked them in the past about their experiences in the Holocaust, they didn't tell until they were assured their stories would earn them a payoff. Slava was critical of these people who told their stories for money. He was also critical of the men who waited in the hospital waiting rooms so they could offer Jewish funeral services to families that had lost a member to death. Although the men were responding to the demand of the market Slava still believed they were taking advantage of the people because they weren't even really Jewish rabbis. Another instance in which money was used in a way that made Slava angry was when he learned his grandfather was charging people for the letters Slava was writing. Slava had not intended to charge for his services and was angry because his grandfather was using his good will to make a profit.

Writing

There are two fronts on which writing is a theme in the novel. First, writing is important in the novel because Slava so desperately wanted to be a writer for "Century." The way in which the novel is written is also worthy of comment as the author uses a variety of literary devices to enliven his writing.



Slava dreamed of being a writer for “Century” magazine. He worked for the magazine as a junior staffer hunting down bloopers in other newspapers to put in the “Century” column, “The Hoot.” Slava believed it was the influence of his Russian relatives that kept him from being published in “Century.” For that reason, he decided he needed to separate himself from his family. One day he asked another writer at “Century” why his articles weren’t getting published. That writer told him that Slava didn’t write in the style that the “Century” liked. His girlfriend, Arianna, told Slava that he was a good writer but needed to submit his writing to another magazine so he could actually get published.

The way in which the story is written is also worthy of note. The author uses a good deal of literary devices to enliven the story. Literary devices used include metaphor, simile, personification and even some alliteration. An example of personification can be found on page 265 where Slava dreamed of writing a letter in Yiddish. The letters are described as, “bowing and scraping.” The sentence: “A vein came through her temple, steady and unruffled, a blue valley.” (p. 279) is an example of a metaphor while the phrase “where stones with pretty striations loomed in various sizes like bird droppings” (p. 175) is an example of a metaphor.

The Feud

The feud that separated the Gelmans and Rudinskys is an important part of the story. It is especially important since it was at grandmother’s funeral that Vera told Slava she had a plan to heal the rift that had divided the once close families. While Slava had believed the rift between the Gelmans and Rudinskys was caused by a request for money, he began to wonder if it were not a disagreement encouraged by his grandfather in hopes of saving himself from embarrassment.

The Gelmans and Rudinskys became friends when they immigrated from Russia together. They’d been assigned to the same guesthouse in Austria and had even lived down the street together in Italy. Slava remembered that he and Vera had played together as children. He was surprised that his young friend had become a woman when he saw her again after his grandmother’s funeral. It was at this time that she told him she had a plan to reunite their families.

Slava had always understood that the two families had divided because Vera’s father asked Slava’s grandfather for seed money to start a limo business when they reached American. Because Slava’s grandfather was such a ruthless businessman he wouldn’t loan money to Garik because he didn’t like to make loans for which he couldn’t charge interest. He didn’t feel like he could charge interest to the Rudinskys.

As Slava became more aware of his grandfather’s past, he wondered if his grandfather hadn’t encouraged the rift between the two families because he didn’t want the Rudinskys to learn how he survived the war. Instead of going to war, Yevgeny had altered his draft card making him appear a year younger. He also ran away from his home town and pretended to be retarded so that he wouldn’t be in danger of serving in the military. Looking back at his grandfather’s actions, Slava wondered if his grandfather

had not intentionally kept the Rudinskys at bay to keep them from knowing him too well and learning his secret.



Styles

Point of View

This novel is written from the point of view of a third person narrator with an emphasis on Slava. The narrator knows and reports Slava's feelings and emotions, but does not know those of other characters. The reader learns about the intentions and plans of the other characters in the novel only at the point that Slava learns them. For instance, the reader has no idea that Slava's grandfather had been charging a fee for the letters that Slava was writing until Slava learned it, when Lazar handed the fee to Slava instead of waiting to give it to Slava's grandfather.

This point of view is important in the novel because no other point of view would have worked as well to show the way Slava's thinking about the letters evolved throughout the course of his experience with the Jewish people. Slava learned how much the people of his grandfather's generation had suffered during their lives and continued to suffer as immigrants to America. Slava transformed from a person who was afraid of getting caught and punished for breaking the law to one who was willing to lie in order to help others. He knew his lies would allow people whom he knew desperately needed the restitution money to get what they needed to have a more comfortable life.

If the author had focused on another character to tell the story, the reader would have missed Slava's struggle with his own conscious as he tried to determine if telling the truth was better than being morally right. Although the story might have worked if it were told in the first person point of view, the reader would have been too close to Slava and his story to be able to empathize as fully with the immigrants and their plight.

Language and Meaning

One thing to keep in mind about the language of this novel is that although it is written in English, many of the characters spoke to one another in Russian, the language that was familiar to them. When one of these immigrants, like Slava's grandfather, does speak in English, the author uses broken and grammatically incorrect English in their spoken passages. For example, Yevgeny told his grandson at one point: "I no steal, okay?" (p. 306). For one of the Jews for whom Slava wrote a letter, he wrote in broken English: "Camp wall was like giant, bigger than tree. Climb was if you wanted sueycide, and nobody who say nice Polish girl from village give food hush-hush over wall is saying accurate" (p. 158).

Along with copying the broken English used by some immigrants, the author also dresses his writing with a variety of literary devices. He uses personification, in which he gives human like characteristics to inanimate objects. For instance: "The streetlights ticked and buzzed, playing with one another in the cool night" (p. 275). He also makes comparisons using both metaphor and simile. "The bags in his other hand were a stone"



(p. 162) is a phrase from the novel that is an example of a metaphor. "...Draped over the stair railing and illuminated from behind by the sun like an arthritic god, Israel Abramson." (p. 200) is an example of a simile. Both metaphor and simile make comparisons between two unlike objects but a simile uses the words like or as while a metaphor does not.

Structure

This 316-page novel is divided into 20 chapters. Slava's story is told mostly in a linear fashion in the past tense. One exception to the linear timeline of the story comes in Chapter 3 which begins with the story of how Slava's grandparents met in 1945. Although a good deal of the family's history does come into play in the novel, much of it is conveyed through spoken memories or through Slava's thoughts. Notice that the final chapter makes a switch from the past tense to the present tense.

Notice the author uses dates in combination with some of the chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 for instance, take place on Sunday, July 16, 2006. This was the day Slava was told his grandmother had died and they day on which her funeral was held. Chapters 4 and 5 cover the events of Monday, July 17, 2006. The entire novel covers the time period from July 16, 2006 through Oct. 14, 2006.

In the course of the novel the author includes a variety of stories within the story as Slava writes the fictitious letters requesting restitution. In these stories Slava imagined he was trying to write the truth about what had happened to his grandmother during the Holocaust. Although they are basically fictional, notice that each contains a small bit of his grandmother's history. The letters that are included in the novel are headed with the words: "NARRATIVE. Please describe, in as much detail as you can, where the Subject was during the years 1939 to 1945." This heading sets the stories apart from the remainder of the novel.



Quotes

He hadn't spoken to any of them in weeks, if not a month, but in his mind, his grandmother, quiet sufferer of a cirrhosis that had been winning for years, was fixed to her bed in Midwood, as if the way he remembered her was the way she would be until he came to see her again, until he authorized new developments."

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph 7)

Importance: Slava was shocked to learn that his Grandmother had died. Even though he had been to see her only once in the past year and knew she was sick, he hadn't considered the possibility that she would die.

The English preposition, stunned by the assignment, came up short — though she said no more than that, and no one disturbed her on the subject."

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph 26)

Importance: As Slava tried to find the proper preposition to use in conjunction with a description of his grandmother's experiences he personified the parts of speech in the English language and described the language as being stunned by the idea of having to provide a proper preposition to accompany the Holocaust.

They loitered in the hospital waiting rooms, Soviet immigrants who had learned a little Hebrew and were conveniently present to enoble a passing like Grandmother's with Torah-compliant burial guidance for a small fee."

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph 46)

Importance: The men who loitered in hospital waiting rooms waiting for people to die so they could provide burial services were characterized as taking advantage of the immigrants.

Slav Berta, whose people had used to terrorize Jews like Grandfather! This — more than the profusion of meat in American supermarkets, the open availability of rare technology, even the cavalierness with which Americans spoke of their president — was the mysterious grandeur of the country that had taken in the Gelmans of Minsk. It had the power to turn tormentors into kitchen help."

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph 54)

Importance: Slava saw the irony in Berta's work in his grandfather's kitchen because Slavs like Berta had once terrorized the Jews. In the present, the people who had once terrorized the Jews were employed as maids and cooks for them.

Mother had taken from Grandmother the condiments without the meal. She clung to Slava but knew not why and did not ask. Grandmother clung because her previous family had been taken without asking."

-- Narrator (Chapter 2 paragraph 5)



Importance: Slava recognized that his mother had picked up the habit of holding tightly to her family from her mother who had done the same thing. His grandmother had held onto her family tightly because so many of her family members had been killed without her permission. Slava's mother continued the habit of holding on tightly even though she didn't have the same reasons behind her behavior as her mother did.

This country does not invent things?' Grandfather said, his eyes flashing. 'Bush did not invent a reason to cut off Saddam's balls? When the stocks fall down, it's not because someone invented the numbers?'"

-- Grandfather (Chapter 2 paragraph 139)

Importance: When Slava pointed out to his grandfather that he couldn't just make up a story about the Holocaust, his grandfather reminded him that people invented things all the time, even Americans.

No, Peter, no, Slava pleaded silently, but in this, too, Peter was going to humiliate him, his hand rising to join two others to vote for Slava."

-- Narrator (Chapter 4 paragraph 106)

Importance: To add insult to injury, Peter was one of the three people who voted in favor of publishing Slava's article instead of his own.

I want to write something people will read,' he said. 'And say, There goes the fellow who wrote that.'"

-- Slava (Chapter 5 paragraph 152)

Importance: In this quote, Slava explained to Arianna why he wanted to be a writer.

So Slava wrote the rejoinders 'for the drawer,' as they used to say about the great suppressed writers during the Soviet period."

-- Narrator (Chapter 6 paragraph 11)

Importance: Slava compared himself to the suppressed writers of the Soviet period because of the way that he and his writing were treated at "Century."

Well, yes,' Morton said. 'There's liability in criminal law. I don't have the time to go into it now, but it's money obtained under false pretense. So it's theft — fraud.'"

-- Professor Andrew Morton (Chapter 6 paragraph 120)

Importance: Slava called this professor to find out what punishment he might face if it was discovered that he had faked letters for Jewish immigrants.

But let's say. Somebody happens to know that, they see that wrong, they say, What else is wrong? They lose trust. You can't give a reader a reason to lose trust."

-- Arianna (Chapter 8 paragraph 48)

Importance: When Slava asked Arianna why she took her job so seriously, she



explained that if a reader were to find a fact in the stories published in “Century” that was wrong, the reader would lose trust in the magazine.

So, listen,’ she said. ‘I have an idea for how to get them together.’ She had switched back to English.”

-- Vera (Chapter 9 paragraph 211)

Importance: Vera continued to encourage Slava to get on board with his plan to help their families reconcile with each other.

Every time his grandfather was about to give him a new name and address, like a dealer feeding his junkie, Slava held his breath, wondering if the name would be Vera’s, also wishing it wouldn’t be hers — just as his grandfather could not bring himself to charge a Rudinsky interest, Slava would not dare take a Rudinsky only to bed.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 10 paragraph 6)

Importance: Slava both hoped and didn’t hope that his grandfather would give him the name of one of Vera’s relatives for whom he could write a story. Just like Slava’s grandfather didn’t think that he could loan money to the Rudinskys without getting interest, Slava didn’t think he could sleep with Vera without doing something in exchange for her family.

The American dollar would force out the stories that love and consideration had elected not to elicit. Slava, working in concert with the philosophy of the nation that had taken them in — good works as the by-product of self-interest — was able to give the descendants at the table, the children and grandchildren, the gift of knowing, at last, the unknown corners of their forebears, all because the forebears stood to make money.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 10 paragraph 7)

Importance: Slava noted that the elderly Jewish people who told him the stories of their experiences during World War II did so with money as their motivation. Just like he couldn’t bring himself to push his grandmother to tell her story he knew these families wouldn’t be hearing these stories if it were not for the promise of money.

The person in question examined his grandfather with blazing eyes.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 11 paragraph 191)

Importance: Slava glared at his grandfather when they met at the Rudinskys because he had just learned that his grandfather was charging his Jewish friends for the letters that Slava was writing for them.

Of course you can think of the person. You can think of the person whenever you want. It’s only the rituals that are finished.”

-- Rabbi Bachman (Chapter 12 paragraph 48)

Importance: Slava questioned the rabbi about mourning. The rabbi told Slava the even



though the mourning rituals ended after a prescribed amount of time, Slava was allowed to think about his grandmother any time he wished.

Was he a monster, the details of death merely the instruments of a story, kindling for a vocation he didn't have the talent to practice another way?"

-- Narrator (Chapter 13 paragraph 2)

Importance: As Slava struggled with his inability to get published in "Century" as well as the difficulty he had in dealing with the details of the Holocaust he wondered if he didn't really have the writing talent he thought he did.

They are old, Slava. They are in a place they don't understand." / "And what do you want?" he said. / "I want them to have comfort."

-- Vera and Slava (Chapter 15 paragraph 83)

Importance: Vera explained to Slava that she was working to get the restitution deadline extended and benefits expanded because she wanted to give her older relatives some comfort because they were old and living in a place that they didn't understand.

How terrible for someone of talent and promise to labor in darkness. Well, the subjects of the letters know, but we both know that isn't the same. You wanted to get caught, Mr. Gelman. Tell the truth. The similar maneuvers, the details?"

-- Otto Barber (Chapter 16 paragraph 85)

Importance: Barber accused Slava of wanting to get caught because he used similar writing techniques in each of his letters. He also played to Slava's desire to be a writer as he noted that Slava had promise and talent as a writer even though his work was unknown.

Who had called Otto Barber? Was it Lyuba Rudinsky, unable to let go of her grudge before one final comeuppance for the high heads of the Gelmans? Was it someone Slava turned down, angry at having to do without what everyone else was getting?"

-- Narrator (Chapter 17 paragraph 19)

Importance: Slava wondered who had told Otto that the letters were being forged and what their motive was for keeping the elderly people from getting restitution money.

For a person like Grandmother, there was no law but what we find in each other. And Grandfather was the man she had found."

-- Narrator (Chapter 17 paragraph 37)

Importance: Slava reasoned that his grandmother had accepted grandfather's behavior, even though it wasn't always legally right, because she had lived in such a lawless land when she was growing up.



He had survived the war at the price of punishing himself for the rest of his life with the lie that had made it possible.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 17 paragraph 39)

Importance: Slava finally realized that the feud between the Gelmans and Rudinskys had developed not entirely because of Grandfather's refusal to loan money to the Rudinskys but also because Grandfather wanted to distance himself from that family because he didn't want them to find out how he'd come to survive the war while so many his age had died.

The Gelmans managed to leave the Soviet Union only because all sides had agreed to pretend that they were going to Israel.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 17 paragraph 72)

Importance: Slava realized he and his family had only been allowed to immigrate to America because they had lied and said they were going to Israel. That lie had been beneficial because it had allowed them to get away from the place that was causing the family so much distress.

Mr. Gelman maintains an adversarial attitude toward people from his community. It may be more productive to present him with someone from a neutral or unfamiliar background.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 19 paragraph 9)

Importance: Slava wondered why Otto Barber, who had a background different from his own, had been assigned to question him. He wondered if he had been tagged as having a dislike of and inability to work with people from his own culture.

Pay them all,' Slava said. 'Because you are responsible. Or because you can. Fate has put you in this lucky position to do the just thing.'”

-- Slava (Chapter 19 paragraph 46)

Importance: Slava asked Otto to do the right thing and approve all of the restitution applications for payment.

He had seen Slava three times in a month, three times more than in the year before, and now his mouth would send Slava away once more. Send him away for reasons he would never grasp, but send him away all the same, that much he understood.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 19 paragraph 123)

Importance: When Slava's grandfather made a comment to Berta about Slava's personal life, he realized that he'd upset Slava even though he didn't understand why. He was afraid his grandson was going to go away and not visit him again. Instead, Slava told his grandfather that he loved him.