

A Thread of Grace Study Guide

A Thread of Grace by Mary Doria Russell

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Plot Summary

When Mussolini surrendered in 1942, Jews were no longer under the Italian Army's protection from the invading Germans, and many fled from several small countries over the treacherous Alps to northern Italy. Small farms and villages in these mountains, populated by people of diverse political and religious beliefs, extended their hands and homes to 43,000 Jewish refugees who might otherwise have been lost to the horrors of Nazi death camps. In her novel, "A Thread of Grace," Mary Doria Russell's wonderful characters live with courage, guilt, fear, hope and compassion, all intertwined with one another in a complex web woven by a disastrous war. The driving force they have in common is their sheer will to survive in a war-torn Europe, severely sliced in every direction by political factions and devastation.

Russell's characters handle the challenges of tremendous personal loss each in their own way. Claudette Blum, a teenage Belgian girl whose mother and brother have disappeared since they boarded a train from France, escapes to Northern Italy with her father, Alberto. Renzo Leoni, an Italian Jew whose guilt over atrocities committed in the Abyssinian war fuel his acute alcoholism, disguises himself as a Catholic priest and a Nazi officer as a way to bring food, aide and supplies to his fellow Jewish refugees. Iacopo Soncini, a rabbi, and his wife Mirella, also leaving the hotel in San' Andrea, eventually take in hundreds of refugees of every nationality who are desperate for food, shelter and medical aid. Dr. Schramm, a fallen SS officer, enters the story looking for absolution for the 91,867 people whose lives he has taken under Hitler's command in the name of science.

Although the history of this period in Europe is fundamentally tragic, as readers, we applaud these suffering, resolute people, not only for surviving the robbery of family and basic living conditions, but also for surviving through the immeasurable damage to their sense of home, hope, faith and joy. They do not all survive, but a greater percentage survived in Italy due to human kindness and a "thread of grace."



Preludio Austria 1907

Preludio Austria 1907 Summary

Klara Hitler's immaculate home was simply a reflection of her massive guilt and self-loathing, since she was impregnated by her uncle at an early age and eventually married him. Losing her first three children, she was overly-protective and domineering with the son who lived, Adolph. Forcing him to breast-feed for too long, Klara was afraid of every kind of threat, real or imagined and, therefore, so was Adolph.

Terrified of suffocation, meat, and a host of other everyday things and people, combined with the shame of incest, the fear of ill health and severe paranoia on many levels forced Adolph to adopt the contrived conclusion that he was pure and faultless, and that others were filth and needed to be annihilated. Adolph decided to "free Europe of pollution and defilement - only health and confidence and purity and order would remain!" Perhaps a factor that determined history was that it was a Jewish doctor who was not able to save Klara Hitler when she suffered, and eventually died, from breast cancer.

Preludio Austria 1907 Analysis

This brief psychological study of Adolph Hitler is a helpful addition to this novel, since it is otherwise so difficult to explain why Hitler was capable of the atrocities he committed. If there were any doubt about Hitler's mental condition, his childhood, summed up on these few short pages, would make any thinking person doubt his sanity. With all of his afflictions of fear, shame and anger, Adolph could withdraw, explode or simply turn it all outward and take on the world.

Perhaps his mother taught him about power and control, forcing him to breast-feed long after he was ready to be weaned. Her strict standards of cleanliness gave her a sense of self-worth when there was not much else to rely on for self-esteem. Her intense and well-founded fear over losing another child transferred to Adolph, whose uncertainties grew into multiple layers of fear, the list taking up an entire paragraph in this prologue. Wondering whether all of this information is significant, the author reveals what is, perhaps, the most telling event of Hitler's life, which was the failure of a Jewish doctor to save his mother from cancer.

That Hitler was a maniac is indisputable. Not necessarily evoking compassion, this prologue at least sheds some light on the origins of his profound mental illness.



Greater Italy - 1943 - Anno Facista XXII - September 1943

Greater Italy - 1943 - Anno Facista XXII - September 1943 Summary

An interesting social phenomenon of the holocaust is one of which many are not aware. When Mussolini surrendered in 1942, Jews were no longer under the Italian Army's protection from the invading Germans, and many fled from several small countries over the treacherous Alps to northern Italy. Small farms and villages in these mountains, populated by people of diverse political and religious beliefs, extended their hands and homes to 43,000 Jewish refugees who might otherwise have been lost to the horrors of Nazi death camps. In her novel, "A Thread of Grace," Mary Doria Russell's wonderful characters live with courage, guilt, fear, hope and compassion, all intertwined with one another in a complex web. The driving force they have in common is their sheer will to survive in a war-torn Europe, severely sliced in every direction by political factions and devastation.

Porto Sant'Andrea, Liguria, Northwestern Coast of Italy

An inebriated German Waffen SS officer, Doctor Werner Schramm searches for a priest in the small village of Porto Sant' Andrea along the Italian Riviera, where he is on a two week leave. In the bomb-damaged basilica, Schramm struggles to converse with Suoras Marta and Fossette, as well as Renzo Leoni, and we learn that Mussolini has just surrendered. A priest named Oswaldo Tomitz, introduces himself to Leoni. Leoni and Oswaldo help themselves to Schramm's money and cigarettes for the sisters to sell on the black market for their work with orphans.

Leoni was at the church waiting to meet his brother-in-law, Tranquillo Loeb, an attorney for the Delegation for the Assistance of Hebrew Emigrants. Oswaldo is shocked to learn that Leoni, caring for a drunken Nazi soldier, is a Jew. The bells begin to ring, and Suorta Marta excitedly announces that the war is over because Italy has surrendered.

Sainte-Gisele on the Vesubie River - Southeastern France

Occupied by the Italian Fourth army, the old mountain resort of Sainte-Gisele is home to Claudette Blum's family, as well as hundreds of Jewish refugees. The Jews are under the protection of the carabinieri, or Italy's elite military police, who have kept them safe from Nazis. However, with the news of Mussolini's surrender, her father is ordering her to pack quickly. Her neighbor, Duno Brossler tells her the Germans will be coming in as soon as the Italians leave southern France. The Brosslers, too, are packing to trek over the high-altitude mountains, leaving Duno's aging grandmother behind. Claudette's mother and two brothers left on a train some time ago and Albert Blum has not been able to locate them, but Brigadiere Umberto Giovanetti has arranged for them to stay in



Italy, where the war is allegedly over. He has invented the identity for them of Italian Aryans, descendants of their grandmother's Italian lover and eligible for Italian citizenship. He will stay behind to try to slow down in the influx of the Germans.

Albert Blum is Polish, and from Belgium. Young Claudette, Claudia in Italian, knows three languages and now wants to learn Italian; the family has been on the road much of her life. In Belgium, the Germans tricked them by coming in tanks. They continue to flee, Claudia continuing to study her math along the way. When their car was destroyed, they began to walk but when her mother, Paula, could no longer walk due to bleeding blisters, the doctor who helped her arranged for her and the boys to take the next train south, with the family planning a reunion later in Nice. Paula and the boys never showed up, and Claudia and Albert continue to move on with the Nazis close behind. Santino Cicala, a young soldier helping Jews get over the mountains, takes a special interest in Claudia and Albert. In the meantime, Duno Brossler's grandmother, Rivka whom they left in Saint Gisele, is murdered by a German soldier in her room.

Greater Italy - 1943 - Anno Facista XXII - September 1943 Analysis

Russell has set the stage for her main characters with this meeting of the Jewish Renzo Leoni, the Catholic priest Don Osvaldo, and the German Nazi doctor, Werner Schramm. Although this chapter ends with the announcement of the end of the war, the story is just beginning to unfold, since it takes place in the last part of World War II. Renzo, retired from the military, is obviously an intelligent and well-dressed man who does not seem to be ruffled by the appearance of the Nazi doctor. The ironic setting of the Catholic Church foretells the presence of Catholic sympathizers throughout the story. Even the Catholic nuns struggle to repress their rage.

Immediately a sense of urgency overtakes the story as Mussolini's defeat signals an opportunity for the Nazis to begin occupying the area to wipe out those Jews who have, up until now, been protected by the Italian army. The dark sensibilities of war are woven throughout this chapter, even in the young children. The senseless killing of Duno's grandmother tells us that the slaughter has begun, and the enemy is right behind the families trekking over the mountains.



9 September 1943

9 September 1943 Summary

Porto Sant'Andrea

Renzo Leoni lives with his forward-thinking mother, Lidia. Renzo, always courageous, wanted to fly at a very young age. A member of the Italian Royal Air Force, he survived the war on Abyssinia, escaping five airplane wrecks, as well as being lost in the air and low on fuel. Renzo drinks to soothe his scars, physical and mental. Renzo has spent the previous evening with his new acquaintance, Dr. Schramm, fascinated by Schramm's sympathy and patriotism for Germany. Renzo's brother in law, Tranquillo Loeb, scolds him for being out at night with a Nazi. Renzo and Lidia resist Loeb's frantic warning that every Jew in Italy is in mortal danger, as well as his invitation to flee to Switzerland. Lidia considers herself an Italian who celebrates Passover and although her children went to Torah Talmud classes, they also attended Catholic schools. She considers the race laws annoying.

Renzo has lived in atonement without hope of absolution since the Abyssinian war in which he was a fighter pilot. He tells his mother that the Germans, according to Schramm, are stronger and will make Italy pay for the armistice, information which she thinks will be appreciated by the resistance. Strongly anti-fascist and anti-German, Lidia admits she marched in anti-war demonstrations while Renzo was in jail, and helped oust Mussolini from power. Renzo decides to apply for a job as a driver for the Dairy Association.

There is an obvious affection between the pregnant Rabbi's wife, Mirella Soncini and Renzo, who has disturbed the entire neighborhood by coming in at five in the morning. Elderly Rina Dolcino, another neighbor in the hotel, has been a bickering friend to Lidia for decades. As the two gossip, we learn that little Altira, Mirella Soncini's last baby, died very young, and that there is a new assistant to the archbishop named Don Osvaldo.

Maritime Alps France

Claudette, her father Alberto and their soldier guide Santino are camped out in the mountains. Albert explains the small boxes tied to his forehead and hands for prayer that contain sacred words to remember. When Albert loses his wedding ring in a sock he had on his hand for warmth, he and Claudette clash over its importance.

As they cross the Alps, they see abandoned possessions left for centuries that people could no longer carry with them as they made the trek. Santino tells the exhausted Claudia to save her tears as she might need them later. They see the Brossler family also making the climb. Santino, who blames Eisenhower for their predicament, is no longer able to carry the Blums' luggage and after emptying the valises, tosses them down the steep mountainside, drawing curses from the climbers below. Claudette



sneezes and is saved from falling by Santino. The three finally cross the border into Italy.

Colle Aurelio, Italy

At the border, we learn that hostilities between Allied forces and Italy are to cease, although the armed forces are ordered to resist other attacks, meaning the Germans. Rinaldo Miroglio, who is arranging lodging for the refugees, considers it a miracle that they made it over the Alps at this time of year. A phone call informs the military that Italy's government has collapsed and Germans surround the Vatican. Miroglio has been ordered by phone to keep the Hebrews under guard until the SS arrives to take care of them, and all Italians are ordered to disarm. Miroglio and Santini decide to get everyone out of the area by dawn, and to scatter the Jews among the small farms in the mountains. Santino realizes there is much in Italy that the Germans will want and much they will destroy to delay allied advances. He decides to enlist in his next war.

9 September 1943 Analysis

Porto Sant'Andrea

Russell packs quite a bit of detail into a chapter and, since these characters all live in the same building, there exists a relationship among all of them. We also subtly learn that Renzo is a handsome drunk rascal who has seen too much violence. His mother Lidia is a secret political activist and a poor housekeeper. Mirella Soncini is beautiful, and hopeful, but still grieving the loss of her second child. Tranquillo Loeb, an intelligent lawyer, is judgmental and frightened. Jewish Lidia and Catholic Rina are very competitive, but dear old friends. We also learn there is some reason that baby Altira perhaps should not have been kept at home.

Martitime Alps, France

Young Claudette and Santino appear to be falling in love, as he protects her and her father in the harsh conditions of the Alps. Russell's characters manage to keep a sense of humor throughout their treacherous journey, dealing with the realities of no bathrooms and the danger of fire attracting attention to themselves. Ironically, the Blums and Santino laugh at the tumbling luggage, and Claudette acts like a fairy princess when they cross the border into Italy.

Colle Aurelio, Italy

The nightmare of war is intensified by the Hebrews' sense of being chased by the Nazis, especially through the rugged terrain of the Alps. To be expected to surrender to the Nazis, even though non-Jewish Italians do not have much to fear, is unpalatable, since they will come under the service of Hitler's regime. Santino was already disenfranchised from his army unit when Italy surrendered, and had been looking forward to going home to Sant' Andres to live a normal life. Choosing now to oppose the Nazis foreshadows a situation that will put Santino into refugee mode, as well as his friends.



10 September 1943

10 September 1943 Summary

Young Angelo Soncini's baby sister died in an accident with a coal stove, but Angelo feels no sadness for her. Angelo's mother, the wife of a rabbi, is tired and irritable and Angelo's only friend was his grandfather, who was sent away to live with an aunt. His mother, Mirella, who is pregnant again, tries to finagle ration cards from Serafino Brizzolari, a public official whose sympathies lie with Mussolini after having been scorned as a wounded war veteran. Brizzolari gives Mirella a large envelope of ration cards, knowing the Germans are coming and that she and her husband are aiding Jewish refugees passing through on their flight from the Germans. He tells her to sell them on the black market. The visiting refugees are from Germany and Poland and their cultural and religious customs are quite different from the Soncinis', but Iacopo Soncini is a generous rabbi, devoted to his work.

Running home from a visit to her daughter's grave where they find Nazi soldiers desecrating the cemetery, Mirella and Angelo run into Renzo who tells them Iacopo has been arrested. When they are stopped by the Nazis to have their papers checked, Renzo quickly assumes the identity of "Ugo Messner," and degrades Mirella publicly, telling the Nazis in fluent German that she is his Italian wife and is therefore stupid and has left her papers in their hotel room. Later, Renzo, who has always loved Mirella, kisses her on the cheek and little Angelo is shocked. Iacopo is released from jail with the help of Don Osvaldo and Renzo. The Soncini family returns to their messy house, and Iacopo admits to Mirella that he would like the new baby to be a boy.

Renzo prepares to go out drinking and his mother tries to help him understand that he and Mirella would not have made a good match. She offers to keep liquor at home for him rather than his having to break curfew, but he leaves, angry.

Maritime Alps, Piemonte

The Jews are roused from sleep in the Alpine resorts and hotels early in the morning because Italy is now occupied and the SS knows they are there. Border guards arm themselves and load the people onto trucks, including the Brosslers and Blums. They all plan to try to make it to Valdottavo, an isolated valley with a few farmhouses. After they have traveled some distance on winding roads, Santino, the soldier in love with Claudette Blum, wakes them and tells them they must abandon the truck and start walking. The Brosslers ask if they can join the Blums under Santino's guard.

Santino discusses the Italians' acceptance of everyone regardless of race, but also describes their habit of only trusting family members. He tells them that farmers hate the government and will be helpful. Santino was a drystone waller who hates concrete; Albert hates calculators and typewriters. As they travel on foot through the mountains, Alberto Blum becomes ill. Frieda Brossler will not leave him behind. Santino, exhausted,



scared, and having slipped and possibly broken his nose, spots an abandoned charcoal-maker's stone hut after praying fervently to the Virgin. They finally have a fire and shelter. Claudette misses her mother, but has placed her love and hope in Santino, who has left them but promises to come back.

10 September 1943 Analysis

Russell's perfectly fine, normal people are reduced to being chased like animals through mountainous, rainy terrain. The gunfire makes this chapter frightening, as the people try to travel and stay quiet and unnoticed. At one point, the little girls are asleep in the mud; it is such a miserable journey that it is comforting when they find a stone hut and are able to build a fire. Alberto Blum's illness foreshadows worse times for him, added to his already-broken heart over losing his wife and sons. Claudette's imaginary conversation with her mother reveals that she is growing up and thinking about marrying Santino.

Santino is a brave soldier, but we also see his softer side in this chapter, as he cries and prays for help. It is interesting to note that Santino would not have known that "Hebrews" still existed until this time in his life when he finds himself helping them. The arguing between the Brosslers is not helping young Duno's angst and anger, and Duno is watching Santino as his adult values develop.



11-13 September 1943

11-13 September 1943 Summary

Basilica San Giovanni Battista, Porto Sant'Andrea

Don Osvaldo hears a funny confession by Catarina Dolcino, who wants to be punished for the most minor infractions. "Rina" explains that Renzo is not really a criminal, but went to jail in place of his brother in law, Tranquillo Loeb, who had also not done anything wrong, but in 1938, every city had to send ten anti-Fascist Jews to jail. Rina feels the Leonis are good people, and asks Osvaldo if he will participate in her plan, which involves Suora Marta and Signora Leoni.

Serafino Brizzolari, the bureaucrat who once sent Renzo to jail, confesses his numerous sins to Don Osvaldo, hoping for absolution since he has already confessed them to the Archbishop and did not follow his advice. Osvaldo is impatient with the sinners and with the war. His little village is under pressure, with the Allies trying to keep the Germans back, and the air raids have increased since the armistice. Italian males are being forced into service in the German army and factories, with the exception of the black-booted fascists.

Outside, Osvaldo is approached by the coughing Werner Schramm who wants to confess, and apologizes for his earlier drunkenness in the church. Schramm wants to know if children go to heaven if they are too young or unable to reach a state of reason. Osvaldo says they do. Dr. Schramm confesses that, as a state hospital doctor he murdered 91,867 people with drugs, gas, acid and other means of extermination in Hitler's euthanasia program. He told stories of killing children and lying to their parents, executions in Russia, Jewish toddlers being shot in the head, live bodies being cut apart. Osvaldo cannot give him penance or absolution and tells Schramm all he can do is kill himself. Absolution requires contrition, and it is clear that Schramm is only seeking forgiveness because he is dying of tuberculosis. Schramm falls to the ground with a hemorrhage.

Rabbinical Residence - Porto Sant-Andrea

As young Angelo asks questions about childbirth, Mirella thinks of her deceased child, Altira, whose development was not normal. The priest, Osvaldo Tomitz pays a visit to the rabbi's home and tells Iacopo he has refused someone absolution. He also advises the rabbi that Jews should leave the area to avoid arrest and deportation, offering to give them baptismal certificates. Renzo Leoni arrives, appearing very drunk, and tells the rabbi that Mirella is in labor. The rabbi leaves and Renzo tells Osvaldo that a river of Jews are coming through the Maritimes from France, thinking they will be safe there. Renzo just lost his job as a milk truck driver due to a mechanical delay, but Osvaldo offers to help get him his job back. He thinks they can help Jews along the milk route,



distributing money and places to hide with the help of Osvaldo's friend in Valdottavo named Leto, a Catholic activist.

Lidia Leoni is a Jewish political activist who thinks Communists will eventually give women the vote. With help from Osvaldo and Suora Marta, Lidia hides her elderly friend, Giacomo Tura, in the basilica's basement, where he will create documents to help Jews get past the Nazis. Tura is a sofer - a ritual scribe.

11-13 September 1943 Analysis

It is significant that Osvaldo, in desperation, goes to the rabbi to try to resolve his conscience about not being able to absolve the guilty criminal, Dr. Schramm. Cooperation among Jewish and Catholics in Italy is central to the story. Osvaldo cannot say what he knows, but becomes determined to help the Jews after hearing Schramm's horrible confession.

We are learning that Renzo Leoni is a master of disguises can assume the two identities of Ugo Messner and Stefano Savoca. Renzo appears to be very drunk at the synagogue, but Osvaldo realizes he is not. Renzo also admits in this chapter that Mirella chose Iacopo over him, and it becomes clear that he is not a scoundrel, but a war-weary veteran determined to help his people by doing whatever he needs to do.

In this chapter, the characters are making preparations and constructing plans to help themselves through this disastrous time. They are pooling their resources and networking, and Russell continues to remind us that the Nazis are right around the corner. It is interesting that, although Communists are enemies of Germany, they are not enemies of the Jews and Catholics at this time. The Nazis are the dominant evil force that threatens everyone, but especially Jews.



Late September 1943

Late September 1943 Summary

Valdottavo: Near Frazione Santa Chiara

Claudette and Albert Blum have been in the charcoal-maker's shack for a week when two apples appeared on a flat rock outside their hut. They move farther up the mountain, knowing someone is aware of their presence. Claudette goes down each day to check the rock. Soon cheese and pears appear, and later bread, milk, mushrooms, berries and, eventually, a warm wool cape. Each time Claudette retrieves the gifts, she leaves flowers. Sick and desperate, Albert agrees with Claudette to return to the stone hut.

Near Frazione Gore

The Brosslers formerly lived in Venice in a beautiful home with art and music and a good education for Duno and Leisel. Brossler's mother, Rivka, would tell horror stories of her own family who was plundered by the Cossacks, and she is sure they will come again because if a Jew has something, the goyim will take it; she repeats how the optimists all died in a work camp.

The Brosslers have been staying with a farmer who has fed and sheltered them in his barn. The farmer shows them a German flyer that requires all Jews in the district of Valdottavo to report to SS commanders by September 28, 1943 in Roccabarbena or Borgo San Mauro to surrender. It says those who surrender will be resettled in the East where work and schools will be provided. After this date, Jews who have not surrendered are to be shot on sight. Hermann and Duno Brossler fight over whether to surrender and, after his father slaps him, Duno goes into the mountains on his own, angry that his father will not fight the Germans. He is affected by all of the hatred toward Jews he has experienced, and feels like a chased bird in these mountains, but knows he will never go back.

Casa Di Goletta, Valdottavo, Piemonte

Battista Goletta, the farmer who had tried to help the Brosslers, tells Santino Cicala that many of the families have turned themselves in, and that he would have helped the Brosslers to safety, but they could not understand what he was saying to them. Santino has not found Claudette and Alberto Blum. Battista asks Santino to stay on the farm to help him and his wife Rosa, and promises to help look for Claudia.

Late September 1943 Analysis

Unfortunately, the language barrier has forced a decision on the Brosslers that they might not have made otherwise. The Brosslers lived a rich, comfortable life before the



war but at this point, they are as poor and endangered as any other Jew on the run is. Alone in the mountains with winter coming on, Duno's fate is unknown.

Santino has a good, safe position with Goletta, but will continue to try to find the Blums. Alberto Blum is ill and his fate looks decidedly grim. We still do not know who is furnishing food to the Blums. Although the people who initially all lived in the hotel in Porto Sant'Andrea have drifted away from one another, they are each on their own path, either to the work camps or safety, running from the Nazis.

Russell allows us to look at the Jewish reaction to the Nazi threat through characters like Hermann Brossler, who thinks that maybe it is all just rumor about what the Nazis are doing to Jews. He thinks that possibly they really do have schools for the children and that maybe they really will provide them with jobs. It was impossible for many people to even conceive that human beings could be burning thousands of Jews in ovens. Russell wants us to realize that it was not so much a matter of trust, but their goodness and naiveté that led many Jews into the hands of Hitler's monsters.



October 1943

October 1943 Summary

Pensione Usodimare, Porto Sant'Andrea

Werner Schramm's sister, Irmgard, had encephalitis as a child and the family institutionalized her. His mother committed suicide, confirming Werner's feeling that Irmgard ruined his family. He began to believe that money and time should not be spent on those who are weak. Serving as a physician, he became the protégé of Professor Hoche, who encouraged him to do research. Schramm confesses to Renzo he has been AWOL from the German army for over a month. Schramm's gory horror stories do not disturb Renzo. Schramm, who is dying from tuberculosis, realizes Renzo is Jewish. They discuss their personal backgrounds, Schramm admitting to German idealism.

It would take cold, dry air, plain food, nursing to postpone Schramm's death, and Renzo decides to see what he can do to help Schramm live long enough to see his family again.

Valdottavo, near Frazione Santa Chiara

The provider of food to the Blums is a young girl whose mother, Tercilla Lovera, who invites the Blums to her home for food. The men of her family, except her one-armed son Pierino, have been taken by the war. The Blums go with her to the tiny village of Santa Chiara. The villagers have been cooking and cleaning in preparation for the Hebrews. Each household presents them with a gift, and they are fascinated with Albert's stories. However, when they learn that Albert's wife and boys were put on a train, Pierino can only say the word, "Hands," as he remembers seeing Hebrews on trains.

Pierino was an Italian draftee headed for Russia. He saw cattle cars filled with thousands of hungry and thirsty Hebrews, their destination unknown. In the piercing Russian winter, the Soviets fired relentlessly on the Italian lines, and drove tanks across the frozen river, slaughtering them, but the Germans would not allow the Italians to retreat. Pierino's hand was blown off by a mortar shell. He hid on a truck and was almost dead when he was delivered to an Italian military hospital near Warsaw, where his arm was amputated. Pierino learned that the Germans were separating families and sending them to labor camps, or ovens.

Alberto, who still does not really believe the rumors, is spared the horrid details by Pierino.

Leoni Apartment - Porto Sant'Andrea



Young Angelo Soncini hopes his sister Rosina will die like Altira. Angelo is only seven and wants to be a soldier. He tells his neighbor Lidia Leoni that he saw Signor Ravera walking around with a bucket that contained Signora Ravera's head.

Angelo's father Iacopo arrives, dirty with a black eye. Angelo gives his father a note that indicates Tranquillo and his family are in German custody for trying to leave Italy with false documents. Renzo advises Iacopo to close the synagogue, distribute money to the employees and tell everyone to get out of the city or, at least, let Osvaldo bury all its records among the Catholic records in the Basilica. Renzo tells them there is a Nazi shakedown in Rome and although his sister and her children are fine, she was forced to give her jewelry to the Nazis. The Nazis gave Roman Jews thirty-six hours to deliver fifty kilos of gold or be deported. Interrupting the conversation, Angelo shows the adults a woman's thumb he found in the street.

Rabbinical Residence - Port Sant'Andrea

Iacopo is introspective, wondering if he should have taken Renzo up on his offer to get the family out of the city. He is distressed that Angelo was interested in the thumb he found. It is Yom Kippur and the Jews are fasting, and Don Osvaldo wants Iacopo to close the synagogue. Although Iacopo believes that we are partners of God, he must do what he can to save his people. He decides to bring his son Angelo to Suora Marta to be enrolled in the Catholic boarding school in Roccabarbena. He will send Mirella and the baby to Mirella's Catholic in-laws in Decimo, away from industrial targets. His faith is unwavering but his heart is heavy.

En route to Roccabarba, Valdottavo, Piemonte

Angelo, Suora Marta, Iacopo and old Suora Ilaria ride the crowded train to Roccabarbena, where Valdottavo's olive oil, wine, cornmeal and other resources are shipped on trains to the coast. Marta instructs Angelo on his new last name, which is now Santoro, and explains that he is now Catholic and must never tell anyone why he is at the Catholic school. However, Angelo thinks he has been put in the school because he made his baby sister cry.

Divisional headquarters, 12th Waffen-SS Walther Reinhardt, Palazzo Usodimare, Porto Sant'Andrea

Erhardt Von Thadden thinks he is doing the right thing by cleansing the world of its worst people. A student of Aryan theology, he is now a respected Nazi lieutenant-general in the Waffen-SS. Command. Von Thadden, the Gruppenfuhrer, now lives in the Usodimare with his wife, and its ballroom has been turned into a large office for Nazi officials. Von Thadden, pointing to a map, explains to his officers how they plan to take substantial areas of Italy, including the Piedmont area at the foot of the Maritime Alps. Artur Huppenkothen, a Gestapo officer, discusses how Jews are the oldest religion, having originated in Rome centuries before the Vatican was built. He explains that Jews have infiltrated Italian society at all levels in trade unions, military and government. Officer Reinecke presents the estimated numbers of Jews in the area, and the men joke



about the military ineptness of Italian Jews. However, von Thadden warns them not to underestimate the Jews. Later, von Thadden presents Reinecke with a promotion and pay increase, and tells him to see Ugo Messner about the details of moving Reinecke and his pregnant wife to Porto Sant'Andrea.

Former Rabbinical Residence, Porto Sant'Andrea

Erna Huppenkothen has moved into the former home of Mirella and Iacopo Sancini, with the help and support of Ugo Messner (who is Renzo Soncini in disguise), who has become her good friend. She is the spinster sister of Artur Huppenkothen, a high-level Gestapo officer, and has come here to be his housekeeper and personal maid. The house is beautifully furnished and elegant, and Messner brings her gifts from his frequent travels.

October 1943 Analysis

A particularly long chapter, we are now in the heart of the story. The Germans have moved into Italy and those who can, have taken up the fight to resist. We learn the background of Werner Schramm and, strangely, feel something akin to sympathy for this monster. It is easier to understand how he arrived his idealistic opinions when we realize that a disabled child destroyed his family.

The Jewish friends have all left from Sant'Andrea. At this time we know that little Angelo Soncini is in a Catholic school and thinks his family has put him there because he is noisy. The long-suffering Blums, Alberto and Claudette, now Albert and Claudia, are being housed and fed at Santa Chiara. Renzo Leoni has assumed the identity of Ugo Messner and is making friends with German officers. We do not know at this point the whereabouts at this point of Lidia Leoni, Mirella Soncini, Santino Cicala or Werner Schramm, and it is not yet clear whether Don Osvaldo Tomitz has been successful with the cover-up of Jewish records. Russell has introduced us now to some of the Nazi officials who are assigned to this area of Italy, and they are not likeable. They have replaced the town's heritage with the essence of Adolph Hitler, and are bent on destroying Jews and robbing Italy of its natural resources.

Russell lets the reader follow her characters and in doing so, we grow attached to them without any overt knowledge of their goodness. Likewise, without being particularly critical, it is easy for the reader to dislike the arrogant Nazis



November 1943

November 1943 Summary

En route to Borgo San Mauro Valdottavo, Piemonte

Renzo Leoni and Osvaldo Tomitz work on a broken-down milk truck on their way to Valdottavo. Renzo speculates that ten percent of any group of human beings are shitheads, ten percent are saints and the rest are just trying to get by. Osvaldo has a considerable amount of cash with him to distribute to the thousand Jews hiding in the mountains. Duno Brossler arrives looking for Leto Girotti, an activist priest in the area. Osvaldo and Renzo give Duno clothing and tell him not to speak. They pretend to have milk for orphans and Renzo takes on the identity of a crazy Sicilian named Savoca. They tell German police that Duno's family was killed and that he is a mute. They proceed to Leto Girotti's church. Don Leto has a wooden leg and is known as the Red Priest. Osvaldo catches Leto up on war news and wonders why the Pope does not excommunicate Hitler, but Leto understands the politics of the Vatican.

En route to Santa Chiara

As they travel on foot, Don Leto helps Duno with his Italian and tells him he was a boy when he lost his leg, and was allowed to go to school because he could not farm. Telling Duno to wait, Leto goes on to visit the Loveras at Santa Chiara, and meets Albert and Claudia Blum. Leto delivers a message to Claudia that Santino has not forgotten her, but had gotten lost and is at another farm until the snow melts. Leto tells Claudia that Santino has a good soul and she should wear his love like a crown. Don Leto gives Pierino a gun, a gift from the milkman, Renzo. Pierino stutters badly, but Leto tells him Moses was also "halt of tongue." A postman's position in Valdottavo, which would allow Pierino to travel all over the valley, is open and Leto will recommend him for it. Leto tells Peierino that Duno, a new recruit, is waiting for him.

November 1943 Analysis

It seems that the ability to be legitimately mobile in the area is key to keeping the networks open and the refugees fed. Central to this activity are the two priests, Osvaldo and Leto. This chapter is much more upbeat, since we actually see some progress for the refugees. There is money being distributed, and Don Leto is a blessing to them. The Blums are safe and Santino and Claudia will eventually be together. Likewise, Duno Brossler finally has a place to go. As far as we know, they have all gotten out of Sant'Andrea before the Nazis arrived, with the exception of Renzo, who is working alongside of them under a German identity. One of the worst enemies of the refugees' is the extremely cold weather. Missing his leg, Leto has a special fondness for Pierino who is missing an arm.



The author's jumping from place to place could prove confusing for the reader, but the activity is all basically taking place within a small area in northern Italy, for which she provides an excellent map. Several times the term "resettled" is used, implying to the Jews that the Germans intended to simply move and resettle them, when in fact, there was no such plan. However, this partially explains the Jews' trust and willingness to board trains and obey the Nazis.



Winter 1943-44

Winter 1943-44 Summary

Cadenza d'Inverno

In Werner Schramm's brilliant mind, war is compared to misdiagnosed tuberculosis, with infiltrates in its battlefield resulting in attack and retreat, attrition, weakness and eventually death. He remembers how the artists of the world romanticized illness and fainting with high colors and drama, and thinks of the talented men and women who succumbed to tuberculosis. He now understands why people cling to one small thread of life for as long as they can.

Werner Schramm traveled from Sant'Andrea through German checkpoints, drunk in a coffin with a stinking dead pigeon, surrounded by two women feigning grief, one of them being Lidia Leoni. Renzo has arranged Schramm's escape as a symbolic repayment to someone Renzo may have killed in Absynnia. Desperately ill, Schramm now lies in a hayloft, recuperating with the help of an older woman and a young mother. He weeps at the mother's lullabies.

Winter 1943-44 Analysis

This chapter is short and purposely stands alone. It is the grace shown toward Werner Schramm, who has killed thousands of Jews and unfortunate humans, which sets this chapter apart in its brevity. We can only guess that Werner Schramm is with Lidia, who posed as his mourning mother, and Mirella, whose crying baby he hears in the background of his foggy mind. He now watches a mountain peak and weather changes through a small window, warmed by layers of wool and fur. This is a man who, it could be argued, does not deserve to live and yet, miraculously, is recovering through acts of human kindness.



March 1944

March 1944 Summary

Northwestern Italy, 1944 Anno Fascista XXIII, Frazione Decimo, Valdottavo

Lidia is now Signora Savoca, and Renzo goes by Stefano Savoca. Mirella Soncini is now Marisa, and is caring for Schramm, nursing him, bathing him, doing his laundry and feeding him. Since his health is improving, Schramm is able to walk to the house and meets baby Rosina. They discuss their families and how distressing it is to be hated due to lies. Mirella tells him the Allies leveled Monte Cassino. Schramm disapproves of Mirella's indulgent parenting. Mirella tells him why she could not marry the unstable Renzo. Mirella's life as a rabbi's wife was difficult and she is now enjoying the solitude of being in the mountains. She has come to appreciate the hard work of peasants and the residual effects of poverty. She ponders why she decided to marry the soft-spoken Iacopo instead of the dashing Renzo, and decides she made the right decision.

Borgo San Mauro

Lidia and Adele Toselli, bend over and walk into town as tired little old women. They have a young accomplice, Maria Avani, who strolls by the German soldiers in a short skirt and flirtatiously tight sweater. While they are occupied looking at her, the two old women steal the ignition wires from their motorcycles. Tired and sore from the long walk, Lidia returns to Decimo and tosses the wires off the mountainside.

Tabaccheria Marrapodi, Valdottavo

Pierino Lovera, now a postman, delivers the mail to Bertino Marrapodi at his general store, who is astonished at how much cash he is being paid for groceries. Bertino is a Fascist and is only supposed to sell certain items to his customers. He warns Pierino that the people up the hill are communists.

The war in Italy is bleeding the citizens dry with taxes and black market corruption. Now the Germans are sweeping through taking men as soldiers, offering bounties for Jews or partisans and burning the property of people who hide them.

Attilio Goletta is a poor farmer, his son Tullio having joined the partisans. Attilio supports his own family as well as three Jewish refugees. Pierino delivers money to Goletta that has made its way from Don Leto. He tells Attilio that Marrapodi is suspicious, but Goletta does not care. Goletta's wife, Florina, sends a sweater and bread to be delivered to her son.

Climbing on toward the cave of San Mauro, Pierino arrives at the appointed place and is met by Jakub Landau who takes him to the cave.

Cave of San Mauro



Duno is at the cave working on his weapons. Duno admires Pierino Lovera, who does not hate the Russians for taking his arm off, because they were defending their homeland, just as the Italians will have to defend themselves against the Germans and the Allies. The men of the San Mauro Brigade are hiding in the cave from the rastellamenti, or the German sweeps for laborers. Some are deserters.

Duno's friend, Nello Toselli, comes to relieve him of sentry duty and they share the bread and sweater from Pierino's mail delivery. Among the brigade is Lidia Leoni, or laNonna, who delivers food to the group supplied by her son, Renzo.

Jakub Landau, a blond, Polish Jew who speaks perfect German, is recruiting for a fighting force called Volunteer Corps of Liberation. He is the organizer for the Committee for National Liberation and he is dedicated to fighting the fascists.

When Lidia returns from four ambushes with the partisans, Renzo is waiting with Mirella. Renzo is furious with his mother for compromising his identity as Stefan Savoca and for bringing danger to all those around her. He is angry that the food he is bringing to Mirella is being used for the troops. She brings up his protection of a German deserter.

The milk truck Renzo was driving was stolen at gunpoint by the resistance, and Renzo has a bruise from a pistol on his face.

Renzo tells Mirella he was responsible for bombing a hospital in Absynnia that killed patients and a doctor. There were red crosses painted on top of all kinds of buildings, and Renzo remembers dropping the bomb, even though a nurse was trying to warn him.

Promising to find a way for Mirella to see Angelo and Iacopo, and giving her some precious salt, Renzo leaves on a mule. Schramm has overheard the conversation and knows now that Renzo really has understood that the most appalling things can become just part of the job and afterward there are days when one is ashamed to be sane.

Divisional Headquarters, 12th Waffen-SS Walther Reinhardt, Palazzo Usodimare, Porto Sant'Andrea

Helmut Reinecke reports to von Thadden that four company commanders have been approached by old women asking for protection from the communists, and offering to lead the Germans to partisan hideouts. The women led patrols to armed partisans, who stripped them of their arms and uniforms. One German officer was killed and two injured. Von Thadden orders Reinecke to have five men in each of six villages hanged, the buildings burned and crops and animals confiscated. He thinks this will drive the partisans further into the end of the valley where they will be easier to deal with later. He sends Reinecke home with a kiss for his new baby.



March 1944 Analysis

The innocence of the villagers and their fear for their futures is palpable, as Pierino travels with the mail. The partisan warriors are mostly adolescent boys afraid of being drafted by the Germans. None are sure where their next meal will come from, but they are kind and giving. Lidia's involvement in the partisan ambushes may prove to be unfortunate. Renzo knows the fruitless, self-perpetuating result of this kind of fighting and, although he loves his mother, is disappointed in her.

Like Renzo and Schramm, Von Thadden and Reinecke casually make abominable decisions that have simply become part of their jobs. Russell draws our attention to the similarities of wartime decisions and their dissimilar effects on those who decide. The Nazis are drunk with power and with their delusion of self-righteousness. Those with a conscience, like Schramm and Renzo, can never live comfortably with their decisions.



April 1944

April 1944 Summary

Casa di Goletta, Valdottavo

Santino Cicala is helping Battista Goletta build a new stonewall when Don Leto appears to tell him that a meeting with Claudia has been arranged for him in Santa Chiara, where she is called Claudia Fiori. Santino is a master stonemason and tells Leto that the wall's strength comes from the inside, as well as from what you see.

Rectory - Church of San Mauro

Adele Toselli has scraped together a feast for the courting Santino and Claudia. Alberto Fiori, formerly Alberto Blum, has passed away from typhus and a weak heart. Don Leto carved a small six-pointed star at the bottom of his gravestone.

Claudia agrees to marry Santino and live in Santa Chiara. He vows to Alberto's grave that he will find Claudia's mother and brothers.

With a distinct, heavy German accent, Renzo appears, no longer as Savoca but now as Ugo Messner. Behind closed doors, Renzo angrily tells Leto to leave the women out of the resistance effort, but Leto shows him a newspaper article about three hundred thirty-five Italians being shot in retaliation for German injuries. Renzo has heard the Nazis now want reprisals of fifty-to-one. Renzo finally agrees to furnish weapons, but on the condition that the brigade goes underground until he gets back, and that the women stay out of it.

Renzo takes Santino and explains that he wants Santino to build a faulty sea wall for a German engineering firm.

En Route to Porto San'Andrea

Santino meets a girl on the crowded train who diverts the Nazi soldiers' attention as a fugitive boy slides under the train seats. She shouts to the passengers that they are sitting ducks for allied bombers and they need to hurry the process of getting their documents checked, thus causing confusion and diverting attention from the boy.

Pensione Usodimare, Porto Sant'Andrea

Renzo/Messner tells Santino that the girl was probably a staffetta, or a messenger for the resistance. Messner sees the Sant'Andrea hospital has been bombed.

Messner wants Santino to approach the bersaglieri to find out what they are selling. Before leaving, he tells Santino to look up Don Osvaldo Tomitz at the basilica and tell him he heard from a shithead that Osvaldo is a decent man.



Warehouse District, Porto Sant'andrea

Iacopo Soncini has been enduring months of bombings. Hiding in a warehouse, he watches rats for cues, analyzing the pattern of explosions. He thinks about a girl who wandered the streets sleepwalking with her eyes open, a common phenomenon in wartime. Iacopo scavenges charcoal from bombed buildings and delivers it as fuel to housewives, along with words of encouragement.

Immacolata Convent, Porto Sant'Andrea

Frieda Brossler begs Suora Marta for help finding her young daughter, Steffi. The Brosslers were staying at an armory, but Nazi soldiers came and were treating the people cruelly. Afraid for Steffi's safety, Frau Brossler made her wait in an alley but, with Frieda and Liesl watching, Hermann was shot. They could not find the door again where they had left little Steffi. Marta takes the mother and daughter to the basilica's dormitory and plants a small note under a vase in the church, while old Giacomo Tura takes note of her activities.

Palazzo Usodimare, Porto Sant'Andrea

Artur Huppenkothen, Erhardt von Thadden and Reinecke discuss strategies for eliminating the resistance in Italy. Von Thadden reminds Artur that the plan is to use the lure, not the cudgel, to bring the Jews out of hiding, and Artur angrily tells him he will do whatever is necessary. Ugo Messner provides von Thadden's wife with luxuries to enhance her extravagant lifestyle. She tells Artur that Messner is also friends with Erna Huppenkothen, Artur's sister.

Oswaldo Tomitz, having been summoned to meet with von Thadden at the Palazzo, sees the filthy, tattered Iacopo Soncini gathering coal. Von Thadden interviews Tomitz about his heritage, referring to a file of information. Von Thadden offers his opinion that Christianity is based in Judaism and mythology, and tells Oswaldo to warn his people that reprisals for injuries to Germans will be set at twenty-to-one.

In the street, Oswaldo is directed by a stranger to Serafino Brizzolari who tells him there is a warrant out for his arrest, that the Gestapo suspects Oswaldo and Suora Marta. Renzo joins them after his night with Erna Huppenkothen. They learn that the Germans plan to destroy the Catholic convent. The three decide that Renzo will go undercover as a priest, and Oswaldo will be disguised as a doctor. Serafino will arrange to get von Thadden's hostages transferred into a municipal jail.

April 1944 Analysis

There is so much information packed into this chapter that, like some others, it is a novel within itself and the story is becoming even more disturbing. Tomitz, Soncini and Leoni are so enmeshed in their activities to help the Jews that they have sacrificed their entire lifestyles, their health, and perhaps, ultimately, their lives. It is important to

remember that Serafino Brizzolari is the municipal official who gave food ration cards to Merilla Soncini and who is now, also helping with the resistance.

Descriptions of the destruction from bombings are gruesome, and the daily horror has become ingrained in the minds of those who have remained at Sant'Andrea. They now know what size bomb is dropped on what kind of target, and recognize the sounds and smells with total familiarity. The characters each react differently to the possibility of their instantaneous death. The sneering von Thadden and his arrogant lackeys are stereotypical Nazis - intelligent and educated, and so terribly lustful for power and prestige that they are blinded to the evil aspect of their activities.

One confusing aspect of this chapter is that we are told earlier that Iacopo Soncini has taken to collecting charcoal to distribute it to poor families, but in this chapter he is in the Gruppenfuhrer's garden collecting charcoal, and is said to have been caught up in Nazi's the labor sweep. The chaos and confusion generated by this hideous war is made quite clear in this chapter.



May 1944

May 1944 Summary

Mother of Mercy Orphanage, Roccarbarbena

Little Angelo Soncini, now Santoro, has realized he is not the only Jew in hiding at his boarding school. The food is sparse and rules are strict. Suora Corniglia is very good to Angelo, and he feels close to a little mute called Isma. Angelo is learning Catholicism and seems to enjoy the local bombing raids.

Suora Corniglia, whom Renzo met in Sant'Andrea and nicknamed Sister Dimples, arranges for a meeting between young Angelo and Renzo Leoni, who is now disguised as Padre Righetti. Renzo explains to Angelo that his father is in jail. Renzo manages to get Isma to tell him her name is Stefania and she is from Austria. He tells the children a story about Adam, Eve, and the sun, and gives them oranges and chocolate. Taking a message from Angelo for his mother, Renzo and Sister Dimples flirt for a while and he leaves on his bicycle.

The Hunchback's House, Frazione Decimo

Werner Schramm is recovering in the mountains with Mirella, Lidia and little Rosina. Mirella is expecting a visit from Iacopo. Mirella is convinced that Hitler harbors an atypical sexuality, and Schramm likens Hitler's charisma to seduction. He describes Hitler's stories as repetitive, boring and fantastical, and describes his rage at being contradicted. Schramm looks at a photo of Mirella's Altira, who had what we now call Down's Syndrome, and says the condition was not associated with malnutrition, but tells her it is better that the child is dead. He considers malformed children to be like a bomb that kills the family. Mirella is outraged at Schramm for under-valuing her daughter's life.

Suddenly, a plane dropping bombs and machine gun fire delivers a warning to the nearby partisans that the Germans know where they are. Mirella saves the baby from a live bomb ticking in their yard, which takes out the entire garden when it explodes. Schramm has an emotional meltdown as he looks at these Jews who just escaped death, and realizes he is categorizing them in his mind. Dr. Schramm is summoned to the Cave of San Mauro where the Brigade sustains its first casualty. Renzo has arrived in his priest's outfit, with Angelo's message is that he wants his parents to adopt Stefania. Renzo asks Lidia if she will participate in blowing up a building. She is bored and feels, as an old woman, she will be inconspicuous.

May 1944 Analysis

Renzo continues to be a very seriously active, giving and comical character. His tender interaction with Angelo's friend Stefania is touching, since the nuns have not been able

to get her to talk. Dr. Schramm is a practical, educated man who finally realizes he has buried his feelings for many years, favoring scientific theory over true compassion.

Russell's descriptions of bombings are stark, realistic, and very disturbing. When bombs land near Angelo's school, water splashes up from the river and the children actually see the pilot, illustrating how low the plane is swooping. Her description of the horrors left by bombings in the city is not only convincing, but bring the reality of life during war conditions into a more candid light.

It is interesting that, although Renzo has been adamant about not wanting his mother to be involved in the resistance, he has now asked her to do a project with him that could mean her demise, knowing that she can only find fulfillment in her contributions to the effort. She is a feminist and a staunch political activist, and he finally realizes he needs her in that capacity. Through copious dialogue, we come to an increased understanding of the relationships among Russell's characters.



5 June 1944

5 June 1944 Summary

Porto Sant'Andrea - 10:15 a.m.

Again, the suave Ugo Messner (Renzo) is with Artur Hüppenkothen drinking at an outdoor café. Artur almost shoots a young boy on a bike who he thinks is an assassin. The Nazi party is becoming disorganized in Italy, having lost Rome and retreated from Russia. Messner tries to convince Artur that Italians are only rabble causing trouble and are not really a threat. When a thousand American planes pass over on their way to Germany, Renzo fakes a toast to Hitler and buys the house a round of Cognac. Renzo talks Artur into a deal that will be a trade of a vehicle for yards of good fabric.

Sant'Andrea Municipal Jail, 11:45 a.m.

Jakub Landau, the organizer of the resistance in Italy, has been caught at a German checkpoint with anti-fascist documents and will be shot. In jail, he talks with fellow-inmate, Iacopo, describing his mixed Polish and German background. Jewish property was given to Poles with German ancestry and he worked for the Reich under the name of Obermüller. He made a dash for southern France and joined the Italian fourth Army's retreat across the Alps and arrived in Italy the day the German occupation started. His wife and children were killed. He laughs at the rabbi's blessing.

Tavern ail Duce, 12:40 p.m.

Santino Cicala waits with black marketer, Giuseppe Farini for Ugo Messner, who arrives with Erna Hüppenkothen in a flourish. Messner secretly gives Santino a packet of transport papers and tells him there is an Opel Blitz at the Gestapo motor pool and he is expected there, but Santino does not know how to drive. Messner somehow makes covert arrangements with Farini, who is now proud and determined.

Renzo is walking a fine line among his identities as Renzo, the man who sleeps with prostitutes, Ugo Messner, the drunken gigolo dating Erna Hüppenkothen, and Padre Righetti, the sober and earnest priest. Still grappling with his guilt, his shame is "the last vestige of honor in a vicious, barbaric world."

When, as Padre Righetti, Renzo reaches the municipal jail, an old woman is making trouble, trying to get a bag of outgrown boys' clothing to a mother with an older boy who will trade with her. The ersatz priest takes the bundle for her, and suggests that she sit and wait with other women who are waiting to see prisoners, telling the women that if she goes away, they should go with her.

Sant'Andrea Municipal Jail, 4:05 p.m.



Entering the jail to hear confessions, Renzo quietly tells Iacopo that the outer wall is going down in five minutes and there will be a car waiting for him. Iacopo wants to take Jakub Landau with them. They begin to warn the prisoners. As Renzo says mass for the prisoners, Brizzolari directs the arguing women away from the building, and the wall suddenly explodes. Renzo and Iacopo get out through the exploded wall, and in the confusion, Renzo is shot, sees his mother get shot, and he collapses in Iacopo's arms. Farini is waiting with the truck; Santino, Iacopo and Landau and Renzo drive away, fully armed. Renzo can only mouth the word, "mama."

5 June 1944 Analysis

Making a deal with Hüppenkothen for a truck was an extremely risky and courageous move on Renzo's part. His act as the debonair Ugo Messner is so convincing no one has questioned his motives. The bolts of Jewish fabric he promised to Hüppenkothen disguises the guns and ammunition in the escape truck. The fact that he is mistaken for CNL is interesting, since he is only breaking the prisoners out to get Iacopo back to Mirella.

Lidia Leoni has died in her last act of selflessness, and Renzo will surely feel the guilt of putting her into such a hazardous situation. However, Renzo's selfless, self-destructive behavior is the only way he can live with the guilt of what he has done in his earlier life, and his dangerous decisions signify a strong death wish, but also reconfirm his love for Mirella.

The reader can have hope now that Santino will return to Claudia, Iacopo will be reunited with Claudia and their baby, and Landau can continue to fight for his cause. The high-level tension created by Russell in this breakout scene could be compared to a James Bond story. Each participant has a specific role, and anything can go wrong. No one is who they seem to be, and the action is fast and frenzied.



Summer 1944

Summer 1944 Summary

San Mauro Brigade field Hospital, Valdottavo, Piemonte

Since Duno Brossler's friend, Nello, was violently killed, Werner Schramm has taught Duno in detail how to care for the injured. The Brigade has developed a successful system and is defeating the Germans in this area. The Allies have invaded France, and things are going well for the partisans. Landau tried once to recruit Renzo for the CNL and was rebuked

Duno is treating Renzo with Iacopo's help. He learns that this is la nonna's son and that she is dead. By August, Renzo can walk with a crutch and moves to Castello Ritanna. Werner Schramm looks in on Renzo and compliments Duno's work, and offers condolences for Lidia's death.

Summer 1944 Analysis

Another short chapter signifies the grace surrounding Renzo, who survives another horrendous incident that takes many lives, even that of his own mother. Yet his heart was in the right place, and he is recovering well due to the kindness of the people around him. There is some hope in this chapter that the war is coming to an end, that the Germans will retreat and leave these poor, tormented people alone. The famous invasion of France by the Allies signals the beginning of the end, but there is much healing that needs to take place among Russell's characters, both individually and communally. The Germans do not consider the war to be over, by far.



September 1944

September 1944 Summary

Frazione Santa Chiara, Valdottavo, 16 September

Claudia, now officially a woman, has worked with Bettinna and Tercilla for nearly a year, learning household chores. Santino has arrived and is talking about progress against the Germans when Claudia rushes in and tells them six German soldiers are raping a girl. Santino shoots all but one of them who escapes into the woods. The violated girl, Maria Avoni, had agreed to sex with one of them in exchange for food. The women of the village are enraged that she has brought such danger to them, and Tercilla Lovera slaps her hard.

Headquarters, SS-Panzer Grenadier, 2nd Regiment, 12th Waffen - SS Walther Reinhardt Division, Roccarbarbena

The Germans are losing ground to the Allies and Russia. Reinecke and von Thadden discuss that it is time for the cudgel. Reinecke has been promoted and wants to hold northern Italy at all costs. Field Marshal Kesserling has promised protection for any commander who exceeds the Germans' usual restraint against the partisans. Reinecke gets the news that six Germans were ambushed and five are dead at San Mauro.

Church of San Mauro 17 September

Battista threatens Leto that he must tell the Germans who killed the five soldiers or he will tell them about Leto and Battista's own Communist cousins, the Golettas. As a storeowner, Battista has been made a Knight of Labor by the Germans intends to stand by the oath he took. Don Leto finds Renzo, who is feeding soup to an injured soldier. He shows him the German ultimatum that harsh reprisal will fall on Valdattavo unless they turn over the person who killed the five soldiers. Renzo tells him to send Santino to the hunchback's house and to stay there so that he can work something out with Reinecke and his officers. Leto heads back down the mountain when Santino and Claudia stop him; they want him to hear Santino's confession, and to marry them.

Waffen-SS Regimental Headquarters, Roccarbarbena, 18 September

Gruppenführer von Thadden has decided to make an unescorted trip into the mountains, with a young Hans-Dieter Meisinger at the wheel, von Thadden and Reinecke in the back, and Ernst Kunkl up front. Meisinger rises in the officers' opinion when he avoids a land mine. They come upon an old farmer who says the bridge is out, and offers them apples in exchange for cigarettes. The old man rolls under the car and armed partisans, including Tullio Goletta, Duno Brossler and Attilio Goletta, shoot Schmidt, who has set fire to some documents. They take von Thadden and the others at gunpoint as their prisoners.



The Hunchback's House, Frazione Decimo

Santino and Claudia are married, and spend a wonderful time dreaming of their future together, talking and making love and playing house. When Santino leaves, Claudia again saves her tears.

Borgo San Mauro, 19 September

San Mauro's is sealed off and surrounded by German battalions. Don Leto tells the Sturmbannfuhrer there are no combatants here, but Eduard Knyphausen says he wants the bodies of his men, and wants the guilty to surrender, or they will be responsible for what happens here. All of the citizens are corralled in the middle of town. Ugo Messner has arrived without papers, saying he has been held prisoner since June when he was captured delivering a truckload of fabric to Germany. Messner tells them that if the troops withdraw, the partisans will turn Reinecke and von Thadden over but, otherwise, will execute them. He also tells them the five German soldiers who were killed were raping a girl. Messner asks to talk to Reinecke to buy some time, but the ultimatum stands. In the crowd, Santino confesses that he is the one who killed the five German soldiers. Renzo climbs the hill to tell Claudia Cicala that her husband, Santino, has died. She says Santino wanted to confess so no one else would be hurt.

Helmut Reinecke makes his report that thousands of people and homes in Valdottavo have been destroyed. He does not mention that they put the population of the town into the church and destroyed it, as well. He assumes von Thadden is dead. He vows to make the Italians pay.

Castello Ritanna, 23 September

Jakub Landau and Ugo Messner arrive to read the indictment in German to nine German prisoners before a group of citizens. Von Thadden is shocked that Ugo Messner is not who he thought. When the accusations of atrocities are read and photos shown to the Germans, the people empty their guns into the nine prisoners. Renzo feels that it was wrong to slaughter the prisoners. Claudia has come to join the resistance. Renzo sits alone, realizing that he has sworn off ethics.

September 1944 Analysis

The reader may find himself cheering when the Italian people finally get the opportunity to vent their rage against the Nazi officers, but this is the point of Russell's story - we do not know how we will react when atrocities have been committed against us and our families. The brutality that potentially lies in every person is not something that can be analyzed with religion, medical science or any other theory. People have their individual limitations - some have longer fuses and a more complicated ability to rationalize than others. Renzo Leoni is a broken man, more so than ever before and finally gives over his angst to a force more powerful than himself. Young Claudia has come a long way from being a little girl, and having seen and lost too much, she must help where she is needed.



November 1944 and Cadenza d' Inverno, Winter 1944-45

November 1944 and Cadenza d' Inverno, Winter 1944-45 Summary

Villa Malcovato, Near Roccabarbena

A paradisiacal farm, clinic and teaching job are offered to the Soncinis by Suora Corniglia, who turns out to be the daughter of Massimo Malcovato (il maggiore) who owns the farmland. Malcovato's chauffeur is Osvaldo Tomitz, who drives his large Vatican car for him. Malcovato has businesses in Milan, Turin, Genoa and Sant'Andrea, and unlimited access to ration cards that can be exchanged for money and supplies. Malcovato relates that he was carried a half a kilometer to a field hospital by Tranquillo Loeb, and he knows about the Soncinis through Renzo's association with his daughter. The farm is bountiful and there is a lot of work. Angelo and the adopted Stefania work in the gardens and fields. Malcovato, or il Maggiore and Don Osvaldo arrive at the farm and tell them Don Leto is dead, along with hundreds of others in San Mauro. The Gestapo and SS are now rooting out Jews, partisans and priests, and anyone who helps them. Iacopo comes to bed and tells Mirella that Osvaldo is doing the work of six men; he cannot promise her that he will not go back and help. She hopes by Christmas it will be over.

Cadenza d' Inverno, Winter 1944-45

The Italian struggle is no longer big news and the four hundred thousand men killed there are forgotten. Italy is being hit with the mayhem of torrential rains. The resistance held until Italy was no longer safe for fascists and the end of the war is in sight for Italy. Supplies and reinforcements were diverted from Italy to other regions, Kesserling was injured and out of commission and Italy's war was handed off second-tier generals, both American and German. Both sides were relentless and the dream of having it end by Christmas became a nightmare.

November 1944 and Cadenza d' Inverno, Winter 1944-45 Analysis

Teasing her readers once again with an almost surreal setting, Russell allows the Soncinis respite and even some modern conveniences. Although the work is exhausting, Merilla has something like a normal life. However, it is not long before they receive bad news that threatens to take Iacopo away again. Although this seclusion has given the Soncinis time to be a family, the war is not over. They must continue to endure its effects on their lives.



Russell's prose has become morbid in this chapter, including gore and ghosts and deep winter and a war that has begun to seem absolutely endless, even when it seemed so close to being over. The tone of this short chapter is macabre, dark and depressing. Russell uses the literary device of brevity to make these short chapters stand out in the book. They knock her reader for a loop, as if the entire story has not been difficult enough to take. Her methodology of creating a flash of intense detail seen through the lens of a microscope is brilliant, and it works. If Russell's book has done nothing else, it has reminded her readers, in a very realistic way, that war is truly hell.



February 1945

February 1945 Summary

Above Northwestern Italy

Planes carrying American and British special ops team Simon Henley, British and Giordano Salvi, Italian, head to the Piemonte area where they will parachute into enemy territory behind German lines. They are shot at by German planes and jump before they find their signal, dropping into the bitter cold of winter.

Valdottavo

Renzo supervises the train track dynamiting operation, with Schramm by his side. They watch the paratroopers and supplies drop from the American plane, and then watch it crash into the mountainside, its engine on fire. The train explodes as planned, its crew jumping for safety. Tullio Goletta and thirty of his men go to unload the train's cargo. Renzo and Schramm take a small group to find the airdropped supplies. British paratrooper Simon Henley has fallen, feet-first into a snowdrift and is unable to move. Major Salvi's parachute did not open. Simon tells himself not to cry. Young Angelo Soncini tries to sneak outside after hearing the plane, but Mirella catches him because Stefania has told on him. He threatens Stefania, and sneaks out a window. Renzo finds Angelo at the body of Salvi, and Angelo offers to show him where the other paratrooper landed. Schramm and Renzo get Simon Henley to Mirella's house where he wakes up confused. In very broken English, Otello tells him he must rest one night here, and he can radio in tomorrow. Iacopo is now in Sant'Andrea with the refugees, and Osvaldo Tomitz has been arrested.

Gestapo Interrogation Center, Porto Sant'Andrea

Artur Huppenkothen is discouraged with his efforts to wipe out the enemy. He is interrogating Osvaldo Tomitz, reciting all of the successes the Germans have had and explaining the evils of Jews. Osvaldo was waiting in the car for il maggiore when he was arrested. He realizes that the interrogation is not about obtaining information but about asserting control, and compares it to rape. He is eventually put on the strappado and tortured unmercifully, but will not give names, addresses and meeting places as is commanded to do. The torture is ghastly.

February 1945 Analysis

Simon Henley is just a boy, frightened and inexperienced. His fortunate parachute landing among people who will help him is a bright spot in the story.

Angelo Soncini is still fascinated by war and has now seen enough death that he is desensitized at ten-years-old. The war activities in Italy have degenerated from

energetic survive, hide and attack strategizing, to exhaustion and the darkest, ugliest inhumanity.

It does not appear that Osvaldo Tomitz will live through the interrogation by the Germans. The monster administering his torture is a predictably revolting character, as one would expect. PierCarlo watches his victim, almost clinically, as he torments him mercilessly. This scene almost seems gratuitous, as we have already been shown what evil butchers the Nazis are.



March 1945

March 1945 Summary

Pensione Usodimare, Porto Sant'Andrea

Antonia Usodimare is running her place as a boarding house. She will exchange a bundle from under a floorboard for a package of British cigarettes, to be delivered by a la vedova, who turns out to be the six-month pregnant Claudia Cicala, who pretends to fetch Antonia's laundry. The German soldiers assume Claudia is a slut and when they paw through her laundry basket, they touch menstrual blood, which makes them stop before they get to the German uniform she is transporting to Werner Schramm. Getting through the barricade, Claudia stops and bargains with a boy named Riccardo, who takes two packs of cigarettes in exchange for identity papers.

Near borgo San Mauro, Valdottavo

Maria Avoni, toting a machine gun, escorts Simon Henley to his first camp. Maria teaches Simon about nature and Italian politics, as well as her language. She guides him to new transmission locations so he will not be found by the German SS or the Italian Black Brigades, since he is transmitting intelligence for Britain on enemy troop movement.

A little girl warns the group of German soldiers, who see them and fire upon them, killing Maria and several of the partisans. Renzo and Otello give Simon gunfire cover as he runs to safety with his equipment. They partisans spend the day dodging Germans and eventually return to Maria's body. Simon is confident now about his training, and plans to get ammunition, supplies and medicine to the partisans but for now, cries over the loss of Maria.

Villa Malcovato, near Roccabarbena

Mirella appreciates the huge sacrifices made by the staffettes who have helped the resistance. Claudia has given birth to a boy many weeks too soon. Duno Brossler, Mirella and Werner Schramm are there to help Claudia, but the baby is not expected to live through the night. Werner Schramm has taken the uniform and identity provided to him by Claudia and steps out into the road as a German officer, demanding a ride from a lesser German officer. He is arrogant and intimidating. When he sees the terrible, near-death condition of Osvaldo Tomitz, he demands to know who is responsible. In private, he administers last rites to Osvaldo, asks him to pray for him, and then ends Osvaldo's life with a syringe of poison. Sick and sad, Schramm explains that with Irmgard as his sister he would have to judge or be judged, and if he joined the party, he would not be sterilized. He promises Osvaldo that he will do penance, and prays to God for healing. He considers killing the torturer, but instead tells him to clean up the mess, remembering something Suorta Marta said to him years ago. He goes to the nearest



hospital and begins operating on patients, hour after hour. A German officer appears, asking for Schramm. He is needed for casualties, because the Allies have broken through.

March 1945 Analysis

Antonia Usodimare does what she needs to get by. Claudia is deeply involved in military activity at this point, since she has nothing left. We know she is transporting a uniform to Werner Schramm, but Russell typically does not reveal his plan in advance. Claudia has become adept at pretending and does not seem afraid, a sharp contrast to the more idealistic girl she was earlier in the story.

Maria Avani, prostitute turned militant, has taken charge of her small band of soldiers and, although she is experienced and trustworthy, she makes a terrible mistake by ignoring the warnings of the little girl about German soldiers. It is not surprising that this character is killed, since she is fearless after being raped by German soldiers and, like others, has seen so much violence that she is desensitized.

Werner Schramm is able to switch back into the strutting Nazi that he was before coming to Sant'Andrea. Clearly, Osvaldo is not going to live through the damage to his body, but it is not clear why Schramm came prepared with a syringe. He does try to comfort Tomitz with the communion and blessing, but apparently still seeks absolution for himself.



April 1945

April 1945 Summary

Villa Malcovato near Roccabarbena

Since Werner, Simon Henley and Claudia came and went, Mirella has taken in hundreds of people needing a place to sleep and a meal. The Germans have ravaged the Italians' possessions and burned their property, and Villa Malcovato's population has doubled twice with displaced evacuees. Mirella gives everyone jobs, and the villa has reverted to a medieval city. If you can help, you must help. Mirella strangely turns away someone who says there is a Jewish British paratrooper who needs help. She sense something wrong, and refuses to help.

Conflicting leaflets are dropped by Germans and Allies, and rumors abound. Spies have determined who is hiding refugees, and German officers arrive to take over the Villa for a hospital. An elderly contessa, who is a guest, tells the officers this is a children's home. Il maggiore is trapped in Milan.

The next morning, the house is surrounded by German troops. As Mirella is sending the children to the cellar for safety, Allied machine gun fire hits the house, and Mirella is killed.

April 1945 Analysis

This is surely a character whose death is unexpected for Russell's readers. Mirella is a selfless, hardworking giver who has struggled until she finally was blessed with something resembling a normal life. That life turned into another huge undertaking when refugees began swarming to her house, but she handled it gracefully. As she is isolated, all she hears are rumor and conjecture. There is a sense that Mirella, like thousands of others, was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, and her luck finally gave out. It is not clear whether her children and the other boarders are safe, but based on what we have learned about the Nazis, it is likely that they wiped them out.



May 1945

May 1945 Summary

Sant'Andrea Bluffs

After a bloody battle on the hill beneath them, Renzo goes down to meet a lone officer of the Republican troops who has climbed up to assess the dead. They shake hands; when Renzo returns in tears, he informs the partisans the Germans have surrendered, the war is over and the dead Republicans below them are countrymen who should be honored.

Porto Sant'Andrea

Delirious and singing, partisans return to the town, exhausted from burying their dead enemies. In the midst of the celebration, a British officer summons Simon and tells him there were orders for him not to allow the partisans into Sant'Andrea until the Allied forces arrived. Simon tells him he tried to stem the tide, but it did not good.

Pensione Usodimare, Porto Sant'Andrea

Antonia Usodimare has lived through the war by housing Germans and Fascists. Renzo, who she once knew as Ugo Messner, gives her British money and a letter, and tells her Claudia and Duno will help her. Renzo Leoni, relaxed from having no one to live for, strolls to town for a haircut, an espresso and a newspaper. Sant'Andrea is already planning rebuilding, with Jakub Landau as head of a civil engineering group. He sees a German girl with her shaved head painted red. The city is in ruins and dead bodies still scattered about, including that of Serafino Brizzolari. The waiter who overheard Ugo Messner proclaim his loyalty to the Nazis, and the Fascist bar owner who saw Messner with Erna Huppenkothen spy Renzo, and identify him as Ugo Messner. Suaro Marta tries to save him, but he does not defend himself and is quickly hanged, dying peacefully.

May 1945 Analysis

The end of war proves to be the end of Renzo Leoni. His life was tragic but certainly not worthless. Ironically, his finest work for humanity, as well as his worst mistake took place in the context of war and, rather than dying of his own self-abuse as the reader expected, he is hanged as a traitor as he was such a fearless and ambitious actor. Russell provides Renzo with a great sense of peace, even as he strolls into town before he dies. The end of the war has left him empty and resigned, but not unhappy. He accepts his death with a certain relief as he symbolically rises above the arguing and discussion about his guilt or innocence.



Mother of Mercy Orphanage - Rocabarbena, and Coda

Mother of Mercy Orphanage - Rocabarbena, and Coda Summary

Sister Corniglia notes that things are getting better. She is no longer afraid of being near the windows, and they at least have paper. The orphans are better fed and are growing. The property was left to her when her father died, and she divided it into individual farms, giving title to those who had worked the land before the war.

The rabbi, Iacopo Soncini comes to see her. Corniglia tells him Dr. Schramm has inquired about his family. Iacopo plans to move to a kibbutz in Palestine. He has done research and found that nearly all the Italian deportees were sent to Auschwitz, but the Italians saved almost fifty thousand Jews. He repeats a Hebrew saying, which is that "no matter how dark the tapestry God weaves for us, there's always a thread of grace." He gives her an envelope found in Renzo Leoni's pocket with the name Sister Dimples on it, containing her rosary. Corniglia will pray for Father Clown.

Coda

North Toronto, Canada

Claudia's children remember that she never cried. She always told them to save their tears; they may need them later, which was the advice Santino gave her when they were young. Claudia Kaplan's children are a prosecutor, a psychologist and an interpreter for the deaf. Her children report that she was generous but tight-fisted at home, and emotionally icy. The rabbi at her death bed ponders how the poison of the holocaust seeps through the generations, and it occurs to him that Klara Hitler's son may have never fired a gun; "all the harm he ever did was done for him by others".

Mother of Mercy Orphanage - Rocabarbena, and Coda Analysis

Of all of the characters in this book, the pure Suora Corniglia or Sister Dimples, and rabbi Iacopo Soncini are the two whose lives cross again in the end. As stressful as this story has been, and even though we know that those who survived will never be the same or be whole, this novel is an incredible adventure and journey through history and the personal lives of Russell's excellently wrought characters. We learn that Iacopo's children were killed along with their mother.

Coda: The effects of the holocaust on its survivors has been documented for generations. Claudia Blum, Fiori, Cicala, Kaplan was emotionally hardened, withdrawn

and so damaged that even her own children never really knew her. Their choices of careers reflect their need and desire to solve the puzzle of their mother, but she died keeping secret thoughts and images that no young woman should ever have had to endure. Mary Doria Russell has done a masterful job of weaving factual history with a fictional landscape and characters that are poignant and unforgettable.



Characters

Renzo Leoni

Also known as Ugo Messner, Stefano Savoca and Don Righetti, Renzo is the main character in the story whose experience as a pilot in the Abyssinian war took a toll on his conscience and affected his entire life. Renzo felt that if he continued to feel guilty it would justify the fact that he lived on after bombing a hospital full of patients in Africa. He is a heavy drinker and a master of disguises and languages, and is one of the most endearing characters in the novel. Renzo is able to help little Stefania speak, he is very much loved by his mother, Lidia and by Mirella Soncini, who rejected his offer of marriage. He never stopped loving Mirella and much of his political activity was done in her best interests, even though she is married to the rabbi Iacopo and bears his children. In spite of his alcoholism, Renzo is a handsome ladies' man, but does not commit to a serious relationship, seeking the occasional companionship of prostitutes. He is very attracted to Sister Corniglia, but primarily because he cannot have her. He projects an essence of being a bad boy type, but underneath Renzo is extremely tender hearted, and struggles to find the logic in killing others, even when he willingly participates.

As Ugo Messner, Renzo is swaggering Nazi, boisterous and magnanimous, making friends with the wives of officers and the sister of the head of the Gestapo. He is perfectly dressed and groomed, and knows how to finesse people into giving him what he wants. He is masterful at keeping his identities separated, even when alcohol has blurred his perception. As Righetti, the Catholic priest, Renzo becomes mild mannered and quiet, offering convincing if not quite accurate religious rituals and skimming through checkpoints as a holy man. As Savoca, he drives a milk truck delivering supplies, money and information to the resistance.

Renzo loves his mother and cries for her when she dies. He is angry with her for wanting to be politically involved, but proud of her at the same time. At the end of his life, Renzo is peaceful and ready to die, even when he is unjustly accused of being a traitor. He offers no resistance, but goes quietly.

Werner Schramm

Werner Schramm is a German officer physician who appears in Sant'Andrea searching for absolution from a Catholic priest. Dr. Schramm, an alcoholic with tuberculosis, is AWOL from the German army, and has had some kind of crisis of conscience over the 91,867 people he has murdered under Hitler's euthanization program. Schramm is a complex character who, instead of returning to his family Germany and resuming his work with the Nazis, befriends the Italians in Sant'Andrea and stays on in Italy. Deathly ill, he is taken to Cadenza d'Inverno in the mountains, and is nursed back to health by Lidia Leoni and Mirella Soncini, two Jewish women hiding from the Germans. Renzo



Leoni saves Schramm's life and tries to arrange for Schramm to see his family again someday, as a penance for the doctor Renzo killed in a bombing he Africa years earlier. Schramm's role in the novel is to ask us to look more deeply into the minds of murdering criminals and understand how brutality to others can become just another daily task, all in a day's work. We learn that Schramm's younger sister had encephalitis and without his cooperation with the military, he would have been marked for sterilization. He did what he needed to do, but his conscience eventually caught up with him and nearly killed him.

Werner's last act in Italy was to resume his German identity and visit the dying priest, Osvaldo Tomitz, who had been tortured and imprisoned for his role in helping the Jews. Werner, after coming to some peace with Tomitz and God, euthanizes Tomitz to end his pain. With the war over, we assume that Werner returns to his family in Germany. The irony of his newfound health and survival through abominable conditions is that so many innocent, giving people died horrible deaths, while Dr. Schramm, who killed thousands of people, regains his health and lives on. Schramm is a likeable character who helps the resistance, nursing their wounded and teaching Santino how to doctor the injured. Before leaving Italy, he spends hours at a hospital performing surgeries. He is a brilliant man who happened to find himself in difficult circumstances, and responded accordingly.

Claudette Blum

Claudette becomes known as Claudia Fiori and later Claudia Cicala. She is a young Belgian Jewish teenager who is on the run in Italy with her father, Alberto Blum. Her mother and brothers were put on a train by soldiers and never seen again. She and the ailing Alberto are taken in and cared for by various Italian farmers. In the roughest possible conditions, Claudia and her father manage to survive the winter in the mountains. She meets and marries Santino Cicala, a young soldier who is killed by German soldiers when he confesses to killing five German soldiers who were raping a girl, Maria Avani. After his death, Claudia loses her premature baby and goes on to join the resistance effort, becoming a staffetta, running messages and supplies among the Jews under different disguises. The beginning and end of the novel are about Claudia, whose grown children have never understood her withdrawn, cold personality. We understand, by the end of the story, why Claudia had to freeze emotionally. She saw too much and lost too much to ever live a completely normal life. She tried to help where she could, which was a theme of the Jewish refugees', but the hard shell she placed around herself was to encapsulate a period of her life that was unbearable. Claudia goes from an innocent adolescent to a hardened, responsible woman in this story. Living in Canada at the time of her death, she had remarried and had three grown children.



Iacopo Soncini

As chief rabbi at Sant'Andrea, the gentle, soft-spoken Iacopo Soncini is a devoted, hard-working servant of his people, who is truly a humble and generous soul. Leaving his wife and children and being jailed more than once, he makes sure his people have food and money, and at one point, collects charcoal from the city streets to deliver to the poor households for fuel. Eventually imprisoned in a labor sweep, he is the reason that Lidia and Renzo Leoni blow up the municipal jail. Iacopo and his wife Mirella represent the Jews in this story who not only survive impossible circumstances, but also spend their lives helping other people. Iacopo is educated and devout, spending hours reading, researching, praying and working. Iacopo loses his family in a bombing and in the end of the story plans to live in a kibbutz in Palestine. He researched the fate of the Italian Jews and found that most of them who had been taken away on trains ended up in Auschwitz.

Don Osvaldo Tomitz

Osvaldo is a kind Catholic priest in Sant'Andrea whose affection and caring for the Jewish refugees consumes his life during the war. His major personal conflict is his inability to give absolution to Werner Schramm, who confesses that he has murdered 91,867 people. Tomitz struggles throughout the story with his inability to forgive Schramm. Eventually imprisoned and tortured by the Nazis for helping the Jews, Tomitz dies in jail with Werner Schramm by his side, administering last rites and communion, and finally ending Tomitz's suffering.

Lidia Leoni

The mother of Renzo Leoni, Lidia is a feminist and political activist. She becomes la nonna to the partisans who hide in the mountains, providing them with food and helping them however she can. She gives her life in a scheme to blow up the municipal jail in an effort to free Iacopo Soncini. Lidia is bored with housework and growing old, and is frustrated and worried about her son, Renzo, who drinks too much. Lidia has marched in anti-war demonstrations and helped the resistance movement, and Renzo fears for her safety but eventually realizes that her political activity is what gives her life meaning. Disguised as a crazy old woman, she is successful in breaking the prison wall down, but is mistakenly killed by partisan bullets.

Duno Brossler

The young son of Hermann and Frieda Brossler, Duno is from Austria. The Jewish Brosslers leave their aging grandmother, Rivka, behind, knowing she cannot make the journey over the mountains, and knowing she will be killed. During their trek through the Alps, Duno leaves his arguing parents and joins the resistance movement, becoming a partisan who hides in the mountains. He also leaves behind his two sisters, Liesl and



Steffi. Having lived in the same hotel in Sant'Andrea when they were young, he and Claudia Blum are friends. Dr. Schramm teaches Duno about medicine and how to care for the injured. Duno is one who survives the war, and we can assume he goes on to be a doctor.

Santino Cicala

Santino is a young, homely infantry soldier from Calabria who was drafted into the Italian army. Santino helps the Blums make the treacherous trek over the Alps, which is when he falls in love with the young Claudia Blum, whom he eventually marries. Santino is a good man, but when he sees six German soldiers raping a young girl, he shoots and kills five of them. The German Gestapo promises to kill twenty people for every soldier who was shot unless their killer confesses, so Santino makes a public confession about having shot the five Germans. He is killed on the spot and never lives to fulfill the dreams he has with Claudia.

Erhardt von Thadden

As Gruppenfuhrer, or division commander, von Thadden is known as the schoolteacher due to his long academic ramblings. He thinks he is quite clever and sees the war as a giant chess game. Arrogant and impressed with his own status in the military, he lives in luxury and has a sneering, sarcastic personality. Von Thadden eventually decides to make a road trip into the mountains without a military escort and is kidnapped by partisan soldiers and held as a hostage. He meets his death when the partisans hold a mock trial, showing the citizens photos of atrocities and allowing them to take out their rage on von Thadden and the other hostages.

Simon Henley

A young British boy, Simon Henley joins the paratroopers, because he thinks he will be attractive to women. When he drops into Italy from a plane, missing his targeted area as the plane has an engine on fire, he is taken in by the partisans and stays on with them, still a British soldier. Henley becomes an integral part of the resistance while he is in Italy and, when he leaves, makes sure that the area receives copious air drops of ammunition, food and supplies.

Suaro Marta

Marta is the older nun who serves at the Catholic Church under Osvaldo Tomitz. She helps the Jewish refugees in every way she can and, although gruff, is a kind and caring soul. She gets Angelo Soncini placed in a Catholic school for his protection and is a key player with Osvaldo Tomitz in helping the resistance movement, passing messages and eventually being noticed by the Gestapo for her involvement in subversive activities.



Suaro Corniglia

Also known as Sister Dimples by Renzo Leoni, Sister Corniglia is the daughter of Massimo Malcovato, or il maggiore, and owns a large piece of land near Roccabarbena which includes farms, a school and a clinic. When the war ends, she divides up the land into farms and deeds them to the people who worked the land during the war. She is a good friend to Renzo and has a special love for Angelo and Stefania Soncini.



Objects/Places

Porto Sant'Andrea

Porto Sant'Andrea is a fictional small town on the Ligurian coast in the northern part of Italy where most of the characters in this story have lived for a period of time. It is the town where Iacopo Soncini is a rabbi and Osvaldo Tomitz a priest and secretary to the local bishop. It is also where the hotel is where the Brosslers and Blums and Leonis stayed before fleeing to the mountains.

Piemonte

Piemonte is a green flatter foothill region of France, occupied by Italy, that became a prime target for German infiltration.

Borgo San Mauro

The fictional Borgo San Mauro region is located in the mountains south of Sant'Andrea where young Angelo Soncini was sent to boarding school at Roccobarbena. The Germans hoped to push the refugees and partisans into this area where they could more easily capture them, since it lies near the Mediterranean.

Martime Alps

The Martime Alps are the mountains between France and Italy that the Jews cross over to get to safety in northern Italy.

Valdottavo

Valdottavo is an isolated valley near France in the Santa Chiara area with a few farmhouses where the Italians welcome, house and feed Jewish refugees.

Absynnia

Italy invaded Absynnia in northeastern Africa to obtain access to its natural resources. Renzo Leoni, as an army fighter pilot, accidentally dropped a bomb on an Absynnian hospital, which is at the base of his guilt and self-destructive behavior and his search for atonement..



CNL- Committee for National Liberation

In this story, Jakub Landau, is the recruiter and organizer for the CNL and its offshoot, the Volunteer Corps of Liberation. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, the organization included roughly 20,000 partisans, with both Socialists and Liberals having significant armed bands in some areas. Partisans of different political persuasions normally worked together in local Committees of National Liberation (CLNs), which coordinated strategy, cooperated with the Allies, administered liberated areas, and appointed new officials.

Rastellamenti

Rastellamenti was the name given to the sweeps conducted by German soldiers through Italy that gathered up men for the purpose of building labor forces to work on projects for the German military.

Ritual Scribe

Also called a sofer, a Jewish ritual scribe writes Torah scrolls and documents official events in the community, such as weddings and births. In this story, Giacomo Tura, the sofer, prints up false identity papers for Jewish refugees.

Tefillin

Tefillin are small black boxes which contain written scripture, worn on the head and heart by Jewish men during morning prayer. Alberto Blum keeps his tefillin safe as he treks through the Alps.

Staffeta

Staffeta are young female girls in Italy who were runners carrying messages for the resistance. Maria Avoni and Claudia Blum both served in this capacity.



Themes

Give Help Where it is Needed

One of the recurrent themes through *A Thread of Grace* is that if a person can help, he should help. This theme not only applies to the Italian Catholics' attitude toward the refugees, but also carries over into the partisans' attitudes. Claudia Blum, a Jewish partisan, carries this philosophy to her grave, not so much out of a sense of generosity but out of the knowledge that the suffering of human beings can only be relieved by the mercy and kindness of other human beings and the grace of God.

The Italians, and particularly the Catholics, live by this concept and because of it, manage to save more than forty thousand Jewish people from the Nazis. Even Werner Schramm, after seeing it illustrated repeatedly, adopts this philosophy and tries to help the injured. As a doctor, helping others was initially part of Schramm's medical training, but euthanizing, rather than healing the less fortunate, dominated his work under Hitler's regime. In his twisted thinking, Schramm felt he was helping the human race by eliminating what was not perfect about it, but the conflict in his mind over his abnormal sister, as well as his conscience, finally has the effect of making him a true helper of others, healing and teaching rather than murdering. It is initially difficult for him to understand Mirella's grief over her retarded child, but he eventually comes to terms, perhaps, with the importance of love for humanity, in general.

There is No Holy Judgment

Russell's story illustrates her belief that it does not matter if your deeds are good or bad, if you are a caring, kind person or a murderer. She almost implies that, at least during World War II, everything depended on luck and whether one was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Both good people and bad meet with violent death, and sometimes the worst people survive. The random chaos generated by war does not pick and choose its victims based on their morality. This theme has been repeated by Holocaust victims for many years. No fine qualities of intelligence, honor, or generosity spared people from Hitler's sweeps. Those who were sent to camps and the ovens were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Although the Jews believe in God and good works, they also feel that our individual mortal fate is somewhat random, and the Holocaust certainly supports that. Another illustration of this theme is Renzo Leoni's accidental bombing of a hospital in Absynnia. The victims of the bombing were patients, doctors and nurses, none of them any worse or any better than anyone else. As there were many buildings with red crosses painted on them, Renzo could not have known which the hospital was, and these people were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Russell's decision to "kill" most of her characters was made with the toss of a coin, which also illustrates this theme.



War is Hell

The conditions described by Russell in this novel could be no more difficult than any that can be imagined. The noise, body parts, stench, and destruction combined with the elements of surprise, paranoia, fear and chaos rob any sense of human innocence or trust. There has been much written about the Germans' pursuit to cleanse the world of Jews. However, Russell gives us personal haunting details of the war that affected everyone, such as the schoolchildren being able to see the face of the bomber pilots as they swooped, and little Angelo bringing a thumb to his father, and seeing a man with his wife's head in a bucket. The intense fear and eventual numbness experienced by people in a war zone, such as Iacopo Soncini in his basement, creates a disease of the heart that cannot be healed.

When Claudia Blum's enigmatic personality is described by her children, we understand that she spent some time in hell and is not able to totally relate to those who have not been there. Of all of the suffering endured by humans, such as poverty, hunger, climatic disasters and disease, war can be considered the most devastating. When humans take life, love and property from others and destroy the fabric of an entire culture, a new illness is born, such as the one Claudia Blum suffers with until her death. The loss of faith in humanity, the loss of trust, the hardening of the heart and the cynicism created by man's inhumanity to man is a wound that reaches far more deeply than any other does. Claudia Blum's children, who are affected throughout their lives by Claudia's pain and withdrawal, in some ways will pass that pain down to their own children. It can take many generations for the wounds of war to heal, which Russell emphasizes in her portrayal of Claudia.

Evil is a Complex Concept

Hitler's childhood could not have been any more dysfunctional. A domineering, paranoid mother who passed on her neuroses to an only son who was effeminate and deeply ashamed of his heritage was a recipe for Hitler's over-inflated conclusion about his own superiority. Werner Schramm's fear of being sterilized and marked for his sister's deformity resulted in his blind acceptance of a prestigious position where his job was to murder human beings. When the Nazis abused their power, it was out of fear that they might not dominate the human race that was, in their opinion, seriously flawed with the exception of the Aryans. Once they had some successes, they began to fear the loss of the power they had attained. Renzo Leoni's act of bombing a hospital may have seemed evil to others, but Renzo knew what it was like to be caught up in the moment, confused and afraid. It is not that Russell wants us to feel sorry for Schramm, or Hitler or even Leoni, but simply that there is always a complex underpinning to peoples' behavior.

Russell wants us to understand that little Adolph Hitler was also a victim. His environment, his neurotic mother, his obsessive-compulsive illness, and the feeble-mindedness that results from generations of incest contributed to the insanity that made



him a charismatic, believable leader. Russell suggests that rather than living with the unbearable facts of his life, Hitler chose to package them up and disguise them as golden perfection out of his sheer need to survive. Hitler's mind converted the definition of evil to that of imperfection, and decided he would be the one to rid the world of it. Hopefully, in these times, if a child is in as much trouble mentally and emotionally as young Adolph, there are counselors, drugs and children's services agencies that would be assisting him before he could harden his tormented beliefs into powerful motives.



Style

Point of View

The author uses an omniscient point of view in order to allow us to see and understand the thinking and activities of different people in different places. We are allowed to view the world through Claudia Blum as she lives her childhood on the run. We are able to experience the remorse and anger of Renzo Leoni, whose worst mistake was made accidentally, and whose heart was good. Using this point of view, it is also possible to perceive the horrible atmosphere of war, with all of its smells, noise, fear and confusion. With so many characters in this story, Russell had to write from an omnipotent view so that readers can draw their own conclusions and make their own judgments about them.

Setting

The setting for this novel is primarily in the norther part of Italy in the mountains and foothills. The refugees first cross the Maritime Alps, which separate France from Italy, and later hide in the mountains where small farms are tucked in the ravines and canyons. Closer to the Mediterranean where Roccabarbena is located, the setting becomes more pastoral and beautiful. We experience a terrible winter as the refugees cross the mountains, a beautiful spring and summer, and a period of torrential rains that create tons of mud. The ramshackle homes where the refugees are hidden are simple, old farmhouses built many decades before. We also experience the luxurious lifestyle of the Nazis, whose superior attitude demanded the most expensive furnishings and accoutrements.

Language and Meaning

Mary Doria Rusell's prose, although flowing, can be complicated. She often jumps into a situation that we, as readers, are not allowed to understand until she describes it later. She does a wonderful job of translating Italian and German expressions, and it is not until the Coda that we are reminded that Claudia spoke no English at all. Her writing tends to be succinct, brief sentences with a tremendous amount of dialogue that allows us to know her characters without her having to specifically describe them. There is generous detail about the war, using military language and expressions that, although unfamiliar, are easy to understand. Russell tends to cover a lot of ground in each paragraph, often including detail that is not critical to the story, but fascinating to read. She has a sound grasp of history and an an incredible gift for weaving it with fiction.

Structure

This book consists of 429 pages, divided into twenty-one discernible chapters which are each subdivided into time periods and location, not in a particularly uniform way. Since



characters and activities were varied at different times, Russell catches us up in each time period with the current events in different locations of Italy, as the Hebrews make their way through the mountains and their former residences are taken over by Germans. She includes a preface that describes the sad life of young Adolph Hitler and his mother, Klara. At the end, she adds a chapter about Claudia Blum who is old and dying, and whose grown children ponder her life. In between those two chapters, the saga of the Jewish refugees' flight through the rugged terrain of southern France and northern Italy dominates the story.



Quotes

The tavern is small, dimly lit. Longshoremen hunch over low mounds of cheap food. Sailors' thumbs hook the edges of plates in memory of meals tossed by waves. The earthy smells of tripe, dried cod, and chickpeas mingle with the tang of sweat. Renzo takes a small table in the back. The barman delivers a bottle of grappa and two small glasses. (131).

"Jews are simply members of the human race." After a thoughtful pause, Renzo adds, "I can think of no worse insult." (135)

Schramm shakes his head "I never understood the logic. You're Communists to a man, but you own all the banks. You're subhuman, but you're running the world." Renzo leans over the table. "Never underestimate how soothing it is to have someone else to blame. If Jews didn't exist, someone would have to invent us. "Oh I don't know," Schramm says judiciously. "There's always the Jesuits. Or Freemasons." Renzo drinks off his grappa in a single searing swallow and sets the glass gently on the table. "Secret Jews," he declares, belching. "Every last one of them." (136)

In 1941, the Fuhrer thought Russia would fall as fast as France, and neither Axis army had winter gear for the first Battle of the Don. With a second winter coming on, the Italian reinforcements expected cold. As the days shortened and the weather worsened, they added to their gray-green uniforms a second woolen shirt, a thick sweater, and finally a greatcoat, but no wool in the world could stand up to Russian cold, and their boots were already falling apart. Warm in fur-lined hats and fur-lined parkas, with felted valenki like a second skin over fur-lined boots, the Soviet army waited on the other bank, patient as a glacier. (145)

I knew you understood, Schramm thinks in the darkness. The most appalling things can become..just part of the job, and afterward...Christ, there are days when you're ashamed to be sane. Ah, Renzo. God help us both. Scheisse, we're a pair. (225)

"When the snow melted and the path to goletta's place was clear, Don Leto hiked up the mountainside to see Santino's work. "You are an artist!" he cried as Santino swept up stone chips and packed them firmly into the hearting of the wall. "Is that to neaten the job site," the priest asked, "or do you do it for a reason?"

"Both," Santino said. "Strength comes from the inside—from the inside, not from what you see." "And the same is true of people, as I told your ebra. It's what's inside that counts. Of course it doesn't hurt for the outside to be beautiful, ne?" "You found her?" Santino had almost given up hope. The winter, the Germans..." (228)

Messner takes a last look out the window. "The Allies are bombing us, the Axis is starving us, and the Communists will grab whatever's left at the end. Mondo boia! Executioners rule!" he swears softly, shaking his head at the destruction. "I need a bottle, and a whore whose politics can be trusted. Care to join me?" (243)



"The appeal to race rarely stirs Italians, Helmut. They define blood by direct kinship only."(253)

"What could be better, Artur?" Messner asks, brushing bread crumbs from his fingers. "French brandy, Ethiopian coffee, Italian sun, and German Power!" (298)

"Tell me their names," he whispers. "If I live I will look for your family and tell them of your fate." "they're dead," Landau says without emotion. "The Germans sent everyone in Kossow to a place called Treblinka." All the rabbi can summon is the most exalted of banalities. "Surely, they are with God." Around the room, conversations and card games stop. Two hundred prisoners packed into the jail stare while Landau laughs, loud and long. Amused and indulgent, the Pole shakes his head, wipes his eyes and waves their interest off. Smiling tenderly, he pats Jacopo on the arm, like a father soothing a child. "Rebbe," he says, "What I have seen would make an atheist of Abraham."(304)

"But do you know why so many people hate the Jews? Messner asks the others. "Because Jews think they matter! What they say, what they do, what they believe. Even when they don't believe in God, Jews think their disbelief is significant. It's positively comic, and intensely annoying to the rest of us." (305).

He who was always so immaculately turned out when visiting the Palazzo Usodimare is shabby now, and hollow-eyed, half his face pitted by scars. "Mein got," von Thadden says, "Ugo Messner" "Sometimes," Messner replies. "Not recently." "You—you sat at my table. You danced with my wife!" "You occupied my country." (349)

And every night more fine young ghosts whispered in a knife-blade wind. Welcome to hell, brother. Damn the generals. Damn the politicians. Damn them all. Damn everyone who is warm and dry, and alive tonight. (359)

The Facists say Attilio Goletta helps the resistance. The Communists say Battista Goletta is a Facist informer. Broken clocks are correct two times a day. The Black Brigades and the Garibaldini - they are both correct this time."..."Most of the time they are wrong. Fascisti think all peasants help the partisans, so they burn houses. Communisti think if a farmer's house isn't burned, he must be a collaborator. So they burn houses." "And your group?" "We just want all these bastards to leave us alone. Germans, Facists, Communists."

Topics for Discussion

Discuss Werner Schramm's need for absolution. Was it simple forgiveness he was seeking?

Renzo Leoni is cynical and has a great sense of humor. What are some of the ways his humor comes through in the story?

Why do you suppose that the Italians were able to save so many Jews from the Nazis? Why did they want to, and what made it possible?

Discuss the bond of friendship between Renzo Leoni and Werner Schramm. What was its basis, and how did one affect the other?

The women in this story have varied roles. In what way could you say that feminism was involved in their decisions?

Discuss the psychological effects of running from a powerful murderous force, knowing that the Nazis were only a few steps behind them. How might a person view his own life if he knew that it could end at any moment?

Did Mary Doria Russell stereotype the German Nazi characters in this story? If so, how?

Discuss the phenomenon of becoming so desensitized to death that one could make gruesome decisions all in a day's work, as Dr. Werner Schramm did.

Discuss Hitler's childhood as described in the Preludio. Was he simply a product of his environment? Could he have been mentally ill as a child? How did his unfortunate childhood experiences translate into his later behaviors?