

Reading Group Guide

1. Author Krysia Jopek divides the narration of her story among four different points of view: Henryk, the brother; Helcia, the sister; Zofia, the mother; and Andrzej, the father. Why do you think she may have chosen this approach?
2. How are the coming events foreshadowed in the description of the idyllic life on the family farm?
3. Henryk describes his *osada* or village as “an oasis surrounded by Ukrainian villages.” What is the significance of this geography for Henryk and his family?
4. What reasons do the Russian soldiers give for the family’s sudden deportation? In spite of their deportation, why does the family consider itself lucky?
5. Helcia expresses her fear of the unknown future by scribbling on bits of paper torn from her precious dictionary. What’s the significance of this and why do you think she compares her actions to those who stuff messages into the Wailing Wall?
6. Despite the deprivations of their Siberian labor camp, Zofia manages to get one or two pints of milk a week for Józef, the youngest child. How does she do it? And why does she say that

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the boy was, among the three children, either “the luckiest or perhaps, the most scarred” by the experience?

7. Poetry can illuminate a subject in a very different way than prose. How does the poetry in *Maps and Shadows* add to the reading experience?

8. Why does Helcia call “44 Barber Street, Windsor, Conn.” a “rectangular flag of hope”?

9. The upheavals experienced by individuals and families as the result of history is a theme of *Maps and Shadows*. What historic events caused the family to leave their home in Poland, and subsequently to leave Siberia? Has anyone in your family experienced similar upheavals?

10. When the Polish forced laborers are freed by the Russians, why does Andrzej decide it’s best to leave his family and join the Polish Army?

11. After nearly two years in Siberia, Zofia, Helcia and her youngest brother, Józef, arrive in Tanganyika. How does the author convey the atmosphere in Africa?

12. Freed at last from the frozen forests of Siberia, fourteen-year-old Henryk finds himself in the desert of the Middle East as a member of the Young Polish Battalion. In what ways is this geographically hostile setting a metaphor for Henryk’s life?

13. During the emotionally charged scene when Henryk and his father are reunited in Gaza, the boy observes that his tata has changed. But, he thinks, so has he. Discuss the universal and often conflicting feelings that arise whenever a parent and child reunite after a period of time.

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14. Zofia finally arrives at the refugee camp in England, closer than ever to reuniting with her husband and son. Yet she says she's lost all the energy she had in Siberia. Why do you think this happened?
15. Looking back on her life, Zofia observes that she didn't properly appreciate the years the family lived on their beautiful farm in Poland. Do we all tend to only really appreciate our blessings when they're gone? Is there a lesson here?
16. Why does the family—along with so many of their compatriots—refuse to return to Poland after the War?
17. What happens to Helcia's treasured dictionary? What does its fate say about Helcia's dreams of teaching?
18. What are the lasting effects of the family's exile from Poland on each of the book's four characters? How does that experience continue to resonate beyond the generation that experienced it?
19. Discuss the significance of the burial at the book's end.