

Reading Group Guide

1. When the author is a mere 14 years old, he tells his mother he is joining the Polish Army. It is the first of many times in the book that the author notices his mother's eyes are red, but dry. "When does she do her crying?" he wonders. Discuss the stoic qualities embodied by mothers everywhere during war.
2. "I am almost ashamed to admit it, but at times I enjoyed my time in Siberia," says Stefan. Why do you think he felt that way?
3. Do you think the average teenager today would be as adaptable and resourceful as the author under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
4. Stefan proudly announces that he is an atheist, like his father—but adds that he is not a communist. Discuss the role that religion, or lack of it, plays in this book. If you are a religious person, would your beliefs help you survive such a traumatic experience, or would the experience be more likely to cause you to rethink your beliefs?
5. The author and his family subsist on meager and seemingly unpalatable meals—but occasionally there's a rare treat of sugar lumps, sweet tea and fresh country bread. Discuss any personal or family experiences with food shortages, and how they affected the persons involved as well as subsequent generations.
6. Any place the Waydenfeld family lands for more than a short while, the young Stefan enrolls in the local school. In the face of such chaotic circumstances, what is the point of an education?
7. Between the earthy Russian curses the young boy delights in hearing and his "innocent" use of pages from a pamphlet bearing images of Joseph Stalin as toilet paper in the public outhouse, humour offered Stefan a relief from the misery of refugee life. Is humour a survival instinct? How so? Can you recall moments when humour penetrated a dark occasion in your own life, in film or in literature?
8. What motivated Stalin's mass deportations of innocent civilians to slave labour camps? How were Stalin's methods and goals similar to or different from those of Adolf Hitler? What does this history tell us about the dangers of totalitarian political systems?