

Salt to the Sea



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RUTA SEPETYS

The daughter of a Lithuanian refugee, Sepetys was born in Detroit, Michigan and spent her childhood there. She entered college intending to be an opera singer, but graduated with a degree in International Finance. After college she spent two decades managing her own company, the Sepetys Entertainment Group, which looked after musicians and composers. In 2011 Sepetys published her first novel, *Between Shades of Gray*, which is about a girl deported from Lithuania and sent to a labor-camp in Siberia. *Salt to the Sea* is her third novel. Today, Sepetys lives in Nashville, Tennessee.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The book takes place at the end of the Second World War, which involved many of the world's nations, but was primarily fought between the Axis (Germany, Italy, and Japan) and Allies (the United States, Soviet Union, United Kingdom, China, and others). Although fought primarily in Europe, the "theatre of war" extended to the Mediterranean, North Africa and the Pacific Ocean. *Salt to the Sea* looks specifically at far Eastern Europe, and the (former) nation of East Prussia, the territory of which is now split between Russia, Poland, and Lithuania. By 1945, the German forces were clearly losing, as Allied forces advanced from both the West and the East. Civilians were forced to flee north towards the Baltic Sea, where they hoped German ships would transport them to safety. Only certain citizens would be allowed to evacuate, and the Nazi party had already murdered many others. Beginning in 1933, Nazi Germany passed increasingly oppressive laws, singling out and maligning groups they saw as "undesirable." While this group was primarily composed of Jewish people, it included the Polish, gay people, Jehovah's witnesses, and people with disabilities. These groups were corralled into camps where they were systematically murdered. Those who managed to escape, like the fictional Emilia (the character at the heart of *Salt to the Sea*), were forced to conceal their identities in order to pass freely through German-held territories. The climax of the book, the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, is a real-life event. The ship's sinking marked the greatest loss of life ever recorded from the sinking of a single ship; however, the story was not as widely publicized as other famous shipwrecks, like the *Titanic* or *Lusitania*.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Salt to the Sea is related to Sepetys' other WWII novel, [Between](#)

[Shades of Gray](#). In both books, Sepetys sought to tell the "lost stories" of people who had been unable to tell their own stories about the horrors and complexities of war. *Salt to the Sea* also shares many similarities with other young adult novels dealing with WWII and the Holocaust, specifically those that focus on the experiences of children and young adults, like [The Book Thief](#) by Markus Zusak, [Number the Stars](#) by Lois Lowery, [Milkweed](#) by Jerry Spinelli, or [The Diary of Anne Frank](#).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Salt to the Sea
- **When Written:** 2010s
- **Where Written:** Tennessee
- **When Published:** 2016
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** East Prussia
- **Climax:** The Sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*
- **Antagonist:** Alfred; Fascism and the Nazi Party; the Soviets
- **Point of View:** First person, from the perspective of four different characters

EXTRA CREDIT

Unofficial Sequel. One of the protagonists of *Salt to the Sea*, Joana Vilkas, is the cousin of the protagonist in Sepetys' first novel, *Lina Vilkas*, who appears in *Between Shades of Gray*.

Untold Stories. In both of her careers, as an entertainment manager and as an author, Sepetys has focused on making sure under-told stories were made accessible to the general public. In her novels, she enjoys writing from the perspectives of children and young adults, who are often left out of historical narratives.



PLOT SUMMARY

Salt to the Sea takes place in January 1945, during the final days of WWII. The Allied forces are gaining ground both to the west and the east, and so German civilians are evacuating, fleeing violence and running towards the Baltic Sea where the German navy will transport them to safety.

The story is told from four points of view: Joana is a Lithuanian refugee who was allowed to resettle in Germany; Emilia is a pregnant teenager who escaped the genocide that wiped out many of her fellow ethnic Poles and is trying to remain off the

radar of roving German soldiers; Florian is a former art restorer from Prussia who is smuggling a priceless statue he has stolen from the Nazis as revenge after they killed his father; Alfred is a delusional Nazi soldier working on the *Wilhelm Gustloff*.

Emilia meets Florian in a potato cellar, where he saves her from a Soviet soldier's attempted assault. Emilia becomes attached to Florian, whom she sees as her "knight," and begins to follow him on his journey out of East Prussia. That evening, the two hide out in a barn, where they meet Joana and her fellow travelers—Klaus, Eva, Ingrid, and a man called "the Shoe Poet." Although the other refugees distrust Florian, Joana is a nurse and feels obligated to help him. She removes shrapnel from a wound on his side and stitches the site closed. In the morning, Florian slips out, and Emilia follows him.

The next day, Florian and Emilia accidentally run into Joana again when they all decide to spend the night in the same abandoned Prussian mansion. Although Florian's wound has begun to heal, Emilia is now clearly sick. Joana examines her and realizes that, although only fifteen, she's almost nine months pregnant. Joana worries the pregnancy is the result of rape, but Emilia assures her that the father of her child is a man named August, whom she loves and is on her way to meet.

The two groups decide to travel together. They walk for another day until they reach the coast, at which point they must cut across a frozen bay. As they begin to cross the water, Allied planes shoot through the ice and Ingrid, who had been the first to cross, falls into the water and drowns. Shocked by the death of their friend, the group nonetheless makes it across the bay, where they encounter a German soldier. Florian has altered his identification papers to make it look as though he is on a personal mission for Erich Koch, and so the soldier offers to take him by boat wherever he needs to go. Joana and the rest of the refugees convince Florian to let them tag along, and so the group is transported to the city of Göttenhafen, a port town where they will be able to board a ship and, they hope, sail to freedom.

In Göttenhafen, the group meets Alfred, who is working on the *Wilhelm Gustloff*. Everyone but Eva manages to get a boarding pass for the same ship—Joana by trading her expertise as a nurse for safe passage, Florian by forging his. Joana begins to work in the maternity ward. There, she cares for Emilia, who gives birth to a baby daughter, Halinka. As she goes into labor, Emilia reveals that Halinka is not August's child, but the result of rape at the hands of Soviet soldiers. Initially unable to face the prospect of motherhood, Emilia eventually warms to her daughter with the encouragement of her friends and fellow travelers.

Two days after boarding the ship, it finally sets sail. That same day, however, Allied torpedoes pierce the hull and cause the *Wilhelm Gustloff* to begin to sink. Joana, Klaus, Florian and Halinka make it onto the deck and onto a lifeboat. Emilia asks

Florian to carry her baby into the lifeboat. Meanwhile, Florian asks Alfred to briefly hold his pack (which contains a priceless stolen artifact, the **amber swan**), but then the lifeboat is lowered into the water, and Emilia is separated from her child, and Florian from his belongings.

Joana and Florian are eventually rescued by a boat that comes to save the drowning and freezing refugees, but Emilia and Alfred, although they manage to board a raft, remain adrift at sea. Alfred, who has been writing letters to his beloved Hannelore for much of the novel, reveals that Hannelore was Jewish, and that he turned her into the Nazis when she spurned him. Overcome by rage, delirium, and hypothermia, Alfred first confuses Emilia for Hannelore, and then lashes out when he realizes she is speaking Polish and therefore belongs to a group Hitler has deemed "undesirable." As he advances on her, Alfred falls into the water and dies. Emilia also freezes to death on the raft, but the final chapter implies that she is reunited with her family and friends in the afterlife.

In a final letter that serves as an afterword, a woman named Clara Christensen writes to Florian about how, twenty years earlier, she found Emilia's body washed up on the shore by her home. She explains how she buried Emilia, and hopes she is at peace. She adds that she also buried Florian's backpack, along with the amber swan, and hopes that he is at peace as well.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Joana Vilkas – One of the four principal characters and narrators. From the first chapter, Sepetys notes that Joana is primarily motivated by guilt. Joana is a young Lithuanian woman, who repatriated to Germany from Lithuania in 1941, when Soviet forces threatened to overtake the country. She blames herself for the capture and imprisonment of her cousin, Lina, and so dedicates herself to helping others as a way of relieving the guilt she feels over allowing harm to come to someone she loved. Joana is a nurse and uses her skills to help others whenever possible. In the beginning of the novel she travels with the Poet, Ingrid, Eva, and Klaus, treating any refugees she meets on the road. This is how she first encounters Florian and Emilia, whom she meets when they spend the night in the same barn as her group of refugees. Joana is generally open and trusting, and privileges helping others over her own health and safety. For example, she fights with Eva about whether or not they should allow Emilia and Florian to travel with them. Eva worries the two will put the group in danger, but Joana is unwilling to abandon anyone who she feels could use her help. Later, Joana serves as a nurse on the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, and even delivers Emilia's baby. Over the course of the novel, Joana and Florian become friends, and eventually lovers. The final chapter of the novel reveals the pair

has had a long and happy marriage with their one biological child, and their two adopted children: Klaus and Emilia's daughter, Halinka.

Florian Beck – One of the four principal characters and narrators. From the first chapter, Sepetys notes that Florian is driven forward by a sense of his own predetermined fate. Florian is a Prussian artist, who for many years worked with Erich Koch and Dr. Lange to restore European art that (unbeknownst to Florian) had been stolen by the Nazis. Consumed by his admiration of Dr. Lange and his love of art, Florian didn't realize he was working on unethically and illegally acquired artworks until many years into the war. After Florian's father becomes involved in an unsuccessful plot to assassinate Hitler and is executed, Florian rebels against his superiors, steals a precious artifact, and flees. For much of the novel Florian acts selfishly, for the sake of his mission, and for his family. His relationships with other characters like Emilia and Joana begin cautiously as he is wary of trusting others, but as time goes on Florian reveals himself to be kind and caring, his thoughts of revenge eventually melting into a desire to help his new, chosen family. His relationship with Emilia is resembles that of an older brother protecting a younger sister, but his relationship with Joana becomes romantic. In the final chapter, Sepetys reveals that the pair has had a long and happy marriage with their one biological child, and their two adopted children: Klaus and Emilia's daughter, Halinka.

Emilia Stozek – One of the four principal characters and narrators. From the first chapter Sepetys notes that Emilia's driving emotion is shame. Emilia is Polish, but has spent the past several years in the German village of Nemmersdorf with the Kleist family. Her mother, Halina, died during the birth of Emilia's younger brother, and Emilia's father was killed by Nazis during her time in Nemmersdorf. Emilia has experienced tremendous trauma during the war—including separation from her family and rape at the hands of the invading Soviet army, resulting in pregnancy. She deals with this trauma by retreating into a fantasy she has constructed in her mind. From the moment she meets him she includes Florian in this fantasy, imagining him as a knight from Polish folklore, sent down from the mountains to protect her. Emilia believes she is marked for death, and although she has a strong spirit, she struggles to imagine that a brighter future is possible. Emilia's mother died in childbirth, and (in part because of the symbolic sinking of her childhood **wreath**) she expects to do so as well. However, she eventually gives birth to a healthy baby whom she names Halinka, after her mother. At first, Emilia has difficulty accepting responsibility for her baby, as she did not expect to survive to be a mother, and still has residual shame around her rape and pregnancy. It is only when Florian meets Halinka and tells Emilia that her daughter "is Poland," that Emilia sees that Halinka is a member of her family, and a vessel for her memories of Poland and her family. Emilia dies at sea after the

sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff. She makes sure Halinka is safe, but is unable to board the same lifeboat. Instead, she and Alfred board a raft together, where she eventually freezes to death. Her body is found shortly after by a woman named Clare, who gives Emilia a proper burial.

Alfred Frick – One of the four principal characters and narrators. From the first chapter Sepetys notes that Alfred's driving emotion is fear: fear of being inferior, fear of rejection. Alfred begins the book as a pompous, if misunderstood German soldier, and as the story progresses reveals himself to be increasingly racist, bigoted, delusional, and possibly psychopathic. He has no friends, and very little loyalty to anyone but himself, and Hitler. Every action he undertakes is to advance himself, and to somehow prove his worth as a "Good German." He is in love with Hannelore, his former next-door neighbor, to whom all his chapters are addressed. It is later revealed that Alfred reported Hannelore (who was half Jewish) to the Nazi Youth after she rejected his advances. Alfred has a complicated relationship with his parents. His Mutter loves him, but Alfred's father is ashamed of him, especially after he was rejected from the Hitler Youth, which continues to be a source of shame for Alfred. Alfred remains separate from the other main characters—Emilia, Florian, and Joana—for the first half of the novel, but his storyline intersects with theirs in the town of Gotenhafen, where his ship is stationed, and where they are trying to board a boat and evacuate East Prussia. Alfred becomes instrumental in helping Emilia, Florian, and Joana obtain permission to board the Wilhelm Gustloff. He gets Joana a position as a nurse on board, and gives Florian blank boarding passes, which Florian uses to forge identification papers that will guarantee him passage.

Hannelore Jäger – A German girl who lived next door to Alfred Frick. She never appears during the novel; instead, Alfred composes numerous letters to her, and often revisits his memories of her. In the final chapters, Hannelore is revealed to be half Jewish, a fact Alfred exploited by turning her in to the Nazis when she spurned him. Although she is only viewed through Alfred's eyes, Hannelore seems principled, self-possessed, and proud of her Jewish heritage.

Eva – A German refugee in her fifties who travels with Joana, the Poet, Ingrid, Klaus, and others. She is exceptionally tall, and exceptionally rude, often making offensive statements and attempting to mitigate their effects by adding "sorry" to the end. Because of this she is sometimes referred to as "Sorry Eva." Eva seems to like her travel companions not for their company but for their utility, as traveling in a group is easier than traveling alone. As a result, she is unwilling to help anyone, if by helping them she would potentially put herself in danger or jeopardize her own evacuation.

Ingrid – A blind German refugee traveling with Joana, Eva, the Poet, and others. Although she cannot see, Ingrid has preternatural extrasensory abilities, and is able to tell when it

will snow, or when danger is approaching. She also uses these abilities to read people, and decide who is trustworthy and who is not. Because Ingrid was born blind, the Nazis see her as “undesirable.” As a result, she is at constant risk of being captured by patrolling Nazi forces and taken to a labor or a death camp. Her friends do their best to protect her, avoiding soldiers when possible, and pretending that she is not congenitally blind, but instead recovering from a treatable injury. Ingrid dies midway through the novel as the group crosses a frozen bay. She walks ahead to test the sturdiness of the ice, but falls through when Allied planes shoot through the ice, causing her to fall into the freezing water and drown.

Heinz, “The Shoe Poet” – The Poet is an older German man who is fleeing East Prussia along with Joana, Ingrid, Eva, and Klaus. A former shoemaker, he pays close attention to everyone’s footwear, and believes that **shoes** hold secrets about the past and personality of the wearer. His foot-related ruminations lead his friends to dub him “the Shoe Poet,” or “the Poet” for short. He and Klaus form a close friendship, to the point where Klaus calls him Opi, or grandfather. The Poet dies during the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff. He makes sure Florian, Klaus, Halinka, and Joana board a lifeboat, even giving Florian his lifejacket. Then he sacrifices himself by jumping into the sea, weighted down by coins in his pocket.

Gauleiter Erich Koch – A high-ranking Nazi official tasked with overlooking East Prussia. A real person, in the book he collaborates with Florian and Dr. Lange to repair and consolidate European art and artifacts stolen by the Nazis. He appears primarily in Florian’s memories of the past for the first two thirds of the novel, but nearly exposes Florian’s true identity in the final chapters. The Blonde Nazi who checks Florian’s papers as he boards the Wilhelm Gustloff is suspicious of Florian, and so sends a wire to Koch verifying that he knows the teenager. Koch responds that he does, but also wants to know where the key to the Amber Room is, causing Florian to fear that Koch will track him down.

Anni Beck – Florian’s little sister. She escaped East Prussia and is living with their Aunt in Denmark. Emilia reminds Florian of Anni, which initially motivates him to help the Polish girl instead of abandoning her as he is inclined to do. Whenever he tries to leave Emilia behind, he thinks of Anni, and how he hopes someone is helping her, too.

Dr. Lange – A German art restorer with whom Florian apprentices. Although Florian’s father is skeptical of Lange, Florian is initially enthralled by his mentor, unquestioningly assisting him with the restoration of hundreds of stolen European paintings and artifacts. Over time, however, it becomes clear to Florian that Lange’s allegiance is to the Nazi party, and that, in Lange’s eyes, Florian is but a lackey (and a potential scapegoat) should the operation be discovered.

Mrs. Frick, or “Mutter” – Alfred’s mother. She never appears in

the novel, and is instead present only in her letter to Alfred and in his memories of her. Unlike Alfred’s father, she was more sympathetic and caring towards her son. She takes solace in his physical and military failures, because for many years they kept him out of the military and out of harm’s way.

Erna Kleist – The matriarch of the Kleist family, the family that takes in Emilia after the invasion of Poland. Erna Kleist is ethnically German, and has internalized the doctrine of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party. She does not like Emilia or accept her into her family because of her Polish identity. Even after Emilia has lived with the Kleists for several years, Erna still has not allowed her to fully integrate. Erna eventually allows Emilia to be raped by the invading Soviet Army, saving her own daughter, Else, whose life and safety she values more.

Else Kleist – The German daughter of Michael and Erna Kleist, the sister of August. She and Emilia always got along during the years Emilia lived on her family’s farm. Although Else doesn’t think less of Emilia because she was Polish, she cares about Emilia’s wellbeing less than she cares about her own. When Soviet Forces invade their city and come to their farm, they want to rape Else. Erna protects her daughter by offering Emilia in her place. Else does not protest and does not try to stop Emilia from being dragged away.

Mr. Stozek – Emilia’s father. A Polish academic and mathematician opposed to the Nazi’s treatment of Polish people, especially Polish children, whom they intended to deprive of an education. During the invasion of Poland by Soviet forces, he sends Emilia to live with the Kleist family in hopes that they will be able to keep her safe. Some time later, Erna Kleist callously informs Emilia that her father is dead.

Mr. Beck – Florian’s father. He was killed by Nazis after helping create maps for a failed assassination attempt on Hitler. A thoughtful and principled man, who always encouraged Florian to think and create for himself. During their last conversation before Mr. Beck’s execution, he advises his son to make sure that he does not become a traitor. Florian assumes his father is advising him not to be a traitor to his country, but Mr. Beck clarifies that he wants to make sure Florian stays true to himself and his own moral compass, and does not become “a traitor to [his] soul.”

MINOR CHARACTERS

Klaus “The Wandering Boy” – A young refugee who joins with Joana, the Poet, Ingrid and Eva as they flee the advancing Soviet forces. Orphaned before the book begins, Klaus forms a close relationship with the Poet, whom he begins to call Opi, or grandfather.

Lina Vilkas – Joana’s cousin, who, along with her family, was sent to a Siberian labor camp. Lina was an artist, and Joana carries one of her drawings in her suitcase. Joana blames herself for Lina’s imprisonment. Lina never appears in the

novel, but Joana thinks of her frequently.

August Kleist – A member of the Kleist family. His sister is Else, his mother is Erna, and his father is Michael. August appears only in Emilia's memories, and her fantasies of the future. Although August always treated Emilia with kindness he is not, as she claims, the father of her child.

Josef Stalin – The leader of the Soviet Union.

Zarah Leander – A Swedish singer, exceptionally popular in Nazi Germany.

Dr. Richter – A German doctor tasked with looking over the injured and pregnant on the Wilhelm Gustloff. Joana works under him during her brief time on the vessel.

Michael Kleist – The patriarch of the Kleist family, the family that takes in Emilia after the invasion of Poland.

Halina Stozek – Emilia's mother, who died giving birth to Emilia's little brother.

Halinka – Emilia's daughter, born aboard the Wilhelm Gustloff. Named after her mother, whose name was Halina, but whose nickname was Halinka. Halinka is the product of Emilia's brutal rape by Soviet soldiers during the war.

The Blonde Nazi – A soldier and inspector who checks the paperwork of Florian, Klaus, and the Poet when they are boarding the Wilhelm Gustloff. He is suspicious of Florian especially, and makes trouble for him aboard the *Wilhelm Gustloff*.

Rachel – Emilia's childhood friend. She was Polish and Jewish, and was killed by the Nazis.

Helen – Emilia's childhood friend. She was Polish and Jewish, and was killed by the Nazis.

Clara Christensen – A Danish woman who discovers Emilia's body on the shore weeks after the Wilhelm Gustloff disaster. She writes to Florian when she hears about Halinka in the news and puts together the pieces of Emilia's identity.

Dr. Wendt – A doctor on the Wilhelm Gustloff.

Adolf Hitler – The Leader of the Nazi party and the author of *Mein Kampf*. A real historical figure, Hitler does not appear in the novel, but his specter, and his ideas about the Aryan master race, loom large.

TERMS

Amber Room A real room, formerly housed in the Catherine Palace near the city of Leningrad (present day Saint Petersburg). It was a beautiful chamber made entirely of amber, precious stones, and precious metals. In 1941, Nazis stole it from the Soviet Union. In the fictional world of the story, **Dr. Lange** has been tasked with transporting and hiding the crates that contain the disassembled room. **Florian** assists him, but

eventually turns against Lange, fleeing the city and taking with him the prize jewel of the room, an **amber swan**.

Hitler Youth The youth division of the German Nazi Party. Originally a Boy Scout-like organization, it became a pipeline to service in the German military during WWII, instilling in its members the philosophy and doctrines of Hitler and the Nazi Party.

Gotenhafen A port city in the north of East Prussia (now modern day Poland) where much of the action of the second half of the novel takes place.

Kriegsmarine The naval division of the army in Nazi Germany.

Mein Kampf **Adolf Hitler's** autobiography. It contains the foundations of his anti-Semitic and white supremacist worldview, as well as plans for the future of Germany.

East Prussia A province within the larger Free State of Prussia. Prussia itself was part of the even larger German Empire, which extended from modern-day Germany to the present Latvian border. East Prussia was partitioned and absorbed by Poland and Lithuania.

Baltic Sea The part of the Atlantic Ocean sandwiched between Scandinavia, Finland, Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, and Germany.

Deserter A soldier who has abandoned their position without authorization, or a civilian who has evacuated their city against government decree.

Lwów A city which fell within the boundaries of Poland during WWII, but now sits in present-day Ukraine.

Nemmersdorf A city in East Prussia and the site of a 1944 Soviet massacre of German civilians.

Heidelberg A city in southwest Germany.

Repatriate To return to one's country. In the novel it is often used to refer to someone returning to the land of their ancestral roots. For example, **Joana**, who is ethnically German on one side of her family but identifies as Lithuanian, repatriates to Germany, returning to a site of familial origin.

Königsberg Formerly an East Prussian city controlled by Germany, Königsberg is now controlled by Russia (although it is technically an exclave, as it is not connected to mainland Russia, and is instead situated between Poland, Lithuania, and the Baltic Sea).

Wilhelm Gustloff A German leisure vessel and cruise ship converted by the German military into a transport ship to aid in the evacuation of German civilians at the end of the war. Although it originally had a capacity of less than 1,500 people, it eventually was made to accommodate over 10,000.

Axis Powers The countries that fought against the Allies in WWII. The major players were Germany, Italy, and Japan, but the Axis also collaborated with Hungary, Romania, Croatia, and other countries.

Allied Powers The countries that fought against the Axis in WWII. The major players were the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and China, but the Allies also collaborated with Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ethiopia, Brazil, and many other countries.

Pillau A coastal city. Formerly in East Prussia, like Tilsit and Königsberg, Pillau is now part of a Russian exclave (meaning that it is not connected to the Russian mainland, and is instead situated between Poland, Lithuania, and the Baltic Sea).

Tilsit Formerly an East Prussian city situated on the border of present-day Lithuania and Poland, it is now controlled by Russia. Like Königsberg, it is technically an exclave, as it is not connected to mainland Russia, and is instead situated between Poland, Lithuania, and the Baltic Sea.

Kiel A German city in the far north of the country, situated on the Baltic Sea.

Aryan A term used in Nazi Germany to describe the ideal “master race” of Caucasians. A non-scientific category, the idea of the Aryan race was mostly defined by what it was not; Aryans were not Slavic, and they were not Jewish. They were generally stereotyped as being blonde, blue eyed, physically fit, and white.

face of curses that they believe are following them across the European continent—the protagonists of the novel demonstrate that the will and determination to live can overcome seemingly insurmountable odds.

At the novel’s start, the Nazi’s racialized predetermination of people’s fates has been internalized by many of the characters. Joana explicitly states at one point “Our papers determined our fate.” Referring to Emilia, who is Polish and without papers, she continues: “No papers, no future.” However, an individual’s will to live proves to be more powerful than a state-sanctioned death sentence. Reflecting on the hardships she has faced because of her identity, Emilia recalls: “The Nazis claimed I didn’t need an education” and “The Nazis said the people of Poland would become serfs to the Germans.” However, even though “they had burned our books in the Polish language [...] I had learned to read very young. They could never take that away from me.” The Nazis want to crush Emilia’s life by crushing her sense of agency and her will to live, but Emilia resists. Even though the government ostensibly has control over her life, her will to survive and exercise control over her own destiny is stronger than the Nazi regime that has tried to entrap her. With her father’s help, she escapes Poland. By her own force of will, she escapes her next home of Nemmersdorf. With the help of her newfound friends, and the memories of her culture and family, she manages to survive years past the point that the Nazis first tried to take her life.

Across Europe and beyond, the fates of individuals during the war were determined by specific markers of their identity—a fact that, for many who saw themselves as doomed, bred a sense of hopelessness and helplessness. Emilia, who has endured the death of her family at the hands of Nazis as well as rape and a subsequent pregnancy at the hands of Soviet soldiers, finds it difficult to continue living her life. She is superstitious, and sees signs everywhere that she assumes point to her own death. Her future, to her, seems predetermined; she believes that, just as her own mother died in childbirth, she too will die giving birth to her daughter. As a young girl, Emilia took part in a festival in which girls launch flower wreaths carrying lit candles down a river. Emilia relates, “Legend said that the boy who retrieved your wreath downstream was the boy you would marry.” Unfortunately, Emilia’s **wreath** caught fire and then sank, “quietly sealing [her] fate,” she believes. However, over the course of the novel Emilia begins to believe in a brighter future, and when she delivers her baby and survives, she thinks, “maybe the storm was finally behind me.” Emilia eventually does die, but only after she has proven every one of her prophecies wrong: she did not die in childbirth, and she did not die with the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff. Instead, she manages to save her child, kill a Nazi soldier, and tell the truth about her Polish heritage before eventually freezing to death on a raft in the Baltic Sea. Unlike the death she had predicted for herself—sinking passively like



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



AGENCY, WILLPOWER, AND FATE

During World War II, the fate of many Europeans was determined by their race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and health. The Nazi party labeled many groups as “unworthy of life,” and these groups were rounded up, imprisoned, and, in many cases, killed. The majority of these people were Jewish, but other groups—including Romani people, people with disabilities, homosexuals, and the ethnically Polish—were also singled out for imprisonment or extermination. The government and the military tried to control these people’s futures, systematically attempting to crush their willpower and deprive them of agency. By labeling certain groups as undesirable and marking them for death, the government and military tried to control the futures of its citizens, by ensuring they would not have one at all. In Nazi Germany, being in possession of the “wrong” identity became a death sentence. The characters in *Salt to the Sea* have managed to survive many atrocities. Through their perseverance, they demonstrate the power of the will and of hope. Even in the face of a government that wants people like them dead—or in the

her wreath many years before—Emilia dies as an active participant in determining her own fate.

Like Emilia, other characters similarly believe they have some degree of free will, but worry that their lives are marked by a curse which causes them continual bad luck and hardship. Florian, who has spent many months working on restoring and hiding the stolen Amber Room, worries that, because he stole the **amber swan** and carries it with him, he is carrying a curse. Florian wonders if the Amber Room is responsible for the string of tragedies and bad luck he has experienced in the last few years (with the murder of his father, his shrapnel injury, and the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff). Eventually, however, Florian breaks free from what he perceives to be his curse. He realizes that the swan trapped him in an endless loop of revenge, but by letting go of his anger, he can move on with his life.

Surviving during World War II requires constant effort. Although the fates of the protagonists of *Salt to the Sea* have some agency and free will, they are nonetheless aware that the Nazi government has strict ideas about who deserves to live and who deserves to die. Therefore, those condemned to die because of who they are—because of their nationality, or because of a disability—know they are living on borrowed time. If they want to make it out of East Prussia alive, they must somehow navigate forces more powerful than they are—superstitions, curses, and fascist soldiers—to take charge of their own destinies.



STORYTELLING AND FANTASY

Salt to the Sea illustrates the horrors of war.

Whether escaping genocide at the hands of the Nazi party, escaping death at the hands of roving

Soviet gangs, or surviving beatings by soldiers, many of the characters in the novel develop techniques to take a break, or dissociate, from their traumatic or stressful realities. These techniques sometimes take the form of songs and chants, which serve as a kind of mediation. They also take the form of invented fantasy worlds which the characters superimpose atop the upsetting real world, helping them cope with their traumas. They also include folklore and nursery rhymes that connect characters to a happier time, or to happier people, the memories of which are soothing and comforting. The power of fantasy and storytelling helps many characters face what would otherwise be unbearable situations. However, often, the fantasy worlds become so essential to an individual's navigation of the world that they begin to genuinely believe in them, and convince others of their veracity as well.

Emilia and Alfred both create elaborate fantasy worlds that help them cope with difficult realities. Emilia creates several, which help her to deal with the trauma of her rape, pregnancy, and separation from her family. From the moment she meets Florian she refers to him as a “conqueror, a sleeping knight, like in the stories Mama used to tell.” She explains, “Polish legend

told of a king and his brave knights who lay sleeping in mountain caverns. If Poland was in distress, the knight would awaken and come to the rescue.” Imagining Florian as a knight makes Emilia feel safer, as does the idea that there are other knights sleeping in the wilderness waiting to come and rescue Poland, which has been overrun by Nazis. Similarly, Alfred creates a fantasy world through his letters, which allow him to deal with the drudgery and indignities of his military service. Most of his chapters take the form of letters written to Hannelore, his former next-door neighbor and would-be lover. The letters involve multiple layers of fantasy. First, the letters themselves depict a fantasy world in which Alfred is much more important and talented than he is in reality. Often a letter will finish and then his real life will snap back into focus, underscoring the disparity between his fantasies and his reality (even as Alfred maintains the sense of importance he receives from completing his many imagined important tasks). Second, Alfred never actually *writes* any letters to Hannelore; rather, he composes them in his head, showing that they he “writes” them out of a desire to escape from reality and not an actual desire to communicate. Even if Alfred were to put pen to paper, Hannelore would be unable to receive a letter because she is not Alfred's girlfriend, and is quite probably no longer alive; the novel's climax reveals that Alfred had formerly lusted after Hannelore, but turned her and her Jewish father in to the Nazis when she spurned him. This revelation attests to the true depths of his delusions. His letters to Hannelore then become a multilayered fantasy through which he can pretend to be more important than he is, while also pretending that Hannelore is alive, and yearning for him as he yearns for her.

Storytelling is used by multiple characters as a tool for forging new selves and identities. Sepetys shows that stories, when they are told confidently, can become reality—both to those listening to the stories and sometimes even to the storytellers themselves. The most explicit example of this is the fantasy Emilia creates to explain her pregnancy. She claims a family friend named August fathered her child, and that she is on her way to meet him. Although this is not true, and the child is the result of her rape by Russian soldiers, she begins to believe her own story. Although a quarter of the novel is told from her point of view, Emilia keeps the identity of her child's father a secret for hundreds of pages, even in her own internal monologues. In addition to telling her fellow refugees lies and fantasies, she tells herself the same stories. In her thoughts, she thinks of “August and our wedding, and how we'd make a big nest for the storks above our cottage, just like the nest I had seen on top of the barn.” These are visions of an imaginary future, based on an invented past. Still, their purpose is to soothe Emilia, and they succeed in calming her. She notes, “the images were so peaceful, so perfect, that soon I fell asleep.” Needless to say, such visions contrast starkly with the reality of her bleak circumstances and uncertain future.

Songs and poems, like fantasies, help several characters in *Salt to the Sea* process their emotions by evoking a certain feeling of bringing the characters back to a certain memory. Emilia frequently sings herself a childish song about ducks that she learned from her mother. Although her mother has passed away, this nursery rhyme allows Emilia to feel connected to her. Additionally, the poem provides Emilia a framework to deal with new trauma, which otherwise might be too overwhelming to process. After the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff, for example, Emilia is able to describe the horrific scene of corpses bobbing around her as “*little duckies with their heads in the water*” (a line from her song). Similarly, Alfred has created a bigoted rhyme about all the groups designated as enemies of the Nazi party. The song, which lists “Communists, Czechoslovaks, Greeks, Gypsies, Handicapped, Homosexuals...” feels to Alfred like “reciting a lesson in song”—such that a sickening concept, when set to music, becomes easily digestible. Alfred sings to himself as he unhappily performs his various martial duties, and it helps make his work more bearable, and acts as a kind of self-soothing meditation. Constantly returning to the song also acts as a kind of reinforcement of his own identity as a “Good German,” reminding him of the principles of racial supremacy according to which he lives his life.

The novel shows repeatedly that the stories people tell themselves and others can become as powerful, or more powerful, than reality itself. These stories serve many purposes: they can connect a person to the past, keep them out of harm’s way in the present, or help them deal with trauma. It can also allow them to project a new persona into the future, and construct a new identity based on a story they have told about themselves. In *Salt to the Sea*, fictions and storytelling prove to be the foundation of characters’ identities, both for the reader, the characters themselves, and other characters within the world of the novel.



MEMORY AND SURVIVAL

In the afterword to her novel, Ruta Sepetys explicitly states that this novel is written for those who endured great atrocities or tragedies and did not survive. It is also for the survivors, who must live with the guilt of being among the few to make it out alive, and feel obligated to carry on the memories or legacies of their family and friends. The novel begins with an epigram, which reads, “We the survivors are not the true witnesses. The true witnesses, those in possession of the unspeakable truth, are the drowned, the dead, the disappeared.” The novel’s protagonists, at least until the very end, are the survivors. As a result, they must carry with them not only their own trauma, but the weight of duty and obligation to those who did not survive. This is a doubly difficult situation to be in, and the novel investigates the question of how to preserve the memory of the fallen, while living a life not entirely consumed by guilt. In her

author’s note, Sepetys insists that “when the survivors are gone we must not let the truth disappear with them,” and commits herself to “giv[ing] them a voice.” Through the act of writing her novel Sepetys gives voice to groups that have historically been underrepresented, their stories untold. Within the novel itself the individual characters grapple with the same issues as Sepetys, asking themselves how a person can come to terms with guilt over their own survival, and how a person can remain connected, loyal, and dutiful to a family even in their absence.

The novel begins with a sentence that illustrates the role guilt will play in the lives of the various characters. Joana, in her internal monologue thinks, “Guilt is a hunter,” continuing, “*It’s all your fault.*” Although this thought specifically applies to her situation and the imprisonment of her own family, the idea that survivors of tragedy are somehow guilty for the deaths of those they have left behind permeates the book. Joana feels that she is responsible for her cousin, Lina, and Lina’s family, being sent to Siberia. Joana’s father had joined an anti-Soviet group, and Joana wrote her cousin to explain. Although Joana’s family managed to escape Lithuania, the letter was intercepted, and her cousin’s family was subsequently detained and sent to Siberia as a result. Joana sees herself as a deserter who abandoned both her homeland of Lithuania and her family. Although the alternative to leaving would have been death or imprisonment, she is constantly putting herself down, remarking at one point “I didn’t need [...] criticism. I carried enough guilt on my own. I had done everything wrong.” Later, in response to Eva’s comment that she has been lucky to make it this far, Joana says, “I didn’t feel lucky. I felt guilty.” Later still, she makes her feelings even clearer, reflecting that “Survival had its price: guilt.” This feeling of culpability becomes so advanced that she even refers to herself regularly as a “murderer,” and believes that her “freedom cost [Lina’s] family their lives.” Similarly, although she herself was brutally raped and forced to bear a child she did not consent to have, Emilia feels guilt at having survived for as long as she has. When she is separated from her child and stranded on a raft after the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff she comments, “It was my punishment. Honor lost. Everything lost. Shame is a hunter. My shame was all around me now.” Thus, for Emilia, the price of surviving is not so much guilt as it is guilt’s cousin: shame. She feels shame at her rape, and shame at her pregnancy, both things she has no control over, and which others make clear are not her fault.

Sepetys suggests that the survivors of any atrocity have a duty to continue the legacy of their families by telling the stories of those who were left behind. She does not, however, suggest that duty and guilt must exist together. Instead she hopes that those who have endured great hardships can carry on in strength, preserving the memory of the past. Although many of the characters struggle with feelings of guilt, Sepetys herself assigns them no blame as survivors. Instead, the act of

surviving in itself is portrayed as a kind of triumph, and a way of honoring those who have already died. Joana feels guilty that she has allowed members of her family to be captured by the Soviet army. By helping others with her medical expertise, she is able to alleviate some of the guilt she feels for the family she was unable to help. This is clearest during an explosion on the road to the coast, when she tries to run to help other injured refugees. The Poet pulls her back, arguing that she will hurt herself if she enters the chaos. He cautions, “You must preserve yourself in order to help others.” Although Joana does not respond, she thinks, “I had already preserved myself. I had left Lithuania and those I loved behind.” Because of her guilt, Joana feels her life and her body are no longer fully her own; because she has survived thus far, she feels she must help others even if the cost is her health or her life. However, her friends (like the Poet and Eva) act as voices of reason, urging her to look after her own wellbeing in addition to the wellbeing of others.

For much of the novel, Florian believes that his duty as a survivor is to continue to engage in a cycle of violence. He has stolen a piece of the Amber Room as an act of vengeance against Erich Koch and Dr. Lange, but this has caused him as much pain as it has them, as he worries he has been labeled a traitor or else put on some kind of Nazi blacklist. Only in the final chapters, when Florian loses the **amber swan** (a priceless artifact he stole from the Nazis as revenge for the death of his father) does he consider the emptiness of his journey. He realizes that by stealing the swan he was only entering into “the endless circle of revenge: answering pain by inflicting pain.” He wonders, “Why did I do it?” Having lost the object that has driven his journey, he is finally able to reconsider his purpose. Although he has acted in his self-interest for the sake of revenge for so long, Florian has also consistently helped and protected the people he has come to care about: Joana, Emilia, Klaus, and the Poet. Once he turns his attention from the amber swan to the outside world, he is provided with a new reason to live—not to inflict revenge, but to love his new, chosen family. His pack gone, Florian opens up to Joana for the first time, connecting emotionally with her, but also with memories of his mother and father. In this moment, he demonstrates that even without the motivation of revenge, he can still honor his family’s memory.

Within the novel, Sepetys treats survivors gently, not blaming them for their survival, but giving them outlets for their guilt. Sepetys’s characters reassure their friends that they are not responsible for the suffering of those who did not survive. The trauma characters endure over the course of the novel are a result of the horrors of war, not a form of punishment for outliving others. The responsibility of a survivor is, in the end, to go on living, and to do his or her best to connect and engage with the memories of those who were left behind.



FAMILY AND COMMUNITY VS. SELFISHNESS

As millions of refugees evacuated Poland, Prussia, Lithuania, and the surrounding countries, bonds of family and community were broken and reformed. The refugees at the center of the novel (Joana, Florian, Ingrid, Emilia, Eva, the Poet, and Klaus) have either been separated from their families by distance or by death. They form new bonds with each other, partially out of necessity, but also out of love. Their new family unit helps them to survive, but it also brings them joy and comfort. Over the course of the novel, the characters’ chosen family becomes as important as their biological family, even as the bonds and memories of biological family remain important motivators for the survivors. However, given the opportunity to create new, strong bonds of community, characters who choose to follow their own self-interest, like the Nazi soldier Alfred, stand out in stark contrast to the novel’s other characters. Sepetys creates a clear dichotomy of acceptable versus unacceptable behavior: a communitarian mindset versus an individualistic mindset. Within *Salt to the Sea*, communal and familial bonds are something to be celebrated, and connection with others is something to strive for. Selfish people, in contrast, only succeed in the short term. In the long term, the novel shows, selfishness can only lead to sadness and isolation.

Biological family and the need for community motivates many of the characters throughout the novel. A desire for a family unit helps unite the protagonists, but a desire to meet up with, or avenge their families is what keeps them moving forward. Joana, the Shoe Poet, Ingrid, Eva, Klaus, Florian, and Emilia form a makeshift family on the road together. Each has a different skillset, and so they are able to collaborate to make each other’s lives easier. This makeshift family is formed out of necessity, but also out of love. Klaus calls the Shoe Poet “Opi” (meaning “grandfather”) and at the end of the novel it is implied that Joana and Florian get married, adopting Klaus and Emilia’s newborn baby. Although forged initially out of necessity, their makeshift family becomes a real one, stitched together by genuine love and affection. Joana is motivated by her desire to reunite with her family in Germany after the war is over. This is also true of Eva, and of many of the unnamed refugees. The love of their chosen family helps the refugees survive, as Joana provides medical aid to the group, Florian’s forged papers occasionally garner them special treatment, and the Poet’s insights keep their feet healthy and strong. Similarly, the character’s love of their biological families gives them a reason to live and move forward, also helping them survive.

Sometimes, the bonds of family can prove dangerous. If one member of a family is targeted by the Nazi or Soviet army for example, the entire family is put at risk. Hannelore, a Jewish girl and the object of Alfred’s affections, was arrested by Nazi’s after Alfred turned her Jewish father in to the Nazis. Although

she could have disavowed her father, or claimed that she was ethnically German like her mother, Hannelore went with the police who came to collect her, and shouting out proudly “I am Jewish!” Alfred, who has no real obligation to anyone, not even the Nazi party, cannot understand Hannelore’s commitment to her father, her family, and to her religion and culture, which, in the end, are more important than her freedom, and even her life. Even though Hannelore will likely die as a result of her loyalty to her religion and to her father, her sacrifice is depicted positively. Cultural pride and the bonds of family, even if they cost an individual her life and freedom, are demonstrated to be preferable to disavowing one’s heritage. Similarly Florian knows he is marked by “*Sippenshaft*,” or “blood guilt,” because his father was involved in a failed plot to assassinate Hitler. According to Nazi law, “If a family member had committed a crime or treason, his blood was considered bad,” and so Florian is technically implicated in his father’s plot. In spite of this, Florian remains loyal to his father’s memory, often turning to it for advice and comfort. Even though his connection to his father could lead to his own death, Florian instead spends much of the novel actively trying to take revenge on Hitler for causing his father’s death.

In contrast to individuals who could abandon their families and communities but choose not to, Alfred stands out as the most selfish character in the novel. He is motivated only by his own ego, and by the hopes that he will impress someone—*anyone*—after a lifetime spent disappointing himself and his family. He isn’t even fully committed to the Nazi party; instead he enjoys participating in the military because he hopes he will be somehow recognized and valorized, and because he relishes the fact that the Nazi Party’s hateful hierarchy places him at the top. However, Alfred pays a price for his blind selfishness. He has no friends and a strained relationship with his family. Most damningly, Alfred’s selfishness and bigotry eventually lead to his own death. Stranded on a raft with Emilia, he becomes enraged when he realizes she is Polish. He stands on the raft unsteadily, and when Emilia reaches out to help and steady him Alfred, who would rather die than accept help from someone he believes is inferior, falls into the water to his death. Alfred’s unceremonious death underscores the dangers of an unconnected, self-centered life.

The family unit, whether biological or chosen, is essential to the health and wellbeing of the central characters in *Salt to the Sea*. Memories of their own families push the protagonists forward, while their new chosen families keep them safe in the present, allowing them to survive the harsh winter and violent war. Those characters who are selfish, or who reject the idea of family and community, are punished for it, or they eventually change their ways. Thus, communitarian behavior is celebrated in the novel, and selfishness is deeply criticized.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



EMILIA'S WREATH

As a child, Emilia participated in a tradition in which young girls would make a wreath of flowers and let it float down the river, carrying a candle. Whoever caught the wreath downstream would be the girl’s future husband. However, Emilia’s wreath got stuck in the middle of the river, caught on fire, and sank. As a result, Emilia assumed her future was cursed—that she would never find a husband, and that she would die tragically. The wreath becomes symbolic of Emilia’s tragic story as a whole, as the young girl’s life was cut short abruptly by the gruesome reality of war.



STORKS AND BIRDS

Emilia often reminisces about her childhood home in Poland, and the storks that would nest nearby. For her, storks represent her family in happier times. Her longing for storks is a longing for a unified, living family, and a return to the homeland that has been stolen from her. Emilia primarily references storks, but when her daughter, Halinka, is born, she is described as a “little bird”—a little piece of home away from Poland. In Emilia’s final chapter, which seems to depict some kind of afterlife, she sees her mother (who has died) and her Jewish friends (who were killed in the war) once again. As she greets them, storks fly above her and land in their nest, symbolizing the reunification of her family and loved ones in the afterlife.



SHOES

The Shoe Poet, a former shoemaker, often says that you can tell everything you need to know about a person from their shoes. One of his favorite phrases is “The shoes always tell the story.” Throughout *Salt to the Sea*, shoes become symbolic representations of the deeper characters of human beings. They act as indicators of individuals’ true thoughts, feelings, and motivations. They reveal the secrets that characters have meant to hide, or their secret histories. For example, the Poet can look at Joana’s boots and see that they used to belong to her mother. From this he infers that her mother loved her, and gave her the shoes in hopes that they would carry her to safety. Similarly, the Poet can tell that Florian has modified his boots to hide a key inside the heel—a secret Florian desperately wanted to keep to himself.



THE AMBER SWAN

Florian has stolen the **amber swan** from the shipping containers which hold the disassembled Amber Room. In addition to stealing the swan, Florian has taken a map to the location of the Amber Room and a key to the secret cellar where it is hidden. Stealing the swan is Florian's revenge against Hitler for the death of Florian's father, who participated in an assassination attempt against Hitler. More specifically, however, the swan represents "the endless circle of revenge." Florian eventually realizes that answering pain by inflicting further pain will never bring him peace.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Salt to the Sea* published in 2016.

1. Joana Quotes

☹️ Guilt is a hunter.

My conscience mocked me, picking fights like a petulant child. *It's all your fault*, the voice whispered.

Related Characters: Joana Vilkas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

These are the first lines of the novel. Each of the first four chapters begins with a similar declaration, as the four protagonists name what they believe is hunting them. Joana is hunted by guilt, Alfred by fear, Emilia by shame, and Florian by fate. These motifs will reappear throughout the novel.

When Joana writes that she is hunted by guilt, she means that guilt is with her always, and although she does her best to escape it, she cannot. Although Joana managed to escape her native Lithuania and repatriate to Germany, many of her relatives remained behind, and were captured or killed by the Soviet army. Joana feels it was unfair that she was lucky enough to survive and escape, while her loved ones could not. She also feels responsible for her family's capture, though these details are only revealed later in the novel.

4. Alfred Quotes

☹️ *Fear is a hunter.*

But brave warriors, we brush away fear with a flick of the wrist. We laugh in the face of fear, kick it like a stone across the street. Yes, Hannelore, I compose these letters in my mind first, as I cannot abandon my men as often as I think of you.

You would be proud of your watchful companion, sailor Alfred Frick. Today I saved a young woman from falling into the sea. It was nothing really, but she was so grateful she clung to me, not wanting to let go.

"Thank you, sailor." Her warm whisper lingered in my ear. She was quite pretty and smelled like fresh eggs, but there have been many grateful and pretty girls. Oh, do not be concerned. You and your red sweater are foremost in my thoughts. How fondly, how incessantly, I think of my Hannelore and red-sweater days.

I'm relieved you are not here to see this. Your sugared heart could not bear the treacherous circumstances here in the port of Gotenhafen. At this very moment, I am guarding dangerous explosives. I am serving Germany well. Only seventeen, yet carrying more valor than those twice my years. There is talk of an honor ceremony but I'm too busy fighting for the Führer to accept honors. Honors are for the dead, I've told them. We must fight while we are alive!

Yes, Hannelore, I shall prove to all of Germany. There is indeed a hero inside of me.

Related Characters: Alfred Frick (speaker), Hannelore Jäger

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

This chapter introduces Alfred, one of the novel's four main characters. Most of his chapters take the form of letters to Hannelore, a girl from his hometown. He never writes or sends the letters, instead composing them in his mind. Alfred primarily lives in his own mind, in which he is safe from the fear that hunts him and governs his life. Alfred is afraid of the outside world—pain, discomfort, war, death—as well as other's responses to his perceived weaknesses. Alfred is afraid of being disrespected or mocked by his peers, and of being rejected by anyone, especially women.

To cope with these fears, Alfred has created a fantasy world in which he is the kind of man he has always wanted to be. In these letters, he is a high ranking naval official with men in his command. He is assigned important tasks and saves important lives. He is respected by high ranking officials in the Nazi Party, and will soon have a physical medal as a symbol of his honor. Throughout the novel Alfred also

frequently returns to the idea of the hero's journey. He sees himself as the hero of his own story, midway through some epic quest. The reader can see the irony in this, as *Salt to the Sea* follows three additional characters that truly *are* on epic journeys, and who learn, grow, and change, as heroes are expected to do, over the course of the novel.

6. Emilia Quotes

☝ “Are you okay?” I asked, barely recognizing my own voice. His face twisted at the sound of my words. He was German. I was Polish. He would want nothing to do with me. Adolf Hitler had declared that Polish people were subhuman. We were to be destroyed so the Germans could have the land they needed for their empire. Hitler said Germans were superior and would not live among Poles. We were not Germanizable. But our soil was.

Related Characters: Emilia Stozek (speaker), Adolf Hitler, Florian Beck

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

After Florian rescues Emilia from a Soviet soldier, Emilia tries to speak to Florian. He reacts to her use of the Polish language, and Emilia assumes this is because he is German, and believes that Polish people are genetically inferior.

Emilia is Polish, and for the past five years has been on the run, hiding her Polish identity from the German government, which instituted a multi-step ethnic cleansing of Poland and its people. Although Emilia managed to escape, she has begun to internalize ideas of Polish inferiority, and no longer feels anger at those who reject her; instead, she glumly accepts any mistreatment. She assumes her Polish identity will make life harder for her, but does not challenge those who are unkind to her.

In reality, Florian reveals (in chapters written from his point of view) that he is not German, but Prussian. This is a distinct ethnic group, and his allegiances are to his Prussian family and himself, not the German government. As a result, he has not accepted the Nazi doctrine of Aryan supremacy. His reaction to Emilia is likely one of surprise at encountering a Polish person. Or else, Emilia, so used to being dismissed and degraded, misinterpreted his neutral reaction.

7. Joana Quotes

☝ The old man spoke of nothing but shoes. He spoke of the with such love and emotion that a woman in our group had crowned him, “the shoe poet.” Them woman disappeared a day later but the nickname survived.

“The shoes always tell the story,” said the shoe poet.

“Not always,” I countered.

“Yes, always. Your boots, they are expensive, well made. That tells me that you come from a wealthy family. But the style is one made for an older woman. That tells me they probably belonged to your mother. A mother sacrificed her boots for her daughter. That tells me you are loved, my dear. And your mother is not here, so that tells me that you are sad, my dear. The shoes tell the story.”

I paused in the center of the frozen road and watched the stubby old cobbler shuffle ahead of me. When we fled from Lithuania she rushed me to Insterburg and, through a friend, arranged for me to work in the hospital. That was four years ago. Where was mother now?

I thought of the countless refugees trekking toward freedom. How many millions of people had lost their home and family during the war? I had agreed with Mother to look to the future, but secretly I dreamed of retuning to the past. Had anyone heard from my father or brother?

Related Characters: Joana Vilkas (speaker), Heinz, “The Shoe Poet”

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

The Poet is able to deduce information about his fellow travelers only from their shoes. Throughout the novel he will uncover secrets about characters' motivations and their pasts simply based on what they are wearing on their feet. Here, he correctly assesses Joana's family background and her relationship with her mother. Joana, although she has been separated from her family for many years, often thinks of them. Reminders of her family—in her mind and on her feet—help her continue forwards, both figuratively and literally. Joana often feels guilty when she thinks about the past, and this passage is no exception. Although she has promised her mother to only look forward, Joana cannot help thinking about the past and the family she was forced to leave behind in Lithuania.

9. Emilia Quotes

●● He wanted to leave me. His race was his own.

Who was this German boy, old enough to be in the Wehrmacht, yet dressed in civilian clothes? For me he was a conqueror, a sleeping knight, like in the stories Mama used to tell. Polish legend told of a king and his brave knights who lay asleep within the mountain caverns. If Poland was in distress, the knights would awaken and come to the rescue.

I told myself that the handsome young man was a sleeping knight. He moved forward, his pistol at the ready. He was leaving.

Why did everyone leave me?

Related Characters: Emilia Stozek (speaker), Florian Beck

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Because Florian looks German (although he is actually Prussian), Emilia assumes he is German and so makes assumptions about his beliefs and opinions regarding Polish people. Being Polish, Emilia assumes that Florian wants nothing to do with her. After having been told that she is inferior because of her ethnicity and nationality, Emilia has begun to believe it, and has almost grown to accept this mistreatment. Instead of being angry that Florian's "race was his own," she is resigned.

This passage marks the beginning of one of Emilia's recurring fantasies. In this fantasy, Florian is not just a teenage boy, but a knight from Polish legends, who exists specifically to protect Polish people, Emilia included. This is especially appealing to Emilia because she has been alone for so long, and has felt unprotected and unloved. The idea that someone has come down from the mountains specifically to care for her makes her feel safe and comforted, and helps give her the mental strength to continue her journey.

14. Joana Quotes

●● My heart ached for the girl. What had she seen? And deep down I knew the truth. Hitler was pushing out Polish girls like Emilia to make room for "Baltic Germans," people with German heritage. Like me. My father was Lithuanian but my mother's family had German roots. That's why we were able to flee from Stalin into the barbed arms of Hitler.

"You know, I think it could be worse," said Eva.

"What do you mean?"

"My husband told me that Hitler suspected the Polish intellectuals of anti-Nazi activity. The senior professors in Lwów, they were all executed. So the girl's father, sorry, but he was probably strangled with piano wire and—"

"Stop, Eva."

"We can't bring the girl with us. Her coat is splattered with blood. She's clearly in trouble. And she's Polish."

"And I'm Lithuanian. Are you going to toss me out too?" I was sick of it. Sick of hearing the phrase *German Only*. Could we really turn our backs on innocent homeless children? They were victims, not soldiers. But I knew others felt differently. I looked over at the girl in the corner, tears streaking her filthy face. She was fifteen and alone. The tears reminded me of someone. The memory opened a small door in my mind and the dark voice slipped through it.

It's all your fault.

Related Characters: Eva, Joana Vilkas (speaker), Emilia Stozek, Adolf Hitler

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

After meeting Emilia and Florian in a barn where all the refugees have settled down for the night, Eva and Joana discuss the two strangers. Joana, always empathetic, feels for Emilia, and is sorry that she has had to suffer so greatly. Eva, meanwhile, cares only about herself and ensuring her own survival. Although she recognizes the hardships Emilia has endured, Eva does not feel more sympathetic towards her. Joana wants Emilia to continue traveling with her group, but Eva worries that Emilia, because of her Polish identity, will put the entire group at risk.

Meanwhile, Joana feels guilty that she, a Lithuanian, was allowed to repatriate and was actively welcomed by Germany, whereas Emilia, who is also not German, has been persecuted. Joana feels it is unfair that her life has been easier than Emilia's because of her nationality, and so feels an additional obligation to help the teenager. Although it is

never explicitly stated, Sepetys implies Eva is German, and that she rarely thinks about the ways in which the Nazi's racial and ethnic hierarchies affect people from other countries and of other religions. Joana, who has not faced discrimination but is not German, is better able to empathize with the plights of the oppressed.

Joana is extra empathetic because Emilia reminds her of "someone." Later, she will reveal this someone to be her cousin, Lina, who remained behind in Lithuania and was captured by Soviet forces. Because she left Lina behind, Joana feels an urge to help Emilia to make up for what she sees as the mistakes of her past.

25. Emilia Quotes

☛ I looked at the trees and thought of the big stork's nest I had seen on top of the barn. It made me think of Mama. I thought of the warm sunny days when she would take me to pick mushrooms in the forest. In the forest near Lwów was a beautiful old oak tree with a hollow large enough to sit in. We'd take our baskets to the tree and I'd scramble into the cavity. Mama would sit with her back against the trunk, legs crossed at the ankles beneath her skirt.

"You love stories, Emilia. Well, the trees hold hundreds of years of stories," she'd tell me, touching the bark. "Think of it, everything these trees have seen and felt. All of the secrets are inside of them."

"Do you think they remember each and every stork?" I'd ask from inside the cool hollow.

"Of course the trees remember. Like I said, they remember everything."

Just as the trees were Mama's favorite, storks were mine. I had them six months of the year. At the end of each summer the storks would leave and fly to Africa, where they'd live in warmth along the Nile for the winter. In March they would return to Poland to the nests they had left. To invite a stork to nest, families would nail a wagon wheel to the top of a tall pole. We had one in our yard. Every March we would celebrate when our stork returned to the nest. As August faded, the departure of the storks symbolized summer's end.

Six years ago, the day our stork left, Mama left too. She died giving birth to what would have been my younger brother.

My throat tightened. I swallowed, reminding myself she wasn't really gone. I felt Mama among the trees. I could feel her touch and hear her laughter in the leaves. So I talked to the trees as I walked, hoping their branches would carry messages up to Mama and let her know what I had done, and most of all, that I would try to be brave.

Related Characters: Emilia Stozek (speaker), Florian Beck

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

As a child, Emilia was soothed by her mother's stories. Now, as a young woman, she finds comfort in the memories of her mother. The past several years of Emilia's life have been incredibly difficult. Although she has yet to reveal specific details, readers understand that she has escaped an ethnic cleansing in her native country, and is now traveling without friends or family in a hostile foreign nation. It follows that Emilia would need to comfort herself, and she does so by thinking about happier times in her past. Emilia specifically focuses on the idea of the yearly return of the storks, which become a recurring symbol in her life and thoughts. Storks used to nest at her home in Poland, and she could count on their return every spring. The year her mother died, the storks departed on the exact same day, and so, storks, in Emilia's mind, are tied to the memory of her happy, unified family. The departure of the storks, by contrast, symbolizes the dissolution of her family. Now, Emilia talks to the stork-less branches of trees, searching for meaning, community, and someone who will care for her.

29. Emilia Quotes

☛ The Nazis claimed I didn't need an education. Polish schools were closed. Our desks and equipment were taken to Germany. Would a German girl open my desk and find my treasures inside?

The Nazis said the people of Poland would become serfs to the Germans. They thought we only needed to count and write our name. My father was part of the Lwów School of Mathematics. He would never agree with children not being taught reading, writing, and arithmetic. They had burned our books in the Polish language. But I had learned to read very young. They could never take that away from me.

Related Characters: Emilia Stozek (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

Emilia has been persecuted because of her Polish identity since she was a young child. She has remained strong in the face of great adversity, as demonstrated in this memory of early Nazi attacks on Polish culture. Emilia doesn't understand why she is less deserving of an education, and

doesn't believe that she is inferior to ethnic Germans. Like her father, she believes she deserves basic rights, including an education, and because of her father, is able to read—a small act of rebellion that nonetheless helps inspire her and motivate her to continue forward. Now, as a teenager, Emilia has been beaten down by years of constant discrimination and oppression, but nonetheless has the force of will to continue forward, even as the government actively works to destroy her people and her culture.

44. Joana Quotes

☛☛ We trudged on in silence. I stared down at the icy road. His breath was suddenly close. “The girl. She doesn't have papers.”
Papers.
He was right. Emilia had no identity card. I had forgotten that. Germany required all civilians to legally register and carry documentation that contained our name, photograph, nationality, race, birth, and family details. The regime then assigned identifiers on the cover of the cards. My identity card said *Resettler*, indicating that Germany had allowed me to repatriate from Lithuania. We were required to show our identification to any official or soldier who requested it. Our papers determined our fate.
I looked up at her, balanced in the bundles. She smiled and gave me a small wave.
Emilia had no papers.
No papers, no future.

Related Characters: Joana Vilkas (speaker), Emilia Stozek, Florian Beck

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

In Nazi Germany, a person's identification papers determine their future. A person with the right identification papers will be allowed entry to the country, and free passage within it. A person with the wrong papers will be detained, sent to a labor camp, or killed. If Emilia had papers, they would say she was Polish, which would guarantee imprisonment or death. Having no papers, however, is just as bad; if she cannot prove that she is a “desirable” citizen to the Nazi soldiers, they will assume she is “undesirable,” and treat her accordingly.

Joana, who has her papers, forever feels guilty that she was allowed to resettle in Germany because of her German heritage, although she feels herself to be Lithuanian. Emilia,

without her papers, and without German heritage, is doomed if the group cannot somehow outwit the guard at the checkpoint.

This moment is additionally significant because it is one of the first times Florian and Joana come together to help Emilia. Although Florian has mentioned before that he cares about her, here he is clearly concerned about her wellbeing, and worrying about her future without prompting. Although this isn't technically Florian or Joana's problem, they like and care for Emilia, and want to guarantee her safety.

46. Florian Quotes

☛☛ My father's words hung heavy on my conscience:
“Don't you see? Lange doesn't want to train you—he wants to use you, Florian.”
“You don't understand,” I had argued. “He's saving the treasures of the world.”
“Saving them? Is that what you call it? Is that how easily he's duped you? This greedy imposter fills your head with rubbish and you become a traitor?”
“I am not dishonoring Germany. Just the opposite.”
“No, son,” pleaded my father. “Not a traitor to your country. Much worse. A traitor to your soul.”
A traitor to your soul. Those were the last words my father said to me. Not because he was finished, but because I stormed out of the house and refused to listen. When I returned months later, panicked and in need of his counsel, it was too late. So now I risked everything, confronting fate and the knowledge that had authored my own demise. But only if I failed.

Related Characters: Florian Beck (speaker), Dr. Lange

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

Florian revisits memories of his last conversation with his father. Florian had loved his mentor, Dr. Lange, and his love was so all-encompassing that he was unable to see that Dr. Lange was a heartless Nazi, and that all the art Florian was tasked to work with was stolen by the Nazi party to enrich itself. Although now Florian is solitary and distrustful, slow to form connections with his fellow refugees, this memory shows that he was once much more open. His respect for Dr. Lange eclipsed his own morals, as well as his relationship with his father. It was only when Florian found a stack of letters he had sent Dr. Lange unopened that he realized that Dr. Lange didn't care about him at all. At this point, Florian

was finally able to break free.

Although at the time Florian ignored his father's advice, he has internalized it since. The distinction between being a traitor to one's country versus being a traitor to one's soul or one's family is significant. Florian had assumed his father valued the allegiance to Prussia or Germany above all else, and looked to them as moral authorities. In fact, Florian's father could see what Florian could not: that the Nazi party was in no way acting morally or ethically, and therefore the only way forward was to develop one's own internal compass, and to look internally for what is right or wrong. Now, Florian follows his own internal compass, but also looks to the memory of his father to guide him forwards.

47. Joana Quotes

☛☛ The bombing propelled everyone forward at a quicker pace, anxious to reach Frauenburg and possible shelter. I didn't want to move forward. I needed to go back, to help the injured. But they would not allow it.

"What good will you be, my dear, if you are injured?" said the shoe poet. "You must preserve yourself in order to help others." Poet didn't know the truth. I had already preserved myself. I had left Lithuania and those I loved behind.

To die.

Related Characters: Joana Vilkas (speaker), Heinz, "The Shoe Poet"

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

Joana has an incredible amount of survivor's guilt, which affects her life in several ways. Primarily, she channels her guilt into a need to help other people. Most frequently she is able to use her training as a nurse to help injured people she meets on the road. Even when her medical training cannot help her, Joana is always solving problems. When she realizes Emilia doesn't have papers, or when she is trying to get Ingrid past a checkpoint, she creatively schemes and figures out new, innovative ways to help her friends.

In this moment, she wants to help those people injured by the bomb blast, even though there is still enemy fire raining down and she is still in danger. Her friends care about her, and see that it is not worth it for her to injure herself to help other people, in which case she would no longer be able to help. Joana, blinded by her guilt, feels that her life is a fair sacrifice to make in service of a greater cause, liking helping

others. When she left Lithuania, Joana left some of her family members behind to be captured by Soviet forces. As a result of her lucky escape, Joana feels that she has had her opportunity to save herself, but should never value her own life above another's again.

60. Florian Quotes

☛☛ It could have been so easy. I could have walked across the ice myself, without the burden of the group. They could have tried to save the blind girl. Maybe they all would have drowned in the process. That would have been so much easier.

And so much harder.

"Bitte."

The word was so quiet, I wasn't even sure I had heard it. I liked down at the Polish girl. She wore red lipstick. Her blonde hair was released from the captivity of her braids. She pulled her pink hat down over her eyes. "Bitte," she whispered again.

"Please."

Related Characters: Florian Beck (speaker), Ingrid, Joana Vilkas, Emilia Stozek

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

Florian has used his falsified papers to trick the German soldiers at the checkpoint into helping him. Because they believe him to be on an important mission for the Nazi Party, they offer to provide him a boat to take him to his next destination. As Florian prepares to board the boat, he thinks back to the previous day, when, instead of crossing a frozen body of water alone, he had walked behind Joana, Emilia, and others, rescuing Joana when she tried to dive after Ingrid (who had fallen through the ice). After claiming that he was a lone wolf, who was not invested in the wellbeing of others, his clear interest in Joana's wellbeing suggests he is not as selfish as he has suggested.

In this moment, when Florian considers how easy it would have been to cross the ice alone, and how easy it would be to take a German boat unburdened by his new friends, he also acknowledges that he has formed emotional connections with his fellow refugees over the past few days. He has a relationship with Joana, Emilia, and the others, and cares about their wellbeing. He knows that, although he would travel more swiftly, and more inconspicuously alone, he cares too much about these new friends to leave them behind.

62. Emilia Quotes

☛☛ Father constantly worried about me. He cried when he told me that he was sending me away to the Kleists' farm in East Prussia for safety. I wanted to cry too. I wanted to scream and refuse. But it hurt so much to see him sad, losing all that he loved. So I assured him that he was right, it was for the best, and that I was not upset. I told him that we would see each other in a couple of year, when the war of winter turned to spring.

I became good at pretending. I became so good that after a while the lines blurred between my truth and fiction. And sometimes, when I did a really good job of pretending, I even fooled myself.

Related Characters: Emilia Stozek (speaker), Florian Beck, Michael Kleist, Erna Kleist, August Kleist

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

Emilia witnessed the beginning of ethnic cleansing in Poland, but was luckily saved by her father, who sent her to live with family friends in East Prussia. Although Emilia has not clarified what has happened yet, she has hinted that something horrible happened to her between the time she arrived at the farm and the moment she was saved by Florian in the woods. Emilia has told her fellow travelers a story about her time on the farm, and about her pregnancy. She has claimed that August, the son of the family who took her in, fathered her child, and she has said she is going to meet him. However, this moment calls into question the truthfulness of her story. As she will reveal in later chapters, aspects of her story have been fabricated to cover up the horrible truth that her unborn child is the product of her rape by Soviet soldiers. These fabrications seem at first to be a way of preventing her new friends from seeing her negatively or judging her, but they are also a way for Emilia to protect herself from traumatic memories of the past.

66. Emilia Quotes

☛☛ Joana still had her mother. Reuniting with her mother was her motivation. She would slay dragons to get to her. Mother was anchor. Mother was comfort. Mother was home. A girl who lost her mother was suddenly a tiny boat on an angry ocean. Some boats eventually floated ashore. And some boats, like me, seemed to float farther and farther from land.

I forced my mind toward happy thoughts—August, warmth, storks, home—anything to distract myself from the swelling pressure inside me. I walked with the others in search of the movie house. With each step, the truth drew closer. I could not make it much longer.

Related Characters: Emilia Stozek (speaker), Joana Vilkas

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

Families motivate different individuals in different ways. Many members of Joana's family are still alive, and so she is driven by a desire to reunite with them. In contrast, Emilia's family has all died, and so while she continues to soldier on, she feels she has nothing to look forward to because she has no relatives to welcome her with open arms.

Emilia sees a mother as an "anchor," a source of "comfort," a "home." Joana, separated from her family, feels pulled to them. In this way, she has a reason to live and a reason to continue with her journey. Emilia feels that, without a mother, she has no true home. She hopes she will be able to continue on, but feels that, without the pull of a mother, she could just as easily lose herself, metaphorically, and her life, literally.

73. Joana Quotes

“Why are you so nervous?” said Eva. “You know you’re getting on a boat. You told me you’ve got a letter.”

“Shh.” I looked behind me to see if anyone was near. “I don’t want the others to know.”

“Why the secrecy?” whispered Eva.

“I don’t want them to think I’ll have preferential treatment or opportunity.”

“It’s a letter from the doctor in Insterburg saying you’re good at dealing with blood and guts, Joana. I’m sorry, but I don’t call that an opportunity,” she said.

“The whole thing’s unfair, Eva. You know that. Hitler allowed me into Germany. He thinks some Baltic people are ‘Germanizable.’ But for every person like me that Hitler brought in, he pushed some poor soul, like Emilia, out.”

“Do you think you have time to be moral?” snapped Eva. “The Russians are right around the corner. If you wait, they’ll be under your skirt and you’ll be dead. Sorry, but don’t waste your time with some goodwill gesture for a lost Polish kid. Get in line and get on a boat. It’s been nice to trek with everyone, but now we’re here. I don’t need a group. I need my belongings and I need a ship.”

Related Characters: Joana Vilkas (speaker), Emilia Stozek

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

Joana often feels guilty when she perceives she is receiving special treatment. However, in this case, as Eva points out, Joana is not receiving special treatment. Instead she is receiving fair compensation for her labor. A trained nurse, Joana plans to volunteer to help care for wounded soldiers boarding the Wilhelm Gustloff. In return, she expects to be guaranteed a place on the ship. Because Joana feels she was unfairly saved from Lithuania while her cousin and extended family were captured, she is sensitive to other perceived injustices, and bristles when she feels her life is being prized above the lives of other people.

Eva, in contrast, has never thought this way. Eva cares only about herself. She doesn’t care what is “fair,” instead, she cares only that she and her belongings survive their evacuation. Although many of the refugees have become closer after their shared journey, Eva explicitly states that she doesn’t “need a group,” she only needs her “belongings and [...] a ship.” Even after spending time with people who have grown to call her their friend, Eva’s number one priority is herself and her safety.

103. Emilia Quotes

Everything hurt. My strength dissolved into exhaustion.

Wasn’t a person supposed to feel better after telling the truth? Perhaps there was no peace because Joana hadn’t understood or hadn’t heard me. Was it enough to admit the lie to yourself and the heavens, or did you have to tell someone who listened? For months I had done so well. Most days I actually believed my own story. Yes, August Kleist existed. He visited the farm for a while during my stay. He carried wood for me, climbed the ladder so I didn’t have to, shared his plums, and defended me in front of his mother. He did it all because he was a kind person. But I didn’t exist for him the way he existed for me. He left before it happened.

Related Characters: Emilia Stozek (speaker), Eva, Joana Vilkas, Erna Kleist, August Kleist

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 238

Explanation and Analysis

For the duration of the novel, Emilia has lied, telling Joana and her friends that her pregnancy is the result of a consensual relationship with her lover, August Kleist. Although she hinted that she created a fantasy to obscure some part of her history, this is the first moment in which she explicitly reveals that August was not the father of her child. Instead, she implies that her child was instead the product of a rape that occurred during the massacre at Nemmersdorf (which is how Joana and Eva initially assumed Emilia had gotten pregnant).

Emilia concealed the nature of her pregnancy for two reasons. First, her fantasy allowed her to better cope with the trauma. If she acknowledged her trauma—with herself or with others—she would be overcome with grief and shame, unable to carry on. Additionally, Emilia worried that people would judge her for her rape. She feels it is shameful, and so worries that other people will see it as shameful too. Because of this, she uses a fantasy which she hopes people will more readily condone.

112. Emilia Quotes

☛☛ [Florian] looked from the baby to me and then back to the baby.

“Hmm. Your eyes. Your nose. Pretty,” he said. He put his lips against the top of the baby’s head and closed his eyes. He looked beautiful. Joana stared at the knight. She thought he was beautiful too.

He opened his eyes and whispered to me. “Kind of incredible. She is you, she is your mother, your father, your country.” He kissed her head and leaned down to whisper in my ear.

“She is Poland.”

My arms lifted and reached for the child.

Related Characters: Florian Beck, Emilia Stozek (speaker), Halinka

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 261

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter 66, Emilia commented that to have a mother was to have an “anchor,” a source of “comfort,” and a “home.” In contrast, “a girl who lost her mother was suddenly a tiny boat on an angry ocean.” Emilia has been unable to see herself as a mother to her baby daughter, and has been unable to see the ways in which she could be an anchor, comfort, and home to her daughter.

Because her daughter was the result of rape, and because Emilia didn’t expect to survive the pregnancy, she has difficulty accepting the child as her responsibility or part of her family. However, in this moment, Florian frames her daughter as part of her legacy. The baby not only looks like Emilia, but carries within her the genetic memories of her country, and of Emilia’s extended, but deceased, family. By seeing her daughter as a symbol of Poland’s future, Emilia is better able to love and accept her.

116. Emilia Quotes

☛☛ She should know Poland. Looking at the child, I suddenly became hungry for my country, for its fat bees carrying nectar from apple flowers and for the birds singing in clusters of hazel.

How would she know the truths from the untruths? Would she believe that Poles, Jews, Ukrainians, Armenians, and Hungarians had all coexisted peacefully in Lwów before the war? That I often made tea and doughnuts with Rachel and Helen in our kitchen?

Food. I wanted her to know our food. How my hands missed the feel of dough dusted with flour. My ears missed the snap of apple pancakes in the pan and my eyes missed the rainbow of fruits and vegetables sealed in jars on the shelves. War had bled color from everything, leaving nothing but a storm of gray.

I wanted her to know not only Poland, but *my* Poland.

I pulled her close and whispered in Polish: “There were no ghettos, no armbands. I often fell asleep to a breeze floating through my open window. It’s true. It was like that once.”

Related Characters: Emilia Stozek (speaker), Florian Beck, Halinka

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 268

Explanation and Analysis

When Halinka was first born, Emilia was unwilling to acknowledge the baby girl. The shame of her rape, combined with her belief that she would die in childbirth, meant that Emilia felt unprepared to be a mother, and didn’t see the child as her responsibility, or even as her flesh and blood. Emilia only accepts Halinka as her own after Florian comes to her bedside in Chapter 112 and exclaims, “Kind of incredible. She is you, she is your mother, your father, your country.”

Now that Emilia sees Halinka as part of her, and part of her family’s legacy, she is excited to share her Polish identity with her daughter. Emilia suddenly has something, and someone to live for. She wants to teach Halinka about how the world was before the war—a world which Emilia experienced as peaceful and happy, her family and her nation unified.

This is also one of the few moments where Emilia expresses pride in her Polish heritage. Oppressed by the Nazi Party for so long, Emilia has internalized much of their hatred and bigotry, and although she never makes disparaging statements about herself, her acceptance of her unfair treatment demonstrated a kind of acceptance of her oppression. Now, however, presented with the opportunity to share her family’s history and culture, she is once again

proud of who she is and where she came from.

131. Emilia Quotes

☝ I hadn't planned for this. I was certain the birthing would kill both of us, just as it had Mama. Yet somehow, after five cruel winters of war, I was still alive. I adjusted the baby in my arms. What was happening? Could I have been wrong about the sign?

I had received the sign six years ago. It was Saint John's Night, the longest day of the year. Mama loved Saint John's celebration—a night of bonfires, singing, and dancing. The tradition called for girls to make wreaths of flowers and candles. At dark, they would light the candles and send their wreaths floating down the river. Legend said that the boy who retrieved your wreath downstream was the boy you would marry. The year Mama died, the older girls let me make a wreath of flowers and candles with them. I chose all of Mama's favorites—hibiscus, roses, poppies, and dried herbs.

After setting the wreaths to the water, the girls danced around the bonfire. I decided to follow my pretty wreath. I padded barefoot in the grass along the river, watching the flowers and candles turning slowly in the water. I walked quite far. My wreath suddenly bounced, catching on something beneath the surface. I stopped in the center of the river. One of the candles tipped onto the flowers. The herbs caught on fire.

I sat in the grass and watched my wreath burn and sink, quietly sealing my fate.

I had expected everything to end. But now, I began to think that maybe the sign had been wrong. I had fought so hard to overcome so much. Something changed when the knight arrived. Maybe he truly saved me, had pulled my burning wreath from the water. After all, in Poland, Saint Florian was fighter of fire.

For the first time in years, people cared for me. Protected me.

Related Characters: Emilia Stozek (speaker), Florian Beck, Halinka

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 300

Explanation and Analysis

Emilia often makes statements about how she thinks death is in her immediate future. Here, she gives a sense of where this superstition originated. As a child, Emilia watched a wreath (which she believed symbolized her chances at happiness in life and in marriage) catch fire and sink. She

saw this as a sign that her life would be cut short. She suspected she would never marry, and that she would die young, or, if she became pregnant, that she would die in childbirth like her mother. However, Emilia has now given birth to a healthy baby and wonders if she was paranoid to believe the wreath held some kind of symbolic meaning about her future.

Florian's arrival in her life has also brought her hope. As she's been saying throughout the novel, she sees Florian as her knight and protector. He was the first person to look out for her and care for her since her rape, and the first person to truly protect her since her father left her on the Kleist family's farm. The sinking of the wreath made Emilia think she would never find another person who could love her—especially not a man. However, even though her relationship with Florian is platonic, the fact that she feels loved and cared for causes Emilia to believe her curse is broken and helps give her the will to live.

170. Florian Quotes

☝ A young girl kicked and shrieked in the water next to our lifeboat.

I removed my life vest and threw it to her. "Grab my hand," I told her.

"No!" yelled a woman in our boat. "She'll turn us over!"

I stood and leaned over the side. Our lifeboat tipped toward the water. Everybody screamed. I reached down and grabbed the girl by her hair. She gripped my arm and I pulled her into the boat. She full, soaked and exhausted at our feet.

A woman in a fur coat yelled at me. "You had no right! You're endangering everyone!"

"Shut up!" I roared. My body shook with anger. "Do you hear me? Shut up!" Everyone fell quiet. The wandering boy hid his crying face in the crook of his arm. Joana reached up to me.

Related Characters: Florian Beck (speaker), Joana Vilkas

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 346

Explanation and Analysis

After the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, Florian, Joana, Klaus, and Halinka wait on a raft to be rescued. All around them in the ocean float passengers who were not lucky enough to obtain a spot on a lifeboat—some alive, some dead. Florian, looking around his lifeboat and realizing there is extra space, feels it is unfair that he gets to live while other people in the water must die, especially if he can simply pull them to safety.

Other people in the lifeboat see their lives as more important than anyone else's. They feel that the risk of the boat capsizing as Florian rescues the girl in the water is not worth it. They would rather let others die than risk their own lives. Florian, in contrast, has determined that his own life is worth that of a stranger. This is a stark contrast from who Florian was at the beginning of the book, where he was intensely focused on himself and his own mission. Now, he has grown kind, empathetic, and selfless.

175. Joana Quotes

☝☝ "One more."

That's what the sailor had said.

Most would have fought to be "the one." They would have insisted they ought to be "the one." But Emilia had pushed the wandering boy into the boat, sacrificing herself for another. Where was she now? Had she gotten into a boat? I thought of frightened yet brave Emilia, and I started to cry.

I wanted my mother. My mother loved Lithuania. She loved her family. The war had torn every last love from her life. Would she have to learn the grotesque details of our suffering? Would news make it to my hometown of Biržai, to the dark bunker in the woods where my brother and father were thought to be hiding?

Joana Vilkas, your daughter, your sister. She is salt to the sea.

Related Characters: Joana Vilkas (speaker), Florian Beck, Klaus "The Wandering Boy", Halinka, Emilia Stozek

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 357

Explanation and Analysis

Joana, Klaus, Florian and Halinka have all managed to escape the sinking ship and board a life raft. Although Joana is happy to be alive, and happy that some of her friends survived, she is having difficulty processing Emilia's sacrifice. Instead of taking the final spot on the life raft and being reunited with her daughter, who had already boarded, Emilia pushed Klaus to safety. After a long war, during which Joana observed many people acting selfishly and trying only to preserve their own lives, Joana was awed by this act of sacrifice. Additionally, as a woman who has survived against all odds, Joana likely feels guilty that, once again, she made it to safety, while those she loved were left behind.

This is the only passage in the novel to contain the novel's title. "Salt to the sea" suggests that Joana, lost among thousands of other refugees, drifting in the ocean, is simply

one life among many—inconsequential, unimportant.

176. Alfred Quotes

☝☝ *Hitler, he understands my theories. And I, his. Protection of the sick, weak, and inferior is not sensible. That is why I told the Hitler Youth boys about your Jewish father. Do you understand that I was trying to help, Lor? Your mother is not Jewish. I thought surely you would have had sense enough to tell the officers that your mother was a gentile, that you would have aligned yourself to the greater being inside of you.*

But you decided otherwise.

And now, years later I am still confused by our final conversation.

Do you remember it? I remember it so clearly. I ran out onto the sidewalk as they were taking you away. I told them that half of you was the master race. You stopped in your tracks and whirled to face me.

"No," you yelled. And then you screamed so very loud.

"I am Jewish!"

Your words echoed between the buildings and bounced down the street.

"I am Jewish!"

I am certain everyone heard your proclamation. It almost sounded like pride. And for some reason those words are now caught, like a hair, in the drain of my mind.

"I am Jewish!"

Related Characters: Alfred Frick (speaker), Hannelore Jäger

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 358

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the novel, Alfred has been writing letters to Hannelore. Although primarily composed of fantasy versions of his days, towards the end of the book his letters become less fantastical. Instead, they become a way for him to explore his troubling memories of the past. Here, finally, the most troubling memory is revealed.

Alfred was in love with Hannelore, and continues to be in love with Hannelore, but after she rejected him, he told the Hitler Youth that her father was Jewish. When the Nazis came to take Hannelore's father away, they took Hannelore as well because she had Jewish blood. Alfred assumed Hannelore would denounce her father and deny her own Judaism to save her life. Alfred assumed this because, as a selfish and self-involved person, this is what he would have done. His lack of empathy for others is so great that he

cannot imagine that anyone would have a connection to another person so strong that they would put their own lives in danger. Even though this moment was shocking for Alfred, he seems to have learned nothing from it. Although it comes at the end of the novel, chronologically this scene took place before the book began. Throughout, Alfred has remained selfish and cruel, except when he thought a relationship could be manipulated to his advantage.

183. Florian Quotes

☝☝ So, dear one, I have grown old now and my Niels is gone. Receiving your kind letter brought such peace to my heart, knowing that you, Joana, Klaus, and Halinka are together in America along with a child of your own. I do understand how you have struggled for this new life. The sinking of the Gusloff is the largest maritime disaster, yet the world still knows nothing of it. I often wonder, will that ever change or will it remain just another secret swallowed by war? You wrote that Emilia was your savior and that she is ever on your mind. Please do know, Florian, that she is ever in my heart as well. War is catastrophe. It breaks families in irretrievable pieces. But those who are gone are not necessarily lost. Near our cottage, where the small creek winds under the old wooden bridge, is the most beautiful bed of roses. And there Emilia rests. She is safe. She is loved.

Related Characters: Clara Christensen (speaker), Emilia Stozek, Florian Beck

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 378

Explanation and Analysis

The last chapter of the book takes place 24 years after the other events of the novel. Clara Christensen, a Danish woman, found Emilia's body washed up on the shore of her property in February of 1945, a few weeks after the Wilhelm Gustloff sank. Since then, she has wondered about the identity of the body, but only realized who Emilia was when she read about Emilia's daughter, Halinka, in the newspaper. Clara then wrote to Florian, who wrote back, and now Clara is writing a second letter in response.

In her letter, Clara references details from Florian's correspondence about his life. He and Joana have made a family together. Although likely separated from any relatives who remained in East Germany or the Soviet Union after the war, together they were able to build a new family—including Halinka, Klaus, and their own biological child.

Emilia often thought of Florian as her savior, but in the end, she herself demonstrated great strength and self-sacrifice, saving others and demonstrating that she no longer needed other people's help or support. Because of this—and because of her kindness and the friendship she and Florian developed—he misses her, and thinks of her often. This is the price of survival: living with grief over those who were left behind.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

1. JOANA

Joana believes “guilt is a hunter.” She is haunted by her conscience, which tells her, “It’s all your fault.”

Joana is traveling with a group of refugees fleeing north through East Prussia to the Baltic Sea. Her traveling companions include the Poet, Eva, and Ingrid. Evacuation orders have not technically been issued, and so the group would be branded deserters for fleeing. Joana has been a deserter for four years, since fleeing her native Lithuania in 1941.

The group comes across a small boy (whose name will later be revealed to be Klaus) whose grandmother died in the woods the night before. Dazed by the death of only companion, he walks with the group until he spots a frozen woman who has died by the side of the road. Joana checks her pockets for useful goods, and takes the woman’s identification papers to give to the Red Cross. As they resume walking, the group hears a gunshot.

2. FLORIAN

Florian’s chapter begins with a variation of the same phrase that begins the other of the first four chapters: “Fate is a hunter.”

Florian hears the German helicopters above him. Although he is in pain from a shrapnel injury in his side, he wills himself to continue forward. He remembers his mother telling him he’s talented, and his father reminding him “You are Prussian. Make your own decisions, son.” He wonders if his parents would approve of him now that he carries a secret with him.

Each of the four central characters begins their introductory chapter alluding to the force they feel controls or “hunts” them. Joana believes that guilt is a hunter because she is consumed by guilt at having allowed some of her family members to be captured and imprisoned by the Soviet military.



This book takes place in the last months of WWII, in January of 1945. Allied forces are closing in on German holdings in central and eastern Europe, and civilians are in danger as they must choose between punishment from the Nazis for disobeying orders, or death at the hands of the advancing Soviet Army. Many civilians have chosen to protect their own lives as opposed to listen to their government.



Separated from their relatives, the refugees have gathered together to create a new family out of necessity. This has allowed them to survive longer than they may have been able to otherwise. This is especially true for the very young, like Klaus, the very old, like the Poet, and those with disabilities, like Ingrid.



Although he doesn’t specifically reveal the details of his curse until later in the novel, Florian believes that he is doomed, and that only bad things will happen to him and those associated with him.



Although Prussia was part of the German Empire, and later part of Nazi Germany, ethnic Prussians felt themselves to be culturally separate from Germany, and did not unilaterally support the Nazi regime. Florian speaks German and looks German, but feels his identity is distinctly separate.



Florian knows that if he is captured by the Soviets he will be killed and tortured. He knows the Nazis, if they uncover his secret, will also kill him. This fear motivates him to continue on. He finds a potato cellar in the woods and jumps inside. This chapter, like the other four, ends with the “Bang” of a gunshot.

Caught between two regimes, Florian’s life is in danger. He has no true allies to whom he can turn for comfort, and instead must rely upon his memories of his family for strength.



3. EMILIA

Emilia’s chapter begins with a variation of the same phrase that begins the other of the first four chapters: “Shame is a hunter.”

The survivor of multiple atrocities—chief among them, readers will later discover, is her rape at the hands of Soviet soldiers—Emilia unnecessarily feels shame because of the horrors that have been committed against her.



Cold and exhausted, Emilia hides in a potato cellar. Frozen by the January cold, she closes her eyes and thinks of August.

In the text, the word August seems to refer to the month, however, later in the novel Emilia reveals that August is a family friend. However, like the idea of a summer month, his memory of this friend provides her with emotional warmth and comfort.



A Russian soldier interrupts Emilia’s rest. He asks her how old she is. She tells him she’s fifteen. She tries to explain she isn’t German, but he points his gun at her anyway and begins to pull her towards him. She puts her hands across her stomach and asks him to shoot her rather than rape her, as she fears he intends to do. This chapter, like chapters 1, 2, and 4, ends with the “Bang” of a gunshot.

The book repeatedly highlights the ways in which individuals’ ethnicities and nationalities affect how others treat them. Emilia, for instance, assumes the Russian soldier wants to hurt her because he thinks she is German, and therefore his enemy. However, she is Polish, and although this does not technically make her a Soviet ally, it means she and the soldier share an enemy in Nazi Germany.



4. ALFRED

Alfred’s chapter begins with a variation of the same phrase that begins the other of the first four chapters: “Fear is a hunter.”

Alfred is motivated by his own insecurity, and a fear that he is not important and special. Sepetys suggests that this is why he is so committed to the Nazis and to Hitler; according to their hierarchy, he is superior simply by virtue of his race.



Alfred’s chapter takes the form of a letter addressed to a woman, Hannelore, who seems to be his lover back home. He mentally composes these letters throughout the novel, but never writes them down or sends them. A sailor fighting for Germany, Alfred tells Hannelore about his bravery, about his military accomplishments, his dangerous job, and his recent rescue of a beautiful young woman. He tells Hannelore he remembers her well and thinks of her often.

Alfred spends much of the novel inside his own fantasies. These letters to Hannelore, which he never transcribes and never sends, portray a fictionalized version of his life. In it, he is important and valued. He is everything that he is not in real life, and he has everything that he so deeply desires, including love and respect.



Alfred ends the letter by telling Hannelore and that he is doing exceptionally well, and might soon receive an honor for his service. He believes “There is indeed a hero inside of me.”

Another aspect of Alfred’s fantasy involves the idea that he is completing a hero’s journey. In this fantasy, he is the protagonist of an epic adventure, waiting for a chance to prove his heroism.



When the letter ends, Alfred is revealed to be crouching inside a supply closet, hiding from his duties.

Alfred’s fantasies contrast starkly with his real life, where he is a low-ranking grunt with few responsibilities, little respect, and even less courage.



5. FLORIAN

The chapter opens in the moments after Florian has shot the Russian soldier who tried to attack Emilia. Florian goes through the man’s pockets, taking cigarettes, food, and gun. The Russian has watches taken as trophies, which Florian leaves. Florian puts his pilfered goods in his pack. Also in his pack is a mysterious small box. He wonders, “How could something so small hold such power?” He continues, “Was I really willing to die for it?”

Florian clearly feels some compassion for Emilia, even though he ignores her after he saves her. His disregard for the Soviet’s watches reveals that he is not interested in the spoils of war, he is only interested in survival. Florian believes the box, whose contents are revealed later in the novel, carries a curse, which has ensured he will have bad luck on his journey.



Florian prepares to leave, but pauses when Emilia sits up from where she had collapsed on the ground. Florian points his gun at her, but hesitates when she speaks to him in Polish.

Nazi Germany has declared all ethnically Polish people to be “undesirable,” so anyone aligned with the Nazis would be more likely to shoot Emilia after discovering her Polish identity. Florian’s allegiances remain a mystery to the reader, but his hesitation reveals a certain amount of sympathy for oppressed groups.



6. EMILIA

Emilia takes a moment to process what has happened. She realizes Florian has killed the Russian, and probably won’t kill her. She asks him, in Polish, if he is okay, but observes, “his face twisted at the sound of my words.” She assumes he is German, and like all Germans will look down on her as a Pole, as Hitler had declared, “Polish people were subhuman.” Emilia tries to speak to Florian in German, and offers him a potato to thank him for saving her life. Although he does not take it, she can tell that he is hungry, injured, and protective of something secret in his backpack.

Emilia has begun to internalize the Nazi proclamation that “Polish people were subhuman.” She holds on to hope that she will find people sympathetic to her, but is unsurprised that this man who looks German (but the reader knows is Prussian) would hate her based on her nationality and ancestry. By speaking in German, Emilia hopes to gain Florian’s sympathy.



7. JOANA

Joana walks with a group of fifteen refugees. This group includes Ingrid, who is blind, and an old shoemaker whom she calls the Shoe Poet.

The Poet observes that the dead woman frozen on the side of the road died because of her shoes. He believes “the **shoes** always tell the story.” Joana disagrees, but the Poet looks at her feet and correctly infers that she came from a wealthy family, but the shoes belonged to her mother, who loved her and sacrificed for her.

Joana wonders if Ingrid is in fact lucky to be blind, since it saves her from seeing the atrocities of war. However, Ingrid’s other senses are heightened, and as they are walking she notices the sounds of airplanes before anyone else.

The ragtag group of refugees who did not know each other before they began their evacuation has grown closer because of their shared journey.



The refugees share skills and expertise with each other. In this instance, the Poet can deduce personal information about others based on their footwear. The quality of a shoe, its style, and its age all provide insights into a person’s life. In Joana’s case, her shoes symbolize the memory of her mother, which at once supports her and drives her forward.



Although Ingrid is blind, and has therefore been marked for death by the Nazi regime, her blindness is often an asset. Here, it allows her to focus more acutely on her sense of hearing.



8. FLORIAN

Florian leaves the cellar and Emilia follows him, crying. He knows that Hitler has occupied Poland, killing millions of ethnic Poles and Polish Jews. Florian and his father both agreed that Hitler was a coward, but he still has little sympathy for Emilia and whatever trauma she has endured.

As Florian walks away, Emilia begins to cry. This reminds him of his little sister, Anni. He doesn’t know where she is, and imagines she, too, is alone and frightened. This thought, combined with the pain of his shrapnel wound, causes him to pause. Emilia takes this moment to catch up with him. Emilia hears the sound of planes above them. Bombs begin to fall, and anti-aircraft guns fire. Florian tries to push Emilia away but she drags him forward. He sees that she is bleeding and feels obligated to stay with her.

Although Florian does not believe that ethnic Poles are inherently inferior to Baltic or Aryan Germans, he is uninterested in Emilia’s struggle because he is focused on his own journey.



Florian is unmoved by what he assumes is Emilia’s tragic backstory—narrowly escaping the Nazi’s ethnic cleansing of Poland—but the memory of his own little sister and the horrors she might currently be enduring forces him to feel momentary empathy for Emilia.



9. EMILIA

Emilia can tell that Florian wants to leave. She observes, “His race was his own.”

Emilia misinterprets Florian’s reluctance to walk with her as Nazi racism and bigotry when in fact he is worried that she will slow him down.



Emilia doesn't know Florian's name, but she imagines he is "a sleeping knight" out of Polish folklore, in which knights slept in the mountains, but "if Poland was in distress, the knights would awaken and come to the rescue."

This is the beginning of one of Emilia's multiple fantasies. After many months alone and uncared for, Emilia takes comfort in the idea that Florian is a knight who exists specifically to protect Polish people like herself.



Florian runs away from Emilia and the military planes overhead. She chases after him as she wonders, "Why did everyone leave me?" Emilia feels like a duck moving through the snow. This reminds her of a nursery rhyme her mother used to sing to her about "All the little duckies with their heads in the water." She wonders "where were all the duckies now?"

Emilia returns to this nursery rhyme frequently throughout the novel. It reminds her of her mother and comforts her. It is also slightly ominous. When Emilia wonders "where were all the duckies now?" she seems to be referring to her childhood friends, her loved ones, and her own youthful innocence.



10. ALFRED

Alfred is criticized by a superior for hiding in a supply closet instead of following his work assignment. He is ordered to travel to the port to help load ships for evacuation, as the Soviet forces as well as American and English troops have closed in on the city of Gotenhafen, and villagers from the whole region are traveling north to the sea to escape the fighting.

Although Alfred's job requires him to complete various tasks, and although he presents himself as a hero in his letters to Hannelore, in reality, Alfred is an ineffective, unproductive soldier, less interested in serving Germany than he is in making his own life more comfortable.



The officer ordering Alfred around calls him a "pathetic slug" when he doesn't move quickly enough. Alfred immediately begins to compose another letter to Hannelore in his mind, telling her how good he looks in his uniform, and how he will soon be promoted.

This passage juxtaposes Alfred's real life, where he is not valued or respected, with the fantasy world he presents to Hannelore, where he is highly regarded by his peers and superiors.



11. JOANA

The refugees stop for the night in a deserted barn. Joana, a nurse, does her best to treat the wounded, but she notes, "I had no treatment for what plagued people the most. Fear." For the past four years both the Soviet and German forces have "committed unspeakable atrocities, not only against each other, but against innocent civilians." The Soviets targeted the people of Poland, Ukraine, and the Baltic region, whereas Hitler rounded up a growing list of those he deemed "undesirable."

Joana, haunted by her own secret guilt, does her best to ease the suffering of others. She understands that war causes suffering to all people, however a person's racial, ethnic, or religious background affects which armies an individual must fear the most.



Joana thinks back to her training as a nurse. Medicine had been her dream, and she continues to use her expertise to help those she can. As she thinks she looks up to see Florian and Emilia enter the barn.

Joana's compulsion to help others is partially motivated by her survivor's guilt. As someone who has managed to escape tragedy, she feels it is her duty to help others stricken by tragedy.



12. FLORIAN

Florian is unhappy that the barn is not abandoned, but he decides to stop there anyway. Joana comes over and asks him about Emilia and if he has any food. Florian brushes her off. He plans to keep to himself; he believes he will be safer that way.

Florian notices that Joana's German is "fluent, but not native." He also notices that she's very pretty. Still, he reminds himself that he needs to be "able to kill her, kill them all, if I had to."

As Florian tries to go to sleep, Joana comes back to point out that Emilia is Polish, and that Florian did not share this. She also tells him she knows what he is hiding.

Although many refugees have banded together to form a community, Florian selfishly believes that he is safer alone.



Although not a Nazi, Florian is attuned to the nationalities of the various soldiers and civilians he meets on the road. Immediately attracted to Joana, Florian must fight his impulse to form any kind of connection with her so he can continue his journey unburdened by obligations to other people.



When Joana notes Florian's secret, she is probably talking about his wound, but there is a double meaning, as he worries she might be talking about the secret parcel in his pack.



13. EMILIA

Sitting in the barn, Emilia thinks back to before the war, when her mother was pregnant with her younger sibling. Emilia's mother had been certain she was going to have a son. Emilia notices many of the refugees have their possessions with them, but Emilia left her home with no time to pack.

Joana comes over to Emilia to check on her. Joana can tell something is wrong, but Emilia refuses to be examined. Joana notices Emilia's accent, and Emilia offers her a potato in exchange for her silence.

Emilia's mother's premonition turned out to be correct. Memories of Emilia's family in happier times comfort her, and make the present moment marginally more bearable. While other people have belongings that connect them to their homes or loved ones, Emilia carries nothing but her memories.



Emilia constantly worries that the discovery of her Polish identity will turn her fellow refugees against her.



14. JOANA

Florian and Emilia make Joana nervous. She knows Eva speaks a little Polish and so asks her to talk to Emilia. Both Joana and Eva are suspicious of Florian, who is the right age to be in the army but is wearing civilian clothes. Joana makes the rounds, tending to the wounded. The Poet encourages her to "Make sure to treat their **feet** or all is lost."

Although more open-minded than many of her fellow travelers, Joana nonetheless privileges the wellbeing of those she knows over the wellbeing of strangers. Still, she feels obligated to treat the wounded regardless of her suspicion.



Eva reports back that Emilia has no papers but is Polish, and that she grew up in Lwów (a region of Poland in which people are sometimes blonde and blue-eyed like Emilia, which might have protected her from the Nazis). However, Emilia was sent to Nemmersdorf, which Soviet forces massacred just under a year ago. Eva and Joana wonder what kind of horrors Emilia has seen or experienced.

Joana feels pity for Emilia, and understands that the extermination of Polish girls is “to make room for ‘Baltic Germans,’” like Joana. Eva thinks that Emilia is a threat to the group because she is Polish. Joana pushes back that she herself is only half German on her mother’s side, and that she is “sick of hearing the phrase German Only.” She insists they help Emilia. Furthermore, Emilia reminds Joana of someone. This causes Joana to think to herself, “it’s all your fault.”

15. FLORIAN

After everyone else has fallen asleep Joana comes back to talk to Florian. He agrees to let her see his shrapnel wound. Emilia also comes over to help, and Florian tells her to go away, but Joana asks her to look outside for a stick for Florian to bite. Joana tells Florian that Emilia came from Nemmersdorf, and he immediately understands.

Joana introduces herself as a Lithuanian physician’s assistant. This is not a problem for Florian, who says, “I don’t care what you are.” She asks him for his name but he does not give it.

As Florian closes his eyes and waits for Joana to begin to operate he thinks to himself, “I’ll be dead soon.”

16. EMILIA

Emilia isn’t sure if she trusts Joana, but decides to stand watch as she performs surgery, as Emilia feels she owes Florian (whom she calls “the knight”) a debt for saving her life.

At this point in the war, a person’s papers are essential to their safety and survival. German checkpoints along the road require individuals to show their papers. If a person is designated as undesirable, they will be arrested or killed. In this way, the absence of papers, or the wrong information on a person’s papers, can be a death sentence.



Joana feels solidarity with Emilia. Although they come from different backgrounds, Joana feels guilty that Emilia has suffered so much because she has been unfairly designated “undesirable” by the Nazis, whereas she, Joana, has not only been tolerated but even allowed to repatriate. Emilia also reminds Joana of a family member, which further motivates her to help Emilia.



Although suspicious of Florian, Joana is unable to resist her compulsion to help those in need. Emilia has formed an attachment to Florian, although he has not done the same with her, and, like Joana, just wants to help him.



Joana wonders if Florian is a Nazi, and so reveals her nationality as a way to test him.



Florian knows his mission is inherently dangerous, but also believes there is added danger because he is cursed.



Emilia sees Florian through a layer of fantasy – she never refers to him by name, instead calling him her knight and protector, whom she, in turn, feels obligated to watch over.



Emilia feels indebted to Florian, even though when he told her to go away “his voice was another in the chorus of those who wanted the Poles to disappear forever.” She remembers meeting a Polish woman on the road as she fled Nemmersdorf. The woman told her that Nazis had killed hundreds of thousands of Polish Jews in her hometown of Lwów, including, in all likelihood, everyone she had ever known.

Possibly the lone survivor of her village and her family, Emilia looks for personal connection where she can. Although she has begun to internalize Nazi ideology that says she is worthless and unworthy of life, she does her best to soldier on.



Outside, looking for a stick, Emilia wonders if she can tell Joana her burning secret, but decides not to because she is sure Joanna will be “disgusted.”

Emilia’s shame at her secret pregnancy constantly weighs on her. Having survived many atrocities, she feels somehow responsible for the crimes that have been committed against her.



17. ALFRED

Alfred mentally dictates another letter to his “dear Hannelore.” He tells her a secret: when he lived in the building next to her back in Heidelberg he would spy on her through his bathroom window. He is excited for his upcoming naval “adventure.”

Once again, Alfred mentally abandons his underwhelming and often actively unpleasant reality for his fantasy life where his military service is an “adventure” as opposed to drudgery.



Refugees are beginning to gather at the port, and Alfred observes “Stalin has stolen more than land [...] he has stolen human dignity. I see it in their forlorn eyes and broken posture. It’s all the fault of the Communists. They are animals.”

Alfred has entirely bought into the Nazi ideology, and sees himself in contrast to those unlike him, like the communist Soviet forces, entirely ignoring the ways in which the Nazi regime has failed its civilians and “stolen the human dignity” of the people under its rule.



Alfred tells Hannelore not to fear because although people cannot be trained for situations like these, luckily he was “born for them.”

In his fantasies, Alfred sees himself as a hero destined for greatness since birth.



After Alfred finishes composing his letter, he is transported back to the real world, where he has yet to write a letter home to his Mutter. He begins to read his copy of Mein Kampf.

Although Alfred resists forming any kind of fraternal bond with his fellow soldiers, or even maintaining his relationship with his family, he finds solace in Adolf Hitler’s screeds of German racial supremacy.



18. JOANA

As Joana begins to operate on Florian, she tells him about her repatriation. Stalin occupied Lithuania, but because her mother was German, Hitler allowed her family to come to Germany. Florian asks if Hitler is her “savior.” The tone of his voice makes it clear he is either “critical of the Nazi Party, critical of [Joana] for repatriating, or both.” Joana thinks to herself that she feels guilty enough without his criticism.

Florian’s critical tone comes from his feelings towards Hitler. He does not support the Nazis, and although Joana would have died without the help of the Nazi Party, Florian remains skeptical. Joana, too, is conflicted. She understands that repatriation saved her life, but she does not support the Nazis or their mission.



As she operates on his side, Joana tries to take Florian's identification papers from his pocket. He notices and stops her. After the surgery is over, he grabs her by the arm and threatens her. He is upset that she has both seen his papers and his wound.

Feeling vulnerable, Florian asks Joana for a fact about her. He begins to fall asleep as he waits for an answer, which she eventually gives him. She whispers, "I'm a murderer."

Florian is so concerned with his own survival that he will jeopardize his budding relationship with Joana, who is actively saving his life, to protect his identity.



Joana's survivor's guilt has intensified to the point that she feels her survival actively led to the deaths of those people whom she left behind.



19. FLORIAN

The next morning, Florian wonders if he dreamed his conversations with Joana. He is attracted to her, but realizes staying with her will slow him down, and time is of the essence. He decides to leave early in the morning. Before he goes he looks through Joana's suitcase and steals an unnamed object. He thinks to himself "it wasn't stealing. It was protection." Ingrid wakes up and looks at him, but because she is blind Florian assumes she does not know what he is doing.

Outside, as Florian reorganizes his things, he thinks of Dr. Lange, the art director back in Königsberg with whom Florian apprenticed. Florian had loved Dr. Lange, and worked with him to restore artwork that had been stolen by the Nazis, although Florian didn't realize this is where the artwork was coming from at the time.

Over the years, Florian began to realize that Dr. Lange was not as wonderful as he seemed. For starters, he collaborated with Gauleiter Erich Koch, a high-ranking Nazi official. Additionally, one day Florian was in a back room and found a stack of unopened letters. When Florian was training at art school he had written Dr. Lange frequently, and on this day he realized the Dr. had never read a single one of his notes. Florian snaps out of his reveries when Emilia runs out of the barn behind him.

Florian is concerned only with his own safety and his own wellbeing. Although he is attracted to Joana, he knows this will only compromise his journey, which requires him to continue forward unburdened.



Florian hasn't always been as cold and antisocial as he is now. In the past, he formed a close relationship with the Nazi Dr. Lange, whom he respected and whose opinion he valued. Florian cared for this man so much that he didn't even notice the literal war crimes he was committing on his behalf.



Florian's love of Dr. Lange began to dissipate when he realized that Dr. Lange didn't feel the same way about him. Finding all his unread letters demonstrated to Florian that Lange only liked what Florian could do for him, not who Florian was as a person. In the end, it was this personal betrayal, less than Lange's Nazi affiliation, that turned Florian against him.



20. EMILIA

Emilia doesn't trust the refugees in the barn, especially Eva, but she trusts Florian, her "knight." Florian tries to tell her to stay behind, explaining "It's safer for [her] to stay with the others." Although she doesn't speak, Emilia thinks to herself "Safer? He didn't realize. I was already dead."

Emilia remains attached to Florian, whom she continues to see as her fantasy savior. Like Florian, Emilia believes that she is marked for death, although she does not explain why until later in the novel.



21. JOANA

The Poet knows of a nearby manor house and prepares to lead the group to it so they can spend some time there, safe from the Soviets and the weather.

The Poet is happy to share his knowledge of the house because he sees the group of refugees as friends and family, and he wants them to be safe and protected at least for a night.



Joana notices Florian and Emilia have left. The rest of the group is happy that they are gone. They believe Florian is a deserter, and know that Emilia is Polish. Both Florian and Emilia would likely put the whole group in danger if caught. Even the Poet agrees. Joana isn't sure that Florian is a deserter, but she knows he has a secret.

Although the group of refugees has managed to embrace each other despite their different ages and countries of origin, Emilia and Florian's suspicious behaviors have made them seem like potential threats, and the group is unwilling to accept them.



22. ALFRED

Alfred is carrying lifejackets over the dock to the Wilhelm Gustloff. As he works he imagines how he would react if the U.S. Army bombed him. He imagines he would fight back impressively.

Alfred is delusional. Although at no point has he demonstrated any physical strength or any courage, he nonetheless believes that, in the right situation, he would prove himself a hero.



Alfred prides himself on his self-perceived powers of observation, which he thinks are especially important considering Hitler's love of order and documentation. Alfred has invented a song to help him remember "the Reich's racial, social, and political enemies." It bothers the other sailors when he sings it, but Alfred believes they are merely "jealous of [his] archival facilities."

Alfred's song soothes him like a lullaby or nursery rhyme would. The act of repeating it is a kind of meditation, which calms him, as does the content itself. The song reaffirms Alfred's self-perceived racial superiority as a member of the German "master race."



23. FLORIAN

Florian tries to convince Emilia to leave him but she will not go. He tells her he cannot protect her, and she suggests that maybe she can protect him. He continues to walk and she continues to trail behind. He is frustrated that she is slowing him down, but is once again reminded of his little sister. He turns back and gives her a gun to protect herself.

Florian is torn between a selfish desire to travel alone and unburdened, and memories of his own little sister, who might be in need of a savior, in the same way Emilia is in need of a knight. He ignores the possibility that Emilia might be able to help him, only seeing her as a burden.



Florian wonders if he has made a mistake, and realizes how suspicious he and Emilia look—a Prussian "carrying enough secrets to blow up the kingdom," and a "Pole with a Soviet gun."

Florian knows how he and Emilia look to the outside world. For those who judge individuals based on their nationality or ethnicity, the two of them are clearly out of place. He worries this will lead to their deaths.



24. JOANA

Joana and Ingrid walk together. Ingrid can sense that it will soon snow. Although blind, Ingrid has an acute sense of the world around her. Ingrid trips as she walks, but tells Joana, “Don’t feel sorry for me [...] I am able to see things. Just not the same things you see.” She asks Joana what Florian and Emilia looked like physically, but already seems to have a sense. Ingrid calls Florian a thief, because she sensed him stealing from Joana, but does not tell Joana this.

Although marked by the Nazis as an “undesirable,” Ingrid is competent and perceptive, an important asset in her group of refugees. Like the others, she distrusts Florian and Emilia, but unlike the others she has a specific reason to favor the group of familiar friends over these strangers: she witnessed Florian’s act of thievery.



25. EMILIA

As she walks, Emilia thinks back to her childhood with her mother. They would sit in the forest together and her mother would tell her about all the stories the trees held.

Memories of her mother telling stories, as well as the specific stories her mother told, help comfort Emilia.



Back home, Emilia also loved waiting for **storks** to pass through her village each spring, where they would nest. Emilia’s family set up a pole with a wheel on top for storks to nest in, and they came every March, leaving in August, symbolizing the end of summer. Thinking about endings and departures makes Emilia think of her mother again, who died in childbirth six years ago. Thinking about her past is hard for Emilia, but she hopes that the trees in the forest will somehow carry a message from her to her mother.

Thinking about her family helps motivate Emilia to carry on, but it also brings her grief. She associates the storks with her home, and with happier times. When she thinks of them, she always thinks of her family, alive and unified. Emilia maintains her connection to her family and to her past. She imagines a kind of supernatural connection to her mother, which comforts her.



26. JOANA

The group of refugees is growing more and more skeptical of the Poet’s claim that there is a manor nearby. As the group begins to complain, the Poet spots the manor through the trees and they march toward it.

Although the Poet could travel alone, and keep the mansion and its potential treasures to himself, he wants his travel companions and friends to enjoy a night of comfort with him, even if they are rude and skeptical.



27. FLORIAN

Florian takes a break from walking. He wonders if he should have stayed with Joana and her group of refugees. Florian keeps vacillating between wishing Emilia would leave him alone, and being reminded of his sister and feeling too guilty to abandon her. He begins to eat some sausage but reconsiders and gives Emilia half.

Florian wonders if he should have stayed with the refugees not because he liked them, but because he selfishly wonders if he would have been safer or faster. He’s shaken out of his selfishness by Emilia, who reminds him of his sister, and forces him to be more empathetic.



Emilia asks Florian “Heil Hitler?” but he doesn’t respond. He decides he will abandon her that night.

Emilia remembers Florian's negative reaction to Polish, and so wonders if he is a Nazi sympathizer, and whether she can win favor with him by appealing to any fascist tendencies. She is unsuccessful, however, as Florian disapproves of the Nazis.



28. ALFRED

Waiting in the harbor, Alfred becomes more anxious. The Allied forces are closing in, and the Germans have organized a water evacuation. Alfred has gotten a rash on his hands and in his armpits. He blames the Communists for it.

Although in his fantasies Alfred claims he wants to be important and take care of important tasks, when presented with the opportunity he becomes nervous and useless.



Alfred doesn’t think there will be enough time to register and board hundreds of thousands of people, but the High Command says, “you will make it possible.” He imagines the power he will feel vetting and selecting which refugees will be allowed to evacuate. He begins to compose a letter to Hannelore in his head, telling her “I have been selected for a very important mission to disinfect this land. But we heroes eat danger atop our porridge for breakfast. It is nothing, dear one.”

Alfred is excited about the idea of being responsible for “vetting and selecting” refugees for evacuation. This will give him the kind of power he has been fantasizing about. For once, the events of his letter to Hannelore are not fictionalized. However, his description of himself as a hero reveals he still sees himself in mythic terms.



29. EMILIA

Emilia knows her “knight” (Florian) has secrets, but she has secrets too. She thinks back to one day when she went to school in Lwów, and arrived to find German forces taking all their desks and chairs, and burning their textbooks. Emilia remembers “The Nazis claimed I didn’t need an education [...] The Nazis said the people of Poland would become serfs to the Germans.”

The Nazi Party wanted to control the lives of the Polish people. They wanted to begin by controlling Polish children, and the minds of the population. By preventing them from reading or learning, the Nazi’s were depriving them of a variety of futures, including any future that required literacy.



Emilia’s father was an academic, and disagreed with this massive disenfranchisement of Polish children. Although all books in Polish were burned, luckily Emilia had already “learned to read very young.” She knows “they could never take that way from [her].” Emilia takes a break to pee against a tree. As she squats she sees a soldier with a gun emerge from the trees and point it at Florian.

Emilia was able to escape from the Nazi’s control because she was already able to read, and because her father was actively rebellious. Although the government tried to lay out a specific future for her, Emilia was able to escape through her and her father’s force of will.



30. FLORIAN

Florian turns at the sound of a gunshot. Emilia has killed the soldier. Florian sees he was German, not Russian, and criticizes Emilia for killing him. Nevertheless, he takes supplies from the dead man’s pocket and encourages Emilia to run with him, as the noise likely drew attention.

Emilia sees all soldiers as threats. Florian, who passes for German, is only concerned by Soviet soldiers who will see him as an enemy. Florian begins to warm to Emilia, and takes pity on her, feeling some responsibility for her wellbeing.



31. JOANA

As the group of refugees enters the estate, many of them feel relief. Ingrid, in contrast, has a bad feeling about the place. Everything inside the house has been destroyed, either by looters or roving soldiers. Joana sees that the family's dinner was left unfinished on the tabletop, meaning they had to evacuate suddenly.

Ingrid's premonition is related to her often preternatural ability to sense the emotional quality or texture of a place, which Sepetys attributes to her blindness.



32. FLORIAN

Florian hides the dead German soldier beneath the snow, and then continues marching. He realizes Emilia thought she was defending him, not realizing that he is not concerned about being stopped by Germans.

Emilia defended Florian because she sees him as her savior. As the first person to treat her with any kindness in months, she now feels it is her responsibility to look out for him as well.



Florian can hear Emilia trying not to cry. She once again reminds him of his sister, Anni. The two emerge from the woods, and see a manor before them—the same one where Joana and her fellow refugees are camped out, although Florian does not know this yet. He wonders if German or Russian forces occupy the house, though he knows that either group would cause him trouble.

Just as Emilia is growing increasingly attached to Florian, he is growing increasingly attached to her. He can't help but see her as similar to his little sister, and so, in his mind, he begins to think of her as family he must look out for.



33. EMILIA

Emilia can't stop thinking about how she killed a man. Even though she saved Florian, she doesn't feel good about it. The gunshot triggers "discarded memories," of "boots. Screaming. Glass shattering. Guns firing. Skull against wood." She can't make the memories go away, and revisits her nursery rhyme "All the little duckies with their heads in the water..."

Overwhelmed and in sudden pain, Emilia collapses into the snow.

Emilia often tries to disguise memories of her traumatic past with layers of fantasy. Sometimes, however, the truth breaks through. Repeating her mother's nursery rhyme helps calm her, but it isn't powerful enough to overcome the mental and physical trauma she has endured.



34. JOANA

Joana leaves the mansion to look for oak bark that will help treat the refugees' blisters. The Poet remains full of energy. Joana observes, "he refused to buckle under the burden of grief and loss." As she leaves the house Joana sees a copy of the Charles Dickens novel *The Pickwick Papers*, which her grandmother had given to both her and her cousin Lina for Christmas. Suddenly guilty, Joana thinks to herself, "what had I done?"

Joana has an almost compulsive need to look after others. Helping others helps her, since keeping busy means that she doesn't have time to think about her guilt, and it gives her a reason to continue moving forward so she does not become stuck in painful memories of the past.



Once outside, Joana recognizes Florian and Emilia in the snow. Emilia has collapsed and Joana goes to help her. Pulling open her coat, Joana sees that Emilia is pregnant.

Once again, Joana sees someone in pain and must help them. For the first time, Emilia's pain and trauma is revealed to be physical, not just mental.



35. FLORIAN

Florian is shocked and disgusted to learn that Emilia is pregnant. He assumes she has been raped, either by conquering soldiers or civilians made lawless by the conflict.

Florian's disgust is related to the fact that someone would have sex with a fifteen-year-old girl. However, Emilia often expresses shame at her condition, assuming that any disgust is targeted at her.



After entering the manor, Joana brings Florian into a private room to look at the wound on his side. Joana assumes Florian will keep caring for Emilia, but Florian explains he's behind schedule and can't look out for the Polish girl. Joana points out that she and her group of refugees are walking in the same direction as Florian, and they should all stay together. Although he does not say it, Florian believes "it wasn't 'safer' for anyone to be with [him]."

By this point, from the outside, Florian and Emilia appear to be friends, or at least intimate travel companions. Although Florian has had moments where he has felt responsible for her, he still thinks it is better for him to travel alone. Notably, his rationale for splitting up is no longer selfish (worrying Emilia will slow him down); instead, it is selfless (he doesn't want to put anyone else in danger).



36. JOANA

Joana joins the other refugees by the fire. Eva points out that Florian is cute, and suggests that Joana could become romantically involved with him even if he is, as Eva suspects, a spy.

Joana and Florian have both noticed the other is attractive, but are hesitant to try and pursue a relationship because they worry it would complicate their respective journeys.



Eva comments on the destruction of the manor. She and Joana agree it was likely destroyed by Nazis who distrusted the Prussian nobles who lived there. Although Prussians were on the German side of the war they didn't "blend" with other Germans, and some even tried to assassinate Hitler. Joana asks Eva to talk to Emilia. Eva discovers that the teenager is eight months pregnant.

Although Prussians were accepted by Nazi Germany as members of the "master race," many Prussians were hesitant to embrace the future this kind of protection guaranteed. They remained more committed to their culture and nationality than to the Nazi German Empire.



37. EMILIA

Eva and Joana come over to Emilia to ask her about her pregnancy. Eva wonders if the Soviet soldiers at Nemmersdorf raped Emilia. Emilia tells her no, she is pregnant with a boy named August's child. He lived on a farm owned by family friends, where her father sent her for safety. She is on her way to meet him, and begins to fantasize about their wedding, and the **stork's** nest they will have by their home.

Emilia's claim that August is the father of her child is part of an elaborate fantasy that helps protect her from the traumatic truth of her situation. Thinking about their future together helps her endure brutality in the present. When she thinks about the storks in her future she is really thinking about a happier past, when her family members were living together peacefully. This is what she hopes her future will look like.



38. ALFRED

Alfred writes another imaginary letter to Hannelore. He tells her he has been confirmed to sail on the Wilhelm Gustloff. He claims he is a “sailor of priority” and will be responsible for saving “two thousand lives.” He is brought back to reality by a higher up asking him if he has cleaned the toilets yet.

As in most of his chapters, Alfred disappears into a fantasy world where he is more important and more powerful than he is in reality.



39. FLORIAN

Florian watches the refugees from a corner. Klaus has found a gramophone and is playing a song by Swedish singer Zarah Leander, over and over. Eva and the Poet are dancing together. It reminds Florian of easier times.

Watching the makeshift family the refugees have created makes Florian think back to his own family. In the recent past, he has been focused on his mission, and hasn't had time to form friendships or interpersonal connections.



Joana brings Florian some soup and they discuss the song. It's in German and Joana doesn't entirely understand the lyrics. Florian tells her the woman is singing, “*It's not the end of the world.*” Joana tells Florian about another song she knows, “Lili Marleen,” about a soldier who meets a girl under a lamppost, and later, by lantern light during the war, he thinks of her.

Florian begins to open up to another person for the first time in the novel. Although he has treated Emilia kindly before, which represented a kind of progress, here he is having a friendly conversation for the first time. The song Lili Marleen will appear again in the novel, symbolizing lovers separated by fate.



The Poet invites Joana to dance and Florian watches and thinks back to his time with Dr. Lange. He wonders why, although he was an expert at detecting flaws and forgeries in paintings, he couldn't see the way Dr. Lange was manipulating him.

Florian feels guilty that he was such a bad judge of character, and that he opened himself emotionally to someone who did not like or respect him.



Florian gets up to go to the bathroom. He takes his pack with him. Joana suggests he leave it but Florian refuses. As he walks across the room the Poet stops him. The Poet has noticed Florian's hollow left heel, which hides something secret. The Poet observes, “The **shoes** tell a story.”

Florian still doesn't trust the refugees, even if he is willing to spend the night with them. The perceptive Poet demonstrates that his catchphrase “the shoes tell a story” has some truth to it. Although Florian has done his best to reveal no personal details (not even his name), the Poet has deduced an intimate fact about him.



40. JOANA

Joana and Ingrid discuss the journey ahead. Ingrid knows she will be stopped at a checkpoint, because Hitler has labeled all children born with disabilities as “inferior,” and has added them to a registry. All those on the registry will be killed. To get around this, Ingrid and Joana will bandage Ingrid's eyes and pretend she is recovering from an injury, as opposed to congenitally blind.

Ingrid's disability has made it much more difficult for her to travel the countryside. Nazis have marked her for death because of her blindness, and so she must actively fight for her life—doing her best to outwit the government that will kill her if they catch her.



Joana goes off to look for supplies. She begins to climb to the second floor but a sound in the kitchen distracts her. She returns downstairs to find Florian rifling through the cupboards. He has found more jars of food, but says some are for “the Polish kid.” Joana reminds him her name is Emilia.

Although in some ways Florian has seemed to warm to Emilia, he still refuses to refer to her by name. This is a method of distancing himself from her, and abdicating responsibility for her wellbeing.



Joana turns to go upstairs again, but Florian stops her. He tells her “No one should have to see that.”

Still, Florian is kinder than he needs to be. Having seen the carnage upstairs—the details of which are revealed in the next chapter—he cares enough about Joana to warn her away.



41. EMILIA

Emilia wakes up in the middle of the night because she has to pee. She observes her fellow travelers as they sleep. Everything is calm, for a moment, until Eva begins to scream. She had explored upstairs and found the Prussian family who owned the home dead in their beds.

Although Florian liked Joana enough to warn her about the carnage upstairs, he hasn't integrated into the group fully enough to warn and protect all of its members from the grisly scene.



42. FLORIAN

Florian suspects the Prussian family had been eating dinner when Russian forces began to approach. The patriarch, rather than “allow his family or legacy to be stripped from their land” decided they should “die with dignity.” He sent them to bed, shot them all, and then shot himself.

The Prussian family decided to take control of their own destinies. Knowing they would surely die when the Soviet forces arrived, they decided to die as peacefully as possible and on their own terms.



No one wants to stay in the house after Eva’s discovery. They pack up and resume their journey. Eva complains that Florian and Emilia should not be allowed to come with them. Emilia, because she’s Polish, and Florian, because Eva believes he is a deserter. Florian tells her that he’s not a deserter, and Joana argues Emilia needs to stay with the group and ride on their cart because she may be going into early labor. Ingrid breaks up the fight by pointing out the sound of nearby voices. The group has intersected a long line of fellow refugees, fleeing to the sea. Florian infers evacuation orders have finally been issued.

Eva displays both selfishness and bigotry as she argues against letting Florian and Emilia tag along. Eva’s own wellbeing is more important to her than helping protect two strangers. Although Emilia is pregnant, and has done nothing wrong, Eva uses the fact that Nazis are actively targeting people like her as a reason to leave her behind. Whether or not Eva believes Polish people are inferior is beside the point; instead of feeling pity or empathy for Emilia, Eva can only see how she would be negatively affected by harboring a person the Nazis considered “undesirable.”



43. ALFRED

Alfred composes another letter to Hannelore in his head. He suspects she is thinking of him, just as he is thinking of her. He tells her that evacuation orders have finally been issued, and that “millions of people in this region of East Prussia will now flee to me for help.”

For once, Alfred’s fantasy and his reality will collide. He will truly be in charge of the lives of thousands of people as he helps them board ships that will transport them to safety.



He ominously remembers how he used to watch Hannelore through her window. It was as he watched her that “duty called and I made my decision.” He adds, defensively, “But really, my sweet, what choice did I have?”

Alfred will not reveal what his decision was until later in the novel, but here he hints that he was driven by, and committed to, some force greater than his love for Hannelore.



44. JOANA

Joana wonders where all the refugees came from. She wants to help people but there are too many and the scene is too chaotic. Eva asks people where they’ve come from and finds a Lithuanian woman. When Joana asks about her home the old woman says, “Our poor Lietuva [...] we shall never see her again.” Joana doesn’t understand. She assumes when the war is over everyone will be able to go home. Joana thinks back to the song she listened to last night, which said, “*It’s not the end of the world.*” She hopes this is true.

Joana loves and misses her homeland, and is motivated by the belief that she will be able to return to Lithuania where she will be reunited with her family. Although she does not know this yet, after the war, Germany will be split in two, and the Soviet Union and its new holdings, including Lithuania, will wall itself off from the rest of the world. If she continues her journey west, she will be cut off from her homeland indefinitely.



Joana and Florian discuss the future — they decide to march across the ice at night, when it will be stronger. Florian criticizes those whom he feels have brought too many belongings. Joana points out that “it’s all they have left.”

Florian un-empathetically criticizes refugees with too many belongings. He doesn’t consider the ways in which physical objects can hold important memories.



Florian suddenly realizes Emilia has no papers. All civilians are required to carry identification documents, including “name, photograph, nationality, race, birth, and family details.” Joana darkly observes, “Our papers determined our fate,” and “no papers, no future.”

A person’s papers determine how the government interprets their identity, and in Nazi Germany a person’s identity determines their future. Unfortunately for Emilia, even if she did have papers, they would announce her Polish identity, and would be a death sentence.



45. EMILIA

Emilia sits on the wagon, and while she appreciates it, she also feels guilty that others have to walk.

Although she deserves to ride because she is pregnant, Emilia is uncomfortable with any kind of preferential treatment.



Emilia has blackberry seeds stuck in her teeth from preserves taken from the manor house. These remind her of her father, and collecting berries for him as a child. Her mind then shifts to the farm her father sent her to in East Prussia, and the storage cellar there. Emilia reaches for her pregnant stomach.

Although Emilia often sets up walls of fantasy to protect her from dwelling on past traumas, sensory memories and associations transport her backwards in time, first to a positive memory, and then to a negative one that she quickly shuts down.



46. FLORIAN

The group moves more quickly now that they are officially allowed to evacuate. As Florian walks, he thinks back to a conversation with Florian's father, who warned him that Dr. Lange was trying to use his son, not train him. His father argued that by serving Lange he was "Not a traitor to your country. Much worse. A traitor to your soul."

Those were the last words Florian's father ever spoke to him, as he was killed soon after. Now, Florian carries on in his father's memory, with his father's words always in his mind. He thinks how he "risked everything, confronting fate and the knowledge that," if he fails, he "authored [his] own demise."

A German soldier stops Florian and looks at his papers. The papers not only pass inspection, but impress the soldier, who salutes Florian and calls him "Herr Beck." He begins to ask Florian if he is traveling with Joana and the others, but an aerial attack and series of explosions interrupts their conversation.

Florian mistakenly put his trust in Dr. Lange, which likely contributes to his reluctance to trust other people now. His father tried to teach him that loyalty to his country was less important to loyalty to his own values and he own sense of morality.



Now, Florian tries his hardest to follow his conscience and to do right by the memory of his father. Still, he believes that he is fated for disaster. He knows the secret task he has undertaken is risky, and likely will lead to his death.



Florian has doctored his papers to make his passage easier. In this way, the identity he has constructed for himself changes the way he is perceived and moves through the world.



47. JOANA

In the aftermath of the explosion, children scream and soldiers yell. Joana wants to help the injured, but the soldiers and the Poet usher her towards safety. The Poet argues, "What good will you be, my dear, if you are injured? [...] You must preserve yourself in order to help others." Joana thinks to herself that the Poet doesn't know the truth, "I had already preserved myself. I had left Lithuania and those I loved behind. To die."

Joana feels so compelled to help people that she is willing to put her own life in danger. Luckily, the Poet and her other friends are looking out for her, and care about her safety more than she cares about her own wellbeing. Joana's need to help others clearly comes from guilt at having escaped Lithuania when so many others did not. She feels that, having been saved once, she doesn't deserve to be saved again.



48. ALFRED

Walking up and down the Wilhelm Gustloff is too much exercise for Alfred. He often hides to avoid his duty. Still, his superior finds him and orders him to clear furniture from a ballroom for refugees. He looks at the dance floor and imagines Hannelore dancing as he often observed through the window, but admits to himself that she "might be dancing for someone else now."

Ominously, Alfred hints that Hannelore may not be waiting in his hometown for him. Just as he hinted in an earlier chapter that "duty called" and he was forced to take action, this idea that Hannelore is "dancing for someone else" suggests that she is not, in fact, his sweetheart.



49. EMILIA

Florian has disappeared in the chaos. Emilia tries to look for him but Joana holds her back. She insists the group stay together, approach the military checkpoint where their papers will be inspected, and wait for the ice to freeze over.

The nearest village was renamed Frauenburg, but was originally named Frombork. It was the home of the astronomer Copernicus. Emilia is reminded of the phrase “*Per aspara ad astra*,” taught to her by her father, which means “through hardship to the stars.”

Joana gives Emilia an identity card that she found on the body of a Latvian woman who died on the road. Emilia opens her coat so her pregnancy is revealed and unbraids her hair to look older. Joana will pretend Emilia is Latvian and cannot speak German.

Overhead, **birds** squawk. Emilia knows a legend that says “Seagulls were the souls of dead soldiers. Owls were the souls of women. Doves were the recently departed souls of unmarried girls.” She wonders, “Was there a bird for the souls of people like me?”

50. FLORIAN

Florian examines his own identification papers. He has forged them to say “*Gonderausweis*,” or “special pass.” He originally had forged soccer tickets as a young man, but has grown more skilled since then. Florian wonders if Dr. Lange has discovered the object Florian has stolen, in which case he likely would have alerted German authorities to look out for Florian.

The German soldier at the checkpoint cannot let Florian cross the ice because it is full of holes from the airplane fire, but tells him he can cross in the morning. The soldier salutes Florian with “Heil Hitler!” and Florian responds in kind, but feels ill as he says it.

Emilia is so fixated on Florian that she is willing to risk her life to find him. Luckily, just as Joana’s friends held her back from running into enemy fire to help the injured, Joana holds Emilia back.



Memories of Emilia’s father, and the wisdom he imparted to her when she was younger, help motivate her now. She has been through hardship, but still has some hope that she will reach the “stars,” or a happier future.



Without papers, Emilia has no future. She will be pulled aside at the next checkpoint and sent to a labor camp or to her death. By adopting a new identity, she has a chance at survival.



Emilia often returns to the idea of storks as symbolic of her united, happy family. Here, she wonders if she’ll ever be able to be a stork again, or if her pregnancy has doomed her and prevented her from having a happy future or afterlife.



Florian is able to manipulate his papers to change his perceived identity. This changes the way he is treated, which changes the possibilities in his future. Still, he knows he has potentially doomed himself by stealing something from Dr. Lange, which, if discovered, will lead to Florian’s death.



Florian has no allegiance to Hitler or Nazi Germany, although he looks Aryan and his papers say he is on a special mission for the Nazis. In fact, he actively dislikes them, but fakes compliance.



51. JOANA

Joana and her group of refugees approach a registration checkpoint. Joana feels “Homesick. Exhausted. Full of regret.” However, she also feels selfish, thinking, “It wasn’t fair to think of myself. The stakes were much higher for others.”

Ingrid asks Joana what the man at the checkpoint looks like. Joana tells her he is young and blonde and wearing a blue scarf. Ingrid uses this information to pretend that she is recovering from a shrapnel injury, but that she has partial sight. Ingrid compliments his scarf, which he then gives to her. The soldier tells her his youngest brother was born blind, and that she is lucky.

The Poet offers to examine the soldier’s foot, which is injured and elevated. Grateful and distracted, the soldier barely looks at Emilia or the group’s registration papers.

Resting in a converted cathedral after registering, Joana intends to write a letter to her mother. She reminisces about “how much [she] had left behind,” and considers how “war had rearranged [her] priorities.” Now, she clings “to memories more than goals or material things” like her schoolwork. As she looks in her suitcase for paper she realizes one of her belongings (the one stolen by Florian) is missing.

Joana is constantly wrestling with guilt over having survived while her family died. Even when things in her life are objectively bad, she feels that it is unfair for her to feel upset, as if she is being ungrateful for being alive at all.



The soldier implies that his blind younger brother was taken away and/or killed by fellow Nazis. In contrast, he believes Ingrid will recover from her (fake) injury, and be allowed to continue to live. In reality, Ingrid was also born blind and, if not for quick thinking and force of will, would also be in a Nazi death camp somewhere.



The group works together, all looking out for each other, so that they can all get past the checkpoint.



Joana, like many of her fellow refugees, draws strength from her memories of her family. Although in the past she cared only about her studies and herself, she has grown less selfish. Now, she cares about her family and helping others.



52. ALFRED

Alfred composes another letter to Hannelore. He briefly mentions the war effort but then turns his attention to the Wilhelm Gustloff. He is sharing “undisclosed details,” but knows Hannelore loves keeping secrets. Alfred tells her about a fake chimney in the ship that can serve as a hiding spot, and about how he stole a stack of blank boarding passes after realizing how valuable they would be. He decides not to tell her that the ship is supposed to have twenty-two lifeboats, but only twelve are accounted for.

Although he will never send a letter to Hannelore, just imagining telling her secret details about his job excites Alfred. Alfred loves feeling powerful. Knowing secrets about the boat makes him feel important, as does having a stack of boarding passes. He cares less about the actual lives of the boat’s passengers than about his own importance.



53. FLORIAN

Florian hides in the same cathedral as the rest of the refugees, but he hides inside of the church organ so as not to be seen. He watches Joana but tries not to become too invested in her.

Florian is constantly fighting his attraction to Joana. He worries that affiliating with her will slow him down and put her in danger.



Florian goes through his backpack and considers his special parcel: a **tiny amber swan**, stolen from the disassembled Amber Room. The Amber Room was stolen from Russia in 1941, and placed under the care of Dr. Lange, and, by extension, Florian. Florian helped Lange move and hide the room from advancing Soviet forces, but Florian realizes that by allowing Florian to help, Lange was setting him up to potentially take the blame. Florian stole the swan, as well as a map and key to the cellar where the crates containing the Amber Room is hidden. He sees taking the key as revenge against Lange, but the swan is revenge against Hitler.

Florian stole the swan, map, and key in order to get back at Hitler and Lange. He was upset that Lange had manipulated and disrespected him, and upset that Hitler killed his father. Florian feels that he is avenging his father—especially as his father always warned him not to trust Lange. Florian’s occasional ominous thoughts about the future and his imminent death all stem from his possession of the swan. He sees it as a symbol of his revenge, but also worries that he is cursed by it, and that by carrying it he is setting himself up for death.



54. EMILIA

The Poet wakes the refugees in the morning so they can cross the frozen lagoon. Joana plans to tell any Germans that Emilia is on her way to meet her boyfriend. This makes Emilia think of August, and how she observed him carefully. Emilia knows Joana has been observing her, but feels confident that even Joana has not perceived Emilia’s darkest secrets.

Joana knows that Emilia will be denied passage if she admits that she is Polish, but will be able to continue on if she lies about who she is. Emilia returns to her fantasy of August as self-soothing meditation in times of stress.



55. JOANA

Joana wonders where Florian has gone. She pretends to herself that she cares about his wound, but in reality she is curious about him, and wants to know more.

Just as Florian is falling in love with Joana, Joana is falling in love with Florian. Each has intellectual reasons why their attraction is irrational, but despite this, they can’t resist.



Joana and her group are some of the first to cross the ice. Ingrid insists on going first, as she can sense the strength of the ice. Some of the ice is frozen red with the blood and bodies of refugees who have fallen in before. Ingrid can sense this even though she cannot see it.

Once again, Ingrid demonstrates that her disability doesn’t make her a less important or valuable member of society, regardless of what the Nazis have decreed.



Suddenly, Russian planes appear overhead. They fire bullets at the ice and Ingrid falls through. Joana, who has fallen to the ground, tries to crawl towards her but the cracks in the ice expand and threaten to swallow her too. Florian, who has appeared from nowhere, grabs Joana’s ankle and pulls her to safety as Ingrid drowns.

Joana lets her desire to help Ingrid overpower her own sense of self-preservation. Luckily for her, Florian has been watching Joana, and although he insists he doesn’t care about her wellbeing, in this moment he demonstrates that he does, as he risks his own life to save hers.



56. FLORIAN

Florian had followed behind Joana and the group secretly. When the planes fired down at the ice he ran to save her, and Klaus, in turn, ran to save him. Back on land, Joana begins to cry. Florian is unsure what to do, but Emilia lifts his arms and places them comfortingly around the weeping nurse.

Florian cares about Joana, but hasn't fully admitted it to himself. Emilia can tell how much Florian likes Joana, but she can also tell that he is conflicted, so she takes it upon herself to bring the two closer together.



57. ALFRED

Alfred composes another mental letter to Hannelore in his head. He tells her how crowded it is getting at the port. He thinks German deserters may be hiding among the refugees. He writes, "I pity the man who cannot overcome his cowardice, who cannot step on the neck of his own weakness." Alfred reveals he himself was not part of the Hitler Youth, who bullied him when he could not qualify. Now, however, he claims he is a man who has succeeded "where boys have failed."

Alfred reveals that much of his insecurity comes from his earlier rejection from the Hitler Youth, a kind of Nazi Boy Scout troop that fed directly into the military. Although he eventually did join the military, it seems to be more out of a desire to prove that he is important than an actual desire to serve his country.



Alfred admits he might sound "hostile, but this is war," a numbers game. Alfred shares his military number, 42089. He wonders if Hannelore has a number.

Alfred's reference to a numbers game suggests that Hannelore might be in a Nazi camp, where inmates were famously tattooed with identification numbers.



58. EMILIA

The refugees wait on the bank for the ice to refreeze. Emilia is beginning to go into labor—she has cramping and pressure in her abdomen—but she keeps it secret. She tries to think of August. She does not reveal to the group that she does not know how to swim.

Emilia refuses to admit that she is suffering because she doesn't want to inconvenience her group. She tries to use her fantasy of August to help her power through the pain.



59. JOANA

It takes several hours for the group to cross the ice. Once on land again, Joana lashes out at Florian. She argues that, if not for him, she could have saved Ingrid. He argues that she would have died from the shock of the icy water, even if she could be pulled out.

Joana once again must deal with survivor's guilt which stems from the fact that she lived while Ingrid died. Florian argues that she should be happy that she's alive, since she likely would have been unable to save Ingrid and, had she gotten closer to the hole in the ice, both women would have died.



The Poet stops the arguing by saying that Florian saved Joana, and also Emilia, who had begun to scramble towards Ingrid as well. Eva, meanwhile, was the only one who made no effort to save anyone.

All the refugees, Florian included, care about each other's wellbeing. Eva, however, remains selfish, caring only about her own survival.



60. FLORIAN

A soldier approaches the group of refugees and asks for papers. Joana tells Florian he “owes” her. Emilia comes up to him and thanks him in German. She says “*Bitte*,” or *please*. Florian knows it would have been easier to cross the ice alone, but in some ways it also would have been harder.

When Florian says it would be easier to cross alone, he means that as a single person he can travel more quickly and inconspicuously. However, because he’s become emotionally attached to Emilia, Joana, and the others, he realizes that it will be difficult for him to leave them behind.



The German soldier sees from Florian’s papers that he is a special envoy carrying a special package. The soldier wonders if Florian is trying to meet Koch, who has signed his papers and will be in Pillau. Florian says he is instead going to Gotenhafen, which is in the opposite direction. The soldier offers to take him in a boat.

Florian’s forged papers open up new doors and opportunities for him that his true identity would not grant him.



61. ALFRED

Alfred has been assigned to the ship’s sundeck, which has been converted into a maternity ward. He is informed that there is only a single doctor, and no nurses assigned to the ward. He complains, and a soldier pushes back that his work is not very hard. This soldier, who has an injured knee, is resentful that he’s not “at the front, Killing Russians,” but instead stuck on a ship with men like Alfred. This soldier also reveals to Alfred that while the ship only has the capacity to hold two thousand people, it will be carrying many more.

During Alfred’s chapters, he constantly suggests (or states directly) that the ship is unsuitable for its intended purpose. Although it is a passenger vessel it is not intended to carry as many people as it eventually will. This becomes more ominous if the reader considers the historical events on which the novel is based. The Wilhelm Gustloff famously did eventually sink off the coast of Prussia.



62. EMILIA

The refugees debate the best way to evacuate. Either way, they will have to walk for a long time to reach either Gotenhafen or Pillau. They wonder how best to transport their possessions, and decide to flag down a boat to take them, and lend their cart, with their possessions, to another family who will meet them in the city. Emilia considers how she no longer has any possessions. She thinks back to her father who once told her “you’re all I have” after her mother died.

While many refugees have been separated from their homes, they still can hold on to their possessions that remind them of the life they left behind. Emilia, in contrast, has nothing; she has lost her family, and she has lost every possession she ever owned. She is left with only her memories.



Emilia continues to think about the past. She remembers being sent to the Kleist family farm, and how she had to pretend she was not upset to leave her father. She remarks, “I became good at pretending,” so good that “sometimes, when I did a really good job of pretending, I even fooled myself.”

For the first time, Emilia admits that part of her identity and some of her “memories” of the past are in fact a fantasy. Although she doesn’t admit which pieces of her life she has invented, she explains that she has begun to believe in her fantasies herself.



63. FLORIAN

Florian worries that his time is running out. Although he's managed to trick a few guards so far, he knows Gotenhafen will have higher security and more experienced soldiers. A soldier approaches and tells Florian his boat is ready. Florian is prepared to take Emilia with him, but anticipates losing her in the port city, which is a relief. However, as he turns to leave, he sees Joana, Klaus, Eva, and the Poet. Joana looks at him as if saying, "you owe us," give us a ride.

Although Florian knows it would be easier for him to travel to Gotenhafen alone, when Joana and her friends approach him he is unable to leave them behind. Although he could argue that he doesn't owe Joana anything for preventing her from saving Ingrid, he has become attached enough to the group that he allows them to tag along.



64. ALFRED

Alfred writes another mental letter to Hannelore. He tells her how he has marked a functioning toilet as inoperable so that he can take breaks there privately. He reminds her that he is "truly exceptional," and although he doesn't have friends he often thinks of her.

Even in Alfred's fantasy world he is shirking his professional responsibility. As he hides in a bathroom stall, he thinks of himself as being "truly exceptional," demonstrating the depth of his delusion.



65. JOANA

Arriving in Gotenhafen is overwhelming. There is no organized lodging. There are lost animals in the streets, belongings dumped by the side of the roads, families separated and searching for each other. The group makes a plan to meet under a large clock if they get separated.

Amidst the chaos, the refugees turn towards each other for comfort. They know that if they are separated, reuniting as a group will make it easier for them to navigate the city and face the disorder.



A woman walking by (who is carrying a goat she intends to eat in a baby carriage) tips off Joana and the others to an old movie theatre that they could sleep in. After the woman has left, the group makes fun of her, and even Florian cracks a joke. He then takes Joana's hand for a brief moment and apologizes about Ingrid.

Although Florian has been demonstrating with his actions that he cares about the group, for the first time he laughs and jokes with them as though they are friends. When he takes Joana's hand he expresses his explicit romantic interest in her for the first time.



66. EMILIA

Emilia sees that Florian is beautiful when he smiles. He reminds her of August. Emilia wishes that her mother could have met August as well. She knows Joana still has her mother, and understands that reuniting with her mother is Joana's primary motivation. Emilia thinks, "A girl who lost her mother was suddenly a tiny boat on an angry ocean. Some boats eventually floated ashore. And some boats, like me, seemed to float farther and farther away from land."

Because her mother is alive, Joana is given purpose and direction: she must survive to reunite with her family. Emilia's entire family has died, and so, although she has been fighting for her life, she feels that she has no direction, she has nowhere to go, and no one to motivate her to continue forwards.



Emilia believes she cannot make it much longer. She feels "with each step, the truth drew closer."

Although Emilia has been hiding her trauma beneath layers of fantasy, she believes that the truth will eventually come out, perhaps when her baby is born.



67. FLORIAN

Florian is shocked by the military presence in the port, as well as by the tragic scenes playing out on each street. Still, even with the disorder of the refugees, the German military is organized and efficient. Florian knows Nazi officials and their families will be allowed to board first. Then injured soldiers, military personnel, women and children. Florian knows that as a young single man he won't be allowed at all. He thinks he might have to ask Joana for help, and reveal another secret in exchange for her assistance.

Each individual's identity and identification papers will determine whether or not they will be allowed to board a ship, and as a result, whether they will survive if the Allied forces invade the port. Because Florian is a young man who is of age to be in the military, he will be denied entrance on the grounds that he should be fighting and serving his country, not fleeing.



68. ALFRED

Alfred writes to Hannelore. He complains about the ugliness he is forced to look at — the horror of the sick, injured and deformed. A fellow soldier, who informs him he will be examining the wounded to determine who to take on board, distracts him. Alfred does not think he is up to the task.

Alfred has very little empathy for others. Even in his fantasies, he struggles to feel pity for the wounded or the sick, despite the fact that he himself is dealing with a severe rash on his hands.



69. JOANA

The group walks through the city to the movie house. Florian helps pick the lock on the movie house door. Joana asks him to leave it open for future refugees who need a place to stay

Joana is constantly looking out for other people. Even if she would benefit from the extra space in the movie house they would receive if they locked the door, she would always rather help others than live in comfort herself.



The group settles down, resting and eating dinner. Florian and Joana discuss how they will keep the group together as they board ships. Florian suggests Joana offer herself to work as a nurse, under the condition that she is allowed take Emilia and Florian with her as her patients. Joana notes that Florian's shrapnel wound has healed, but he reveals his left ear has been damaged. Although he has his "important assignment," he knows he might be sent to fight anyway if he does also have a medical ailment.

Joana and Florian grow closer as they talk to each other. Although the conversation is not romantic, every time they speak, their feelings for each other intensify. Once again, Florian references how his identification papers determine his fate and whether or not he will be allowed to board a ship. He hopes that adding a note to his information about this damaged ear will be enough to render him unfit for duty and guarantee him safe passage.



70. ALFRED

Alfred reads a letter his mother sent him two months ago. She tells him she is worried because he has not written her anything. Hannelore's house is empty, and Mutter suspects Alfred always liked Hannelore. She wonders if he has some secret related to her, and reminds him he is free to tell her if he wants to. Mutter writes, "when the war is over there will be a 'right side' to land upon. The 'wrong side' could have grave consequences." She hopes Alfred understands. Alfred quickly writes back. He lies that Mutter's letter has just arrived, and explains he's been too busy to write anyway. He tells her he doesn't know or care about Hannelore or her family.

Alfred has spent much of the novel thus far writing imaginary letters to Hannelore, but here it is revealed that he has selfishly spent no time writing to someone who actually loves and cares about him. Mutter's assumption (that Nazis will be on the right side and everyone else will be on the wrong side) is ironic, since the Nazis lost the war and their philosophy was discredited.



71. FLORIAN

While the rest of the group has settled on the floor of the movie house, Florian has barricaded himself inside the production booth. From his perch, he can see Joana making her way up to him. He knew she would come to see him and inspect his ear because she has this "terrible need to heal people."

Unkindly, Florian is happy to exploit what he has identified as Joana's need to heal others, which stems from her guilt at having evacuated Lithuania and survived when much of her family died.



Joana inspects Florian and they flirt. She tells him she calls him "the German" because she does not know his name, and he corrects her, explaining he's Prussian. She asks him to call her Joana, not "nurse" or "girl" as he has been.

As Joana and Florian get to know each other better, they reveal their names. This is an intimate act, and gives clues to their identities that will allow them to determine if they do want a future together.



Florian wonders if Joana is married. She says she isn't. He silently thinks about the song "**Lili Marleen**," and wonders if a soldier is waiting for Joana somewhere.

Once again, the song "Lili Marleen" symbolizes love and longing. Florian's reference to it suggests that, despite his initial hesitation, he loves and longs for Joana.



Joana reveals that Emilia reminds her of someone (her cousin Lina). Florian realizes he can manipulate Joana by talking about family. He tells her Emilia reminds him of his little sister, Anni, whom he says he is going to find. Florian likes Joana, and is attracted to her, which makes him feel guilty about manipulating her in this way.

Both Florian and Joana feel sympathetically towards Emilia because she reminds them of other important people in their lives. However, Florian's decision to reveal this to Joana is manipulative; he only tells her in order to get her to let her guard down and reveal more personal information to him.



Joana reveals that she left a signed note in the Prussian mansion saying she'd borrowed their sewing kit. She worries someone will find the note and think she killed them. What Florian doesn't reveal is that he noticed the note and took it from the house to protect her. As she gets up to leave, Joana tells Florian she knows he stole something from her. He pretends not to know what she's talking about, and suggests she check again. Although he did steal something, he has since snuck it back into her suitcase.

Joana always feels obligated to do the "right thing," even if it puts her in danger. Florian, meanwhile, feels it is only necessary to protect those he cares about. Because he cares about Joana, he stole the note with the aim of protecting her, even if leaving it was perhaps a more ethical thing to do.



72. ALFRED

Alfred writes another mental letter to Hannelore. He remembers the Hitler Youth coming to visit him and then visit Hannelore next door. He wonders why she opened the door. He writes, "We cannot be too cautious [...] Just because someone knocks on the door doesn't mean you have to open it."

Although Hannelore remains a fantasy, Alfred does still care about her. He implies that something bad happened to her when she opened the door to the Hitler Youth, and he wishes it had not.



73. JOANA

The next morning Joana and her group leave the movie house for the port. Joana feels guilty because she has a letter from the doctor she used to assist, verifying that she is a skilled nurse. Joana feels she will benefit from preferential treatment, and believes it is unfair that her skill will make her a priority passenger. Eva jokes that a letter "saying you're good at dealing with blood and guts" isn't something she'd "call an opportunity."

Joana continues to feel guilty that she sometimes receives preferential treatment. This stems from her guilt at having escaped Lithuania when other people, just as deserving of life and freedom, were left behind. However, Eva rightly points out that she isn't receiving preferential treatment; instead, she is trading a useful skill for safe passage.



Eva continues that Joana doesn't have time to be moral. Personally, Eva was happy to meet Joana and the others, but now "I don't need a group. I need my belongings and I need a ship." At this moment Joana looks down and sees Alfred Frick digging through a pile of luggage for valuables.

Eva, unlike Joana, cares primarily about herself and feels no survivor's guilt. As she says explicitly, she has suffered little emotional fallout from the trauma of her evacuation. She just wants to survive, and to bring her belongings with her.



74. FLORIAN

Florian eavesdrops on Joana and Alfred's conversation. Joana asks where registration begins and Alfred gestures towards the ships. Joana notices his rash and offers to help, explaining she's a nurse. Alfred lights up and explains that he is working in the medical ward of his ship, and needs more professionals. He offers to assign her to his ship, where she can work. Joana asks if she can take her patients—Florian and Emilia—with her, and Alfred agrees they can come if their papers are in order.

Joana is happy to be helpful, as working as a nurse is one of the few things that continue to bring her joy. As always, she thinks of others, and makes sure her friends are guaranteed passage as well. Alfred is happy because, for one of the first times this novel, his fantasy is intersecting with reality: he is doing an important job.



75. ALFRED

Alfred feels “the fates of fortune had found me.” He brings Joana to the ship’s doctor, Dr. Richter. He agrees to register her and her patients to the Wilhelm Gustloff—and her friends to any ships with space—after she helps him unload a train of wounded soldiers. Alfred feels proud and important. He thinks to himself that, given the opportunity, he easily “rose to the occasion and seized the path of the hero’s journey.”

Alfred feels that luck has brought him to Joana. Being useful to a higher-up makes him feel important, and helps reinforce his fantasy that he is a hero on a mission.



76. JOANA

Joana is happy for an opportunity to help, but unhappy to leave the group behind. The Poet reminds her to meet at the clock. As the group departs, Florian pulls her aside, plays with her hair flirtatiously, and tells her his name is Florian.

Florian wants to guarantee passage on a ship, and knows that the more Joana likes him, the more likely she will be to help him. Although he genuinely likes her, he also knowingly manipulates her emotions.



Joana grabs Alfred before he walks off and tells him that the group she has been traveling with “are very important.” She makes him promise to get them onto the same ship she will be assigned to.

Florian succeeds in manipulating Joana’s emotions. Although she already cared about him, she now thinks of him as a member of the same chosen family that includes the Poet and Klaus, and will work hard to ensure his safe passage.



77. EMILIA

Emilia sees Joana leave to help the soldiers and wonders, “Why did everyone leave me?” Still, she recognizes Joana was chosen for a special task. As she walks with Alfred and the rest of the group, she notices him kick a stray dog. She immediately distrusts him.

Emilia is kind and gentle, and does her best to treat everyone well. Alfred, meanwhile, is selfish and cruel, and makes no effort to treat anyone with any decency unless he thinks he can somehow benefit.



Emilia thinks back to when her father dropped her off at the Kleist family farm. Her father asked Mr. Kleist to “protect her, take care of her, love her like your own.” In the end, Emilia remembers, Else, August, and Martin all welcomed her, but Mrs. Kleist did not.

Only three members of the Kleist family were able to open their hearts to Emilia and see her as a member of their family. Her ominous tone suggests that Mrs. Kleist’s rejection of her resulted in some tragedy later on.



78. FLORIAN

Alfred draws attention to the group by ushering other refugees out of the way and announcing the presence of his party. Florian spots a group of Nazi officials up ahead. He knows that if they discover him, it could lead to trouble, and so he takes Alfred aside and explains he is on a secret mission, which requires Alfred's help and discretion. Buoyed with his new purpose, and Florian's promise that he could receive a commendation medal, Alfred becomes more discreet. Alfred reveals he has extra, blank boarding passes stored away. Florian asks Alfred to bring those passes to the movie house later. Alfred breaks off to retrieve them, and Florian salutes him by saying "Heil Hitler, sailor." Alfred responds in kind.

Alfred frequently engages in fantasies where he has some very important or very secret mission. Florian's half-lie, that he is engaged in a secret mission (true) for the Nazi Party (false) perfectly exploits Alfred's preexisting need to feel special. Although he has difficulty caring for others, Alfred is able to care for Florian because he knows doing so will potentially lead to him (Alfred) receiving some award, which will only further confirm his importance.



79. ALFRED

Alfred fully believes Florian's story. He is proud to help him, but has forgotten his promise to help Emilia, the Poet, and Klaus. They ask him to wait for them, and he watches as Emilia tearfully says goodbye to Florian, who disappears into the crowd. Although disgusted by the "weakness" of Emilia's tears, Alfred realizes that "she was Aryan, a fine specimen of the master race. She could be saved."

Alfred continually displays a shocking lack of empathy. He is unmoved by the clear emotional bonds between the refugees, which makes their farewell more difficult, and has no pity for young, pregnant, crying Emilia. He only cares about her because she looks Aryan (although she is not).



80. JOANA

Joana does her best to treat the many wounded soldiers flowing off the ambulance train. Dr. Richter asks her how many men she has examined who are healthy enough to survive a journey on the ship. She tells him confidently that she has counted seventy-three, although, in reality, she isn't sure. Still, she feels that she must try to save as many men as possible.

Joana does her best to help as many soldiers as she can. Although she does not know them, and although she is not even sure she can save them, she lies so as to give the greatest number of men a chance at survival.



81. EMILIA

Emilia feels abandoned, both by Joana and Florian, her "knight." However, she still has Eva, the Poet, and Klaus. Alfred leads Emilia to the front of a long line of refugees, against the protests of those who have been waiting for hours. Eva, unwilling to leave without her valuables, goes to find them, and so Alfred presents only Klaus, the Poet, and Emilia to the inspectors.

Eva cares more about her physical belongings than she does about her friends. The rest of the group, in contrast, would rather stick together and make it onto the same ship than retrieve the few physical objects left from their former lives.



82. FLORIAN

Back at the movie house, Florian worries that he misjudged Alfred, and that the soldier will not return to him. Florian thinks of Dr. Lange, whom he trusted, although Florian's father initially saw through him and warned Florian against his mentor.

Florian is haunted by his initial misjudgment of Dr. Lange, which has made him hesitant to trust or open himself to anyone since.



Florian remembers one day last July, when a Polish painting arrived on a truck. Florian recognized the painting as one that belonged to Poland. The Nazis had stolen it. A few days later Florian found his unopened letters in Dr. Lange's drawer. This is when he realized "Koch and Lange weren't saving the treasures of Europe. They were stealing them. And, unknowingly, I had been helping." The next day Florian traveled home to Tilsit to ask Florian's father for advice. When he arrived, a neighbor informed him his father had been killed.

Florian's memories of Dr. Lange and his father transport him back in time. He reveals for the first time that his revelation regarding Dr. Lange's untrustworthiness and the death of his father happened almost simultaneously, making him feel even guiltier that he did not listen to his father when he was alive.



83. EMILIA

Alfred insists Emilia show the inspectors her papers. She freezes. The papers aren't hers and she feels it isn't her right to steal this dead woman's identity. She wants to go home, and realizes that even if she boards a ship, she will have nowhere to go. The inspecting officer grows impatient but the Poet pushes her forward and points out her pregnancy. Alfred points out her Aryan features, though they make no real impression on the officer.

If Emilia uses the papers Joana took from the dead Latvian woman, she will be granted passage on a ship, will be able to have Joana care for her, and will likely survive. Without papers, however, she will be unable to board and will likely die. Even knowing this, Emilia feels guilty that she will survive by using this woman's papers, when the woman herself has died.



Emilia whispers to the Poet that it isn't right for her to steal a woman's identity. He convinces her that she must go on, "for [her] child." Elsewhere in line a mother cries and tries to pretend that her baby is sleeping and not dead. Watching this woman suffer convinces Emilia to take the dead woman's identity. She begins to fake labor so she can more swiftly board the ship.

Thinking about her obligation to the memories of her family—and about providing a future for her unborn child—motivates Emilia to lie about her identity to attain passage on a ship. She decides her duty to her flesh and blood is stronger than her duty to a dead stranger.



84. ALFRED

Alfred composes another mental letter to Hannelore. He explains how he found a nurse for Dr. Richter, and helped Emilia and her friends. He also tells her about Florian and his special mission for Gauleiter Koch. Alfred brags, "my catalog of heroics is growing so rapidly I can scarcely keep track."

For once, Alfred is able to tell Hannelore true facts about his life, instead of fantastic inventions that make him seem more important than he truly is. Still, he makes himself out to be the hero of the story, which is a clear fabrication.



85. JOANA

The crowds in Gotenhafen have doubled over the course of the day. Joana's stethoscope acts as a magnet for the sick or malcontent. Joana eventually puts it away so she can walk to the ship more directly.

For the first time, Joana makes the choice not to help strangers so she can attend to personal matters—in this case, finding her friends.



Joana runs into Eva, who is looking for the wagon full of her belongings. Joana worries that if Eva goes looking for her belongings now they'll never reconnect, or worse, Eva won't get passage on a ship at all.

Before the refugees took the boat to Gotenhafen, they had given another group of refugees the wagon full of their belongings. Eva is more preoccupied with finding the wagon and her possessions than with staying with her travel companions.



86. EMILIA

Emilia lists dates in her mind. "On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland from the west. On September 17, 1939, Russia invaded Poland from the east." The Nazis sent Polish people to "ghettos and concentration camps," and the Soviets sent them to "gulags and Siberia." Although Emilia has learned to stay quiet and keep secrets inside, she wonders, "how long could I play this game?" with war "both outside and inside." She wonders if Germany will be safe for her, and, when the war is over, "which side would be the right side for a Pole?"

Much of Emilia's life has been affected by the wars around her, and by the Nazi's treatment of her entire ethnic group. Because Polish people were seen as subhuman, she was forced to flee Poland in order to survive. Now, she has no sense if Polish people will ever be allowed to live freely again. She also hints at the traumas of her past when she refers to war "outside and inside." Often this trauma is concealed behind the fantasy of her "fiancé" August, but here she allows the truth to peek through.



87. FLORIAN

Florian waits impatiently for Alfred to arrive. He also wonders about Joana, and whether she will come for him. Florian looks at a German propaganda flyer he found outside the movie house about Good and Bad Germans. Florian believes that "the labels were currently applied in reverse." Florian knows that as more time passes the more likely it becomes that Lange will have found him out. He has a sudden thought that Erich Koch might be waiting on the docks for him.

Because he so seriously misjudged Dr. Lange, Florian remains wary of trusting new people. A Prussian who never bought into Nazi propaganda, Florian does not believe that he is a "bad German" for refusing to support the Nazi party. Instead, he thinks the Bad Germans are those who refused to think for themselves and bought into the hateful philosophy of the Nazis.



88. ALFRED

Alfred is assigned to collect life vests and floats. The task gives him the chance to go find Florian. He finds him in the movie house, where Florian hands Alfred the propaganda flyer he had found earlier. Florian tells the soldier that he believes Alfred is a "good German."

Earlier, Florian had been looking at the same piece of propaganda and thinking that the individuals whom Nazis have deemed "Good Germans" are actually bad people. However, he understands that Alfred has bought into the German's philosophy, and so Florian acts as though he believes the propaganda to try and get on Alfred's good side.



Alfred brings Florian a blank boarding pass and wonders how he will use it to get on the ship. Florian evades the question but asks Alfred to find Joana, and tell her that Florian needs to see her. Florian is surprised to find that Alfred thinks Joana is attractive. Defensively, he tells Alfred that Joana is "already spoken for."

Florian likes Joana and has become increasingly protective of her. When he sees that Alfred is potentially interested in her, Florian does his best to shut him down. However, by using vague language, he doesn't say who speaks for Joana, leaving open the possibility that she has some far-away lover.



89. JOANA

Joana worries Dr. Richter will be angry with her, because she abandoned her post to look for the Poet and the rest of her friends. Emilia, the Poet, and Klaus have all received boarding passes. Emilia is waiting for Joana in the movie theatre. As they talk, Alfred finds them, and announces that Florian “needs” Joana. Confused, she goes to find him.

Although guilty about leaving her post, Joana decides to prioritize her friends over her work. When she finds out Florian “needs” her, not understanding that he is not actually in trouble, she runs to him because she has grown to care about him and think of him as an important person in her life.



90. FLORIAN

Joana is annoyed to arrive and find that Florian did not have an emergency. Still, she stays to talk. Florian asks to see her boarding pass and looks at it carefully, memorizing details so he can forge his own later. Joana tells Florian that she is aboard the Wilhelm Gustloff, which is going to Kiel, near the Danish border, where Anni might be.

Florian initially wants to be on the same ship as Joana because he likes her, but is further motivated by the realization that he will potentially be able to reunite with his little sister.



Joana accuses Florian of only talking to her when he needs something, but he changes the subject quickly to ask her about her time in school. As they talk they draw closer together, almost kissing, before Joanna pulls back and leaves.

Joana is correct that Florian has been using and manipulating her. However, some of the feelings between them are real, and they are genuinely attracted to each other.



91. ALFRED

Alfred narrates another letter to Hannelore. He reminds her that the Wilhelm Gustloff was built as a leisure vessel for the everyman, and soon it will carry all sorts of people. Alfred explains sees himself as a hero and explains to Hannelore that, “to be a hero requires difficult choices and sacrifice.” He feels he will soon be called upon to participate in some greater cause.

Alfred continues to retreat into his fantasies in which he has cast himself as a hero midway through some epic journey. This sense of his own importance has only been reinforced by Florian’s lie that he is on a secret spy mission and needs Alfred’s help.



92. JOANA

Emilia wants to wait for Florian but Joana convinces her to come to the ship now. Passing again through the chaotic city, Joana wonders if Poland and Lithuania look this bad as well. The women enter the ship, and Joana is struck by the relative calm indoors, compared to the chaos outside. A bad feeling overtakes Emilia, and she wants to leave the ship, but Joana ushers her forward. They find Dr. Richter, who directs them to the maternity ward. He promises to find someone Latvian who will be able to speak to Emilia.

Emilia cares for Florian and is willing to put her own health in danger to wait for him. Luckily, Joana convinces Emilia that her wellbeing is important enough that she should take advantage of this preferential treatment. Although Emilia doesn’t give a specific reason for her ominous premonition, she often has bad, vague feelings about the future and about the likelihood of her own death.



93. EMILIA

Emilia feels increasingly panicked. She hates being inside the ship. She is caught up in a memory for a moment, remembering Mrs. Kleist who, like Hitler, believed in a master race, and who, like Hitler, believed the Polish were inferior. She hears the echoes of words spoken many months ago: “*Not that one. This one is prettier.*”

Even as the Wilhelm Gustloff is filled with bodies, and even as the Nazi officials promise it will lead to freedom, Emilia remembers that the ship is named for a man who was murdered. She thinks, “The ship was born of death.”

Emilia believes that, to some extent, a person's race determines their future. Because Emilia was Polish, Mrs. Kleist was unable to see her as a member of her family, and as result, allowed something terrible to happen to Emilia.



Emilia finally has a reason for her ominous feelings. It seems unlucky to be aboard a boat named for someone with such bad luck himself.



94. FLORIAN

Florian barricades himself in the projection room. He was able to look both at Joana's and Emilia's boarding passes, and so is better able to forge his own. He thinks back to when he first started drawing, and how proud Florian's father was of his skill. However, Florian was happy to only make copies, whereas his father hoped his son would make original artwork.

Florian often disappointed his father. However, in this instance, although he continues to practice a skill of which his father disapproved, Florian's father would likely support his son forging documents to save his own life and continue the family line.



95. ALFRED

Alfred writes another letter to Hannelore. He tells her the temperature is below freezing outside. He tells her about the sacrifices every German must make, and the sacrifices he himself has made—like taking a vapor bath to strengthen his lungs before he was deployed. Alfred writes that he will be happy to leave East Prussia, which he finds strange. He writes about members of the Prussian nobility who would rather stay in their homes and kill themselves when the Russians approached than leave their lands.

Alfred rarely demonstrates empathy for anyone else, inside or outside of his fantasies. In contrast to Joana, Florian, and the Poet, who understood that the Prussian nobility would rather die than leave their homes and legacies behind, Alfred cannot imagine being so committed to anything outside of oneself.



96. JOANA

Dr. Richter allows Joana a moment to “freshen up.” She barely recognizes herself, and is happy to clean herself but can't stop thinking about “The remorse [she] would never be able to wash down a sink.” She's glad she can “help and heal” as a distraction. Still, Joana misses her family and her cousin. She misses Lithuania and her language. She thinks, “Survival had its price: guilt.”

Joana remains guilty over her past. Here, her dirty skin is a kind of metaphor for her perceived dirty deeds, however, unlike dirt, her remorse cannot be washed away. Although she has survived to help others, Joana feels it is unfair that she has been allowed to continue to live.



97. FLORIAN

Done with his forgery, Florian considers whether to board now, and risk close inspection, or later, and risk all the hiding spots on the boat filling up. Florian takes a moment to wonder what will happen to all the art stolen by the Nazis. He knows someone will eventually go looking for the Amber Room is the “greatest treasure of all.” Florian knows Hitler will look for the **swan** first, but Florian is the only one with a map to the cellar where the Amber Room is hidden, and the only one with the key to access it.

Florian stole the amber swan as an act of revenge against Dr. Lange and against the Nazi Party as a whole. The swan represents his total rejection of their regime and doctrine. He took it because he knew it was the most precious item in the amber room.



98. JOANA

Back in the maternity ward aboard the ship, Dr. Richter observes, as Joana has, that Emilia is traumatized. He wonders if Joana has lost anything during the war. Joana wants to say that she’s lost her family, language, and country, but she holds back.

Joana misses her family, her homeland, and everything she has lost. However she worries that, even though she has lawfully repatriated, Dr. Richter will judge her for being Lithuanian and not German.



Joana pulls a cot next to Emilia’s so they can sleep side by side. Emilia reminds Joana of her cousin Lina, as both girls had “the same blond hair and sea-blue eyes, deep with strength and secrets.”

Joana has grown to love Emilia. This is helped by Emilia’s similarity to Lina, Joana’s cousin, whom she left behind in Lithuania. Although Joana was unable to help Lina, she has done her best to help Emilia.



99. ALFRED

As the temperature drops, Alfred decides it’s too cold for him to do his job (collecting life vests and floats). Instead, he marches through the ship singing to himself. A fellow soldier notices Alfred’s hands and suggests he go to the infirmary. Alfred likes this idea, as it will let him spy on Joana.

Once again, Alfred demonstrates his selfishness. Instead of doing his job, which would help other people later on in case of disaster, he only cares about his own comfort.



100. EMILIA

Joana falls asleep quickly, but Emilia is kept awake with the pain of contractions. She sings “All the little duckies” to herself, but it cannot keep pain, and painful memories, from flooding her mind. She remembers sitting on the floor outside of her mother’s room as her mother went into labor, and remembers the midwife coming out and telling her that her mother had died.

Emilia’s nursery rhyme occasionally helps soothe her and prevent her from dwelling on painful moments from the past, but as the physical pain of labor overtakes her she is unable to stop the memories.



Emilia believes her mother is with her now, and asks, in Polish, “I’m going to die now, aren’t I, Mama?” Joana wakes up when she hears Emilia speak, and helps sit her up in bed, which Joana takes as confirmation that she will die. However, she thinks, “Unlike Mama, I would not go to heaven. My secrets padlocked the gates.”

Emilia remains connected to her mother even though her mother has died. She feels especially close to her mother in this moment because Emilia fears that she, like her mother, will die in childbirth.



Emilia is suddenly wracked with intense pain. Joana becomes busy preparing Emilia to give birth, and urges her to think of August. Not wanting to die with a guilty conscience, Emilia reveals, through tears, “There is no August.”

Joana has believed Emilia’s fantasy about August, whom Emilia claimed to be her child’s father. In reality, although August did exist, he did not father her child. This was a lie Emilia constructed so she did not have to dwell on the painful truth.



101. JOANA

Joana can barely understand what Emilia, “gripped with pain and terror” is saying in a mixture of German and Polish. She screams variations of “*Liar. Liar. Help me, Mama!*” to which Joana is unable to respond.

Emilia feels guilty that she has lied about what has happened to her, and also feels guilty about her pregnancy. In this moment, because she feels certain she is going to die, she tries to reveal the truth behind her fantasy life.



Alfred comes into the infirmary and Joana sends him to get Dr. Richter. However, the doctor does not come quickly enough and so Joana must deliver the child alone. Emilia pushes her baby, “a perfect little **bird**,” into Joana’s waiting arms.

Emilia often uses storks as a stand-in for family and home. That her baby is described as a “bird” suggests that Emilia’s child can help her create a new family and a home somewhere new.



102. FLORIAN

Florian brings the Poet and Klaus into the projection room to sleep. The Poet asks Florian about his hollow heel, which he noticed many days ago. Florian worries the Poet will ask more questions, but he doesn’t. Instead, he talks about how the war has stolen six years from him. Florian wonders “What would it mean to be German after the war? What would it mean to be Prussian?”

Both men have grown closer and more comfortable with each other, even though Florian still holds on to some secrets. They wonder how their ethnic and national identities will shape their futures. For many years, any sense of culture or pride in one’s national identity were systematically stripped away as the Nazis divided groups into desirable and undesirable based on race, ethnicity, and nationality.



The Poet tells Florian that Klaus came out of the woods with an address pinned to his coat. They wonder who is waiting for him at that address in Berlin. The Poet explains that while he understands everyone dies, it is hardest for him to accept the death and suffering of children.

The Poet has become increasingly attached to Klaus. This is because he loves the boy, but also because he has empathy for the plight of all children.



103. EMILIA

Emilia is shocked to be alive. She is also surprised she does not feel better; she thought she was supposed to feel better after telling the truth. She wonders if it was because Joana didn’t understand her and asks herself, “Was it enough to admit the lie to yourself and the heavens, or did you have to tell someone who listened?”

Emilia has finally begun to dismantle the fantasy she has constructed around her past to protect herself. Much of her pain comes from the trauma of her past, and much comes from her denial of it.



August did exist, and was kind to her, but he wasn't the father of her child. Instead, one day Russian soldiers arrived at the Kleist family farm. They tried to take Else, but Mrs. Kleist told them "we have one who is much prettier," and traded Emilia for her own daughter. Emilia was dragged to the cold cellar, where the Soviet soldiers raped her.

Joana brings Emilia's baby to her. Dr. Richter asks if she has a name yet, but Emilia shakes her head no. Exhausted, Emilia closes her eyes and waits to die.

Emilia finally looks past her fantasy to the real events of the past. Mrs. Kleist was unwilling to accept Emilia as a member of her family worthy of protection because Emilia was Polish. This directly led to Emilia's rape.



Having survived a traumatic rape and carried that child to term, all the while expecting to die in childbirth, Emilia is unprepared for motherhood.



104. FLORIAN

Florian decides to try and board the ship sooner rather than later. He thinks traveling with the Poet and Klaus will help his case. Florian carries Klaus on his shoulders so that the group can better navigate the crowd. In the distance is the sound of artillery shells. Rumors fly through the crowd of Allied attacks on soldiers and civilians. A woman tries to buy Klaus, thinking she'll have a better chance of getting on with a child, but the Poet and Florian reject her offer.

Florian, Klaus, and the Poet approach the harbor. Florian makes sure the blood from the wound on his side is visible, even as he considers his *sippenhaft*, or bloodguilt, an invisible wound. Because his father made maps for an assassination attempt on Hitler, he was hanged. Florian is guilty by association. Plus, Florian is now smuggling the key and map to the Amber Room, which will also spell out certain death if he is discovered. He reflects, "Beck blood was bad."

Florian wants to be on the ship because it will take him closer to his sister, but also because Joana and her fellow travelers will be on it. As he often is, Florian is torn between self interest and a sense of community. He lifts Klaus onto his shoulders partially out of kindness, but also partially because he knows if he looks related to Klaus he will be more likely to gain passage.



Florian's connection to his father gives him strength. Revenge motivates him onwards, but it also puts him in danger. Florian worries that his "bad blood" has not only doomed him if he is captured by Nazis, but that it carries some kind of supernatural bad luck that will prevent him from escaping Germany.



105. JOANA

Joana thinks over what Emilia said to her during labor. She understands what Emilia was trying to say—that the child is not August's but the product of rape—but hopes that she is wrong. Dr. Richter introduces Joana to a new doctor, Dr. Wendt, and tells her the ship will soon set sail.

Now that Emilia has revealed the truth, Joana is able to deconstruct Emilia's fantasy and finally understand what happened to her. Joana had originally assumed Emilia was raped at Nemmersdorf, but was misled by Joana's fantasy.



106. EMILIA

Emilia wakes up. Joana tries to get her to move around a little bit, but she resists. Joana finally understands what happened to Emilia, and Emilia sees that Joana looks at her differently. Joana takes Emilia's hands and tells Emilia what she has been waiting to hear, the words she thinks her "Mama would say [...]" if she could." Joana tells Emilia she's so sorry for what happened to her.

Emilia has carried immense shame and guilt as a result of her rape. She worried that revealing this part of her past would change how others viewed her. However, Joana understands that Emilia is a blameless victim of sexual violence. Joana still cares for and respects Emilia, and treats her with additional kindness now that she understands the trauma Emilia has endured.



107. FLORIAN

Florian, Klaus, and the Poet approach the officers. A soldier asks Klaus about his relationship to Florian and the Poet, and Klaus calls Florian his uncle, and the Poet his *Opi*, or grandfather. The soldier notices Florian's wound and asks to see his papers, which pass inspection.

Florian and the Poet pretend to be related to each other and Klaus, because they know that will improve their chances of boarding a ship. Florian also flaunts his wound because he hopes it will make him seem weaker and therefore worthy of preferential treatment.



Before they go to the next inspection point, Eva appears, carrying the Poet's carpetbag and Joana's suitcase. She managed to get passage on a different ship and says her goodbyes, unsentimentally asking Florian to make sure Joana gets her bag, as Joana was the "only one of you that I liked. Sorry."

Although Eva often claims she does not care about her fellow travelers, and she prioritized finding her belongings over staying with the group, the fact that she returned their belongings to them demonstrates she did care about them somewhat.



108. JOANA

Emilia pretends to sleep. Joana knows she must raise her spirits and convince her to nurse, for the health of the baby, but also to avoid suspicion.

Without her fantasy, Emilia has difficulty dealing with her trauma. Joana cares about Emilia and her child, both from the perspective of her nurse and her friend.



Alfred comes to speak to Joana. She assumes he needs help with his hands, but instead he asks if she would like to take a walk with him sometime. Joana explains she's busy with work, and is surprised he is not busier as well.

Alfred has developed a crush on Joana. He prioritizes the potential of a romantic connection above his own professional duties, and doesn't even consider that Joana would be too busy saving lives to pay attention to him.



109. FLORIAN

The next checkpoint is luggage inspection. Florian is nervous. The line is efficient, and soon Florian is at the front. The Poet and Klaus make it through easily, but Florian is flagged for additional inspection. This new officer (later referred to as the blonde Nazi) is young, healthy and Aryan. He eyes Florian suspiciously.

This is the first time Florian runs into trouble with his papers. Because this soldier has benefited so heavily from his Aryan German identity, he is more invested in policing who will and who will not benefit from "approved" identities.



Florian explains one of his bags is for his nurse. The blonde Nazi asks for her name. Florian feels guilty about implicating her, but nonetheless tells the soldier her name is Joana. Having only seen his identification papers, the soldier wonders why Florian isn't serving in the military. Florian gives him the medical testimony, and the forged document from Gauleiter Koch. The soldier is angry that Florian did not provide him with all of his papers initially, and has now embarrassed him by pulling rank, but lets him through.

Florian cares enough about Joana to feel guilty for implicating her, however he is selfish enough to implicate her anyway, knowing that it will make his life easier to name her. Florian's regular papers were not impressive enough to ensure him passage on the ship, but his forged papers, which make him appear to be a high-ranking German spy, help ease his passage.



110. ALFRED

Alfred walks through the ship. Joana had asked him to keep a lookout for Florian, and this request has reinvigorated Alfred. He runs into the Poet and Klaus, who make their dislike of him known. The Poet tells Alfred he saw him kick a stray dog, and Alfred responds that, according to Hitler, "it makes no sense to support the weak or crippled."

Alfred feels important completing tasks for Joana and Florian, whom he still believes is on a secret Nazi mission. Joana and Florian do not like or respect him, and neither do Klaus or the Poet. Although Florian sometimes acts selfishly, the other three care deeply about the wellbeing of others, and the survival of the weak.



111. JOANA

Joana tries to hold Emilia's baby near her and inspire some sense of motherly love. Alfred, who has brought Florian, distracts her. She has him lay on a cot and takes his stitches out, but Florian can tell Joana's mind is elsewhere. She explains Emilia had her baby, but that she has been lying about how it was conceived.

More characters learn that Emilia's story about her baby's father, August, was a fantasy constructed to protect her from the horrible truth. Florian and Joana care about Emilia's wellbeing and do their best to get her to accept and care for her baby.



Joana understands that Emilia clung to Florian because he "saved her from the Russian in the forest." He's "proof that there are still good men in the world." Florian disagrees. Joana asks Florian to come talk to Emilia and raise her spirits.

Joana understands the connection Emilia felt to Florian. She hopes that Florian—the person Emilia seems to care about most, can help convince Emilia to live, and to embrace her baby.



112. EMILIA

Florian comes to greet Emilia. She still calls him her "knight." He takes the baby and compliments her, saying the baby has Emilia's eyes and nose. He tells her, "Kind of incredible. She is you, she is your mother, your father, your country." He kisses the baby and hands her back to Emilia, who is ready to accept her role as a mother.

Emilia's fantasy of Florian as a protective knight remains intact. Florian helps explain that, as a survivor, Emilia has the opportunity to carry on the legacy of her family and her country. Her daughter is not only a physical manifestation of Emilia's rejection of her trauma, but a symbol of a brighter future, in which the past can live on through memory.



113. FLORIAN

Joana is shocked at how good Florian was with the baby. Florian is going to go look for a hiding place, but before he does he talks with Joana for a moment. They flirt and smile, and the Joana thanks him for bringing her suitcase, and for helping Emilia, with a kiss. Florian kisses her back.

This moment is significant as it demonstrates that although Florian has often presented himself as a lone wolf, he does have the ability to empathize and connect with other people—as seen in his treatment of Emilia and her baby, and his flirtation with Joana.



114. JOANA

Joana takes a moment to consider her kiss with Florian. Did she kiss him to thank him? Or because she really likes him? She thinks ahead to the end of the voyage. It will only take the ship two days to reach Kiel, and then hopefully Joana will be able to reunite with her mother.

Even as Joana makes new connections with her fellow travelers, she continues to be motivated by her desire to reunite with her family. Although she wonders if it was a kiss of thanks, her earlier attraction to Florian suggests that she does genuinely like him.



115. ALFRED

Alfred composes another letter to Hannelore. He tells her he feels his friendship with Florian has developed. He also tells her about his potential medal. He ends the letter reminding Hannelore that “everything I achieve, everything I have done, it is all for you. For you and for Germany.”

Although Alfred says he is motivated by his love for Hannelore and Germany, in his thoughts it is clear he is motivated by love for himself.



116. EMILIA

Emilia considers what Florian told her as she cradles her child. She hopes the baby will have a chance to know Poland, Poland before the war, when “Poles, Jews, Ukrainians, Armenians, and Hungarians” coexisted peacefully. Emilia begins to whisper to her daughter, “There were no ghettos, no armbands. I often fell asleep to a breeze floating through my open window. It’s true. It was like that once.”

Emilia’s child allows her to connect to her past. Her baby is an opportunity for Emilia to revisit her positive memories of her family and Poland, and a vessel for her hopes about a peaceful future. Just as Emilia once lived peacefully and happily, she hopes her daughter will one day experience the same kind of happy life.



117. FLORIAN

Florian hides away in the hollow chimney in the center of the ship. Alfred comes in with news that a group of female naval auxiliaries are being housed in the ship. He seems to be trying to bond with Florian over the thought of pretty women, but it does not work. Florian asks Alfred about himself, and Alfred explains he was a late recruit because he was generally untalented, a fact that disappointed his father but relieved his Mutter.

Alfred wants to win Florian’s approval, if not necessarily his friendship. However, the two men are too different to ever get along, and their relationship is based on mutual need; Florian needs Alfred’s help navigating the ship, communicating with Joana, and staying hidden, while Alfred needs Florian to feel important.



Florian asks Alfred if his Mutter loved the Hitler. Defensively, Alfred points out “We all love the Führer [...] as the papers say, ‘The good German fights for the Führer.’” Alfred admits he sometimes feels sad for those who “could not be part of the master race.” Florian finds Alfred and his views increasingly off-putting.

Alfred reveals himself to be antisocial, maybe even sociopathic. However, this is the first time he has expressed any sympathy for people not of the master race, who were killed or imprisoned as a result of their ethnic, racial, or religious backgrounds.



118. JOANA

The blonde Nazi interrupts Joana in the maternity ward. He is looking for Florian and wants Joana to confirm his name, which she will not do on the grounds of confidentiality. The soldier threatens Joana, pointing out that as a repatriated Lithuanian she could easily be turned over to Stalin.

Joana cares about Florian enough that she will put herself in danger. Although she legally repatriated, she remains vulnerable as her asylum status could technically be revoked at any time.



The blonde Nazi reveals that Florian is a courier for Gauleiter Koch, and that Florian claimed Joana was assigned, by Koch, as his personal nurse. The soldier also tells Joana about the signed medical testimony (which Florian, unbeknownst to her, had forged with her signature). Shocked by this new information, Joana nonetheless maintains her composure. She tells the soldier she briefly saw Florian to take out his stitches, but that he had said he wanted to board the *Hansa*, another ship, instead.

Joana is forced to confront the fact that, although she likes Florian and has recently kissed him, she doesn't fully know him. Some of the information the blonde Nazi has presented her with is false—identification papers fabricated by Florian to gain access to the ship—but Joana, like the blonde Nazi, is forced to wonder if Florian is a Nazi spy.



119. EMILIA

Emilia eavesdrops on Joana's conversation with the blonde Nazi. This is the first time she has heard Florian's name. She's thrilled to learn his name is Florian, like the Patron Saint of Poland.

Emilia always thought of Florian as her protecting knight, and so her fantasy is only reinforced when she learns his name is that of a Polish protector.



Emilia is taken back to living on the farm with the Kleists. She remembers Mrs. Kleist complaining about how much it cost to take care of Emilia over the past four years, and she remembers saying her father would return and pay the Kleists back, only to be told by Mrs. Kleist that her father was dead already.

Emilia embraced the Kleist family, but the family never fully embraced her—least of all Mrs. Kleist, who believed that Emilia, a Polish person, was racially inferior. This rejection was even more devastating for Emilia when she learned that the last member of her biological family had died.



Back in the present, the Poet and Klaus have arrived in the maternity ward and want to see the baby. The Poet finds it beautiful that the baby “has beaten this war,” like “like [spitting] in the eye of death.”

The Poet and Klaus have welcomed Emilia into their chosen family and have accepted her baby as well.



120. ALFRED

Alfred writes another letter to Hannelore. He relays his conversation with Florian. He confesses his occasional sympathy “for those who are inferior,” but continues, “we are good Germans. It is our birthright” to weed out those whom Hitler has deemed undesirable. Although he was often teased as a child, and was rejected from the Hitler Youth, Alfred explains, “I now understand what it is to feel superior. And I quite like it.”

In his letter, Alfred once again expresses his sympathy for those who are not members of the “master race.” Here, however, his sympathy seems based on his own former feelings of insecurity. Now that he feels powerful and important assisting Florian with his “mission,” he feels less empathetic.



121. FLORIAN

Florian thinks of home, of his mother who died of tuberculosis, of his little sister. He wonders, “Would I recognize her if I passed her on the street? Where had she been and what had she experienced?”

Florian loves and misses his family members. He feels guilty that he has been separated from his sister for so long.



Alfred interrupts his thoughts with a meal delivery. He tells Florian the ship will depart soon. Alfred shares some Nazi doctrine, and Florian suggests that Alfred might be better off thinking for himself. Alfred remarks that he finds Hitler’s writing to be beautiful, but Florian is disturbed. He believes Alfred to be “a sociopath in training.”

As Alfred tries to connect with Florian he only alienates the Prussian more. The advice Florian gives Alfred is advice from his father, which Florian himself had originally ignored.



122. JOANA

Joana is furious with Florian. She considers how she is *Volkdeutsche*, of German ancestry, and wonders how much she owes to Germany, and whether she should turn him in. Alfred comes to fetch Joana once again, and they navigate the ship together. Although only built for fourteen hundred, the ship holds over eight thousand people. Joana is grateful to be in the relatively calm maternity ward, instead of fighting for space in a hallway or stairwell. Alfred brings Joana to the secret chimney where Florian is hiding. Joana asks for a moment alone with Florian.

Joana has often expressed love for her native Lithuania, but rarely for her adopted home of Germany. Instead, she has only expressed occasional gratitude at being able to repatriate. Based on her past expressions of national pride, her desire to turn in Florian seems to come as much from anger at his betrayal as it does a sense of duty to her adopted nation.



123. FLORIAN

Joana is furious. She slaps Florian. She’s angry that he forged a letter, and that he claimed Erich Koch appointed her. She’s also angry that he’s putting her in danger. She remembers Ingrid and Eva saying he was a thief and a spy. She regrets ever trusting him. Florian wonders if she will turn him in.

Joana feels betrayed by Florian. She has opened herself to him emotionally, and she worries that he has only been kind to her in order to advance his own personal mission.



124. JOANA

Joana wants Florian to tell her the truth. He explains that he isn't really carrying anything for Koch, but that he is carrying the **amber swan**. He stole this out of revenge after Nazis killed his father. To try and explain why he has been deceiving her, Florian asks Joana if she loves her country and family. She does, and he explains that he also loved his country and his family.

Joana is not convinced, even when Florian promises to prove to the blonde Nazi she was not involved by showing the soldier how he forged Joana's signature from the note she left in the Prussian manor that Florian stole to protect her. Joana leaves, angrily, but first tells him that he should watch out for himself, because the soldier is sending a wire to Koch about Florian.

Florian has been acting out of a desire for revenge, but also out of love. His love for his father and his love for his native Prussia have motivated him to act out against Hitler, and against Nazi Germany, whom he feels have destroyed his life and stolen his homeland from him.



Although she feels angry and betrayed, Joana cares enough about Florian to warn him about the message being sent to Koch. Although these revelations about Florian are false, she still has to reconsider if he is worthy of her trust, considering how little she knows about him.



125. EMILIA

Emilia thinks back to her time with the Kleist family. She worked hard but nothing she did was enough for Frau Kleist. Still, Else and August were kind to her. She doesn't blame Else for her rape, but wonders if she ever thinks of it, or if she, too, tries to bury the memories.

Although Emilia has suffered incredible trauma, she remains kind and empathetic towards the Kleist family, who passively let the Soviet soldiers rape her. She wonders whether they endured some kind of secondhand trauma as a result of her rape.



126. FLORIAN

Florian wonders if Joana is telling the truth, and if Koch really has been wired. It is now nighttime, and as the ship sleeps, Florian goes to find Joana in the infirmary. She confirms that the soldier did contact Koch.

Florian is as concerned for his own safety as he is about his damaged relationship with Joana. He doesn't know her well, and so does not know if she is the kind of person to threaten him out of spite. She is not, and told him about Koch because she still cares for him.



127. ALFRED

Alfred spends the early morning spying on the women who have been housed in the drained pools far below deck. After many hours, he's interrupted by a soldier looking for Florian. The soldier asks the women if they've seen Florian, and when Alfred tries to say he knows Florian, the soldier dismisses him. Alfred is angry, and thinks to himself "I did not serve this soldier. I did not serve my father. I served only one. The one." He then salutes, "Heil Hitler!" and walks out.

Although Alfred has many important duties that will help the ship run more smoothly, he is happy to satisfy his own basic desires—like spying on women—instead of doing his job. Still, he holds on to his delusional beliefs that, even as he actively shirks his duty, he is personally serving Hitler and the Nazi Party.



128. JOANA

In the maternity ward, Emilia tells Joana she's named the baby Halinka, after her mother, Halina's nickname.

By naming her baby after her mother, Emilia fully welcomes Halinka into her family.



The blonde Nazi returns to the maternity ward. Koch has written back and has a message for Florian. Curious, Joana asks about it. It says, "Have Beck contact me directly. Tell DRL dead. Keys needed. Urgent."

Joana asks about the message because she still cares about Florian's wellbeing. Although Joana doesn't fully understand the message, readers understand that Dr. Lange has died, and although Koch knows the keys are missing, he does not necessarily suspect Florian of having stolen them and defected.



129. FLORIAN

Florian considers his Prussian identity. He wonders what will happen to the forty million people who called Prussia home. "Its legacy reached back to the thirteenth century, but now lay crushed underfoot. Can history disappear if it's written in blood?" An air horn signals that the ship is finally departing. Through a seam in the steel, Florian watches the frantic refugees who have been unable to board. He knows the "Gustloff was their only hope," just as it was his.

Florian remains connected to his past, his culture, and his homeland. Although Prussia is part of the German Empire, he is distinctly Prussian and not German. His question is prescient; after WWII, Prussia was dissolved and reabsorbed by other European nations, essentially disappearing from the map although remaining alive in ethnic and cultural memory.



130. ALFRED

Alfred writes another letter to Hannelore. He tells her the ship finally departed, at ten times carrying capacity. He tells her he is of steely constitution, before ending the letter and vomiting on his own shoes.

Once again, Alfred's imaginary letter to Hannelore contrasts sharply with the reality of his life and military service.



131. EMILIA

Emilia is nauseated by the motion of the ship. She is shocked she is still alive. She notes, "I hadn't planned for this. I was certain the birthing would kill both of us, just as it had Mama." She wonders if she has misread the signs. Six years ago, after her mother had died, Emilia took part in Saint John's Night, a festival on the summer solstice. As was tradition, she made a **wreath** of flowers and candles and launched it on the river. Legend has it that the boy who catches your wreath will marry you, but Emilia's wreath became snagged on something in the river, caught on fire, and sank.

Throughout the novel, Emilia has anticipated her own imminent death. Here, she reveals that her superstition was born out of two distinct events: the death of her own mother in childbirth, and the sinking of her wreath. Emilia's wreath symbolized her life and her future, and so the fact that it both burned and sank implied that she would never marry.



Emilia feels that “something changed when the knight arrived.” For the first time in a long time, people have cared for and protected her. Emilia looks down at her daughter, who is, like Florian said, “part of me, my family and Poland.” She wonders if her troubles are over.

Having survived childbirth, Emilia feels she may have beaten her curse. After having been on her own for so long, the idea of Florian as her personal savior, as well as her new baby, which represents a brighter future both for her and Poland, makes her optimistic.



132. FLORIAN

Waiting in the chimney, Florian considers the future. He plans to try and get from Kiel to Denmark where his sister, Anni, is living with their great aunt. He has the stolen identity card of a German soldier Emilia killed in the woods. He considers using it to disembark the ship without incident, especially since Koch is looking for him.

Once again, Florian’s future can be bought through manipulated identity papers. As always, he is motivated by thoughts of his family, and specifically by thoughts of being reunited with his long-lost sister.



133. ALFRED

Seasick, Alfred tries to check himself into the infirmary. The injured soldiers there mock him, and the nurses turn him away.

Alfred is unable to see that his own affliction is less severe than that of soldiers who were injured in combat.



Alfred composes another mental letter to Hannelore. He remembers playing on the same team as her once, during a game in the street. He wonders why sometimes people don’t “assist or even welcome those on their own team,” but is even more confused by people who “welcome those from an opposing team.” He gives the example of Hannelore’s own parents. He does not understand why her mother married her father. When he asked Hannelore’s mother about this, she explained her reasons for marrying her husband: “Because I love him.”

Although Alfred rarely seems interested in collaborating with or helping others, he is nonetheless judgmental of Hannelore’s mother who, he will later reveal, was an ethnic German woman married to a Jewish man. Alfred cannot understand how love can transcend the strict racial, religious, and ethnic boundaries drawn by the Nazi Party, although his love for Hannelore technically transcends this boundary.



134. JOANA

Florian visits Joana in the maternity ward again. He needs her help cutting his hair into the crew cut of a soldier. She follows him back to his chimney and assists him, her anger abating. As she cuts they chat. She tells Florian how he had revealed a few secrets about himself the first night they met, when she did surgery on him. He doesn’t remember, and asks if she revealed any secrets to him. Joana tells Florian again that she is a murderer.

Florian and Joana care enough about each other that they are able to move past Florian’s deception. Joana, who has been mentioning her guilt and hinting at her past crimes, finally reveals the truth, a disclosure that further cements her intimate relationship with Florian.



135. FLORIAN

Joana clarifies that she believes her actions indirectly led to the death her cousin. When she was evacuating Lithuania, she wrote Lina a letter explaining her family had to go because her father was involved with an anti-Soviet group. The letter was intercepted, and the Soviets came looking for Joana's family, taking Lina's instead.

Joana knows her uncle died in a Soviet gulag, and believes Lina, if she is still alive, is in Siberia. Joana feels "so guilty. My freedom cost her family their lives." Lina was about to go to art school when she was arrested. This is why Joana has been carrying a drawing with her—the same drawing Florian briefly stole.

Joana has finished cutting Florian's hair. They discuss what they'll do once they land in Kiel. Both will try to contact their respective families. They make a plan to meet up later. As she leaves, Joana relays Koch's message to Florian. He is uneasy. Dr. Lange has died. Florian believes he is next.

Joana is not literally a murderer, but she is burdened by guilt as though she directly killed her relative. Her accidentally harmful actions led to her cousin's imprisonment, but in no way did Joana directly bring about Lina's death.



Joana has carried her guilt with her as well as her memories. Although carrying Lina's drawing with her is painful, Joana seems to draw strength from this connection to her past and her family.



Florian remains superstitious and pessimistic about his future. Although he does not explicitly say this, he is likely considering the curse of the Amber Room, which he believes led to Dr. Lange's death.



136. EMILIA

Emilia watches Joana return to the maternity ward, smiling. Emilia knows something is happening between Joana and Florian. A broadcast celebrating the 12th anniversary of Hitler's appointment to chancellor of Germany begins on the ship speakers. Emilia catches only a few phrases, including "When was the helpless goose ever not eaten by the fox?"

Although Emilia loves Florian because he is her "knight," she selflessly watches Joana's relationship with him unfold. Each woman has a different kind of connection to the Prussian, and each is secure and generous enough to understand that he has love for them both.



137. ALFRED

Still seasick, Alfred collapses in the music room. When a little girl laughs at him, he tears the button eye off her stuffed bear.

Alfred has no empathy for the suffering of the refugees around him.



138. FLORIAN

Florian wanders through the ship to find the Poet and Klaus. Florian likes the Poet, and wishes he had apprenticed with someone like him instead of Dr. Lange. Florian and the Poet finally exchange real names. They discuss their futures. The Poet admits he likes being a grandfather, and will continue to look after the boy. Florian says he'll look for Anni, but worries he won't recognize her. The Poet assures him he will. The two talk about love. The Poet was married for 55 years, and suggests Florian has found a kind of real love with Joana.

Florian and the Poet's relationship has continued to develop and strengthen. The disclosure of their real names is a major step forward. They are finally fully open and intimate with each other. Florian is able to love his new family even as he searches for his sister. His thoughts about Anni help drive him forward, whereas the Poet and his other friends help support him in the present.



139. JOANA

Joana is excited to see Florian again soon. As she thinks this, the ship is rocked by a series of loud bangs, the lights flicker off, and the alarm bells begin to ring.

Joana has fully forgiven Florian and has welcomed him back into her life after his betrayal.



149. EMILIA

Emilia is thrown to the floor as the ship is rocked by loud bangs. She crawls looking for her baby and Joana.

Even in the midst of disaster, Emilia is first and foremost concerned with the wellbeing of her loved ones.



150. ALFRED

Twenty-five nautical miles offshore, the ship is hit by something. Alfred can tell the ship is listing. Its nose is sinking.

In contrast to the other protagonists, Alfred is not concerned with the wellbeing of anyone else.



151. FLORIAN

As the ship slams from side to side, Florian realizes it has been hit with torpedoes. The Poet makes sure to adjust Klaus's life vest.

Like Emilia, Florian's immediate concern is the wellbeing of those around him.



152. JOANA

The ship immediately tilts and the room begins to slide. Joana wants to wait for orders from Dr. Wendt and Dr. Richter, but Emilia, with Halinka in her arms, insists they get their coats and evacuate. Emilia knows the ship is sinking and wants to make sure they get to the deck safely.

Even in an emergency, Joana is committed to her role as a nurse. Emilia, meanwhile is more concerned with guaranteeing the safety of her friends and family.



153. EMILIA

Emilia cannot get the image of the burning, sinking **wreath** out of her mind. She tries to call out to other women to get their coats and evacuate. She knows she and Joana must move now, or risk getting trapped below deck, either by waters or the densely packed, panicked passengers.

Although she had temporarily been optimistic about the future, Emilia wonders if the burning and sinking of her wreath means that she will die on a burning sinking ship.



155. ALFRED

A sailor running through the ship instructs everyone to put on their life vests. He tells Alfred Russian submarines have hit the ship. The floor of the ship begins to tip, and a little girl is crushed by a piano. Alfred takes her life vest and begins to evacuate, leaving the rest of the refugees in the room behind.

Alfred reveals his true colors in an emergency. Instead of helping those around him, he acts selfishly. Instead of helping the little girl, he steals her life vest, ensuring he will survive while she will not.



155. FLORIAN

Florian rushes to evacuate to the deck of the ship with the Poet and Klaus, making sure they all stay together. Florian doesn't have a life vest but pushes on ahead anyway, even as one of the straps on his backpack breaks.

Florian is more concerned with the wellbeing of the Poet and Klaus than he is with his own survival. The novel is more sympathetic toward characters who display qualities of selflessness.



156. JOANA

Announcements over the speaker system urge passengers to remain calm. Dr. Wendt runs into the room, and instructs Joana to ignore the speakers, and to evacuate all the women to the deck and onto lifeboats. The ship is tilting at an even steeper angle, which makes it hard to climb the stairs. Joana tries to help a child trampled on the path to the deck but is pushed forward by the surging crowd.

Joana remains committed to her job as a nurse, even when abandoning her post would increase her chances of survival. Even on the stairs, when stopping could easily lead to her own death at the hands of her fellow passengers, Joana prioritizes helping other over helping herself.



157. ALFRED

Alfred runs along the corridor, ignoring cries for help, and stealing a coat from a woman putting on her life vest. A fellow soldier helps smash the windows and break the doors of people stuck inside locked rooms, but Alfred has no desire to help anyone but himself. Instead, he runs the numbers in his head: the ship's capacity is 1,463, there are 10,573 people on board, and of the 22 lifeboats the boat should have, only 12 are accounted for.

Once again, Alfred demonstrates a total disregard for the wellbeing of others. Even though stealing a woman's coat will mean she will likely freeze outside, Alfred doesn't care. He only cares about his own survival, and only cares about the lack of lifeboats because it means he is less likely to get on one.



158. EMILIA

Emilia and Halinka make it to the deck. The nose of the Gustloff is already underwater. Emilia sings "All the little duckies" to Halinka as she looks around, not for a lifeboat, but for her knight, Florian.

Emilia sings "all the little duckies" in times of stress to calm herself, but it does not work now, as the stress is too great.



159. FLORIAN

Florian, Klaus, and the Poet make it to the top deck. The Poet realizes that it is slippery and they must crawl to prevent from sliding. People are slipping into the sea, and lifeboats are overturning. The Poet instructs them to "look for our girls."

Even as they fight for their own lives, Florian, Klaus, and the Poet look out for their friends and loved ones.



160. JOANA

Climbing onto the deck, Joana cannot find Emilia. She helps direct pregnant women towards Dr. Wendt and Dr. Richter, who are loading the wounded onto boats. She watches, in horror, as an anti-aircraft gun comes unmoored from the deck, slides, and crashes into a lifeboat, drowning its passengers.

Joana remains dedicated to helping other people even as delaying her escape puts her own life in grave danger. The novel is sympathetic in its portrayal of selfless characters like Joana.



161. ALFRED

Alfred makes it to the deck. Passengers are crying for help and looking to him, but he makes no effort to assist anyone. The chaos somehow calms Alfred and his “arm [begins] moving, turning the invisible crank of Death’s music box.” Alfred sees the ship’s captain boarding a boat. He thinks if the captain is evacuating, he should, too. Before he can, however, he sees Klaus, the Poet, and Florian, who is screaming for Joana.

Unlike Joana, who is volunteering her time, energy, and possibly her life to save other evacuees, Alfred only cares about himself. While Klaus, the Poet, Florian try to find Joana and Emilia, and Emilia tries to find them, Alfred instead tries to find a lifeboat to save only himself.



162. FLORIAN

The remaining boats are filling, but Florian wants to find Joana and Emilia before he boards one. He spots them through the crowd. He helps Joana into a boat first. Emilia refuses to get in until Florian gets in and carries her baby down. Florian leaves his pack with Alfred so he can more easily carry Halinka down the ladder into the boat. The sailor announces only one more person is allowed on the boat. Joana tries to get Emilia to come, but Emilia pushes Klaus from the deck of the ship into the boat. Alfred is left with Florian’s pack on deck, and Florian is left with Emilia’s baby in the lifeboat.

The protagonists, with the exception of Alfred, want to make sure everyone is taken care of before they get into a boat. Emilia selflessly wants to make sure her daughter is safe before she herself is, and only trusts Florian, her “knight,” to carry Halinka to safety. Although there is only a single spot left in the boat, Emilia saves Klaus’ life rather than her own.



163. JOANA

The lifeboat drops into the sea. Klaus cries for the Poet who jumps into the ocean behind them. Florian stands to dive in after him, but the boat is thrown by a wave and he stumbles before he can attempt a rescue. Florian reveals the Poet tied a sack of coins to his belt and gave his life jacket to Florian, dying so that Florian could live.

The Poet sacrifices himself so that Klaus, Florian, and the others can live. Even though Florian knows that the Poet jumped into the water intending to drown, Florian cares so much about his friend that he is willing to dive in after him.



164. ALFRED

Alfred is frozen on the deck — the lifeboats are gone, and he is too afraid to jump. Emilia notices two rafts, stuck together by ice. She kicks them to free them and pulls Alfred on board as it slides across the deck.

Emilia is willing to help Alfred even though he has made few efforts to help her, and all of his efforts were motivated by his misconception of her as an Aryan woman worthy of salvation.



165. EMILIA

The raft slides across the deck, launching itself into the ocean. Drowning, freezing people float in the water. Emilia tires to call out to those in the water, offering them a place to rest on her raft.

Having survived thus far, Emilia does her best to help other people survive as well.



The Wilhelm Gustloff has sunk entirely, and Emilia thinks to herself, “how foolish to believe we are more powerful than the sea or the sky.”

After briefly believing that she has beaten the curse she believed had been placed on her life, Emilia once again feels as though she has been doomed from the beginning.



166. JOANA

This chapter is only three sentences. Joana thinks, “The baby. The wandering boy. What was I to do?”

Joana suddenly realizes that, as a survivor, she is responsible for these two children.



167. FLORIAN

This chapter is only three sentences. Florian thinks, “The Polish girl. My pack. Where were they?”

Florian has been preoccupied with his pack, the amber swan, and his mission the entire novel. In this moment, for the first time, he thinks of another person before he thinks of his mission of vengeance.



168. EMILIA

This chapter is only three sentences. Emilia thinks, “The knight. He had the baby. I knew he’d be a savior.”

Although Emilia is stranded on a raft with no way to steer, facing down probable death, she is happy that her baby has survived, and happy that Florian is more than a fantasy of a savior; indeed, he truly saved her child.



169. ALFRED

This chapter is only two sentences. Alfred thinks, “Bodies strewn like human confetti. Would I still get my medal?”

Alfred’s chapter contrasts with the three before it. While Florian, Joana, and Emilia think about other people, Alfred only cares about himself.



170. FLORIAN

The sea is full of corpses. Florian tries to rescue a girl in the water, to the protestations of a woman in the boat who worries he'll capsize it. He pulls the girl in anyway.

Although many of the survivors only want to protect their own lives, Florian remains selflessly committed to helping others.



Florian slumps down next to Joana and Klaus. He thinks, "Fate is a hunter. Its barrel pressed against my forehead."

Throughout the novel, Florian has repeated the phrase "fate is a hunter." He believed he was somehow cursed, and the sinking of the ship has only confirmed this.

**171. JOANA**

Joana closes her eyes but can still see the chaos and tragedy replaying behind them—thousands of people dying and drowning. It is difficult for her, knowing "so many people needed my help. And now I could do nothing." Her chapter ends with the thought, "Guilt is a hunter. I was its hostage."

As someone who has been carrying guilt for surviving tragedy for the past four years, Joana unsurprisingly is unable to deal with the guilt of knowing people are dying around her while she is unable to help them.

**172. EMILIA**

Emilia takes the pack from Alfred, who is vomiting over the side of the raft. She considers how she has Florian's pack, and he has her baby. She wants to be with Halinka. Emilia has no oar, no way of steering. Around her float dead children. She considers the nursery rhyme, "All the little duckies, with their heads in the water." She thinks, this "was my punishment. Honor lost. Everything lost. Shame is a hunter. My shame was all around me now."

Emilia doesn't regret sacrificing herself to save her child, but she does miss Halinka, the last living member of her family. She tries to comfort herself with the same nursery rhyme she often sings, but as her situation has grown more dire, the lullaby has become less effective.

**173. ALFRED**

Alfred composes a letter to Hannelore in his mind. He explains his ship has sunk, and he is now stranded on a raft in the middle of the Baltic Sea. Now, he admits, "I have time not only for reflection but for honesty." He wonders how he ever loved Hannelore after "what you said." He explains, "fear is a hunter" that traps him and forces him to make decisions. He believes he made the right decision, by trying to help Hannelore, and that she, by rejecting his help, made the wrong one.

Throughout the novel, Alfred has revealed, piece by piece, the extent of his fantasy relationship with Hannelore. Now, close to death, Alfred decides to be honest with himself, and in the same moment begins to disclose the truth behind Hannelore's story to the reader.



174. FLORIAN

The ship has sunk. Florian looks at the lifeboat and realizes they could have fit the Poet and Emilia. He considers his pack. Everything—his papers, his forgery tools, **the swan**—was in it. He wonders why he engaged in “The endless circle of revenge: answering pain by inflicting pain.” It doesn’t seem to matter now. He wonders if the Amber Room really is cursed.

Florian begins to feel guilty that his friends have died (or are presently dying) when he could have saved them. He realizes for the first time that by fixating on the swan, the past, and revenge, he prevented himself from truly living in the present, or planning for a better future.



175. JOANA

Because he is afraid he is going to die, Florian begins to tell Joana the secrets of his life. Joana thinks of her own mother, and wonders how she will find out about her daughter’s death.

Florian has remained closed-off to protect himself and his mission, but now that he has lost the swan and embraced the possibility of death, he can finally be open and honest. Joana continues to find strength in memories of her family, as she has always done.



Joana considers Emilia, how she pushed Klaus into the boat, sacrificing herself, and begins to cry.

Selflessly, Emilia saved her child and Klaus instead of herself.



Joana wonders if her mother, who loved Lithuania, will be able to return and reunite with Joana’s father and brother, who might be hiding in a bunker in the woods. As she thinks this Florian kisses her and points out that a boat is coming.

In this moment, people Joana has loved in her past and present come together. She and Florian might actually be rescued, and they might reunite with her family.



176. ALFRED

Alfred writes a final mental letter to Hannelore. He remembers their last interactions. He had tried to tell her about Hitler’s theories on the sidewalk one day, and she had run away. Hannelore’s father was Jewish, but her mother was German, and out of spite Alfred told the Hitler Youth boys about her father. As a result, Nazi officers came to Hannelore’s house to take her and her father away. Alfred expected Hannelore to disavow her father, but instead Hannelore loudly declared to the street, and to the world, “I am Jewish!” Alfred remains confused by this. He notes, “your proclamation... it almost sounded like pride.”

Alfred’s letter finally contains what appears to be a true, unembellished look at the past. Hannelore was Jewish, and Alfred turned her family in because she rejected him. Alfred expected Hannelore to reject her family because he has no true sense of obligation to anyone but himself. However, Hannelore loved her family and her Jewish heritage, and decided she would rather be imprisoned or put to death than reject an important part of herself.



177. EMILIA

Emilia doesn't think she can make it to sunrise. Alfred, delirious from the cold keeps talking to her and calling her Hannelore. He keeps repeating the word "Jewish." He tries to take the pack from Emilia, complaining that she's stolen his medal. She shouts at him, accidentally speaking Polish. Alfred is angry to realize she has tricked him by pretending to be Latvian, but Emilia, suddenly brave, asserts, "I am Polish!" Alfred declares he will serve his country like a "hero." He says "Einer winger," or one less, and tries to push Emilia into the water as he sings his song about groups Hitler has proclaimed inferior

Alfred jumps to his feat, but as he does so he slips, hiding his head against the raft. He gets up but is unsteady. Emilia reaches to help him, but he jerks away, falling into the water. Emilia is alone. She can feel herself dying, but she feels relaxed. She sees a light coming towards her.

Alfred has begun to confuse his fantasies and about Hannelore with reality. Although he is beginning to lose his mind, he holds on to his anti-Semitism, as well as his desire to be recognized by the Nazi Party as the hero he imagines himself to be. Emilia is sick of being treated poorly for being Polish, and so proudly asserts her identity, just like Hannelore did. This is triggering for the already unstable Alfred, which is presumably why he lashes out and tries to kill her.



Even when facing down a man who wants to kill her, Emilia remains empathetic and caring. She tries to save Alfred even though he would not do the same. He dies because he refuses to accept her help—because he has internalized the Nazi ideology of his own racial superiority.



178. JOANA

A rescue ship pulls up alongside the lifeboat and extends a net so people can climb aboard. Florian passes Halinka up to the sailors, and then waits as the rest of the refugees make their way on the deck. Joana climbs up ahead of Florian, but her foot slips, and she accidentally knocks Florian into the water.

Florian selflessly makes sure that the people he cares about—Joana, Klaus, and Halinka—make it to safety before he begins to take care of himself. This is a marked shift from his behavior at the start of the novel.



179. FLORIAN

Florian falls into the water. Disoriented, he hears a phantom female voice telling him to Kick and swim. He makes it to the surface, and is rescued by a soldier.

Although the identity of the phantom voice is never revealed, it could easily be the memory or spirit of Florian's mother, motivating him to continue living.



180. JOANA

Joana is thrilled that Florian has been rescued. Even as other people run across the deck looking for their loved ones Joana, Florian, Halinka and Klaus have each other.

Florian, Joana, Halinka, and Klaus have created a new family out of tragedy.



Florian tells Joana he could hear her from beneath the water, but she is confused. She didn't instruct him to kick.

Florian assumes the voice is Joana, but instead it seems to be the spirit or memory of an important woman in his life, perhaps his mother.



181. FLORIAN

Florian had been sure he was going to die. Now, he has a new lease on life. Soldiers are going from person to person asking for their information. Florian, who has no papers, wonders “Who was I?” and “Who did I want to be?”

Florian has spent the novel using his altered identification papers to guarantee himself safe passage on his mission. Now, he has a final chance to determine what he wants his future to look like, and it all depends on who he claims to be.



182. EMILIA

Emilia is in the kitchen of her childhood home. Her friends Rachel and Helen are coming over after synagogue. Halinka, now a young child, is running around the kitchen, playing. Outside, are Emilia’s mother and her baby brother. **Storks** fly overhead, and her mother comments that the birds have finally come home. Emilia raises her face to the sun. She thinks, “my war had been so long, my winters so cold. But I had finally made it home.”

Emilia has spent much of the novel trying to comfort herself with fantasies of a happier life. Now, as she dies, Emilia’s fantasy has fully come to life. The storks flying above symbolize the reunification of her entire family, living and dead. She has finally found peace.



183. FLORIAN

Florian sits on a porch. Twenty years have passed since the war ended, but a letter about the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff has just arrived. He opens the note and begins to read.

The past is difficult for anyone to escape, but especially a past so littered with tragedy and trauma as Florian’s.



The letter is from a woman named Clara Christensen, writing from Denmark. She reveals that she had previously written to Florian, who responded, and this is her second letter. She first wrote after reading about a swimmer named Halinka in the newspaper, who told a story about her birth mother, a Polish woman named Emilia who died during the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff, but only after saving both Halinka and her brother, Klaus.

Emilia’s legacy has lived on, just as she hoped it would, in her daughter. Although further information about Halinka is not provided, Emilia would likely be proud that her daughter grew up knowing she was Polish, and knowing that her mother loved her and fought for her to have a better life.



Clara explains that Emilia’s frozen body washed ashore in February of 1945, weeks after the Wilhelm Gustloff sank. Clara and her husband defrosted her rucksack and read through Florian’s notebook, which was inside. In it, he had written Emilia’s name, identifying her by her signature pink hat and her nationality. However, Clara didn’t connect Emilia to the Wilhelm Gustloff disaster until years later. Clara writes that Florian’s letter brought her peace. She references how he wrote that Emilia was his savior and ever on his mind. Clara confirms Emilia is in her heart as well. She concludes, “War is catastrophe. It breaks families in irretrievable pieces. But those who are gone are not necessarily lost.” She continues, now, Emilia “rests. She is safe. She is loved.”

Clara did not know anything about Emilia or her past, but she nonetheless felt responsible for her, and wanted to know more about who she was and where she came from. That Emilia is in Clara’s heart demonstrates that Clara is kind and empathetic, capable of loving a woman she never got to know. Although the previous chapter suggested to the reader that Emilia found peace mentally in the moment of her death or in the afterlife, here Emilia’s body is given a peaceful resting place as well.





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