Book: The Endless Steppe

Reviewed by: Estela Yap

Level of Difficulty: Medium

My thoughts about the book and its suitability for my group:

The book was not my first choice of the four that I brought for the group to choose from, but the majority picked this. I was concerned that the group would not sustain their interest considering the book is categorized as a children’s book. I was happily proven wrong. The book is a page-turner throughout. The author’s characterization is vivid and detailed; it felt like you were reliving her ordeal as a child uprooted from a privileged life in Poland to a very austere life in Siberia at the start of WWII. The constant theme is staying strong as a family and resilience in the face of catastrophe and her love of books and being in school. This is a moving and inspirational true-to-life story of Esther Hautzig as a child growing up on the endless steppe of Siberia.

Students’ reaction to the book:

They enjoyed the book. I did some research and provided the group a background history of WWII. The author is Jewish, and some of the vocabulary words in the beginning were about her culture of which we got the opportunity to learn. I showed them a print out of a map of Europe to see the extent of their journey to Siberia. A student gladly brought a globe on the next meeting to see where Asia is in relation to Europe. One of the students is Russian and she helped us with the pronunciation of the many Russian words and their meanings. Despite the gravity of their life situation, Esther managed to keep her sense of humor, and this lightness of spirit buoyed us as we read through her story.

Tips for other tutors who may want to use this book:

This book is for intermediate to higher level students. Although the author employs simple and direct sentences, quite a bit of the vocabulary words are challenging. The book prompted me to research on topics that the author wrote about: the Jewish culture, WWII, a bit of Russian history and literature and some pop culture circa 1940s. The class had a great time with the book and they had animated discussions. This was a very gratifying experience for me.