

1. After reading the author's note about her conversation with Lale Sokolov, the Tattooist of Auschwitz, did knowing that Cilka's story is based on a real person change your reading experience? Does the author weave fact and realistic fiction into the story effectively? In what ways?
2. What drew you to this time period and novel? What can humanity still learn from this historical space—from the front lines of an infamous concentration camp to the brutal Russian Gulags? How was this story unique in its voice and characters?
3. Is Cilka's prison sentence in Vorkuta as punishment for "sleeping with the enemy" in the concentration camp cruel? Was she forced into this role in order to survive as a mere sixteen-year-old girl? How might Cilka's outward behavior compare to her inner intentions?
4. "What you are doing, Cilka, is the only form of resistance you have—staying alive. You are the bravest person I have ever known, I hope you know that." (Chapter 32) Is Lale right? Is Cilka brave, and were her acts of resistance the best course of action she had? What does Cilka feel guilty about or complicit in? How is she suffering because of it?
5. Could you imagine having the fortitude to survive one death sentence and then another? How do these two hells—the camp and the prison—compare? Were your perceptions challenged or expanded on what life in the Gulag was like after reading this book? In what ways?
6. What strategies does Cilka use to survive? Which ones does she teach the others, including Josie? How could her body be her ticket? What does she sacrifice in giving of her body but not her mind?
7. "Another number. Cilka subconsciously rubs her left arm; hidden under her clothing is her identity from that other place. How many times can one person be reduced, erased?" (Chapter 3) How would you answer Cilka here? What inner fire allows Cilka to live? How does she endure with so much death and suffering around her?
8. Does Cilka assume a protective role for the women in her hut? For her block at the camp? In what ways is Cilka a target for their rage and a focus for their hopes for life beyond the fencing? How does she help the women survive the toughest parts of their sentences (the rapes, work, injuries, separation)?
9. How do the women form a sisterhood or join in solidarity? Do you believe there is something universal about what they do? From snowy rescues to smuggled food—even Elena's self-inflicted burn in order to get a message to Cilka—how do the women look out for one another? How is this essential for their survival?
10. Why do the women invest their time and scarce energies into "beautifying" the hut with their meager resources? What does this tell us about the human spirit?