

***Letters From Rifka*, by Karen Hesse. New York: Penguin Books, 1993.**

Story Summary: It is 1919 and Rifka's brother Nathan has deserted the Russian army. This puts the family at great risk, so to protect themselves, twelve-year-old Rifka and her family flee Russia for America in the hope of a better life. After barely escaping from Russia into Poland, Rifka's family is on their way to Warsaw to purchase steamship tickets to America. While on the train, Rifka contracts ringworm from another passenger. Because of this condition she is refused passage to America. Her family leaves without her, and she is sent to Belgium to be treated for the disease. Finally, when she is cured, she sets out for America. Despite the fact that the ringworm is gone, her hair has not yet grown back. As a result, when she reaches Ellis Island, she is detained because of her appearance. The doctors fear that without hair she will be unable to find a husband and will instead become a "ward of the state." She remains in a hospital, where she becomes a friend with a Russian peasant boy. When at last she is interviewed to determine whether she will be able to remain in America or be sent back to Russia, she uses her intelligence and confidence to ensure that she will be allowed to stay. The story is told in a series of letters from Rifka to her cousin Tovah. The letters are written on the pages of a volume of Pushkin's poetry. At the end, Rifka is finally able to send the letters to her cousin. This book tackles the issues of anti-Semitism and a totalitarian government, which are the underlying causes of Rifka's family's need to flee Russia. The concepts of social classes, hatred and hardships, and Rifka's determination also play a role in this moving story.

Objectives: Students should be able to:

- explain reasons why people immigrate;
- give examples of the courage in the story;
- become aware of the procedure used to allow immigrants into the United States; and
- begin thinking through the difficult issues and problems associated with immigration.

Suggested Topics for Discussion:

- Explain why it is necessary for Rifka's family to leave Russia.
- Find examples in the story of restrictions placed on Jews, described in the Historical Note. Do you think that these rules are just? Explain.
- Why did the Russians not inspect Tovah's house? Tell why Tovah's family was not in danger.
- How do you think Rifka would describe what it is like to be an adult? Explain why you believe she would answer in this way.
- What things or events must Rifka overcome throughout the book? Which do you believe would be the most difficult obstacle to face? Why?
- As you read you begin to see how people react to Rifka not having hair. What kinds of reactions do you notice? Tell why you think people acted the way they did. How would you react to Rifka being bald?
- Describe what life was like for Rifka while she lived in Russia. Explain what Rifka thinks life will be like in the United States. Why does she think this?
- While Rifka reaches Belgium, what happens to stop her from wishing she could return to Berdichev?
- What does the word "democratic" mean? Is it an important word for Americans? Explain. Why is the word so important to Rifka?

- Tell whether you agree with Rifka's conclusion that, in America, looks are more important than cleverness? Why?
- Explain how Rifka helps the Russian peasant boy at the hospital on Ellis Island. Why does she help him despite her first impression?
- When the doctor is deciding if Rifka can stay in America he considers the things Rifka has done while on the Island. What factors convince him to let her stay?

Suggested Activities:

- Create a presentation based on research from the events happening in the world in 1919. Be sure to include the events that had a direct impact on Rifka and her family.
- Research or ask Jewish students to explain what bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies are. Ask a speaker who has had a bar or bat mitzvah share his or her personal experiences.
- Pretend that you are Tovah and have received the letters from Rifka. Write her back in response to what you have read.
- Create a children's picture book based on the events of *Letters from Rifka*. Include illustrations along with the text.
- Read some of Pushkin's poems aloud in class. Create a visual representation for one of the poems and display it in class.
- Using a world map follow Rifka's journey noting what major events happened in each place.
- Write a paper explaining what you think happened in Rifka's life after leaving Ellis Island. You may wish to include topics such as her education, jobs, family, or marriage.
- Research famous immigrants who have come to America. Come to school dressed as a famous immigrant you have researched. Introduce yourself to the class and share what you have learned. Allow the other students to ask questions.

Related Resources:

- Fisher, L. (1986). *Ellis Island: Gateway to the New World*. New York: Holiday House.
- Franklin, P. (1995). *Melting Pot or Not?: Debating Cultural Identity*. Enslow.
- Jacobs, W. (1990). *Ellis Island: New Hope in a New Land*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Kindersley, B. (1995). *Children Just Like Me*. New York: Dorling Kindersley.
- Knight, M. (1993). *Who Belongs Here? An American Story*. Gardiner, ME: Tilbury House.
- Koral, A. (1992). *An Album of the Great Wave of Immigration*. New York: Franklin Watts.
- Orlev, U. (1991). *Lydia, Queen of Palestine*. New York: Puffin.
- Pushkin, A. (1982). *The Bronze Horseman: Selected Poems of Alexander Pushkin*. New York: Viking Press.
- *Skipping Stones: A Multicultural Children's Bimonthly Magazine*. OR.
- Sonder, B. (1993). *The Tenement Writer: An Immigration Story*. New York: Steck-Vaughn.
- Uchida, Y. (1981). *A Jar of Dreams*. New York: Macmillan.