

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Letters from Rifka

by  
Karen Hesse

### Book Information

Karen Hesse, Letters from Rifka

Quiz Number: 8533

Henry Holt & Co, 1992

ISBN 0-8050-1964-2; LCCN

148 Pages

Book Level: 4.2

Interest Level: MG

Rifka and her family flee the pogroms in Russia in 1919 and cross the Atlantic to land on Ellis Island.

**Award:** ALA Notable/Best Books; Christopher Award; Sydney Taylor Award/Honor

**Topics:** Countries/Regions, Belgium; Countries/Regions, Russia/Soviet Union; Countries/Regions, United States; Family Life, Cousins; History, Emigration/Immigration; People, Jewish; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 4-6; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 6-8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, Jewish Stars; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks

### Main Characters

Dr. Askin the doctor at the Ellis Island hospital

Gaston and Marie the elderly couple who houses Rifka in Antwerp

Ilya a seven-year-old Russian peasant boy whom Rifka helps at Ellis Island

Mr. Fargate the immigration officer at Ellis Island

Nathan Nebrot Rifka's older brother who deserted from the Russian army

Nurse Bowen the nurse at the Ellis Island hospital

Papa and Mama Nebrot Rifka's parents

Pieter a young sailor who befriends Rifka on the boat to America

Rifka Nebrot a twelve-year-old Russian Jewish girl who is separated from her family due to disease while immigrating to America

Saul Nebrot Rifka's sixteen-year-old brother, who teases her

Sister Katrina a Belgian Catholic nun who assists Rifka in curing her ringworm

Tovah Rifka's cousin, to whom Rifka addresses her diary entries

### Vocabulary

**czarina** the wife of a Russian czar, or ruler

**fumigate** to apply smoke, vapor, or gas for the purpose of disinfecting or destroying pests

**immigrants** people who enter a country for the purpose of making permanent residence

**plummeted** dropped sharply and abruptly

**pogroms** an organized massacre of people

**sterilize** to make free from living microorganisms, make germ-free

### Synopsis

With her brother, Nathan, deserting the Russian army, twelve-year-old Rifka and her Jewish family must escape their home in Berdichev to avoid a sure death. Mama, Papa, Nathan, and Saul hide inside boxcars at the train station. Because of her blond hair and fair skin, Rifka resembles a Russian peasant, so she distracts the two Russian guards, preventing them from discovering her family. As the train leaves Berdichev, Rifka jumps aboard, holding her rucksack containing the poetry book from her cousin Tovah. To ease her fear, Rifka uses the pages of this Pushkin poetry book to write her thoughts and feelings to Tovah beginning with their escape in September 1919.

At the Polish border, the family is ordered to undress to be examined by a doctor. Rifka sees how bravely her mother faces this situation, even when her Sabbath candlesticks are stolen by the guards. Shortly afterwards, Rifka contracts typhus, causing the family to stop at Motziv and stay with a distant cousin. Soon everyone except for Saul has typhus, and Mama, Papa, and Nathan are hospitalized. While Saul finds work in an orchard, Rifka recuperates alone. Desperately wanting to see her family, she visits the hospital where a kindly doctor

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Letters from Rifka

by

### Karen Hesse

---

allows her to sit near her mother's bed. When everyone recovers in November, the family travels on to Warsaw to buy tickets for a steamship to America.

To pass time on the train, Rifka agrees to braid a young mother's hair, but notices open sores on her head. Upon arriving in Warsaw, the family must pass another medical inspection before purchasing tickets. Rifka is denied a ticket because she now has ringworm on her scalp. A lady from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) agrees to find Rifka a place to stay in Antwerp, Belgium, where medical treatment is available. Because the cure for ringworm takes many months, the family sadly decides not to wait for her, so they leave her, promising to send money and letters when they reach America. Wearing Mama's special gold locket and holding Papa's prayer shawl, Rifka wonders if she will ever see her family again.

In Antwerp, Rifka lives with an elderly couple and gets medical treatments through Sister Katrina at the convent. Rifka celebrates her thirteenth birthday in secret by constructing a straw Star of David marking her mitzvah. Sister Katrina is helpful with the treatments and understands Rifka's loneliness. She instructs Rifka in Flemish and English and discovers she is a quick study. Katrina encourages Rifka to walk around the city. In mid-March, Rifka begins to experience Antwerp. A kindly milkman assists her when she gets lost, and she finds new foods such as bananas, ice cream, and chocolate. By July, the ringworm is better but her beautiful blond hair is completely gone. While shopping for new clothes with the lady from HIAS, Rifka uses money her parents have sent to purchase a beautiful black hat to cover her baldness.

In September, the doctor signs her examination papers, and Rifka purchases a ticket on a small ship sailing for America. On board she finds a friend in Pieter, a young Belgian sailor. A violent storm, however, washes Pieter overboard and nearly destroys the craft. Since it will take days for another boat to tow them, Rifka is afraid her parents will not be at the dock.

Finally, a year after starting out, Rifka stands on Ellis Island only to be put into the hospital for contagious diseases due to her ringworm. A lady from the American division of HIAS explains that baldness is considered an economic disability, because the immigration officials believe she will not be able to marry and she will, therefore, be dependent on others. But they will review the case in a few weeks to see if her hair begins growing. While waiting, Rifka assists in the hospital with a Polish baby and a seven-year-old Russian boy named Ilya, who is awaiting his immigration hearing. Rifka has mixed feelings about Ilya, since it was the Russians who made her family leave their homeland. She begins to teach Ilya some English and reads Pushkin to him. Rifka realizes she feels close to Ilya, and she wants to help him stay in America.

Finally the day arrives for the immigration decision. During Ilya's hearing, Rifka shows the doctor how intelligent Ilya is by having him read Pushkin. She tells his uncle that they need each other, and the official lets Ilya remain in America. Worried that her ringworm has returned, Rifka explains that she has abilities to support herself in America whether she is married or not. The official agrees, and gives her permission to immigrate. But while the family is hugging, Rifka's scarf comes off, causing everyone to stare. Nurse Bowen makes Rifka feel her scalp where new hair is beginning to grow, and Rifka realizes that she is cured. As her family heads for home, Rifka decides she will write a letter to Tovah and send with it the Pushkin book containing her thoughts and feelings during her immigration to America.

### Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Letters from Rifka

by  
Karen Hesse

---

### Initial Understanding

Why did the United States need to have a place like Ellis Island for immigrants?

*Many people were immigrating to America at this time, and the U.S. wanted to make sure contagious diseases would not cause an epidemic among its population. Also, with the increasing number of people, the work force would be overloaded. The U.S. needed to make sure people coming in could work and support their families properly and would not expect the government to supply them with food, clothing, and housing.*

### Literary Analysis

As Rifka reads the poetry of Pushkin to Ilya, she says the words rock him as they do her and they both ache for something they have lost. What have they lost?

*Answers may vary. On the surface, they have lost their families because they both are separated from those they love. On a deeper level, they have lost their childhood and their homeland and must deal with the world as adults, even though they are children.*

### Inferential Comprehension

Pieter calls Rifka a treasure. In what ways is she a treasure?

*Rifka is the only girl in a family of five boys, which makes her special. She has a gift for understanding and learning languages quickly that helps the family in its travels. She is also compassionate toward others, even her enemies.*

### Constructing Meaning

Rifka does not understand when her mother says that Tovah is one of those girls who is not meant to marry. What does Rifka's mother mean? Do disabilities affect the way people see others today?

*Tovah's family does not want to spend money or time improving her or teaching her things to attract a husband because they believe no man would marry her because of her disability. However, many people today see those with disabilities as capable members of society, even if they lack some capabilities, such as walking or speaking. Businesses are usually handicapped accessible, and computers have made it possible for people with disabilities to work at home, if necessary. Many people with disabilities choose to marry and have families.*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Rifka makes a Star of David for herself out of broom straws when she turns thirteen to honor her mitzvah, or becoming a woman. Invite someone of Jewish background to your class to explain the importance of this event in the lives of Jewish children. Find out the difference between a bar mitzvah (boys) and a bat mitzvah (girls). Ask students if they know of any other special ceremonies to honor coming of age or growing up in today's society.

**Extending Meaning** The officials on Ellis Island do not release Rifka immediately because she is bald. They believe this condition prevents her from marrying and becoming a productive member of American society. Rifka shows everyone by her actions that she has abilities and that being bald is not a handicap. In groups, have students discuss activities and jobs that people with disabilities are able to accomplish. Have each group make a poster showing their results.

**Recognizing Feelings** Rifka is a Russian Jew who must leave her homeland for a place called America. She misses everything familiar. When she is separated from her family, she is lonely

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Letters from Rifka

by

### Karen Hesse

---

and spends time wondering what they are doing. View the film, *An American Tail*, which tells the story of a Russian Jewish mouse named Fievel, who travels to America and gets lost when he arrives. Compare Fievel's feelings about his family with those of Rifka while she is in Belgium and also on Ellis Island.

**Responding to Literature** Rifka and Ilya enjoy the poetry of Alexander Pushkin, who is considered Russia's greatest poet. Read some of his poetry aloud in class and discuss it. Have students write a journal entry explaining their response to his poetry. Do they like it? Why or why not?