

# Letters from Rifka

by Karen Hesse

## Classroom Favorites

Teacher's Guide by Laurie Rozakis, Ph.D.

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### SYNOPSIS

**September 2, 1919** The letters of the title, written in the margins and blank pages of a treasured book of Alexander Pushkin's poetry, are penned by the young girl, Rifka, to her cousin Tovah. When the novel opens, 12-year-old Rifka and her family have long endured the harsh conditions for Jews in Russia in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution. They decide to escape when Rifka's brother Nathan deserts from the Russian army to warn his brother Saul that he is going to be taken into service. Mama knows that Nathan will be shot when he returns and so the family decides that it is time to join their three oldest sons in America.

As her brothers and parents hide in the train, Rifka bravely fools the Cossack soldiers into thinking she is a Christian being sent to work for a family. With her blond curls, fair skin, and talent for languages, Rifka is able to fool the cruel soldiers. Wealthy Uncle Avrum lures the soldiers away by claiming that his factory has been robbed.

**September 3, 1919** At the Polish border, a lecherous doctor examines the family and fumigates them. The Poles steal Mama's Sabbath candlesticks, the family's sole valuable possession.

**October 5, 1919** The family is felled by the dreaded typhus. A medical student predicts that Rifka will die, but she recovers. Mama, Papa, and Nathan are hospitalized while teenage Saul takes care of Rifka.

**November 3, 1919** Saul moves them from a shed to a room in an inn. Although Rifka is not close to Saul, he treats her kindly and fairly, sharing their small pittance of food. Rifka decides to return his generosity by giving him part of her food, but the innkeeper's daughter steals her scrap of herring and roll. Rifka cannot understand this cruelty, since she and her family have so little and the innkeeper's daughter and her family have so much. Rifka visits her mother in the hospital and shares her loneliness and fear in her letters.

**November 27, 1919** The entire family has survived typhus but they are all very weak. Only Saul is still strong. On the train across Poland, Rifka kindly arranges the hair of a young mother. The woman's scalp is infected with ringworm and Rifka contracts it.

**November 30, 1919** Rifka is not allowed on the ship to America because of her ringworm. When Rifka is cheated out of the family's food money, readers realize that she is very much a child, albeit bright and brave. She hates Warsaw.

**December 1, 1919** A woman from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society helps the family by arranging for Rifka to stay with a family in Belgium while the rest of the family immigrates to America. Rifka is very upset but understands that the family has no other choice.

**February 25, 1920** As they say farewell to their only daughter, Mama gives Rifka her precious gold locket and Papa, his prayer shawl. Rifka takes a train through Germany to Antwerp. There, she is installed in a nice house with kind people. She celebrates her thirteenth birthday alone by making a Star of David from straw and saying prayers. Meanwhile, Sister Katrina, the nun, is successfully treating Rifka's ringworm. However, Rifka is bald. Rifka thinks back to her crippled cousin Tovah and her beautiful cousin Hannah.

**March 17, 1920** Rifka decides to take the nun's advice and explore Antwerp but she gets lost. A kindly milkman takes her home and he reminds Rifka of her beloved Uncle Zeb, shot by the Cossacks before she could say good-bye to him.

**July 29, 1920** Rifka is very happy in Antwerp, especially after she discovers bananas, ice cream, and chocolate. She has never had such delicious food before. Although she misses her family very much, Rifka is adjusting to her new life.

**September 14, 1920** Rifka is finally going to America. Her ringworm is completely cured, although she is still bald.

**September 16, 1920** Rifka is very happy on the small ship. Unlike her family, she does not have to travel in steerage. She makes friends with Pieter, a young sailor. Rifka is shocked when he kisses her.

**September 30, 1920** Rifka's idyllic voyage ends tragically when the ship runs into a terrible storm and Pieter is swept overboard. Rifka nearly drowns and the ship must be towed to port. Rifka realizes how powerless all people are, not just Jews.

**October 1, 1920** Rifka is excited about arriving on Ellis Island and being reunited with her family after more than a year.

**October 2, 1920** Rifka is detained at Ellis Island because she is bald and officials worry that she will not marry and thus become a ward of the state. She is very upset and worries.

**October 7, 1920** A week passes. Rifka befriends a seven-year-old Russian boy, Ilya, who refuses to eat because he feels he will be sent back to his beloved Russia if he does not cooperate. Rifka feeds him off her plate and helps him adjust. Rifka also takes care of a baby with typhus.

**October 9, 1920** Saul comes for a visit and Rifka is overjoyed to see him. Saul brings her a banana and fills her in on changes in the family. Rifka gives him all the money she had saved from her food allowance for her parents to use to honor

the Sabbath.

**October 11, 1920** To Rifka's great joy, Mama comes for a visit. Rifka realizes that she and Ilya are trapped between two worlds—the new and the old.

**October 14, 1920** To Rifka's horror, Ilya unwraps the toilet paper in the bathroom. Nurse Bowen reassures Rifka that there is plenty of paper in America. Rifka begins to write her own poems.

**October 21, 1920** The baby with typhus dies. Rifka is sure that her ringworm is back because her head has begun to itch again.

**October 22, 1920** The authorities are unwilling to release Ilya to his uncle because they think the child is a simpleton. Rifka convinces him to read from her copy of Pushkin and the authorities realize that he is very smart. Ilya returns the favor when he convinces Rifka to read her poems and the authorities agree to release her, even though she is still bald. To Rifka's astonishment, her head itches because her hair is starting to grow back. Rifka and her family are reunited for good.

#### TIME LINE

- 1350s** Large number of Jews expelled from Germany flee to Poland.
- 1654** First Jews arrive in the New World.
- 1730** First synagogue in North America is built in New York City.
- 1772-1793** Annexations of Polish territory bring large numbers of Jews under Russian rule.
- 1794** Russian Jews are restricted to living in certain areas.
- 1881** Following the assassination of Czar Alexander II, widespread anti-Jewish riots (known as pogroms) sweep Russia. They will continue until World War I.
- 1882** "May Laws" require Jews living in the Russian countryside to move to selected cities and towns.
- 1890s** Over 3.6 million immigrants from Eastern Europe, many of them Jews, arrive in the United States.
- 1891** Jews are forbidden to live in Moscow.
- 1905** Russian secret police publishes forged materials claiming that Christian children are sacrificed in Jewish religious rituals.
- 1909** Jewish population worldwide is estimated at 10.2 million, with 5.2 million living in Russia and 1.7 million living in the United States.
- 1917** **March** Czar Nicholas II abdicates; a Provisional Government is formed.  
**April** Provisional Government lifts restrictions on Jews.  
**November** Bolsheviks seize power in Russia.
- 1918** **May** Russian Civil War begins after various anti-communist groups, known as White Russians, rebel against Bolshevik rule.  
**July 16** Bolsheviks murder the czar and his family.  
**September** Bolsheviks begin killing their opponents.
- 1919** **October** Bolsheviks defeat White Russian forces in battles outside Moscow and Petrograd.
- 1920** **March** Bolsheviks invade Poland.  
**October** Poles stop Bolshevik invasion and force Communists to recognize their independence.

**November** White Russian army in Crimea is destroyed.

**1922**

**Dec. 30** Russia becomes the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Karen Hesse was born in 1952, in Baltimore, Maryland. Hesse has worked as a teacher, librarian, advertising secretary, typesetter, and proofreader as well as a writer. She and her husband Randy have two daughters, Kate and Rachel. She currently lives in Williamsville, Vermont.

As a child, Hesse believes she was "thin and pasty, I looked like I'd drifted in from another world and never quite belonged in this one," she noted. A sickly child, she could often only be soothed by a ride in the family car. Years later, Hesse often climbed an apple tree. "There, cradled in the boughs of the tree, I spent hours reading," she said. "Often my bony bottom would go numb, but I loved it up there so much, I ignored the discomfort."

Hesse's father was a collection man, and sometimes Hesse joined him on his rounds, an experience that taught her a degree of sympathy for people who were less well off than she was. When Hesse was 19, she left college to get married. Shortly thereafter, her husband shipped out with the Navy for Vietnam.

While her husband was overseas, Hesse finished her degree at the University of Maryland. She started writing and sharing her work aloud, becoming known as a poet. After Hesse's husband returned from Vietnam, the couple moved to Vermont, where she gave birth to their daughters. In 1991, Hesse published her first children's book, *Wish on a Unicorn*. Her career was launched. A dedicated professional, Hesse sticks to a writing routine as much as possible. Up at 5:00 A.M. seven days a week, she drives to her studio and begins work.

"I love writing," Hesse explained in a recent interview. "I can't wait to get to my desk every morning. I wish everyone felt that way about their chosen profession...The thing about writing . . . until your words become a book you can change them, mold them, shape and reshape them until they look and sound and feel precisely the way you want."

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 p. 328; April, 1998, p. 46.

### CRITIC'S CORNER

*Letters from Rifka*, Hesse's second book, was enthusiastically received by reviewers. Writing in *Horn Book*, Hanna B. Zeiger commented that this "moving account of a brave young girl's story brings to life the day-to-day trials and horrors experienced by many immigrants as well as the resourcefulness and strength they found within themselves." *Booklist* noted that "the narrative flashes occasionally with lively Yiddish idiom" and that "the emerging sense of Rifka's personality" is what "especially raises it above docu-novel." Writing in *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, Betsy Hearne observed that while many novels have focused on the immigration experiences of the Jews of Russia, *Letters from Rifka* "is vivid in detailing the physical and emotional toll exacted for passage." A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* concurred: "Hesse's vivacious tale colorfully and convincingly refreshes the immigrant experience."

### HESSE'S OTHER WORKS

- Come On, Rain* (1999)  
*Just Juice* (1998)  
*Lavender* (1993)  
*Lester's Dog* (1993)  
*A Light in the Storm: the Civil War Diary of Amelia Martin* (1999)  
*The Music of Dolphins* (1996)  
*Out of the Dust* (1998)  
*Phoenix Rising* (1994)  
*Poppy's Chair* (1993)  
*Rain* (1998)  
*Sable* (1994)  
*Stowaway* (2000)  
*A Time of Angels* (1995)  
*Wish on a Unicorn* (1991)

### GENERAL OBJECTIVES

1. To appreciate the author's use of epistolary style
2. To understand the novel's title
3. To recognize the importance of setting
4. To assess Rifka's personality
5. To recognize the novel's theme
6. To appreciate the difficulties that Russian Jews and all Jewish immigrants from Europe experienced in the 1920s

7. To explore the ways kindness can be shown
8. To find examples of bravery and courage
9. To sympathize with the main character's plight
10. To describe the novel's mood or atmosphere

### SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze the importance of family in Rifka's life
2. To see how Rifka deals with being separated from her family
3. To understand why Rifka's family must leave Russia
4. To probe institutionalized anti-Semitism
5. To probe the relationship between Rifka and her brother Saul
6. To see the effect of setting on a person's life
7. To understand the plot structure
8. To grasp the depth of Rifka's connection to her religion
9. To understand why the author wrote the novel
10. To visualize the story's action

### LITERARY TERMS AND APPLICATIONS

For a better understanding of Karen Hesse's style, present the following terms and applications to the novel:

**setting** is the time and place where the events of a literary work take place. The setting may be stated outright, or readers may have to infer it from details in the story. The setting of *Letters from Rifka* is directly stated: Europe and America from 1919 to 1920. The setting is tremendously important to the novel, functioning almost as a character. Everything the characters do is influenced by the setting. For example, Rifka encounters tremendous anti-Semitism because such hatred was officially sanctioned by the Russian and Polish governments.

**point of view** is the position from which a story is told. In *Letters from Rifka*, Hesse uses the first-person point of view to give the events a personal and immediate slant. The narrator, Rifka, is one of the characters in the story. She explains the events through her own eyes, using the pronouns *I* and *me*.

**humor** is parts of a story that are funny. Humor can be created through sarcasm, word play, irony, and exaggeration. Hesse enlivens her otherwise deadly serious book with light touches of humor. For example, on page 5, Papa orders Rifka to quickly fill her rucksack with all of her belongings. Jews were not allowed to own more than two of any object; besides, the family was very poor. Rifka wryly comments: "I do not know what Papa thought I owned." On page 141, Hesse again uses humor to relieve the novel's sadness when Rifka decides to recite all her poems. The official, Mr. Fargate, has had enough of Rifka's conversation so he turns to the doctor and comments: "Heaven help the man she does marry."

### CROSS-CURRICULAR SOURCES

#### Books

- Barry Denenberg, *So Far From Home: The Diary of Mary Driscoll, an Irish Mill Girl, Lowell, Massachusetts, 1847*  
 Joyce Hansen, *I Thought My Soul Would Rise and Fly: The Diary of Patsy, a Freed Girl*  
 Eric A. Kimmel, *The Jar of Fools: Eight Hanukkah Stories from Chelm*  
 Kathryn Lasky, *Dreams in the Golden Country: The Diary of Zipporah Feldman, a Jewish Immigrant Girl and A Journey to the New World*  
 Joan Lowery Nixon, *Land of Hope*  
 Marissa Moss, *Emma's Journal: The Story of a Colonial Girl, Hannah's Journal: The Story of an Immigrant Girl, and*

*Rachel's Journal: The Story of a Pioneer Girl*  
Gloria Whelan, *Goodbye, Vietnam*

#### Videos/DVDs

*An American Tail* (1986)

*The Chosen* (1981)

*Fiddler on the Roof* (1971)

#### Internet

<[www.culture.privateweb.at/manfred.muehlmann/defa](http://www.culture.privateweb.at/manfred.muehlmann/defa)>

(Extensive bibliography of the Jewish town of Felshtin in Ukraine and other books, articles, archives, and links about Ukrainian Jewish history)

### THEMES AND MOTIFS

A study of the central issues and situations in Karen Hesse's *Letters from Rifka* should include these aspects:

#### Themes

- anti-Semitism
- death
- family love
- fear
- hardship
- hunger
- illness
- poetry
- self-realization
- starvation

#### Motifs

- being brave in terrifying situations
- dealing with events out of human control
- family love and support
- coping with death and despair
- the importance of sacrifice and selflessness
- random acts of kindness
- mindless hatred and institutionalized anti-Semitism
- self-awareness and maturity
- growth and change
- belonging to dual cultures

### MEANING STUDY

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have particular meaning in the novel. Explain the meaning of each. Page numbers indicate the context from which the item is taken.

1. Why is it, Tovah, that in Russia, no matter what the trouble, the blame always falls upon the Jews? (p. 6)  
(*Tragically, anti-Semitism has existed around the world for centuries, but in the modern world, few countries institutionalized the practice to the extent the Russians did. As Hesse explains in the "Historical Note" at the end of the novel, the Russian government deliberately fomented outbreaks of violence against her Jewish citizens to divert attention from the collapse of the government. As a result, Rifka is not imagining things when she realizes that the Jews of Russia have become the country's "official" scapegoats.*)
2. She has all this food and she has to steal from me. (p. 29)  
(*Although he is much bigger and older than Rifka, Saul unselfishly splits their meager food equally. Even though she is recovering from typhus and desperately needs the food, Rifka decides to save some of her meal to give to Saul. Rifka is horrified to find that the innkeeper's well-fed daughter*

*has stolen her small bit of herring and bread. This scene shows the cruelty and deprivation of Rifka's life in Europe.*)

3. "I will do everything there." (p. 38)  
(*Rifka meets a very young Polish mother on the train. The foolish uneducated woman, missing teeth and clumps of hair, cannot imagine life outside her narrow world. She is astonished that Rifka has plans for her life and looks beyond her immediate sphere.*  
"I would never leave Poland," the woman responds with laughter. "You can have everything you want right here." Tragically, the woman does not realize that the Jews cannot have anything in Poland. Even though she is not Jewish, the young woman has no future, either.)
4. I kissed the strong-leathery hand of the milkman, right out in front of the house on King Street. (p. 65)  
(*Since she has only encountered hatred from gentiles, Rifka is astonished to discover that the Christian milkman treats her kindly. He reminds her of her beloved Uncle Zeb, who was shot by the Cossacks. Meeting the milkman allows Rifka to symbolically bid farewell to her murdered uncle.*)
5. Tovah, suddenly I felt how defenseless we are — not just Jews, all of us. (p. 87)  
(*The violent storm aboard the ship and Pieter's death drive home the point that every life is fragile, not just those of beleaguered Jews. Rifka realizes how precious every life is — and how short.*)
6. "Some Jewish women shave their heads on purpose," I said. "It is written into the Jewish law." (p. 96)  
(*Rifka is being detained on Ellis Island because she is bald. The authorities fear that she will never marry and so become a ward of the state. Rifka realizes that in her time and place, women are judged on their beauty, not their intelligence. Although some Orthodox women shave their heads and wear wigs, Rifka knows that appearance, not brains, is what matters for women in this world.*)
7. "I want you to take this money, Saul," I said. "I want you to take it and buy candlesticks for Mama." (p. 112)  
(*Rifka has saved much of her food allowance to give back to her struggling family. When she realizes that they are now forced to work on the Sabbath, she gives her brother her money to buy Sabbath candlesticks and observe their heritage. Here, Rifka shows her deep connection to her religion and determination to honor its rites.*)
8. I am Jewish, yes, but I am Russian too. (p. 117)  
(*Rifka realizes the classic immigrant issue: straddling two cultures. She is both cultures yet so much more than the sum of their parts.*)
9. Ilya wants to go back to Russia, to the only place he has ever known. I want to enter America. Yet neither of us can leave this island. (p. 119)  
(*The author sets up Ilya as a counterpoint to Rifka: the former does not want to become an American; the later wants desperately to do so. Ironically, both children are being denied their wishes.*)
10. "Mr. and Mrs. Nebrot. There are your daughter's papers. With this stamp I give permission for her to enter the United States of America." (p. 141)  
(*With these words, Rifka's long nightmare is over as she is officially welcomed to America. At times, she despaired of*

ever being allowed to leave Russia, Poland, and even Ellis Island. At long last, Rifka can begin her new life in America.)

### COMPREHENSION STUDY

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages in the book.

#### Questions 1-5 (Literal Level)

1. When and where does the story take place?  
(The story opens in Russia on September 2, 1919. The characters travel through Russia to Poland; from there, everyone but Rifka goes to America. Rifka is detained in Antwerp for a year. The family is reunited in America, at Ellis Island, on October 22, 1920.)

2. Why do the Nebrots leave Russia?  
(The inciting incident occurs when Nathan deserts from the army to warn his younger brother Saul that the soldiers are coming to take him into the army. However, the family had long planned to leave their homeland because of anti-Semitism; years earlier, they had sent their three oldest sons ahead to America to set down roots. The young men had sent sufficient money for their parents' and siblings' passage.)

3. Why isn't Rifka allowed to leave Poland with the rest of her family?  
(Rifka has contracted ringworm, a highly contagious skin infection. Even if she could leave Poland, she will not be allowed to disembark in America. All immigrants must be healthy to be allowed to land.)

4. How is Rifka nearly killed traveling by ship to America? Who saves her and why?  
(The ship hits a terrible storm and Rifka is nearly killed. Her friend, the sailor Pieter, saves her from being swept overboard in the tempest. Pieter acts with great courage not only because he is a fine young man but also because he is in love with Rifka.)

5. How does Rifka convince the authorities to allow her to enter America?  
(Rifka is in danger of being deported because she does not have any hair. The authorities fear that no man will marry her and she will have to rely on public assistance. Rifka claims that she is so intelligent and compassionate that she will support herself by being a doctor. To prove her intelligence, Rifka's brother Saul suggests that she read her own poetry. Ilya seconds the idea. When she reads her verse, the authorities grant her petition to enter America.)

#### Questions 6-8 (Interpretative Level)

6. Who is Ilya? What role does he play in the novel?  
(Ilya is the seven-year old Russian boy whom Rifka meets on Ellis Island while she is waiting to be allowed to enter the country. He serves as a counterpoint to Rifka. Ilya does not want to stay in America and so refuses to cooperate in any way, going so far as to refuse to eat and speak; Rifka, in contrast, desperately wants to enter America so she cooperates with the authorities in any way she can.)

7. Why is the setting so important in *Letters from Rifka*? What do Russia and America symbolize?  
(To the Russian Jews, their homeland is hell on earth.

Government-sanctioned bandits deny the Jews even the most basic human rights. Jews are denied the right of land ownership, closed out of many professions, and periodically purged in vicious pogroms. America, on the other hand, is the promised land, a country based on freedom and opportunity for all of its citizens.)

8. What traits make Rifka an admirable hero?  
(Rifka is brave and honest, compassionate and opinionated. She bravely stands up to the Cossacks when her family is escaping. She does not lie or cheat, even when she is starving. Further, she helps the baby dying of typhus and little Ilya, even though as a Russian peasant he is her enemy. Finally, Rifka is not afraid to take a stand and make her voice heard, as shown in the last letter when she reads her poetry and proclaims her considerable intelligence.)

#### Questions 9 and 10 (Critical Level)

9. Why do you think Karen Hesse wrote this novel?  
(Hesse wanted to celebrate the courage her ancestors had in the face of nearly unimaginable oppression. Students might also argue that Hesse wanted readers to draw parallels between the Nebrots' experience and that of other courageous immigrants to America from countries around the globe.)

10. Do you think Rifka's parents should have left her behind in Antwerp? Why or why not?  
(Students can argue that the Nebrots did not have a choice. The entire family could not be sacrificed for one member. The rest of the family had to get to America to start earning money and establishing themselves. After all, they were all still very weak from their bout with typhus.)

#### Questions 11-12 (Creative Level)

11. Write a free verse poem that describes what happens to the main characters ten years in the future.

12. Working with a small group of classmates, discuss some ways that you might have coped with Rifka's situation had you been in her place.

### ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

#### Art/Music

1. Create a three-dimensional diorama of any scene in the novel, such as the boxcar, the shed, or Rifka's home in Antwerp.
2. Create a collage of newspaper headlines for the time period covered in the novel. Be sure the headlines cover key events in the world as well as in America during that time.
3. Using scenes from the novel, create a mural that shows its main events.
4. Create Rifka's family tree. Draw pictures to show how you imagine each of her relatives looked.
5. Select a dramatic scene from the novel and use it as a backdrop for a movie poster of *Letters from Rifka*.

#### Foreign Language

1. Hesse dedicates the novel to "Zeyde and Bubbe." These are the Yiddish words for Grandpa and Grandma, respectively. Find the affectionate terms for Grandpa and Grandma in at least three other languages.
2. Create a glossary of Yiddish words that have entered English. Here are some examples to get you started: *gonnif*, *bagel*, *bialy*, *schnorer*, *mazel tov*, *mench*.

### **History and Social Studies**

1. Make a map of any region described in the novel, such as the Ukraine, Poland, or Ellis Island. Be sure to establish a scale so your map is accurate.
2. In her Author's Note, Hesse mentions that her grandfather was denied passage on the *Titanic* because he was "only an immigrant." Explain what the *Titanic* was and what happened to it.
3. Who was Pushkin? Why was he famous? Write a brief biography of Pushkin, including additional examples of his writings.
4. Create a map tracing the path that Rifka and her family took on their journey from Russia to America.
5. Rifka and her family follow the customs of their religion, Judaism. Explain the history of Judaism and the customs that observant Jews follow.

### **Language Arts**

1. In your own words, state the novel's theme or message.
2. In her Newbery acceptance speech, Hesse remarked. "I was once told that writing historical fiction was a bad idea. No market for it. I didn't listen. I love research, love dipping into another time and place, and asking questions in a way that helps me see both the question and answer with a clearer perspective." Explain how you would find research about immigrants from your heritage.
3. Hesse believes that books can change a person's life, because John Hersey's *Hiroshima* changed her life. "The courage, the profound compassion, dignity, and humanity of the Japanese people in the face of such unfathomable destruction helped me see the world in a way I never had before," she said. Explain what book has changed your life and how.
4. *Letters from Rifka* is divided into sections titled with dates rather than names. Replace each of these dates with a chapter title.
5. Rewrite one of the letters as a conventional narrative. Then decide which version you like better and why. Be ready to justify your choice with specific reasons and examples.

### **Science/Math**

1. Write a report describing the causes and effects of typhus. How is the disease treated and controlled today?
2. Many diseases that routinely killed people a century ago are prevented today through vaccines. List the vaccines that children must have before they are allowed into school.
3. Rifka suffers from ringworm. Explain how she contracted this condition and how it is treated.
4. Rifka lost her hair as a result of the ringworm treatment. Discuss ways to keep your hair healthy.
5. Create a chart showing numbers of immigrants in 1900 and today. From your chart, draw some generalizations about the number of immigrants coming to America and their countries of origin.

### **Speech and Drama**

1. Many Jews left Russia around the turn of the 20th century to start a new life in America. Create two teams to debate whether or not people should have tried to start a new life in America or should have stayed in Russia and waited for the political situation to stabilize.

2. Karen Hesse gathered the information for this novel by interviewing family members. Create an oral history of your family by videotaping or tape recording interviews with at least two members of your immediate or extended family.
3. Select an especially important or dramatic scene from this novel and perform it for the class. Videotape your performance and place the tape in the school media center for others to access when they read the novel.

### **ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT**

1. List examples of difficulties that Rifka faced. Then rank these hardships on a scale from most to least difficult.
2. Write a poem about Rifka and her experiences. Use the models in the last letter.
3. Compose a scene ten years in the future. What has happened to Rifka and her family?
4. Make a character list and describe each character.

## VOCABULARY TEST

Match each word to its meaning. Write the letter of your choice in the space provided.

- |                     |                         |
|---------------------|-------------------------|
| _____ 1. throbs     | a. beats                |
| _____ 2. chatter    | b. bent down            |
| _____ 3. schnapps   | c. evil                 |
| _____ 4. stench     | d. disorderly           |
| _____ 5. vile       | e. disturbance          |
| _____ 6. tormented  | f. windy                |
| _____ 7. tempest    | g. turned               |
| _____ 8. czarina    | h. settler from abroad  |
| _____ 9. Cossacks   | i. scarf                |
| _____ 10. unruly    | j. stink                |
| _____ 11. crouched  | k. tortured             |
| _____ 12. drafty    | l. backpack             |
| _____ 13. blur      | m. out of focus         |
| _____ 14. greenhorn | n. divert the attention |
| _____ 15. commotion | o. Russian queen        |
| _____ 16. shawl     | p. a type of liquor     |
| _____ 17. distract  | q. fierce storm         |
| _____ 18. immigrant | r. Russian soldiers     |
| _____ 19. pivoted   | s. babble               |
| _____ 20. rucksack  | t. inexperienced person |

## COMPREHENSION TEST A

### Part I: Matching (20 points)

Complete each of the following descriptions with a name from the list that follows. Place the letter of your answer in the blank provided at left. You will have choices left over.

- |               |                 |            |                 |              |
|---------------|-----------------|------------|-----------------|--------------|
| A. Rifka      | D. Doctor Askin | G. Saul    | J. Cousin Tovah | M. Isaac     |
| B. Ilya       | E. Mr. Nebrot   | H. Nathan  | K. Mr. Fargate  | N. Uncle Zeb |
| C. Bubbe Ruth | F. Pieter       | I. Pushkin | L. Uncle Avrum  | O. Rueben    |

- \_\_\_ 1. sailor who loves Rifka
- \_\_\_ 2. writer whose book Rifka carries with her in her travels
- \_\_\_ 3. Rifka's father
- \_\_\_ 4. novel's courageous and bright narrator
- \_\_\_ 5. Rifka's beloved uncle, killed by the Cossacks
- \_\_\_ 6. Rifka's least-favorite brother
- \_\_\_ 7. seven-year-old Russian peasant boy who Rifka meets on Ellis Island
- \_\_\_ 8. The person to whom Rifka addresses all her letters
- \_\_\_ 9. Rifka's wealthy uncle who provides the distraction at the train station
- \_\_\_ 10. Rifka's beloved grandmother

### Part II: Multiple Choice (20 points)

Underline the term that best completes each of the following statements.

- 1. Mama knows that Nathan will be shot when he returns and so the family decides that it is time to join their three oldest sons in (Russia, America).
- 2. The Poles steal Mama's Sabbath (tablecloth, candlesticks), the family's sole valuable possession.
- 3. The family all become ill with a terrible disease called (tuberculosis, typhus).
- 4. The innkeeper's daughter steals Rifka's (food, clothing).
- 5. As they say farewell to their only daughter, Mama gives Rifka her precious (shawl, gold locket).
- 6. Rifka loses all her (hair, money) after she is ill.
- 7. Ilya refuses to (sleep, eat) because he feels he will be sent back to his beloved Russia if he does not cooperate.
- 8. While she is on Ellis Island, Saul brings Rifka a (banana, Star of David) and tells her all the news about the family.
- 9. To Rifka's horror, Ilya unwraps the (Christmas presents, toilet paper).
- 10. Rifka is allowed to enter America when she (writes some poems, reads her poems) to convince the authorities that she is intelligent.



**Part III: True/False (20 points)**

Mark the following statements either **T** for true or **F** if any part is false.

- \_\_\_ 1. When the novel opens, 12-year-old Rifka and her family have long endured the harsh conditions for Jews in Russia in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution.
- \_\_\_ 2. Mama, Papa, and Saul are hospitalized for illness and soon after, Papa dies.
- \_\_\_ 3. Rifka catches a disease called ringworm from a young Polish mother on the train.
- \_\_\_ 4. Rifka is not allowed on the ship to America because of her ringworm.
- \_\_\_ 5. Rifka celebrates her 16th birthday alone by making a Star of David from straw and saying prayers.
- \_\_\_ 6. On the way to America, Rifka is swept overboard but a brave sailor jumps into the water and saves her. He dies in the rescue.
- \_\_\_ 7. About three years pass before Rifka sees her family again.
- \_\_\_ 8. On Ellis Island, Rifka takes care of a orphaned baby who has typhus.
- \_\_\_ 9. The authorities are unwilling to release Ilya to his uncle because they think the child has ringworm.
- \_\_\_ 10. Rifka's hair never grows back.

**Part IV: Essay (40 points)**

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

- 1. Explain why the family had to leave their homeland.
- 2. Argue that Rifka's parents should or should not have left her in Antwerp when they continued their journey.
- 3. Describe the hardships Rifka faces and how she deals with them.
- 4. Explain what family means to Rifka.

## COMPREHENSION TEST B

### Part I: Motivation (20 points)

Complete each phrase below with a reason or justification.

1. Rifka and her family leave Russia because
2. Rifka is able to fool the cruel soldiers because
3. Saul takes care of Rifka in Warsaw because
4. Rifka gets ringworm because
5. Rifka is not allowed on the ship to America because
6. Rifka loses her hair because
7. She likes Antwerp because
8. Rifka's idyllic voyage to America across the ocean ends tragically because
9. Rifka is detained at Ellis Island because
10. Ilya refuses to eat because

### Part II: Matching (20 points)

Complete each of the following descriptions with a name from the list that follows. Place the letter of your answer in the blank provided at left. You will have choices left over.

- |               |                 |            |                 |              |
|---------------|-----------------|------------|-----------------|--------------|
| A. Rifka      | D. Doctor Askin | G. Saul    | J. Cousin Tovah | M. Isaac     |
| B. Ilya       | E. Mr. Nebrot   | H. Nathan  | K. Mr. Fargate  | N. Uncle Zeb |
| C. Bubbe Ruth | F. Pieter       | I. Pushkin | L. Uncle Avrum  | O. Rueben    |

- \_\_\_ 1. the sailor who loves Rifka and is killed in the great storm
- \_\_\_ 2. the writer whose book Rifka carries with her in her travels
- \_\_\_ 3. Rifka's father
- \_\_\_ 4. the novel's courageous and bright narrator
- \_\_\_ 5. Rifka's beloved uncle, killed by the Cossacks
- \_\_\_ 6. Rifka's least-favorite brother
- \_\_\_ 7. the seven-year-old Russian peasant boy Rifka meets on Ellis Island
- \_\_\_ 8. The person to whom Rifka addresses all her letters
- \_\_\_ 9. Rifka's wealthy uncle who provides the distraction at the train station
- \_\_\_ 10. Rifka's beloved grandmother

**Part III: Identification (20 points)**

Briefly describe each of the following objects and explain their importance in the story.

1. Mama's candlesticks
2. bananas
3. The Statue of Liberty
4. Puskin's poems
5. Mr. Nebrot's prayer shawl

**Part IV: Essay (40 points)**

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Hesse said: "Often, our lives are so crowded, we need to hold to what is essential and weed out what is not." Explain what "essential" elements Rifka holds onto in *Letters from Rifka*.
2. Analyze what the title means and tell why it fits the novel's theme.
3. Describe the novel's setting and explain how it functions as a character.
4. Explain why the author decided to write this novel as letters rather than a conventional narrative.

## ANSWER KEY

### VOCABULARY TEST

- |      |       |       |       |
|------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. a | 6. k  | 11. b | 16. i |
| 2. s | 7. q  | 12. f | 17. n |
| 3. p | 8. o  | 13. m | 18. h |
| 4. j | 9. r  | 14. t | 19. g |
| 5. c | 10. d | 15. e | 20. l |

### COMPREHENSION TEST A

#### Part I: Matching (20 points)

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. G  |
| 2. I | 7. B  |
| 3. E | 8. J  |
| 4. A | 9. L  |
| 5. N | 10. C |

#### Part II: Multiple Choice (20 points)

- |                 |                     |
|-----------------|---------------------|
| 1. America      | 6. hair             |
| 2. candlesticks | 7. eat              |
| 3. typhus       | 8. banana           |
| 4. food         | 9. toilet paper     |
| 5. gold locket  | 10. reads her poems |

#### Part III: True/False (20 points)

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. T | 6. F  |
| 2. F | 7. F  |
| 3. T | 8. T  |
| 4. T | 9. F  |
| 5. F | 10. F |

#### Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.

### COMPREHENSION TEST B

#### Part I: Motivation (20 points)

1. they must escape the fierce anti-Semitism in Russia in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution
2. she has blond curls, fair skin, and a talent for languages, so she does not seem to be Jewish
3. the rest of the family is in the hospital with typhus
4. she handled the scalp of an infected woman
5. her ringworm is highly contagious
6. of the ringworm and the treatment she received for it
7. the people are kind and she has plenty to eat
8. the ship hits a terrible storm and Pieter the sailor is killed
9. she is bald and officials worry that she will not marry and thus become a ward of the state.
10. he feels he will be sent back to his beloved Russia if he does not cooperate.

#### Part II: Matching (20 points)

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. G  |
| 2. I | 7. B  |
| 3. E | 8. J  |
| 4. A | 9. L  |
| 5. N | 10. C |

#### Part III: Identification (20 points)

1. Mama's candlesticks represent the family's devotion to their religion. The candlesticks are the family's most prized possession not only for their intrinsic value but also because of their association with the joyous Sabbath celebrations.
2. Bananas represent the sweetness and promise of life outside Russia.
3. The Statue of Liberty represents America and its vast freedom and hope.
4. Puskin's poems represent the beauty of language and the glory of poetry.
5. Mr. Nebrot's prayer shawl represents his deep religious faith.

#### Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.

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