

Letters from Rifka Study Guide

Letters from Rifka by Karen Hesse

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Plot Summary

Letters from Rifka is the story of a young Russian-Jewish girl and her family who leave their homeland in 1919 to travel to America. Persecuted in Russia by the soldiers and others who dislike Jews, Rifka's family makes their way across Russia to Poland and the U.S.

However, Rifka encounters many difficulties along the way. Initially worried that they will not make it out of Russia, the family runs into guards on the train on the way out (whom Rifka successfully distracts), and unkind guards at the Polish border as well. In Warsaw, Rifka comes down with typhus and slowly the whole family, except her brother Saul, comes down with the disease and must be hospitalized. Thankfully, they all survive.

When the family arrives in Warsaw and goes to the steamship office, though, Rifka is not allowed to purchase a ticket: a doctor has diagnosed her with ringworm. Heartbroken, she must stay in Europe as her family goes forward to the United States. Left in the care of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, she is sent to Antwerp, Belgium, for treatment.

In Antwerp, Rifka flourishes. She lives with a kind couple, gets treated by a nurse who teaches her Flemish, and makes friends in the park across the street. She has a talent for languages and reads quite a bit. All of her hair falls out during the treatments; though it does not grow back, the nun who is treating her says that she is cured and she gets sent to the U.S.

Though the ocean crossing is rough, Rifka successfully makes it to Ellis Island, though a sailor friend she makes along the way, Pieter, dies in a storm. Once she makes it to Ellis Island, she is detained because she is bald. The doctors must make sure that she no longer has ringworm and, more importantly, want to see her hair grow back so that she does not become an unmarried woman, a "ward of the state." In the detention center, Rifka starts to learn English and becomes quite good at it quickly; she adopts a small Russian boy and takes care of a baby who later dies of typhus.

Rifka's family comes to visit her and she attempts to convince the officials that she will do what she wants with her life, whether it involves being married or not, which she will do with or without hair. When they listen to her, they agree, but immediately thereafter discover that her hair has started to grow back anyways - she is free to go into America with her family.



September 2 - February 25

September 2 - February 25 Summary

Letters from Rifka begins with Rifka writing to her cousin Tovah, telling her of how the family escaped Russia on a train on their way to the United States. Rifka thanks Tovah for her family's role in the escape and describes how Rifka, the only daughter and with beautiful blond hair, had to distract the guards. As they searched the different cars, Rifka had to keep talking to the guards to keep them from finding her family hiding in the car behind her - or finding her family's candlesticks stashed in her bag. Meanwhile, Rifka thinks back to why they left; her brother Nathan had escaped from the army and, terrified that the army would come for him and their other sons, Rifka's parents decided to leave the harsh conditions in Russia and head to the United States to live with their other sons. Rifka returns to the scene with the guards, telling about how she lied to them, speaking in Russian (rather than Yiddish) and saying that she was on her way to work as a servant for a wealthy family. She talks fast but not enough to distract both of them; however, her Uncle Avrum calls from the side of the road that someone has robbed his factory and the guards go, leaving Rifka and her family in safety to get to the Polish borders.

At the Polish border, Rifka and her family must encounter even more guards, who make the family remove their clothes and take their things away. A disgusting doctor sprays the family with something to fumigate them, and when they get their possessions back, someone has stolen Rifka's family's candlesticks. She is disappointed and humiliated. It is her first time in another country; she sends her love to Tovah, noting that while Russia was good for Tovah's family, it was because they had money. Once in Poland, however, the family is stranded by illness and must stay with her father's cousin. Rifka has come down with a rash and a cough; a medical student diagnoses her with typhus and tells her family she will probably die. However, she doesn't; they all come down with typhus except for her brother Saul, and must stay at the hospital. Rifka and her brother go stay elsewhere, in an inn, and Saul finds work. That night, Rifka dreams that someone is stealing her candlesticks and tries to clutch them to her chest. When she wakes up, she has scratched herself until she is bleeding.

At the inn, Saul works while Rifka tries to make use of herself. He is very fair with the limited food that they have, and she tries to repay the favor by saving him some of her share. However, she wakes to find the innkeeper's daughter eating the food. She is furious but Saul tells her it's her fault and not to try to save food in the future. Later, she goes to the hospital to see her family but is chased away by the nurses; she goes back though and a doctor lets her see her mother, and she comes often, eating there and starting to learn Polish. Everyone in the family survives; since they are better, it is time to go to Warsaw. They take the train and Rifka makes friends with a girl who has disgusting hair, and fixes her hair for her.



In Warsaw, the family gets bad news. Though Rifka's American brothers have sent money for their passage, the company will not sell a ticket to Rifka, who they say has ringworm. If they shipped her to the U.S., the government would make them send her back at their own expense. Therefore, she will have to be sent to Belgium under the auspices of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), who will give her treatment. Her family leaves for America, and Rifka leaves for Belgium.

September 2 - February 25 Analysis

In this first section, we learn quite a few important facts about Rifka and her family's background. Not only do we know that they are Russian Jews, but we can see up-close exactly what this means for them at the time, and why they have to flee the country; the guards, who discuss Jews with disdain (even wealthy Jews, such as Rifka's uncle), are the perfect example of this attitude. Rifka also provides descriptions of other circumstances in which her family has been discriminated against because of their religion. By providing this information, Hesse not only gives a reason for the family's immigration to America, but places them within the classic framework of the American Dream, in which immigrants leave the "old country" to seek a better life in the "new world." The difficulties they encounter along the way - disease, boarder control, and so on - also fall within this framework, demonstrating the many sacrifices which were required to reach America.

At the same time, the story immediately introduces Rifka as a character to whom readers will relate: she is thoughtful and intelligent, family-oriented, but still brave and outspoken (her mother has to scold her when they are in front of the guard, for example). She is kind and appreciates her brother's sacrifice when he splits their food evenly, and is outraged at the unfairness of the innkeeper's daughter eating it instead. This sense of right and wrong will serve her well throughout the book and is one of her strongest personality traits.



February 25 - October 2

February 25 - October 2 Summary

Before her parents leave for the United States, Rifka's mother gives her the gold locket she always wears, and her father gives her his religious tallis. Rifka goes to Belgium, where she loves her room, but is sad that it is not home. She receives letters from her parents, and is excited that they have indoor plumbing at their new apartment in New York. Her thirteenth birthday comes and goes without anyone noticing. She writes to Tovah about the doll that her cousin gave her for her ninth birthday, which her family eventually sold for food. She describes her treatments to her cousin, which are given to her by a nun who teaches her to scrub her nails and teaches her Flemish, and encourages her to exercise. Every day, Rifka writes to her cousin looking out at the park and watching other children play.

Rifka begins to discover Antwerp. However, after a man with gold teeth at a cafe scares her, she runs away and gets lost; she finds a milkman, talking to him in Flemish and Yiddish. He is kind to her and takes her home. He reminds her of an uncle who died, and she kisses his hand at the end to thank him. She begins to love the city, playing with the children who tease her nicely about her accent, and loving the food: she discovers bananas, ice cream, and chocolate. Her ringworm is beginning to heal, but she still does not have hair. She sees a hat, saves up for it, and finally buys one just like it, specially made for her.

Finally cured, Rifka still does not have hair. The women at the HIAS help her buy her ticket. She goes on a small boat which will leave immediately and does not have a steerage class. She starts to learn English, watching cowboy films. She has lots of money saved, from the food money her parents have sent, and hopes her cousins might come to the US as well. On the ship, Rifka enjoys herself, making friends with a sailor, Pieter, who adores her and kisses her. However, there is an enormous storm, and Pieter gets her away from the side of the boat down into the basement, where everyone is staying, sick. However, he leaves and later drowns overboard in the storm. She is distressed and scared that she won't ever make it to the United States.

Finally, Rifka arrives in the United States wearing her hat, and sees the Statue of Liberty before going to Ellis Island.

February 25 - October 2 Analysis

In this second section, Rifka is alone for the first time in her life. These letters demonstrate the work she has to do to mature and learn about life on her own, without the comfort of her family. However, throughout her stay in Antwerp, though she is alone, she learns to find her family in unexpected places as a source of support. For example, she sees her uncle in the milkman who gives her a ride home, and thanks him for his



help - in a way resolving old wounds she never closed. Similarly, she taps into her family as a source of strength by clinging to their Judaism and refusing to give up her religion, despite how easy it would be. Instead, Rifka makes a star of David and uses it as a reminder of who she is.

Her growing up is also represented by her making the journey alone and by her relationship with Pieter. Though it is brief, the two characters have a genuine affinity for each other, and she is heartbroken when he dies in the storm. At the same time, tragedy has become such an everyday part of her life by this point that, though she mourns for him, she does not dwell for too long on his death, for she has further challenges to face at Ellis Island.



October 2 - October 22

October 2 - October 22 Summary

At Ellis Island, Rifka is screened for diseases and asked many questions in English; however, her mastery of the language isn't yet good enough, and she has to have an interpreter. A lady from the HIAS comes to help her, and tells her that she must calm down; she is going to be kept there because she has no hair and they need to make sure that the ringworm is gone. Also, she tells Rifka that they need to make sure that she will have hair or she will never find a husband and will be a burden on the state. Rifka spends her first week at Ellis Island in a crib, since there are not enough beds. Her brother Saul comes to visit but can't find her, so they don't see each other. Rifka makes friends with a nurse there, as well as interpreting for some of the other immigrants. She looks after a baby and makes friends with a young Russian boy, even though he is a peasant and therefore her enemy as a Russian Jew.

The family sends Saul again, who brings her a banana and is shocked when she knows how to open it. He tells her that her eyes are enormous and he is shocked that she knows English. He meets Ilya, the small Russian boy, pulling the Pushkin away from him. He tells her that their parents work day and night at a factory, Nathan in a bakery, but that they insist on sending him to school. Isaac is married, with a baby (however, she has never met her brother Isaac). Saul says that their parents work all day, even on the Sabbath; she gives him money that she has saved first to replace their candlesticks and secondly to stop her parents from working on the Sabbath.

Her mother finally comes, bringing her a honey cake for her belated birthday. She is amazed at how fast Rifka has learned English. She also meets the baby, and Ilya; Ilya's uncle wants him in the States to earn money. Rifka knows that Ilya is smart, though he doesn't seem so. Later, Rifka is terrified that Ilya will be in trouble, as he unravels all of the toilet paper, wasting it. In Russia, this would be a terrible crime, but the nurse explains to them that here, there is lots of paper.

The baby Rifka has been looking after dies of typhus. Rifka's head starts itching and she is terrified she will be sent home; however, her family comes and she presents herself in front of the doctor and a committee to decide if she can leave. Ilya is there at the same time, and they think he is an idiot until she shows them how he can read Pushkin. At the same time, she uses her spunk and wit to show them that she will be self-supporting and will marry whether or not she has hair. Saul shows them the poems she wrote; later, she takes off her kerchief only to discover that, rather than ringworm again, her hair has actually started to grow back. She leaves the detention center and is finally in America.



October 2 - October 22 Analysis

The last third of the book describes only three weeks at Ellis Island, whereas the first two thirds of the book cover more than a year. This partially demonstrates the feeling of waiting and the difficulty of not knowing whether Rifka would be allowed to stay or sent back to Russia, where she no longer had a home. In these letters, we can see how Rifka will have some difficulty integrating into her new environment with her new personality traits: for example, she already knows more English than her brother, who is shocked at how she has changed and has a hard time accepting her at first. However, eventually we can see how Rifka's time alone and all of the hardships she has endured have combined to give her a strength which will serve her well in the future. The doctor notes that she would make an excellent physician, and that she is so stubborn and clever that she will surely be able to succeed in America.



Characters

Rifka

Rifka is a young girl of twelve and later thirteen years old. She is Russian and Jewish, a fact which has been hard for her family and which has subjected them to much persecution. She loves to read, and is very intelligent; she carries with her a copy of Pushkin's poems that her richer cousin has given to her, and she learns Flemish and later English with apparent ease in a very short period of time. Very persevering, Rifka rarely lets herself get too upset by the many events that come her way. Though she is sad to leave her parents and go to Belgium, for example, she is stoic and accepts what has to be. She is also extremely stubborn, as in the case where she attempts to distract the soldiers, or later when she convinces the doctor that she will be a productive woman in society and not end up as a ward of the state. Although she is intelligent, Rifka also has a strong nurturing side, which comes into evidence as she takes care of Ilya and the baby in the Ellis Island detention center.

Tovah

Rifka's cousin, who still lives in Russia, Tovah has a curved spine and so is considered less "marriageable" than her sister Hannah. However, from the way Rifka writes to Tovah and the stories she remembers about the two of them together, Tovah is an intelligent, generous, and witty friend. Her father is richer than Rifka's, and so Tovah's family does not have as hard a time as Rifka's in Russia.

Mama

Rifka's mother, a woman with five children, does her best for her family and works to raise her children in the way that she thinks is best. Not a very sentimental woman, she nevertheless leaves her favorite locket with Rifka when Rifka has to stay behind in Poland.

Papa

Rifka's father is a Russian Jew who decides to move his family to America for a better life.

Nathan

Nathan is Rifka's older brother; they get along well. In the United States, he takes a job at a bakery.



Saul

Saul is one of Rifka's older brothers; they do not get along well. However, he is very impressed by Rifka when he sees her in the Ellis Island detention center and they start to understand each other slightly better.

Uncle Avrum

Rifka's uncle Avrum is Tovah and Hannah's father. A wealthy factory owner in Russia, he helps the family escape by providing a distraction when the guards start to search the boxcars where Rifka's family is hiding.

Hannah

Hannah is Tovah's sister and Rifka's cousin.

Pieter

Pieter is a sailor Rifka meets on the boat to the USA; he dies, drowned during one of the storms the ship encounters.

Nurse Bowen

Rifka makes friends with Nurse Bowen, the nurse at the Ellis Island facility.

Ilya

Ilya is the Russian peasant boy Rifka meets while detained at Ellis Island.



Objects/Places

Russia

Russia is Rifka's homeland from which she and her family flee.

Ukraine

Rifka says she and her family are from Ukraine so as not to get into trouble.

Poland

The point of departure for Rifka's family is Poland.

Warsaw

Warsaw is the capital of Poland, where Rifka gets detained.

Antwerp, Belgium

Rifka must go to Antwerp, Belgium to recover from her ringworm.

Ellis Island

Ellis Island is the point of entry for immigrants to the United States. Rifka is detained here until her hair grows back.

New York City

New York City is the US city where Rifka's older brothers live and where the rest of her family moves.

Pushkin

Tovah gives Rifka a poetry collection by Pushkin to take with her to the US.



Candlesticks

The guards in Poland steal Rifka's family's heirloom candlesticks. Rifka eventually gives her brother money to buy more candlesticks for the family.

Star of David

Rifka makes a Star of David out of straw in Antwerp.



Themes

The American Dream

Rifka's family's journey is in pursuit of their American dream; the idea that in the United States, anyone can succeed regardless of their family background, race, or religion. However, this idea is contradicted and mediated by several harsh truths about the reality of succeeding in America. First of all, Rifka's journey is indicative of what many immigrants went through to reach the United States. Her family was persecuted in their former country, mostly for their religion: as Jews, the soldiers often came and picked on them, taking their property and discriminating against them, particularly because they were poor Jews. To escape, however, they had to go through many difficulties: long and dangerous train rides, seemingly inexplicable customs and border controls with corrupt officials, disease and death. The dream of the United States awaits for them at the end of their journey. After all, their sons have been living there for years already. Though Hesse does not explicitly state the problems of immigrants in America that contradict the American dream, she does imply them: Rifka's brother has married a girl from the old village, showing the ghettos and insular communities in the new world; Rifka's parents have to work all day and all night, including on the weekends; and everybody in the family has to work, except for Saul, who is the only one who can go to school. Still, Hesse makes no judgments as to whether or not the trip was worth it, never implying that the new found freedom made the voyage worthwhile but also withholding judgment.

Growing Up

Rifka's journey, while indicative of a particular place, time, and experience, is also the very personal story of a young girl who is growing up. Rifka has always been mature for her age; this is evident in her lengthy letters to her cousin and in her reflective, quiet nature. However, she is also stubborn when she needs to be, and has to step up to challenges throughout her trip, which make her mature even faster than she would have already. In ways, poverty has made Rifka old already. As a nine-year-old girl, her family had to sell a doll she got as a birthday gift so that they could eat. However, during her trip she has to distract guards, deal with illness and death, live on her own in foreign countries where she does not speak the language, lose her hair (her major source of beauty) and make an Atlantic crossing on her own. She starts off at twelve years old and is thirteen when the book ends. However, she is very wise and already a writer, having made notes and poetry in the Pushkin book her cousin gave her, as well as developed a nurturing side of herself that appears when she takes care of the baby or of Ilya, for example.



Religion

The importance of religion to individuals, as well as the ways in which religion functions in society, plays an important role in *Letters from Rifka*. Especially in the beginning, Rifka defines herself as Jewish almost before she defines herself as Russian; she always makes a note of it when she is speaking in Russian rather than in Yiddish, which she thinks is strange. In addition, she remarks several times that in Russia, the peasants pick on the Jews when they have nothing left (she backs up these statements with anecdotes and memories about how her parents' property and pride had been damaged). Similarly, as Rifka goes along, she still keeps her faith; her father gives her his tallis, which she keeps with her in Belgium. Even though she respects and admires the nun who helps her with her ringworm treatments, Rifka still silently refuses to say the Christian prayers she gives her, using Hebrew prayers instead. Finally, while she is in Belgium, completely disconnected from her family and her faith, Rifka weaves herself a Star of David out of straw as a reminder of who she is and where she came from.



Style

Point of View

Letters from Rifka is written from the point of view of Rifka, a bright twelve-year-old girl, writing letters to her cousin Tovah back in Russia. Rifka is intelligent and self-reflective, providing Tovah and the reader with much information about her trip and her family's hopes and expectations. Overall, Rifka is hopeful about the future and writes positively about America (for example, when she finds out that her parents have indoor plumbing). Still, she is blunt and quick to speak the truth. Her mother has to quiet her when they are being examined by the disgusting doctor at the Polish border, for example, and later Rifka is very outspoken in front of the US officials who are deciding whether or not she can be allowed access into the country. At the same time that she is wise and thoughtful, however, Rifka is also still very much a young girl and is very excited to discover things like bananas and ice cream, and longs to play with the children in the Antwerp park who eventually become her friends. This collection of contradictions contribute to a nuanced and unexpected narrative, led by a likeable but understandable character.

Setting

The setting of Letters from Rifka changes drastically. It begins in Russia, moves to Poland, then to Belgium, a boat across the Atlantic, and finally to Ellis Island and America. Since Rifka has never even been to another city, let alone another country halfway across the world, she takes the viewer on the journey with her, explaining things as she sees them for the first time. She has a terrible time in Poland, which she finds dull and grey, and Warsaw, which she finds overwhelming. In Warsaw, she sees her first car, and finds them aggressive and terrifying. Everybody is sick in Poland, which is also the place where she is denied passage to the United States. In Belgium, however, things are different for Rifka. She finds it warm, neat, and welcoming; the only problem she has in Antwerp is that her parents aren't with her. Otherwise, she is happy and enjoys the exotic foods and things she can get there. She journeys across the Atlantic in more luxury than many immigrants of her day, in a ship without steerage. However, the storm causes her terror and heartache. Finally, arriving at Ellis Island, she is very upset to be kept apart, and to stay in a crib at the beginning, but does appreciate the food they give her as well as the kindness of the people, like her friend the nurse, she finds.

Language and Meaning

Rifka's language is very advanced for a girl of her age; she writes clearly and vividly, with an advanced vocabulary, sometimes referencing Yiddish words. The Pushkin she keeps with her might be responsible for the beautiful and often poetic tone of her writing. At the same time, she does not hesitate to make jokes and write like a normal



adolescent girl, using exclamation points and talking colloquially to her cousin. While Hesse keeps her writing clear and simple for elementary-aged readers, she also has Rifka use syntax that is slightly more formal than contemporary readers may be used to. This formal syntax provides a slightly foreign tone to each sentence, even though Rifka writes fluently. Rifka also seems to pick up different languages with ease. Throughout the book, she encounters Yiddish, Russian, Polish, Flemish, and English, and learns to speak at least a few words of the latter languages within a matter of days.

Structure

The book is structured through letters; each one is prefaced with a quote from Pushkin that has special meaning for the section, and followed by a letter from a particular location. Rifka writes between two and three letters to Tovah from each location. The letters are relatively long, and certainly seem so to today's readers, who may not be used to such long epistles. Nevertheless, within each letter, Rifka describes one or two main events or troubles her family has experienced, as well as describing her surroundings and other things of interest to Tovah and to the reader. By doing so, she not only moves the story forward through her descriptions of events, particularly her journey to the United States, but also describes her world to the reader, who can recreate her surroundings by imagining the many sensory details she includes in her letters to Tovah.



Quotes

"Why is it, Tovah, that in Russia, no matter what the trouble, the blame always falls upon the Jews?"

Page 6

"I have never been in another country before, not even in another village."

Page 20

"In my sleep, I had clawed at my chest until it bled."

Page 25

"It is odd to see Mama and Papa and Nathan so changed."

Page 35

"How can I live without Mama and Papa to care for me, to protect me?"

Page 44

"Kissing the hand of the milkman, I felt at last I could say good-bye to Uncle Zeb too."

Page 65

"I cried until I was empty of tears. Then I was still. As still as the sea after a storm."

Page 86

"'It's not just the ringworm that concerns them,' said the lady from the HIAS. 'It's your hair.'"

Page 95

"Then I knew. The boy was a peasant. A Russian peasant. Here, sitting before me, Tovah, was the reason we had fled our homeland."

Page 100

"Then he was gone. I had forgotten how lonely I'd been until he was gone."

Page 112

"Mama can be more accepting of the Polish baby. A baby that speaks no language."

Page 117

"If I wish to marry, I will do so with hair or without hair."

Page 138



Topics for Discussion

In what way do Rifka and her family embody the American Dream? How does their experience contradict this ideal?

Discuss Rifka's relationships with her brothers. How does each relationship express different parts of Rifka's personality, and how do they change over time?

Rifka celebrates her thirteenth birthday in the book. How does she mark this occasion, and how does she change and mature throughout the story in ways that have nothing to do with how old she is?

Rifka has to cross several different borders in the book. Compare and contrast her experiences in Poland, Belgium, and the United States.

Getting married was an important goal for young girls at this time. How does this affect Rifka's journey? What about her cousin Tovah's life?

Rifka meets many people along her way. Compare and contrast her experience making friends with Pieter and with Ilya. What does each boy represent for Rifka?

Rifka loses her hair due to the ringworm. What does her hair symbolize, and how does she develop after its loss?