

## Letters from Rifka by Karen Hesse

**Subjects:** Emigration and Immigration; Jews

**Awards:** Best Books for Young Adults, Sydney Taylor Book Award, Horn Book Fanfare, The Christopher Award

**Book List:** Europe

**Props:** Poetry book, rucksack

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This book is a fictitious story but it is based on fact. It is based on the experiences of Great Aunt Lucy, the author's Great Aunt Lucy who came to the United States from Russia just after the Russian Revolution in 1919. The 12-year-old girl in this story, her name is Rifka, is basically Great Aunt Lucy. The book is written as letters from Rifka who is escaping from Russia to her cousin Tovah who stayed behind in Russia. Rifka had no paper to write such letters, so she wrote them in the margins of a book of poetry by the famous Russian writer, Pushkin. The book was a gift from her dear cousin Tovah. Each letter begins with a quote from Pushkin, followed by the date, the content of the letter, closing with Rifka's signature.

(Hold up poetry book and read from it) Here is the letter she wrote her cousin after they had fled Russia and arrived in Poland:

... and from  
The gloom land of lonely exile  
To a new country bade me come ...

Pushkin

September 3, 1919 (Poland)

My Dear Cousin Tovah,

After we hid on the train leaving Russia, we were fortunate that we ran into no further trouble until we reached the Polish border. At the border, though, guards came aboard. "Get off the train! Take off your clothes. A doctor must examine you before you enter Poland." a squat man ordered. His round face and red cheeks did not match the sharpness of his voice.

Can you imagine? Taking off your clothes just like that in the middle of a train yard? I fought them. I would not take off my clothes for them. "Do as I say!" the guard barked at me. "Or you will be sent back, all of you." From the

fierceness of his voice I knew he would not hesitate to turn us over to the Russian police. I could not have my family returned to Russia because of me. I took off my clothes. I huddled beside Mama as we stood in our underwear outside the boxcar. I thought of the things the Russians had taken from my family as I stood in the train yard and I was angry. Why, Tovah? Why is it that if a Russian peasant does not get what he wants, he feels justified in stealing it from a Jew? The guards picked up our clothes and our belongings and took them away, even my rucksack with Mama's candlesticks. (Show rucksack)

The doctor made me feel dirty. He looked in my eyes and my mouth and my hair. I kept my eyes down. I could not stand to look at him. He yelled at me, something in Polish. Mama spoke with him. Then she took my hand and led me into a small building where a woman sprayed us with something vile. It burned my skin and my scalp, my nose and my eyes. Finally the Polish guards allowed us back onto the train. They returned our clothes to us and our bags, stinking of fumigation. My eyes watered from the stench of it. That was not the worst, though. When I lifted my rucksack, (Lift rucksack) it was not as heavy as it had been before. Mama's candlesticks were gone. "So they stole our candlesticks." Mama said. "It could be worse, Rifka, much worse. Stop sniffing and finish getting dressed."

I will stop writing now. My head throbs and my body aches from all that has happened.

Shalom, my cousin, Rifka

As ugly as her experience upon entering Poland was, it is not the worst ordeal she would endure on her voyage to America. She will suffer disease, separation from her family, storms at sea, and detainment on Ellis Island. This is an immigrant's story; it is Great Aunt Lucy's story. It is a fascinating story. (Hold up book) Letters From Rifka by Karen Hesse.