

# LETTERS FROM RIFKA

BY NEWBERY MEDAL-WINNING AUTHOR

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"Told with unusual grace and simplicity, an unforgettable picture of immigrant courage, ingenuity, and perseverance."—*KIRKUS REVIEWS, POINTER REVIEW*

...And thoughts stir bravely in my head, and  
rhymes  
Run forth to meet them on light feet, and fingers  
Reach for the pen...

—*Pushkin*

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October 1, 1920  
Entering New York Harbor

*Dear Tovah,*

Today we will arrive at Ellis Island. Today I will see Mama and smell her yeasty smell. Today I will feel the tickle of Papa's dark beard against my cheeks and see my brother Nathan's dimpled smile and Saul's wild curly hair. Today I will meet my brothers Asher and Isaac and Reuben.

Already I am wearing my best hat, the black velvet with the shirring and the brim of light blue. I'm hoping that with the hat, Mama will not mind my baldness. I've tucked Papa's tallis into my rucksack, but Mama's gold locket hangs around my neck.

The captain said his company notified our families and they are awaiting our arrival. I must pass a screening on the island before I can go home with Mama and Papa. Papa wrote about Ellis Island in his letters.

He wrote that at Ellis Island you are neither in nor out of America. Ellis Island is a line separating my future from my past. Until I cross that line, I am still homeless, still an immigrant. Once I leave Ellis Island, though, I will truly be in America.

Papa said in his letter that they ask many questions at Ellis Island. I must take my time and answer correctly. What's to worry? I am good at answering questions. Even if they ask me a thousand questions, I will have Mama and Papa near me, my mama and papa.

Just one week ago, I did not think I would ever make it to America. We drifted on the sea for days, helpless, waiting for the ship to come and tow us. I assisted with the cleanup as best I could, doing work Pieter would have done if he were there.

Then, once the tow ship arrived it took so long between the securing of the ropes and the exchanges between the two ships, I thought we would never begin moving. At last, when we did, the other ship pulled us so slowly. I could swim faster to America.

In Russia, all America meant to me was excitement, adventure. Now, coming to America means

so much more. It is not simply a place you go when you run away. America is a place to begin anew.

In America, I think, life is as good as a clever girl can make it.

Very soon, Tovah, I will be in this America. I hope someday you will come, too.

*Shalom, my cousin,  
Rifka*

P.S. As I was finishing this letter a cry went up from the deck. When I went out to see what it was, I found all the passengers gathered on one side of the ship, looking up. They were looking at Miss Liberty, Tovah, a great statue of a woman standing in the middle of the harbor. She was lifting a lamp to light the way for us.

... Give me your hand. I will return  
At the beginning of October...  
—Pushkin

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October 2, 1920  
Ellis Island

*Dear Tovah,*

I don't know how to tell about what has happened. I feel numb and I can't believe. I thought if I could tell you, maybe it would make some sense, maybe it would help.

They are holding me, detaining me on Ellis Island, at the hospital for contagious diseases. They won't let me go to Mama and Papa. They won't even let me see them. Tovah, I can't go to America!

After we landed, I sat on a bench in an enormous room with hundreds of others, waiting to hear my name called.

I waited a long time. I just wanted to see Mama and Papa. I kept looking around for them, for Mama's black hair, for Papa's beard, but they

weren't there. There were others with thick beards, with dark hair, but they weren't my mama and papa. Certainly I would know my own mama and papa.

Finally a man called my name. I couldn't understand what he said to me. I felt nervous and he spoke English so fast, much faster than the lady from the HIAS. Someone found an interpreter for me. I answered their questions, I read from a book to prove I am not a simpleton, but they kept delaying my approval.

The doctor examined me. He took off my hat, my beautiful hat. I didn't like his taking off my hat any more than I liked the Russian guard touching my hair or the Polish doctor examining me at the border, but just as then, I had no choice.

The first doctor called over another doctor. They spoke fast. They looked at my scalp. They shook their heads. Then they called for a tall man with glasses. The nosepiece was dull with the mark of his thumbprint, so often did he shove the gold rims up on his thin nose.

"What is it?" I asked, pulling on the doctors' sleeves, but they didn't answer. The first doctor put a chalk mark on my shoulder and pointed me in the direction of a cage holding the detainees.

Detainees are immigrants who are not welcome in America. They remain on the island until the authorities decide what to do with them. People like

criminals and simpletons are detainees. I didn't belong with them. I could not belong with them.

"Why are you holding me?" I cried in Yiddish. "Why have you put me with these people? I don't belong here. I belong in America. I have come to America."

A lady from the HIAS came over. She, too, was short, like the HIAS lady in Antwerp and the HIAS lady in Warsaw, but this one had a red bun on the top of her head.

"Shah," she said. "Don't make such a fuss. If you calm down, I will help you."

She spoke with the doctor. She spoke with the man who wore the gold-rimmed glasses. I saw her face grow less and less hopeful. When she walked back to me, I could tell it was not good news.

She explained to me in Yiddish what the doctors had said. "You must be kept in the hospital for contagious diseases. It's because of the ringworm you suffered from in Europe."

"They cured my ringworm!" I cried.

"Mr. Fargate, the tall man with the glasses, says he must be certain the ringworm is gone before you can enter the country," the lady from the HIAS said. "Perhaps it will only take a day or two."

"A day or two. I must go to Mama and Papa now! My papers say the ringworm is cured!" I cried.

"Why don't they believe my papers? Why must I wait?"

"It's not just the ringworm that concerns them," said the lady from the HIAS. "It's your hair." She stroked my cheek with the back of her hand. She had a brown wart on her chin, with red hairs growing out of it. I pulled back from her.

"My hair?" I asked. I tugged at the black velvet hat, pulling it down until it nearly covered my ears.

"The doctors worry about your hair."

"Why should they worry over such a thing as my hair?" I asked.

"To them it is important," the HIAS lady said. "Even though your ringworm may be gone, if your hair does not grow back, Rifka, the American government will have to view you as a social responsibility."

"What does this mean? Social responsibility?" I asked.

"It means the American government is afraid they will have to support you for the rest of your life," the lady from the HIAS said. "Your lack of hair makes you an undesirable immigrant. They think without hair you will never find a husband to take care of you and so *they* will have to take care of you instead."

I couldn't believe what she was saying.

"Some Jewish women shave their heads on purpose," I said. "It is written into the Jewish law. To be bald is not a sin."

The HIAS lady sighed.

"You mean the country will not let me in simply because they are afraid when I grow up no one will want to marry me?"

"That is right."

"You don't need hair to be a good wife, do you?" I asked. "Jewish women wear wigs all the time. I could wear a wig and still be a good wife."

"You are a child," the lady from the HIAS said. "It is not that simple."

"It is that simple," I said.

She said, "I can't change the rules, Rifka. Either your hair grows or they will send you back."

There it was. What chance did I have of my hair growing now? It had not grown in almost a year.

Tovah, I think maybe you were wrong after all. You said a girl must not depend on her looks, that it is better to be clever. But in America looks are more important, and if it is my looks I must rely on, I am to be sent back. How can this be?

*Shalom,  
Rifka*