

TEACHERS' RESOURCE KIT

Longacre Press NZ Non-Fiction

Krystyna's Story

A Polish refugee's journey

Halina Ogonowska-Coates

'As a child I loved my mother but she seemed different from other mothers. She didn't know how old she was. She couldn't remember where she was born. I wondered what had happened to her that she could have forgotten such important things. It had something to do with the Second World War ...'

Krystyna is one of 732 'Polish children' who survived forced deportation to the Soviet Union and was given a home in New Zealand in 1944. Her remarkable story, a composite portrait drawn from interviews with Polish survivors, begins in a peaceful Polish village and follows her family's harrowing journey to a labour camp in Siberia, the terrible flight to freedom, and Krystyna's lonely voyage to a safe refuge in New Zealand.

This story is a beautifully evoked account of a child's journey through Europe at war, and a young woman's bewildering encounter with rural New Zealand.



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RESOURCE KIT CONTAINS:

- Author statement
- Language exercises
- Character study questions
- Creative responses / research ideas

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About the Author:

Halina Ogonowska-Coates is a writer, filmmaker, broadcaster and oral historian. Born in New Zealand to a Polish mother and a New Zealand father, she has a Masters degree (Hons) in New Zealand History from Canterbury University and lives in Sumner, Christchurch. Her work includes touring exhibitions, film and radio documentaries.

In 2005 she won the Qantas Media Award for Best Radio Documentary and in 2006 was awarded a Media Peace Award. In 2007 she received a New Zealand Mental Health Foundation Media Award and is currently working on a project associated with this award.



Juliet Nicholas

Author Statement:

‘Living in New Zealand, it is hard to imagine the experience of war, being taken from your home, seeing your family members die and having to make a new life far away from the place where you were born.

‘There are thousands of refugees and displaced people in our world today and the journey of change and adjustment to a new life and culture is a challenging and often bewildering path.

‘The Polish refugees who came to New Zealand in 1944 found challenges not only in losing their homeland but also in the experience of starting new lives somewhere on two small islands at the bottom of the world.

‘This story of finding a new life reaches deep into the human resources of survival and self-awareness as part of the experience of being a refugee.’



Questions and Activities

Before Reading:

1. What does the cover picture indicate that the book is about?
2. When and where might the story be set?
3. Who is the main character?
4. What do you know about events of World War II, both overseas and in New Zealand?

Language:

1. Figurative language is used to convey ideas that might otherwise be difficult to express. Two examples of figurative language are metaphors and similes. For example, 'The traffic made a solid, moving tide.' (p.38) and 'Women who looked like big soft mattresses...' (p.135). Find more examples of each type of figurative language from the book.
2. The author uses images of hell in some similes. For example, 'It was as if the gates of hell had been opened.' (p.39) and 'It was like being shunted towards the gate of the damned.' (p.40). Write three similes using images of heaven.
3. The author uses symbolism in the book. What might the following symbolise; the building of a ladder (p.58), and a land of milk and honey (p.129)?
4. The author uses personification to help describe, in this instance, hunger, which was '...begging me to find it something to eat.' (p.82). Find another example of personification from the book. Write a sentence using personification for the following words: fear, anger, joy and sadness.
5. In 'Journey Two' Krystyna hears a lot of NZ sayings and colloquial language. Define these words: cuppa, beaut, tucker, bobby dazzler.

Characters:

1. The character of Krystyna is a composite character. What does this mean?
2. How old is Krystyna at the start of the book?
3. Describe Krystyna's reaction to the following events:
 - Her father leaving to join the war.
 - The death of her mother.
 - The birth of her sister's baby.
 - Her arrival in New Zealand.
 - Her lack of English at school.
4. How has Krystyna changed and developed by the end of the book?
5. Krystyna dreams of an imaginary world to escape the horrors of the camp (p.81). Draw a picture of this world.
6. How does Krystyna react to the soldier's news that the Polish are free? (pp.95–98). What were the consequences of her actions?
7. How does Krystyna feel about being separated from her Polish friends and having to speak only English at the convent school (p.170)?
8. In 'Journey Two' make a list of the things which help to give Krystyna '... a sense of belonging ...' (p.194).

Themes:

1. The book mentions *pierogi*, *barszcz* and *sernik* (p.7 & p.14). What types of food are these?
2. Krystyna reacts very differently to the poisoned sweets dropped by the Russians (p.11) and the chocolate later given to her by the American soldiers (p.124). Why is this?
3. Food is a major theme throughout the book. Why is this? Write a list of the food Krystyna eats throughout the book. How does Krystyna react to the abundance of food in New Zealand?
4. Animal imagery is prevalent throughout the book. List examples.

Creative Responses / Research:

1. Translate the Polish saying at the start of the book (p.5).
2. Locate Poland and Siberia on a map.
3. Locate Krystyna's hometown, Baranowicz, on a map of Poland (p.6).
4. Write a time-line of the major events of World War II.
5. The following two pacts are mentioned in the novel: The Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, August 1939 (p.10) and The Polish-Soviet Pact, July 1941 (p.94). Research the history of these pacts and the effect they had on the events of World War II.
6. Krystyna's father is an officer on reserve who is called up to fight for Poland (p.15). Was this the same for New Zealand men? When did New Zealand soldiers start to fight in World War II?
7. Krystyna's family is taken away by NKVD officers (p.32). What does this stand for?
8. Krystyna is given soup which a soldier says is 'A present from Father Stalin' (p.63). Who is Stalin?
9. What is 'forced deportation' (p.5)?
10. List the hiding places Krystyna's family use at the start of the book (p.17). Who are they hiding from? Why do they stop hiding?
11. What do the Russians do to Krystyna and her family while they are still on their family farm (pp.22-28)?
12. The Russians start to take registers of names (p.28). Why is this?
13. 'What would you do if the soldiers came into your home and said that they were taking you away? Destination unknown. What would you take?' (p.32). Imagine this was happening to you. Make a list of what you would take with you.
Read the instructions given by the Polish officer about what Krystyna's family is allowed to take with them (p. 34). Do you need to revise your list?
14. Research the diseases dysentery, typhoid and polio. Did people suffer from these diseases in New Zealand during World War II? Are they still around today?
15. Krystyna's family are put into *Ciepluszki* – cattle wagons (p.41). Draw a picture of both the interior and exterior of the cattle wagon.
16. Krystyna's aunt gives her a sprig of lavender in the cattle wagon, the smell of which reminds her of home (p.46). Write down some smells and the memories that they bring back for you.
17. When a private toilet area is constructed in the cattle wagon Krystyna states that 'This small act seemed like a victory to us.' (p.49). There are many moments of heroism by ordinary people in the book. Which do you think is the greatest? Explain why.
18. There are many episodes when Krystyna and others around her sing songs and hymns from Poland. Why do you think they do this? Is there a song about New Zealand that would do the same for you?
19. Krystyna's family is interred in 'Camp Niechodnik'. Can you find out anything about other camps in Siberia? What jobs did the inmates have to do in the camp (p.77)?
20. Two organizations 'Red Cross' (p.164) and 'Sally Army' (p.214) are mentioned in the book. What are these organizations and what did/do they do?
21. On her arrival in New Zealand Krystyna meets Prime Minister Peter Fraser. (p.134) Which years was he Prime Minister and what were his policies?
22. Locate Pahiatua on a map of New Zealand (p.137).
23. Krystyna leaves school at fifteen to work at the Timaru Railway station (p.212). What other career options for girls are mentioned in the book (p.212)?
24. Krystyna marks her journey on a map (p. 214). Draw her journey from Poland to New Zealand on a world map.

25. In the prologue the author states that the stories she was told ‘...haunt the corners of my mind’ (p.6). Choose a scene that you find the most haunting from the book and re-write it in the third person.
26. While at school Krystyna is given the novels *Oliver Twist* and *Wuthering Heights* to learn English from (p.181). Who were the authors of these novels and when were they written? What were their themes and how might they have struck Krystyna?
27. Imagine you are a journalist for a war-time newspaper. Write an article on the conditions you find at the camp in which Krystyna is interred.
28. Household items mentioned in the book include ‘the copper and mangle’ (pp.172–173) and a ‘meat safe’ (p.146). What was daily life like for a New Zealand housewife in the 1940’s?
29. Krystyna is sent to stay in several different places and with several different families when she reaches New Zealand. Where, and whom, would you have wanted to stay with? Explain why.
30. Imagine you are one of the Polish girls in the boarding school. Write a diary entry describing your life there.
31. Krystyna attends the Fairlie Agricultural Fair (p.202). Create a poster for this fair.
32. Write a review of this book for your favourite magazine.
33. Re-write the ‘blurb’ of the book.
34. Research how many Poles were interred in camps during World War II and the reasons why.
35. Watch the documentary *Paperclips* (2004). Develop a class project to help commemorate the victims of World War II like those in this book.
36. Watch the film *Exiles; The Story of a Polish Journey* (1991).