

**Reading Discussion Guide for *A Jewish Refugee in New York* by Kadya Molodovsky
Written by Anita Norich**

The Book

"I arrived on a beautiful day. Perhaps this was a sign that things would go well for me in America." So begins *A Jewish Refugee in New York*. But when the protagonist of this novel begins her diary, it is December 15, 1939, and she knows full well that things have gone terribly badly before her arrival in the United States. The hope and the uncertainty of her first diary entry permeate every page of this book as Rivke Zilberg, a 20-year-old refugee from Poland, comes to New York to escape the horrors back home and to build a new life. In the journal Rivke writes during the next ten months, the struggles faced by immigrants and refugees in the United States are described against the terrifying backdrop of war in Europe.

On May 30, 1941, the first installment of this novel appeared in the New York Yiddish daily newspaper, *Morgn-zhurnal* (*Morning Journal*). It was called *Fun lublin biz nyu york: dos togbukh fun a yidish flikhtling-meydl* (*From Lublin to New York: The Diary of a Jewish Refugee Girl*). When it was published as a book in 1942, the subtitle was changed and the book became *Fun lublin biz nyu york: togbukh fun rivke zilberg* (*From Lublin to New York: Diary of Rivke Zilberg*). We have no evidence of why the change was made or by whom. The current English title seeks to combine both Yiddish versions: *A Jewish Refugee in New York: Rivke Zilberg's Journal*. Thus, it restores the focus on Kadya Molodovsky's central questions in the novel: what is the life of a refugee in America like? How do we, as a country and as individuals, respond to refugees?

When Rivke arrives in New York, she lives with her aunt and uncle, who speak Yiddish, and their two children, who do not. The older generation still retains the language and some of the customs of their Eastern European life, but they are incomprehensible to Rivke. On Friday nights, her aunt lights the Sabbath candles and then—as is certainly far from traditional—everyone plays cards. Rivke's difficulties communicating and understanding are central concerns of this novel. She is surprised that the people her age know so little Yiddish, or use it so incorrectly. Learning English is difficult for her, as it is for many immigrants. Molodovsky conveys this by including English words in the Yiddish text; they are transliterated, sometimes translated, but most often left to be understood by context alone. In this way, the Yiddish reader begins to experience those difficulties as Rivke herself must have experienced them. (In this English translation, that foreignness is conveyed by transliterating the sounds Rivke would have heard back into English and italicizing them. Thus we have words such as *partee* [party], *kayk* [cake], *muvees* [movies], and so on.)

Rivke must accustom herself to new social norms. In New York, people her age seem to be concerned with leisure activities and with flirting and dating. Rivke is told that in America it is easier to find a husband than a job and, unlike in Lublin, she is considered an "old maid" at the age of 20. She wonders what the differences are between one Layzer (the fiancé who has miraculously made his way to Palestine) and another (the American young man who is called by

his nickname, Red). She flirts with Red and even with her cousin's fiancé, although she knows that her own fiancé is waiting for her.

Rivke certainly struggles with the differences between her old and new worlds. But even more profoundly, she struggles with the knowledge of what is happening in Europe, in Poland, to her family. She is concerned that her shoes don't match her dress, and at the same time she is concerned that her father is living in a cow's stall in a barn. Such combinations of the mundane and the tragic appear throughout the book. Particularly poignant are the different understandings of two key words that are frequently repeated: "fire" and "war." When Rivke thinks of fire, she is thinking about the Nazi bombs that burned Lublin to the ground and killed her mother; when her uncle talks about the fire consuming his family, he is referring to the cost of his daughter's wedding and the money he will burn through in paying for it. We know what Rivke is referring to when she talks about war; what the women of the Lublin Ladies Society call a war is the battle over who should send thank you notes after a fundraising event.

The American Jews among whom Rivke lives are certainly not indifferent to what is happening to Jews in Europe. They know that the families they have left in Europe are trapped and there is little they can do to help them. The book offers insights into what it must have felt like to learn of the ever-growing horrors taking place in one's country of origin and to be aware of one's own distance from them. Written before the "Final Solution"—the murder of European Jews—could have been understood, it also reveals just how much *was* known by American Jews. The Yiddish newspapers these characters read carry daily, accurate news about what is happening in Europe. In fact, Molodovsky's serialized novel—like much of Yiddish literature—appeared side-by-side with news about the war. The novel does not blame American Jews—who were themselves fairly recent immigrants—for not doing more. But it does insist that in such situations the question "what can be done?" needs to be asked. It also compels us to consider what it means to empathize with the plight of refugees. Whether readers find Rivke likable or not, admirable or shallow, Molodovsky challenges us to understand her situation and to think about how best to respond to it.

The Author

Kadya Molodovsky (1894–1975) was one of the twentieth century's most well-known and prolific writers of Yiddish literature. She was born in Bereze in what is now Belarus but was then part of the Grodno province within the Pale of Settlement, the region within the Russian Empire in which Jews were allowed to settle. Her movements—from Russian small towns to Odessa, Kiev, Warsaw, New York, and Tel Aviv—encompass the trajectories of much Jewish migration in the twentieth century. In her teenage and young adult years she was compelled to relocate many times, pursuing education and employment and barely escaping the worst horrors of pogroms, war, and revolution. Like many Yiddish writers of the time, she was not only peripatetic but also multilingual and well-educated in secular subjects as well as religious texts. She was a teacher of and in Yiddish and Hebrew. It has most often been men who are thought of as the writers, teachers, and intellectuals in her generation, but she is one of the most prominent examples (although certainly not the only one) of a woman with this range of knowledge and experience.

As a Socialist Zionist engaged in educational and social reform, Molodovsky was committed to the politics and culture associated with Yiddish. Her husband, Simkhe Lev, was a historian, a printer, and a Communist. In 1935, a time when it was exceedingly difficult to come to the United States, Molodovsky's fame brought her an invitation from a Yiddish publishing house in New York, and she was able to leave Poland. She was reunited with her father and sisters in Philadelphia before settling in New York, then the center of American Yiddish letters. It took another three years, filled with frightening bureaucratic obstacles, before her husband was able to join her.

Molodovsky was a well-known writer when she came to the United States. With the exception of three years (1949–1952) when she lived in Israel, she spent most of the rest of her life in New York. Her time in the newly established State of Israel was difficult financially and personally. She and her husband were in serious financial straits, and she was disappointed in the country's harshly negative view of Yiddish, but she remained committed to the Zionist ideal. When her husband died in 1974, she was in poor health, and her relatives, who lived in Philadelphia, moved her to a nursing home there where she died several months later.

Known primarily as a poet, essayist, and editor, Molodovsky wrote over twenty books, including plays and four novels, of which *Fun lublin biz nyu york* is the first. In English, she is perhaps best known for her poem, "El khanun" ("God of Mercy"; see resources below), written in 1944, asking God to choose a different people because the Jews have grown weary of death. Her work was translated into Hebrew by two of the most important Hebrew poets of the twentieth century—Natan Alterman and Leah Goldberg—and her poems for children became part of the Israeli school curriculum. Often, children and their teachers recited or sang her poems without knowing that they were originally written in Yiddish. Her poems and stories have also been translated into English (see resources below); this is the first of her novels to appear in translation. A prominent figure among modernist Yiddish writers in Poland, Russia, the United States, and Israel, Molodovsky also has the distinction of being the only woman in the history of Yiddish literature to edit a major literary journal, *Svive (Milieu)*, published as a bimonthly in New York from January/February 1943–April/May 1944 and then again as a quarterly from November 1960–September 1974. She served, as well, as editor of the literary pages of the Warsaw Communist daily *Fraynd (Friend)*, 1934–36, and of *Heym: dos vort fun der arbetndiker froy in yisroel (Home: the word of the working woman in Israel)* in Tel Aviv, 1950–52.

Questions for Discussion

- 1) What do you think of Rivke? To what extent do you find her to be a sympathetic character? What makes her sympathetic, or keeps her from being so?
- 2) How would you describe the relationship between Rivke and her relatives in New York?
- 3) What is the difference between calling Rivke a refugee, an exile, or an immigrant?
- 4) How does Rivke describe the struggle to learn a foreign language—in this case, English?

- 5) What is the significance of the name changes in the book? (Rivke to Ray or Ruth; Layzer to Larry and Red, etc.)
- 6) There are three young men who want to pursue a relationship with Rivke. Why do you think she chooses Red?
- 7) Compare and contrast the three places that are important to Rivke's story: Lublin, New York, and Palestine before the creation of the State of Israel.
- 8) Rivke describes several individuals and institutions who offer aid to refugees, immigrants, or those still in Europe. How does she depict them? What does she think of them? What do you think of them?
- 9) Why do you think Molodovsky chose to write this novel as a diary? What effect does that form have on the story?
- 10) As you're reading this book, how aware are you that this is an English translation of a Yiddish book? What makes you aware of that? Do you find the italicized words—English with a Yiddish accent—distracting? Annoying? Helpful?
- 11) The Yiddish book was serialized in 1941, describing events that begin in December 1939. What does the book tell you about the history of those early war years?
- 12) Historical dates are important in this novel. Molodovsky came to the United States in 1935. Her character, Rivke, arrives in New York in December 1939. The book was serialized in 1941. It was published as a book in 1942. Research and discuss: What would have been known about the situation of Jews in Poland in each of those years?
- 13) How would you compare Rivke's situation in the 1930s with the situation refugees in America find themselves in today? What's similar and what's different?

Multimedia Resources

- 1) Molodovsky's voice can be heard reading her most famous poem, "*El khanun*" ("God of Mercy"). The [recording](#) is from Sheva Zucker's CD, "The Golden Peacock: The Voice of the Yiddish Writer" (2001).
- 2) Josh Lambert created a [resource kit](#) for teachers on Molodovsky's poem "*El khanun*" ("God of Mercy").
- 3) [Photographs](#) of Kadya Molodovsky
- 4) [Additional photographs of Molovsky](#)

The Yiddish Book Center's "Coming to America" Reading Groups for Public Libraries Program

- 5) The most comprehensive collection of Molodovsky's poems in English translation is *Paper Bridges: Selected Poems of Kadya Molodowsky* (Wayne State University Press, 1999), translated by Kathryn Hellerstein.
- 6) See *A House of Seven Windows: Short Stories* (Syracuse University Press, 2006), translated by Leah Schoolnik, for a volume of Molodovsky's short stories in English translation.
- 7) Watch this [interview](#) (in English) with Molodovsky's niece, Edith Schwarz, from the Yiddish Book Center's Wexler Oral History Project.
- 8) For [more information](#) about Rivke's home town of Lublin.
- 9) [Additional information about Lublin](#)