

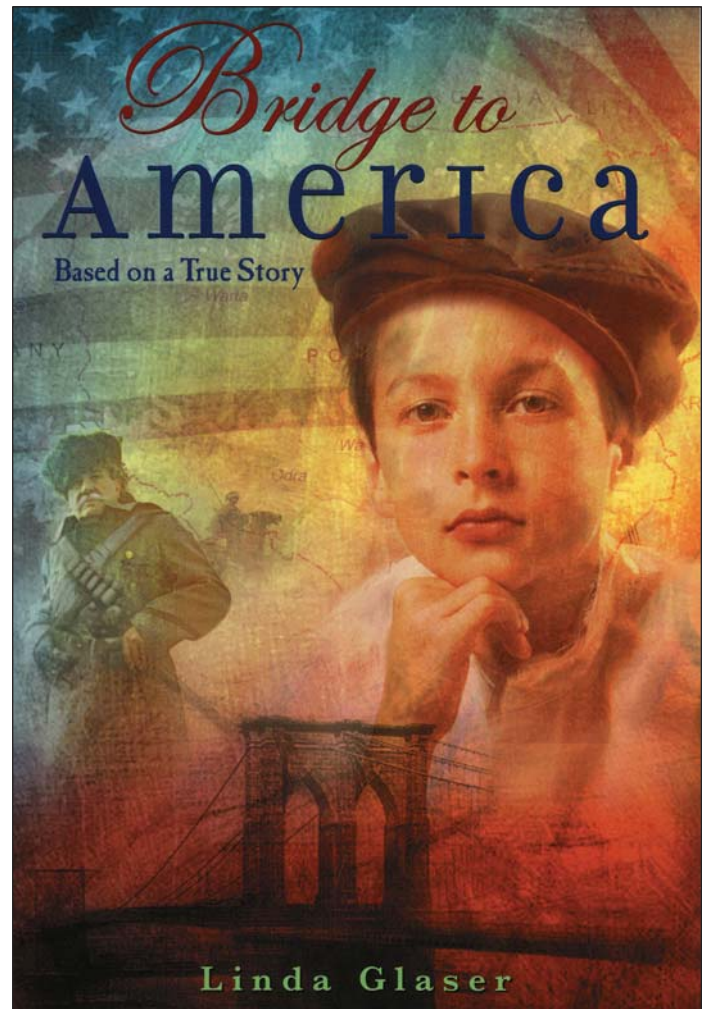
Bridge to America

Introduction

Bridge to America is based on the early life of a real person, Fivel, a Jewish immigrant who grew up in a shtetl, a small village in Poland in the early 1900s. Although the book is fictionalized, most of the people and events are real. Fivel and his family were extremely poor, often hungry, and in fear of Cossacks raiding their village. Fivel hoped and dreamed that his pa would send money from America for his family's passage. His family might well have starved were it not for a kind baker, Beryl. They might have been killed were it not for a brave neighbor, Ana. The author felt compelled to share their story—real-life heroes who will never be found in the history books.

Class Activities

- For Fivel, living in a time before TV and computers, life in America seemed as foreign and inaccessible as life in another solar system. He didn't have an accurate picture of how to get to get there. So he made up his own—a bridge across the ocean. How would you imagine life on another solar system? How would you picture yourself traveling there? Write a story or draw a picture.
- Fivel's family's soup was "mostly water with some potatoes and onions." Make a soup like this in class. Have everyone eat some for lunch. What if this was your one meal of the day? What insight does this give you about Fivel's family?
- As a class, collect food for the local food shelf and bring it there. Try volunteering at a local food shelf.
- There are many conflicts between groups. Often it comes from not knowing the other group. Is there a group you want to learn more about? Visit a mosque. Visit a temple. Visit a cultural center for a particular group in your community that you'd like to learn more about.
- Create a 3D model of Fivel's shtetl. Would there be stoplights? Streetlights? Outhouses? Yiddish signs on the stores? Electric lines? Telephone lines?
- Watch the movie *Fiddler on the Roof*. It takes place in the 1800s, but life in the shtetl didn't change very much from that time to when Fivel's family lived.
- Collect money for UNICEF or another charitable organization. Or is there a group in your community that could use help? Could you collect clothing? Food? What can you do locally?
- Fivel gets a new name. Choose a new name and have everyone call you by your new name for the day.



Class Discussion Questions

- Have you ever been very hungry and not known when you'd get food again? Have you ever had to eat the same food day after day, with little hope of change? This is not only what it was like for Fivel and his family; this is what it's like for many people in the world today. How do you think Beryl felt helping out families in the shtetl?
- Fivel and Benyomin talked Kvola into stealing the flour. Think of a time that you did something you knew was wrong. Or think of a time when you talked someone else into doing something you knew was wrong. What were the consequences?
- Do you think that seeing Kvola suffer was enough of a punishment for Fivel? Which would you choose? To see someone you love suffer or to get yelled at? In your opinion, which is the harder punishment? Explain.

- Kvola did something wrong—stealing. So did Mrs. Koslowski—beating Kvola and not paying her. If you were a judge, what do you think would be a just sentence for each of them? What would you have each of them do to make amends? Or how would you try to create an agreeable solution?
- Fivel mentions that a bunch of Polish boys would insult and gang up on the Jewish boys. Does this remind you of anything in your own community, school, or neighborhood? In your opinion, what needs to be done so that kids don't tease or bully other kids? Does punishment work? What might work?
- Fivel and the people who lived in his shtetl were afraid of the Cossacks. Is there something you're afraid of that you have no control over? What's the same and what's different between fear of terrorism today and Fivel's family's fear of Cossacks as they hid in a house with only a latch on the door?
- Fivel and his friends were so poor that they took things off the dead Cossack. Have you heard in the news of somewhere in the world where children are in such desperate poverty today? Where? What are the circumstances? Can anything be done?
- Kvola wouldn't let her mother leave the house to try to save Benyomin because it was too dangerous. Have you ever stood up to an adult because you knew it was the right thing to do? What happened?
- When they left, they got to pack only a few things. Hannah took a few needles and thread. Kvola took a copper cup. Fivel took his boots. Ma took blankets, Sabbath candlesticks, wooden bowls and spoons, and Pa's photo. Benyomin didn't get to take the wheel. Some things were necessities. Some weren't. Was Pa's photo a necessity? Were the Sabbath candlesticks? Why were they important?
- At home, imagine that you are leaving the country and can only take one thing with you. What would it be? Bring it to school. Share it with a small group. Explain why you'd choose it.
- One of the recurring themes in the book is the value of kindness. Both in the opening Yiddish proverb, "The highest form of wisdom is kindness," and throughout the book, with Ma telling Fivel, "You should grow up to be like Beryl with a big heart." Think about the proverb "The highest form of wisdom is kindness." Do you agree or disagree? Why? Who in the book showed kindness? Who didn't? How did it affect other people?

History Activity

- What was going on in Europe in 1920? Research world events for that year.
- Research the Statue of Liberty. When was it built? Why was it built?
- Research Ellis Island. In 1921, when Fivel's family came, where did most immigrants come from? Where do they come from now? Why did people come to the United States in 1920? Why do they come today?

Writing Exercises

- "*Compare and Contrast*" Essay: Ana did something brave and compassionate by bringing over the silver cross. Think of a time when someone helped you or your family when you really needed it. How did it feel? Think of a time when you helped someone when the person really needed it. How did that feel? What's the same and what's different about those two experiences?
- Fivel wants so badly to go to America to be with his father, but he has no control over it. So Fivel dreams that he's in America. And each Shabbat he imagines that he's hugging his father. Have you ever wanted something very badly that you had no control over? What was/is it? Can you imagine having it? Write about what that would be like.
- People were afraid to open their doors and help Benyomin. Is there a similar situation today in which people are afraid to help other people? Describe.
- When the rich man comes back, Fivel wonders what to do. Run and hide? Refuse to go? Beg Ma? If you were Fivel's friend, what would you advise him to do? Write a response, considering all of Fivel's different options.
- Fivel grabbed the photo out of the fire. Have you ever done something you felt so strongly about that you felt compelled to do it no matter what might happen? Describe.
- Have you ever had to say goodbye to someone you cared about knowing you'd probably never see that person again? Have you ever had to move to another town, state, or country and leave behind everyone you knew? Describe the experience.
- Read *The New Colossus* by Emma Lazarus. Now imagine you are a poor immigrant arriving in New York Harbor and seeing the Statue of Liberty for the first time. Write a poem about what you think the statue is saying to you.
- Rifka is reunited with her family. Put yourself in Rifka's place the night before. Write a journal entry about saying goodbye to your grandparents who have cared for you for the last six years. What are your thoughts and feelings about leaving?
- Imagine you were Fivel's pen pal. Write a letter to him to prepare him for what he may find once he arrives in America.
- The American cousins made fun of Fivel's leather boots. Has anyone ever made fun of something you were proud of? Did you feel the same about it afterward? Describe.
- Imagine you were suddenly in a different country and didn't know the language. Write a journal entry about a day in school not knowing the language.
- If you didn't know your birthday, what day would you choose? Would you tell people you'd made it up? Would you keep it a secret? Why?

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