



Jesse's Star
Ellen Schwartz

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Consider the following question as you read *Jesse's Star*:

Is there any way to tell if doing something you don't want to do will change your life?

Author

Ellen Schwartz is the author of many books for children, including the *Starshine* series, *I Love Yoga!* and *Yossi's Goal* (Orca), the second book about the irrepressible Yossi. She lives in Burnaby, British Columbia.

Story

Nine-year-old Jesse is totally uninterested in writing a school assignment about his Russian-Jewish ancestors. When he finds an old Star of David in his attic, he is magically transported to a small Russian village in the early 1900s, where he experiences life through the eyes of Yossi, his great-great-grandfather.

Yossi and his fellow villagers are being terrorized by cruel Russian soldiers who steal their food, burn their homes and persecute them for their religious beliefs. Clumsy mischievous Yossi finds himself an unlikely hero when he comes up with a daring plan to help the Jews escape—using his trusty wooden stilts. Back in modern time, Jesse finds new appreciation for his roots and his heritage.

Curricular Integration**Language Arts**

- Baba Yaga is an evil witch in Russian folklore. Brainstorm with students and create a chart of witches from folk and fairy tales. In pairs, have students create a character sketch of the witch based on reading one folk or fairy tale.
- Yossi and his fellow villagers are bullied by the Russian soldiers and he decides to dress up as the much-feared Baba Yaga to get them to stop. Have students write a newspaper article that connects the bullying with the solution Yossi comes up with.
- Using the traveling case drawing described below (see Art), brainstorm as a class about the emotions and questions Jesse experiences as he goes through its contents. Using these as background, have students write a poem that captures the power of this moment for Jesse.
- The traveling case doesn't contain a diary. Have students create one by writing 4-6 diary entries as Jesse when he travels back in time to become Yossi.

History

- At the time of *Jesse's Star*, the only way to travel from Europe and the USSR to any part of North America was by steamship across the Atlantic Ocean. The opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 greatly increased the ease of traveling to the west coast of North America. Have students consider what issues immigrants arriving in North America would be faced with. In small groups, discuss these issues and possible solutions.

- Jesse travels back in time to 1890. Have students do research to find out what events happened in the world that year. Some events are: the completion of the Eiffel Tower, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck of Germany was fired, W.B. Purvis patented the fountain pen, Ellis Island opened as a U.S. immigration depot, the corrugated cardboard box was invented by Robert Gair and New York garment workers won the right to form a union.
- Thomas Newcomen, James Watt, Robert Fulton and Richard Trevithick are all connected to the steam engine. Have students find out more about these men and their links to the steamships that traveled back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean.
- Author Ellen Schwartz gives a brief historical background to *Jesse's Star* at the end of the book. Divide students into groups and have each group study a specific subject (pogroms; immigration; Star of David; the Diaspora etc.) and report back to the class.

Art

- Jesse's adventure begins with a photograph and a necklace he finds in a traveling case in his attic (p. 11). Have students draw the case and its contents.
- Baba Yaga is a creature found in Russian folklore. Many versions of this classic tale exist today. Using the description of Baba Yaga on page 81, have students draw what they think she would look like. Display the pictures and have students brainstorm the similarities and differences between the pictures.
- Mythical creatures exist in many cultures of the world. For example: trolls, sea serpents and dragons. Have students find out more about one of these creatures and then create a comic strip to provide information about them.
- Marc Chagall was a famous Jewish painter who was influenced by his Russian upbringing. His work reflects cubist, fauvist and surrealist influences. One of his most famous works is entitled "I and the Village." Read about his work and have students create a picture in his style.
- Draw a steamship that Jesse's ancestors might have traveled on across the Atlantic.

Drama

- Baba Yaga plays an important part in Yossi's plan to save the village from the soldiers. Have students create short skits with Baba Yaga as the evil main character, then have students create short skits in which Baba Yaga is a good character, such as the one in the book *Babushka Baga Yaga* by Patricia Polacco.
- On the cover of *Jesse's Star* we see a boy looking down at a Star of David. Before reading the book, have students in small groups create dialogue for what this boy might be saying, thinking, feeling, etc. Have them act out the dialogue and then predict how this picture might connect to the story. Once *Jesse's Star* has been read, have them revisit the dialogue and revise it with the new information they have gained.

Social Studies

- Jesse has to complete a project that he really doesn't want to do. He travels back in time to find out how his ancestors came to Canada. Have students interview their parents, grandparents or other relatives to find out how they or their ancestors made it to Canada from their home country.

- Canada is made up of people from around the world. Invite a local consulate representative or someone from a local immigrant's society to talk to students about the country they represent, their customs and the number of people who have immigrated to Canada.
- Yossi and his family traveled from Braslav, Russia to North America by steamship. Today there are many ways people may travel to other parts of the world. Research to find out the most common methods of travel and which countries have the most immigrants.
- Most cultures have an event that celebrates the harvest season. In North America we celebrate Thanksgiving and in *Jesse's Star* they celebrate Succot, the Jewish festival. Have students research how the harvest season is celebrated around the world. Divide the class into six continent groups (omitting Antarctica!) and then into smaller subgroups if required.

Science

- Ocean and wind currents affect ocean travel and climate around the world. On a world map have students draw the major ocean currents including the: Gulf Stream, North Atlantic Current, California Current, Atlantic South Equatorial Drift and the Westwind Drift. Read about how these and other currents affect world travel and climate.
- The major world wind currents are: the Trade winds, Westerlies, Polar Easterlies and the Jet Stream. Place them on a world map and find out more about each one.

Fiction

- Ayres, Katherine. *Family Tree*.
- Cohen, Myra. *Molly's Pilgrim*.
- Cowan, Catherine. *My life with the wave*.
- Dueck, Adele. *Nettie's Journey*. (Russian Revolution)
- Hesse, Karren. *Letters from Rifka*
- Hest, Amy. *When Jessie came across the Sea*.
- Johnston, Tony. *The Harmonica*.
- Matas, Carol. *Turned Away: The World War II Diary of Devorah Bernstein*.
- Nixon, Joan Lowry. *Land of Promise*.
- Polacco, Patricia. *Babushka Baba Yaga*.
- Rohmer, Harriet. *Honoring our Ancestors*.
- Schwartz, Ellen. *Yossi's Goal, Mr. Belinsky's Bagels*.
- Sweeney, Joan. *Me and my Family Tree*.
- Taylor, Cora. *Ghost Voyages, Ghost Voyages II: The Matthew, Ghost Voyages III: Endeavor and Resolution*. (time travel)

NonFiction

- (Dewey Decimal Classification numbers appear in parentheses where applicable.)
- Ayres, Becky Hickox. *Matreshka*. (398.2)
- Cole, Joanna. *Bony-Legs*. (398.2)

- Douglas, Ann. *The Family Tree Detective: Cracking the Case of your Family's Story*. (929.1)
 Freeze, Gregory L. *Russia: A History*. (947.9)
 Hughes, Susan. *Coming to Canada: Building a Life in a New Land*. (304.8)
 Kimmel, Eric A. *Baba Yaga: A Russian Folktale*. (398.22)
 Lasky, Kathryn. *The Man who Made Time Travel*. (526)
 Leedy, Loreen. *Who's in my Family Tree?* (306.85)
 Maki, Wilma (ed.) *Weaving a Country: Stories from Canadian Immigrants*. (971.008)
 Meredith, Susan. *The Usborne Internet-linked book of World Religions*. (291)
 Oram, Hiawyn. *Baba Yaga and the Wise Doll*. (398.2)
 Pozzi, Gianni. *Chagall*. (709.2)
 Purslow, Frances. *Jewish Immigrants in Canada*. (971.004)
 Rutter, Jill. *Jewish Migrations*. (304.8)
 Smith, David. J. *If the World Were a Village: A Book about the World's People* (304.6)

Online

- The World Factbook
www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/rs.html
 World Atlas.com
worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/europe/eur.htm
 Pier 21
www.pier21.ca
 National Museum of American Jewish History
www.nmajh.org/links/links1.htm
 The History Channel Ellis Island
www.historychannel.com/ellisland/index2.html
 Ellis Island
sydaby.eget.net/swe/ellis_island.htm
 An Interactive Tour of Ellis Island
teacher.scholastic.com/activities/immigration/tour/index.htm
 Virtual Jewish History Tour Canada
www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/canada.html
 Immigration to Western Canada
www.civilization.ca/educat/oracle/modules/ckitzan/page02_e.html
 Teaching Heritage: Immigration to the Golden Land: Jewish Life in America
www.thirteen.org/edonline/teachingheritage/lessons/lp4/index.html
 The American Jewish Experience Through the Nineteenth Century: Immigration and Acculturation
www.nhc.rtp.nc.us:8080/tserve/nineteen/nkeyinfo/judaism.htm
 Steamships
www.saburchill.com/history/chapters/IR/033.html
 The Migration to North America
www.let.leidenuniv.nl/history/migration/chapter52.html
 Push and Pull of Immigration and Diversity Kit
www.jaha.org/edu/discovery_center/push-pull/index.html

Myth and Legend from Ancient Times to the Space Age

www.pibburns.com/myth.htm

The Magical World of Russian Folktales

edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=590

Baba Yaga by Ivan Bilibin

www.oldrussia.net/baba.html

A few words from the author

Dear Readers,

I wrote *Jesse's Star* because of an image that came to me when I was in synagogue on a Jewish holiday several years ago. The image was of a young boy. Somehow I knew it was in Russia a long time ago and that the boy's name was Yossi. (Why Yossi? Maybe because my grandfather, who was from Russia, was named Joseph, and Yossi seemed like a Russian version of Joseph.) I felt that Yossi was in danger. I imagined him trying to warn his neighbors that Russian soldiers were going to burn down the village. The people at first did not believe him – after all, he was just a foolish boy. But Yossi convinced them the danger was real, so they followed him to where the soldiers were already setting fire to a barn. Led by Yossi, the people chased the soldiers away and saved the village. Yossi was a hero.

When I got home, I wrote the story. It was very short – the length of a picture book. Later, I decided to expand it into a chapter book. That's when I decided to add a character in the present, who travels back in time to become Yossi. Jesse sounded like an English version of Yossi, so I called this character Jesse. Jesse doesn't care a hoot about his ancestors, but he has to write a report on them – due the next day! By the end of the story, Jesse has learned a lot about his great-great-grandfather and thinks Yossi was a cool guy.

I think that's generally true of history. It can be boring when it's just facts and dates, but when we learn stories about real people – especially our relatives – it becomes much more interesting. That's when we realize that history is part of us.

In the first version, Yossi didn't walk on stilts. I was having trouble figuring out how a nine-year-old boy could scare away a band of Russian soldiers. Then I remembered a dance I had learned when I was a girl. It was set to the music “Pictures at an Exhibition” by the Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky. The dance was about the witch of Russian folklore, Baba Yaga. I thought that if Yossi could impersonate Baba Yaga, he might be able to scare the soldiers away. I read about Baba Yaga and found out that she had long bony arms and long bony legs – and that's when the idea of stilts popped into my mind.

Even though *Jesse's Star* is a made-up story, it's based on truth. In Russia and other countries of Eastern Europe in the late 1800s and early 1900s, there was a wave of violence against Jews. Jewish villages were destroyed and people were killed. Thousands of people – like my grandparents – immigrated to countries like Canada and the United States, where they found peace and freedom. So *Jesse's Star* is, in a way, my family's story. I hope you enjoy it.

Sincerely,

Ellen Schwartz