

Study Guide:

A Jewish Refugee in New York by Kadya Molodovsky (Kadia Molodowsky)

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Adolf Dehn, Spring in Central Park (1941)



JDC (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee) in the 1940s

About the Author:

- Kadya Molodovsky (Kadia Molodowsky) (1894-1975)

- Novelist, Poet, Editor, Playwright, Journalist
- Prominent in the Yiddish literary scene in Warsaw, Poland (1920s-1935) and New York (1935-1975)
- Invited to New York by a Yiddish publisher in 1935, so she did not perish with her fellow Polish Jews in the Holocaust—90% of Polish Jews (including her brother and his family) were killed in the Holocaust
- Lived in Israel three difficult years (1949-1952), where she founded and edited the review “Heym” (Home) for “pioneer” women
- Looking for more? Kadya Molodowsky [About the Author](#)



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 each of her relatives in New York? Why are her relationships like they are?
- 3) What is the difference between calling Rivke a refugee, an exile, or an immigrant?



View of passengers sleeping on the crowded deck of the SS Navemar coming to the United States, 1941. LBI Archives, SS Navemar, Saul Sperling Collection

<https://www.lbi.org/exhibitions/virtual-refuge-heights/> (accessed 8/7/26)

- 4) How does Rivke describe the struggle to learn a foreign language—in this case, English? How is Rivke's struggle similar or different to immigrants and/or refugees today?
- 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) How is Rivke's *Yikhes* (ancestry) honored in the United States? How is this similar or different than the way that Jews honored their family history in Europe?
- 9) 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?
- 10) How does Rivke react to taking charity in the novel? Does her reaction have something to do with her status as a refugee? Explain.
- 11) Why do you think Molodovsky chose to write this novel as a diary? What effect does

that form have on the story?

12) As you are 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?

13) Gender Stereotypes:

In Molodovsky's writings, she often spoke of the dichotomy between her being a (prominent) Yiddish language author and the traditional role of wife in Judaism. How do you think Moldovsky might have reconciled these two aspects of her life? Explain.



“Daughters of the Shtetl”
(Molodovsky is not pictured)



Yiddish Female Writers:
Kadya Molodowsky, Ida Maze, and Rokhl Korn

14) The Yiddish book was serialized in 1941, describing events that began in December 1939. What does the book tell you about the history of those early war years?

15) 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. These are the years in which the Holocaust was at first planned, then implemented, then systematized and standardized to become the horrifically-efficient killing machine that it was. In what ways does the Holocaust surface in the novel? How much does Rivke know about what is going on in Lublin during the course of the novel? How is she getting her information?

16) Could the United States have done more to avert the rise of the Nazis and/or the Holocaust? What might the United States have done? Why do you think that the US did

so little to avert these disastrous developments in Europe?



Refugee Families in Ontario Camp, Oswego, NY. 1944.

Under pressure from his government, FDR agreed reluctantly in 1944 to “temporarily shelter” 1000 Jewish refugees, who were interned, and under the agreement to return to Europe after the war. Despite American public outcry, these interns were given visas after the war.

<https://www.nps.gov/places/fort-ontario.htm> (accessed 08/08/26).



Refugees on the deck of the MS St. Louis. May-June, 1939.

The St. Louis, carried 937 Jewish refugees from Hamburg, Germany to Havana, Cuba. Cuba, the United States, and Canada all refused assistance to the refugees who were forced to return to Europe. 254 out of 937 on board were eventually killed in the Holocaust.

683 lives were saved by Great Britain, France, and Belgium who took them in.

- 17) Rivke is haunted by her past, particularly the absence of her mother. In fact, ghosts are a prominent motif of the novel. How do ghosts (her mother, her father, Layzer, Mr. Fish (the Messiah), Chatsel, Janet) materialize in the novel? What is their role in the novel and how do they develop and change over time? How does Rivke's relationships with her ghosts reflect her relationship with Lublin?
- 18) How are German Jews portrayed in relation to Polish Jews in the novel? What do we learn about the Yiddish language from this comparison?
- 19) Rivke feels lonely and displaced throughout the novel—stuck between Lublin and New York, Yiddish and English, Old World and New World, black shoes and white shoes, ghosts and New Yorkers. Where does Rivke belong? Where does she want to be? How can we read the ending of the novel—particularly the lines that read, “In New York, someone named Ray Levitt will soon be walking around. Rivke Zilberg remained in Lublin. Someone in Palestine is waiting for Rivke Zilberg. And Ray Levitt lives in New York”? (172).
- 20) How would you compare Rivke's experiences in New York in the early 1940s with the situation of refugees, who attempt to enter the United States today? How are their situations similar or different? Explain.
- Historical Context:
 - John Green on European Genocide and the Holocaust:
 - ▶ The Holocaust, Genocides, and Mass Murder of WWII: Crash Cours...
 - Lublin/ Majdanek Concentration Camp:
 - <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/lublin-majdanek-concentration-camp-conditions>
 - The Liberation of Majdanek Concentration Camp, Lublin, Poland (Molodovsky's home town)
 - <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/liberation-of-nazi-camp-majdanek-1944>
 - On the US and the Refugee Crisis: (from the Holocaust Encyclopedia)
 - <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-united-states-and-the-refugee-crisis-1938-41>

- Lecture: Dr. Linda Burghardt, on Washington Heights, New York, the Largest Settlement of German Jews in the World (on Youtube)
 A Haven from the Holocaust: Washington Heights & the Jews of Eu...
- National Park Service Article on Camp Ontario, the only US refugee camp in US for Jewish Refugees Fleeing the Holocaust, 1944-1946
<https://www.nps.gov/places/fort-ontario.htm>

Multimedia Resources (For Further Study)

- 1) Molodovsky's voice can be heard reading her most famous poem, "*El khanun*" ("God of Mercy") on the Yiddish Book Centre's Website. The Book Centre provides a teaching guide for Molodovsky's poem "Merciful God." Scroll down to the green boxes and click on "Download_el_khanun_01_Molodowsky_reciting."
<https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/educational-programs/resources-teachers/resource-kit-s-teachers/grappling-holocaust/kadia-molodowsky#resource-1>
- 2) 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. (Available for sale on the YBC website).
- 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.
<https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/oral-histories/interviews/woh-fi-0001031/edith-schwarz-2018>



Source Material:

The questions in this discussion guide were drawn primarily from two sources, a discussion guide crafted by the Yiddish Book Center the first time they discussed this book ([Discussion Guide](#) (PDF)); and also from Mostowsky, Lizy. “Teaching Guide to Kadya Molodovsky’s A Jewish Refugee in New York trans. Anita Norich. *In Gheveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies* (April 2021). Accessed August 05, 2026. I also crafted questions based on the “Historical Context” links above.

