Suzy and Leah

Jane Yolen

Dear Diary,

August 5, 1944

Today I walked past that place, the one that was in the newspaper, the one all the kids have been talking about. Gosh, is it ugly! A line of rickety wooden buildings just like in the army. And a fence lots higher than my head. With barbed wire on top. How can anyone—even a refugee—live there?

I took two candy bars along, just like everyone said I should. When I held them up, all those kids just swarmed over to the fence, grabbing. Like in a zoo. Except for this one girl, with two dark braids and bangs nearly covering her eyes. She was just standing to one side, staring at me. It was so eerie. After a minute I looked away. When I looked back, she was gone. I mean gone. Disappeared as if she'd never been.

Suzy

My dear Mutti,

August 5, 1944

I have but a single piece of paper to write on. And a broken pencil. But I will write small so I can tell all. I address it to you. Mutti, though you are gone from me forever. I write in English, to learn better, because I want to make myself be understood.

Today another girl came. With more sweets. A girl with yellow hair and a false smile. Yonni and Zipporah and Ruth, my friends, all grabbed for the sweets. Like wild animals. Like . . . like prisoners. But we are not wild animals. And we are no longer prisoners. Even though we are still penned in.

I stared at the yellow-haired girl until she was forced to look down. Then I walked away. When I turned to look back, she was gone. Disappeared. As if she had never been.

Leah

1. barbed wire: twisted wire with sharp points all along it, used for fences and barriers.
2. Mutti (moht' te) German equivalent of Mommy.

Dear Diary,

September 2, 1944

Today we got cereal in a box. At first I did not know what it was. Before the war we ate such lovely porridge with milk straight from our cows. And eggs fresh from the hen's nest, though you know how I hated that nasty old chicken. How often she pecked me! In the German camp, it was potato soup—with onions when we were lucky, without either onion or potato when we were not. And after, when I was running from the Nazis, it was stale brown bread. If we could find any. But cereal in a box—that is something.

I will not take a sweet from that yellow-haired girl, though. She laughed at Yonni. I will not take another orange fruit.

Leah

September 2, 1944

My dear Mutti,

Today I brought the refugee kids oranges today. Can you believe it—they didn't know you're supposed to peel oranges first. One boy tried to eat one like an apple. He made an awful face, but then he ate it anyway. I showed them how to peel oranges with the second one. After I stopped laughing.

Mom says they are going to be coming to school. Of course they'll have to be cleaned up first. Ugh. My hand still feels itchy from where one little boy grabbed it in his. I wonder if he had bugs.

Suzy

September 5, 1944

Dear Diary,

So how are those refugee kids going to learn? Our teachers teach in English. This is America, after all.

I wouldn't want to be one of them. Imagine going to school and not being able to speak English or understand anything that's going on. I can't imagine anything worse.

Suzy

Reading Strategy

Drawing Inferences. What can you infer about Suzy's understanding of the refugees from her thoughts and feelings?

Critical Viewing

How is the expression on this girl's face different from the way Leah's expression is described? When might Leah have been more like the girl in the photograph?

Compare and Contrast

Where do Leah and her friends live?
September 5, 1944

My dear Mutti,

The adults of the Americans say we are safe now. And so we must go to their school. But I say no place is safe for us. Did not the Germans say that we were safe in their camps? And there you and baby Nathan were killed.

And how could we learn in this American school anyway? I have a little English. But Ruth and Zipporah and the others, though they speak Yiddish and Russian and German, they have no English at all. None beyond thank you and please and more sweets. And then there is little Avi. How could he go to this school? He will speak nothing at all. He stopped speaking, they say, when he was hidden away in a cupboard by his grandmother who was taken by the Nazis after she swore there was no child in the house. And he was almost three days in that cupboard without food, without water, without words to comfort him. Is English a safer language than German?

There is barbed wire still between us and the world.

Leah

September 14, 1944

Dear Diary,

At least the refugee kids are wearing better clothes now. And they all have shoes. Some of them still had those strippy pajamas on when they arrived in America.

The girls all wore dresses to their first day at school, though. They even had hair bows, gifts from the teachers. Of course I recognized my old blue pinafore. The girl with the dark braids had it on, and Mom hadn't even told me she was giving it away. I wouldn't have minded so much if she had only asked. It doesn't fit me anymore, anyway.

The girl in my old pinafore was the only one without a name tag, so all day long no one knew her name.

Suzy

September 14, 1944

My dear Mutti,

I put on the blue dress for our first day. It fits me well. The color reminded me of your eyes and the blue skies over our farm before the smoke from the burning darkened it. Zipporah braided my hair, but I had no mirror until we got to the school and they showed us the toilets. They call it a bathroom, but there is no bath in it at all, which is strange. I have never been in a school with boys before.

They have placed us all in low grades. Because of our English, I do not care. This way I do not have to see the girl with the yellow hair who smiles so falsely at me.

But they made us wear tags with our names printed on them. That made me afraid. What next? Yellow stars? I tore mine off and threw it behind a bush before we went in.

Leah

September 16, 1944

Dear Diary,

Mr. Forest has assigned each of us to a refugee to help them with their English. He gave me the girl with the dark braids, the one without the name tag, the one in my pinafore. Gee, she's as prickly as a thistle. I asked if I could have a different kid. He said I was the best English student and she already spoke the best English. He wants her to learn as fast as possible so she can help the others. As if I would, Miss Porcupine.

Her name is Leah. I wish she would wear another dress.

Suzy

3. **Yiddish** (yidˈish) n. language spoken by eastern European Jews and their descendants. It is written with Hebrew letters and contains words from Hebrew, German, Russian, and Polish.

4. **Pinafore** (ˈpinəfɔr) n. a sleeveless garment worn over a dress, often over a blouse.

5. **Star** (stār) n. stars Jews were forced to wear fabric stars during the Holocaust to distinguish them from others.
My dear Muttii,

Now I have a real notebook and a pen. I am writing to you at school now. I cannot take the notebook back to the shelter. Someone there will surely borrow it. I will instead keep it here. In the little cupboard each one of us has been given.

I wish I had another dress. I wish I had a different student helping me and not the yellow-haired girl.

Leah

September 20, 1944

Dear Diary,

Can't she ever smile, that Leah? I've bought her candy bars and apples from home. I tried to give her a handkerchief with a yellow flower on it. She wouldn't take any of them.

Her whole name is Leah Shoshana Herskhowitz. At least, that's the way she writes it. When she says it, it sounds all different, low and growly. I laughed when I tried to say it, but she wouldn't laugh with me. What a grooch.

And yesterday, when I took her English paper to correct it, she shrank back against her chair as if I was going to hit her or something. Honesly!

Mom says I should invite her home for dinner soon. We'll have to get her a special pass for that. But I don't know if I want her to come. It's not like she's any fun at all. I wish Mr. Forest would let me trade.

Suzy

September 30, 1944

My dear Muttii,

Avi loves the food I bring home from school. What does he know? It is not even kosher. Sometimes they serve ham. But I do not tell Avi. He needs all the food he can get. He is a growing boy. I, too, am growing fast. Soon I will not fit into the blue dress. I have no other.

Leah

September 30, 1944

Dear Diary,

Leah's English is very good now. But she still never smiles. Especially she never smiles at me. It's like she has a permanent frown and permanent frown lines between her eyes. It makes her look much older than anyone in our class. Like a little old lady.

I wonder if she eats enough. She won't take the candy bars. And she saves the school lunch in her napkin, hiding it away in her pocket. She thinks no one sees her do it, but I do. Does she eat it later? I'm sure they get dinner at the shelter. Mom says they do. Mom also says we have to eat everything on our plates. Sometimes when we're having dinner I think of Leah Shoshana Herskhowitz.

Suzy

September 30, 1944

My dear Muttii,

The girl with the yellow hair is called Suzy Ann McCarthy. It is a silly name. It means nothing. I asked her who she was named for, and she said, "For a book my mom liked." A book! I am named after my great-grandmother on my mother's side, who was an important woman in our village. I am proud to carry on her name.

This Suzy brings many sweets. But I must call them candies now. And a handkerchief. She expects me to be grateful. But how can I be grateful? She treats me like a pet. A pet she does not really like or trust. She wants to feed me like an animal behind bars.

If I write all this down, I will not hold so much anger. I have much anger. And terror besides. Terror. It is a new word for me, but an old feeling. One day soon this Suzy and her people will stop being nice to us. They will remember we are not just refugees but Jews, and they will turn on us. Just as the Germans did. Of this I am sure.

Leah

October 9, 1944

Dear Diary,

They skipped Leah up to our grade, her English has gotten so good. Except for some words, like victory, which she pronounces "wrick-toe-ree." I try not to laugh, but sometimes I just can't help it!

Leah knows a lot about the world and nothing about America. She thinks New York is right next to Chicago, for goodness sakes! She can't dance at all. She doesn't know the words to any of the top songs. And she's so stuck up, she only talks in class to answer questions. The other refugees aren't like that at all. Why is it only my refuge who's so mean?

Suzy

Reading Check

What does Leah do with her food at lunchtime?

A. She saves it in her napkin.
B. She eats it immediately.
C. She shares it with her classmates.

452 ♦ Short Story

Suzy and Leah ♦ 453
My dear Muttie,

I think of you all the time. I went to Suzy's house because Mr. Forest said they had gone to a great deal of trouble to get a pass for me. I did not want to go so much, my stomach hurt the whole time I was there.

Suzy's Muttie was nice, all pink and gold. She wore a dress with pink roses all over it and it reminded me of your dress, the blue one with the asters. You were wearing it when we were put on the train. And the last time I saw you at the camp with Natan. Oh, Muttie. I had to steel my heart against Suzy's mother. If I love her, I will forget you. And that I must never do.

I brought back food from her house, though, for Avi. I could not eat it myself. You would like the way Avi grows bigger and stronger. And he talks now, but only to me. He says, "More, Leah, please." And he says "light" for the sun. Sometimes when I am really lonely I call him Natan, but only at night after he has fallen asleep.

Leah

October 10, 1944

Dear Diary,

Leah was not in school today. When I asked her friend Zipporah, she shruged. "She is ill in her stomach," she said.

"What did she eat at your house?"

I didn't answer "Nothing," though that would have been true. She hid it all in a handkerchief! Mom gave her. Mom said, "She eats like a bird. How does she stay alive?"

Suzy

October 11, 1944

Dear Diary,

They've asked me to gather Leah's things from school and bring them to the hospital. She had to have her appendix out and nearly died. She almost didn't tell them she was sick until too late. Why did she do that? I would have been screaming my head off with the pain.

Mom says we have to visit, that I'm Leah's American best friend. Hah! We're going to bring several of my old dresses, but not my green one with the white trim. I don't want her to have it. Even if it doesn't fit me anymore.

Suzy

October 12, 1944

Dear Diary,

I did a terrible thing. I read Leah's diary. I'd kill anyone who did that to me!

At first it made no sense. Who were Muttie and Natan, and why were they killed? What were the yellow stars? What does kosher mean? And the way she talked about me made me furious. Who did she think she was, little Miss Parvut? All I did was bring candy and fruit and try to make those poor refugee kids feel at home.

Then, when I asked Mom some questions, carefully, so she wouldn't guess I had read Leah's diary, she explained. She said the Nazis killed people, mothers and children as well as men. In places called concentration camps. And that all the Jews—people who weren't Christians like us—had to wear yellow stars on their clothes so they could be spotted blocks and blocks away. It was so awful I could hardly believe it, but Mom said it was true.

How was I supposed to know all that? How can Leah stand any of this? How could she live with all that pain?

Suzy

October 12, 1944

Reading Check

What does Suzy learn about Leah's past?
Review and Assess

Thinking About the Selection
1. **Respond:** How do you think you would have reacted if you had tried to help Leah and she had rejected you?

2. (a) **Recall:** What happened to Leah’s mother and brother? (b) **Interpret:** How does Leah come to live in Susy’s town? (c) **Analyze:** What does Leah mean when she says, “There is barbed wire still between us and the world”?

3. (a) **Recall:** How are Susy and Leah forced to get to know each other? (b) **Analyze:** What do Susy’s reactions to Leah tell you about Susy? (c) **Analyze:** What do Leah’s reactions to Susy tell you about Susy?

4. (a) **Recall:** Why doesn’t Leah eat the food she is given? (b) **Apply:** In what other ways does Leah’s experience of the war affect her thoughts and behavior in the story?

5. (a) **Distinguish:** How do Susy’s motivations for offering candy to Leah at the story’s beginning differ from her motivations for offering her diary to Leah at the end of the story? (b) **Draw Conclusions:** What has each girl learned from her experience with the other?

6. (a) **Connect:** This story is set decades ago in a difficult time in history. Do you think it teaches lessons that still apply today? Explain. (b) **Make a Judgment:** Why do you think it is or is not important to study events from history? (c) **Extend:** Why do you think it is or is not important to be aware of political events occurring in other countries?

**Jane Yolen**

(b. 1939)

Jane Yolen’s storytelling career began in first grade, when she wrote a class musical about vegetables. Since then, Yolen has written more than two hundred books. She has produced novels, short stories, poems, songs, and essays. She gets her ideas from an “idea file” that she keeps. Whenever a letter, magazine article, or experience gives her the seed of an idea, she saves it in a file. When she is looking for ideas, she reviews the files.

Although Yolen is known mainly for her fantasy stories, she found inspiration in her Jewish heritage to write “Susy and Leah,” the story of a Holocaust survivor. Yolen wrote about the Holocaust so that her own children could understand and remember.

Connecting Literary Elements
4. **Why does Susy feel about Susy and her new home?**
5. **How does Susy experiences of war help to explain these feelings?**
6. In a chart like the one below, record three details from Leah’s diary entries, and explain what they reveal about how the war has affected her.

**Reading Strategy**

**Drawing Inferences**
7. Susy and Leah’s first observations of each other end with nearly identical words: “When I looked back, she was gone. . . . Disappeared as if she’d never been.” What can you infer from this?
8. Based on her experience with wearing a yellow star, infer why Leah is frightened when she is asked to wear a name tag.
9. What can you infer about Leah based on her attitude toward Susy’s name?

**Extend Understanding**
10. **Social Studies Connection:** How has this story affected your understanding of the Holocaust?