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## Lesson One

### FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the work more fully.

Born in 1928 to a family of Russian immigrants, Cynthia Ozick spent her childhood in the Pelham Bay area of the Bronx. Her parents owned a neighborhood pharmacy. Ozick spent afternoons and evenings reading and re-reading such favorites as classic fairy tales and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Acceptance to Hunter College High School in New York, an academically competitive school for young women, gave her the confidence she needed to pursue her goal of becoming a writer.

### Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. Students should take notes as they listen. Distribute the Reader's Guide essays "Cynthia Ozick (b. 1928)" and "An Interview with Cynthia Ozick." Divide the class into two groups. Assign one essay to each group. After reading and discussing the essays, each group will present what they learned. Ask students to add a creative twist to make their presentation memorable.

### Writing Exercise

Cynthia Ozick knew from the time she was a very small child that she would be a writer. Have students write a three-paragraph essay on the career they plan to pursue or another goal that will define their lives. When did they first become aware of their desire? Did they find encouragement from family, friends, or teachers? Was there pressure for or against their choice? If so, why? Ask students to consider what provides them with the confidence and discipline needed to achieve their dreams.

### Homework

Read the opening short story, "The Shawl" and Handout One: Jewish Life in Pre-World War II Poland and Handout Two: The Warsaw Ghetto. Ask students to make a list of ten adjectives or phrases Ozick uses to describe Rosa's, Magda's, or Stella's experience in the death camp.

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## Lesson Two

### FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

Though the exact location is never mentioned, the book’s opening story takes place in a Nazi death camp during World War II. In the novella, we learn that Rosa comes from a well-educated and highly assimilated family of Polish Jews. Home to Europe’s largest Jewish population prior to World War II, Poland served as a center of learning and culture for the Jewish community worldwide. After the Nazi invasion in 1939, all Jews were forced to live in restricted areas known as ghettos. Rosa recounts some of her experiences in the Warsaw ghetto. Despite a brave rebellion, most of the Jews detained in the Warsaw ghetto were eventually sent to Treblinka—an extermination camp fifty miles outside the city.

### Discussion Activities

Distribute Handout One, Handout Two, and the Reader’s Guide essay, “The Holocaust and World War II.” Divide your class into three groups. Assign each group an essay. Starting with “Jewish Life,” ask groups to present what they learned to the class.

Using the adjectives collected for homework, what emotions are captured through Ozick’s vivid language? Why is Magda like a “tiger”? Near the end of the story, we read about “green meadows” and “innocent tiger lilies.” Does this glimpse to the green meadows imply hope or hopelessness for Rosa, Stella, and Magda? Why would Ozick provide us with a glimpse of beauty before a horrific event takes place?

### Writing Exercise

Ask your students to write a two-page essay considering whether or not a genocide such as the Holocaust can take place today. What, if any, responsibility would an average person bear? How can we, as a humane society, prevent or stop racial prejudice and genocide?

### Homework

Read from the beginning of “Rosa” to when Rosa burns the letters. Ask students to pay close attention to the way Rosa perceives her surroundings. What does she mean when she says, “Once I thought the worst was the worst, after that nothing could be the worst. But now I see, even after the worst there’s still more”?

# 3

## Lesson Three

### FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters’ thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

*The Shawl* employs a third-person narrative voice that does not participate in the story or novella’s action, but has access to Rosa’s private thoughts and feelings. Further, the narrator uses descriptive language and imagery that evoke Rosa’s thoughts and moods. For instance, at the beginning of the novella, the narrator describes a “shrieking pulley,” “squads of dying flies,” and streets like a “furnace.” Ozick uses these images in the narration to underscore how deeply memories of the Holocaust affect Rosa, even more than thirty years after the war’s end.

### Discussion Activities

Share the images mentioned above with your students. Ask them to find other instances where the narrator describes people, places, or things as if looking through Rosa’s eyes with her unique personal history. Ask your students why Rosa feels that “even after the worst, there’s still more.” How does her perception of her surroundings feed into her despair?

Sometimes the narration is so closely aligned with Rosa’s perspective it seems as if the book could have been written in the first person. Why might Ozick have chosen to use such a close third-person point of view rather than writing in the first person from Rosa’s viewpoint? Does third person offer any objectivity that might be lost if Rosa told her own story? Why or why not?

### Writing Exercise

Ask your students to choose one character other than Rosa that has appeared so far. Have students rewrite a short scene of their choice from the first-person point of view of that character. Have volunteers read their scenes aloud to the class. What equips their character to tell the story? What does this character’s point of view add to the story? What is lost?

### Homework

Read from the letter-burning scene to the end of the hotel scene. Ask your students to pay close attention to the letter Stella sends Rosa. What do we learn about Stella?

# 4

## Lesson Four

### FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

### Discussion Activities

Rosa Lublin is the protagonist of *The Shawl*. Who or what is Rosa's most formidable antagonist? Discuss Stella's letter to Rosa. Is it reasonable for Stella to expect Rosa to move on with her life? Do your students find her letter cruel or helpful? Ask them to support their answers with passages from the text.

Simon Persky serves as a foil for Rosa. Distribute Handout Three: Jewish Immigration to the United States. Rosa repeatedly tells Persky, "My Warsaw isn't your Warsaw." What does she mean by this? Persky calls Rosa a refugee and she thinks of him as an immigrant. How do the circumstances under which Rosa and Persky came to the United States color their views of life and each other?

Although Magda dies in the first story, Rosa attempts to keep her alive through memory. Read Rosa's letter to Magda aloud. Discuss the life Rosa invents for Magda. What traits does Rosa give her daughter? Why might those traits be particularly important to Rosa? Do your students ever feel as if their parents project unfulfilled desires onto them? How might Rosa be doing the same?

### Writing Exercise

Rosa writes to Magda, "You have a legacy of choice, and they say choice is the only true freedom." What does Rosa mean when she tells Magda that choice is freedom? Does she live her life with this in mind? Ask your students to write three paragraphs considering whether choice is "the only true freedom."

### Homework

Have students finish reading the book. Ask them to pay very close attention to the passage about the ghetto.

# 5

## Lesson Five

### FOCUS: Figurative Language

An author uses images, similes, metaphors, and symbols to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions contained within a story.

Cynthia Ozick believes figurative language is critical to understanding literature and uses it masterfully throughout *The Shawl*. In a 1998 *Atlantic Monthly* interview she said, “Just as you can’t grasp anything without an opposable thumb, you can’t write anything without the aid of metaphor. Metaphor is the mind’s opposable thumb.” In her essay “Metaphor and Memory” she writes, “Without the metaphor of memory and history, we cannot imagine the life of the Other. We cannot imagine what it is to be someone else. Metaphor is the reciprocal agent, the universalizing force: it makes possible the power to envision the stranger’s heart.”

### ?? Discussion Activities

Parables are metaphorical stories that use realistic characters and circumstances to make a point. They often carry a strong message that has meaning beyond its literal reading. Stella calls Rosa a “parable maker.” In her last letter to Magda, Rosa recounts a story about a woman with a head of lettuce traveling through Warsaw on the tramcar. Read it aloud.

Rosa writes, “The most astounding thing was that the most ordinary streetcar, bumping along on the most ordinary trolley tracks, and carrying the most ordinary citizens going from one section of Warsaw to another, ran straight into the place of our misery. Every day, and several times a day, we had these witnesses.” Ask your students why Poles traveling through the ghetto on the tramcar might have been unwilling to help the Jews. Do they believe people today would react differently? Why or why not?

What does Rosa mean when she writes, “And in this place now I am like the woman who held the lettuce in the tramcar. I said all this in my store, talking to the deaf.” Why would a head of lettuce be so important to Rosa? What lessons does the parable of the woman with the lettuce teach? Why is it important to Rosa that her story be heard?

### Writing Exercise

Write Ozick’s quotes on metaphor on the blackboard. Ask your students to write three paragraphs considering why Rosa refuses to forget what happened during the Holocaust. Why does she feel she must tell others what happened? How does bearing witness to these events help Rosa cope with her horrible memories of life in the Warsaw ghetto and the extermination camp?

### Homework

Have students page through the book to find examples of objects that could be considered symbolic. Ask them to write two paragraphs about one of the book’s symbols. How is the symbolic meaning different from the literal value of the object? How does this inform our understanding of the story or characters?

# 6

## Lesson Six

### FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and reinterpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

### Discussion Activities

In the book's opening story, Rosa swaddles her infant daughter Magda in a shawl to protect her and keep her warm. Throughout the rest of the book, the shawl represents different things to different characters. Ask your students to consider what the shawl meant to Magda, an infant barely clinging to life in an extermination camp. What did the shawl represent to fourteen-year-old Stella? To Rosa, a young mother? Why do your students think Rosa kept the shawl for more than thirty years? Over the years, did the shawl begin to represent something different to Rosa? If so, what? As an adult, how does Stella feel about the shawl? Are her feelings justifiable? Why or why not?

After her trip to the laundromat, Rosa notices that a pair of her underwear is missing. Why is Rosa so upset by the loss? Ozick writes, "Because of the missing underwear, she had no dignity before him. She considered Persky's life: how trivial it must always have been: buttons, himself no more significant than a button. It was plain he took her to be another button like himself, battered now and out of fashion." Ask your students to consider the reasons why losing such an intimate item might be especially upsetting to Rosa. Why was it particularly humiliating for Rosa to think Persky took them?

### Writing Exercise

On the day Rosa and Persky meet, she is ashamed when Persky, a retired button manufacturer, notices her dress is missing a button. Later, when he visits her apartment and offers to take her to the library, Rosa is touched. "A thread of gratitude pulled in her throat. He almost understood what she was: no ordinary button." Ask your students to read that scene again and then write a two-page essay on what buttons symbolize to Rosa. How are the actual image and its symbolic value appropriate considering Rosa's background and history? Have your students support their ideas with passages from the text.

### Homework

Ask your students to make a list of Rosa's strengths and weaknesses. They should support each trait with a passage from the text.



# 7

## Lesson Seven

### FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

In *The Shawl*, Rosa struggles to survive in a world that seems to have forgotten the atrocities of the Holocaust. Rosa's life is defined by her need to bear witness to the cruelty she experienced, while Stella attempts to move past the horrors of the extermination camp. Rosa tells Persky, "Stella is self-indulgent. She wants to wipe out memory." Persky becomes the one person in Rosa's life who truly listens, and their continued friendship offers a bit of hope at the book's end.

### Discussion Activities

Using their homework from the night before, ask your students to list some of Rosa's strengths and weaknesses on the blackboard. Talk about each of these traits while referring to the text. Have the students listed more good qualities or bad? Ask them if they find Rosa to be a sympathetic character. Do they consider her a heroic protagonist? Why or why not? Who or what serves as an antagonist to Rosa? What do we learn about her character from these forces of conflict?

Persky provides comic relief during what is otherwise a very serious work of fiction. What do we learn about Persky's and Rosa's personalities during their banter? How does Persky use humor to gain Rosa's trust? Both Persky and Stella suggest that Rosa should forget about her life in Poland. Why might Rosa listen to Persky when she cannot bear to have Stella tell her to move on with life?

### Writing Exercise

Many Polish citizens were highly assimilated Jews. Until Hitler's Holocaust, they did not necessarily consider their religion to be their primary identification. Ask your students to write a two-page essay on the character that best assimilates to American culture. Does the need to assimilate to American culture deepen or cure the wounds left from the war? Have students support their thesis with passages from the text.

### Homework

Have students page through the book and identify three major turning points.

# 8

## Lesson Eight

### FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a novel either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story's conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution, or denouement, in which the effects of that climactic action are presented.

The events that took place in the Warsaw ghetto and the extermination camp shape the way Rosa views herself and others. Convinced that Persky has violated her trust by taking her underpants, Rosa calls him a thief. The next morning she finds them inside a towel. Immediately afterward, she goes downstairs to talk to the receptionist about having her phone reconnected. The long-awaited package from Stella is there but, rather than excitement, Rosa initially feels indifferent when she sees the colorless cloth in the box. During a phone call to Stella, Magda comes alive in Rosa's imagination just long enough for Rosa to write her the story of the woman with the lettuce. Magda slips away when the phone rings. The receptionist announces that Persky is downstairs waiting for Rosa.

### Discussion Activities

Ask your students to identify several major turning points in the book. Discuss these turning points with the class. Ask your class to consider what we learn about Rosa at each of these moments. Do they feel Rosa changes during the course of the book? If so, in what ways does she change? If not, what prevents a transformation? What, if any, signs of hope occur in the book's last passages?

Map a timeline that depicts the dramatic build-up in the book. Do your students feel that Magda's death in the first story causes the rest of the book to be anticlimactic? Why or why not?

### Writing Exercise

Outline a sequel to *The Shawl*. Write a few paragraphs of the sequel's opening scene. What happens after Persky comes up to Rosa's room? Do they continue their friendship? Does Rosa ever reconcile with Stella?

### Homework

Ask your students to identify three major themes in the book.



# 9

## Lesson Nine

### FOCUS: Themes of the Book

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.

### Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises in order to interpret the book in specific ways. Using historical references to support ideas, explore the statements *The Shawl* makes about the following themes and the themes your students identify during their reading of the book:

#### Memory/History

Rosa writes to Magda, "When I had my store, I used to 'meet the public,' and I wanted to tell everybody—not only our story, but other stories as well. Nobody knew anything. This amazed me, that nobody remembered what happened only a little while ago." Why does Rosa feel compelled to tell her story to people who do not want to hear it? What does she hope to accomplish? Do people have a responsibility to study history? Why or why not?

#### Dignity

Rosa often feels ashamed. Discuss instances that cause Rosa embarrassment. Why do these events cause such profound pain? What does Rosa mean when she says she is "no ordinary button"? How might it have been important *not* to be ordinary while trying to survive in a death camp? Does the desire to be something special influence Rosa in positive ways or negative ones? Support your answers with references to the text.

#### Life

Rosa tells Persky that people have three lives: "the life before, the life during, and the life after." Discuss Rosa's three lives. Which is the most important to her? Does Rosa have the power to change "the life after?" Why or why not?



### Homework

Ask students to begin their essays using the Essay Topics. Outlines are due the next class period.

# 10

## Lesson Ten

### FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

#### Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Write these on the board. What elevates a work of fiction to greatness? Then ask them to discuss, within groups, other books they know that include some of these characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *The Shawl*? Is this a great book?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Cynthia Ozick create in *The Shawl*? Does this story speak about more than one woman's personal trauma? What can we learn about the importance of memory and history from reading this book? Human dignity? The will to live?

Divide students into groups and have each group determine the single most important theme of the book. Have a spokesperson from each group explain the group's decision, with references from the text. Write these themes on the board. Do all the groups agree?

#### Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a letter to a friend, perhaps one who does not like to read, explaining why *The Shawl* is a good book. The student should make an argument that explains why this book has meaning for all people, even those who have no interest in other times or other places.

#### Homework

Students will finish their essays.

## Jewish Life in Pre-World War II Poland

For centuries Jews from all over the world sought refuge in Poland, located in eastern Europe between Germany and the former Soviet Union. The first large migration of Jews began during the Crusades, in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. Encouraged by the religious tolerance they found, Jewish families settled, established communities, and eventually became the cornerstone of the Polish economy.

The twelfth through twentieth centuries were punctuated by periods of anti-Semitism fueled by xenophobia and envy of the Jews' perceived control of the economy. Still, compared with much of Europe, Poland remained relatively tolerant. According to the 1931 census, more than three million Jews lived in Poland—Europe's largest Jewish population. Newspapers were printed in Hebrew, Yiddish, and Polish. Jewish schools—both religious and secular—promoted scholarship and intellectual debate that influenced the Jewish community worldwide.

Jewish life and culture especially thrived in Warsaw, the country's capital city. A beautiful metropolis bisected by the Vistula River, Warsaw housed the world's second-largest Jewish community after New York City. Before World War II began, Jews accounted for nearly thirty percent of the city's population. The largest and most beautiful synagogue in Warsaw was known as the "Great Synagogue" in Tlomackie Square. It held more than two thousand people and had meeting rooms, a library, an archive, and a *heder* (school).

Though some Jews maintained their own religious and cultural traditions, other families were highly assimilated. They identified themselves first as Polish citizens and only secondly by religion. They conducted their lives just as any other Polish citizen, and a person passing on the street would not have known they were Jewish.

Poland's central location and large Jewish population made it a target of the Nazi regime. German troops invaded Poland in September 1939. The Nazis immediately placed heavy restrictions on Jews. Jewish businesses were required to display the Star of David as a symbol of Jewish identity. Jews could not have bank accounts, hold large amounts of money, or work in the textile or leather trades. By November 1939, the Nazis required all Jews to wear a blue armband with the Star of David. The Nazi regime closed Jewish schools, confiscated Jewish property, and forced Jewish citizens into labor camps. Jews could not own radios, attend movies, enter a post office, or mail letters overseas. In October 1940, the Nazis decreed that all Jews in Warsaw must move to a sealed-off area that came to be known as the "Warsaw Ghetto."



## The Warsaw Ghetto

During World War II, the Germans established ghettos throughout Europe that separated Jews from the rest of the population and isolated Jewish communities from each other. This allowed Nazis to maintain control and arrange deportations to forced labor, concentration, and extermination camps. In October 1940, just over a year after Germany invaded Poland, the Nazi regime required all of Warsaw's Jewish citizens and those from nearby towns to move to a designated area. This area, sealed off from the rest of the city, eventually held over 400,000 people—more than a third of the local population—but was less than five percent of Warsaw's land area.

The Nazis established a *Judenrat* (Jewish Council) to uphold order inside the ghetto. The Judenrat did not know that the Reich's ultimate plan demanded the complete extermination of all European Jews. They cooperated with the Nazis in the vain hope of saving lives. Jewish council members who refused to cooperate were often killed or transported to one of the camps.

Food allotments rationed by the German authorities were not enough to sustain life. As a result, a black market developed. Countless Jews sold their few remaining possessions in order to purchase food or medicine. Between 1940 and 1942 nearly 100,000 people died of illness and starvation while living inside the Warsaw Ghetto.

At the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, the Nazis decided on what they called “The Final Solution,” the systematic murder of all Jews living within the Reich. They established extermination

camps with specialized gas chambers capable of killing large numbers of people. From July until October 1942, the Nazis sent more than 300,000 Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto to Treblinka, an extermination camp in a sparsely populated area fifty miles outside of Warsaw. Information trickled back to the ghetto about what was taking place there.

Several Jewish resistance groups decided to fight back with smuggled guns and homemade weapons. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was the largest and most important opposition effort organized by the Jewish resistance during World War II. On April 19, 1943, the ghetto fighters opened fire on German SS and police when they attempted to deport the remaining Warsaw Jews.

Despite being vastly outnumbered and short of weapons, the ghetto fighters inflicted heavy casualties in the first days of the battle. Germans began burning the ghetto building by building to flush out the fighters. They regained control of the ghetto and, on May 16, 1943, German General Jurgen Stroop ordered the destruction of the Great Synagogue on Tlomackie Street as a symbol of German victory. The 56,000 Jews that remained in Warsaw were either shot or transported to extermination camps.



## Jewish Immigration to the United States

Anti-Semitism, overpopulation, and racial discrimination prompted many Jews to leave Eastern Europe in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Between 1880 and 1924, when the United States adopted immigration restrictions, more than two millions Jews came to America. Many of these immigrants were unskilled laborers, struggling to learn English. Enticed by freedom and opportunity, they primarily settled in large cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Chicago and found work in factories, manufacturing, and construction. This wave of immigrants embraced the American experience and made the country their new home. By the turn of the century, most major cities in the United States had thriving Jewish communities.

As Jews assimilated to the United States they made significant contributions to the country's intellectual and cultural life. In *The Shawl*, Simon Persky brags that film legend Lauren Bacall (born Betty Joan Perske to Jewish immigrant parents) is his cousin. Broadway composer Irving Berlin, magician Harry Houdini, and science fiction writer Isaac Asimov all came to America as children, part of the vast wave of European Jewish immigrants. Like Simon Persky, they found an America full of opportunity and embraced the American dream.

However, after World War I attitudes toward immigration began to change. Congress passed a series of laws to limit the flow of immigrants. During the Holocaust, obtaining a visa became an issue of life and death. The United States, like many countries, initially refused to allow Jewish refugees and stood silent while millions of Jews died at the hands of the Nazi regime.

Just before the outbreak of World War II on May 13, 1939, the *St. Louis* sailed from Hamburg, Germany, to Havana, Cuba. Almost all the passengers were Jews fleeing Nazi anti-Semitism. Most applied for U.S. visas and planned to stay in Cuba only until they could enter the United States. Ultimately, Cuba did not allow the ship to dock. The passengers on board were stranded. The United States government was aware of the situation and had been asked to allow the refugees safe haven. The government refused, and most of the passengers were sent back to Europe just as World War II began.

Nearly five years later, the Roosevelt Administration, faced with undeniable evidence of what was taking place in the Nazi extermination camps, formed the War Refugee Board in January 1944. An executive order established a new policy that promised “to take all measures within its power to rescue the victims of enemy oppression who are in imminent danger of death and otherwise to afford such victims all possible relief and assistance consistent with the successful prosecution of the war.” This directive created a safe haven for many Jewish Holocaust survivors.

Though many refugees embraced the opportunities provided in America, Rosa Lublin represents the feelings of refugees—Jewish and non-Jewish—who never desired to leave their home countries and who did so only under duress. Rosa longs for the security, comfort, and familiarity of her native Poland even as she realizes that it's the product of a past life, a life stolen from her by the atrocities of the Holocaust.

