A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS

COMPLICATIONS OF CULTURE
The Case of Dora Levine

OBJECTIVES
Students will:
• review “push” factors for immigrants in general and for the Jews of Eastern Europe in particular
• imagine difficulties in leaving one’s home country to travel to a new land
• analyze Dora Levine’s letters

DOCUMENTS
A: Background Information on Jewish Immigration and Dora Levine
B: Letter from Dora Levine to her brother Morris (Masky) Levine
C: Photograph of Masky Levine
D: Map of Latvia

TERMS
Anti-Semitism
Pogrom
Dowry

I. Introduction: Secondary source as background
1. Give the students the background information on why Jews left the Russian empire. Ask students to list three specific reasons why Jews left Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

2. Discuss this with them.

3. As a follow-up, ask the students to brainstorm about obstacles to leaving one’s country.

   Possible responses:
   • Lack of money
   • Government restrictions
   • Lack of documents
   • Homesickness, fear of leaving the familiar
   • Don’t want to have to separate the family
   • Previous obligations
   • Age (too young, too old)
   • Illness or physical handicap

II. Introducing the document
1. Tell students that they will be analyzing the story of one woman who wanted to leave the Russian Empire and come to America, but was not able to. How might we learn this woman’s story? (The answer is, of course, by examining a primary source.)

2. Give the students background information on the Levine family and a historical map that shows Dvinsk, Latvia (now known as Daugavpils).
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3. Where is Daugavpils/Dvinsk on the map? The Levine family would likely have left Latvia from its capital city Riga. Find Riga and compute the distance from Daugavpils/Dvinsk to Riga.

4. Read the background information aloud with students and introduce the letters. Have students generate questions about the young woman’s experience.

III. Reading the document

1. Introduce this document analysis chart

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Reactions? Conclusion?

2. Working independently or in pairs, students should read the documents and fill the chart with notes. They will use their own questions as a guideline.

3. Instruct students to underline phrases or sentences that they feel are particularly significant in understanding Dora’s story.

They may also use the document analysis chart as a template for taking notes.
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IV. Concluding discussion
1. What did we learn about Dora Levine?
2. What obstacles kept her from immigrating to the United States? How did her family prevent her from leaving?
3. How did her culture serve as a barrier to leaving Dvinsk?

HOMEWORK / REFLECTION
1. Creative writing: Write a letter back to Dora from one of her brothers. What is life like in the United States? How can you help her escape her fate?
2. Create a genealogy: Design a family tree of the Levine family and their journey. Do the same based on your own family.
3. Explore family roles: Dora Levine’s family expected her to stay in Dvinsk to take care of her ailing father. Do you think this is fair? What family obligations do you have? Compare them with those of your siblings.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY
Choose a member of your family whom you’ve never met but have heard stories about.
1. What interests you about this person?
2. What have you heard about him or her?
3. How would you go about writing a story about this person?
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Background Information on Jewish Immigration and Dora Levine

Why did Jews leave Eastern Europe to come to the United States?

From the 1880s to the early 1920s, millions of Jews left the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires and immigrated to the United States. They left for two main reasons.

1) Jews in the Russian Empire faced increased anti-Semitism from the government and the general population, which in its worst manifestations culminated in pogroms (riots against Jews) encouraged or tolerated by the government. Pogroms took place throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the Russian Empire. The worst of these occurred after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, from 1903 to 1906 and from 1919 to 1921 during the Russian Revolution.

One of the worst pogroms took place in Kishinev, Moldavia, in 1903, when mobs, inspired by local leaders, looted and rioted for two days without hindrance from authorities. Soldiers eventually dispersed the rioters, but 45 Jews had been killed, almost 600 wounded and 1,500 homes destroyed.

2) Because Jews were not legally allowed to be farmers or to own land, their employment was concentrated in skilled and semi-skilled manufacturing. In the late 19th century, Jewish merchants and craftsmen came into competition with industrial manufacturers, who could mass-produce similar goods at lower costs. Many Jews moved into cities to work in these factories, while others immigrated to the U.S. and other countries in search of other opportunities.

Who was Dora Levine?

Dora Levine was a young Jewish woman living in the city of Dvinsk (now known as Daugavils), Latvia (then a part of the Russian Empire). Her brothers Masky and Leibke had immigrated to the U.S. and were living in New York City and working in the garment industry. In this letter, she is writing to her brother Masky (circa 1910). Dora sees few opportunities for herself in Dvinsk. An unmarried daughter without enough money for a dowry, she feels trapped by her circumstances. She is the only daughter left behind to take care of the family store and her ailing father, while her siblings Rukie, Mulke and Itke are in school or working. As in most traditional societies, her needs and desires were secondary to those of her parents and the family. We do not know what happened to Dora after she wrote this letter, but she never immigrated to the United States. However, we do know that most of the Jews of Latvia died during the Holocaust.
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Letter from Dora Levine to her brother Masky Levine, circa 1910.

(Morris was his English name; Masky/Masenke was his Yiddish name.)
No city or country is on the letter, but Morris’s family came from Dvinsk (now known as Daugavpils) in Latvia and he lived in New York City, his home after he came to America.

Good wishes to my brother Masky. Be well, our health is good. Hope to hear from you soon with good news. Received your letter and happy to hear you are well and you visit Leibke, why don’t you live together? You are both alone from one family, there is no one else. We have frequent letters from Leibke. We received their photos. They all look well. He has two children; we should live long enough to see them. We have a store. Itzke works and support himself. He eats with us & doesn’t give us any money. Riuke & Mulke attend classes and I stay.

In the store father doesn’t do anything. He is weak. He coughs a lot.

[continuation of the same letter]

Dear brother Masenke. I want to ask your advice. I am a 20 year old girl. My father has no money for me so no match can be made for me. We don’t need much but even with 500 Rubles, one can’t make a great match.

I am thinking of going to America but father doesn’t let me go. I don’t know how this will end. Let me know whether it pays for me to come to America. Can you & Leibke send me some money? If not all at once, a little at a time. Dear brother, advise me. Answer soon.

Thank you for your frequent letters. Write often and mother wants to hear from you often. She would write you but her eyes are weak. She sends best regards & wishes that your business goes well.

Write us whether you were engaged
If we will receive your photos, we will send you our photos.
No more news.

From me your sister
Dora Levine

1 Yiddish is the language of Eastern European Jews. It is a Germanic language which uses Hebrew characters and includes elements of Hebrew and Slavic languages.
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Photograph of Morris (Masky) Levine, circa 1910
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Map of Latvia
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DISCOVERING HISTORY IN TODAY'S NEW YORK TIMES

1. The New York Times often publishes maps, some of which show immigrants’ home country or town. Look through the International section of The Times over the course of several days and cut out three maps of a region where a news story takes place. Discuss the information presented in the map and whether or not additional information would be required to better understand the main focus of the article. Also, discuss the importance of charting information on immigrants, not only their country of origin, but also the area within and surrounding that country and the neighboring cities, to better understand the politics and resources and perhaps the prejudices of the region.

2. Locate a photograph and/or an article in The New York Times concerning a woman or young girl who might have had to make personal sacrifices for her family to do better in another country. Imagine what this person would suggest to Dora Levine, who had neither the resources nor the opportunity to travel to the United States. Create a dialogue between the person from the Times article and Dora Levine.

3. Dora Levine wished to travel to the United States. Had she been able to surmount all obstacles to her departure, what might she have had to encounter as a new student in a typical American middle school? An American short story, “The All-American Slurp” by Lensey Namioka, suggests the difficulties an immigrant might experience having dinner with an American family. Discuss some of the idiomatic expressions that are typical of American English but would be difficult for an immigrant to understand. An example might be “raining cats and dogs,” meaning raining very hard.