

# Language/Literature – 12-14 years Unit and Lesson Plans



Refugees contribute to the culture of their host community. Some are well-known artists, painters, poets or novelists. Dante Alighieri created the major part of his work during his exile. Playwright Bertold Brecht, authors Thomas Mann and Franz Kafka, poets Pablo Neruda and Jorge Semprun, musician Miguel Angel Estrellas, painters Lucian Freud and Remedios Varo -- all suffered periods of exile which, in some cases, deeply colored their work. The theme of exile can be studied in literature, the history of music and art. Texts addressing refugee issues can also be used in language courses.

## **UNIT PLAN FOR AGES 12-14 IN LANGUAGE/LITERATURE**

### **The Endless Steppe by Esther Hautzig**

#### **Knowledge**

To know how East European refugees and deportees lived in Russia during World War II

#### **Values**

To foster in the students empathy for children and their families who suffer persecution because of their membership of a minority group, and because of the politics of their government

To demonstrate the resilience of the human mind and people's capacity to create hope for the future

To appreciate the contribution that refugees can make to their host communities

#### **Skills**

To practise analysis of plot, character and descriptive writing in a novel

To apply concepts conveyed in a novel to the students' own situations



## LESSONS 1 and 2

<b>CONTENT</b>	<b>TEACHING METHODS/LEARNING STRATEGIES</b>
<p><b>Esther's happy early childhood in Vilna, living in the large family mansion which was composed of several apartments, all occupied by her aunts, uncles and cousins, and her own immediate family</b></p> <p><b>The drafting of Esther's father into the Polish army to fight the German invaders, and his subsequent safe return</b></p> <p><b>The removal of Esther's entire extended family from the mansion by unfriendly Russian soldiers, and the splitting up of the family.</b></p>	<p>Introduction: Teacher reads aloud from the beginning until half way down to page 4, stopping just after the sentence "But in 1939 Hitler's army marched on Poland."</p> <p>Students continue to read to the end of the chapter silently by themselves.</p> <p>Development: Class discussion dealing with the characteristics of the happy environment in which Esther spent her early childhood; the war events of 1939-40 and their actual impact upon Esther's life; the short time the family were allowed to pack for their exile; the fast destruction of the world of Esther's childhood - to be separated from family, home and country.</p> <p>Homework: Students read chapter 2.</p>
<p><b>RESOURCES</b></p> <p><b>Esther Hautzig, The Endless Steppe (New York, Harper Collins, 1968), chapter 1</b></p>	

## LESSONS 3 and 4

<b>CONTENT</b>	<b>TEACHING METHODS/LEARNING STRATEGIES</b>
<p><b>Deprivations while en route to exile</b></p> <p><b>How might a person react when faced with injustice?</b></p>	<p>Class Discussion Students are asked to give their reactions about their homework reading. Refer to the lesson plan for possible questions.</p> <p>Students are given class time to read chapter 3 and are required to write a short account of how they would react if they were in a similar situation as the</p>

Rudomin family, confronted by a mean and hostile soldier like Popravka.

Homework  
Students read chapters 4 and 5.

#### RESOURCES

Hautzig, *The Endless Steppe*, chapters 2 and 3

### LESSON 5

<b>CONTENT</b>	<b>TEACHING METHODS/LEARNING STRATEGIES</b>
<b>The hardships suffered during the early period of exile - learning to adapt, changing one's expectations of daily life</b>	<p>Homework review A few minutes are spent asking questions to check comprehension, with emphasis on the portion of the reading dealing with the village market, the baracholka.</p> <p>Preparation for role play Students are divided into 'families' and discuss among themselves what each family member would pack for their 'exile'.</p> <p>Homework For the next lesson, the students bring real examples of the items which they have decided upon; these items can then be sold at the class baracholka.</p>
<b>RESOURCES</b>	
Hautzig, <i>The Endless Steppe</i> , chapters 4 and 5	

### LESSONS 6 and 7

<b>CONTENT</b>	<b>TEACHING METHODS/LEARNING STRATEGIES</b>
<b>The class baracholka.</b>	<p>Setting the scene Students are asked to think about the characteristics of the local inhabitants of Rubtsovsk.</p> <p>Role play Three 'families' are selected first to present their goods for sale. Later, other families can have their turn. The currency used at the baracholka is hard-boiled eggs. The refugee 'traders' have to persuade the 'locals' to part</p>

with their eggs.

Debriefing discussion

Teacher and students compare their class baracholka with what they consider would be the situation at the real baracholka.

Homework

Students read chapters 6-10.

## LESSON 8

<b>CONTENT</b>	<b>TEACHING METHODS/LEARNING STRATEGIES</b>
<b>Esther Hautzig's literary techniques used to convey the vibrant and optimistic character of the character, Esther</b>	Exercise Students sift through their five chapters of homework reading to locate and to write out the various descriptions, sometimes exaggeration, that the author used to convey her picture of the child, Esther.  Homework Students read chapters 11 to 14.
<b>RESOURCES</b> <b>Hautzig, The Endless Steppe, chapters: 6-10</b>	

## LESSON 9

<b>CONTENT</b>	<b>TEACHING METHODS/LEARNING STRATEGIES</b>
<b>Extreme poverty in Siberia making each facet of daily life a problem to be surmounted</b>	Students are asked to consider aspects of their own daily lives which became trials of hardship for the Rudomins. How did the Rudomins cope?  Homework Students read to the end of the novel.
<b>RESOURCES</b> <b>Hautzig, The Endless Steppe, chapters: 11-14</b>	

## LESSON 10

<b>CONTENT</b>	<b>TEACHING METHODS/LEARNING STRATEGIES</b>
<b>Displaced children's capacity to adapt, to fit in with their new environment; their determination to get on with life, whatever the circumstances</b> <b>RESOURCES</b> <b>Hautzig, <i>The Endless Steppe</i>, chapters: 15-22</b>	Discussion ...dealing with Esther's adaptation first to life in Russia and then her adjustment to the prospect of return to Poland, her former homeland.

### LESSON PLANS FOR AGES 12-14 IN LANGUAGE/LITERATURE

#### ***The Endless Steppe* by Esther Hautzig**

##### **Purpose**

This cluster of lessons revolves around the novel *The Endless Steppe*, the autobiographical account of the author's 5-year exile in Siberia during her late childhood. The story of Esther is about hardship, deprivation, injustice; but above all, it is about how a child's zest for life takes her through these tribulations, and helps her to become part of her new community.

#### **LESSONS 1 and 2**

##### **Preparation**

A class set of *The Endless Steppe* is needed.

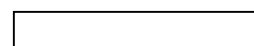
##### **Procedure**

For the necessary entry behaviour, tell the students that this story begins in Poland, during the period of the Second World War. At the beginning of World War II, Germany and Russia agreed not to attack one another. In September 1939, Poland was first invaded by the Germans, and then by the Russians. Up to a million Poles were deported, many to Siberia, including the author and her family.

To begin the lesson, it is suggested that the teacher reads aloud from the beginning of chapter 1 until halfway down page 4, stopping just after the sentence "But in 1939 Hitler's armies marched on Poland". Students are then given class time to finish the chapter.

##### **Discussion questions**

1. a) How would you describe Esther's childhood in Vilna? Give examples of her childhood memories.  
b) What were Esther's impressions of her father, mother and grandparents?  
c) How would you describe Esther?
2. What do you think was in the mother's mind when she sent Esther off with her jewels to her maternal grandmother? (To prevent the theft of the jewels)



by the soldiers? A financial protection for the future, indicating a belief in their eventual return to Vilna?)

3. a) List the things that the family finally selected and packed for their journey.  
  
b) Why did Esther want to bring along her photo album? Suggest some reasons that her mother could have had in her mind for refusing?  
  
c) If you were about to become a refugee, like the Rudomin family, and only given a little time to pack, what would you take with you? Write down the answer to this question because the information will be needed for lesson 5.
4. What was the reason given by the soldiers to the Rudomins for their deportation? Could this be considered a form of persecution?
5. Chapter 1 began with a description of the emotional security which Esther enjoyed, surrounded always by her extended family, her life full of familiar traditions such as her grandfather in his garden, calisthenics with her cousins on Thursdays, and preparing Friday evening meals with her mother and their cook. How does chapter 1 finish?

**Homework:** Students read chapter 2.

### **LESSONS 3 and 4**

#### **Procedure**

Students are asked to give their reactions about their homework reading:

how would they feel about sharing a cattle car, that still reeked of cattle, with forty people?

of living for six weeks in this cattle car, never leaving it, spending all the time on a bunk, with nothing to do, no privacy at all, even when going to the toilet?

nothing to eat except thin cabbage soup once a day, delivered in a rusty pail?

no running water, except a bucket of water used for both drinking and washing one's face?

Students are given class time to read chapter 3. In their minds, how do the students see Popravka? What do they think of him? If they were in the same situation as the Rudomin family, confronted by Popravka, how would they react to him? Ask the students to write a short account of the thoughts that would be passing through their heads if they were in this situation and had to plan for their immediate future, plan in fact for their survival in this strange new land, faced with harsh, unfriendly people who had the authority over their future?

**Homework:** Students read chapters 4 and 5.

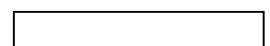
### **LESSON 5**

#### **Procedure**

A quick review over the homework reading:

What were the new living conditions like?

What type of work was allocated to the deportees? Do you think the authorities had given much thought to who should do what work? What could have motivated those in charge to decide, for example, that the women should do the dynamiting?



Thinking back to the formerly wealthy lifestyle of the Rudomin family in Vilna, do you think the *baracholka* (the village market) would have been of any interest to the grandmother and Esther? Give your reasons.

**Preparation for role play:**

The students take out their answers to question 3(c) from lesson 1. The students are then divided into "families" and discuss among themselves what each student has decided to pack for his or her exile and why such a choice was made. Let them feel free to argue, as each group represents a family. Ask them if it is necessary for a family to stick together in such a situation. Then, as a family unit, the students are required to decide among themselves what objects they feel they could part with and sell at the class *baracholka* during the next lesson.

Homework: Students are to bring to class examples of the items for 'sale' (eg. CD walkman, games, toys) and a couple of **hard boiled** eggs per student.

**LESSONS 6 and 7: *The Class Baracholka***

All the hard boiled eggs are collected for a general fund/kitty.

**Discussion questions**

How would the students describe the local village people of Rubtsovsk?

the composition of the population i.e. were they all peasant?

their financial situation?

their needs and wants?

did common sense always prevail? (Consider the buyer of the lace trimmed French silk, slip.)

**Role play**

Three refugee "families" are allowed to present their goods in three locations in the classroom. The eggs are used as currency, (each egg is worth 15 rubles, see page 69 of the novel) and are distributed among the rest of the class who pose as locals. The refugee "traders" have to persuade the "locals" to part with their eggs. Other "families" can have a turn at trading.

**Debriefing discussion**

Why did three of the "families" not receive any eggs/money? (The Rudomins had no money until they had sold their French slip, shirt and umbrella.)

Did the "traders" find it very difficult to persuade the "locals" to buy what was on sale? If so, why? What features were absent in the classroom situation that would have been present at the real *baracholka*?

What would the students do with their eggs/money in a real situation where they were poor deportees, living in very straitened circumstances as did the Rudomins?

**Homework**

Students read chapter 6 to 10.

**LESSON 8**



At the end of chapter 5, after a happy and successful day at the *baracholka*, Esther and her grandmother make their long trudge back to their miserable home at the gypsum mines. However, they were very cheerful, and the author describes herself and her grandmother as being "very" people - "either very sad or very gay, with nothing in between". For this lesson, the students are required to sift through their five chapters of homework reading, to locate and to write out the various descriptions, sometimes exaggeration, that the author used to convey the vibrant and optimistic character of the child, Esther.

Ask the students to write down three examples that demonstrate these traits of Esther, and three examples of the realistic attitude of the adults.

In chapter 7, Esther has the opportunity to attend the local school. Ask the students

to describe Esther's reaction to school

to suggest why she was so positive about school and why she was so desperate to be friendly with the local Russian children.

In chapter 8, Esther has her first personal confrontation with tragedy - the news that her grandfather had died from the combination of forced labour and illness. Not only does Esther experience her own grief and loss, but she also suffers with the suffering of her parents and her grandmother. Ask the students to describe the difficulties that Esther's family faced in their desire to conduct the ritual mourning for the grandfather.

**Homework:** Students read chapters 11 to 14

## **LESSON 9**

Further sufferings that hit the Rudomin family are described in the homework reading. Ask the students what everyday features, that are troublefree in their own lives, were trials of hardship for the Rudomins (e.g. when students need light, they switch on lights, when they are hungry, and want a snack, they simply raid the fridge or larder. What about the Rudomins?)

How would the students describe the respective attitudes of the grandmother, the mother and Esther to their situation?

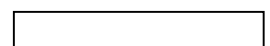
**Homework:** Students read to the end of the book.

## **LESSON 10**

### **Discussion questions**

Esther was ten when her world was turned upside down by the confiscation of her family's property by Russian soldiers, and she with her parents and grandmother were sent to Siberia. After five years of exile, they can finally go home, and yet, Esther seemed a bit reluctant leave the harsh place which had become her home. Why?

It has often been noted that immigrant children pick up the language of a new place faster than the adults, and also become assimilated into the society of the new country quickly. Could this notion be applicable to Esther? Did she want to blend in with the people around her? Was she always welcomed?



The book began with Esther's childhood completely enclosed within the world of her large extended family in Vilna. Then, for five years, the Siberian village to which her family had been exiled was her complete world, physically isolated from Europe and mentally and emotionally enclosed by the worries of daily survival. The book ends with their return to Poland, where all the markers of their prewar life have been destroyed by the Second World War. How do you think Esther will cope? (This could be an essay topic.)

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