

Prisoners in the Promised Land
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Teacher's Guide

Summary

Prisoners in the Promised Land tells the story of one family's wartime struggles seen through the eyes of 12 year old Anya. Written entirely in the form of journal entries, this accessible and engaging novel is set during World War I and focuses on the experiences of a young Ukrainian family who emigrated to Canada only to find themselves betrayed by the Canadian government. Ukrainians were seen as 'enemy aliens' because they were from districts or countries who were now at war with the Commonwealth. They were rounded up and shipped to harsh internment camps, where they suffered through extreme cold, hunger, and forced labour.

Anya's journal entries are simple, yet profound, and allow readers to clearly imagine the fear and betrayal that Anya and her family must have felt. Ideally suited for students ages 8-12, this Dear Canada novel provides an excellent opportunity for parents and educators alike to help students learn about a little known part of Canadian history, and discuss the important themes of acceptance, racism, empathy, and perseverance.

Historical Background

Between 1891 and 1914, close to 170,000 Ukrainians immigrated to Canada. They crossed the ocean for a number of reasons. Some were fleeing in order to escape being conscripted into the Austro-Hungarian army. Many were sinking under the weight of their debts, having to pay incredibly large sums of rent to the aristocrats that owned much of the farmland in the Austro-Hungarian provinces of Bukovyna and Galicia. They believed conditions in Canada would be more forgiving, and went in search of a better life for their families. Since the Canadian government had been inviting Eastern Europeans to come to Canada to help build up Western Canada, it seemed like a natural choice.

Most Ukrainian immigrants settled in the Western provinces, but some ended up in bigger cities such as Montreal. When war broke out, many Ukrainians were unsure of where their loyalty should lie. Quite a few enlisted in the Canadian armed forces in order to help defend their new home. However, this didn't stop a sort of hysteria from breaking out as the war began. Even though the Canadian government was reassured that

people of Ukrainian descent were not “the enemy”, feelings of distrust and even hatred bubbled up towards “foreigners” by many Canadian citizens. Immigrants were treated rudely, and sometimes violently, and many lost their jobs for “patriotic reasons”.

In 1914, the War Measures Act was put into effect. This Act gave the Canadian government nearly unlimited power to suspend or limit the civil liberties of anyone they deemed to be an “enemy alien”. Close to 90,000 people living on Canadian soil were considered ‘enemy aliens’. Of those, almost 9,000 were incarcerated at 24 internment camps across the country. They were targeted specifically because they were from what is now known as Ukraine, which was at the time split between the Austrian-Hungarian empire (an enemy of the British Empire) and Russia, an ally. The vast majority of internees were of Ukrainian heritage. Those who were lucky enough to not be interned were forced to carry identification papers and check in regularly with the authorities. Internees were required to complete forced labour in often harsh conditions, and paid far less than a living wage, if they were paid at all. Banff National Park, for example, was developed using forced labour. In fact, using internees as labourers was so appealing that even two years after the end of the war, many internment camps were still operating.

The War Measures Act would again be used in WWII to imprison thousands of innocent Japanese citizens living on Canadian soil.

Comprehension Questions

The following questions will help your students deepen their understanding of the novel and allow them to demonstrate their knowledge to you, as well as any gaps in comprehension. Some are basic questions, while others act as excellent starters for a classroom discussion. You may choose to assign some as essay style questions, or topics for a blog post. Pick and choose the ones that work best for your students age and abilities.

February 10, 1914- Easter Sunday, April 19, 1914

Page 3-13

1. The novel starts with the main character Anya talking about what she is going to pack when she moves from Austria-Hungary to Canada. She is allowed to bring one trunk of

stuff. What would you pack if you were moving across the world to a country you have never been to before?

2. Do you think Anya is excited about moving to Canada. Why or why not? (pg.7)

3. Who is Baba? Why does she say that she cannot go to Canada? (pg.7)

4. Who is travelling with Anya to Canada? Are all of her family members going, or are some staying behind? (pg.8)

5. Why does it seem hard to believe to Anya that they are travelling on Easter Sunday? What do they usually do on Easter Sunday that they are not able to do now? (pg. 9)

6. Why did Tato tell Anya and his family to stay out of sight and avoid being outside too much when they are waiting for the ship? (pg. 10)

7. On page 12, we find out that Anya's brother Volodymyr is dead, and that is why he isn't going to Canada with the rest of his family. Did this surprise you? How does the author tell us this? (pg. 12)

8. Tato tells Anya that "everyone is equal in Canada." What do you think this means? Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? (pg. 12)

Easter Sunday, April 19, 1914- Sunday May 24, 1914

Pg. 13-60

9. When Anya first boards the boat that will take her and her family to Canada, she is unable to write in her journal for several days. Why? (pg. 16)

10. Why don't Anya and her family drink the water on the ship, or eat the food? They are staying in a part of the ship called steerage. What does this mean?

11. Why did Anya's father have no choice but to settle in Montreal as soon as he got off the ship in Canada? (pg.19)

12. When the ship lands in the Port of Montreal, officials ask Anya's family a bunch of questions. Anya finds it scary, and says she has always been "afraid of people in uniforms". Why do you think this is? Have you ever been afraid of someone in a uniform? (pg. 24)

13. At first, Anya's father is not there to pick up his family at the port. Why do you think he was late? How do you think Anya felt waiting for him to finally arrive? (pg. 26)

14. The clothes that people wear in Montreal are very different than what Anya is used to wearing. What are some of the differences? Even though she misses the embroidery, why is she happy to have these 'Canadian' clothes?

15. There is only one thing that Anya's parents seem to argue about. What is it? Why do you think they argue about this?

16. On Anya's first day of school, her neighbour Stefan tells her to put her stockings on and offers to trade lunches with her. Why does he do this? (pg.42)

17. Anya's mother has taught her that when people are mean, it is because they don't like themselves, so they hurt others to make themselves feel better. Do you agree with this? Why or why not? (pg. 50)

18. On page 60, we finally learn about Anya's older brother. What was he doing when he was killed?

Sunday May 24, 1914-Saturday July 25, 1914

Pg. 61-89

19. What is a 'suffragette'? Can all men vote in Canada?

20. Why is Anya all of a sudden worried about her parents getting injured at work? (pg. 68)

21. On page 73, Anya tells us about a wish she has for her Mom and Dad. What does she hope she can one day afford to do for her parents? Do you think this is something that a typical girl thinks about in Canada in 2017? Why or why not?

22. Why is Anya trying so hard to get a job? What are some things she does to try to earn money for her family? (81)

23. What did Canada Day used to be called in 1914? (pg. 81)

24. How does Anya convince the factory owner to hire her?

25. On Friday, July 24, 1914, Anya mentions war for the first time. What makes her begin to talk about war?

Saturday July 25, 1914- Friday, January 29, 1915

Pg. 89-117

26. There are some unpleasant things that begin to happen to Anya and her other neighbours once war has been declared. What are some of these bad things? Why are people being so cruel?

27. Why does Anya feel better once Tato knows that she went behind his back and got a job at the factory? Have you ever done anything that you felt guilty about? Did you feel better once you didn't have to keep it a secret anymore?

28. Anya's father tells her that Canada has enacted the War Measures Act. What does this mean for Anya and her family?

29. What is an 'enemy alien'?

30. Why does Anya have to force herself to look happy when school starts again?

31. There are many different countries who are fighting in this war. Which countries are considered the 'allies'? (pg. 107)

32. How would you feel if you were the one visiting the prisoners in the Immigration Building, like Anya and her father? (pg. 112)

33. Where did Anya's family go after they were kicked out of their apartment?

34. Why is Anya so mad at her father for standing in the soup line? If you had to choose between having food for your family to eat, or staying safe and out of jail, what do you think you would choose? Why? (pg. 117)

Friday, January 29, 1915 - Sunday, August 22, 1915

Pg. 117- 178

35. What was Tato arrested for? (pg. 120)

36. On page 124, Anya says Canadians are as mad as bees. Have you heard this saying before? What does it mean? Why are the Canadians so mad?
37. Anya says “why do Canadians think that all foreigners are bad?”. Why does she ask this? Do Canadians today still think that foreigners “are bad”? Explain your answer.
38. What thoughts would be going through your head when you are on the train heading to the internment camp?
39. Imagine being greeted by guard dogs and mean faces as soon as you arrive at a new place where you are supposed to live. Would this make you feel very welcome? Why do you think Canada is treating Anya and her family as if they are dangerous criminals? (pg. 132)
40. Anya makes lists in her diary sometimes. She lists things she likes and doesn't like about a new place, or an experience she is having. Why do you think she does this? Does it help make her feel better? Have you ever done anything like this? (pg. 139)
41. One of the soldiers at the camp, Private Palmer, takes pictures of the children, and of the bunkhouses and buildings. Why would he do this?
42. Do you think Anya is a positive person? Does she complain a lot? How can she manage to stay so positive when her life is so hard? (pg. 145) Does this make you appreciate your life a little bit more? Why or why not?
43. Do you think it would be better to live in a place where you were free to do whatever you wanted, but your home was filthy and people were mean to you, or interned in a camp like Anya and her family, where people are nicer and things are clean and beautiful, but you are prisoners? Explain your answer.
44. The soldiers at the camp are meaner to the prisoners when there are “bad stories in the papers about Germans and Austrians.” Why would they do this?” (pg. 146)
45. The Canadian government decides to send more Ukrainians to internment camps to “calm people down” after the sinking of the Lusitania. Why would this calm people down?

46. On page 150, Anya says that she thinks being “interned is for our own safety.” Do you agree or disagree?

47. Anya and her mother come across a woman in the woods, and they think she is a ghost. In fact, she is a member of the Pikogan people. What is life like for the Pikogan people now that the internment camp is on their land?

48. On June 3, 1915, Anya gets a letter from her old school friend Maureen, but most of it is blacked out, so she can’t read much of it. Who would have blacked some of it out, and why?

49. “Have you ever noticed that people who do not have very much are always willing to share?” Anya says after the Pikogan woman again helps her. Do you agree with Anya? (pg. 178)

Sunday, August 22, 1915-Friday, July 21, 1916
Pg. 178-211

50. On October 21, 1915, Anya wonders how a war ever ends. This is a good question. If Anya asked you this question, how do you think you would answer it?

51. On July 21, 1916, Anya and her family are released from the internment camp, and sent back to Montreal via train. How do you think Anya feels when she is sitting on that train?

52. In the epilogue, the author tells us what becomes of Anya, Stefan, and their families and friends. What does Anya decide to do when she gets back to Montreal? What does Mykola do that no one else in his entire family has ever done?

Culminating Tasks

These culminating tasks have been designed with a variety of learning styles in mind. There should be a project that appeals to all learners, and can easily be modified to suit all needs and abilities. You can allow students to choose their own task or assign them, and many activities are well-suited for group work. Many of these tasks incorporate

other curriculum expectations (Fine Art, Technology, History, and Writing, to name a few).

- When Anya is waiting for the boat to take her to Canada, she begins to think of all the things she will and won't miss about her home in Ukraine. Pretend that you and your family are moving far away. What are some things that you would be happy to leave behind if you were leaving your home and country forever? What do you think you would miss? Make a list. Be creative!
- Anya and her family celebrate Easter with pysanka, or written Easter eggs. This is an important part of Ukrainian culture. Create your own design of a beautiful Ukrainian Easter egg. Research how to decorate and dye the eggs.
- Create a timeline of major events for Anya and her family. Be sure to include major historical events on the timeline, since they play such a big role in Anya's life.
- Ukrainians celebrate Christmas on January 7th, rather than December 25. Research all about Ukrainian or Orthodox Christmas, and create a colourful brochure or slideshow showing details about how people celebrate, and why they celebrate on a different day. Include information on the types of food they eat, the gifts they give, and how they decorate.
- There are German prisoners of war being held in Canada during the war, but they were treated better than Ukrainians who were interned. Why do you think this happened? Research more about the people who were held as prisoners in Canada, even though the war was far away in Europe.
- Before the Canadians built the internment camp on Spirit Lake, the Algonquin people lived there quite happily. Research information on the Algonquin people, specifically the Pikogan tribe. What was life like for them before the internment camp was built there? What is it like for them now? Compare and contrast the similarities and differences.
- Create a character web for one of the main characters in the journal. List characteristics or qualities of their personality. Support each characteristic with a story or event from the book.
- Examine the setting of the book in terms of time and place. What was going on in

the world when the events in Prisoners in the Promised Land book took place? Compare and contrast different types of technology, political systems, religious beliefs, etc. that appeared in this book, as opposed to today.

- Draft a letter from Anya to Halyna. Put yourself in her shoes. What types of information would you tell her? Would you be honest about how scared you are? How hard your life has been? What would you ask her?
- When Anya learns what a suffragette is, she is surprised that not all men in Canada are able to vote. In her old country, all men, no matter what their skin colour, were able to vote, even if they were very poor. Why do you think that only white men with property were allowed to vote in Canada? Explore this question by researching early voting rules in Canada, and the suffragette movement.
- This book is based on true events that took place in Canada during WWI. Research more about the internment camps in Canada, and the people and families that were kept there. What did these families do after they were released from the camps?
- Choose a main event in the story, and write 5 to 10 tweets from that character's point of view detailing the events that took place ('live-tweeting'). Choose a Twitter handle that would suit the character that you have chosen. Come up with a few creative hashtags as well.
- Create a newspaper that could have been published during this time period. Research and write several different articles, and include advertisements, current event listings etc. Make it as realistic as possible.

Additional Resources

Canada War Museum

<http://www.warmuseum.ca/firstworldwar/history/life-at-home-during-the-war/enemy-alien-s/the-internment-of-ukrainian-canadians/>

Scholastic Canada

<http://www.scholastic.ca/books/view/dear-canada-prisoners-in-the-promised-land>

InfoUkes: An Information Resource About Ukraine and Ukrainians

<http://www.infoukes.com/history/internment/>

Toronto Ukrainian Genealogy Group

http://www.torugg.org/History/history_of_ukrainians_in_canada.html#The

Historica Canada: The Canadian Encyclopedia

<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/ukrainian-canadians/>

Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund

<http://www.internmentcanada.ca/>

For a detailed map of the 24 internment camp locations in Canada, please visit:

<http://www.internmentcanada.ca/resources-map.cfm>

This guide was prepared by Kim Therriault, OCT. For more information, please contact therriaultkim@gmail.com. This project has been made possible by a grant from the Endowment Council of the Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund.