Dreams in the Golden Country:
The Diary of Zipporah Feldman, a Jewish Immigrant Girl
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Study Guide

I. INTRODUCTION

This study guide aims to provide material to aid in the preparation of a lesson, unit, or book club discussion about *Dreams in the Golden Country: The Diary of Zipporah Feldman*. Studying this fictional diary of a twelve-year-old Jewish immigrant girl in New York City can contribute to an exploration of American Jewish history as it highlights important themes about Jewish immigrants' experiences and their contributions to American society in the early 20th century.

Zipporah (Zippy) Feldman's diary begins with an account of her arrival at Ellis Island in September 1903 and continues to detail her experiences over the next eighteen months. Zippy, her mother, and her sisters have come to America from Russia to join her father who arrived in America two years earlier. Through the pages of the journal, the reader can travel with Zippy as she lives in a cramped tenement in the Lower East Side, goes to an American public school, makes new friends, becomes involved in the Yiddish theater, and tries to adapt to American culture. As Zippy describes events in her family's and friends' lives, the diary lends insight into some important issues of the Jewish immigrant experience. These include the generational conflict that existed between parents and their children, the tensions between German Jews and the more recent Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe and Russia, the Jewish immigrants' role in the burgeoning labor movement, and their contributions to the developing garment industry and the arts.

This fictional diary is an excellent way to help students identify with and understand the early 20th century Jewish immigrants. Through the diary, readers not only learn about the facts of immigrant history, but can also perceive the turbulent emotions that a Jewish immigrant child might have had during this transformative period.

II. QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. How did learning about Jewish immigrant life through a fictional diary help you understand and identify with the Jewish immigrant experience? What advantages and limitations does the diary format present?

2. Why did Zippy and her family – and approximately two million Jews from Eastern Europe and Russia – immigrate to America?

3. Consider Zippy's relationships with each member of her family. How do they influence each other? What conflicts do they have? Think about your own families. How do you help shape each other's lives?

4. On pages 31-32, Zippy describes some of the tensions that existed between German Jews and the Eastern European and Russian Jews in America. Why did this conflict exist?

5. What are some of Zippy's *middot* that shine through her interactions with her family and friends?

   Some examples: She exemplifies the *middah* of *kol Yisrael arevim zeh l'zeh* (all Jews are responsible for one another) when she works to help her friend Blu Wolf improve her English and when she volunteers at the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society to make bundles of clothes to give to new immigrants. She exemplifies the *middah* of *kibbud av v'aim* (honoring your parents) when she seeks ways to help her parents improve their lives in America.

6. Zippy's sister Tovah becomes a leader in the labor movement and is vocal about women's political rights. (See pages 81 and 136.) Tovah's activism worries her mother. Why? Why do you think Tovah (and other Jewish women) got involved in the labor and suffrage movement, when they never would have contemplated such activities when they lived in Russia?

7. Zippy's mother, Yitzy Silver, Uncle Moishe, and even Zippy's father become involved in the garment trade. Why do you think so many Jews entered this industry?

8. Zippy's friend Mamie dies in a fire at the Diamond Shirtwaist factory. This fictional tragedy is based on the actual fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in 1911 that killed 146 people, mostly women and girls. How does the Diamond Shirtwaist factory fire affect Zippy? How did the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire impact the labor movement? (See pages 139-142 and 163.)

9. How did the immigrants of the Lower East Side create a subculture of their own, including their own social and political organizations, as well as their own newspapers and forms of entertainment?

III. PASSAGES FOR CLOSE ANALYSIS

1. On page 9, Zippy writes "It is awful, this tenement apartment. I cannot believe that back in Russia everyone called America the *Goldeneh Medina*- the Golden Country. There is nothing golden. It is only darkness."

   The Feldmans, like many immigrants, come to America with an "American dream," a glorified vision of America. Some thought that America was a land of endless possibility where they could easily become wealthy, live in great comfort, and enjoy complete freedom. Discuss the idea of the "American Dream". What do you think it meant to Jewish immigrants in the early 20th century? Look at the quote above. How do you think Zippy's feelings about

America change over the course of her life? (The epilogue describes how she becomes a famous and wealthy actress.)

What about you today? What are your dreams for your future in America? Do you think you and your family are living the "American Dream"?

* Teachers might want to reference Rael Meyerowitz's *Transferring to America: Jewish Interpretations of American Dreams* for further discussion of the idea of the "American Dream" as it related to Jewish immigrants.

2. After discussing the story of Hanukkah (page 61) Zippy writes, "I think maybe I understand better why Mama does not want to give up her wig. In a way the Americans are like the Greeks. Oh, they do not force pigs on our altars, of course, but it was very easy for those Jews of ancient times to take up Greek styles in small ways. It is so easy to become like all the others. So hard to stand apart and feel free, feel chosen as Mama says but not superior."

   In what ways do the Jewish immigrants find it difficult to maintain their Jewish values? What parts of Jewish practice do Zippy's father and uncles begin to abandon? How does her mother try to preserve their religious observance? What aspects of American culture does Mama begin to value as the diary progresses? Do you think this quote could apply to Jews today? In what ways?

3. On page 79, Zippy writes, "Now, I tell you what Tovah has to go and do: Organize a union!!! She is going to be in big trouble.…THIS IS BIG TROUBLE!" Why is Zippy so worried about Tovah starting a union?

4. Zippy's sister, Miriam, says, "What is it about this country that makes one dream such big dreams?" (page 88) What are the different dreams that the members of the Feldman family have? Why do they feel that they can pursue these dreams in America when they might never have entertained these thoughts in Russia?

5. On page 94, Zippy quotes her father as he refuses to take a job as a boss of a shop for Yitzy's father: "'You don't learn anything in a sweatshop except being a sweater. You think I came here to learn how to exploit, to be a boss? That is vile. Never! Never!'"

   Why is Zippy's father so against taking this job? Why does his position make Zippy wonder, "that maybe Papa is the old-fashioned one and Mama the real Yankee"? How does Papa later reconcile his own and his wife's desires?

6. Zippy discusses the upcoming election (page 137): "I would definitely vote for Teddy Roosevelt if I could. But we will all go tomorrow with Uncle Moishe when he votes (Uncle Moishe is a citizen) and I don't care if it is boiling hot, I am going to wear the new winter coat that Mama fitted for me from one of the samples for Yitzy's father. It has velvet piping around the collar and both pockets. We Feldmans shall all walk proudly down Orchard Street to the polls, even though only Uncle Moishe can vote. Oh, how I wish the Tsar could see us now."

Why is the election so important to Zippy and her family? What are her sister Tovah's political views? How did the students in your school get involved in the presidential election we just had?

7. On pages 151-152, Zippy writes, "I look back in this diary I have kept now for over a year – eighteen months to be exact, and I think this is a very strange sort of story. It begins with an ending, the ending of our life in Russia, and it ends with a beginning. And throughout the entire diary, there are beginnings and endings that seem to braid together like a plait of very long hair. Sometimes one cannot tell the beginning from the ending and this is not necessarily bad for if one really knew one might not have the courage to go on. I want to go on. I think I shall buy a new diary tomorrow and begin to fill it up with my story. I am sure there will be many more beginnings and endings and I hope that I shall never be quite sure which is which." What are some of the beginnings and endings that she experiences throughout the diary? What does she mean when she writes that she doesn't want to be sure what is a "beginning" and what is an "ending"?

IV. LESSON IDEAS

1. Jewish immigrants significantly shaped the political, economic and social landscape of America. How did the Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe and Russia affect the land they settled in at the beginning of the twentieth century? Divide the class into groups. Each group will research an area of influence Jewish immigrants had on American life.

Some possibilities:

1. Unionism. This group can study Jews' role in the labor movement. They can feature some of the important leaders- both male and female. They can discuss the use of strikes as a strategy and contemplate the ways that the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire impacted the labor movement.

2. Development of Social Service Organizations: This group can study the role of synagogues in helping Jewish immigrants and can explore the development of social service agencies such as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, the Jewish Federation and the United Jewish Appeal. They can trace the development of these organizations and assess the differences in origin and focus of these groups.

3. Development of the Fashion Industry and the Garment Trade: Students can explore why so many Jews became involved in this industry. They can examine how the Jews' skills and exclusion from other fields might have encouraged their involvement in the garment trade. They can also focus on the relationship between Jews of German ancestry and Jews who came from Eastern Europe and Russia as they both played a role in the garment industry.

4. The Arts: Students can study the Yiddish Theater- its role in the community, its stars, the subjects of the plays (many were based on Shakespeare), and its influence on other forms.

of entertainment. They can also examine the influence of Jews on music, literature, and the visual arts.

2. Zippy Feldman learns English by going to a New York City public school where only English is spoken. She refers to learning English by reading and memorizing Henry Wadsworth Longfellow poems.

   - Incorporate a literature lesson by reading some of the poems she mentions and imagining how Zippy might have interpreted these poems. The poems include: “The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls”, “Midnight Ride of Paul Revere”, and “The Song of Hiawatha”.

   - You might also want to broaden the discussion by examining the impact of the American public school system on Jewish immigrants. (See Zippy’s description of what she will learn in the fourth grade on page 82.)

   - Teachers may wish to consult *Going to America, Going to School: The Jewish Immigrant Public School* by Stephan F. Brumberg for an extensive look at Jewish immigrants and American public schools.

   - Divide the class and debate the now controversial topic of how best to communicate with and teach immigrant children in America. Zippy was spoken to only in English; many immigrants today are taught some subjects in their mother language. Some argue that students should be taught subjects such as math and science in the language that they understand best so that they can keep up with their peers in all academic areas. Others maintain that the best way for students to learn English is to be completely immersed in the language. Debate the merits and shortcomings of bilingual education.

3. Incorporate math and geography into the discussion of this book! Ask students to construct a scale model of a tenement. They can include a written description of the discomfort and difficulties that people might have encountered by living in such crowded circumstances.

   OR

   Ask students to create a model of some streets of the Lower East Side in the early 1900’s, using the detail of Manhattan on page 180. What did the streets look like? You can use the picture on page 170 for guidance in recreating the crowded conditions. Where is the Lower East Side in relation to the rest of New York City? Why did many Eastern European and Russian Jewish immigrants settle in the Lower East Side? Students can describe what it was like to walk the streets and go to the places that Zippy describes in her diary, like home, school, the marketplace, and the Yiddish theater.

V. PROJECTS

1. Throughout her diary, Zippy refers to social, scientific, and political events that occur while she is writing her diary. These include Marie Curie receiving the Nobel Prize in physics, the first flight of the Wright Brothers’ airplane, “Typhoid Mary”, the outbreak of war between

Japan and Russia in 1904, the revolution in Russia in 1905, and the political election of 1904. Students can divide into groups and write a newspaper, with each group researching and writing an article about a different event.

2. Create a newscast. Instead of writing the articles to be included in the newspaper project described above, the students can explore the same political, social, and scientific events and present the information as a newscast. This could be a good exercise in public speaking.

3. In her diary, Zippy relates how she reads and writes a letter to the advice column called the *Bintel Brief* of The Jewish Daily Forward. Ask the students to imagine that they are early 20th century Jewish immigrants living in the Lower East Side. They should write letters to the *Bintel Brief* about any issue that an immigrant might have had. Then they can each exchange their letter with a classmate who can write the answer with advice appropriate to the historical time and place. Students can read the letters and answers out loud or post them in class. If the class has done the newspaper project, they can append these letters to the newspaper.

4. In the end of her diary, Zippy writes, "I think I shall buy a new diary tomorrow and begin to fill it up with my story." Ask the students to write the first entry in Zipporah Feldman's new diary.

5. Journals have provided historians with personal, detailed insights into the past. The journals we write today may be what historians in the future will use to understand life in the early 21st century. Have the students write an entry in a journal describing their own life and times. They might even want to start keeping a journal throughout the year.