

Jesse's Star

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Jesse's "dumb" homework assignment, put off as usual until the last minute, is to write a report about how his family arrived in Canada and what conditions were like in their country of origin. He's panicky about getting the assignment done, but not interested in relatives who have been dead for years.

Jesse's unsympathetic mother is on her way to a big meeting; he's been told repeatedly not to procrastinate. She does tell him that his relatives came from Russia at the end of the nineteenth century and sends him to the attic to see what he might find in a small box. Grumbling, Jesse searches until he finds what appears to be a traveling case that belonged to Yossi Mendelsohn, his great-great grandfather, who left Russia for Canada when he was about Jesse's age. He finds a yellowed picture of Yossi and his family on the day they arrived in Canada in 1890, and a cloth bag containing a Star of David on a chain. At first he thinks, "Big deal. What's so special about an old Jewish star? But he took a closer look, and saw gold glinting out from under the dull brown tarnish. And was he imagining it, or did his palm feel warm where the star lay?" Jesse puts the chain around his neck and is transformed into Yossi, living a century earlier in the village of Braslav.

Yossi is a clumsy boy who desperately wants to be useful, but his efforts are often disastrous, particularly when he tries to help on stilts. Like many Jewish families, those in Braslav are victims of persecution at the hands of the cruel soldiers. Their food is stolen and their holy books are burned. They know their only hope is to escape to Canada. The quick-thinking young Yossi has his chance to be a hero. He secretly listens to the camped Russian soldiers, learns what they fear most, and gives them a good scare while the villagers escape. The Rebbe gives him the Star of David for his heroism.

Back in the attic, Jesse knows his experience had been "too real to be a dream—the people, the village, the danger. He'd been there, smelled the hay and apples, seen the golden moon in Braslav's sky." He knows that it had all happened because of the star, decides that the Yossi's Jewish star is now a part of his life—causing a genuine change in him.

The persona transformation device works in this well-crafted, action-packed story, which should create a hunger for youngsters to know and dream about their own family heritage. Readers will also learn more about Judaism, the Diaspora, and the Star of David in historical information after the story ends.

LINDA SALISBURY (September / October 2000)

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