

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Eleanor's Story: An American Girl In Hitler's Germany

by

### Eleanor Ramrath Garner

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### Book Information

Eleanor Ramrath Garner, Eleanor's Story: An American Girl In Hitler's Germany

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268 Pages

Book Level: 6.4

Interest Level: UG

This is a chilling story of a young American girl and her family and how they survived in Germany during World War II.

**Award:** ALA Notable/Best Books; Children's Book Award; Misc./Other; VOYA Award/Honor

**Topics:** Adventure, Trials/Tribulations; History, World; People, Nazis; Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice; Recommended Reading, NCSS/CBC Notable Social Studies; Wars, World War II

### Main Characters

Annemarie Tesch Eleanor's wealthy Berlin friend whose family suffers severe financial setbacks during the war

Edit the Polish prisoner-of-war who works as Tante Mieke's maid; she befriends Eleanor when Eleanor comes to stay with her aunt

Eleanor Ramrath the young American girl narrating the story; she struggles to survive with her family in Berlin during World War II

Frank Ramrath Eleanor's older brother, who helps provide her with support during troubled times

Gabi the daughter of a Nazi official; she threatens to report Eleanor when Eleanor says that Hitler cannot win the war

Hildegard Elizabeth Ramrath (Bassi) Eleanor's younger sister, who is born during the war; the family fears she will succumb to malnutrition when food is scarce

Josef Ramrath Eleanor's strict father, who moves his family from America to Berlin at the start of World War II in order to take an engineering job

Lucie the young girl who is assigned to help the Ramraths during the war; her sex life holds a lurid fascination for Eleanor and Frank

Mathilde Ramrath Eleanor's strong, stern mother, whose determination helps hold the family together during the war

Onkel Adolf Eleanor's great uncle, who is married to Tante Mieke; he is a banker and treats Eleanor with kindness

Tante Lina and Onkel Carl the American friends of the Ramraths who offer them a home when they are trying to save enough money to send for Mother and the two youngest children

Tante Mieke Eleanor's great aunt, who is used to a life of luxury; her selfish and spoiled nature complicates Eleanor's efforts to help her family during the war

Thomas Joseph Ramrath (Moppi) Eleanor's younger brother, who is born during the war

### Vocabulary

**air raid** an assault made by airplanes attacking a target

**bunker** a place underground, usually with concrete walls, used to protect people from air bombings

**evacuate** to leave an area or place

**malnutrition** poor health caused by an absence of proper food

**monotony** a lack of change that causes boredom

**refugee** a person escaping from a dangerous place in an attempt to find safety

### Synopsis

Eleanor Ramrath and her family are struggling to survive in post-Depression America. In 1939, Eleanor's stern German-born father accepts a job in Berlin because of an economic boom there, with the understanding that the family will return to America after two years.

Despite signs that war is about to erupt in Germany, the Ramraths depart for Berlin aboard a ship. They feel that after the high costs of World War I, Germany will not attempt to get involved in another

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war. The Ramraths are still aboard ship when the news breaks that Germany has declared war on Poland, and it is too late for the family to turn back.

After visiting several groups of relatives in Germany, the Ramraths arrive in Berlin. Eleanor struggles in school, but she does make several friends, among them Annemarie Tesch. Because Eleanor is determined to fit in, Eleanor's mother allows her to join the Hitler Youth when Eleanor agrees not to attend the political indoctrination sessions.

As Hitler's power grows, Eleanor's father becomes more outraged. On Hitler's birthday, Mr. Ramrath hangs an American flag in the apartment window. Mother, fearing punishment from the Gestapo, hurriedly destroys the flag. Later, Mother markedly warns Eleanor never to discuss the views of her parents outside their home.

Shortly afterward, the family realizes they cannot leave Germany with Mother because she is still officially a German citizen. Eleanor begins to suffer from stress, and she is sent to her wealthy Tante Mieke and Onkel Adolf in Stolp. One of the highlights of this trip is Eleanor's eleventh birthday party, but Eleanor's aunt refuses to allow Eleanor to invite her poor friends. Although she has been punished before for inviting guests to previous birthdays without permission, Eleanor invites her friends anyway. Because she misses her family so much, Eleanor returns to Berlin only to find her mother is pregnant. In January of 1942, Eleanor's brother Tommy is born.

When the bombings on Berlin increase, Eleanor is sent to the Baltic Sea with other students for safety. However, so many fall ill from stress that the facility is shut down. Upon her return to Berlin, Eleanor finds that the air raids have increased, Berlin is in shambles, and food is even more restricted. A coworker reports a criticism Father made against Hitler, but he is saved by the intervention of his boss.

By October of 1942, Mother is pregnant again. By March of 1943, the family is exhausted and strained

by frequent nighttime trips to the basement during the air raids. One particularly horrible night, a bomb makes a direct hit on the building next to the Ramraths. For days, Eleanor can hear the knocking of people trapped under the rubble. Rescuers are unable to reach them.

On Eleanor's thirteenth birthday, her friend gives her a party. While she is gone, her sister Elizabeth (Bassi) is born.

In June, Eleanor is sent back to Tante Mieke in Stolp. Knowing the family left in Berlin is always short of food, Eleanor tries to help them by collecting blueberries to make into preserves. Instead, Tante Mieke serves them to guests. Eleanor is outraged by this selfish act. Later she uses her aunt's spoiled nature to get her to bring Mother and the children to Stolp by suggesting the government will force strange refugees into her house if it is not full of relatives. Tante Mieke agrees, but Mother has difficulty living with Tante Mieke. The family next moves to Waldenburg near the Polish border.

In May of 1944, attacks on Berlin have increased so much that the family loses contact with Father, who has remained there. Frightened, Mother and Eleanor's older brother, Frank, go to find Father. They put Eleanor in charge of Bassi and Tommy and leave her with a limited amount of money and ration cards for food. When they do not return after a week, Eleanor worries that she will run out of food, but Frank returns to give her more money and ration cards. Father is unharmed, but Frank has to go back for Mother because travel anywhere has become exceedingly difficult.

In the late fall of 1944, Father writes to the family that he has lost his job because of orders from the Gestapo after he made a joke about Herman Goering. His employer decides to subvert this order by giving Father his work to take home.

In early 1945 the family flees to Berlin to escape the advancing Russian Army and to be reunited once more. Food is scarce, and the city is constantly bombed by the British and American Air Forces.

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When the Russian Red Army arrives, the family staves off attacks by showing their American passports. The Ramraths somehow manage to avoid the plundering, raping, and wanton killing by the greatly feared Russian soldiers.

The schools eventually reopen, and Eleanor is relieved to find her friend Annemarie still alive. She hears many tales of suffering from her classmates. Conditions slowly improve when the American soldiers arrive.

In April of 1946, Father informs the family that he has applied for visas to America. The U.S. government refuses to pay for Mother, Bassi, and Tommy to return to America, but the rest of the family decides to go on ahead. After many delays and a stormy crossing, they arrive in New York in late July 1946. They stay with their friends, Tante Lina and Onkel Carl, until Father finds a job and earns enough money to send for Mother and the remaining children. By fall of 1947, the Ramrath family has been reunited in America.

### Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

#### Initial Understanding

Why is Frank surprised when the man on the train yells at him for giving up his seat to a Jewish woman?

*Not only do the Ramraths not support Hitler's racist ideas, but they also seem strangely oblivious to the results of this racism. Frank is amazed and mortified at the extent to which the man on the train is willing to take this hatred. Mother is proud of Frank for not succumbing to the man's tirade, even though she is furious with Father when he endangers the family by criticizing Hitler.*

#### Literary Analysis

Eleanor draws comfort from her mother despite her mother's severe nature. What virtues make Eleanor's mother a source of strength for the entire family?

*Eleanor's mother helps the family maintain some semblance of normality and stability throughout the war. She insists they stay together when times are the toughest, adopting a policy that they are all going to suffer the same fate together. She insists that the family members try to keep themselves and their home clean despite the constant bombings and shortages of water, soap, and clothing. She struggles to make interesting and filling meals out of very limited food supplies. She also has a knack for knowing the right thing to do in times of danger, such as when she waters down the Russian soldiers' vodka or waves Eleanor's American passport in the face of Eleanor's attacker.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

At the end of the story, Eleanor says, "Over the years Father and I made our peace." Why does she and her father need to make peace with one another?

*Probably the main reason Eleanor and her father need to make peace is due to the abusive way he treats his children. Not only is Eleanor often slapped because she cannot do her multiplication tables, but her father frequently loses his temper and hits the children whenever they break even minor rules. Eleanor also seems to have other conflicts with her father. She carries a deep resentment that he moved the family to Germany just as the war was beginning, despite the advice of his friends. She also notes her father's carelessness in speaking about political issues and the Nazi party, which jeopardizes the family's safety on numerous occasions.*

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## Constructing Meaning

What are some of the opinions people express about the Nazis and Hitler?

*Father says many things about Hitler. He calls him an idiot; he says he cannot win the war; and he frequently criticizes Hitler's policies. Eleanor overhears people on the street saying they would not want their children in the SS and that the SS training is driving young boys mad. Others insist that Hitler will win the war, that he must have a secret weapon he is waiting to use at just the right moment, and that it is treason to say anything against Hitler. Some people believe that Hitler is providing wonderful social programs such as the Hitler Youth, while others cooperate with Hitler only because they are terrified. Some, like Mother when she refuses to let Eleanor participate in the political meetings of the Hitler Youth, resist in quiet ways.*

**Understanding Characterization** Eleanor writes a poem for her father on his birthday that pokes fun at his faults. Have the students think about what Eleanor may have considered her father's faults and then attempt to write a poem similar to what Eleanor may have written for her father.

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding the Author's Craft** This story is told from Eleanor's point of view, and it is her feelings and perspective that shape the telling of the events in this book. Other members of Eleanor's family probably remember events differently than Eleanor does. Have the students choose another member of the family and tell an event from his or her point of view.

**Recognizing Cause and Effect** This story describes the devastating effect World War II has on the city of Berlin. Have the students search for photos in history books or encyclopedias: one showing Berlin before World War II begins, one showing the city shortly before the Russians arrive, and one showing the city after the Americans arrive.

**Comparing and Contrasting** Like *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Eleanor's Story* is a chronicle of the experiences of a young girl trapped in Europe during World War II. Have the students read a few excerpts from Anne Frank's diary or watch the movie made from her life story and make a list of the similarities and differences in the lives of the two girls.