

A Teacher's Guide to

## ***The Blessing Cup***

By Patricia Polacco

*Choose the questions and activities that work best with the age and interests of the child or class you are sharing this book with.*

### **Discussion Questions**

This is a story about a family in difficult times that was helped by good people. It shows how people can endure hardships, as so many did, just to come to this country. It tells how good people are never forgotten, and how the stories we tell keep memories alive and are gifts from one generation to another.

1. Anna's family was poor, but her papa always told her that there are people with lots of money who are rich and people with very little who can be rich in other ways. What do you think? Do you agree?
2. Life in the shtetl was hard. The Russian soldiers made it even harder, but there were also good times. What were some of those good times?
3. Anna felt that in Roynovka *everyone* was rich. What do you think she meant by that?
4. There was much anti-Semitism in Russia as well as anti-Jewish pogroms (targeted riots against the Jews). Do some research and see what you can learn about this period. What does it mean to be persecuted? Can you think of other groups who have also been persecuted?
5. Persecution is a lot like bullying. Have you ever been bullied or seen or heard anyone else being bullied? How did that make you feel? What did you do?
6. When Aunt Rebecca sent Anna's mother the tea service, she enclosed a note telling her it was magical. What do you think she meant by that?
7. One of Anna's family rituals or customs was a special blessing. Her mother would make tea and sprinkle salt on the bread and say, *Bread so that we shall never know hunger . . . salt so that our lives will always have flavor . . . We shall always know love, and as long as we are together we shall never be poor.* What do you think about this custom? Does your family have a similar custom? If so, what is it?

8. Can you think of any special things your family does or says at special times? What about at bedtime or when you leave for school or before a test or on birthdays or holidays? Can you create a custom you would like to start? Can you think of a tradition that you would like your classroom or school to adopt?

9. When Anna's family had to flee their home, they could take only take a few cherished items. What would you take?

10. To help the family get safely to America, Uncle Genya, the kind doctor, sold his most prized possession—the Persian rug his wife had collected. What is your most prized possession?

11. Do you think Anna remembered Uncle Genya and his kindness? How do you know?

12. What does it mean to be a refugee? How do you think it felt for them to come to America? Do you think all refugees feel the same?

13. When the Blessing Cup breaks, the author says she realized more than any other time that her ancestors were *my bread. That the salt and flavor of my life were their stories. That those stories were kept by them so that I would know that I was loved generations before I was born.* What do you think she meant by that?

14. When Patricia saw that the Blessing Cup had broken in two, she smiled. Why do you think she wasn't sad, but smiled?

### **Activities & Projects**

1. This story begins in Roynovka, a town in Russia. Can you find it on a map? Anna's journey ends in Union, Michigan, and the story itself ends in San Francisco. Can you trace the journey on a map? How many places has your family lived in? Can you name them? What do you know about them?

2. The tea cup is beautifully decorated in a colorful Russian folk art design. Look up Russian folk art on the Internet to see other beautiful objects.

3. Design your own teacup or water bottle. A paper one will do. Let your imagination go and have fun.

4. Anna's family heritage is Russian and Jewish. Do some research to learn more about their traditions.

5. What is the cultural heritage of your class? Find the places on the map where everyone's family came from. Learn about the different customs and traditions. Have a class party with foods from each country or special recipes from different families.

6. Make a family tree of Anna's family. Make a family tree for your own family. You can find a template by searching the Internet for "family tree for kids."

To learn more about genealogy:

**Climbing My Family Tree** <http://www.climbingmyfamilytree.com/genealogy-for-kids/>

### **Helping Kids with Their Family Tree Project**

<http://voices.yahoo.com/helping-kids-their-family-tree-project-12016826.html?cat=25>

7. The pictures in this book are very beautiful and expressive. Try reading the book again just looking at the pictures. Do you notice anything new in pictures or the story that you didn't see before? How do the pictures help to tell the story? What do you think about the artist's use of color?

8. You can tell a lot about life in the shtetl from the pictures. Talk about what life was like there. In what way do the pictures add to the words to paint a picture of life in Russia? Draw a picture or make a collage of life in your town or school.

9. Make a list of the Yiddish words the author uses in the book, and look them up on the Internet or in the library.

10. The teacup was a family heirloom. Do you have any family heirlooms? What makes a family heirloom valuable? Can you create something that could become a family or class heirloom?

11. Anna's mother left a note thanking Uncle Genya for his kindness and goodness. Think of someone who has done something special for you, and write a note of gratitude.

12. Interview a parent or grandparent and ask them to tell you some family stories. Write or illustrate one of their stories. Write or draw a story about you and your family to pass down to your children.

13. Although written before *The Blessing Cup*, *The Keeping Quilt* is a companion book, which continues the story of the author's family to present day. Read it to find out what happens next and how the family traditions continue.

14. Find out more about the author, Patricia Polacco, and read other books she has written and illustrated. You can begin here: <http://www.patriciapolacco.com/>.

*Guide written in 2013 by Judith Rovenger. Judith is on the adjunct faculty of Long Island University and has taught at Columbia, Wesleyan, and Rutgers Universities. Her area of specialty is in ethics and literature. She is the former director of Youth Services at the Westchester Library System (NYS).*

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