

## **ELEANOR'S STORY: An American Girl In Hitler's Germany**

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Lesson Plan  
For Teachers and Librarians  
(Grades 7-12)

### **About the Play**

In the fall of 1939, at 9 years old, Eleanor and her family left New York on the SS Hamburg bound for Germany. A new job and a secure financial future awaited her father in Berlin. Half-way across the Atlantic, Hitler declared war on Poland and return to America became impossible. This is the true story of Eleanor Ramrath Garner growing up as an American trapped in Nazi Germany during WWII. Adapted for the stage and performed by her granddaughter Ingrid, the award-winning autobiography **Eleanor's Story: An American Girl in Hitler's Germany** details her youth struggling to maintain stability, hope, and identity in a world of terror and contrasts. Her family faces hunger, fascist oppression, carpet bombing, the final fierce battle for Berlin, the Russian invasion and the horrors of Soviet occupancy.

Reviews and Awards for **Eleanor's Story**

**Winner: "Best Weekly Theatre Award"**  
-Adelaide Fringe

**Winner: "Critics Choice Award"**  
-Fringe World

**Winner: "Best of Fest"**  
-Edmonton Fringe

**Nominated: "Best Theatre Award"**  
-Adelaide Fringe

"An amazing theatrical experience that delivers a unique historical perspective!" \*\*\*\*\*  
-Erich Marchese, Orange County Register

"Garner completely embodies the vulnerability of the child, the terror of Berlin during the air raids, and also the joy of survival!"\*\*\*\*\*  
-Euart Shaw, The Advertiser (Adelaide)

"Garner's performance reached out to the audience and the powerful story is

unforgettable! A must-see for history buffs and theatre-aficionados alike!” \*\*\*\*\*

-Prerna Ashok, [FringeReview.co.uk](http://FringeReview.co.uk)

## **Themes**

- World War II, Nazis
- Family Relationships
- Coming of Age
- Courage and Survival
- Adaptation and Assimilation

## **A Note from the Preparer**

This autobiographical account of Eleanor Ramrath Garner’s youth as an American is a unique view of World War II Germany. Students will be exposed to disturbing wartime realities juxtaposed with familiar, often comedic, coming of age experiences. As you work with students discussing, sharing, writing, and reflecting on this story, be prepared for reactions ranging from laughter (uncomfortable or otherwise) to tears.

Ordeals and experiences in this play will influence students grades 6-12. Please consider the topics for class discussion and suit them to the needs and abilities of your students.

## **Before viewing the play...**

To understand where Eleanor’s story begins, students may need some geographical, historical, and economic context of post-World War I and the Great Depression.

- To prepare students for the heavy, life-altering events of the story, ask students: What would you do if your parents announced you were moving to a country across the ocean- one that speaks another language and has a culture very different from your own? What is the most frightening thing that has happened to you? How would you feel if your parents were unable to help you?
- It may be prudent to provide a synopsis of the effects of the Treaty of Versailles on the German economy during the 1920s. What was the socio-economic situation in Germany that allowed Hitler to rise to power?

## **Food for thought as you watch the play...**

### **Childhood in your own country**

- Are there children of immigrant parents in your community? How are they treated, parents and children?
- If you have moved, what do miss most about your old community? If you haven’t moved, what would you miss most? What do/would you miss least?
- Imagine you are living in a place where you can understand the language, but cannot read or write it. What would worry you the most? How would you adjust in school?

- What if you discovered that the good manners you were raised with were perceived as bad manners in your new culture?

### **The horrors and reality of war**

- How does a person witness so much violence and death and not go crazy?
- Both Eleanor and her brother Frank face decisive moments in relationship to the safety and dignity of others. How do you react to bullying of other students, to jokes that slur persons or groups that are different from you?

### **Endings and Beginnings**

- What happens when a war is over? What is life like amid the ruins? How does it change from wartime patterns? What do the citizens and refugees need? What do the community and national leaders need to do to bring life back to near-normalcy? Does anyone really win in a war?
- What are the endings in Eleanor's life? What are the beginnings? How have you experienced the push/pull of growing up, the desire to be free of parental supervision mixed with an awareness of the need for parental support?
- Two emotional responses seem to be constant for wartime survivors: survivor's guilt (Why did I live while other's died?) and Post-Traumatic Stress. How do you think these things affected her when she returned to a thriving America from War-Torn Germany?

## **After the Play: *Interdisciplinary Connections***

### **Language Arts**

- How does Eleanor use simile, metaphor, figurative language to give depth to her experiences?

### **History: *Experience, Purpose, and Outcome of War; Propaganda; Nazism, Dictators, Facism***

- Teen experience of WWII: How do Eleanor's experiences compare with other teens in WWII? (The obvious comparison is Anne Frank. Students can dig deeper and find stories by German youth, survivors of the camps, teens and soldiers in allied armies.) How is Eleanor's experience unique?
- Of the wars you have read about, watched in movies iron TV, or studied, what are some universal experiences of war? Throughout history, what has changed in the experience of war, for soldiers and citizens?
- Purpose of WWII: How does WWII differ in purpose from other wars? Why is it still being discussed so much today?
- Mass media: What media has been used over the centuries to promote, inform the public about a war? Why does a government inform the public about a war? What mass media did Eleanor see, listen to, and watch?

- Propaganda: What's the purpose of propaganda? How was it used in WWII Germany? What message was the government trying to convey? What are some present-day political and commercial messages/propaganda (Ads: "Thin is beautiful", "Men must be macho", etc.)?
- Nazism: What does Nazi stand for? What were the beliefs of the Nazi party? How did it become a political party? How did Adolf Hitler come to power? How did the Nazi party come to power? Why did the Nazis hate the Jews and other non-Aryans? Could a similar movement gain power today? If so, where and why? How would or should other governments respond? What was Eleanor's family's experience with the Nazis?
- Dictators: What is a dictator? How was Hitler a dictator? What other countries had dictators during WW II? What leaders in the world today are dictators? What is/was life like under those dictatorships? How do/did other countries respond to those dictatorships?
- Facism: What is facism? How does it relate to a dictatorship? How and why did facism rise and fall?
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### **Sciences:** *Nutrition; Public Health; Natural Resources; Technology*

- Nutrition: Eleanor mentions food often and the importance of food to survival. Using nutritional guidelines, compare the food that was available to her family with the food necessary for good health. Investigate and report on the various diseases related to nutritional deficiencies. What natural or man-made situations in the world today cause the citizens to suffer from malnutrition?
- Public Health: Why is clean water important to public health?
  - What is the public sewer system for? What happens if it does not work or is broken?
  - What diseases thrive and spread during a war or a natural disaster? Why? What needs to be done to control them?
  - What pestilence thrives and spreads during a war or a natural disaster? Why? What needs to be done to control them?
- Natural resources: What are natural resources? What value do they have to civilians and military? How does the presence of natural resources influence the strategies of war? What role did natural resources play in WW II for Germany, for the Allies?
- Technology: What kinds of technology (in WW II, today) are used to destroy life or property? What are some different kinds of bombs (land mines, chemical, conventional, atomic/nuclear)? What must citizens/countries do to defend against them? How can/should these technologies be used for peaceful purposes?

### **Arts: Visual, Performing**

- Visual: Eleanor describes color in her story a great deal, its lack during the war, and its emotional importance in her life. What colors are important to you? What impact do various colors have on people?
  - What kinds of art are used today as therapy? Why?

- Performing: Music plays a big part in Eleanor's life. Eleanor listens to the romantic music of Marika Rokk to escape the realities of war. She's moved by the piece from Hansel and Gretel about fourteen angels who protect you, and finds comfort in that in that image. How did the music make you feel?
- What is your favorite music today? Why is it meaningful to you?
- What kinds of music help identify specific eras? How does the choice or preference of music characterize this era?

## **Religion/Faith/Spirituality**

- Note: These broad questions are intended to address Eleanor's spirituality and how it helped her to survive the war. In general terms they might help students to think about their own spirituality. The questions are not intended to promote one faith over another. Discussion of these issues depends on the age, experiences, and maturity of your students.
- How did Eleanor's faith or spirituality influence her survival? How have you seen faith influence the outcomes of other life stories you are familiar with?
- What is the difference between religion and spirituality? What does faith mean?
- What is the role or purpose of faith, of religion? How does Eleanor's spirituality change as she grows and experiences the depths of the war? How does her spirituality or faith differ from what she learns from the Catholic Church?

## **Personal Integrity**

- Integrity is a word that is often misunderstood. If students check a dictionary or thesaurus, they may find such synonyms as virtue, honesty, honor, principle, trustworthiness. Many of these are words that students can apply to situations in their own lives. Often more interesting than synonyms, and more revealing, is the derivation of a word. Integrity is related to a math word, integer, a single number. The actions and values of a single person of integrity are consistent and support that individual's belief in what is right. Many of the people Eleanor encounters in Germany are able to maintain their personal integrity despite the difficult circumstances that face them everyday; some do not. The following are suggested discussion or writing prompts to further a conversation of integrity.
- Is Eleanor's father a person of integrity? Is her mother a person of integrity? Support your answer with specific examples.
- What was the level of integrity of the ship captain during the family's voyage to Germany in 1939? What was his primary responsibility: the ship or his nationality? Does his changing the colors of the ship reflect integrity or lack of integrity? (This question cannot be adequately discussed without agreement about the definition the students will be using, and without students researching the ship. Was it commercial or military? Who or what owned the ship? Who employed the captain? What were the international maritime rules about the nationality of a ship?)
- The persons influencing the events of the 1930s and 1940s are indirectly referred to in the play, but their personal integrity or lack of it certainly impacted Eleanor's life. Brainstorm two to five people of import in Germany and the United States from 1930 to 1945. Decide on

their level of integrity and support your answers with historical facts. (The number and choice of people will vary considerably depending on the level of students involved.)

- Can a person have integrity if the values they are reflecting are generally judged to be evil? Although this appears to be a closed-ended question, thoughtful complete answers will have to include the students' definitions of integrity, evil, and values and how those ideas influence history. Discussion of this question may seem purely semantic but addresses some of the historical issues that underlie the reality of Eleanor's experiences.
- Consider the situations in this play where the main characters had to make a decision, particularly one involving the difference between what they are supposed to say versus what they want or know is right to say.
- How do the characters in this play choose? How do they decide when they must listen to their hearts? How do we, ourselves, make decisions when we disagree with decisions or policies of the authorities or of the government? How do we know when to trust our hearts, listen to ourselves, and make a risky decision?

## **The Holocaust**

- The stories that perhaps most influence our understanding of World War II are those from the Holocaust. Students from late elementary school through high school—and indeed into college—hear and process these stories in a variety of ways. Students in any classroom will have a varying degree of knowledge and understanding of this dark and heroic time in world history. For all classrooms, it may be appropriate to begin discussion by having students find the definition of a holocaust. Depending on the age and experience of your students, the following questions may help guide the class discussion.
- How does great destruction by fire relate to World War II? What kinds of things did Eleanor see that would apply to the definition of a holocaust?
- How have you heard this word used, especially when it is capitalized? What happened in the Nazi death camps that led historians to use the word Holocaust to describe the treatment of prisoners, particularly Jews, by the Nazis during the war?
- What groups did the Nazis target? Why? What actions did the Nazis take against the Jews and other target groups in the 1930s? How did the Nazis' actions escalate as the war years passed?
- When or where did Eleanor or her family see any signs of the Holocaust? How was it possible to live in Germany during WW II and not be aware of the genocide? Think about how we today find out about events around us. How would living under a dictator influence the reliability of those sources? (Refer to the Social Studies topics above.)

## **Culminating Activities**

Is the world is richer for Eleanor sharing her story? How do the stories we hear, read, and know influence our understanding of our history and our world?