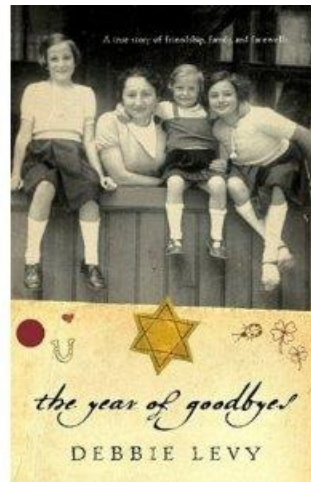
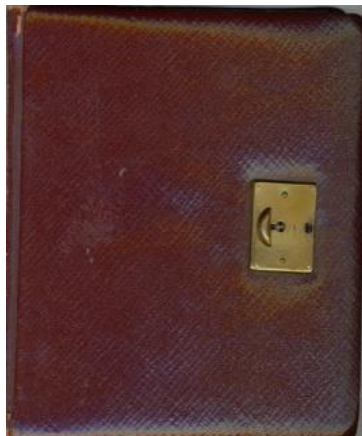


THE YEAR OF GOODBYES: WRITING WORKSHOP GUIDE

by Debbie Levy



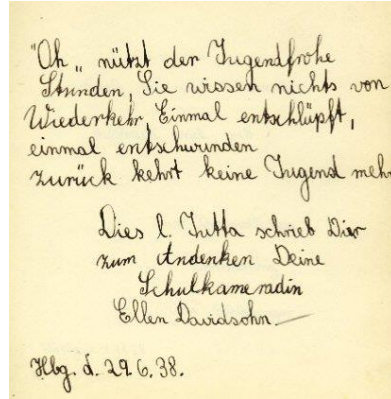
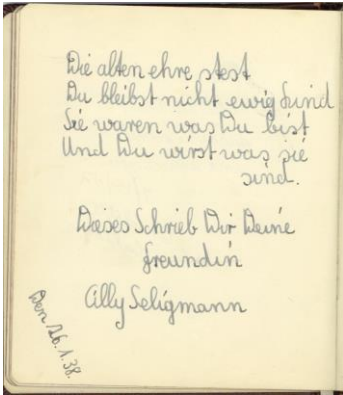
The true story in *THE YEAR OF GOODBYES* isn't only about the history of the 1930s, or the history of one girl in Nazi-era Germany. It's also about universal experiences. From refugees fleeing places where they are unsafe or unwelcome, to young people needing to say goodbye to friends when the adults in their lives make decisions over which they have control—these experiences are as relevant today as they were 75 years ago. The activities in this writing workshop guide are designed to get readers thinking and writing about connections between the events and people in *THE YEAR OF GOODBYES* and the experiences of people and communities today.



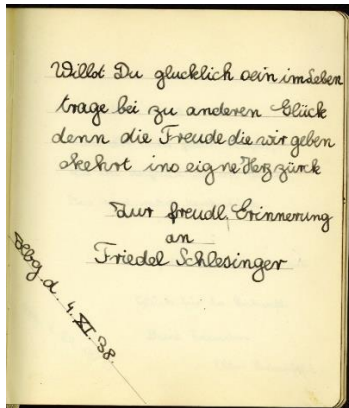
THE YEAR OF GOODBYES includes facsimiles of many of the actual pages that my mother's (Jutta's) friends wrote in her *poesiealbum* (the little brown journal pictured here).

The writings illustrate how members of a community related to one another and revealed themselves through the written word. What I like so much about these pages is how they reflect both contemplation and creativity, scholarliness and self-expression.

For us, as writers and denizens of the 21st century, one reason to try our hands at *poesiealbum*-type writing is simply to step back in time and immerse ourselves in the historical tradition at the heart of *THE YEAR OF GOODBYES*. Another reason is to practice the habit of creating space in our lives for formulating our thoughts into a few carefully chosen words. Important as it can be to let words flow without inhibition when writing, there are also times when we want to write small. We want to make it as right and memorable as we can. We want to be brief, because we may only have a brief moment in which to express ourselves. Also, as Jutta's story reminds us, sometimes in life and in writing we have only one chance.



1. WHAT WE CARRY, WHAT WE LEAVE BEHIND



Let's look at this page in Jutta's *poesiealbum* by Friedel Schlesinger. She wrote (in German): "To be happy in life/spread your joy far and wide/To give joy away/brings pleasure inside."

Friedel wrote her verse on November 4, 1938. At this time, Jutta was struggling to pack a small suitcase as she prepared to leave her home in Germany. Her father had managed to get tickets on board a ship that would take the family to the United States. Jutta loved her possessions—they brought her joy—and she doubted that giving this joy away, as Friedel's poem suggested, would bring her any pleasure. (See Chapter XVIII.)

SO: Say you are forced to leave the place you've lived your entire life. **What do you carry with you, if you could take a single small suitcase?** Write this as a paragraph or two or three; as a poem; as a list—whatever. Make sure you let the reader know why you've selected the things you are bringing with you.

AND:

What would you have to leave behind, either because it's too large to fit into a suitcase, or not capable of being packed (like Jutta's parakeet), and how would you feel about it? Again, write in paragraph or poetic form.

AND:

Try to put yourself in the shoes of refugees streaming out of Syria and other violence-torn countries today, desperately looking for some kind of life elsewhere: What do you imagine the young people among them are packing in their knapsacks? **Write something from the point of view of one of these young people.** Then **write a letter to that person** in which you try to welcome him or her to your community. Keep in mind the concerns that person may have about

friends left behind, not understanding your language, encountering new foods, appearing too “foreign,” and whatever else you might anticipate.

2. *SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING*

“If you see something, say something”—the U.S. Department of Homeland Security uses this slogan in its campaign to engage communities to be aware of suspicious activity that could be related to terrorism. It’s true that we must be alert and attentive to the possibility of danger. We can, at the same time, be alert and attentive to the danger of allowing our communities to become intolerant of differences. THE YEAR OF GOODBYES suggests an additional “see something, say something” approach. It’s about speaking out—or, in the context of a writing workshop, writing out—in response to activity that is related to bigotry, bullying, and hatred. **SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING, by composing a paragraph, brief essay, poem, or letter:**

- responding to friends or classmates today who choose to ridicule people they deem “undesirable” or unacceptably different;
- to the young people in Jutta’s neighborhood in Germany in 1938 who chose to discriminate against, or torment, their Jewish neighbors;
- to inspire or reassure someone whom you know is facing adversity or fear—whether that someone is an outsider or different from most people in your community, or a member of your community who is fearful of outsiders and those who are different.

3. *HOW WE SAY GOODBYE*



This is the *poesie* written by Jutta’s very best friend in Germany—a girl named Felicitas. Her message was simple: “Good luck in all your endeavors/until the end of your life.” The date was November 7, 1938. A few hours later, after Jutta and this best friend said a tearful goodbye, Jutta and her family got on a train to leave Germany.

Write a goodbye message to your best friend—or to a member of your family, or a favorite neighbor or teacher or pet. What would you want to convey in the face of your history together and an uncertain future?

4. REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING

Ironically, 70 years later, Felicitas could not remember who Jutta was. (She lived in England and I contacted her by letter.) The grown-up Jutta was disappointed and even shocked to hear this—“we were such close friends!” she said.

What about you are you sure your friends or classmates will remember 70 years from now?

AND:

What do you hope they forget?

(For the adults engaged in these writing exercises: What about you do you think your long-lost friends or classmates, whom you haven't seen in years or decades, would certainly remember about *you*? What do you hope they've forgotten?)

Write your responses to these questions in *poesiealbum* or poetry style. That is, use your words not only for their meaning, but also for their feeling and sound and look on the paper.

5. ARTIFACTS

I'm not sure I was conscious of this at the time I wrote THE YEAR OF GOODBYES, but looking back I believe I was inspired by a beautiful little picture book I read around 2003 or 2004. Written and illustrated by Nancy Patz, it's called *Who Was The Woman Who Wore The Hat?* The story is a meditation on a hat the author saw on display at the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam; the author imagines the life of the woman who wore the hat, a woman who was killed in the Holocaust. I realized that my mother's *poesiealbum*, like the hat, was a powerful artifact around which one could weave a story—and not an imagined story, but the true-life story of my mother's last year in Nazi Germany.

What are the artifacts in your own lives or families, or things you've seen in museums or out in the world, that might be the basis for a piece of writing that is both personal and universal? It doesn't have to be writing about loss. Maybe your artifacts evoke joy or triumph or love. For me, here are a few things that I can imagine being the jumping-off point for a story: a bicycle, board game, piano, wooden rolling pin—and cookie dough! What are the artifacts of your own history? Would you use them in a work of fiction, nonfiction, memoir, poetry? Describe the work you can imagine, as if you are writing a proposal for an editor.

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