

Around and About New Jersey

TEACHERS GUIDE

PROGRAM EIGHT

ROOSEVELT, NEW JERSEY

by

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I. SYNOPSIS

Roosevelt, New Jersey, was named after Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was President of the United States during the Great Depression in the 1930s. The original name of the town was "Jersey Homesteads." Its purpose was to provide a place in the country for Jewish, immigrant, garment workers in New York and Philadelphia to live and work far from the city slums. The Jewish scientist Albert Einstein, who was then living in nearby Princeton, visited the town to express his support.

The famous artist Ben Shahn, himself an immigrant from Russia, painted a mural in the building which is today the Roosevelt elementary school. The mural shows a stream of Jewish immigrants, led by Albert Einstein, fleeing pogroms in Europe, coming to America, working in sweatshops, organizing unions, and finally settling in Roosevelt, New Jersey.

Social studies teacher Ilene Levine leads her class in an oral history interview with Bernarda Shahn, the widow of Ben Shahn. Mrs. Shahn, who helped her husband paint the mural, discusses its meaning. Then, art teacher Rita Williams has the students draw their own versions of sections of the mural and discuss the emotional meaning of their work.

II. KEY WORDS

Mural - a painting on a wall

Pogrom - a riot against the Jews in Europe

Immigration - the act of leaving one country to live in another country

Garment Industry - the businesses that design and make clothing

Sweatshops - small businesses, typically in the garment industry, with substandard working conditions

The Great Depression - a period in American history in the 1930s when many people lost their jobs and couldn't find work

Labor Unions - organizations of workers to gain better wages and working conditions

III. CORE CURRICULUM CONTENT STANDARDS

6.1: ALL STUDENTS WILL UTILIZE HISTORICAL THINKING, PROBLEM SOLVING, AND RESEARCH SKILLS TO MAXIMIZE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF CIVICS, HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY, AND ECONOMICS.

By the end of Grade 2, students will:

A. Social Studies Skills

1. Explain the concepts of long ago and far away.
4. Retell events or stories with accuracy and appropriate sequencing.

Building upon the knowledge and skills gained in the previous grades, by the end of Grade 4 students will:

A. Social Studies Skills

1. Explain how present events are connected to the past.
2. Apply terms related to time including years, decades, centuries, and generations.
5. Distinguish between an eyewitness account and a secondary account of an event.
6. Distinguish fact from fiction.

STANDARD 6.2 (CIVICS) ALL STUDENTS WILL KNOW, UNDERSTAND AND APPRECIATE THE VALUES AND PRINCIPLES OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY AND THE RIGHTS, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND ROLES OF A CITIZEN IN THE NATION AND THE WORLD.

By the end of Grade 2, students will:

A. Civic Life, Politics, and Government

4. Explain that justice means fairness to all.

6. Explore basic concepts of diversity, tolerance, fairness, and respect for others.

E. International Education: Global Challenges, Cultures, and Connections

1. Explain that the United States is a diverse nation and one of many nations in the world.

Building upon knowledge and skills gained in preceding grades, by the end of Grade 4, students will:

B. American Values and Principles

3. Describe how American values and beliefs, such as equality of opportunity, fairness to all, equal justice, ... and the rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights, contribute to the continuation and improvement of American democracy.

E. International Education: Global Challenges, Cultures, and Connections

6. Explain why it is important to understand diverse peoples, ideas, and cultures.

7. Explain that even within a culture, diversity may be affected by race, religion, or class.

8. Identify aspects of culture and heritage presented in literature, art, music, sport, or the media.

9. Examine common and diverse traits of other cultures and compare to their own culture.

STANDARD 6.4 (UNITED STATES AND NEW JERSEY HISTORY) ALL STUDENTS WILL DEMONSTRATE KNOWLEDGE OF UNITED STATES AND NEW JERSEY HISTORY IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND LIFE AND EVENTS IN THE PAST AND HOW THEY RELATE TO THE PRESENT AND FUTURE.

Building upon knowledge and skills gained in preceding grades, by the end of Grade 4, students will:

A. Family and Community Life

3. Discuss the reasons why various groups, voluntarily and involuntarily, immigrated to America and New Jersey and describe the problems they encountered.

4. Discuss the history of their community, including the origins of its name, groups and individuals who lived there, and access to important places and buildings in the community.

5. Explain that Americans have come from different parts of the world and have a common American heritage, in addition to the heritage of the countries of origin.

B. State and Nation

6. Discuss the experiences of immigrants who came to the United States and New Jersey, including reasons for immigrating, experiences at Ellis Island, and working and living conditions in America.

STANDARD 6.6 (GEOGRAPHY) ALL STUDENTS WILL APPLY KNOWLEDGE OF SPATIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND OTHER GEOGRAPHIC SKILLS TO UNDERSTAND HUMAN BEHAVIOR IN RELATION TO THE PHYSICAL AND CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT.

Building upon knowledge and skills gained in preceding grades, by the end of Grade 4, students will:

A. The World in Spatial Terms

1. Use physical and political maps to identify locations and spatial relationships of places within local and nearby communities.

III. THEMES

A. Immigration - Immigrants have come to America for various reasons, one of which was to escape persecution, but they had to struggle to achieve success here.

B. The Mural - Works of art can be interpreted to gain an emotional understanding of events in the past.

IV. CORE ACTIVITIES

A. IMMIGRATION

1. Objective

Students will interpret an oral history interview.

2. Before Viewing the Program

Explain that they are about to see a program that uses a mural in a New Jersey elementary school to depict Jewish immigration to America. The artist who

painted the mural, Ben Shahn, was an immigrant himself. The students should pay particular attention to information about Mr. Shahn and why he painted the mural.

3. After Viewing the Program

Reproduce and distribute the "Ben Shahn Oral History Interview" provided in the Supplementary Materials section of this guide.

Explain that this interview was tape recorded with Ben Shahn in 1965, before he died, and that in it he talks about how as a boy he immigrated to America with his family. Tell them that Ben came from a part of Russia that is today the country of Lithuania, and show them where it is on a map of Europe.

Then, have several students take turns reading the account aloud, stopping to explain the terms "Biblical calendar," "Cossacks," "cat-o'-nine-tails," and "Czar," when they reach them.

Have the class discuss the following questions about the interview:

- Why did Ben Shahn's family decide to leave Russia?
- How did he feel about leaving Russia?
- Why do you think he said he wasn't too happy once he arrived in America?
- What problems did he face in school as a newly arrived immigrant?
- How did a teacher help him to solve these problems?

As an option, you might ask the students to draw a picture of one of the events that Ben Shahn describes in his oral history.

B. THE MURAL

1. Objective

Students will understand historical events by studying a work of art depicting these events.

2. Before Viewing the Program

Explain to the students that they are about to see a video about a mural in an elementary school in New Jersey that depicts Jewish immigration to America. Define the word mural for the students. Ask them to pay attention to the explanation by Mrs. Shahn, the wife of the artist who painted the mural, and the students who draw their own versions of the mural's details.

3. After Viewing the Program

Reproduce and distribute the copy of the Ben Shahn mural in the Roosevelt Elementary School or download it in color from the ELECTRONIC NEW JERSEY web site: <http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/njh/Homesteads/mural.php>

Ask the students to draw their own versions of a section of the mural, and then ask them to say why they chose that section and what emotions they have about the section they chose.

V. BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. FOR STUDENTS

"Industry," pp. 153-170; "Cities," pp. 189-206; "Immigrants," pp. 115-130. *In You, New Jersey and the World*, by John T. Cunningham. Andover, NJ: Afton Publishing Co., 1994.

"We Need Jobs: The WPA in New Jersey," *Jersey Journeys* (March 1999). Newark; New Jersey Historical Society, 07102.

B. FOR TEACHERS

Shaw, Douglas V. *Immigration and Ethnicity in New Jersey*. New Jersey History Series. Trenton: New Jersey Historical Commission, 1994.

Gowaskie, Joseph. *Workers in New Jersey History*. New Jersey History Series. Trenton: New Jersey Historical Commission, 1996.

York, Hildreth and Mary R. Murrin. *The Arts and Entertainment in New Jersey*. New Jersey History Series. Trenton: New Jersey Historical Commission, 1996.

ELECTRONIC NEW JERSEY web site

<http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/njh/Homesteads/mural.php>

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

BEN SHAHN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

I remember very vividly before we left Russia to come to this country, and I remember the United States very vividly upon my arrival here. And then there seems to follow a period of rather vague memory. . .

Now I will talk about the uprising in 1905. I wasn't aware that it was 1905 or what was an uprising. I don't think I was aware of the year 1905, but I was aware of the Hebrew year, the Biblical (year)(1) . . .

Anyhow, they decided to send the governor of the province(2) through there, and they built sidewalks. They built wooden sort of catwalks, because the streets were so muddy. And preceding the governor's entourage came a contingent of Cossacks,(3) and just whipping with their cat-o'-nine-tails(4) at the people standing along (the way) watching, just to inspire respect. And one of those tips of lead caught my ear, and I thought it would burn off. And I yelled, "Down with the Czar!"(5) It was in the air. . . . When it gets down to the level of children, little children, we automatically yelled, "Down with they Czar!" when we saw a uniform.

We left (Russia) in the end of 1906. I was over eight, just about eight then. My father, who had done very well in South Africa,(6) was going to bring my mother (and) the three children he left to America. . . . We went first in a wagon to the railroad and by railroad to the dock, and so on, and so forth. . . .

The departure was heartrending. I loved my grandfather, and a coach came to take us to the railroad station. I think it was 15 miles or something, and my grandfather walked along, and I held on to his hand. And then the coachman said he would have to start driving and said something to my grandfather and he was going to speed it up. And my grandfather handed me a little nutcracker that he had carved for me . . . and I screamed as I was drawn away from him. . .

I will tell you the God's honest truth: I wasn't happy in this country at all, until the First World War came along. . . . The war had finished my roots, you know, had just cut my roots finally. . . .

We got on the elevator train from Ellis Island to go to Brooklyn, and I saw at that moment a statue being unveiled. It was a statue of George Washington on the Williamsburg Bridge Plaza. I saw everybody chewing. They were chewing gum, and I immediately had to chew gum, because I wanted to be American, you know. . .

As soon as we got here I was put into school, knowing not a word of the (English) language. . . . There was an uncle of mine came down from Philadelphia, who had been here a number of years. And (he) took me to show me a department

store and bought me a xylophone. . . . The next day I took it to school, and the teacher was furious. . . .

She said, "Where did you get this?"

And I said, "My uncle bought it for me." And . . . I said, "I haven't seen him for 25 years."

I meant to say "weeks," but I didn't know the word "week," and she made me repeat it. I repeated it, and she took me by the hand and took me into another class. . . and I was put into an idiot class. . . .

All I knew was I drew all the time, you know, and I found that I could draw. . . . Well, then one remarkable thing happened. In the fifth grade I had a teacher by the name of Miss Quick. Miss Quick saw and knew about my drawing, and you know what she did? She bought me with her own money watercolors and crayons and put me off in the corner of the room and told me to draw.

And my Jewish morality, now troubled by this time, and I said, "How do I ever get into the sixth grade?"

And she said, "I will teach you everything you have to know in a week, before you go into the 6th grade."

Then I was loaned to the other teachers to draw Santa Clauses, to draw turkeys for Thanksgiving, you know, all that kind of stuff.

NOTES

- (1) The Jewish people followed a calendar based on the Bible (Old Testament) as opposed to the Gregorian calendar devised by Pope Gregory XIII that most people use today.
- (2) Ben Shahn's family lived in a part of Russia that is today the country of Lithuania.
- (3) The Cossacks were an elite group of horsemen in the Russian Imperial Army.
- (4) A cat-o'-nine-tails is a whip consisting of 9 knots attached to a handle.
- (5) The Czar was the Emperor of Russia.
- (6) Ben Shahn's father first traveled by himself to South Africa prior to bringing his family to America.

Source: An oral history interview with Behn Shahn conducted by Edwin Roskam on January 10-14, 1965. The Rutgers University Library Special Collections

**Ben Shahn Mural
Roosevelt, New Jersey**

Panel 1



Panel 2



Panel 3



Photograph courtesy of the ELECTRONIC NEW JERSEY website:
<http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/njh/Homesteads/mural.php>