



Teacher's Discussion Materials

THE ADVENTURES OF MOTTEL

THE SYNOPSIS

In a poor village in Russia, in 1905, a Jewish boy named Mottel lives with his Mama and older brother Eli. It is not easy to live in Russia: the Czar, who rules the country, will not allow the Jews to live like others, so Mottel's family and most of their friends are very, very poor and treated cruelly by the Czar's soldiers. To make matters worse, Mottel's Papa dies and leaves his family penniless. Mama's best friend, Fat Peshe, offers to take care of Mottel, but Mottel still gets little to eat. His hunger helps him decide to steal some apples from the stingy neighbor's garden. Of course he is caught, and Mama takes Mottel back home where she can look after him.

The family's one hope is the marriage of Mottel's older brother Eli to the rich baker's daughter, Brokhe. But their happiness is brought to a sudden end when the Czar's soldiers destroy the home and livelihood of the baker, who then decides to leave Russia for America. Eli and Brokhe are left to make their own way in the village.

As the head of the household, Eli decides to try to make a living for the family. With Mottel's help, he makes a powder that will drive mice and other pests out of people's homes. But Mottel accidentally breaks open the bag of powder -- and gives the whole village a sneezing fit. Eli then makes a barrelful of ink to sell. But nobody needs ink, so Mottel tells Eli to get rid of it. What to do with the ink? Dump it into the river, of course. But Eli and Mottel don't know what trouble that will cause until everyone's laundry and drinking water turns blue!

Eli is angry and discouraged that he can't make a living in Russia, so he sets out with Mottel, Mama, Brokhe and friends on a journey to America. But it is not easy to leave Russia, for a Jew must sneak across the border. On the train, an old peasant woman offers to help the travelers, but instead she steals their luggage and betrays them to the Czar's soldiers. Everyone but Mottel is captured and put in jail. But it isn't long before the clever Mottel steals the soldier's keys and releases his family, and they all flee across the border to freedom.

After journeying from town to town, Mottel and his family finally arrive at an emigration office where they must pass medical examinations before going on the ship. The travelers eventually arrive in America and are happily reunited with friends and family. They offer thanks to God for their good fortune and the promise of a new life.

AN INTRODUCTION

The centennial year of the Statue of Liberty seems the perfect time for The Children's Theatre Company to present THE ADVENTURES OF MOTTEL. Although the play is adapted from a book of fiction, it is firmly grounded in real events, based on the experience of the Jewish people in "the prisonhouse of Europe" -- turn-of-the-century Czarist Russia -- and their mass emigration to America.

The traditional faith and humor of the Jews gave them the spirit to withstand hatred and hopelessness. Their beloved poet-laureate, Sholom Aleichem, coined the phrase "laughter through tears" to describe both his work and his people. We believe there is much to learn about life from Sholom Aleichem's world.

Even now, to many native Americans, black Americans, and the poor of our nation, ours may not be the land of freedom and equality our ancestors envisioned. But with courage and with love -- two valuable possessions Mottel carries about with him everywhere -- this country truly can become for all Americans what it is and was to so many: the Golden Land.





SOME JEWISH CUSTOMS

Adult Jewish men in MOTTEL wear beards. This custom is derived from passages in Leviticus prohibiting shaving the face or head for Jewish men, in order that they would be distinguished from other people in Biblical times whose religion included the worship of idols.

Married Jewish women in MOTTEL keep their heads covered with a scarf or wig for reasons of modesty -- only their husbands may see their hair. Men and boys wear a head covering at all times to show reverence for God.

All of Mottel's family tear their clothing when Papa dies as a symbol of grief. This mourning practice occurs both in the Bible and in ancient Greek and Roman tradition. Some other Jewish traditions regarding death are the covering of mirrors (to avoid vanity and also to avoid praying in front of mirrors, which is prohibited), burning a candle to help guide a soul on its way to heaven, and sitting on low wooden benches for seven days in order to stay close to the earth which now holds his body. This custom is called "sitting shiva."

In this culture, a child was regarded an orphan when one of his parents died, even if the other parent was still alive.

Jewish men wear the tallis, or fringed prayer shawl, in order to remind themselves of the Commandments when they pray.

Eli breaks a glass at the end of his wedding to Brokhe to remind us symbolically of the fragility of human happiness.

Entrances to Jewish homes all hold "mezuzahs" - metal ornaments which contained a passage from the Bible. It was customary to kiss one's hand and touch the mezuzah whenever entering or leaving the home.

VOCABULARY

In THE ADVENTURES OF MOTTEL, you will hear words that may be unfamiliar to you. Many are in the Yiddish and Hebrew languages, and some are in English. Below are listed some of the new phrases used in the play:

- Aff simchas - at happier times
- A mazeldikih vaeg - have a lucky journey!
- cantor - professional virtuoso singer who assists the rabbi by singing much of the liturgy during synagogue services.
- challah - a rich yeast bread often baked for the Sabbath or other special occasions
- Cheder - Hebrew school
- Czar - the monarch of Russia before the Revolution in 1917
- Ellis Island - the entry point for many immigrants who came to America via New York
- Fort gesunderheit - travel in good health
- Gentile - a person of non-Jewish faith or origin
- Goldeneh lond - golden land, America
- gornescht - nothing, nothing at all
- Kaddish - Hebrew prayer for the dead
- Kenohorah - God-willing *Mayn oevn eye befall*
- kopek, rouble - units of Russian currency (100 kopeks=1 rouble)
- kosher - food prepared in a manner consistent with holy writ
- Mazel tov! - congratulations!, literally, luck star
- mishugas, mishugenah - craziness, crazy person
- Oy vey iz mir! - Oh, woe is me!
- pogrom - a violent invasion of a Jewish community by Gentile soldiers. From the Russian word for devastation.
- rabbi - literally, "teacher," a religious leader in synagogue and community
- schmaltz - literally, chicken fat; anything easy or fortunate
- schmutzik - filthy dirty
- shah! - an exclamation of disapproval
- Shabbas - the Sabbath, celebrated from sundown Friday until sundown Saturday
- shtetl - a Jewish village, usually quite poor
- shmattes - clothing, rags
- Sholom Aleichem - traditional greeting meaning "peace unto you." Traditional response is - "Aleichem Sholom" - "And unto you, peace."
- synagogue - temple, a house of worship
- Talmud - 63 books which cover Biblical discussions and interpretation written between 500 BC and 500 AD by Jewish scholars.
- Torah - the five books of Moses in the Old Testament (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy)
- trachoma - a contagious disease of the eye which can lead to blindness. Trachoma is now easily treated.
- Yom Kippur - a Jewish holiday - the Day of Atonement

A NOTE TO TEACHERS:

CTC's THE ADVENTURES OF MOTTEL is based on the book of the same title by Sholom Aleichem. Unfortunately, this book is out of print and unavailable at most local libraries. If you would like a photo copy of the book for use in your classroom, please contact Lee Haugee in the CTC Communications Office - 612/874-0500, ext. 112. Cost for copying is \$5.00.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

- Ask your students to write an essay in which they describe how their family celebrates a particular holiday or special event (Christmas, Passover, a wedding, etc.). They may want to ask their parents or grandparents where the family customs originated. Discuss the different traditions represented within your class.

- Ask your students to interview a member of their family, a neighbor or friend who has emigrated to America. Write their story down and share it with the class.

- Contact area senior citizen centers to see if a person who emigrated to America would be willing to come you your class and allow students to interview her/him.

- The art of Marc Chagall served as inspiration for much of the set design for THE ADVENTURES OF MOTTEL. Share with your students some of Chagall's work (a good source with color plates is Homage to Marc Chagall, ed. G.D. Di San Lazzaro, New York: Tudor Pub. Co.). Ask your students to draw a pictures of an adventure from Mottel's life in America, possibly in the style of Chagall.

- Although the music for MOTTEL was composed specifically for this production, it reflects the Jewish traditions of folk, liturgical, and klezmer music. Share more of this music with your students. An excellent recording which surveys all three forms is Almonds and Raisins. Ask your students to identify places in the MOTTEL story where this music might have been used.

- Like Yiddish, English is a language which has borrowed from and been enriched by the languages of many other peoples. Using a good, readable text such as Albert H. Marckwardt's American English (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), assign five words to each student and have them look up the language of origin in a dictionary. Or, have students identify words from their own communities and life experiences which have come from other languages.

THINGS TO LOOK AND LISTEN FOR:

a peach
apples and the apple tree
a loaf of challah
silver and gold pocketwatches
wedding canopy
beards
a live goose
a barrel of ink
Alteh's rag doll
the rats
the Statue of Liberty
a jail cell
riding in the train



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

About the play . . .

- THE ADVENTURES OF MOTTEL takes place on a "unit" set. What things were used to help indicate the different places where the story takes place?

- What can you tell about the characters in the story from the way they dressed? Can you tell their ages? How wealthy are they? What do they do for a living?

- Some of the music in the play was played on a synthesizer, and some on real instruments. Could you tell the difference? What was the music like? Was it familiar/unfamiliar?

About other issues . . .

- Mottel and Eli are very different even though they are brothers. Are you different from or the same as your brothers and sisters? Why do you suppose children raised in the same family are often unlike each other?

- Mottel's family expects to make a home in the New World, even though they are leaving their home in Kasrilevke. What makes a place "home?" Is it a house? A yard? Possessions? Family? A feeling?

- Taibel and Pinye adopt Mendel as their son because they have no children and Mendel cannot find his parents. What makes a family? Can you decide to be a family? Or do families need to be related to each other? Are you still a family if you are separated from your family members?

- Mottel looks forward to life in America. What things will be easier or better for him in New York? What things will be hard for him in the New World?

- Alteh's rag doll is so important that Mottel manages to save it and bring it across the ocean to her. Do you have possessions which are important to you? If you were to emigrate to a new place and could take only one personal possession, what would it be? Why?

- When Mottel and his family are on the train, they meet a man who obviously hates Jews. Have you ever felt that someone didn't like you for some reason? What did you do? Do you think you have ever treated someone unfairly for one of those reasons? Why? Can you change those feelings in yourself? How? Can you change them in other people?

RUNNING TIME

The approximate production length of THE ADVENTURES OF MOTTEL is one hour forty-five minutes. Please note that this is an estimate of the actual length of the performance. For an update and exact timing, please call the School Services Coordinator at 612/874-0500, ext. 171 after opening night, January 10th.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Non-fiction

Freedman, Russell. Immigrant Kids (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984). A superb picture book with text which represents crosscultural experiences of European children who emigrated to America with their parents in the early 20th century. Black and white photos.

Fritz, Jean. Homesick: My Own Story (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1982). The autobiographical experience of an American girl who emigrates to China with her parents in the 1940s. Black and white photos. Suitable for reading aloud.

Lerner Ethnic Studies Library. 28 volumes in paperback survey the background, immigration, and American history of different national, social, religious, and ethnic groups. Suitable for grades 4-6.

Editorial Staff of Life. The World's Great Religions (New York: Simon and Schuster). Simple text and brilliant color photography explain the basic tenets of the major world religions in language appropriate for elementary-aged children.

Goldfarb, Mace, M.D. Fighters, Refugees, Immigrants: A Story of the Hmong (Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books, Inc., 1982). Text and color photography explain the emigration of Hmong peoples to the United States.

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Howe, Irving and Kenneth Libo. How We Lived (New York: Richard Marek Publishers, 1979).

Jackson, Helen Hunt. Century of Dishonor (Minneapolis: Ross and Hains, Inc., 1964). For adults, a classic work on the forced immigration of Native American peoples.

Kurlek, William and Margaret Englehart. They Sought a New World: The Story of European Immigration to North America (New York: Tundra Books, 1985). A beautifully illustrated history of immigration to Canada and the United States for ages 8-11.

Schubert, Barbara and Marlene Bird. Black History (San Jose: Reflections and Images, 1977). A set of 16 cultural activities designed for children in grades K-6.

Waife-Goldberg, Marie. My Father, Sholom Aleichem (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968).

Fiction

Aleichem, Sholom. Inside Kasrilevka (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1948, 1965).

Farrell, Edmund J. I/You/We/They: Literature by and about Ethnic Groups (Glenview IL: Scott Foresman, 1976). A collection of material about many ethnic groups suitable for elementary aged students.

Friedman, Ina R. How My Parents Learned to Eat. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1984). Particularly for younger children, a story in pictures and text about the cross-cultural marriage of an American and Japanese couple.

Film

Available from Hennepin County Library Film Service, 7001 York Ave., Edina, MN 55435. 612/372-6558.

The Immigrant Experience: The Long, Long Journey. Dramatization of a Polish family's experience through the eyes of a 13 year-old boy. 28 minutes.

Available from Minneapolis Public Library and Information Center, 300 Nicollet Mall, Minneapolis, MN 55401. 612/372-6558.

America Part 9: The Huddled Masses. Scenes of 19th century immigration are evoked by visits to the hold of a ship, Ellis Island, New York's Lower East Side, and sweat shops. Narration by Alistair Cooke. Time-Life Films, 1973. 52 minutes.

Storm of Strangers. Period photographs are used to document Jewish immigration to New York's Lower East Side around 1910. ACT Films, Inc., 1970. 27 minutes.

