



## Immigration

### 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. The class also interviews Mrs. Augusta Chasan, who was the first lady firewoman in the town. 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

**Oral History** - the technique of gathering historical information by interviewing people who were eyewitnesses or experienced events personally

### **III. SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES**

#### **A. LOCAL HISTORY/ORAL HISTORY**

##### **1. Objective**

Students will learn how to use oral history to understand local history.

##### **2. Before Viewing the Program**

Download and reproduce Local History/Oral History question sheet. The teacher should explain that one of the ways students can learn about the history of their town is through oral history. Define what is meant by oral history. Then distribute the Local History/Oral History question sheet and ask the students to watch and listen especially to where oral history is used to learn about local history.

##### **3. After Viewing the Program**

Divide the class into groups of four and ask each group to fill out the question sheet together. Then reconvene the class and go over the questions. This activity can be done in connection with the Activity C on Immigration/Oral History below. Or the teacher could assign the students to interview someone in their town about its 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**

Download, 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.

## **C. IMMIGRATION/ORAL HISTORY**

### **1. Objective**

Students will interpret a transcript of 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

Download, reproduce and distribute the Ben Shahn Oral History Interview. 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 answer the questions on the question sheet.

### IV. SUGGESTED READINGS

Greenfield, Howard. *Ben Shahn: An Artist's Life*. New York: Random House, 1998.

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

ELECTRONIC NEW JERSEY web site

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