



Teacher Guide to accompany the Online Exhibit

*Recalling a Lost World:*

*David Labkovski Brings Sholem Aleichem's Stories to Life*

Holocaust Museum Los Angeles

David Labkovski Project

An Educational Guide to accompany the online exhibit at

*Recalling a Lost World:*

*David Labkovski Brings Sholem Aleichem's stories to Life*

at

The Holocaust Museum Los Angeles

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Holocaustmuseumla.org

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At this time, the museum is closed to the public.  
Virtual tours and online exhibits are available to the public, free of charge.

### Curriculum Standards

- Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- Analyze the different points of view as seen in a text.
- Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
- Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.
- Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums.
- Write arguments to support claims with clear reasoning and evidence.
- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.
- Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing.
- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- Describe how a text presents information.
- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.

## Exhibit Background



### **Our artist**

Artist David Labkovski (1906-1991) felt a responsibility to bear witness to history. In addition to his narrative work depicting the Holocaust and reflections of his own experiences in the *Soviet Gulag*, Labkovski wanted to record the daily life of the Jewish community from his childhood in Vilna, current day Vilnius, Lithuania. Through his artwork, the viewer is given a glimpse into the past, into the daily life of the common-man. Vilna was called the

Jerusalem of the North because it was a city full of vibrant cultural, religious, political and social ideologies and organizations. Labkovski felt the imperative to depict not just how the community perished in the Holocaust, but to remember how the people lived before the Holocaust—the world that was.

The majority of Labkovski's work was created after 1959, when he was living in Israel as a free man for the first time in decades. Labkovski's mind and heart remained in the past; his artwork was a tool for him to release all of his sorrow and grief.

## Our Writer



Sholem Aleichem was a pen name taken by author Solomon Rabinovich (1859-1916). Rabinovich grew up in the *Pale of Settlement*, the land on the western edge of Russia where Jews were permitted to live. His childhood was marred by a reversal in financial stability, the death of his mother and changing family

dynamics after his father's second marriage.

Sholem Aleichem chose to write in *Yiddish*, the mother tongue of his audience. He took a pen name because his father would have expected him to write in a more formal language, either Hebrew or Russian.

Because Sholem Aleichem wrote from his own life experiences, the stories were relatable to his Jewish audience living at the turn of the century in Eastern Europe. His writing is full of humor, which belied the hardships that he and his audience faced—*assimilation, emigration, poverty* and *anti-Semitism*. Sholem Aleichem's stories capture the daily life of the *shtetl* world that was already waning, but that the Holocaust completely destroyed. Where Sholem Aleichem's stories are of a time and place, the characters and their narrative share a tender humanness that is timeless and universal.

### The Connection Between Our Artist and Our Writer



Fun similarities between the artist and the writer:

1. Sholem Aleichem worked as a tutor for a woman whom he eventually married. David Labkovski married his tutor.
2. Both Sholem Aleichem and David Labkovski were born in small *shtetls*, market towns, but eventually moved to larger cities.
3. Both began their trade at early ages: Labkovski participated in a Polish Jewish art exhibit in 1922; he was only 16. As a boy, Sholem Aleichem wrote a book of Yiddish curses used by his step mother.
4. Both were *zionists*; they believed in the need for the creation of a Jewish State.
5. Both died in countries far from their birth: Sholem Aleichem in the United States, Labkovski in Israel.

This exhibit explores Labkovski's illustrations of Sholem Aleichem's tales. While Labkovski and Sholem Aleichem never actually met, Labkovski felt a connection to the writer. By reading his stories, Labkovski stepped back into the 'world that was', a world whose memories were a constant part of his DNA. Labkovski integrates the fictional world with his childhood home; he depicts Sholem Aleichem's fictional *shtetl* with the landmarks of Vilna. Labkovski continues the stories of Aleichem's characters in his artwork, moving them forward in time. Labkovski depicts the characters suffering the fate of his childhood community at the hands of the Nazis and the local collaborators—he portrays them entering the Vilna Ghetto.

## The Holocaust in Vilna



Before the German attack of Poland in September 1939, Hitler and Stalin signed a *nonaggression treaty*, the *Molotov Ribbentrop Pact*. This allowed for the division of Poland between them, allowing Germany to attack Poland without fear of a Soviet front. By the agreement, Vilna fell into the hands of the Soviets.

In June 1941, Nazi forces broke the pact with Operation Barbarosa, the offensive attack on the Soviet Union. Immediately behind the initial forces were the *Einsatzgruppen*, mobile killing squads.

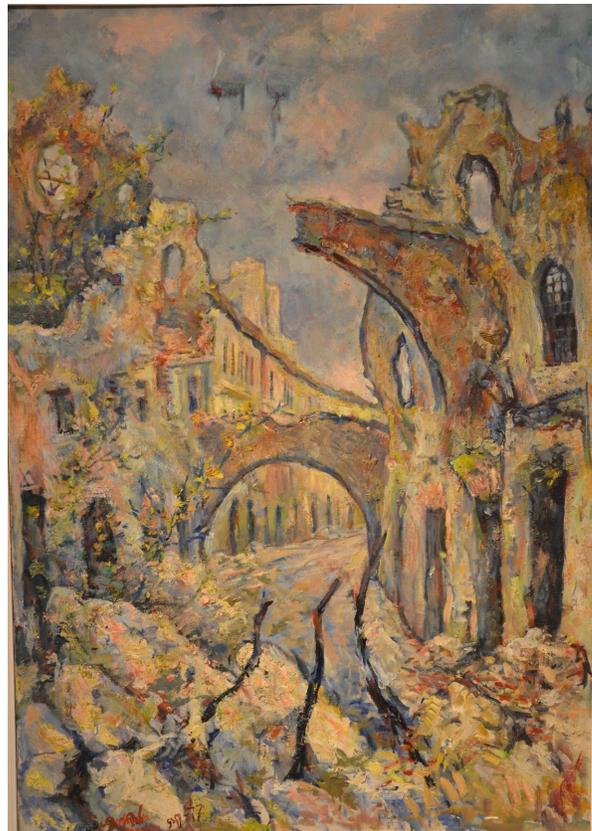
Within days of the Nazi occupation, the first murders of Jewish community members began in earnest. They were literally pulled off the streets by locals, taken to Ponar, a local forested park, and shot.

The majority of the Vilna community was murdered at home and by bullet. It was only after the killing had begun that anti-Jewish laws (and the legalization of antisemitism and killings) went into effect. Nazi policies were only possible because of the level of support by the local collaborators. Anti-Jewish laws included the wearing of identifying stars on their clothing, registering occupants in residences, restriction on movement and the need for permits to work.

In September 1941, the Nazis established two ghettos, one which continued until 1943, the other which was populated for about a month. During the ghetto period, the Jewish community

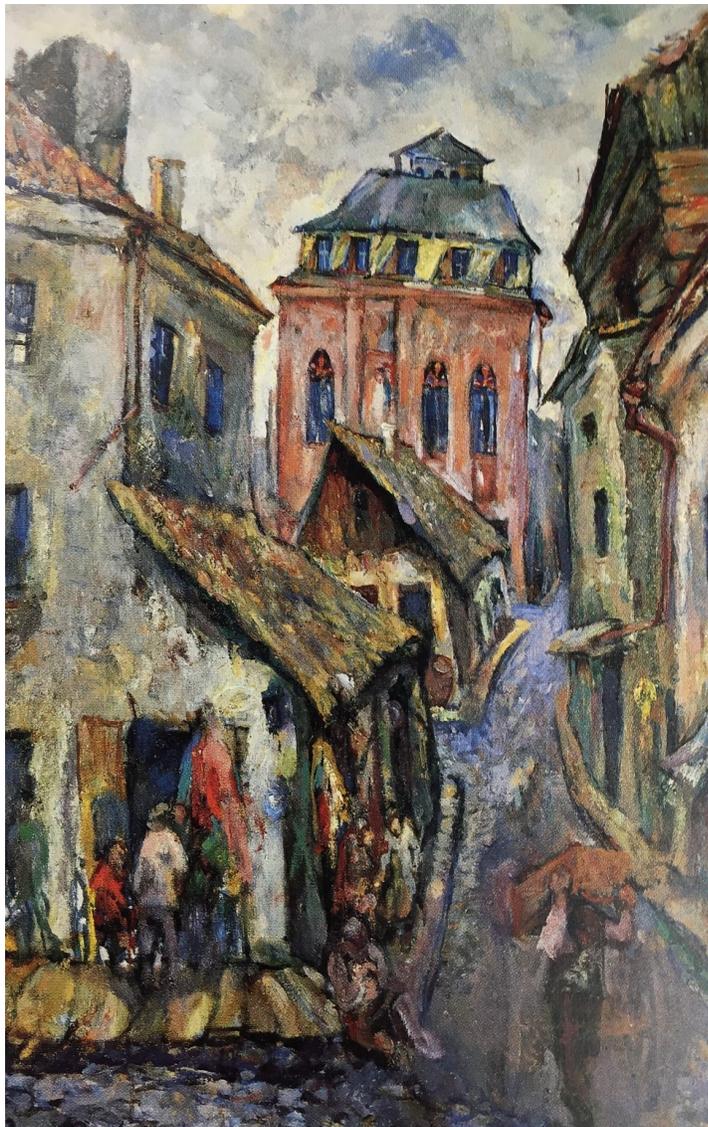
suffered tremendously from overcrowding, lack of food, and the uncertainty of their situation. They were forced to create a *Judenraete*, Jewish leadership organization to fulfill Nazi policy within the ghetto, including a Jewish police force. For the first year of the ghetto, there were also *aktions*, mass killings of Jewish residents who were taken to Ponar and executed. Within the ghetto, the community organized schools, cultural/religious events, inner-ghetto communications, food banks and resistance movements.

In 1943, killing *aktions* began again, leading to the “liquidation” of the ghetto on September 23-24. Thousands were taken to be killed at Ponar. Others were deported to labor camps and death camps. 95% of the pre-war Jewish community was murdered during the Nazi occupation.



The ability to find meaning in imagery involves a set of skills ranging from simple identification (naming what one sees) to complex interpretation on contextual, metaphoric and philosophical levels. Many aspects of cognition are called upon, such as personal association, questioning, speculating, analyzing, fact-finding, and categorizing. Objective understanding is the premise of much of this literacy, but subjective and affective aspects of knowing are equally important.

Philip Yenawine describes visual literacy vtshome.org originally from 1997 article Thoughts on Visual Literacy



## PRE-VISIT

### Using Artwork to Engage Students

Using artwork in teaching enhances critical thinking skills. We are asking students to consider a source (the artwork and the stories), find evidence to support their conclusions and then ask questions to enhance their understanding of the context and make connections to the world around them.

### **Materials Needed**

“See. Think. Wonder” routine worksheet (2 versions)  
Video (Optional)

### **Goal**

To explore narrative as seen in David Labkovski’s artwork.  
To use the see/think/wonder routine to initiate conversation and practice critical thinking skills.

### **Method for independent work**

**Option:** Students watch the interactive video explaining how to read the narrative in Labkovski’s work. Video link: <https://www.davidlabkovskiproject.org/for-students.htm>

**Option:** Teacher facilitates a classroom discussion.  
**Powerpoint provided for classroom discussion.**

### **Method for in-class**

Discussion: What is **narrative art**?

- Define narrative (a spoken or written account of connected events; a story.)

We can analyze art just as we analyze literature. In literature we look at words to give meaning; in art, we look for line, shape, color, texture, subject and brushstroke. Artists convey the mood and tone of the story with these tools.

- Beginning with the woman below, form a hypothesis. We want to analyze what you as the viewer believe the artist is sharing. (What do you see? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can you find?)
  - o Worksheet is available for this exercise or through a google form link, or it can be done entirely as a class discussion.
    - It is important to note that **there are no wrong answers**. Individuals connect to art and then form meaning for themselves. Allow deep reading without judgement.



*What is going on in this picture?*  
*What do you see that makes you say that?*  
*What more can you find?*

After the discussion, ask students to consider what they wonder about the piece? You can ask, “*what do you still want to know?*”

At any point you can break them into pairs to discuss together.

Labkovski was a narrative artist; each piece tells a story but they also fit together to tell a more complete narrative.



Repeat exercise with this communal scene.

*What is going on in this picture?*  
*What do you see that makes you say that?*  
*What more can you find?*

- *How do these two paintings connect?*
  - o Put the pictures together. Question/discussion with students about their observations and whether the two together change the initial hypothesis.
  - o How does it make the narrative grow?
  - o Notice the lower-left self-portrait of David Labkovski carrying a canvas.
  - o The character's shawl from painting 1 can be seen in painting 2.



**Bibliography:**

<http://www.artjunction.org/archives/looking@art.pdf>

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**Step 1: Look at the painting—Take a couple of minutes to really look at it!**

What is going on in this painting? In one sentence, what do you see?

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What do you see that makes you say that?  
List 3 details that you noticed in forming your conclusion.

- \* \_\_\_\_\_
- \* \_\_\_\_\_
- \* \_\_\_\_\_



What more can you find?

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**Step 2: “Read” the second painting**

What is going on in this painting? In one sentence, what do you see?

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What do you see that makes you say that?  
List 3 details that you noticed in forming your conclusion.

- \* \_\_\_\_\_
- \* \_\_\_\_\_
- \* \_\_\_\_\_



What more can you find?

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**Step 3: Look at both pieces together**

What do you notice?

- \* \_\_\_\_\_
- \* \_\_\_\_\_
- \* \_\_\_\_\_

Does your conclusion about the first painting change when it is viewed in relation to the second painting? Why/why not?

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**Step 4: What do you want to know?**

What do you want to know? What do you wonder?

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SEE

THINK

WONDER

WHEN I LOOK AT THE PICTURE I NOTICE:

THAT MAKES ME THINK:

AFTER LOOKING AND THINKING ABOUT THIS PAINTING, I WONDER...



NAME:

## **Putting it All Together: The Artwork and the Stories**

### **Goal:**

To examine the ‘world that was’ for Jews in the shtetl through literature and through the art of David Labkovski.

To use research skills to analyze the life of the artist/writer in the context of the historical events of their lifetimes.

**Information about Sholem Aleichem and David Labkovski can be found on page 3-5 of this guide.**

### **Activity**

Consider the time ( **turn of the previous century**) and the place (**the Pale of Settlement**).

**Powerpoint provided to guide this exercise.**

**HMLA offers virtual docent tours that can be adapted to share their collection of the “world that was”.**

### **Method**

Divide the class into groups, pairs or trios.

Research the author, [sholemaleichem.org](http://sholemaleichem.org).

Research the artist, [davidlabkovskiproject.org](http://davidlabkovskiproject.org).

A third group could research life in the shtetl,

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/shtetl-in-jewish-history-and-memory/>

**Option:** Report back on some facts about each, worksheet attached.

**Option:** Create a timeline of the two men’s lives using Bookwidge, Google Docs or the hard copy (attached)

**Option:** Groups share their discoveries with the class.

Compare discoveries. Did groups select the same facts? Make a classroom document with all of the findings.

### **Questions to consider**

*Do you think the author and the artist ever met?*

*What were the major events in the world during each of their lives?*

*Where do world events fit into the timeline?*

*How did world events affect their work?*

*How do world events affect you? Your work?*

### Pre-Visit Reading Activity

As a class or in pairs/groups read aloud a short excerpt of Sholem Aleichem's *The Town of the Little People*. This story sets the stage for most of the other stories; it describes Kasrilevka, the fictional shtetl.

Sholem Aleichem's stories are great to read aloud!

Remember the stories are translations from **Yiddish**.

Sample Questions:

*Can you tell that these stories were translated from another language? How can you tell?*

*Does the new vocabulary affect your reading? Why or why not?*

*Who is the narrator?*

*What clues can you find about the historical context? (If we know that Sholem Aleichem wrote for his own community, then what can we learn about the lives of the readers from the story?)*

*What more would you want to know?*

### Optional Activity

*The Town of the Little People* by Sholem Aleichem describes the town of Kasrilevka. Before entering the exhibit, have students draw the town as they imagine it.

### Prepare for the Exhibit

The exhibit, *Recalling a Lost World: David Labkovski Brings Sholem Aleichem's Stories to Life*, shares the illustrations of the characters who are from Kasrilevka as described in the **Town of the Little People**. Take time to really "read" the artwork. Look for clues about Labkovski's depiction of Kasrilevka. His view of the shtetl is important to Labkovski's narrative beyond the illustrations.



Name \_\_\_\_\_

Class \_\_\_\_\_

**David Labkovski**



To understand the artist, what would you need to know?  
(Examples: When was he born? Where was he born? Where did he live? What was happening in the world during his life? What were the major life events that he represents in his work?)

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I found these facts about David Labkovski:

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I am still wondering:

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Name \_\_\_\_\_

Class \_\_\_\_\_

**Shtetl**

To understand the artist's audience, what would you need to know?  
(Examples: What is a shtetl? What was life like in the shtetl? What was unique about a shtetl?)



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I found these facts about shtetl:

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I am still wondering:

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Name \_\_\_\_\_ Block \_\_\_\_\_  
Sholem Aleichem and David Labkovski

1850 1900 1950 2000

	Early Lives	Major Life Events	Later Years

My Life

**VISIT THE ONLINE EXHIBIT**

Worksheet for students to fill out as they tour the exhibit (attached).

**Note**

Aside from his illustrations of the stories, pay attention to how the artist uses the characters to further his own narrative. Labkovski's mission in life was to commemorate his childhood community.

Where the majority of the pieces in the exhibit are the illustrations of the stories, the Holocaust is introduced through the final images. The images are not graphic, but the text does inform viewers as to the enormity of the destruction of the community.

*Recalling a Lost World:*

*David Labkovski Brings Sholem Aleichem's Stories To Life*

(As you tour the exhibit, note that more information can be found on many of the pieces by clicking the *i* in the right hand corner of the screen.)

1. The opening of the exhibit sets the stage for Sholem Aleichem's stories. What does the painting of Kasrilevka tell you about the fictional world?



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2. Which character do you find most interesting, and why?

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3. Take a deep reading of the painting showing the meeting of our artist and our writer. What do you notice? What does this piece tell you about the artist, David Labkovski?



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4. At the end of the exhibit, we see that David Labkovski brings the characters "to life" for a specific purpose. How and why do you think he brings the characters "to life"?

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5. If you brought the characters into your life, what would they find shocking or familiar about our world?

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For a younger audiences:

*Recalling a Lost World:*

*David Labkovski Brings Sholem Aleichem's Stories To Life*

(As you tour the exhibit, note that more information can be found on many of the pieces by clicking the *i* in the right hand corner of the screen.)

After touring the exhibit, find a piece that depicts one of Sholem Aleichem's characters, one that you like! Go back and take a deep look at the piece you've selected.

What is going on in the painting?

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What do you see that makes you say that?

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Do the quotes confirm or conflict with your reading? Why? Why not?

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Do you think David Labkovski is more interested in the plot of the stories or the characters? Why?

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If you could meet the character in the painting, what would you ask him/her? What would you tell him/her about your life?

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## **Post-visit Discussion and Activities**

### **Goals**

To connect literature and art as a tool for commemoration.

To analyze the stories and the exhibits.

To think critically about the historical context of the writing and the art work.

To make connections between David Labkovski and Sholem Aleichem and the world today.

To think critically about art as a tool of commemoration.

To write in Sholem Aleichem's style.

To explore the themes in the literature as they relate to today.

### **Method**

After viewing the exhibit, select a story to read.

Class/small group discussions of stories.

### **To Discuss**

Discuss the online exhibit experience. *What did you like? Dislike?*

By the end of the exhibit, we see that the artist felt connected to the writer beyond the stories. Labkovski chose to illustrate so many of Sholem Aleichem's characters and to blend the characters into his own life story and that of his community of Vilna. The characters are a tool for commemoration of the 'world that was' and the community of his childhood.

*Why do you think he felt so attached to the characters in the stories?*

Sholem Aleichem wrote to an audience that was part of his own community about current issues which the community was facing including anti-Semitism, assimilation, migration and poverty.

*Is there a writer today that speaks to you like Sholem Aleichem spoke to David Labkovski? Who? Why?*

### **Students select a story to read/listen to individually online.**

The stories each have threads of the issues facing the readers in that time (the turn of the previous century) and in that place (Eastern Europe).

With the shorter excerpts, students can take turns reading to each other too.

All stories have a pdf file on the HMLA website.

For students, the illustrated stories (some with audio) can be found on:

**recallingalostworld.kotobee.com** or as a link from the HMLA website.

The excerpts most appropriate for a younger audience include *The Purim Dinner*, *My Brother Eliyahu's Drink*, *Methusaleh: A Jewish Horse* and *The Enchanted Tailor*.

- ***The Purim Dinner***

**Synopsis:** Purim is a festive Jewish holiday. A mother is trying to make her son presentable for a family dinner. This short excerpt is told from the point of view of a young boy and the plight of his constantly runny nose.

Themes: economic disparity—they are going to a wealthier Uncle's home to celebrate the holiday; the mother is tense as she prepares her son for the visit.

The nuances of the Yiddish language as a street language with endearing "curses" is also evident. The connection to religion for the character is evident in his pleading with God.

Note: the mother is rough with her son. Sholem Aleichem is describing the mood through the actions of the mother. In today's society, students might question whether she is abusive.

- ***The Enchanted Tailor***

**Synopsis:** This short excerpt is an example of Sholem Aleichem's use of humor; he plays with the Yiddish language as seen in his tongue-twisting names. The story tells of a tailor who saves money to purchase a goat because his wife bemoans the need for one. Like so many of Sholem Aleichem's characters, the main character mis-quotes the Jewish text, including the Hebrew Bible. This excerpt is the first segment of the story, where his wife wants him to buy a goat.

- ***Letters of Menachem Mendel and Sheyne Sheyndl***

**Synopsis:** The letters are the communications between a husband and wife. He is off to make money in the "big city"; she is at home with their children. Reading the letters gives the audience a glimpse into their private lives. Once again, the Yiddish language is a cause for humor, the names and the curses abound! The humor covers the difficulties for families to earn a living in the shtetl world and the encroachment of modernity on a traditional community.

- ***Tevye Strikes it Rich***

**Synopsis:** *Tevye Strikes it Rich* is the first part of the story that became the inspiration for *Fiddler on the Roof*. Tevye is a poor log hauler but through happenstance, he has the opportunity to become a dairyman and have financial stability. Like some of the other characters in the other stories, in his narration, Tevye mis-quotes Hebrew text, he is long-winded and rambling. But still, he is lovable!

■ *My Brother Eliyahu's Drink*

**Synopsis:** This is one chapter in a series entitled *Motl, the Cantor's Son*. Motl's father dies, leaving the family destitute. This misadventure begins with Motl's brother Eliyahu purchasing a 'get rich quick' book. In this story they brew *kvass*, a carbonated barley beverage, to sell. Mishap ensues when Motl, who waters down the beverage to add to the profit, mistakenly adds water from the laundry bucket. When his customers get upset, a Russian police officer stops to uncover the problem. We see the tension between the Russian police officer and the Jewish community. Here Yiddish is used as a distinguishing component, Jewish townspeople speak to Motl in Yiddish so that the police officer does not understand what they are offering. All's well that ends well and the brothers are ready to try another scheme.

■ *Methusaleh, A Jewish Horse*

**Synopsis:** Methusaleh is the oldest person in the Bible, over 900 years old. Already, the scene is set for a humorous tale about an old horse. Indeed, this story opens with a glimpse into the hard life of the horse and Kasriel, the water carrier from Kasrilevka who purchases the horse at the fair to help with the water deliveries.

In this collection, *Methusaleh* ends there; however, in the story, the children tease the old horse, they sneak into Kasriel's yard, dress the horse up, and take him out for a ride. At a point, Methusaleh has had enough and bucks the children off his back. He runs out of Kasrilevka and the non-Jewish field workers see the dressed up horse and set their dogs on Methusaleh. He dies from the attack. The children and others find the tragic ending comical, but not Kasriel and his wife, who mourn the passing of Methusaleh.

### Discussion of the stories

Discuss the issues the characters faced in the stories.

- For example, consider the role of women, religion/assimilation, and economic disparity in *Tevye Strikes it Rich*. In looking at Tevye's world, there is one line about "even the Russians" were interested in his dairy products. What does that 'off the cuff' remark tell us about the society for the Jewish population?
- Or, consider the way Tevye describes the women in the forest. He identifies them as Jewish by their head coverings, but does not specifically mention that they are Jewish. What does that tell you about their society and the readers' understanding? Looking at the role of women, what is the interaction of the two women like? Can you see a difference in their attitudes because of gender or does the economic disparity also come into play? What do you think about the interaction between the women and Tevye? What about Tevye and Golde? How does he talk to/think about the role of women? How do the women talk to Tevye? [Remember that the story is from Tevye's perspective.]
- Tevye often misquotes Jewish sources including the Hebrew Bible. Without biblical knowledge, modern audiences might not pick up on all the mis-quotes. Sholem Aleichem

assumes his audiences will not only know the sources, but will find the mis-quotes humorous. What does that infer? Do you share a familiar knowledge about something that if you misquoted, others would recognize? (A movie? A book?) For Tevye, the mis-quotes also suggest a desire to be perceived as a learned man. Why? What does that tell you about the ‘world that was’?

### Sholem Aleichem’s Style

#### 1. Sholem Aleichem wrote many of his stories in installments.

Why would Sholem Aleichem write in installments? What are the benefits for the author? *As a reader, how do you feel about a book series versus a complete story in one book?*

#### Activity

Write a chapter of a story. You can start in the middle of a tale, the last chapter, or the beginning! *The Fiddle* by Sholem Aleichem has been adapted to be a story starter. In this story, a boy wants to play the violin; in order to do so, he first has to make one. He decides to use the wood from an old sofa. The story drops off as he takes the wood from the sofa and his father awakens from a nap. The students can write what happens next! (*The Fiddle*, attached)

#### 2. Having a character address the author is one of the narrative tools that Sholem Aleichem uses in his writing.

*Why does Sholem Aleichem have the characters address him? What does it do to the story? How did you feel as a reader? Did the narration help you understand the story or did it get in the way? What makes you say this?*

#### Activity

Write yourself into a story in the same way. Have the characters address you in their storytelling. *Does it change how you feel about the characters or the story? Do you want to answer your own character?*

#### 3. In many of the stories, the Yiddish is full of emotion and plays a part in the story, even after translation. In the *Letters of Menachem Mendl and Sheyne Sheyndl*, Sheyne complains in a “loving” way about her husband’s absence. (Attached is a letter with labels for the unique components)

#### Activity

Write a letter of complaint to someone over a dispute. Follow the format of the letters.

## *The Fiddle* (an abbreviated excerpt)

Written by  
Sholem Aleichem

Illustrated by  
David Labkovski



**Today I'll play you something on a fiddle.** I don't know how you feel, but as for me, there is nothing more wonderful than to be able to play a fiddle. As far back as I can remember my heart has gone out to the fiddle. In fact, I loved everything about music. Whenever there was a wedding in our town I was the first one on hand to greet the musicians. I would steal up behind the bass violin, pluck a string—boom! And run off.

Boom—and run off again. For doing this I once caught the devil from Berel Bass. Berel Bass, a fierce looking man with a flat nose and a sharp eye, pretended not to see me as I stole up behind his bass violin. But just as I was stretching my hand out to pull at the string he caught me by the ear and led me to the door with a great show of courtesy. “Don't forget to kiss the mezuzah<sup>1</sup> on your way out,” he said.

But that experience taught me nothing. I couldn't stay away from musicians. I was in love with every one of them, from Shaike Fiddle, with his fine black beard and slim white fingers to round-shouldered Getzie Peikler with the big bald

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<sup>1</sup> mezuzah- a mezuzah is a decorative container with specific Bible passages written on parchment and rolled inside. Jewish people put the mezuzah on the doorposts of their homes.

spot that reached down to his ears. Many a time when they chased me away, I hid myself under a bench and listened to them playing. From under the bench I watched Shaiké's nimble fingers dancing over the strings and listened to the sweet tones that he so skillfully drew out his little fiddle.

I vowed to myself, "Let the world come to an end, I must have a fiddle. No matter what it cost, I must have one." But how do you make a fiddle? Naturally, of cedarwood. It is easy to say—cedarwood. But where do you get this wood that is supposed to grow only in the Holy Land? So, what does God do? He gives me this idea: we had an old sofa at our house, an inheritance from my grandfather over which my two uncles and my father had quarreled for a long time... They carried on their bickering back and forth between them. The sofa this, the sofa that. Your sofa, my sofa. The whole town rocked with it. Meanwhile, the sofa remained our sofa.



This sofa of which I speak had a wooden frame with a thin veneer which was loose and puffed out in several places. Now this veneer, which was loose in spots, was the real cedarwood that fiddles are made of. That was what I heard in *cheder* (school).

Now I began to cast an eye on this sofa. I had already arranged for a bow a long time ago. I had a friend, Yudel, and he promised me as many hairs as I would need from the tail of his father's horse. And a piece of resin, to rub the bow with, I had all my own. I hated to rely on miracles. I got it in a trade with another friend of mine, Maier, Lippe-Sarah's boy, for a small piece of steel from my mother's old crinoline<sup>2</sup> that had been lying up in the attic.

Later, out of this piece of steel, Maier made himself a knife sharpened at both ends, and I was even ready to trade back with him, but he wouldn't think of it.

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<sup>2</sup> crinoline is the structure or frame in a petticoat to wear under a dress.

He shouted at me: “You think you’re smart! You and your father too! Here I go and work for three nights, sharpening and sharpening, and cut all my fingers, and you come around and want it back again!”

Well, I had everything.

There was only one to do—to pick off enough of the cedar veneer for the sofa. And for that I chose a very good time—when my mother was out shopping and my father lay down for his afternoon nap ...

**From Sheyne-Sheyndl in Kasrilevke  
to her husband Menakhem-Mendl in Yehupetz**

To my dear, learned, & illustrious husband Menakhem-Mendl,  
may your light shine! **STYLISTIC GREETING**  
First, we're all well, thank God. I hope to hear no worse from you.  
Second, my dear husband, my enemies should have as much strength to go on  
living as I have to write you this short note. **CURSE** I can hardly get around on my  
legs and may need an operation. At least that's what the new doctor says. He  
should catch all ten of Pharaoh's plagues! **CURSE** The man thinks he'll get rich from  
me. Would you like to know what the trouble is? My blood has bad corpuscles  
from all the heartache you've given me. **COMPLAINT** Who ever heard of such a thing?  
I send you money to come home to Kasrilevke and you run off with it to Yehupetz!  
You've blown your nose all over your face, that's what mother would say...A  
bonafide business! Stockings & bands! And here I was thinking that, after his  
lordship's precious Lumdums had gone down the drain, he would give me the  
pleasure of coming home. But what does my angel of a breadwinner do? He  
dreams a new dream: Yehupetz. May a black desert swallow it! **CURSE** A Jew like  
you, selling stockings in the market square! You know what you can do with a  
business like that! I read your letter, dear husband, and I thought: God in heaven!  
Either you've gone clear out of your mind or else I have... By day it's Yehupetz  
and by night it's Boiberik, men and women together! **HOW TO BE JEWISH IN A MODERN  
WORLD**

What's going on there? Who do you think you are? Make up your mind!  
...My enemies should be as sick as I am! **CURSE** It's my rotten luck that I'm laid up  
with my aches and pains and can't come after you, because I'd take the first coach  
from Kasrilevke and drag you home by the scruff of your neck...But don't hold my  
harsh words against me. It's just my bad corpuscles. I'll get over them.  
A match, says my mother, flares up fast and goes out quickly. I am, from the  
bottom of my heart, **STYLISTIC CLOSURE**

Your truly faithful wife,  
Sheyne-Sheyndl

## David Labkovski's Illustrations

David Labkovski chose the scenes that he wanted to illustrate.

### 1. Labkovski chose to depict the characters more than the story's plot.

*Why do you think Labkovski was more interested in the characters than their stories?*

#### Activity

Option 1: After reading a story, illustrate a scene. ( During COVID, use whatever materials you have available. David Labkovski was poor and often did not have art supplies, sometimes he painted on burlap sacks!)

Option 2: Write an I AM poem (National Gallery of Art: Teaching Critical Thinking) based on a character.



**2. Labkovski's mission in life was commemoration, bearing witness to the Jewish community of Vilna. The stories are a way for him to return to his childhood and remember.**

#### Activity

Write and/or illustrate a short story about something from your own childhood that you want to remember.

### Moving Forward



This exhibit is both about the ‘world that was’ and about both artists’ struggle to come to terms with the events of their lifetimes. The lightheartedness of the quotes and artwork belie the hardship and suffering of the artists and their audiences.

The world around us is fraught with tensions that we are all coping with. This exhibit and its context provides a lens to discuss the world around us. We see both tragedy and the resilience of the human spirit. Sholem Aleichem’s writings brought humor to people confronting a changing world. Labkovski’s work brought him relief from the pain of his past. As he works through his pain, the subject of his work becomes still-lives, landscapes and flora.

*As we experience the pandemic and other*

*communal tensions, what are ways of coping?*

If this exhibit leads to a study of the Holocaust, please turn to the Holocaust Museum Los Angeles for lessons about Holocaust history.

David Labkovski also documented the Holocaust in Vilna. On the David Labkovski Project website, [davidlabkovskiproject.org](http://davidlabkovskiproject.org), there is a *reflect and respond program* where students select a painting of the Holocaust, follow the research links for the historical context and write prose, poetry or create a work of art in response.

Please, be in touch and share your students’ work with us!

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## Glossary

**Most of the definitions are from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/>**

**Aktion:** The German word for “action”. In this case, Aktion refers to the forced “round up” of people to be executed.

**Anti-Semitism:** Prejudiced against or hatred of Jews.  
<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/antisemitism>

**Assimilation:** When a minority group accepts the culture of the dominant group as their own.

**Einsatzgruppen:** Mobile killing squads that were responsible for the murder of Jews and others near their homes, especially after the invasion of the Soviet Union. They carried out systematic genocide through mass shootings.  
<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/einsatzgruppen>

**Gulag:** Gulag is an acronym for Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei, which translated means, “Main Camp Administration”. It stands for the forced labor camps throughout the Soviet Union known for the extreme climate, isolation, disease, starvation and labor.  
<https://www.history.com/topics/russia/gulag>

**Judenraete:** Jewish Councils were established by the Nazis to assist in the implementation of the Nazi policies and regulations.  
<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/jewish-councils-judenraete>

**Migration (emigration and immigration):** Movement of people. In the late 1800 and beginning of the 20th century, there was mass migration from the Pale of Settlement to the United States. Emigration is the act of leaving a country, immigration is the act of entering another.

**Molotov Ribbentrop Pact (non aggression treaty):** An agreement between Hitler and Stalin signed in August 1939 that allowed Hitler to attack Poland without fear of a Soviet reprisal. In the agreement, they divided Poland between the two countries.  
<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/german-soviet-pact>

**Pale of Settlement:** The area of land at the far western region of Russia where the Jews were permitted to live. Regulations about where Jews could settle in Russia lasted from 1791-1917.

**Pogrom:** “Pogrom is a Russian word meaning “to wreak havoc, to demolish violently.”

Historically, the term refers to violent attacks by local non-Jewish populations on Jews in the Russian Empire and in other countries.”

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/pogroms>

**Shtetl:** A small market town that was typically found in the Pale of Settlement and Eastern Europe.

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/shtetl-in-jewish-history-and-memory/>

**Soviet Union:** After the Russian Revolution, Russia was renamed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. After the Holocaust, the Soviet Union occupied most of Eastern Europe including Vilna. It remained the U.S.S.R. until 1991. Lithuania became independent in 1991 with Vilna, current day Vilnius, as its capital city.

**Stalin:** Josef Stalin (1879-1954) was the totalitarian leader of the Soviet State. “From 1934 to 1938, Stalin cruelly purged the Soviet party, government, armed forces, and intelligentsia. Millions of “enemies of the people” were imprisoned, exiled, or shot.”

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/josef-stalin>

**Yiddish:** A language of Germanic origins spoken by Jews of Eastern Europe/Russia.

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/yiddish/>

**Zionist / Zionism:** At the end of the 19th c., as a reaction to the antisemitism and pogroms, the belief that Jews needed independent statehood, called zionism. Individuals who believed in zionism were called zionists.