

New World New Life

The story of Simcha Baevski,
his journey to Bendigo and beyond!

*A Drama / SOSE unit for Years 8 & 9
by Lyndy Clarke*

The initial stimulus material for this process drama work has come from the , ףi ŦzøŸ gallery at the Immigration Museum. Instead of covering several different arrival stories this performance based unit develops from the story of one man, his journey to Melbourne, his survival and his successful transformation from Simcha Baevski into the better known Sidney Myer. The photographic images and artefacts within the Baevski display case at the museum were the catalyst for research and performance. This drama work focuses on the period from the 1890's, when Simcha fled Russia. It allows the students to investigate the reasons for his departure under great secrecy and creatively follow his journey to Bendigo and his time as a travelling haberdashery salesman around the Victorian countryside at the turn of that century.



New World New Life (Years 8 & 9)

education kit

This particular unit is easily adaptable, in its basic format, to any other exploratory performance utilizing the various display cases and their stories in the museum's Settlements and Journeys galleries. It is suggested that for the students to really gain specific and clear knowledge from the activity it is best to use one story as a "stand alone" unit of work. It is advisable to introduce the unit initially through the biographical story and research papers, familiarising the students with a basic outline of the reasons for Simcha's departure from Russia and the persecution he and his family were suffering. This easily contrasts with his arrival and the physical and cultural contrasts he would have experienced on arrival in Melbourne. It is important for the students to visit the exhibition to enable them to comprehend and adapt the varying visual stimuli on display into/or as a catalyst for their performance.

Students engage in this dramatic activity through physical, emotional and intellectual ownership of the story. By means of research and adaptation, students improvise a creative storyline, based on historical truth where they identify the different existent characters in Simcha's story, construct their own characters [this easily adapts to different class sizes] and develop an understanding of the conflicts and difficulties inherent in making the journey to Australia as an immigrant in the 1900's and the similarities and differences intrinsic in that migrant journey today.

This unit can be used as a day long activity or can run over a period of 5 to 6 classes. The culmination of the unit can be in a small group performance or a larger group presentation depending on the requirements of the teacher and group.

Focus Questions:

Baevski Settlements story

What was a 'pogrom' and what would be the reasons for people to emigrate to Australia from Russia in the 19th century?

Why did Simcha's mother plan the trip for him and his brother in such secrecy?

What would it feel like to leave your family and friends and embark on a journey to an unknown country with no English, little cultural knowledge and almost no money?

Why did Simcha sell haberdashery and why did he choose to establish his first business in Bendigo?

What was the significance of Simcha Baevski changing his name to Sidney Myer?



Constructing the performance activities:

Students divide into scenario groups [this can vary in size according to the class.] In these groups the students select, research and improvise a performance about elements of the departure, the journey and the establishing of a new life in Victoria. In developing the improvisations it is effective to utilise either the visual stimulus from the Myer display or by accessing internet visuals to assist in the student's dramatic interpretation. Spartacus Educational has some excellent images in 'Immigrating to the USA - Jewish Immigration' at

www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAEjews.htm .

Departure:

Because the focus of this unit of work is the actual arrival of immigrants to Melbourne it is best to cover the reasons for Simcha and Elcon's [his brother] departure briefly. By researching 'pogroms' and the persecution of Jews in Europe at this time, request that the students write a brief account of life in a Jewish family at the turn of the 19th century. Students may also need to research the traditions of the Jewish religion.

The following is text from the panel on the Baevski case in the *Journeys Gallery*.

"But life was about taking risks. Simcha and his brother Elcon had fled Russia in the 1890's, their mother organising their departure in great secrecy. Jews in Russia lived in an atmosphere of poverty and persecution. They were victims of frequent attacks. Fires raged through Jewish quarters. Young men faced conscription into the Russian army for up to 25 years. Escaping this turmoil, Elcon arrived in Melbourne in 1896, [concerned for Elcon's health his mother sent Simcha] Simcha arrived 3 years later".

The photograph on left of display case window shows Baevski and Slutzkin families in Krichev, Russia [near Belarus] 1897; Simcha is second right.

The photograph on right of display case window depicts vandalised Jewish homes in the 'Pale of Settlement', Russia, 1903.

Some suggested scenarios are:-

1. Pogroms and attacks on Jews in Russia.
2. Family life for a religious Jewish family in the 1890's, with particular focus on the Baevski family. The Myer Foundation website www.myerfoundation.org.au/ gives details about the structure and personalities in the family and the Archive of Australian Judaism at the University of Sydney website <http://judaica.library.usyd.edu.au/histories/histories.html> gives an overview of conditions in Europe for Jews and the lack of persecution they found on arrival in Australia.
3. Conscription and the life of Cossacks.





Students from North Geelong Secondary College actively involved in another Drama and Cultural Diversity workshop



Journey:

The brothers came on the Steamships SS Oldenburg and SS Karlsruhe respectively. Students can research the style of vessel and conditions for those travelling for a 6 to 8 week crossing. Key factors for students to remember when planning this improvisational scenario is the facts that:-

1. The brothers spoke no English and had little understanding about the culture and conditions of the country they were emigrating too.
 2. They brought very little with them other than the lace, cottons, threads and items of their trade in Russia.
 3. The only skills they knew were that of a tailor and haberdashery salesmen.
- Were there others like them on the boat, did they discuss their expectations, hopes and dreams with others starting on a similar adventure?

Students could also develop a series of diary entries from one of the brothers or other passengers and have it taped, used as a voice over or narrated during the "journey" scenario.

Establishing a life in Victoria:

"Simcha arrived at Station Pier in August 1899, and joined his brother Elcon in the room he rented in Carlton. He was 20, spoke no English, and had only enough money to buy a tomato and a glass of beer! They worked wrapping parcels briefly before deciding to set out for regional Bendigo.

It was here Simcha established his first drapery shop; the goods were on display rather than the usual 'behind counter' style adopted by the other shops. The brothers printed catalogues and brochures for women in outlying farming communities and established one of the first mail order companies. It was during this period Simcha changed his name to Sidney Myer."

Source: The Myer Foundation (www.myerfoundation.org.au)

Using the above information for stimulus, students can possibly divide into 4 groups and investigate the following possible scenarios:-

1. The concept of arriving in a country with no verbal communication skills, students could develop voice scapes in this section using tape, sound effects or keyboard. Students could possibly establish the idea of one isolated person in a space full of abstract vocal sounds, surrounding, sweeping and ostracizing Simcha and his brother. [This scenario lends itself to more abstract stylisation and experimentation.]
2. Does the reality meet the dream? Students could investigate:
 - i) Immigrant expectations and the elements that make up the harsh reality of immigration, both in that period and in today's society.
 - ii) Elements of rejection because of language limitation.
 - iii) Ignorance of the local community to different religions and cultures.
 - iv) Finally the problem of ongoing poverty that is reinforced by the inability to gain employment.
3. The concept of "foreigners" walking the dusty roads of regional Victoria, visiting farms to sell their threads, laces and other delicate items unfamiliar to outback farmers wives.
4. Establishing a drapery shop in central Bendigo, giving particular attention to the opinion of the locals. This scenario could depict a local news journalist interviewing the brothers and other imaginary/ or actual dignitaries of Bendigo. A key question for student investigation, is why Sydney changed his name?

Students have access to the photo, bottom image 6475, in the Baevski case, of the second Myer store in Bendigo, about 1905; Sidney Myer is third from left. Also in the feature case is a reproduction of the first certificate of registration for the business name Myer Bros, 1901.





Bringing to life stories from the Immigration Museum are more North Geelong Secondary College students



Performance:

Students and staff can negotiate the length, order and the style of performance for these improvisations, obviously. One of the most effective presentations of this unit was for small groups of students to perform 2/3 minute tableaux's of the different periods of the Myer journey, including the use of similar objects, i.e. thimbles, old suitcases and material as part of the performance. These scenarios can flow from frozen tableaux to frozen tableaux or can be linked by the use of a narrator, possibly reading from a diary that each group adds to. [All of the groups in Simcha's journey can remain on stage for the performance.] The final tableaux could reflect on the similarity between his journey and the journey that today's immigrant embarks on.

Reflection:

Students can enhance on the Myer story by researching their own family history and presenting individual "Family Trees" as an oral presentation to the class, focussing on the reasons their own family decided to immigrate to Australia.

References:

Some helpful internet sites, as well as those previously listed are -:

<http://www.museumvictoria.com.au/ImmigrationMuseum/education/>
www.myerfoundation.org.au