

Adventures in History



Teach Me to Dance

Teachers' Guide



National
Film Board
of Canada

Office
national du film
du Canada

Teach Me to Dance



Level

Elementary and junior-secondary school.

Subject Area

Canadian History, Canadian Literature, Social Studies.

Summary

Set in Alberta in 1919, this film deals with the intense pressure placed on Ukrainian immigrants to the Prairies to be assimilated rapidly into English-Canadian culture. It also deals with the prejudice that they experienced locally and regionally.

Two little girls, Lesia and Sarah, pupils in a one-room school, are close friends. Sarah, visiting Lesia's home on St. Nicholas Day, convinces her friend to teach her Ukrainian folk dances and to perform them at the school's Christmas concert. Lesia's brother, a student at the Ukrainian Institute in Winnipeg, and her father express doubt that the

dance will be permitted. (Both of them have experienced English prejudice against Ukrainians, which World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution had intensified.) Neither is their teacher convinced, but Sarah implies that her father, the chairman of the school board, is in favor. At school, Lesia is called names by some of the English children and is punished for speaking Ukrainian; after school, she and Sarah practice their dancing every day.

On the night of the concert, all of the students, Lesia included, perform the approved English Christmas concert program, but Sarah's father has refused to allow his daughter to dance. A fight breaks out between Lesia's brother and a student who makes fun of Ukrainians; the Christmas message of peace and goodwill seems very hollow.

Nevertheless, the experience does not destroy the children's friendship. On Christmas Day, Sarah brings Lesia a present and introduces her

to the custom of breaking a wishbone. The film ends with both children dancing in the barn.

Aims of the Film

- To dramatize the pressure on immigrants from other cultural backgrounds to be assimilated into a British cultural heritage.
- To demonstrate how the prejudice of adults may affect relationships between children.
- To suggest the positive value of cultural exchange between English Canadians and those of other cultural backgrounds.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe the difference between the school in the film and a modern school.
2. What is the significance of the poem Lesia is made to learn? Comment on whether or not she is a "Child of the Empire."
3. Why is Lesia not permitted to speak Ukrainian in class?
4. The family maintains its cultural heritage despite pressure to suppress it. What items and customs of specifically Ukrainian origin do we see in the film?
5. Lesia's father complains twice that the English have "vinegar for blood." What does he mean?
6. How does the Christmas message of the concert conflict with what is actually happening in the community?
7. The school trustees believe that the songs and recitations the children perform are the proper Canadian Christmas observances. Are Christmas customs which originate in Britain more truly "Canadian" than those from some other country? What Christmas traditions from other countries have become part of the celebration of Christmas in your area?
8. What is the importance of the gifts Sarah brings to Lesia on Christmas Day?

9. Are our schools still as hostile to different cultural heritages as they were in the early part of the century?

Related Projects

1. Where is the Ukraine? What physical similarities exist between the Ukraine and the Prairies which might have made the latter attractive to Ukrainians as a place to settle? What Ukrainian place names are to be found in the Prairie provinces?
2. What conditions existed in the Ukraine which caused so many people to emigrate? How and why was this emigration to Canada encouraged?
3. This film is set immediately after World War I. On what side did the Ukraine fight in that war? How were people of Ukrainian origin treated in Canada during it?
4. What was the Ukrainian Institute? Does it still exist? Are there similar institutions for other nationalities? Are there similar institutions for people of British descent?
5. What is the present status of the Ukrainian language in the Prairie provinces? Find out how and when Ukrainians celebrate Christmas.
6. Research the federal policies concerning education during the period 1910-1925. How did these policies affect the schools' curricula?

Bibliography

- Burke, Marguerite V. *The Ukrainian Canadians*,* Multicultural Canada Series. Toronto: Van Nostrand Reinhold Ltd., 1978.
- Charyk, John. *The Little White Schoolhouse*. Saskatoon: Western Producer, 1971.
- Kaye, Vladimir. *Early Ukrainian Settlement in Canada 1895-1900*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964.
- Kostash, Myrna. *All of Baba's Children*. Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1977.
- Kovacs, Martin L. ed. *Ethnic Canadians, Culture and Education*. Canadian Plains Studies, no. 8, Canadian Plains Research Center. Regina: University of Regina Press, 1978.
- Palmer, Howard, ed. *Immigration and the Rise of Multiculturalism*.* Toronto: Copp Clark, 1975.

*Paperback edition

Related Films from NFB

- Veronica*
14 min. 106C 0177 287
- The Boy Next Door*
18 min. 2 sec. 106C 0362 026
- Kurelek*
10 min. 7 sec. 106C 0166 081
- I've Never Walked the Steppes*
28 min. 106C 0175 018
- Kaszuby*
28 min. 40 sec. 106C 0175 104
- Great Grand Mother*
28 min. 47 sec. 106C 0175 108
- Paper Wheat*
57 min. 41 sec. 106C 0179 002
- Balablok*
7 min. 27 sec. 106C 0372 097
- Neighbors*
8 min. 10 sec. 106C 0152 024
- The Twitch*
13 min. 2 sec. 106C 0173 153

Filmstrips and Slide Sets from NFB*

- Pioneer Life in the Prairies*
(1812-1900)
- Pioneer Life in the Prairies*
(1900-1912)
- Immigration to Western Canada*
1896-1914
- The Immigration Experience* —
a series of six sound filmstrips
(release date, fall 1979)

* Available for purchase only from
McIntyre Educational Media Ltd.,
30 Kelfield Street, Rexdale, Ontario.

One of the most difficult tasks confronting the teacher of history or social studies is that of demonstrating the relevance of the past to the present lives of the students. The **Adventures in History** series has been designed to provide, in a lively, fictional form, a bridge to Canada's past.

Although founded on sound research, the series does not attempt to document specific events or the lives of famous people. Instead it concentrates on the effects of periods of broad social change on the lives of ordinary persons, especially young people. Each half-hour drama provides the teacher with the opportunity to encourage the class to become imaginatively involved with characters whose lives are touched by these social changes, and to develop the capacity to view the subject from a critical perspective.

The **Adventures in History** series is a continuing project which, upon completion, will touch on virtually every aspect of Canada's recent past.

History Consultant:

Terence Brennan, member, Canadian Historical Association Council; and Chairman, History Department, Loyola High School, Montreal.

Writer:

Yvonne Matthews Klein, Professor of English, Dawson College, Montreal.

Support material for "Adventures in History" series coordinated by Ann Pearson, NFB.