

Rutu Modan's "The Property"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/rutu-modans-property>.

Introduction

Rutu Modan is one of Israel's most well-known graphic novelists. Born in 1966 and trained at Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, Modan was co-founder in 1995 of Actus Tragicus, a comics studio and publishing group consisting of five renowned Israeli comics artists. Modan has published three book-length fictional works in English with the famous Montreal-based comics publishing company, Drawn & Quarterly. These graphic novels about the everyday lives of Israeli characters include *Exit Wounds* (2007), *Jamilti and Other Stories* (2008), and *The Property* (2013). She has also published shorter non-fiction works, including memoir and comics journalism, in publications such as *The New York Times* and *Words Without Borders*. Her whimsical and comedic children's books include *Maya Makes a Mess* (Toon Books, 2012) and *Eddie Spaghetti* (Fantagraphics, 2019).

The Property is the story of a grandmother, Regina Segal, born in Poland and now living in Israel, and her Israeli-born granddaughter, Mica. When the story opens in Ben-Gurion airport in the early 2000s, the two are preparing to get on a plane together, presumably to "take back" a property that Regina's Jewish family owned in Poland before she was driven to flee to Israel as a young woman. The story takes place mainly in Warsaw over the course of a week in which family secrets are exposed and the grandmother/granddaughter pair experience firsthand some of the ways that the past—including the traumatic history of Jews in Poland before and during World War II, as well as Regina's early life in Warsaw—continues to shape their present lives. Modan's drawing style can best be described as *ligne claire*, or "clean line," a style made famous by Belgian cartoonist Hergé. Her characters are elegantly rendered, her page structures are geometrically arranged, and her artwork is bright and full of lively colors.

This resource kit includes activities and materials to help contextualize *The Property* and explore some of its key themes, including reparations and restitutions, the complicated nature of commemoration and memorialization, and intergenerational family relationships.

Cover image: Second panel from page 48 of *The Property* by Rutu Modan, trans. Jessica Cohen (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2013).

Subjects

Eastern Europe, Graphic Novels and Comics, Hebrew, Holocaust, Money, Women Writers

Reading and Background

- Rutu Modan's *The Property* was published by Drawn & Quarterly in 2013. Glen Weldon has a sharp [review](#) of the book up on NPR's website, and there is a comprehensive 2013 [interview](#) between Rutu Modan and Marc Sobel up on *The Comics Journal*. (The first page of the interview will give you Modan's background information, and the second page focuses on her creation of *The Property*.)
- More information about Rutu Modan can be found on her [author page](#) on Drawn & Quarterly's website. This [brief article](#) by Liam Hoare in *The Forward* offers some of Modan's thoughts on the development of graphic novels in Israel. In this [short video](#) from Submarine Channel's *Pretty Cool People Interviews*, you can see Modan talk about her earlier work, especially *Exit Wounds*, and see images that will give you more of a sense of her style and process as a cartoonist.
- For a recent academic essay on *The Property*, see Matt Reingold's "[Israeli and Polish Holocaust Commemoration in Rutu Modan's *The Property*](#)," published in *The Journal of Holocaust Research*, Volume 33, Issue 3 (2019), pps. 175-190. A recent academic book focused on her work, *The Comics of Rutu Modan: War, Love, and Secrets*, by Kevin Haworth, was published in 2019 by the University Press of Mississippi.



The Great Jewish Books Teacher Workshop, a program of the Yiddish Book Center, is made possible with support from the Jim Joseph Foundation. The Foundation, established in 2006, is devoted to fostering compelling, effective Jewish learning experiences for youth and young adults in the U.S.

- For two books that are focused more generally on Jewish women and comics, see Sarah Lightman's edited collection, *Graphic Details: Jewish Women's Confessional Comics in Essays and Interviews*, published by McFarland in 2014, and Tahneer Oksman's *'How Come Boys Get to Keep Their Noses?': Women and Jewish American Identity in Contemporary Graphic Memoirs*, published by Columbia University Press in 2016. See also two edited essay collections about Jewish comics more generally: Samantha Baskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman's *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*, published by Rutgers University Press in 2008, and Derek Parker Royal's *Visualizing Jewish Narrative: Jewish Comics and Graphic Novels*, published by Bloomsbury Academic in 2016.

Resources

1: ID card of Sabina Szwarc from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

In Rutu Modan's fictional graphic novel, *The Property*, we get just a bit of background about our protagonist, Regina Segal's, life in Poland before she immigrated to Israel in 1939 (presumably before the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939). We don't know the details of what happened to her family after she left or whether she was ever reunited with any of them.

The Holocaust Encyclopedia, created by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, includes 600 ID cards of actual Holocaust survivors, each of which includes a photograph, date and place of birth, and information about the individual's life just before, during, and after the war. The museum, housed in Washington, D.C., hands out ID cards to site visitors, and the cards are also available as part of an online database. As the museum's website explains, "These cards are designed to help personalize the historical events of the time."

Sabina Szwarc's card shows that she lived in the same city (Warsaw, Poland) as Modan's fictional Regina. Though we don't know Regina's date of birth, we can presume that they would have been born within a few years of each other. Unlike the fictional Regina, Sabina Szwarc stayed in Poland for part of the war, was forced with her family into a ghetto, later escaped and hid in Germany, and eventually immigrated to the United States in 1950.

Suggested Activities: Have students look at Sabina Szwarc's photograph and read the card out loud. What can they deduce by looking at her photograph? When might it have been taken? In what context? Where might it have been kept, and by whom, throughout the war? How might it have been preserved? Ask students to carefully comb through Sabina's brief biography and discuss what questions they still have about her based on the information presented. Given the brevity of her biography, why might museum curators have chosen to include Sabina's memory about the anthropologist commenting on her ears and profile? Why include information about her becoming an ophthalmologist?

Once the class has had a discussion about the card, ask students to think about what Sabina's relationship to Poland might have been after the war, particularly after she immigrated to America. In *The Property*, a character in the book who has known Regina for a long time tells Mica that Regina "swore for years that she would never set foot in this country again" (p. 35). Do you think Sabina might have felt the same? What might be some reasons she wouldn't want to return to Warsaw? Can you imagine reasons that Sabina, like Regina in *The Property*, might have felt compelled to return?

Source: "Personal Histories of Survivors and Victims of the Holocaust," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 92, <https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/20141010-dor-personal-histories.pdf>.

2: Video testimony, "Murray Pantirer describes the antisemitic climate in postwar Kraków," 1990.

This video is part of a media essay titled, "The Aftermath of the Holocaust: Personal Histories." The essay includes fifteen short video clips, from just under a minute up to four minutes long, of various people testifying to different aspects of their lives after the war. Murray Pantirer was born in 1925 and raised in Kraków, Poland. He survived the war as a member of the famed list created by Oskar Schindler, a wealthy German businessman who recruited people to work at his factory in Czechoslovakia. Pantirer was one of seven children, and he was the only member of his immediate family of nine to survive the war. In 1949, he immigrated to the United States.

In this moving video, Pantirer describes returning to his family apartment in Kraków after the war, and finding it was now occupied by a woman unrelated to his family. He tells her "I absolutely don't want nothin' from this apartment," even though everything in

the apartment belonged to his family. He says he only wants to leave a note, in case by some “miracle” someone else in his family had also survived, and they could be reunited. Pantirer goes on to describe how he was mistreated by the woman who now occupied his family’s home, as well as others living in the neighborhood who continued to victimize the few Jews who returned to Kraków after the war.

Suggested Activities: Play the video of Murray Pantirer’s testimony for students. In the opening, Pantirer describes walking into his family home. He tells the woman currently living there that he doesn’t want anything from the apartment, but he also tells his audience, “Everything that was in that apartment belonged to us.” Ask students to think about what that experience would have been like. Why would Pantirer say he had no interest in getting anything back from his family’s apartment? Can they imagine feeling the same way in that situation?

Provide students with the following definitions: “Reparations” can refer to money or goods paid after a war by the defeated to the victors, meant as compensation. “Restitution” refers to the return of something that has been lost or stolen to its proper owner. Have students think about what each of these terms might mean in the context of the aftermath of World War II, about the differences between these two types of operations, and about the complications that come with each of them. What arguments can students imagine for, or against, reparations or restitutions to Jews and other victims of Nazi Germany? Given that *The Property* is the story of a grandmother and granddaughter returning to Poland together, how might the experiences of the children and grandchildren of those directly affected by the war complicate the arguments for and against reparations and restitutions? You might find it useful to refer to [an additional brief resource](#) created by Yad Vashem, The World Holocaust Remembrance Center, summarizing the ongoing conversation about reparations and restitutions with regards to Jews and the Holocaust.

Like Regina in *The Property*, Murray Pantirer and his family were forced out of their city of birth and left everything behind. Both of them had to deal with the emotional fallout of being exiled, and for both of them, their claims to their family’s “property” is complicated by a variety of factors. In a passage in Modan’s book, also referred to in Resource 1 of this kit, a family friend says of Regina: “I’ve known Regina since I was a child. She swore for years that she would never set foot in this country again. That she’d never give the Poles the satisfaction of thinking she’d forgiven them, just for the money” (35). Why do you think someone in Regina’s situation might not want to go back and claim their parent’s property? Why might they change their mind later in life? Does Murray Pantirer’s testimony shed any additional light on the complex emotional issues surrounding reparations and restitutions?

Source: “Murray Pantirer describes the antisemitic climate in postwar Kraków,” interviewed by Linda G. Kuzmack, Apr. 23 1990, video, 1:34, Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/gallery/the-aftermath-of-the-holocaust-personal-histories?parent=en%2F2275>.

3: Video, Mi Polin’s “We Make History Eternal,” 2017.

How can we best memorialize the past? What functions can memorial sites and commemorative gestures serve? These questions are central to *The Property*. Some related moments in the text include: when Mica and Avram Yagodnik stand in front of the “Remains of the Jewish Ghetto, Prózna Street” (34); when Mica meets Tomasz, a local tour guide who gives tours of Jewish Warsaw (40); and when Mica gets swept up in the middle of a reenactment being held by the Society for Jewish Memorialization (159-161).

Helena Czernek and Aleksander Prugar are two artists, both born in Warsaw, Poland. Together, they formed *Mi Polin* (“From Poland”), the first Polish Judaica company in existence since World War II. In this video, we get a glimpse of one of their central art projects—a memorialization project. Czernek and Prugar travel around Poland and Ukraine searching for doorposts (entryways) that bear the imprints of mezuzahs that are no longer there. (Mezuzahs are small casings containing verses from the Torah. In Jewish law and tradition, mezuzahs are affixed to the entryways of people’s homes.) The artists create molds out of the empty spaces they find, each unique, and then cast these shapes in bronze to create mezuzah memorials. Their work has been featured in museums and exhibitions around the world. As the video succinctly puts it, “We cast mezuzah traces in bronze to activate a link between past and present.”

Suggested Activities: Throughout *The Property*, the central characters often find themselves at, or talking about, memorial landmarks. Before showing the video, begin a conversation in class about memorialization. You can open by asking students whether they are familiar with any memorials in their neighborhoods, or whether they have ever visited a famous memorial. Try to get them to establish as many details as possible about any memorial they have seen. What did it look like? Where was it? What

was it commemorating? What did it make them think or feel?

Once you have come up with a few examples, ask students to think more generally about memorials. See if, as a class, you can come up with a one- or two-sentence definition and explanation: what they are, and why they exist. You can connect these answers to the role that memorial sites serve in *The Property*. Do the characters seem interested in memorializing the past? Why or why not?

Have students watch the *Mi Polin* video and try to articulate the artists' goals. Are the artists succeeding in meeting these goals? What does it mean to create something beautiful in an effort to remember lives lost in such a tragedy? Does it matter that the artists are making money from these memorial artworks? For more details about *Mi Polin*'s mezuzah project, you may wish to show students [this page](https://www.mipolin.pl/en/our-journey) on their website, which has photographs of some of the mezuzahs and an interactive map showing the locations of the mezuzah traces.

Optionally, you can have students, either in pairs or in larger groups, come up with their own ideas for memorial objects, sites, or gestures, either to commemorate an individual loss or a communal one, like the Holocaust. Be sure to have them discuss details including design and placement. You can have them either create drawings of these memorials or build them out of simple objects and recycled materials. You can also have students write descriptive text to accompany these memorials.

Source: Helena Czernek and Aleksander Prugar, "We Make History Eternal," Jan. 10 2018, video, 4:35, <https://www.mipolin.pl/en/our-journey>.

4: Visual essay excerpt, Rutu Modan's "Chez Maurice," 2007.

Many of Rutu Modan's works explore intergenerational relationships, an important central theme in *The Property*. Mica and her grandmother, Regina, seem to have a generally loving relationship. They have chosen to travel together on this important trip. But at times there are tensions between them and, after all, the story centers around a secret that Regina has kept from her family, in order (from her point of view) to protect them. Mica, too, occasionally does things behind her grandmother's back, acts that can be interpreted as well-intentioned, but not necessarily honest.

This excerpt is from the final section of a 2007 memoir piece that Modan composed for the online *New York Times Blog*. Called "Chez Maurice," this visual essay is made up of seven long, rectangular panels, each enclosed within a watercolor background. Some of the panels, like this one, contain no drawings and contribute to the story entirely with handwritten prose. Others include tiny drawings of scenes from the story, for example, an illustration of the protagonist driving a car, her grandmother seated beside her.

"Chez Maurice" is the story of a day when the twenty-year-old protagonist is asked to take her grandmother (her father's mother) to the hairdresser. In the first half of the story, we learn that the granddaughter doesn't particularly like her grandmother because of the grandmother's scornful attitude towards the granddaughter's working mother. The granddaughter is also sore that her grandmother has expressed disapproval about a backpacking trip around Europe she has been looking forward to.

In this penultimate panel, the narrator gets a glimpse of "the young girl inside that old woman," as her grandmother mentions that her own father did not allow her to go to university because he "thought it wasn't suitable for girls."

Suggested Activities: Present the class with this excerpt from the comic. Ask students to think about the form as well as the content of the piece. Why do they think the author—a cartoonist—decided to create a story that includes long pieces of handwritten prose, like this one, instead of either typeset prose or comics (words and images together)? What effect does seeing the author's handwriting have on their perception of this snippet?

Have them also reflect on the intergenerational relationship depicted here. What might the narrator mean when she says, "She looked very small to me then." What kind of realization was the narrator having about her grandmother in this moment? Do they think this interaction will change the way the two of them relate to each other in the future? Why or why not? How does the relationship between the granddaughter and her grandmother compare to what we see in *The Property*? In what ways are these pairs similar, and in what ways are they different? Do you think Modan is trying to send a different message about intergenerational relationships in *The Property* than in "Chez Maurice"?

Students can then individually reflect on a relationship they have had with a person of a different generation—this could be a

grandparent, or any older relative, caretaker, or teacher. Have they ever had a revelatory moment with that person, like the one the granddaughter has in “Chez Maurice”? How did their perspective on this older person shift? Students can write about this relationship and an important moment in it for 10-15 minutes.

Optionally, students can then adapt this short reflection into a story that incorporates images and words. This could be a conventional comic, or it could be a collage, or a mix of handwriting and illustrations, like “Chez Maurice.”

Source: Rutu Modan, “Chez Maurice,” *Mixed Emotions* (blog), *The New York Times*, Oct. 3 2007, <https://modan.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/10/03/chez-maurice/?module=BlogPost-Title&version=Blog%20Main&contentCollection=Opinion&action=Click&pgtype=Blogs®ion=Body>.

5: Graphic novel excerpt, Rutu Modan’s “The Property,” 2013.

In the four panels excerpted here, we see Regina, dressed up and sitting tall in a taxi. The first two panels show her looking out at the streets of Warsaw as they are now, with various people walking up and down along storefronts. In the second two panels, though she is still present in the picture, the landscape outside is depicted in grayscale. We are meant to understand that Regina is now remembering the Warsaw of her youth, the city that she left behind as a young woman, and the life and family that went with it.

Suggested Activities: Before students read this section of the graphic novel, show them this image and ask them what they think they are looking at. See if, in groups of two or three, they can come up with a storyline for the old woman in these four panels. Have them write four accompanying narrative boxes to go along with these four panels. Each group should then present their storylines to the class.

Additionally, students can research a well-known location in their town. This could be a street corner, a city block, a park, a building—it could even be the school or building in which their classroom is located. See if they can find any archival photographs of this locale and have them take, and then print out, present-day photographs of the same place. They can then create panels or posters, in groups or individually, showing what has changed in and around these places over time, and what has stayed the same. Help them think about how best to design their posters in order to document and juxtapose past and present. Encourage them to annotate their images to draw viewers’ attention to important details.

Once students have created and presented their posters, hold a class discussion comparing their findings to Regina’s experience in Warsaw in the book. How might the changes that Warsaw has seen since before World War II be different from the changes that can be observed in students’ photographs? How do they imagine Regina might feel observing these changes for the first time?

Source: Rutu Modan, *The Property*, trans. Jessica Cohen (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2013), 48.