Maurice Sendak is best known as the illustrator of more than 100 picture books, including Where the Wild Things Are and In the Night Kitchen. Sendak was born in Brooklyn in 1928, and his childhood was typically American in a number of ways. He still reminisces about childhood friends, family dramas, and the sights and smells of New York in the 1930s. Yet, while he was growing up, he also felt a powerful attraction to the worn, black-and-white photographs of his European relatives: “When my mother and father came to America, which was just a few years before World War I, their family sent photographs. They were all murdered in concentration camps and I knew that at an early age . . . To go through the family album and to see what I thought were these beautiful people who were dead, was unbelievable. All of that was a re-creation of a world I never knew. And I was fascinated with the shtetl world of the European Jew.” The push and pull of New and Old Worlds in Sendak’s memory makes his work playful and dynamic, but also haunting and complex. This exhibit explores those threads of Jewish family, geography, and culture in Sendak’s life, and the way he imaginatively weaves them into his picture books.
Sendak’s father, Philip, arrived in America in 1913, in hot pursuit of a girl he had fallen in love with back home in Poland, but he was too late; she had already married. A short time later, he fell in love again, this time with Sendak’s mother, Sarah, herself a new immigrant from Poland. They met at a wedding, where she attracted his attention by reading a passage from the great Yiddish writer Shalom Aleichem as part of the ceremony.

After they were married, Philip and Sarah began bringing Sarah’s relatives to America. Maurice Sendak remembers these relatives visiting for dinner on the weekends. As a first-generation American, Sendak was struck by the different appearance, speech, and manners of his European aunts and uncles, and in his mind they became grotesque figures: “They smoked cigars, their teeth were terrible, and they had hairs pouring out of their noses, and what was the matter with them?! . . . And waiting for my mother to get all the food ready—and her being late—meant these people could eat you. If they got to be hungry enough they would eat you.” These childhood impressions became the basis for his 1963 Caldecott Award-winning Where the Wild Things Are, in which young Max imagines his way onto a strange island populated by a band of unruly, monstrous creatures.

Max’s journey in the book from his comfortable home across the sea to “where the Wild Things are” is, in a sense, the same journey traced by Sendak himself over his long career, exploring his American upbringing and then making an imaginative crossing to Europe to discover his roots there. Sendak is always interested in grounding his fantasies in reality, and in Where the Wild Things Are he uses his own family, childhood, and neighborhood to do just that. In later books, Sendak continued to return to his own childhood for the emotional core of his stories, and often looked to his family and friends as the basis for his characters.

“They roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth, and rolled their terrible eyes . . . ’
BROOKLYN AND THE NIGHT KITCHEN

“Living in Brooklyn is like living on Planet Y.”

Just as the Wild Things are exaggerated portraits of Sendak’s Jewish relatives, *In the Night Kitchen* and other works are fantastic portraits of 1930s and ’40s Brooklyn and Manhattan. Manhattan is the glamorous, exciting world just across the bridge, while Sendak often sees Brooklyn as an unchanging neighborhood of brick houses and street-wise children. Sendak’s renderings of Brooklyn may suggest the adult artist’s nostalgia for his childhood home, but Brooklyn, with its bustling activity and extraordinary mix of cultures, also played a formative role in Sendak’s development as a storyteller: “My gift with the kids was telling stories. And I would get them all on the stoop and I would tell them the movie I had seen. And then I’d invent parts of the movie, especially gruesome parts, and they wanted that from me.” As an adolescent, he listened to stories of immigration from his family and neighbors, and wrote his own tales about kids’ everyday adventures in his neighborhood.

In 1939 Sendak’s older sister, Natalie, took Maurice along on a date with her boyfriend to the World’s Fair in Queens. “She planted me in front of the Sunshine Bakers,” Sendak remembers, “and I stood there and this aroma came out of the building . . . and the smell of biscuit and cake and flour and milk. It was better than anything in the whole world! And I just sat there sniffing . . . . When I turned around my sister and her boyfriend were gone—they had dumped me.” For Sendak, this experience was emblematic of his childhood in New York: chaotic, adventurous, and full of surprises, both glorious and disheartening. *In the Night Kitchen* turns this memory into a fantasy, as Mickey encounters the Sunshine Bakers and literally immerses himself in their ingredients.

Sendak family photograph, ca. 1928, all rights reserved.

From left to right: Jack, baby Maurice, Sarah, and Natalie. His father, Philip, is not shown. Sendak made use of this photograph in a number of his own drawings.

Sendak’s window designs for F.A.O. Schwarz, ca. 1949, all rights reserved.

Sendak recreated the Brooklyn of his youth for the animated television special *Really Rosie*. The stoops, basements, streets, and rooftops of Brooklyn were all spaces of play and storytelling for the dramatic Rosie, as they were for Sendak.

Sendak’s “foodscape” for *In the Night Kitchen* is made up of ingredients and utensils from his own mother’s pantry. His parents had passed away a few years before he began work on this book, and this is just one of the memorials to them that can be found in the canned-good city of the Night Kitchen. But the book also pays tribute to the movies he loved as a child. The three bakers themselves are clones of actor Oliver Hardy, while Mickey flying over the giant milk bottle recalls another 1930s film moment—King Kong climbing the Empire State building.

Sendak is a self-taught artist. After graduating from high school in 1946, he worked a number of odd jobs, including designing window displays at the toy store F.A.O. Schwarz in Manhattan. It was there he was “discovered” by Ursula Nordstrom, children’s book editor for Harper & Row. She gave Sendak his first children’s book commissions and both challenged and encouraged him in his writing and illustrating. Sendak says of her, “She was sublime . . . She never undercut anything. She never said, ‘Make that lighter, or, ‘Let’s pretty it up,’ or, ‘Make him happier.’ . . . I’ve never met another person like that in my whole life.”

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Sendak’s dummy book for *Happy Hanukah, Everybody!*, © Maurice Sendak, 1955, all rights reserved.

In the 1950s, Sendak received commissions from several Jewish organizations, including B’nai B’rith and the United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education. This cover is from his dummy book for *Happy Hanukah, Everybody* by Hyman and Alice Chanover. The brick house resembles many of the Brooklyn scenes he drew in his youth and in books such as *The Sign on Rosie’s Door* (1960). The house address could be 1756 West 6th Street in Brooklyn, a few doors down from the Sendaks at 1717.

Final drawing for *In the Night Kitchen*, © Maurice Sendak, 1970, all rights reserved.

Sendak’s window designs for F.A.O. Schwarz, ca. 1949, all rights reserved.

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Sendak’s neighborhood, Bensonhurst, was a largely Jewish and Italian community. As a young man, Sendak spent a lot of time at his window, watching and sketching children and adults in his neighborhood. Even in his earliest children’s books, Sendak drew dark-haired, rambunctious kids modeled on the immigrant children he knew from his own borough. These characters broke with long-established stereotypes in the publishing industry about how American children should look and behave. Characters such as Pierre, Max, and Rosie were self-reliant, gutsy, street-smart, and playful. They also exhibited emotions such as anger, frustration, and loneliness that had been deemed inappropriate subjects in children’s literature. Sendak’s belief in the complexity of children’s emotions and personalities evolved from those charismatic and independent immigrant kids he observed in his neighborhood.

The Sign on Rosie’s Door takes place on an ordinary day in Brooklyn, and follows the play-time antics of Rosie, a character based on a little girl who lived on Sendak’s street. Rosie was rougher and brasher than other children’s book heroines, says Sendak. “Girls don’t get rough . . . . Girls don’t act like boys and order people around; that’s what boys do. So she was blamed for not being feminine enough, and she was clearly a little homely, and she is wearing dresses far too big for her.”

The character Pierre first appeared in three books of Sendak’s Nutshell Library: Chicken Soup with Rice, One Was Johnny, and Pierre. The messy-haired, mischievous little boy in his blue suit epitomizes Sendak’s idea of childhood. The heroes of Where the Wild Things Are, In the Night Kitchen, Hector Protector, and Mommy all retain traces of Pierre. Pierre is an enduring character perhaps because he is an avatar of Sendak’s child-self: rebellious, loud, unapologetic, but still subject to fits of childhood angst.

Sendak’s most important contribution to children’s literature is the way he delves into children’s most difficult emotions, such as fear, anger, and loneliness. Sendak was familiar with these emotions from his own childhood, and from the beginning he made them a central feature of his work. The first book he both authored and illustrated, Kenny’s Window, features a lonely boy who thrives on imaginative contact with his toys and pets. His window provides access to a wider world and an escape from his dull home life. Sendak, in his parents’ cramped apartment, found relief by sketching Brooklyn kids from his windowsill.

Sendak designed a series of pamphlets on racism and anti-Semitism for the Anti-Defamation League early in his career. Sendak’s rough line drawings of kids confronting school-yard threats and racial taunts were inspired by the sketches he made of Brooklyn kids from the late 1940s. This reflection on anti-Semitism frames the beginning of Sendak’s career. His pictures for Brundibar (2003) are his most recent call to resist bullies no matter how often they return.

Sendak and Ruth Krauss expanded the possibilities of children’s literature with books like A Hole Is to Dig, which was highly original at the time for its portrayal of a child’s sense of play and wonder detached from any moral or lesson. Sendak illustrated comic-like pictures of kids being kids, getting dirty, and speaking their own language. He assembled the illustrations from small vignettes he drew of frolicsome kids, then pasted them together to form a patchwork of images (you can see the edges of two illustrations pasted together below and blended with a kind of white pigment). His drawings for Krauss were both a celebration of children’s culture and a reflection on the kinds of raucous kids he loved to draw around Brooklyn.

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THE LINDBERGH TRAUMA

“Then this beautiful baby is taken away, and I really felt that unless he was restored, that my own life was in permanent jeopardy.”

As much as Sendak was shaped by his own corner of Brooklyn, he was also deeply influenced by world events, through movies, newspapers, radio, and the adult conversation in his living room. One national tragedy in particular became a source of trauma for Sendak, one he has returned to throughout his career. In 1932, Charles Lindbergh, Jr.—the infant son of the famous aviator—was kidnapped, taken through his window in the night. The hunt for the child and his kidnappers became a national sensation. Sendak noted, “We needed something big happening to take our minds off the Depression. This was Colonel Lindbergh, which was like God.” Several months later, the baby was found dead and Bruno Hauptmann was put on trial for murder, extending the media frenzy. The photographs, radio broadcasts, and atmosphere of helplessness made a profound and lasting impact on Sendak. Haunted and fascinated, he has explored the story in several children’s books and attributes his general sense of children’s vulnerability directly to the hysteria over the kidnapping.

Sendak tried to work through his memories of the Lindbergh kidnapping in books such as Outside Over There, which completed the Wild Things/Night Kitchen trilogy. While Wild Things explored his childhood vision of his own family, and Night Kitchen was a tribute to New York and to his parents, Outside Over There turned to the calamities that can befall children. The book’s kidnapping theme reflected the Lindbergh episode, but it was also the first major book in which Sendak traced his fears and inspirations back to the Old World. The story draws upon European folktales of goblins and changelings, and the pictures make use of Victorian costumes and the rich color palette derived from 19th century German painting. Outside Over There also marks the advent of Mozart, his favorite composer, as a major figure in Sendak’s art; he becomes a symbol of light and hope in an Old World torn apart by violence and hatred.
THROWN BACK TO THE OLD WORLD

“We would try to drag them into America, and they were just dragging back.’

Assimilation was a constant struggle in the Sendak household. Sendak has said that as much as he wanted to live his childhood in the exuberance and excitement of his Brooklyn neighborhood, his parents were constantly pulling him back into their shtetl mentality. Shtetls (Yiddish for "little towns") were the Jewish villages of Eastern Europe, from which many American Jews emigrated at the turn of the 20th century. Often impoverished and subject to acts of discrimination and violence, they were also vibrant communities and centers of Jewish culture and learning. Like many new immigrants, Philip and Sarah Sendak looked back on their old homes with a mixture of despair and nostalgia. They immersed young Maurice in tales of the Old World and photographs of relatives from the shtetls, many of whom were killed in the Holocaust. While the young Maurice sometimes felt that his parents were dragging him back into the Old World, he was also deeply absorbed in the stories and photographs they shared. In numerous books, the adult Sendak has retraced his family steps and, it seems, willingly thrown himself back into the Old World.

Both Maurice and his older brother, Jack, were intrigued by their father’s tales of Old World life. Jack’s story, The Happy Rain, for which Maurice drew the illustrations, recalls the shtetl stories of their father. Both the story and the image pay homage to the Old World spirit both Jack and Maurice grew up imagining. Maurice’s ink wash pictures are at once dreary and jubilant, reflecting the duality he so often associated with shtetl life.

In 1969, Philip Sendak was in ill health and living with his son Maurice in Greenwich Village. Before he passed away in 1970, he wrote a story in Yiddish called In Grandpa’s House, which Maurice illustrated twelve years later. Maurice chose a charcoal style that resembles the worn and faded family photographs that had fascinated him since he was a child.

Sendak illustrated renowned Yiddish-language author Isaac Bashevis Singer’s collection Zlateh the Goat and Other Stories. This collaboration was a proud moment for Sendak’s parents, who were gratified to see their son working with such a prominent author on folktales for adults. Just as he used his Jewish relatives in New York as his inspiration for the Wild Things, Sendak turned to his distant relatives in Europe for the characters in Singer’s folktales. Using photographs of aunts and uncles, Sendak captured Singer’s humorous and sometimes haunting portrayal of shtetl life. He also studied photo albums and yizkor (remembrance) books that showed town life in the old shtetls. Photographs were a window into the Old World that helped Sendak capture both the spirit of shtetl life, and the spirits of his long-lost relatives.

Sendak based the character Atzel on a portrait of his grandfather that hung in his room. Once when he was young, Sendak lapsed into a delirium from scarlet fever: “I tried to climb into the picture and I spoke Yiddish to the picture. And my mother was petrified... she snatched the picture off the wall to get it away from me. And then she tore it into a hundred different pieces... When she died, we found the remnants; she stuffed them into tissue paper, she couldn't throw them away. And I had him restored, and he now hangs in my room again, in a different oval frame.”
A STORY WITHIN A STORY

“I am a child of the Holocaust.”

In Dear Mili (1988), Sendak began what many consider a second trilogy of books, one which engages with the legacy of the Holocaust in picture book form. The story, by Wilhelm Grimm, is about a young girl named Mili who escapes war by hiding herself in a dark forest. Sendak felt Mili’s story resonated with the real-life story of Anne Frank, whose hiding place from the Nazis he visited in Amsterdam. Sendak transformed Dear Mili into a work of Holocaust remembrance, of witness to war, and of the incredible endurance of children. At the same time, he invokes European visual art traditions from several epochs, such as stylistic elements from Rembrandt and Van Gogh. Sendak depicts the barbaric turn in European history, but it is also in Europe that he finds his hope and inspiration—in the lives and works of its artists, especially Mozart.

Final drawing for Dear Mili, © Maurice Sendak, ca. 1988, all rights reserved.

In this scene, Mili stands with her guardian angel in the forest, while St. Joseph looks on from the left. But Sendak subtly builds memorials to the Holocaust into the scene. The girls stand in silent remembrance in front of grave stones with Hebrew lettering, while in the background Sendak places a chorus of children borrowed from a photograph of young French victims of the Holocaust. Sendak has assigned his idol, Mozart, to conduct them, and it is Mozart, more than St. Joseph or the angel, who seems the divine presence here.

Final drawing for Dear Mili, © Maurice Sendak, 1985, all rights reserved.

As Mili loses herself in a dark forest, Sendak employs this wordless two-page illustration to immerse the reader in her desperate situation. Even her guardian angel has forsaken her, falling asleep behind a log. Sendak uses the forest itself to express Mili’s hopelessness on one level, and the horrors of the Holocaust on another: the guard tower of Auschwitz stands in the background of the picture, while the tree trunks and roots suggest the emaciated bodies of concentration camp victims. For many children who have not seen the terrifying films taken of the camps after their liberation, the forest in Dear Mili is merely a creepy, haunted place; but Sendak wants adults to recognize the haunting reality behind the scene.

Untitled frontispiece to The Marquis, Vol. 6 No. 2 (Spring 1946), all rights reserved.

While the Sendak family lived in relative safety in America, the Old World was tearing itself apart. As the horrors of the Holocaust were still being revealed, Sendak created this stark and terrifying picture for his high school literary magazine; the image shows two victims of Auschwitz having just dug their own grave. Sendak was 17 at the time. The image reflects a dark mood throughout Sendak’s community, and a young Sendak grappling with his terror through art.
WE ARE ALL IN THE DUMPS

“It took a lot out of me, and I know it was a book that just sailed over the heads of most people, and it was too strange.”

Sendak’s preoccupation with shtetl life, the Holocaust, and the Lindbergh kidnapping all come together in his haunting 1993 book We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy. The book combines familiar Sendakian children, such as a cast of rough Brooklyn kids, with classic nursery rhyme characters (including rats, cats, and the moon). It also experimentally blends New and Old World settings, as well as episodes from Sendak’s past. As Jack and Guy attempt to rescue a kidnapped little boy in a Brooklyn slum, they are transported to places that eerily resemble the architecture of concentration camps in Europe. If Dear Mili was a way for Sendak to bear witness to the Holocaust, We Are All in the Dumps is a story about the Holocaust’s awful legacy, as well as emerging social problems in America.

Final drawing for We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy, © Maurice Sendak, ca. 1993, all rights reserved.

In this image, Sendak adapts Old World imagery to a New World social problem. Sendak’s inspiration for the cover of this book came from a painting by Andrea Mantegna, an Italian Renaissance artist. Mantegna’s painting shows Jesus reaching out to a lost soul falling into Limbo. Sendak, in contrast, assigns the role of rescuer to Jack and Guy, two homeless children. The newspapers and tattered clothing of the characters reveal that for Sendak moral danger lies not in the afterlife but in the here and now: in the crisis of childhood poverty in America.

Final drawing for We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy, © Maurice Sendak, ca. 1993, all rights reserved.

Mozart appears as an angel in this scene (you can see his wig tied with a ribbon), a mark, once again, of his divine status for Sendak. The characters have just escaped their abductors and are brought heavenward to safety, with the composer adding to the redemptive power of this scene. Mozart’s uplifting influence may be one of the reasons Sendak has slipped him into books that brave the dark corners of his memory.

Final drawing for We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy, © Maurice Sendak, ca. 1993, all rights reserved.

Two longstanding and irresolvable fears emerge in this image from We Are All in the Dumps. Just as Outside Over There was concerned with a kidnapping, the conflict here centers on a group of rats that abduct a homeless child. His friends pursue him through Brooklyn and Manhattan to this pivotal scene, which takes place under a looming guard tower that is based on the tower at Auschwitz.
In 2003, Sendak collaborated with playwright Tony Kushner on Brundibar. This was Sendak’s third major book that attempted to resolve his feelings towards the Holocaust, and rather than focusing on themes of remembrance (as in Dear Mili) or redemption (as in We Are All in the Dumps), Brundibar focuses on resistance. The book is based on a 1938 Czech opera by composer Hans Krása about a town-square tyrant named Brundibar. Hitler was then menacing Europe, and Krása had him in mind when he devised the plot about resistance to bullies. In the opera, when two poor children try to sing for money in the town square in order to buy milk for their sick mother, Brundibar threatens them and chases them away. In the end, they join with hundreds of other kids Brundibar has oppressed to drive him from the square. While cautioning children that bullies always reappear, the central message of the story is summed up in its lines, “Remember, please be brave, and bullies will behave!”

“In my books and the subject matter of my books, my fighting is all there, my fighting to stay alive, my fighting to communicate.’

During World War II, the Brundibar opera was performed by Jewish children at Terezin, a Nazi concentration camp in Czechoslovakia. Soon after the performances, the children were deported to Auschwitz, where most of them died. To immerse himself in this painful history, Sendak collected items from Terezin, particularly photographs. These helped him construct a backdrop for the book, just as he used photographs of his family as the basis for Isaac Bashevis Singer’s stories. Some of his pictures suggest the squalor of the ghetto while others show the splendor of central Prague and the historic Jewish quarter. In the end, Sendak found that Brundibar, like the books that preceded it, offered only momentary refuge from the legacy of the Holocaust: “It only works while you’re doing the work, while you’re drawing the pictures and you’re immersed in the book. And then when you’re done, you know it’s just a book.”

(Right and Below)
Final drawing for Brundibar,
© Maurice Sendak, ca. 2003, all rights reserved.

The architecture of Jewish life in Europe—from the synagogues and houses to the awful reminders of the Holocaust—makes its way into Brundibar and other books. These two drawings are layered with references to the concentration camps, including the pile of shoes in the ghetto in which the children are forced to sleep, as well as the sign reading “Arbeit Macht Frei” (“Work makes you free”), which hung over the entrance to Auschwitz.

Final and preliminary drawings for Brundibar,
© Maurice Sendak, ca. 2003, all rights reserved.

Sendak’s earliest drawings of Brundibar were of Hitler himself. Fearing that depicting Hitler outright actually gave him undue attention, Sendak re-envisioned the character and created his own composite bully drawn from a cross-section of history, including political cartoons of Napoleon. Brundibar represents bullies throughout history combined into one person. An important message in the book is the “coda,” a final note from the beaten Brundibar announcing that there will always be another tyrant around the corner and that children must be prepared to resist.
Sendak’s artistic journey has led him deeper into his own family’s history and his Jewish identity. While his first trilogy dealt with the way he experienced his Jewish roots in the New World, his more recent trilogy is grounded in the Old World. He first returned to European settings and characters as a way to exercise a fascination for the lost world of his parents, but more recently he has taken on the larger problem of exorcising the specter of the Holocaust. Guided by a respect for all children, as well as a tenacious attachment to his own childhood fears and longings, Sendak has transformed our ideas about what a picture book can and should be. Maurice Sendak may never fully resolve his complex feelings about his own past or the lives of children in general, but the questions he has wrestled with have driven him in new directions in his art, and even provided a kind of refuge. As he puts it, “Happiness comes only through art . . . music, reading, working. That’s it. And crappy television.” Sendak continues to work, and he continues to place his fears and inspirations (both high- and low-brow) within the New and Old World nutshell of his imagination.

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Founded in 1954, the Rosenbach Museum & Library is home to one of the nation’s great collections of rare books and manuscripts. It is also the home Maurice Sendak chose for his artwork, and is the largest and most comprehensive Sendak collection in the world. The Rosenbach Museum & Library seeks to inspire curiosity, inquiry, and creativity by engaging broad audiences in exhibitions, programs, and research based on its remarkable and expanding collections. To learn more about Sendak and his collection, visit www.rosenbach.org.

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