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## Summary

*Ar'ursulek – The Whaler* is a tale about a boy who wants to become a whaler, and needed to learn from someone who would be willing to teach him. One day, the Ar'ursulek takes the boy under his wing to train him to become a whaler. Throughout the story, the Ar'ursulek tells the boy not to do things, but the boy disobeys him and does these things anyway. This causes the boy to be very curious about the Ar'ursulek and a little untrusting of him.

After they set out to catch a whale. The boy notices the Ar'ursulek doing some more unusual things. Then he starts to question the Ar'ursulek. This angers the Ar'ursulek; he tells the boy to do what he asks and, never question him. They finally get the whale that they were after and it washes up on the beach of the island. That night, the boy follows the Ar'ursulek and sees him dancing with a corpse, so the boy throws a rock and his bow at him and hits him. The Ar'ursulek gives chase, but then disappears, never to be seen again.

## Author Biography

Ralph Demidoff was an Elder from Little Afognak. In an article by Alisha Drabek, PhD, titled *Honoring the Creator of an Alutiiq Rosetta Stone* (2018), she stated that his family left the village when he was a boy. Throughout his life, he was a fisherman, before and after he entered the military to serve in World War II. According to Drabek he was a “descendent from a hereditary line of whale shamans” (2012). Drabek explains that the story *Ar'ursulek* was told to his niece who recorded the story, which was later preserved at the University of Alaska Fairbanks archives.

An audio recording of Demidoff telling the story of *Ar'ursulek* can be found at <https://languagearchive.alutiiqmuseum.org/creator/ralph-demidoff>. This version is the Sugpiaq version. The quality isn't the best, but according to Drabek, this recording was done a few times and in the English version that was done, five stanzas were left out.

To really understand Demidoff's story, *Ar'ursulek*, a reader should have a deeper understanding of how Sugpiaq Peoples viewed whalers, the use of poison, and little people. According to an article in the Alutiiq Museum about the *Whaler – Arursulek, Arwarsulek* (2020), whaling wasn't just something that someone jumped into on a whim. It was usually passed down in a family lineage or if someone showed a certain amount of aptitude in the work, they were trained by an elder whaler.

The use of poison during whaling is something that Demidoff really focuses on in his story as well and in many other Alaska Native stories. Indigenous Peoples have long known the qualities of poisonous plants in their regions and how they have aided them in hunting. According to an Alutiiq Museum article, titled *Poison – Yaataq*, describes Monkshood, *Aconitum Delphinifolium*, as a slender, beautiful, blue-flowered herb that grows in meadows. This plant was dried and ground and then mixed with the boiled fat of dead whalers to make a potent toxin that whalers smeared onto the tips of their spears. (2020). For more information on the use of poisons in hunting, please refer to: [Where We Found a Whale](#) which contains information on how the use of poisons have aided Alutiiq hunters in maintaining their lifestyle in this harsh environment.

Demidoff also makes mention of a little man that comes out of the whale's mouth to get pails of water. According to an Alutiiq Museum article titled *Dwarf, Magical Little Person – Sunguk*, "Dwarves were often helpful to people in trouble and brought luck to hunters who treated them kindly" (2020). The article goes on to state that "Alutiiq people believe that every object in the universe has a human-like spirit – an actual person inside of it – some people conclude that dwarves are spirits awaiting reincarnation."

### Discussion Questions

1. Why did the Demidoff choose to leave out five stanzas in the English version versus the Sugpiaq version?
2. Why did Ar'ursulek (the whaler) take on the boy as his apprentice but not want to show him some of the things he was doing?
3. Why did the boy disobey the Ar'ursulek, even though a core Sugpiaq value is to respect your elders?
4. Before the Ar'ursulek and the boy leave to go whaling. He goes to the cemetery and digs up a corpse and dances with it. What is the purpose of the cemetery ritual that Ar'ursulek partakes in?
5. Why didn't the village have human oil all ready for the whalers, or is there something special about digging up the remains and using the oil from these specific hunters?
6. Who is or what is the purpose of the little man who comes out of the whale's mouth to get water from the stream?
7. During the story, Demidoff spends a lot of time talking about when the Ar'ursulek smeared the spear with auk (blood) as the boy watched. Why does Demidoff feel this part to be important enough to spend that time on when most would have glazed over it and moved on?
8. Throughout the story, the Ar'ursulek is portrayed as a bad teacher by Western sense, such as yelling at the boy for asking a question. And when the Ar'ursulek asked the boy if he was scared, why did the boy feel the need to lie to Ar'ursulek and say that he wasn't scared?

9. Even though Ar'ursulek taught the boy about whaling and showed him many wondrous, albeit, mysterious things, why did the boy decide to hit Ar'ursulek with a rock and then hit him with his bow in the middle of the ceremony?
10. At the end, Ar'ursulek chases after the boy and then disappears, never to be seen again. What happened to Ar'ursulek at the end?

## Works Cited

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