

JEWS CROSSING THE BRIDGE IN THE LODZ GHETTO



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Lesson 4 **The Ghettos**

STUDENT HANDOUT - The Ghettos

Cultural activity took place within the ghettos and the extent varied from ghetto to ghetto. Some of the activities were clandestine, held at the initiative of underground organizations; they included literary evenings, gatherings to mark the anniversary of a Jewish artist, and concerts. Jewish authors, directors, and poets produced works in the ghettos, and there were secret libraries. Some of the cultural activities were based on works written before the war; others drew on the situation in the ghetto. The cultural activities helped people temporarily forget the worries of ghetto life and were a source of encouragement. However, there was also criticism; some people argued that these events were inappropriate in a place where so many people were dying every day.

The vast majority of Jews deported from the ghettos were murdered in the extermination camps; only a small percentage were taken to concentration and

forced labor camps in the late stage of the war. By the end of the war when Europe was liberated, except in Budapest, not a single ghetto, neither in its entirety, nor in part, remained.



Theresienstadt, Czechoslovakia
The Library

Lesson 4 The Ghettos

STUDENT HANDOUT – The Lodz Ghetto

Lodz is the second largest city in western Poland, known for its textile industry. Before the war, Jews played an influential role in this industry. Lodz was occupied by the German army (Wehrmacht) in September 1939. As part of western Poland, Lodz was annexed to the Reich, and named Litzmannstadt for the German general who had conquered the city in World War I. The Nazis reserved this part of Poland for settlement by Germans, most of whom had lived for generations in the Baltic countries. By the end of 1939, tens of thousands of Jews and Poles had been deported from the area, and Germans were settled there. However, for administrative and logistical reasons, population transfers were halted at the beginning of 1940.

Earlier than most Jewish communities in Poland, the Jews of Lodz suffered from exceptionally brutal persecution, eviction from their homes, and deportation. As early as May 1940, the ghetto was established, and eventually 164,000 Jews were incarcerated in it. The Lodz ghetto was one of the first ghettos to be established and it became the second largest ghetto in the occupied Polish territories. The Lodz ghetto was completely sealed off and detached from the outside world. Since many of the residents of Lodz were of German origin and identified with Germany and the Nazis, Jews there faced a hostile environment. The hostility of their neighbors and the strict closure of the ghetto made it almost impossible to smuggle food into the ghetto, which compelled the Jews to live on the meager ration of food allotted to them by the Germans.

The *Judenrat* in Lodz was led by Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski. Before the war, Rumkowski had been a junior member of the Jewish community administration in Lodz. Like many other Jewish leaders during the Holocaust, Rumkowski found himself in an impossible position between obeying German orders and trying to help Jews grapple with the hardships of ghetto existence. The German authorities created this tension on purpose, hoping the anger and the frustration of the local Jewish

population would be spent on Jewish leaders and not the German authorities.

It appears that Rumkowski often displayed delusions of grandeur and his behavior bordered on dictatorial since he perceived himself to be the only one who could successfully navigate the Lodz Jewish community through troubled times. Although he believed that he could be the savior of the ghetto, in the end, he too was murdered along with most of Lodz Jewry.

The large number of Jews in the ghetto, the total isolation in a hostile environment, the strict supervision imposed by the Germans, the acute hunger, and the difficulties in obtaining the most basic resources necessary to live made it very difficult to survive in the Lodz ghetto. The struggle for survival was a daily, up-hill battle.

Rumkowski thought that the only possible way to keep people alive in the ghetto was to open factories and workshops so that the German authorities would consider the Jews valuable and allow them to live.

**By the end of 1942, some
204,800 people had passed
through the Lodz ghetto.**

This policy came to be known as “salvation through labor.” Jews forced to work in these factories and workshops manufactured textile products for the Germans. Conditions in the labor workshops were harsh. The factory floors were small and congested, lighting and ventilation were poor, and most work was done by hand for lack of appropriate machinery. Production quotas were set beyond the workers’ abilities. Workers were “remunerated” for their efforts with a portion of soup each day and a slice of bread. Despite Rumkowski’s efforts to obtain increased food rations from the Germans, the daily portions did not suffice, and more than 43,000 Jews starved to death.

Lesson 4 The Ghettos

STUDENT HANDOUT – The Lodz Ghetto

In the first years of the ghetto's existence, the chairman of the *Judenrat* ran an education system with the enrollment of 15,000 children, from preschool to high school; even matriculation exams were given in the ghetto. Regular studies ceased in October 1941. Once children were enrolled in the workshops (to protect them from being deported to death), some managed to continue studying at their place of work. Over 7,000 young people continued to study in this way. In the ghetto, there were also some cultural and religious activities, which were often felt to be no more than a sad remainder of what life had been.

In 1942, the first *Aktion* against the Jews of Lodz took place. Most of the people who were deported from the ghetto were very young Jewish children, the elderly, and the sick. They were taken to the Chelmno extermination camp where they were murdered in gas vans.

The ghetto continued to exist for two more years, and work was the focal point of ghetto life. The populace was desperately hungry and food could be obtained only through work. The Lodz ghetto was the last remaining ghetto in Poland, and it was only "liquidated" in August 1944. During the four years of its existence, Jews in Lodz attempted, despite the severe hardships, to preserve some of their previous ways of life and imbue their daily lives in the arbitrary and hopeless ghetto reality with meaning.



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Children Celebrating Purim in the Ghetto,
Lodz, Poland

In the summer of 1944, an unknown Jew was sent from the Lodz ghetto to Auschwitz. Upon his arrival at the camp, he entrusted his diary, which he carried on his last journey, to a member of the Sonderkommando, Zalman Loewenthal. Loewenthal hid the diary, but also felt a historical obligation to add some of his own comments in the margins. The writer of the diary blamed Rumkowski for the catastrophe that had befallen the Jews of Lodz, and Loewenthal added in his own hand that the accusatory finger should be pointed at the Germans — they were the ones who were truly responsible for the murder of the Jews. The writer of the diary, Zalman Loewenthal, and Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski both perished in Auschwitz.

Lesson 4 **The Ghettos**

STUDENT HANDOUT - Photograph from the Lodz Ghetto



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Lesson 4 **The Ghettos**

STUDENT HANDOUT - Poems by Children in the Lodz Ghetto

This poem was written by an unknown girl who was left alone in the Lodz ghetto with her brother. Their fate is unknown, but it must be assumed that both brother and sister perished in the Holocaust.

Childhood, precious days,

Alas, how few they were!

I will remember them as if in a fog.

Only in dreams at night can I

Identify days long gone.

Brief, brief is the happiness of a person in this world of ours.



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Lesson 4 **The Ghettos**

STUDENT HANDOUT – Poems by Children in the Lodz Ghetto

This poem was written by Avraham Koplwicz, a child in the Lodz ghetto. Avraham was born in 1930. In the ghetto he worked in a shoemaker's workshop. He was taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau with his mother and father in 1944. Avraham was murdered in Auschwitz at the age of fourteen.

When I grow up and reach the age of 20

I'll set out to see the enchanting world.

I'll take a seat in a bird with a motor;

I'll rise and soar high into space.

I'll fly, sail, hover

Over the lonely faraway world.

I'll soar over rivers and oceans

Skyward shall I ascend and blossom,

A cloud my sister, the wind my brother.

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Lesson 4 The Ghettos

Lesson-Specific Resources and Supplementary Materials


Notes for Teachers

Teachers are strongly encouraged to review materials carefully before sharing them with students to ensure that content is age-appropriate.

Materials published by Yad Vashem are available through their Web site at www.yadvashem.org; materials published by Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation are available at www.vhf.org; and materials published by the Anti-Defamation League are available at www.adl.org.

Symbol Key:

 Video

 Print material with accompanying CD-ROM

The resources listed below are just a sampling of the many print and non-print instructional materials available to teachers on the topics covered in this lesson. These resources are intended to provide teachers with ideas for additional lessons and activities, projects, and outside student reading assignments.

Adelson, A. (Ed.). (1996). *The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak: Five Notebooks from the Lodz Ghetto*. New York: Oxford University Press.


This diary details Dawid's life in the Lodz ghetto from age fifteen to almost nineteen. Through these entries, readers learn of the horrors and the daily existence inhabitants, especially young people, faced.

Dobroszycki, L. (Ed.). (1984). *The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto, 1941–1944*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

This resource is a day-by-day rendering of the history of the Lodz ghetto based on documents saved by those working in the Jewish administration's Department of Archives and sanctioned by Chaim Rumkowski, head of the ghetto's Jewish Council. Photographs, maps, and extensive notes are included.

Flam, G. (1992). *Singing for Survival: Songs of the Lodz Ghetto, 1940–45*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

This book includes background on the Lodz ghetto and the music culture that flourished there. The songs and stories reveal life in the ghetto through a unique lens.

 "Hell on Earth," from the *Broken Silence* documentary series. (2004). Los Angeles: Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation.

This fifty-six-minute Czech-language documentary focuses on Theresienstadt. Archival photos, drawings, and poems by children and original footage of Theresienstadt are interspersed with numerous survivor testimonies. Subtitled in English.

Milgram, A., Sagie, C., and Imber, S. (1993). *Everyday Life in the Warsaw Ghetto*. Jerusalem: Yad Vashem.

This resource is a documentation of life in the Warsaw ghetto, based on photographs taken by a German soldier in September

Lesson 4 The Ghettos

Lesson-Specific Resources and Supplementary Materials

1941. Included are twenty-seven black-and-white photographs (available as slides or on CD) documenting life in the ghetto; a teacher's manual with a brief historical introduction; excerpts of testimonies and diaries and suggestions for class activities; and a student workbook. Available in English and Spanish.

Rubin, S. G. (2000). *Fireflies in the Dark: The Story of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis and the Children of Terezin*. New York: Holiday House.

This book profiles Dicker-Brandeis, a Bauhaus-trained art therapist who brought art supplies with her when she was deported from Prague to Theresienstadt (Terezin). Included in the book are pictures that the children in Theresienstadt drew and painted under her guidance.

Sagie, C., and Morgenstern, N. (1999). *The Legend of the Lodz Ghetto Children*. Jerusalem: Yad Vashem. 1999.

In the guise of a playful fantasy, this legend and album, created in the Lodz ghetto, vividly describes life in the ghetto where children labored in factories and workshops in the hope of escaping deportation to the extermination camps. The unit contains seventeen color posters with illustrations from the album; a teacher's manual, with historical background; the Legend; testimonies by ghetto survivors; and articles and suggestions for classroom activities.

Smith, F., and Grossman, M. (2000). *My Secret Camera: Life in the Lodz Ghetto*. San Diego: Gulliver Books, 2000.

At great risk to himself, Mendel Grossman secretly took thousands of photographs that bore witness to the fear, the hardship, and the struggle for survival woven through the daily lives of the people unjustly imprisoned with him. Some of those pictures are interspersed throughout this book.

Trunk, I., and Robinson, J. (1996). *Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe under Nazi Occupation*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

A detailed study of the *Judenrate* (Jewish councils) in the ghettos of Eastern Europe, including the councils' relations with the German authorities. Included are maps, charts, illustrations, extensive notes, and an index.

Unger, M. (1995). *The Last Ghetto: Life in the Lodz Ghetto, 1940–1944*. Jerusalem: Yad Vashem.

This monograph presents an exhibit on the Lodz ghetto, including elements typical of other ghettos in Poland as well as aspects that are particular to Lodz alone. The exhibition focuses on the Jewish point of view, and the narrators who tell the story do so in the words of Jews whose authentic diaries are on display at the exhibition.

Weitz, S., and Cogley, S. B. (1993). *I Promised I Would Tell*. Brookline, MA: Facing History and Ourselves. Sonia Schreiber Weitz uses diary entries and poetry to help students understand her experiences as a child in Krakow, her years in concentration camps, and her time in a camp for displaced persons.