

Lesson 4 **THE GHETTOS**



*“It was the beginning of the end....”*

– Ellis Lewin  
Jewish Survivor

## Lesson 4 **The Ghettos**

### Important Information to Keep in Mind When Using This Lesson

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- The Nazis' goal when closing Jews in ghettos was not only to deprive them of their human rights, but to deprive them of their human dignity. The ghetto period is often referred to as the “bypass death,” for more than 100,000 Jews died in the Warsaw ghetto alone. Many people often mistakenly assume that the Nazis issued directives to establish ghettos in the Polish occupation zone in September 1939 in an effort to confine Jews prior to deporting them to extermination camps. However, during this transitional phase, a detailed blueprint for carrying out mass murder did not yet exist, but rather there was a wish to solve the so-called “Jewish problem” in some rapid and radical way. Only in 1941, with the invasion of the Soviet Union, did the last phase of the Nazis' plan begin — a plan in which they sought to murder every single Jew within their reach.
- This lesson uses the Łódź ghetto as a way to tell a larger story. While each ghetto was unique, this lesson uses Łódź as a prism to try and understand the ghettos in general and something of the mentality of the people who would confine human beings in such an inhumane manner. What happened in Łódź and the decisions made by people who established the ghetto shed light on larger decisions that were being made elsewhere, even though the Łódź ghetto had its own uniqueness and special historical circumstances.
- Students often ask why Jews did not escape the ghettos. It is important for students to remember that the Holocaust created a world of choiceless choices. While we know the ultimate fate of Jews during the Holocaust, Jews did not know that they would be sent to extermination camps — especially when the Germans continuously employed many different means to camouflage their actions. In addition, due to conditions in the ghettos, Jews were malnourished and ill. They did not have the strength to carry themselves around — let alone rebel or design escape routes. They had lost their possessions, and many Jews felt a strong responsibility to take care of family members living with them, especially young children and elderly parents. And, even if there was a way to escape, there was no place to go. Non-Jews living outside the ghetto walls were not willing to help them, and many times hiding Jews was punishable by death. It is also important to keep in mind that even prior to the beginning of World War II, Jews who attempted to emigrate from Europe had almost nowhere to turn due to immigration quotas and strict policies toward refugees. Overall, most Jews in Europe were trapped at that time.
- Although empathetic activities such as simulations can be very effective techniques for interesting young people in history by highlighting human experience and responses to events in the past, great care needs to be taken in selecting such activities when approaching a subject as sensitive and complex as the Holocaust. Some young people might over-identify with the events of the Holocaust, be excited by the power and even the “glamour” of the Nazis, or demonstrate a morbid fascination for the suffering of the victims. Herein lies the danger of creative writing or role-play exercises that encourage students to imagine they were directly involved in the Holocaust. It may be useful, however, for students to take on the role of someone from a neutral country, responding to events: a journalist writing an article for a newspaper about the persecution of Jews; a concerned citizen writing to his or her political representative; or a campaigner trying to mobilize public opinion. Such activities can be good motivators and can also highlight possible courses of action that students can take about events that concern them in the world today.

### ABOUT THIS LESSON

#### Cover Photo

Lódź, Poland, Street Scene in the Ghetto (1027/1)

#### Curriculum Connections

This lesson includes material appropriate for history, social studies, Holocaust studies, English, social science, art, and music classes.

#### Lesson Preparation

- ▶ Assemble required materials
- ▶ Cue the VHS or DVD player to view the appropriate testimony clips throughout the lesson
- ▶ Prepare overhead transparencies of *Jews Crossing the Bridge in the Lódź Ghetto* and *Ghettos in Europe*
- ▶ Prepare copies of the following student handouts: *The Ghettos*, *The Lódź Ghetto*, *Photograph from the Lódź Ghetto*, *Poems by Children in the Lódź Ghetto*, Excerpts from *The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak*, and *Diary Entry from the Lódź Ghetto*

#### Key Words & Phrases

<i>Aktion</i>	Lódź ghetto
Auschwitz-Birkenau	Nazi
Chelmno	Nazi ideology
concentration camp	occupation
Einsatzgruppen	Purim
extermination camp	refugee
Gentile	Reich
ghetto	<i>Ressortes</i>
Holocaust	Sonderkommando
<i>Judenrat</i>	Warsaw ghetto
liquidated	Zionist

### RATIONALE

This lesson will provide students with an opportunity to learn about the ghettos established throughout Nazi Europe and to study primary sources that were rescued from the Lódź ghetto in Poland. Students will recognize that the ghettos were another step in the continuum of Nazi racial policies that humiliated and limited Jewish existence and caused many to lose their sense of human dignity. The ghettos were also a death trap caused by overcrowding, starvation, diseases, and grief.

### OBJECTIVES

- Students will identify the aims of the Nazis in establishing ghettos.
- Students will specify countries in Eastern and Central Europe where the Nazis established ghettos.
- Students will examine what life was like for Jews forced to live in ghettos, with particular emphasis on the Lódź ghetto.
- Students will analyze primary source documents from the Lódź ghetto.
- Students will consider the various ways that individuals respond to unjust actions.


### REQUIREMENTS

*Materials:* VHS or DVD of Visual History Testimony: *The Ghettos*, VHS or DVD player and monitor, chalk/dry-erase board, overhead projector, chart paper and markers, student handouts, transparency masters

*Time:* Three to four class periods

### TECHNIQUES AND SKILLS

Large-group discussion, small-group work, interpreting visual history testimony, brainstorming, reading for comprehension and information, comparing and contrasting sources, map skills, analyzing primary source material, interpreting poetry, journal writing

 Testimony Viewing ▶  
Total Running Time: 03:36

### [About the Interviewees]

**Ellis Lewin** was born on May 22, 1932 in Łódź, Poland. He lived in the Łódź ghetto, and later spent time in the concentration camps of Augsburg, Dachau, München-Allach, and Kaufbeuren. Ellis also experienced life in the Auschwitz II-Birkenau extermination camp. His interview was conducted in the United States. When the war began, Ellis was seven years old.

**Joseph Morton** was born on July 11, 1924 in Łódź, Poland. He lived in the Łódź ghetto, and later spent time in the concentration camps of Kaufering, Auschwitz, Mühldorf, Dachau, München-Allach, and Landshut. His interview was conducted in the United States. When the war began, Joseph was fifteen years old.

## PROCEDURES

### Part 1: Life in the Ghettos

1. Write the word “ghetto” on the board. Have students share what they know about the word and record their responses. Tell students to listen in the testimonies for examples of how ghettos during the Holocaust were different from their understanding of what is referred to as a “ghetto” today.
2. Show students Part 1 of Visual History Testimony: *The Ghettos* and discuss the questions below.
  - In their testimonies, Ellis Lewin and Joseph Morton share some of their early feelings and experiences in the ghetto. What kinds of things does Ellis talk about? What kinds of things does Joseph share?
  - Based on the testimonies you just heard, how were ghettos during the Holocaust different from your understanding of what a ghetto is today?
  - What visual picture has begun to emerge for you about ghetto life after listening to these two testimonies?
  - How do you think Ellis and Joseph felt sharing these memories? How did you feel listening to them?
3. Show students the photograph *Jews Crossing the Bridge in the Łódź Ghetto*. Ask students what they remember from Joseph’s testimony about this bridge. The Lodz ghetto was separated by a bridge that spanned trolley tracks in the city of Łódź. Since Jews were not permitted to use the trolleys and had to be completely sequestered and isolated, the German occupiers built a bridge over the tracks to connect the two parts of the ghetto. Because the bridge was narrow, Jews often had to wait long periods of time to get from one side of the bridge to the other. Ask students to discuss what they think the Jews crossing the bridge were feeling as they looked down upon the scene below.
4. Explain to students that the next step in Nazi ideology was the occupation. After conquering Poland in September 1939 (after already controlling Austria and parts of Czechoslovakia), Germany sought to conquer the whole world and arrange it in a “new order” based on Nazi racial ideology. The populations

### [About the word "Ghetto"]

Throughout history, a ghetto referred to a street or city section where only Jews lived. The word ghetto was first used in Venice in 1516, as part of the phrase "Gero Nuovo," meaning "New Foundry." This referred to the closed Jewish section of the city, which had originally been the site of a foundry. During World War II, the Jews of Eastern Europe were forced to leave their homes and move to ghettos where they were essentially held as prisoners.

living in Poland were mostly Slavs who were considered inferior and therefore treated as such.

5. Distribute the student handout, *The Ghettos*, and read together as a class.

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**NOTE:** Teachers may want to pose several of the questions below prior to reading the material.

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6. Have a whole-class discussion based on the questions below.

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**NOTE:** The first several questions address Nazi ideology and the latter questions ask students to consider Jewish responses to the ghettos. It is important that students have sufficient time to explore both perspectives.

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Questions about Nazi ideology:

- What were the Nazis' intentions in closing Jews in the ghettos?
- Why do you think the Germans wanted to establish ghettos near railway transports?
- What do you think Heydrich meant by "the final goal"?
- Why did the Germans establish a Jewish Council, or *Judenrat*, in each ghetto?
- Why do you think that the Germans themselves didn't govern the ghettos?
- How might the establishment of a *Judenrat* have given Jews in the ghetto a false sense of security?

Questions about Jewish responses:

- Share the following statement made by Chaim A. Kaplan, a teacher from the Warsaw ghetto, with students: "Ghetto life does not flow — rather it is stagnant and frozen. Around us — are walls! We have no space, we have no freedom of movement and action." What is the main feeling that emerges from hearing this passage?
- Identify some of the dilemmas that Jews faced on a daily basis in the ghettos.
- What were some ways that Jews attempted to keep their dignity and sanity in the ghettos?

- How does this description of ghetto life compare to the descriptions of ghetto life presented in the testimonies at the beginning of this lesson?
- Discuss the difference between physical and economic segregation.
- When people describe a neighborhood today as a “ghetto,” how is it different from the Nazi ghettos? Are there any similarities?

7. Show the *Ghettos in Europe* transparency. Explain to students that according to the latest findings on ghettos, the Nazis established approximately 1,000 ghettos throughout Eastern and Central Europe. Ask students to consider the following questions after studying the map:

- In which countries were the ghettos located? (Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, Soviet Union)
- Why do you think that there were no ghettos in Western Europe?
- What other observations do you have after looking at this map?

8. Explain to students that the next part of the lesson will concentrate on one ghetto in particular, the Łódź ghetto in Poland. Tell students that in addition to learning background information on this particular ghetto, they will also analyze primary source documents and watch first-person visual history testimonies from survivors of the Łódź ghetto. These sources will provide a glimpse into what life was for Jews (particularly the children and youth) living in ghettos between 1940 and 1944.

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**NOTE:** To learn more about what life was like for children in the ghettos, see Lesson 10: *The Children*.

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9. Distribute a copy of *The Łódź Ghetto* to each student and read together as a whole class. Follow with a discussion, using the questions below.

- Why did the Nazis completely seal the Łódź ghetto?
- Why did Chaim Rumkowski encourage the people in the Łódź ghetto to work and produce war supplies for the Nazi troops?


### [About the Photograph from the Łódź Ghetto]

This 1941 photograph by Mendel Grossman (1917–1945) is of a child leaving a soup kitchen with a pot of soup. Mendel Grossman, a Jew who took more than 10,000 photographs in the Łódź ghetto, recorded for posterity the horrors of the ghetto. He took advantage of his job in the ghetto statistics department — for which he was authorized to have a camera — to document ghetto life. Grossman’s photos, unlike most of the surviving photos of the Holocaust, were

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### [Homework Assignment]

Distribute *Excerpts from The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak* and assign its reading for homework. Instruct students to highlight or underline specific examples that illustrate that the Nazis’ goal was to confine, control, and weaken Jews.

 Testimony Viewing ▶

Total Running Time: 04:08

### [About the Interviewees]

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- What was the reasoning behind having children work in the workshops?
  - Why were the city inhabitants hostile to Jews in the Łódź ghetto?
10. Divide the class into small groups and give each group a copy of the following student handouts: *Photograph from the Łódź Ghetto* and *Poems by Children in the Łódź Ghetto*. Have group members discuss the photograph and poems using the following questions:
- What do you think is happening in the photograph?
  - What are you able to determine about life in the Łódź ghetto from studying this photograph?
  - Discuss the sentiments expressed in each of the poems.
  - What is Avraham Koplowicz’s dream?
  - Why do you think Avraham talks of the future while the anonymous girl talks about the past?
  - What is the significance of time in both poems?
  - Does it appear from reading these poems that both these children believed that they would survive the ghetto? Support your response with specific words, phrases, or lines from the poems.
  - What are your feelings as you look at the photograph and read the poems from the Łódź ghetto?

## Part 2: The Role of the Ghettos

1. Explain that the role of the ghetto was to control, confine, and weaken Jews. Instruct students to divide a piece of notebook paper into three columns and label the columns “control,” “confine,” and “weaken,” and to listen and write examples of each from the following testimonies.
2. Show students the first three clips from Part 2 of Visual History Testimony: *The Ghettos*, and have a discussion using the following questions:
  - Leo Berkenwald lived within the confines of what would eventually become the Łódź ghetto. Even though he was still living in the same city, how did his life change once the ghetto was created?

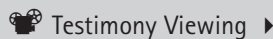
### [About the Interviewees]

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Part 2 Procedure 2 Testimony Viewing

**Leo Berkenwald** was born on August 31, 1923 in Lodz, Poland. He lived in the Łódź ghetto, and later spent time in the concentration camps of Dörnhau, Auschwitz, and Eule. His interview was conducted in the United States. When the war began, Leo was sixteen years old.

**Milton Belfer** was born on August 24, 1922 in Łódź, Poland. He lived in the Lodz ghetto, and later spent time in the

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Testimony Viewing ▶  
Total Running Time: 05:34

### [About the Interviewee]

**Eva Safferman** was born on April 15, 1928 in Łódź, Poland. She lived in the Łódź ghetto, and later spent time in the concentration camps of Hamburg-Sasel, Auschwitz I, and Bergen-Belsen. Eva also experienced life in the Auschwitz II-Birkenau extermination camp. Her interview was conducted in the United States. When the war began, Eva was eleven years old.

- What does Milton Belfer’s testimony add to your picture of life in the ghetto? What does Leo’s add?
  - What role did food play in George Shainfarber’s experience in the ghetto?
3. Divide the class into small groups and provide each group with a piece of chart paper and marker. Instruct each group to identify a recorder to create a composite list of ways that the Nazis controlled, confined, and weakened Jews in the ghettos based on the notes they took while watching the testimonies. In addition, instruct students to identify examples from Dawid’s diary that also illustrate how the Nazis used each of these three methods.
  4. Have a reporter or reporters from each group share the group’s responses to the chart assignment.
  5. Show students the next three clips from Part 2 of Visual History Testimony: *The Ghettos*, and discuss the following questions:
    - What are some specific things that you learned about what life was like for children in the ghettos from Eva Safferman, Ellis Lewin, and George Shainfarber?
    - How was their behavior uncharacteristic for most children?
  6. Explain to students that other diaries were discovered after the city of Łódź was liberated on January 19, 1945 that provide additional information about life in the ghetto. Distribute *Diary Entry from the Lodz Ghetto* or show on an overhead. Read the entry together and then follow with a discussion about both of the diaries and the visual history testimonies, using some or all of the questions below.
    - What do you learn from reading diary entries and listening to testimonies that is different from what you learn from a handout like *The Ghettos*? How are both types of information useful and necessary when studying a topic like the ghettos?
    - What does Joseph Zelkowicz mean when he asks “Do you have any children at all in the ghetto?” What are some examples from the testimonies that illustrate that children felt they could not afford to be children?
    - What are some things that young people you know might

### [About the Interviewees]

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Part 2 Procedure 2 Testimony Viewing

concentration camps of Auschwitz, Siegmarschönau, and Hohenstein-Ernstthal. His interview was conducted in the United States. When the war began, Milton was seventeen years old.

**George Shainfarber** was born on January 4, 1927 in Lodz, Poland. He lived in the Lodz ghetto and experienced life in the Auschwitz II-Birkenau extermination camp. His interview was conducted in the United States. When the war began, George was twelve years old.

### [Journal Assignment]

Either in class or as homework, have students write in their journals about one or more of the topics below.

Suggested Topics:

- The establishment of ghettos marked the end of freedom of movement for Jews. Write about what freedom means to you in your life and what you think it would mean to lose it.
- Even in the midst of chaos and misery, the children in the ghettos imagined and hoped for a better existence. Write about the power of faith and hope, in general, and in your own life, in particular.
- In his testimony, Ellis Lewin talks about what he sees as the only things that have the power to hurt children — losing the comfort of family, being beaten, and being hungry. Do you agree with Ellis's assessment? Are there other things that you would add to this list? Do you think that the things that have the power to hurt children are different from those that can hurt adults?

take for granted that young people in the ghetto learned to cherish?

- What does Dawid mean when he says “Oh, my dear school! Damn the times when I complained about getting up in the morning and about tests. If only I could have them back!” Have you ever had a similar feeling about something?
- What did school mean in the ghetto?
- What does going to school represent for Dawid?
- What do you think Dawid means when he writes, “Humiliation inflicted by force does not humiliate”? Do you agree with him? Explain your thinking.
- Dawid writes, “long live humor.” How does he show in his diary that he had a sense of humor? How do you think it is possible for people to keep a sense of humor during unthinkably difficult times?
- There are also examples of hope and optimism in Dawid's diary entries. Point out an example. Explain where Dawid began to lose hope.
- In his testimony, Ellis says he believes that the children who were physically able to survive did so because “they didn't know any better.” What do you think Ellis means by this? Do you agree or disagree with him? Why or why not?
- In very challenging times, the importance of remaining hopeful and the persistent belief that one's situation will improve is crucial. However, this outlook and attitude is difficult to maintain over a long period of time. Do you believe there is a certain point when people begin to lose hope? If so, what do you think that point is? Do you think it is the same for everyone?
- Has the loss of hope ever happened to you? Have you witnessed it in others?
- How does a person restore hope?

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**NOTE:** To learn more about cultural and spiritual resistance in the ghettos, see Lesson 6: *Jewish Resistance*.

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