

Pre-Virtual Experience Activity “Jewish Life: Diversity and Experience” Teacher’s Guide

Time Needed: 1-3 hours

Teacher Note:

Many of the resources for this activity are located on the IWitness website. Please register at <http://iwitness.usc.edu> and create your free account in order to access the resources.

Introduction:

The area that is now Poland had, on the eve of World War II, been home to Jewish communities for over 800 years. The genocide of European Jewry carried out by the German Nazis and their collaborators occurred under the cover of the Second World War across Europe. The events were complex, multilayered, occurred over a period of years, and were interlinked with the military events of the Second World War. As a result, it is not possible to present a simple lesson that addresses this complexity.

The focus of this Virtual Experience is on a visit to Poland. Unlike Germany, where it is possible to trace gradual legalized antisemitic actions carried out by the Nazi regime, legislation in Poland happened overnight when the Nazis invaded and conquered the country in September 1939. The focus of this activity is Poland. However, it is important that students understand the diversity of European Jewry, and it is recommended they spend time reading the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum article (see Part I Resources), as well as viewing testimony. It should also be remembered that of the 3.3 million Jews in Poland before the Second World War only 45,000 remained, therefore the stories we have of the experience of genocide come from a surviving minority.

PART I: 1919-1939

Prior to World War II, Poland was home to approximately 3.5 million Jewish people, the largest population of Jews in Europe and 10% of the overall population of Poland. Jewish people lived across Europe and had a wide variety of life and family experiences. Therefore, it is not possible to speak of a singular “Jewish experience” during this time. However, it is important for students to truly begin to understand the normalcy of life and what was lost as a result of the Holocaust. In this activity, students will spend time reflecting on the breadth of Jewish life and agency between 1919 and 1939. Such an approach helps students move away from always seeing Jewish individuals as victims and to appreciate the true impact of genocide on people. Through the video testimony of Roman Kent and other survivors of the Holocaust, students will learn about Jewish life in Poland before the Holocaust.

Students are encouraged to focus on a number of events, find out when they occurred, and consider the personal experiences of individuals beyond those explored in this activity and in the Virtual Experience.

Part I Resources:

- **Graphic Organizer: Jewish Life in Pre-War Poland** (see Appendix A)
- **Map: European Jewish Population Distribution, CA. 1933**
http://www.ushmm.org/outreach/en/media_nm.php?ModuleId=10007689&MediaId=358

- **IWitness Video Testimony: Roman Kent**
<http://iwitness.usc.edu/SFI/Watch.aspx?testimonyID=15533&segmentNumber=0&returnIndex=0&contentView=1&pg=2>
 - Games: Clips 6-7
 - Family homes: Clips 7-8
 - Cultural Activities: Clips 12-14
 - Jewish-Gentile Relations: Clips 9-10
- **IWitness Video Testimonies: Life Before the War**
<https://sfi.usc.edu/video-topics?nid=182>
- **Article: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: Jewish Life in Europe before the Holocaust**
<http://www.ushmm.org/outreach/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007689>
- **Website: IWitness USC Shoah Foundation**
<http://iwitness.usc.edu/SFI/>
- **Website: Virtual Shtetl**
<http://www.sztetl.org.pl/en/>
- **Website: Yad Vashem**
<http://www.yadvashem.org/>
- **Article: “What Came Before” – Teaching about Jewish Life before the Holocaust**
http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/newsletter/16/main_article.asp
- **Article: Background: Life Before the Holocaust**
<http://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/voices/testimonies/life/backgd/before.html>
- **Photograph Exhibition: Roman Vishniac Rediscovered**
<http://vishniac.icp.org/exhibition>

Procedure:

1. Display the map “European Jewish Population Distribution, CA. 1933” (see Part I Resources). Have students talk about what they observe on the map and any questions that are raised by the information on the map.
2. Explain to students that they will be viewing clips from Holocaust survivors. In the clips, individuals discuss their lives before World War II and the Holocaust (see Part I Resources for all IWitness Video Testimonies). Encourage students to use the Jewish Life in Pre-War Poland Graphic Organizer to record information and their thoughts about survivors’ different experiences by addressing different themes, such as education, religious identity, pastimes, and family life.

Teacher Note:

Additional survivor testimony can be found on the IWitness website at <http://iwitness.usc.edu>. Additional resources can be found in the Resources section of this activity.

3. Engage students in a discussion about their findings around Jewish life in Poland in the years before World War II. Discussion questions might include:
 - a. What was striking/interesting/surprising to you about the descriptions of Jewish life in Poland prior to 1939?

- b. What similarities and differences did you recognize between your life and the lives described by the survivors in their video testimonies?
- c. What lessons or new learning do you take away from the first part of this activity?

PART II: 1939-1945

In Part II of this Pre-Virtual Experience activity, students will examine definitions of the Holocaust to establish a common foundation for understanding the meaning of the word. They will then work in small groups to curate and create information and media for their timelines, which will incorporate text, images, videos, and a mapping feature. Through the use of multimedia resources, students will connect to the experiences about which they are learning and build understanding of the timing and complexity of the Holocaust. This immersive, exploratory activity will enrich students' understanding and help them inform new audiences about the Holocaust.

Teacher Note:

In this activity, students will use an online interactive timeline mapping application called myHistro. Prior to this activity, it may be helpful to set up one free account for each group of students. This will eliminate the need to take class time to establish accounts and will ensure that you have access to all login information for each group. Consider introducing students to myHistro before the Virtual Experience event so they have some time to practice using the application. For this activity, consider limiting students to the resources noted in this guide. While there is a wealth of resources on the Internet, many of them are inappropriate or inaccurate and may contain images that are unsuitable for students, particularly without warning or context.

Part II Resources:

- **Interactive Timeline Mapping Application: MyHistro.com**
<http://www.myhistro.com/>
- **Definitions of the Holocaust** (see Appendix B)
- **Document: Wartime Events for Timeline Mapping Activity** (see Appendix C)
- **Website: Echoes and Reflections resources (Lessons 1-4: Studying the Holocaust, Antisemitism, Nazi Germany, The Ghettos)**
<http://echoesandreflections.org/the-lessons/lessons-components/>
- **Website: Echoes and Reflections-timeline**
<http://echoesandreflections.org/the-lessons/timeline/>
- **Website: IWitness USC Shoah Foundation**
<http://iwitness.usc.edu/SFI/>
- **POLIN Museum of the History of Jews in Poland**
<http://www.polin.pl/en>
- **Website: Virtual Shtetl**
<http://www.sztetl.org.pl/en/>
- **Website: Yad Vashem**
<http://www.yadvashem.org/>
- **Article: "What Came Before" – Teaching about Jewish Life before the Holocaust**
http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/newsletter/16/main_article.asp

Procedure:

1. Explain to students that, beginning in 1939, life changed dramatically for Jews in Poland and they will be reflecting on some specific events that will help them understand those changes.

Teacher Note:

It is important that students understand that the list of events provided in this activity is not comprehensive. Instead, the list is provided to help students understand the rapid and devastating changes to Jewish life in Poland. Not only were there numerous events in Poland that are not included in the list, the experiences of Jews across Europe were extensive and varied.

2. Ask students how many of them have heard the term Holocaust before. Ask students to briefly share their current level of awareness around the Holocaust. Using the resource in Appendix B, share three definitions of the Holocaust with students.
3. Explain to students that they will be preparing for the Virtual Experience by examining specific events of the Holocaust that occurred in Poland, which is the focus of the Virtual Experience. They will be working in groups to create interactive, multimedia timelines of events to build their background knowledge and make a personal connection to the places they will visit in the Virtual Experience.

Teacher Note:

Be sure to explain to students that the list is neither a comprehensive account of the events of the Holocaust in Poland, nor an account of the widespread and varied events of the Holocaust throughout Europe.

4. Introduce students to the *myHistro* website and allow a few minutes for students to practice using the application (unless they have previous experience with the tool, which is recommended).
5. Introduce the list of events to students (see Appendix C for the list). Suggested wartime events include the following:
 - German invasion of Poland (September 1, 1939)
 - First ghetto is established in Piotrkow Trybunalski, Poland (October 8, 1939)
 - Star of David ordinance in Poland (November 23, 1939)
 - The ghetto in Lodz, Poland is sealed (April 30, 1940)
 - The ghetto in Warsaw, Poland is sealed (November 15, 1940)
 - The ghetto in Krakow, Poland is sealed (March 20, 1941)
 - The first experimental gassings are conducted at Auschwitz (September 3, 1941)
 - Germans begin deporting thousands of Jews from Lodz to Chelmno extermination camp (January 16, 1942)
 - Germans begin deporting thousands of Jews from Warsaw ghetto to Treblinka extermination camp (July 22, 1942)
 - The Warsaw ghetto uprising begins (April 19, 1943)
 - The Polish uprising in Warsaw ends in defeat (October 3, 1944)
 - The death march of prisoners from Auschwitz-Birkenau begins (January 18, 1945)

- Deportation of Jews to Nazi camps located in Poland
 - Liberation of Lodz ghetto (January 19, 1945)
 - Liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau (January 27, 1945)
Source: Echoes and Reflections: Timeline 1933-1945 retrieved from <http://echoesandreflections.org/the-lessons/timeline/>
6. Divide students into groups and assign each group a specific number of events from the timeline. The number of groups and events assigned may vary, depending on your instructional preference and the number of students in your class.
 7. Have each group of students create a new timeline in *myHistro* and add their assigned events to their timelines. For each event, students' entries should include the following information:
 - Date
 - Location
 - People involved
 - A brief description of what happened
 - Significance
 - 1-2 images (or 1 image and 1 video), if possible and appropriate
 8. When students have completed their timelines, have each group share their presentations with the whole group, teaching their classmates about the events they added to the timeline.
 9. After students have shared their timelines, engage them in a discussion to help them recognize how life changed for Jewish people in Poland as a result of the Holocaust.
 10. Ask students if the timeline activity created new questions for them around Jewish life in Poland or the Holocaust. Record students' questions on chart paper (or ask students to record their questions somewhere all students can see). Explain to students that they should revisit their questions after the Virtual Experience to determine whether or not they were answered. For questions that were not answered, students will discuss how and where they might find answers or additional information.
 11. Consider having students compile their timelines into one final class timeline and publishing the final timeline on a class or school website.

Options for Instruction:

- Consider different options for grouping to allow students to research more or fewer events. Have students work in pairs, triads, or small groups of four or five to complete the activity. Each group of students will complete their own timeline presentations, which they will share with classmates.
- Consider compiling students' presentations into a single class timeline.
- Provide images and/or videos for students to incorporate in their timelines. This will help avoid situations in which students are viewing explicit images they may not be emotionally or mentally prepared to view. It will also allow students to complete this activity within one or two class periods.

- Provide students a list of safe and trusted websites they may visit during their group work (see Part II Resources).

Extension Option #1:

Introduce students to the IWitness website (<http://iwitness.usc.edu>). Ask students to view survivor testimony and add one person's story to the class timeline. This activity will help students connect a now-familiar face with historical events as they listen to the powerful stories of Holocaust survivors. It will also help them understand that each person has his or her own story to share within the somewhat sterile context of dates and events. As students add the events of a survivor's story to their timeline, they will make a personal connection to the survivor they viewed and bring their own passion to sharing the survivor's story with others.

Extension Option #2

Following the Virtual Experience, students will review the questions they compiled after creating their interactive timelines in Part II of the Pre-Virtual Experience activity. Students will determine whether or not their questions were answered. For questions that were not answered, students will discuss how and where they might find answers or additional information. If possible, students should record the answers under the questions so that all students can learn from the exercise.

Appendix A

Jewish Life in Pre-War Poland
Graphic Organizer

Topics/Themes	Notes	Quotes	Conclusions
Education			
Religious Identity			
Pastimes			
Family Life			
Work			
School			
Other			

Appendix B

Definitions of the Holocaust

“Under the cover of the Second World War, for the sake of their "new order," the Nazis sought to destroy all the Jews of Europe. For the first time in history, industrial methods were used for the mass extermination of a whole people. Six million were murdered, including 1,500,000 children. This event is called the Holocaust. The Nazis enslaved and murdered millions of others as well. Gypsies, people with physical and mental disabilities, Poles, Soviet prisoners of war, trade unionists, political opponents, prisoners of conscience, homosexuals, and others were killed in vast numbers.”

– Imperial War Museum, London, UK

“The Holocaust refers to a specific genocidal event in twentieth-century history: the state-sponsored, systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Jews were the primary victims -6 million were murdered; Gypsies, the handicapped, and Poles were also targeted for destruction or decimation for racial, ethnic, or national reasons. Millions more, including homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents, also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi tyranny.”

– United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C., USA

“The Holocaust was the murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators. Between the German invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 and the end of the war in Europe in May 1945, Nazi Germany and its accomplices strove to murder every Jew under their domination. Because Nazi discrimination against the Jews began with Hitler's accession to power in January 1933, many historians consider this the start of the Holocaust era. The Jews were not the only victims of Hitler's regime, but they were the only group that the Nazis sought to destroy entirely.”

– Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, Israel

(Source: Hand Book for Teachers from the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research)

Appendix C

Wartime Events for Timeline Mapping Activity

- German invasion of Poland (September 1, 1939)
- First ghetto is established in Piotrkow Trybunalski, Poland (October 8, 1939)
- Star of David ordinance in Poland (November 23, 1939)
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- The death march of prisoners from Auschwitz-Birkenau begins (January 18, 1945)
- Deportation of Jews to Nazi camps located in Poland
- Liberation of Lodz ghetto (January 19, 1945)
- Liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau (January 27, 1945)

Note to Students:

*The list of events provided in this activity is **not comprehensive**. The list is provided to help you understand the rapid and devastating changes to Jewish life in Poland. Not only were there numerous additional events in Poland, the experiences of Jews across Europe were varied.*

Common Core Standards

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.6](#)

Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and present the relationships between information and ideas clearly and efficiently.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.9-10.6](#)

Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology's capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.6](#)

Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6.1.c](#)

Pose and respond to specific questions with elaboration and detail by making comments that contribute to the topic, text, or issue under discussion.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.1.c](#)

Pose questions that elicit elaboration and respond to others' questions and comments with relevant observations and ideas that bring the discussion back on topic as needed.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.8.1.c](#)

Pose questions that connect the ideas of several speakers and respond to others' questions and comments with relevant evidence, observations, and ideas.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1.c](#)

Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1.c](#)

Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6.1.d](#)

Review the key ideas expressed and demonstrate understanding of multiple perspectives through reflection and paraphrasing.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.1.d](#)

Acknowledge new information expressed by others and, when warranted, modify their own views.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.8.1.d](#)

Acknowledge new information expressed by others, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views in light of the evidence presented.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1.d](#)

Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1.d](#)

Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all

sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6.5](#)

Include multimedia components (e.g., graphics, images, music, sound) and visual displays in presentations to clarify information.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.5](#)

Include multimedia components and visual displays in presentations to clarify claims and findings and emphasize salient points.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.8.5](#)

Integrate multimedia and visual displays into presentations to clarify information, strengthen claims and evidence, and add interest.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.5](#)

Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.5](#)

Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.