



LESSON PLAN: Establishment of the Ghettos and the Jewish Response

INTRODUCTION

In this lesson, students are introduced to the concept of a ghetto and distinguish between historical and contemporary conceptions of ghettos. Through informational texts, photos, visual history testimonies, and other primary source material, students explore the aims of the Nazis in establishing ghettos during the Holocaust, what daily life was like in the ghettos, and how Jewish people responded to the brutal and dehumanizing conditions that they faced.

PART 1: WHAT IS A GHETTO AND HOW DID LIFE CHANGE DRASTICALLY FOR THE JEWISH PEOPLE CONFINED TO GHETTOS?

Post the supporting question above for students as you begin this part of the lesson.

1 In groups of three, students engage in a “write-around” in response to the phrase, “A ghetto is...” On a sticky note, each student finishes the phrase and passes the note to another group member. Students add to their peers’ notes and continue passing until they get their own note back. The class then discusses the different notions of a *ghetto* and what this term means within the context of their study of the Holocaust.¹

2 Students watch testimony clips from individuals who discuss how their lives drastically changed after being imprisoned in the Lodz Ghetto in Poland: **Joseph Morton (bio)**, **Leo Berkenwald (bio)**, and **Ellis Lewin (bio)**. As they watch the clips, students reflect on ways in which ghettos during the Holocaust differ from their contemporary understanding of the term. In addition, students take notes on the handout, **Testimony Reflections**, found at the beginning of this unit

3 After viewing the testimony clips, students journal and/or participate in a whole group discussion in response to some of the following questions:

- What images or feelings emerged for you in response to Ellis Lewin’s comment, “It was the beginning of the end of survival”?
- How did life in Lodz change for Joseph Morton, Leo Berkenwald, and Ellis Lewin after being confined to the ghetto? What fears and uncertainties did they and others forced into the ghetto face?

¹ Originally, the term ghetto referred to a street or city section where only Jews lived. The word was first used in Venice in 1516, as part of the phrase “Gèto Nuovo,” meaning “New Foundry.” This referred to the closed Jewish section of the city, which had originally been the site of a metal-casting factory. During the Holocaust, the Jews of Eastern Europe were forced to leave their homes and move to ghettos, where they were essentially held as prisoners. See the “Preparing to Teach This Unit” section above for additional context on the term ghetto and how to help students differentiate between the ways this term is understood within a U.S. historical context as opposed to a World War II context.

² It is often beneficial for students to watch each clip twice, completing the Testimony Viewing Guide during the second viewing.

- What stood out for you about the living conditions in the ghetto? How do you think hunger, confinement, overcrowding, and other features of ghetto life impacted the residents?
- Ellis says, “The instant change and brutality was like the door shutting on you.” How were the residents of ghettos “shut out,” on both physical and emotional levels?

4 The photograph, *Jews Crossing the Bridge in the Lodz Ghetto*, is projected (without the caption). A volunteer recounts Joseph Morton’s description of the bridge in his testimony. In pairs or small groups, students use the *See-Think-Wonder* handout to record their ideas about the photo. Students share their observations with the class and discuss what they think the Jewish people crossing the bridge were thinking and feeling as they looked down upon the scene below. Students’ “WONDER” questions are posted on a sheet of chart paper and revisited throughout the unit as students learn more about the experiences of Jewish people in the ghettos.

What do you SEE? (note observations)	What do you THINK? (explain observations, make inferences)	What do you WONDER? (raise questions, make connections, inquire deeply)

PART 2: WHAT CONDITIONS DID JEWISH PEOPLE FACE IN THE GHETTOS AND HOW DID THEY COPE WITH THE SEVERITY?

Post the supporting question above for students as you begin this part of the lesson.

5 The handout, *The Ghettos*, is distributed and the map, *Ghettos in Europe*, is either distributed or projected. Students form small groups and each group is assigned one of the following categories: (a) The Nazis’ purpose in establishing ghettos; (b) Daily life and conditions in the ghettos; and (c) The Jewish response – how residents coped with ghetto life. Students read the handout and study the map. They annotate and take notes according to their assigned category.

6 When students have completed their analysis of the handouts, they form new groups that contain a mix of students who have focused on different categories. In their new groups, students share highlights from their notes and other significant thoughts and ideas. In their groups and/or as a whole class, students discuss some of the following questions

- The Germans were specific in where they located ghettos – in Eastern Europe, in cities, and near railroad junctions. What do you think was the purpose in concentrating them together in central locations, especially those near railway transports?
- In his 1939 order, Reinhard Heydrich wrote, “For the time being, the first step toward the final goal is the concentration of the Jews....” What do you think he meant by “for the time being” and “the final goal”?
- What were 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?
- Why did the Germans establish a Jewish Council, or Judenrat, in each ghetto? How might this have given the Jewish residents a false sense of security?
- What does it mean that the “ghettos were a means to an end and not an end in and of themselves”?

7 ³ The handout, *Diary Entry from the Lodz Ghetto*, is projected and students read it independently. The excerpt was written by Josef Zelkowicz, a journalist who documented ghetto life and who perished in Auschwitz in 1944. In triads, students contemplate the question posed by Zelkowicz: “Do you have any children at all in the ghetto?” Each group member chooses a quote from the diary entry that they find meaningful and that speaks to Zelkowicz’s question. They take turns sharing their quote and interpreting Zelkowicz’s question. As a class, students discuss the following:

- How would you contrast what childhood is supposed to be with the reality for children in the ghetto? How does the vast difference between the two make you feel?
- What word or phrase in the diary entry most captured for you the misery of ghetto life for children? What images did it bring to your mind?
- How do you think ghetto existence changed children? What did it do to their families?

8 As a summative task, students respond to the *Lodz Ghetto* photo by Mendel Grossman, depicting the harsh reality of ghetto life for children. The NOTE⁴ is used to provide background on Grossman and the image. Students use the following prompt to guide their work:

Josef Zelkowicz wrote that the soup pot was a “symbol of the ghetto.” Study the photo carefully. Think about how difficult life was for children in the ghetto and what the boy in this photo might have been thinking or feeling. Then list at least three ways in which the soup pot and/or other imagery in the photo symbolize life in the ghetto. Refer to information from lesson sources as evidence for your ideas.

ESTIMATED COMPLETION TIME: 90 - 120 MINUTES

³ While hunger and work were part of daily life for children in many ghettos, the diary entry and photo used here are characteristic of Lodz. After the “Sperre Aktion” of September 1942 – in which more than 15,000 children, elderly, and sick Jews were rounded up and deported in a one-week period – Lodz essentially functioned as a labor camp.

⁴ 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 Lodz 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 not taken by the Germans, who usually took photos for purposes of anti-Jewish propaganda. When the ghetto was liquidated, he was deported to the Königs Wusterhausen labor camp, where he secretly continued taking photographs. In April 1945, Grossman collapsed on a death march, still clutching his camera. After the war, the negatives of pictures he had hidden in the ghetto were discovered. Some of the photographs were published in the book *My Secret Camera: Life in the Lodz Ghetto* (Gulliver Books, 2000).