



THE GHETTOS

"It was the beginning of the end..."

–ELLIS LEWIN, JEWISH SURVIVOR

PREPARING TO TEACH THIS UNIT

Below is information to keep in mind when teaching the content in this unit. This material is intended to help teachers consider the complexities of teaching about the ghettos and to deliver accurate and sensitive instruction.

1 Students may be accustomed to thinking about the concept of a ghetto within the context of U.S. history and African American civil rights. Throughout this unit, help them to distinguish between this understanding of a ghetto and the different reality for Jewish people during the Holocaust. Both notions of ghettos reflect the idea of an unjust separation. In the U.S., ghetto was first used to designate slum areas occupied by poor and immigrant groups, and later – due to African American migration and “white flight” – to describe poor, urban, mostly black communities. Segregation in these communities was not mandated by law, but imposed by poverty and racist policy. Jewish people during World War II were forcibly imprisoned in more than 1,100 ghettos using brutal means of control. These ghettos, which grew from Nazi racial policy and served to isolate and weaken the Jewish populace, were sites of mass suffering and death.

2 The ghettos in central Poland were established at the outset of World War II, before the “Final Solution” was planned and extermination camps were built. Their principal purpose was to temporarily isolate Jews, pending the formulation of a more definitive solution to the so-called “Jewish problem.” Some Sinti-Roma people were also incarcerated in ghettos in Eastern Europe after they were deported from greater Germany. When the ghettos were formed, a detailed blueprint for carrying out mass murder did not yet exist; rather, death was a side effect of the starvation, disease, and overcrowding in the ghettos. For instance, more than 80,000 Jews died in the Warsaw ghetto alone. It was only in 1941, with the invasion of the Soviet Union, that the Nazis began murdering Jews in a systematic mass fashion, and a project for murdering all Jews began to coalesce.

3 Students often ask why more Jews did not escape from the ghettos. It is important for students to remember the extenuating circumstances that made it nearly impossible for the vast majority of Jews to flee.

- While we know the ultimate fate of Jews during the Holocaust, Jews themselves did not know (especially during the early years of World War II) that later they would be shot, sent to extermination camps, or worked to death. Nazi policies of persecution were still evolving in the early years of the war and the Nazis continuously employed many different means to camouflage their actions.
- The Nazis’ brutal methods of control and the severe conditions in the ghettos depleted Jews physically and emotionally.

- The Holocaust created a world of “choiceless choices.” Every action had a consequence, which, in many cases, became a matter of life and death. For instance, while many Jews may have wished they could escape, they felt a strong responsibility to take care of family members living with them, especially young children and elderly parents. Escape would have meant abandoning these people.
- The Germans also commonly imposed collective punishment on those who were left behind; prospective escapees understood that their actions could endanger the lives of others.
- Even if there was a way to escape, frequently there was no place to go. Non-Jews living outside the ghetto walls were mostly unwilling to help. Some held antisemitic beliefs and others were reluctant since hiding Jews was cause for severe punishment, even death. In addition, Jews who attempted to emigrate from Nazi- dominated Europe faced tremendous obstacles, due to the global depression, strict barriers to immigration, and, far too often, antisemitic attitudes. Overall, most Jews in Europe were trapped at that time.

ABOUT THIS UNIT

INTRODUCTION

This unit provides students with an opportunity to learn about the ghettos established throughout Nazi Europe and understand that the ghettos were one phase in the continuum of Nazi racial policies that sought to solve the so-called “Jewish problem.” Students investigate the conditions in ghettos and how those conditions severely limited Jewish life and led to immense suffering. Using primary source material, students discover that despite severe overcrowding, starvation, disease, and grief, Jews still did their utmost to conduct their lives and retain their human dignity.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What were the goals of the Nazis in creating the ghettos?
- How did the Nazis isolate and dehumanize the Jewish people in ghettos?
- How did residents respond to the kinds of choices forced upon them in the ghettos?
- How did the Jewish people seek to maintain their humanity in the face of the extreme dehumanization of ghetto life?

OBJECTIVES

Students will

- Explain the aims of the Nazis in establishing ghettos.
- Identify tactics used by the Nazis to control, isolate, and weaken Jewish people in the ghettos.
- Describe what life was like for Jews imprisoned in ghettos.
- Identify ways that Jews forced to live in ghettos sought to maintain their dignity and previous ways of life.
- Interpret primary source documents—including clips of visual history testimony—that represent the experiences and responses of those forced to live in ghettos, with particular emphasis on the Lodz ghetto.