

# LESSON: Exploring Pre-World War II Jewish Life

**GRADE LEVEL:** Adaptable for grades 7–12

**SUBJECT:** Multidisciplinary

**TIME REQUIRED:** Approximately 120 minutes. Extension available

**This is a *foundational* lesson**

Based on a lesson originally written by Aimee Ross, USHMM Museum Teacher Fellow, for the 2003 Belfer Exemplary Lesson initiative

## RATIONALE

In order to better understand what Jewish cultural and communal life was like in Europe before World War II, students search the USHMM digital archive collections, select photographs depicting pre-war Jewish life in Europe, analyze them, and research the town(s) where the photos were taken. This promotes understanding of the individuality of Jewish lives affected by or lost in the Holocaust and the cumulative effects of the Holocaust on their communities.

By using primary source materials, students engage with the first hand records of the Holocaust and learn about primary source archival research.

## OVERVIEW

### ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What can we learn from images of prewar Jewish life in Europe?
- How do Jewish pre-war experiences differ? How are they similar?
- What is a primary source?
- What is document analysis?
- How can photographs be used as primary source materials?

### EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

At the end of this lesson, students understand:

- The wide range of experiences of Jews living in Europe prior to World War II
- The catastrophic impact of the Holocaust on Jewish life in Europe
- The role of primary sources in historical understanding
- How to analyze a photograph

### TEACHER PREPARATION

- [Student organizer](#) for lesson
- Familiarize yourself with the USHMM’s collections search by [learning about the collections](#) and [searching](#) for examples of photos by entering “prewar Jewish life” in the search bar and filtering results to photographs.
- Read Holocaust Encyclopedia articles [Jewish Communities of Prewar Germany](#), [Jewish Life in Europe Before the Holocaust](#), [The Holocaust and World War II: Key Dates.](#), and the animated map [The Holocaust](#)

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## MODIFICATIONS

The lesson can be completed in person or via remote instruction. All activities are compatible.

## LEARNER VARIABILITY MODIFICATIONS

- Holocaust Encyclopedia articles are available in 12 languages, including Spanish
- Pre-select photographs to analyze
- Photo analysis sheets include options for varying scaffolding to assist students learning English and are also available in Spanish.

## PART ONE: EXPLORING THE USHMM DIGITAL ARCHIVES

### PRIOR TO CLASS

**Prior to the lesson** ask students to choose two favorite photos of friends and/or family from their phone, Instagram, or other social media platform, or actual printed photographs that meet the following criteria:

- The photograph must contain people
- The photo cannot be a portrait
- Once the photos are selected write a descriptive caption which answers the questions: Who, What, Where, When, Why and How? Students should note questions they cannot answer. How could they find the answers?

### PREPARING FOR ARCHIVAL RESEARCH

1. Students watch a movie filmed in Poland prior to World War II. Before showing the film clip: [share the context](#) for what the students will see.
2. Show the film clip [Three Minutes in Poland](#)
3. Ask students what words come to mind to describe what they just saw. Collect responses (Padlet, Menti are two options). **Focus on words that describe everyday life.**
4. Define **keywords** and discuss how they are used in archival searches. Introduce or remind students of the definition of **primary sources**.

#### KEYWORDS:

- A word or concept of great significance
- A word that acts as the key to a cipher or code.
- An informative word used in an information retrieval system to indicate the content of a document.

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## PRIMARY SOURCES:

- Immediate, first-hand accounts of a topic, from people who had a direct connection with it.
- Archives store primary sources

## DISCUSS:

- Are films and photographs primary sources? How?

5. Explain that students will be conducting primary source research using the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's photo archive. They will search for photographs that reflect Jewish life prior to Nazi invasion, annexation, or occupation of the country where the photo was taken.
6. Go to the [collections search homepage](#) and walk the students through a sample search.
  - Use **“prewar Jewish life” + keywords generated from viewing *Three Minutes in Poland* in their searches**
  - Show how to filter for photographs as referenced in teacher prep
  - Point out where to locate the identifying information for the photos
7. Once students are familiar with the search function on the USHMM website they can begin their own research. Students should choose two photographs from the USHMM collections. The photos should meet the following criteria:
  - The photograph must contain people
  - The photo cannot be a portrait
  - **The photo should relate to the personal photograph they chose prior to the lesson. NOTE: students can change their personal photo if they see a photo in the archives that reminds them of another specific personal photograph.**
  - The photo must include the date and place that the photo was taken
  - The photo needs to be taken prior to Nazi invasion, annexation, or occupation of the country
    - Students should reference the Holocaust Encyclopedia article [The Holocaust and World War II: Key Dates](#). for invasion dates

## PART TWO: PHOTO ANALYSIS

1. Once students have selected the photos they can
  - Print the photos
  - Save the images to Padlet or other online host
  - Bookmark the images to their browser
  - Copy and paste the photo to a document

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## DISCUSS:

- What is photo analysis?
  - Photo analysis is an aspect of document analysis and is the first step in working with primary sources. Document analysis helps us to think through primary source documents for contextual understanding and to extract information to make informed judgments.
- Why are photographs important for historians?
- How are the photographs they selected similar to the film footage they viewed? How are they different?

2. Students analyze their two photos using one of the photo analysis guides found on the [National Archives](#) site and using their completed analysis guides write a caption for their photo that answers to the extent possible Who, What, Where, When, Why and How? Students note questions they need more information to answer.

## DISCUSS:

- What are the differences between photography in the 1930s and today?
- In examining your archival photos, what can you learn about Jewish life before World War II and the Holocaust from this photograph?
- What did you find as you looked through your own personal photos in relation to those that you had researched?
- Which one did you choose to share that relates and why?
- Compare your photo with the photo you selected from the archive. What do you notice?
- What do these photos, yours and the researched ones, tell you about Jewish life in Europe before World War II?

## PART THREE: TOWN/CITY RESEARCH

1. Students read Holocaust Encyclopedia articles [Jewish Communities of Prewar Germany](#) and [Jewish Life in Europe Before the Holocaust](#) and view the animated map [The Holocaust](#)
2. Using the USHMM's Holocaust Encyclopedia students now research the town/city that is the setting of one of their photos using the [USHMM research tools](#) and determine the following.
  - a. Where is or was that village/town/city located?
  - b. How large was the town's/city's Jewish population and how long had Jews been living there?
  - c. When and how did the town/city come under Nazi rule (timeline)?

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- d. What was the fate of this particular town's/city's Jews during the Holocaust?
- e. If they had unanswered questions from writing the caption, can they answer them now?

## CONCLUSION

Students present their research on the locations of their photographs to the class. A map can be created with each town/city marked by the photograph that inspired the research, paired with their personal photograph, either in the classroom or hosted on a virtual platform like [Padlet Map](#) or [Visme](#).

## ASSESSMENT

- Photo analysis can be assessed
- Discussion questions in the lesson can be assigned for individual responses
- Students write about what they learned: how their understanding of Jewish Life in Europe before World War II changed, what they learned about primary sources, and how pairing a personal photograph to one of historical significance impacted their understanding.

## EXTENSIONS

Film clips of pre-war Jewish life can be analyzed. This [28 minute film](#) is a collection of clips from the USHMM film archive. Students can find personal videos that remind them of scenes from the videos. The National Archives site has a [guide for analyzing film](#).

The film clip that opens the lesson, *Three Minutes in Poland*, can be assigned to be analyzed. Material to support using *Three Minutes in Poland* can be [found here](#).

The lesson [Nazi Racism](#) uses historical film clips to frame a discussion of racism.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Survivor Al Münzer [speaks about the importance of photographs](#)
- [Video of the Tower of Faces](#) in the Permanent Exhibition at the USHMM
- Curator's Corner episodes about photographs:
  - [USHMM curator Teresa Pollin tells the story of how a single, unusual photograph spared Moshe Mandil's family from arrest by Germans, and how a young Albanian Muslim man ultimately saved their lives.](#)
  - [Curator Judith Cohen shares photographs Eva Weinberger Cohen's children donated to the Museum after their mother's death.](#)
  - [Visual documentation of Jewish spiritual practice in the camps is rare. See how curator Kyra Schuster's pursuit of a photo of a prisoner at Gurs lighting Hanukkah candles led her to a whole family's collection of documents that is unique in many ways.](#)