

# 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 that introduces key concepts and information to students.**

## 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 towns 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 was pre-war Jewish life like in Europe?
- What are similarities and differences between prewar Jewish life experiences?
- 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](#)
- 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.
- *Holocaust Encyclopedia* article “[Jewish Communities of Prewar Germany](#)”
- *Holocaust Encyclopedia* article “[Jewish Life in Europe Before the Holocaust](#)”
- *Holocaust Encyclopedia* article “[The Holocaust and World War II: Key Dates](#)”
- Animated Map [The Holocaust](#)

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## LEARNER VARIABILITY MODIFICATIONS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

**The lesson is intentionally flexible to allow for individual teacher modifications to achieve educational outcomes.** Technology and teaching strategies are suggested in the instructional sequence; please use other options if they support the learning needs of your students. Consider utilizing graphic organizers, note-taking strategies, reading choices, and online engagement tools.

Educators may choose to use learner variability modifications specific to this lesson:

- Teachers can provide students with choices as to how they access information throughout lessons, i.e. read print alone, read print with a partner, read along while the teacher reads aloud, etc.
- *Holocaust Encyclopedia* articles are available in various languages; refer to the word “Language” and select the Globe icon available on the lefthand side of the article.
- Incorporate strategies such as think-pair-share and jigsaw to enhance student engagement.
- Pre-selecting photographs for analysis removes the requirement for students to research in online archives.
- Photo analysis sheets include options for varying scaffolding to assist students learning English and are also available in Spanish.

This lesson is available as an [online, asynchronous experience for students](#), which can be accessed through a web browser or LMS files. The online lessons are accessible for all students for in-person and virtual learning, and they provide specific support for students using screen readers.

## 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 (i.e. not your school picture for the yearbook)

Distribute [student organizer](#). Once the photos are selected, students write a descriptive caption for each selected photo, 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](#)

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3. Ask students what words come to mind to describe what they just saw. **Focus on words that describe everyday life.** What do you see? If you were there, what do you think you could hear or smell? Collect responses (Padlet, Menti are two options) for use later.
4. Ask: How do you find something on the internet? Answer: you use keywords in a google search. If they say Google it, ask what does that mean/what does someone specifically do to google something. Define **keywords** and discuss how they are used in archival searches. Introduce or remind students of the definition of **primary sources**. Use the [student organizer](#) for discussion.

## KEYWORDS:

1. A word or concept of great significance.
2. A word that acts as the key to a cipher or code.
3. An informative word used in an information retrieval system to indicate the content of a document.
4. A word or phrase from a question/prompt that will help you answer the question/prompt.

## 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 (see step 3 above).**
  - Show how to filter for photographs as referenced in the Teacher Preparation section.
  - 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.

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- The photo cannot be a portrait.
- **The photo should share some similarity to the personal photograph they chose prior to the lesson. For example, it could have a group of people, be in a certain location (e.g. indoors, in a park, on the street), or have people of a certain age. 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 should 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 platform
  - Bookmark the images to their browser
  - Copy and paste the photo to a document

### DISCUSS:

1. 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.
2. Why are photographs important for historians?
3. 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, or use a graphic organizer of your choice. Then, using their completed analysis guides, students write a caption for their photo on their [worksheet](#) that answers to the extent possible Who, What, Where, When, Why and How? Students note questions they need more information to answer.

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## DISCUSS:

1. What are the differences between photography in the 1930s and today?
2. In examining your archival photos, what do you know about Jewish life before World War II and the Holocaust?
3. What is known about life now as you look through your own personal photos? How is life similar to and different from in your photos as compared to the archival photos?
4. Compare your photo with the photo you selected from the archive. What do you notice?
5. What do the researched photos 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 pre-war archival photos using the [USHMM research tools](#) and determine the following. Students can use the [student organizer](#) which asks the following questions:
  - a. Where is or was that village/town/city located?
  - b. How large was the town's/city's Jewish population before the war and how long had Jews been living there? What was the population of Jewish people after the war?
  - c. When and how did the town/city come under Nazi rule (timeline)?
  - d. What was the fate of this particular town's/city's Jews during the Holocaust?
  - e. Return to your caption that you wrote for this photo and add more details from research.

## 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 OPTIONS

- Photo analysis or presentations can be assessed.
- Discussion questions in the lesson can be assigned for individual responses.
- Students write or use online presentation resources to demonstrate 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.

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## 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.](#)