



## LESSON PLAN: Prewar Jewish Life

### INTRODUCTION

In this lesson, students investigate who the Jews were *before* they were persecuted in the Holocaust. The centerpiece of the lesson is the profiles of six teenagers from different countries and walks of life, expressed in their own words through diary entries and other primary and secondary source material. This glimpse into their worlds allows students to see them as individuals, creating empathy and deepening understanding of the diversity of prewar Jewish life. Supplemental videos and texts provide additional information.

### PART 1: WHAT WAS LIFE LIKE FOR JEWISH TEENAGERS BEFORE THE HOLOCAUST?

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

**1** To begin the lesson, students think about one photo of themselves, or one physical “artifact” they have – a trophy, a locket, a drawing – that best represents them. They complete a journal entry or free-write in response to the following prompts, making sure to incorporate a discussion of the photo or artifact:

- How do I define and express my identity?
- How does my identity influence my life?
- How do I feel when people challenge my concept of myself?
- Have I ever experienced judgements or assumptions about my identity from others?

**OPTIONAL:** Prior to this lesson, students are assigned to bring in a photo or artifact representing their identity. The physical object can be used to inspire the free-write and can be shared with classmates.

**2** Students watch the Yad Vashem video, *Glimpses of Jewish Life Before the Holocaust*. As they watch the clip, students reflect on what they imagined prewar Jewish life was like. After viewing the clip, students participate in a whole group discussion in response to some of the following questions:

- What did you see that caught your eye?
- What surprised you?
- Based on this brief video, how was prewar Jewish life different from what you imagined it to be?

**3** In small groups, students are assigned to read and discuss one profile of a teenager who lived before the Holocaust. Groups are provided with copies of their assigned profile from the handout, *Profiles of Teenagers in Prewar Europe*, or given access online. The map, *Jewish Communities in Europe Before the Nazis Rise to Power*, is either distributed or projected.

**NOTE:** The handout, *About Jews and Judaism*, is included as an optional reading to provide students with context on their teenager’s life and to deepen their understanding of the history of the Jewish people.

**4** Groups receive copies of the graphic organizer, *Reflections on Teenagers in Prewar Europe*. Together they add notes and reflections to the handout as they review the profile and map. When they have completed their notetaking, groups choose one sentence from the profile that was particularly meaningful to them and record it on the handout.<sup>1</sup>

Basic Facts	Challenges	Motivations	Relationship to country, experience with antisemitism

**5** When students have completed their analysis, they form new groups that contain a mix of students who have focused on different profiles. On the map of prewar Jewish communities, students indicate where their subject lived with a pin or a sticker. They then share highlights from their notes and other significant thoughts and ideas. In their groups or as a whole class, students discuss some of the following questions:

- Why do people adhere to their traditions?
- What are your thoughts about identity and how people maintain identity?
- Have people ever assumed something about you because of how you look or how you express your identity?
- Did you assume that all Jews were basically the same? Have you changed your opinion? Explain.

**6** Students return to their original groups. Groups receive copies or online access to the handout, *Epilogues*. They read the epilogue for the teenager whose profile they reviewed earlier, and learn their fate.<sup>2</sup>

**7** Students process and share their feelings about the fate of the teenagers in the profiles by discussing some of the following questions:

- What connections did you feel to the teenager you learned about? How did you feel to learn their fate?
- What comforting or consoling ideas can you take from learning about these young people?
- Why do you think there are photographs of some, but not all, of the teenagers?
- What are your thoughts now about Jewish stereotypes you may have heard in the past?

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<sup>1</sup> This exercise is meant to highlight that before WWII, Jewish life was quite diverse and teenagers were in many respects very much like teenagers today. By personally connecting and empathizing with the teens in the profiles, students will have a clearer understanding of what was lost in the Holocaust.

*This is not meant to be a simulation and students should not play act or read the profiles in the first person. These are real, not fictional, human beings, and students will learn their fates later on in the lesson.*

<sup>2</sup> Six million Jews were killed in the Holocaust - the students now intimately know at least four of them (Esther's fate is unknown) out of the six they studied. This number is proportionate to the number of Jews killed in the Holocaust relative to the entire Jewish population of Europe (2/3). Be aware that students may react emotionally when they understand the fate of the teenagers they read about – they should be given the space and support they need to process this information.

- Why is it important to understand the lives of Jewish people – like these teenagers – *before* the tragedy of the Holocaust?

## PART 2: HOW WAS EUROPE BEING TRANSFORMED IN THE PREWAR PERIOD AND HOW WERE JEWS AFFECTED?

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

**8** Individually or in pairs, students read the handout, *A Picture of Jewish Life in Europe Before WWII*, containing information about the diversity of Jewish life and trends that swept the prewar Jewish world. Students annotate the handout with their thoughts and questions.

**9** As a class, students report back on their findings regarding prewar Jewish life in Europe. They discuss some of the following questions, citing evidence from the text to support their responses:

- What were the significant changes going on in Europe in the prewar period? How did they affect the Jews?
- What was the connection between the economic situation for Jews and the trend toward assimilation?
- What were the connections among nationalism, antisemitism, and Zionism?
- What were the major challenges Jews faced in the prewar period?

**10** As a class or in their small groups from Part I, students watch testimony clips of at least three Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, who discuss their prewar life in Europe: **Penina Bowman (bio)**, **Bernard Broclawski (bio)**, **Ivan Deutsch (bio)**, **Regina Eisenstein (bio)**, **Vera Gissing (bio)**, and **Pinchas Gutter (bio)**. As they watch the clips, students take notes on the handout, **Testimony Reflections**, found at the beginning of this unit.<sup>3</sup>

**OPTION:** As time allows, students view all of the above testimonies in small groups or as a whole class in order to deepen their understanding of prewar Jewish life.

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

- How do the text on prewar Jewish life and the testimonies together help you understand the experiences of the teenagers and survivors you learned about?
- Both the testimonies and the profiles are primary sources (or based on primary sources). How are the post-war testimonies of adults who survived the Holocaust different than the accounts written by teenagers in real-time, who had no idea that the Holocaust was approaching?
- What were some of the challenges faced by Jews in prewar Europe? What examples did you hear of the tension between time-honored traditions and modern life?
- Which of these challenges do you relate to even though they happened to teenagers on a different continent a century ago? Which would you say are universal?

**12** \_\_\_\_\_  
 The visual history testimonies together are approximately 14 minutes in length. If time is limited, we suggest prioritizing these testimonies:

- Penina Bowman [3:12] speaking about rebellion, including against traditional life
- Bernard Broclawski [2:28] speaking about antisemitism and the longing to be treated equally
- Ivan Deutsch [1:19] speaking about assimilation
- Regina Eisenstein [1:14] speaking about Zionism

As a summative task, students write a brief response to the quotation below using the following prompt to guide their work:

*It has been said that “To understand the tragedy of the Holocaust, we must first understand what we lost.” Consider what you have learned about the experiences of Jews in the period before World War II and write a paragraph responding to this quote. Support your response with at least three specific facts from the profiles, testimonies, or handouts that serve as evidence for your ideas.*

**ESTIMATED COMPLETION TIME: 120 MINUTES**