

ARTHUR AND ROCHELLE BELFER

Exemplary LESSONS

i n i t i a t i v e

PRE-WORLD WAR II EUROPEAN JEWISH LIFE PHOTO PROJECT



OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND

The focus of this project is to engage students in understanding both the individuality of Jewish lives affected by or lost in the Holocaust and the cumulative effects of the Holocaust on their communities. It concentrates on exploring the normalcy (religious, cultural, and communal) of Jewish life by finding and analyzing family photographs of an affected community from before the Nazi occupation or invasion and then researching the drastic changes in that community following Nazi rule. Specifically, the project seeks to address the individual lives behind the statistics of the Holocaust, which students cannot fathom, and the misconception that students may have that the Jews were not people like themselves, but somehow different. Thus, the project aims to illustrate parallels between students' lives and Jewish lives through photographs taken before the German occupation affected daily living, as well as to explore how life in those communities came under German rule and what the result was. This project connects to the Museum's theme of renewal through the recognition of individual lives and the remembrance of European Jewish communities lost in the Holocaust.

I use the photo project within the first 3 weeks of a 12-week-long Holocaust-studies elective, taught within the English department at my high school. This lesson follows a brief overview of Holocaust history in timeline form, as well as the study of historical antisemitism, the fundamentals of Judaism, and the comparison of pre-World War II and interwar models of European Jewish communities. It is critical that students do this project before looking at life

LESSON BY

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GRADE LEVEL

10–12

GRADE-LEVEL APPLICABILITY

7–12

SUBJECT

ENGLISH ELECTIVE
(HOLOCAUST STUDIES)

TIME REQUIRED

THREE DAYS

Photo: Izio and Anda Littman
and their son, Otto, sunbathe
on the beach in the resort
town of Skole, July 4, 1939,
two months before the German
invasion of Poland.

USHMM, courtesy of George
Oscar Lee

under German rule: the Nazi rise to power, restrictions against Jews, ghettoization, and the “Final Solution.” They must understand what it is that will be lost, rather than focus on the results of that loss. The project takes approximately three one-hour class periods.

In order to be successful in this project, students need basic computer skills and prior background in Internet use and research. In addition, students need to be familiar with a very basic timeline of the Holocaust (specifically, when different countries came under Nazi control), as well as European geography. Following this lesson, students watch the Home Vision Select video “There Once Was a Town,” which references the Tower of Faces at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and life in the small shtetl of Eishyshok before German occupation.

Over the years, I have found that students who take my Holocaust-studies elective are there because they want to know more about that period of history, and usually, they already have a basic knowledge of the Holocaust. Unfortunately, that knowledge seems to be based simply on “a lot of Jews died.” I feel very strongly that they must study the people who became those lost lives—the individuality, the culture, the community, and the diversity of those lives. Much of my approach in the course consequently focuses on the individual’s experience of the Holocaust, so that students may, in turn, find a parallel to their own experience. Living in a small rural town, where there is no diversity, fuels my drive to teach this course. As a result of my course, and specifically this lesson, students will better appreciate people as individuals, rather than as stereotypes or groups.

PURPOSE OF LESSON

This project provides an opportunity to engage the students in thoughtful research and analysis of what life was like for Jews living in Europe before the German occupation (between the World Wars) by finding photographs and information about the places the photos were taken. The lesson also provides an opportunity for students to relate their own lives to those of the Jews at that time in a more personal way by finding their own family photos to parallel the ones researched. This exercise helps them focus on individuals rather than on numbers or groups of people.

GOALS FOR STUDENT UNDERSTANDING

- Students will develop an understanding of pre–World War II Jewish religious, cultural, and communal life in Europe in order to distinguish individual lives from the statistics of the Holocaust.
- Students will develop an understanding of the importance of recognizing and appreciating differences, whether individual, cultural, religious, or otherwise.

WHAT STUDENTS WILL DO TO BUILD THEIR UNDERSTANDING

- Students will locate and examine pre–World War II Jewish religious, cultural, and communal life in Europe through photographs from that time.
- Students will interpret what some aspects of pre–World War II Jewish life in Europe may have been like and relate that to their own lives.

- Students will research information about the locales of photographs collected to discover different aspects of Jewish life before and after Nazi occupation.
- Students will analyze photographs collected and the research gathered on different Jewish communities.
- Students will evaluate Jewish life in Europe before World War II and describe it in a follow-up writing assignment.
- Students will synthesize the goals of the project through class discussion at the end of the lesson to process the individuality of Jewish lives lost in the Holocaust.

STATE STANDARDS

This project connects to several of Ohio's state standards for English/Language Arts including:

- Reading Process standards, comprehension strategies
- Writing Process standards, prewriting, drafting, and revising
- Writing Applications and Conventions standards, writing responses and producing informal writings
- Research standards, appropriate and accurate sources, and the gathering/evaluation of information
- Communications standards, active listening, interpretation, evaluation and delivery strategies

RESOURCES AND HANDOUTS: BACKGROUND MATERIALS

The Holocaust: Prejudice Unleashed, the Ohio State Department of Education's curriculum guide, by the Ohio Council on Holocaust Education. This is a 10-lesson curriculum that includes materials, student activities, and resources, as well as supplementary guides for teaching any length unit on the Holocaust. The guide includes lessons concerning the foundations of the Holocaust, the culture of the Jews, the steps to the "Final Solution," responses to the Holocaust, and the meaning of the Holocaust in today's world.

There Once Was a World: A 900-Year Chronicle of the Shtetl of Eishyshok, by Yaffa Eliach. Eliach, one of only 29 survivors of Eishyshok, documents life in a shtetl before the Nazis invaded. Because this book is rich in photographs and information of one Jewish community's history, as well as its bitter end, it's a valuable reference to guide students' understanding in the parallels of Jewish communal life then to their own lives now.

Historical Atlas of the Holocaust, by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. This geographical atlas and historical text covers all aspects of the Holocaust, including what happened in different areas of Europe, the Nazi killing centers, Jewish resistance, and postwar Europe. For this particular lesson, the first section on Europe before the war is important, as well as other more specific maps that students may use to locate Jewish communities in Europe for research.

“Survivors of the Holocaust,” video by Steven Spielberg and the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation. A historic documentary chronicled in timeline form through survivors’ own testimonies, this video is profoundly useful in giving students an eyewitness account of Jewish life before the Nazis and how drastically it changed. The hour-long video is the introduction for my course on the Holocaust, and students remember the survivors’ stories of their lives through the entire 12-week class.

RESOURCES AND HANDOUTS: MATERIALS USED

- Project assignment sheet that gives instruction for each step
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Teacher Guide for *Daniel’s Story*, “How to Read a Photograph,” page 5
- Computers with Internet access
- www.ushmm.org Web site: Photo Archives and Holocaust Learning Center
- Large classroom map of World War II Europe

LESSON NARRATIVE

Day 1–2: Finding photos, analysis, and town research

In class, students brainstorm a list of words they associate with “typical” or “normal” daily life, as they know it, and then we share those lists in class. Project instructions are handed out and explained, and students are asked to transfer the “brainstormed” list of words (to use as keywords in searching the archives) to the back of that paper to have at their fingertips.

Students will now spend two days during class time using computers to access and research two photos of pre–World War II Jewish life in Europe. It is important to note the locales of photos and years in which photos were taken to determine whether they depict life before the Nazi occupation of that country, and, if so, note that life was therefore “normal.” Most students will ask the teacher to help with this aspect, but they can also find out on their own; additionally, students will search through the photo archives until they find “just the right one” for themselves. Students are then to copy and paste each photo, the date it was taken, and its locale (not the caption, however) onto a new word document and print. After students have found and analyzed the photos using the worksheets provided, they should begin researching the town or city of one of the photos they collected by answering the following questions. Research is due on Day 3.

- How large was the town’s/city’s Jewish population and how long had Jews been living there?
- What was Jewish life/culture in that town/city like prior to the German invasion?
- Where is or was that town/city located?
- When and how did the town/city come under Nazi rule (timeline)?
- What was the fate of this particular town’s/city’s Jews during the Holocaust?

For homework, students are to look through their own family photos to find at least one to bring in and share with the class that relates in some way to one of the photos they have researched. I do not tell them that they will be bringing in their own photo when they begin searching for photos, so they choose photos that strike them in some way, rather than ones for which they know they may find a match at home. Also as part of their homework, students are to write an organized response to the following questions concerning their photos:

- In examining your researched photos, what evidence suggests that life was “normal” or “ordinary” for the Jews prior to the German occupation?
- What did you discover as you looked through your own family’s photos in relation to those that you had researched? Which one did you choose to share? How does it relate and why?
- What do these photos, both yours and the researched ones, tell you about Jewish life in Europe before World War II?

Day 3: All work due, in-class discussion

The entire project is due, but in stages. Usually I give the following directions, and then 15 to 20 minutes of class time for completion, before our final processing and discussion. First, students are to attach their own family photo to the prewar one it relates to, so that both can be seen. (I have also had students put their photos on one board and the Jewish life photos on a separate board to compare and contrast.) Either way, students are to hang the collected photos (including their own) on a chalkboard or bulletin board so that it will be one large visual collection. Third, students are to mark with a pushpin on the posted classroom map the location researched during this project. Fourth, students are to staple together and turn in the remaining photo analysis sheets (two, one for each photo), writing assignment, and locale research.

After those tasks are completed, a final project synthesis takes place: first, students gather around the boards, and we look at the class photographs together and discuss the similarities and differences we notice. Then, students take their seats so that we may continue our discussion. The focus of the discussion should be on how the students and people pictured are similar to each other, and how the community of the students and those pictured are similar, as well. Discussion questions include but are not limited to the following:

- What did you find out?
- What were you surprised by?
- What was Jewish life like before the German occupation?
- What are the similarities and differences of life in both sets of photos?
- Which European Jewish communities were affected?
- How were European Jewish communities affected?
- How did the Germans gain control?

After assessing students' understanding of the project through the previous questions, discussion should then focus on the magnitude of six million lives lost through the visual on the wall of the people in the photos. Students have already counted them for their analysis sheets, so involving the entire class by adding up the numbers then dividing into six million can be powerful; however, it can also be confusing. Try to make a connection between the individual lives lost and the statistic of six million by gauging the space filled by the photos and number of people there, and then approximately how many walls that would be, and then rooms, floors, and so on.

Finally, emphasis in the discussion should move toward the respect for individual lives lost in the Holocaust as a way of renewing those lives, recognizing them. Focus should also be placed on the recognition of Jewish cultural and communal life in pre-occupation Europe, how diverse it was, and what was ultimately lost.

STUDENT WORK SAMPLES



(left) Date: 1981
Locale: Orlando, Florida

(right) Date: 1937
Locale: Kraków, Poland
USHMM, courtesy of Hadassa
Cudzynowski Gerstner

Amy Dahl, sophomore

I knew that life was normal for Jews before the war because the kids are outside playing on a bike or hanging out with their friends. They are also dressed normally and seem to be happy.

When I was searching through my family photos, I came across several that were similar to the pictures I had researched. I chose the picture of my brother on a tricycle because I found a picture of a little Jewish boy on his tricycle before the war. Both pictures show typical life, whether recent or back then, because most children have tricycles at some point in their early childhood.

The main similarity of both pictures is that they picture kids. Everywhere you go today you see children playing, and this also shows that Jewish children also did that before the war.

The comparison of these photos tells me that before the Nazis invaded their communities, Jews were free and able to live happily without persecution, just like me, because my photos are similar.



(left) Date: ca. 1980
Locale: Loudonville, Ohio

(right) Date: Circa 1930
Locale: Druskieniki, Poland
(now Lithuania)
USHMM, courtesy of Barbara
Berkowicz Soloway

Crystal England, junior

One of the photos that really reminded me of my family is the one with what seems to be a happy couple who look like they're taking a break from working in their garden to pose for a picture; they are also holding one another, showing how much in love they are.

This photo relates to me because it reminds me of my own grandparents, who loved each other very much. My grandfather had a garden of his own, and my entire family would work in it with him in the summer. Even after my grandfather passed away, we still grew his garden every year. This picture reminds me of the times that I spent with my grandfather working in his garden, and the great times we shared.

In comparing my life to that of the Jews before the war, both are "normal." Jews had the opportunity to live a very content and satisfied life, as proven to me through the smiling faces—the Jewish photos reminded me of my family and our content lives.



(left) Date: ca. 1990
Locale: Ashland, Ohio

(right) Date: 1938
Locale: Budapest, Hungary
USHMM, courtesy of George Pick

Tarah Beck, junior

After finding my photos, I could tell that life for the Jews was normal, because they were doing things that my family and I would do on a regular basis. In one picture, a schoolteacher was in a play yard with her students playing in a sandbox. I played in the sandbox with anybody and everybody when I was little. There is nothing different from what those kids are doing to what any kid around the world does.

As I looked through my own family photos at home, I noticed that our photos showed the same type of things that I had seen while researching the photos of Jewish life. Really, no comparison is needed in looking at the two sets of photos. Jews did nothing different from what anybody in the world does. I already know what their life was like because it's like any other human being's in the world: They are normal, they do normal things, and they did nothing to get singled out for genocide.

TEACHER COMMENTARY

While watching the students research the prewar Jewish life photos, I found it interesting that they seemed to sift through several pages of pictures—they did not take the very first photo that fit the criteria of the assignment. In fact, I was pleasantly surprised at the great care students took and the scrutiny with which the students found “just the right one,” for whatever reason. As students are researching, keep in mind that they are not necessarily aware they will be looking through their own family photos at home. The teacher has the discretion to let students know ahead of time or not. I find that they will choose photos with which they identify anyway.

It is interesting to see in the student samples of work that all three chose photos which they say reminded them of their families. They focus on the smiles, the happiness, and the daily activities the photos depict. In finding their own photos to parallel, the students discuss noticing how life is no different now than it was then in terms of activities, specifically playing and gardening, and that this is evident as they looked through all of their family pictures, not just the ones they chose; apparently all of the photos looked through in researching stay in their minds.

In reflecting upon the student work here, it is obvious to the students what the goal of the assignment is as they work, and they already know what they will find: Jews were normal people who had normal lives in normal communities. Students also easily see the relevance of their own lives in comparison to that of the Jews, especially in terms of individuality. This is evident in their explanation of their parallel family photo.

ASSESSMENT

Students are assessed several ways: through demonstrating the ability to choose photos according to the provided criteria concerning places and dates of Nazi control; through completing photo analysis sheets (two); through associating/seeing the parallel of their current life with their own photo that relates as evident in choice of photo(s) brought into class; through answering the questions posed in their writing assignment in an organized, thoughtful piece; and through explaining what happened to the Jewish community researched in answering the questions given.

Indicators of student understanding within these research and writing assignments are presented several ways. In their analysis of the researched photos, the level of detail given clearly suggests the amount of time taken to scrutinize them, and in turn, how well students comprehend what they see in the photos. In the written piece, student explanations of what they see in the Jewish photos about normal life, and how that relates to what they see in their own family's photos, is a good indicator of student understanding of the lesson, particularly if a student shares some type of “story” about a family member in reference to both photos. With respect to researching the Jewish community depicted in one of the photos, student understanding can be assessed through the details they give concerning the community's cultural and communal life prior to Nazi invasion; it seems the fewer the details given, the less students are able to understand how “normal” each community was.

Students are also informally evaluated on this project through class discussion generated to see if they are participating and whether obvious connections were made between the photos researched,

their own lives, and what the communities have in common. Clear indicators of student learning during the discussion are apparent through students' comments comparing their own lives now or as a child to what they see in the photographs of the entire collection. For example, comments that spontaneously parallel what Jews did in their spare time to what the students do is a clear marker.

This particular project is also assessed through an essay question on the test following this unit: What was Jewish life and culture of interwar Europe like? Why is it important to consider as an aspect of the study of the Holocaust? Explain your answer using what you learned through, as well as giving examples from, the photo/research project; the video "There Once Was a Town"; *The Three Gifts*, by I. L. Peretz; and what we read about *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

TEACHER REFLECTION

Over the last couple of years that I have used this particular lesson, I have found that even if modifications are made, it is integral to the understanding of students that they find their own photo that parallels at least one of those researched. It is likely they will say, "But how am I going to be able to find one that relates 70 years after this?" To which I reply, "Just try, you'll be surprised." When they come to class that next day, they can't wait to share, and as the photos are placed on the boards, a very interested but quiet perusal takes place as the students look at the photos together. It is also vital to the project that the class then discuss the collections' similarities and differences.

While researching, some students choose to find out more about the people pictured in their photos, so certainly other assignments can grow from this one; yet, depending on time constraints, or whether students are having trouble researching, this project can be extended a few days or perhaps even shortened.

In directing this project, I must point out that the objectives of the lesson fall into place easily: it is an organized, complete, fun assignment that is highly interactive in many different ways. The biggest challenge presented in this project is helping the students find information on some of the locations where photos were taken; again, I tell them to keep searching, and ultimately, they find the answers on their own. The school librarian becomes an invaluable resource.

Students seem to know from the very beginning of this lesson what they will find: life is not any different for them than it was for the Jews of Europe, and individuals and communities who had much to offer were destroyed. Weeks down the road in class, when we are looking at photos of the ghettos or watching documentary footage of the "Final Solution" being carried out, it is obvious from student reactions, questions, and comments that the connection has been made: the photographs of life are ingrained in their minds, and therefore the ultimate loss is understood. Students remember who those people were, and then remembrance of lives lost continues.