PRE-WAR JEWISH LIFE

INTRODUCTION

This lesson forms an essential introduction to the scheme of work by encouraging students to reflect on the richness and diversity of Jewish life in Europe before the Second World War and reminding them of the common humanity of those who would become victims of the Nazis.

Study of Nazi anti-Jewish persecution often focusses on the perpetrators, reducing the victims to mere statistics. It is therefore important to remember the individuality and humanity of the Jewish men, women and children who were targeted by the Nazis and to be aware that they represented communities and cultures across Europe.

Re-humanising these people through study of their lives before they became victims ensures that students begin to recognise the points of commonality between these lives and their own. At the same time, it also enables students to begin to appreciate the immense diversity of pre-war European Jewish culture. This is especially important if students have limited knowledge of, or hold misconceptions about, Jewish life. In schools which have previously studied Judaism, the lesson will help students to understand that many European Jews did not necessarily define their Jewish identity solely (or, in some cases, at all) in religious terms.

RESOURCES

The lesson makes uses of the following materials:

- *Pre-war Jewish Life* PowerPoint.

- *Pre-war Jewish Life* cards: this resource consists of 15 double-sided A4 cards, each with a pre-war photograph on one side and three questions related to the image on the other. The photographs show Jewish children in a variety of scenes, most of which will be familiar to students from their own lives, highlighting that Jewish children generally had interests and experiences which were much like their own. At the same time, they are drawn from a variety of countries, demonstrating the geographical diversity of Jewish communities.

Two of the three questions are generic to all cards: the first asks why students think the photograph was taken; the third whether anything can be learned about the religion or nationality of the people in it. In almost all cases, it is not possible to tell from the cards alone

that the children are Jewish, a point teachers should emphasise and encourage students to explore, for it directly challenges Nazi stereotypes. Three cards (5, 7 and 14) do depict scenes associated with Jewish religious practice, but this would not necessarily be evident to students without prior knowledge of Judaism.

Further information about each photograph is provided at the end of these notes.

CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Jewish communities had existed in Europe since classical times, initially concentrated in Greek and later Roman dominions around the Mediterranean. For many different reasons, Jewish settlement had spread over the centuries so that Jews could be found in every country in Europe by the early twentieth century. Whilst the majority of Jews lived in eastern Europe, small communities could be found even on the continent's peripheries in countries such as Norway and Ireland. These communities naturally had very different histories and cultures which were expressed in a bewildering range of languages, religious practices and levels of assimilation.

For example, one traditional distinction was that between Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities. Sephardic Jews had roots in Spain, one of the great centres of medieval Jewish life. Following their expulsion from Spain in 1492, the majority settled in the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire, especially in Greece, at the invitation of the Sultan. The term Ashkenazi was originally applied to the Jews of Germany, although it has often been used to describe northern European Jews generally. Antisemitic persecution in countries such as England, France and Germany in the Middle Ages led most Ashkenazi Jews to eventually emigrate to eastern Europe where they were welcomed by the kings of Poland. As a result, the world's largest Jewish community for half a millennium before the Second World War could be found in the historic territory of Poland (modern Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania), although appalling antisemitic persecution in the decades before the First World War by the Russian Tsars led hundreds of thousands to flee to western European countries such as Germany, France and Britain in a reversal of the population movements of earlier centuries.

The Sephardi-Ashkenazi distinction was only one of many which could be applied to Europe's Jewish communities as each country was different. Within the Ashkenazi world, for instance, German Jews (who made up less than 1% of the country's population) tended to be middle-class, secular and highly assimilated. By contrast, Polish Jews (more than 10% of the population) were more often poor, religious and likely to retain an explicitly Jewish identity.

However, it is also important to note that there were also differences within countries. In Germany, for example, the immigration of Polish Jews from the late nineteenth century onwards created differences in language (German v. Yiddish), economic status and religion. There were also countries such as the Netherlands or Yugoslavia which had both Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities, each with different languages, religious practices and even culinary traditions. Across Europe, generational differences were an additional factor, with younger Jews increasingly likely to express their identity in secular terms, whether through political movements or cultural activities. And, of course, there were people who had no faith but still regarded themselves as Jews – several of the most famous Jews in the world in the early twentieth century, such as Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud, were atheists.

Furthermore, the centrality of Jewishness to an individual or community's identity could differ. Whilst the majority of Jews continued to define themselves as Jews, the degree to which they did so varied. For example, it was common in countries with high levels of assimilation such as Germany or Hungary for many Jews to describe themselves as citizens "*of the Mosaic faith*"; that is, they saw themselves first as Germans or Hungarians. And, as the images used in this lesson suggest, all Jews – just like any other people – had multiple facets to their identity, formed by their families, education, interests, leisure pursuits, and much else besides. Ultimately, it was only antisemites such as the Nazis who defined them all purely by their Jewishness, as demonstrated by the fact that they even attacked Jews who had converted to Christianity. By understanding the diverse and multi-layered nature of Jewish life in Europe, we can therefore also better perceive the malignancy of the Nazi vision and appreciate the scale of the immense destruction which it inflicted on communities and cultures which had so enriched the continent for centuries.

LESSON PLAN

Aims

To increase knowledge and understanding of Jewish life in Europe before the Holocaust

To re-humanise the victims of Nazism

To develop skills of visual source analysis and interpretation

Starter

Pose the following questions to the class:

- *Why do we take photographs?* There are many possible answers to this question but some students should note that we take photographs to remember something.

- *How are photographs from the past useful to us?* Again, it should be evident to most students that they tell us something about people or events in the past. Some should be able to make links to the first question, i.e. photographs may tell us something about which events people found memorable in their lives. If necessary, remind students that camera ownership was limited in the early twentieth century and that the use of film meant that photographs would be taken far more rarely than today. This will help them to appreciate that the images they will be exploring show people as they wished to be remembered.

Collect responses to these questions at the front, recording a selection of the remarks on a whiteboard.

Activity

Separate the class into pairs and give each pair a card. (Depending on the class size, teachers may choose not to use all of the cards.)

Ask each pair to look carefully at the photograph on their card and to discuss their answers to the questions on the back. They should note down their answers to the questions: this could be done as a bullet-point list, table, or mind map. Remind students that they should only use what they see in the photograph to answer the questions. In this context, teachers may find it helpful not to mention at this stage that the photographs show Jews.

After an allotted time, collect feedback from the class. Depending on the time available and the ability levels of the students, teachers may choose to *either* select a certain number of cards *or* take feedback from each pair. [Images of all of the cards have been provided in the PowerPoint; teacher who do not wish to discuss the images should delete the appropriate slides before the lesson.]

Whichever method is followed, use the further information at the end of these notes to put the chosen cards in context, revealing that all of the cards show Jewish children and

explaining where possible the stories behind the images. In schools whose students have not previously studied Judaism, the information for cards 5, 7 and 14 can be used to introduce some elements of Jewish religious practice. Also highlight the range of countries represented.

Plenary

Build on the preceding feedback by asking the class to discuss answers to the following questions now that they know more about the photographs:

- *What sort of situations do the photographs show?* Students should be able to note some recurring themes, e.g. family scenes, holidays, leisure activities.

- *What can we learn about the lives of the children in the photographs from this?* If necessary, prompt students by reminding them of the starter discussion on why we take photographs. They may also wish to consider who took the photographs: it seems likely that in most cases this would have been parents, i.e. the images represent important moments in their children's lives which parents wished to capture. Therefore, we can learn something about key events (such as starting school, going on holiday or parties) and about children's interests (such as football, ballet, pets and skating). The photographs depicting siblings (3, 5, 11, 13 and 15) also attest to the importance of family.

- *What can we learn from the fact that we cannot tell what the religion or nationality of most of the people is just by looking at the photographs?* This is a helpful opportunity to dispel any stereotypes about Jews, Judaism or Jewish culture which students may have.

- *What can we learn about pre-war Jewish life in Europe from these photographs?* It should be clear that Jews lived in many different countries and students should be invited to consider what implications this had (e.g. different languages and national identities). Photographs 1 and 9, which show children in, respectively, a Jewish school in Poland and a secular state school in Germany, could be used to highlight that levels of assimilation varied. Equally, the very different appearances of the children in photographs 7 and 11 could be used to illustrate different levels of religiosity within a single country (Poland). Above all, students should realise that Jewishness was just one element of a child's identity alongside a variety of other factors such as family, school, hobbies, and so on – in short, the children in the photographs had lives, concerns and interests which were often similar to students' own.

THE CARDS – FURTHER INFORMATION

Photograph 1: Girls in a Jewish secondary school in Warsaw, Poland, 1937. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Minna Aspler)

The Yehudia Gymnazium was a prominent Jewish girls' school in Warsaw, the city with the largest Jewish community in pre-war Europe. The card asks if there are any ways in which the classroom differs from students' own: they may point to the wooden desks, uniforms and cramped rows. The single-sex class may also be a surprise for some. The existence of Jewish schools (found in virtually every country in Europe) shows the importance that some parents placed on their children being educated in a Jewish environment. However, this did not necessarily mean an entirely religious environment, as illustrated by the modern appearance of many of the girls: although it had religious roots, this was an academically-centred school with a Zionist ethos.

Photograph 2: A Jewish boy with friends and relatives at his birthday party in Kaunas [pronounced 'Cow-nas'], Lithuania, 1934. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Henry Kopelman-Gidoni)

In answer to the card's question of what they think is happening in the photograph, most students should realise that it shows a special occasion, although the clothing and catering may seem rather restrained compared to many modern birthday parties. Such a universal scene should help students to understand the similarities between the lives of these children, who would later suffer under the Nazi occupation, and their own.

Photograph 3: Members of a Jewish family relax with friends on a beach near Copenhagen, Denmark, 1936. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Richard Oestermann)

The card asks what the relationship between these people is: the photograph shows Else Oestermann with her daughters Margot (on the left) and Lilian. Else is holding a friend's baby; the name of the boy in the foreground is unknown but he was presumably also a family friend. This is another scene which will be familiar to many students. Denmark had a highly integrated Jewish community, as reflected in the unique response from civil society when the Jews were threatened with deportation by the Nazis in 1943: the Danish Resistance organised their safe passage

to Sweden, an event explored in the age-appropriate texts *The Whispering Town*, *Number the Stars* and *Hitler's Canary* (see the teachers' guide).

Photograph 4: A Jewish boys' football team in Berlin, Germany, 1935. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Tosca Kempler)

The card asks what we can learn about these boys from the photograph. Most obviously, it illustrates the importance of sport in their identity, as is true, of course, for many children. Careful reading of the photograph may reveal some other clues about the boys' lives. The fact that they are wearing several different versions of the kit (note the different shorts and collars) suggests that they had to provide their own and perhaps that some parents were able to spend more on the kit that others. The small park and buildings in the background would also imply that this was not an especially affluent area of Berlin.

Photograph 5: Five Jewish siblings dressed in Purim costumes in Eaubonne, France, 1934. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Claude & Judith Feist Hemmendinger)

The card asks what the relationship between these children is: many students will correctly realise that they are siblings. Selma, Judith, Martin, Jacob and Ellen Feist are shown on the steps of their home in Eaubonne, a suburb of Paris. Purim is a Jewish religious festival, usually held in March, which commemorates the salvation of the Jews from a plot to kill them in the ancient Persian Empire. The festival is celebrated in a carnival-like atmosphere and children especially are encouraged to dress-up. Traditionally, they would dress as characters from the story although by the modern era, as in this photograph, costumes could take many forms. The children survived the war by fleeing to Switzerland.

Photograph 6: A ballet class in Cluj Napoca [pronounced 'Cloozh Na-po-ca'], Romania, late 1930s. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Ned and Anna Aron)

The card asks what we can learn about these girls from the photograph. It is not certain if all of the girls are Jewish but this is another image which illustrates the universality of many childhood passions, regardless of cultural or religious differences. As today, attending ballet class was not necessarily an affordable option for all parents so the image may well suggest that these girls mostly came from middle-class families. This is not to say that most Romanian Jews were affluent: the majority were poor workers or traders.

Photograph 7: Boys at a Talmud Torah school in Kolbuszowa [pronounced 'Kol-boo-sho-va'], Poland, 1933. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Norman Salsitz)

This photograph represents the most obviously religious image in the resource: the boys' hats, coats and sidelocks clearly indicate that they were Orthodox Jews. Students will not necessarily be expected to know this, but many will guess, in answer to the card's question as to why the boys are wearing these clothes, that their appearance reflects their religious beliefs. Talmud Torah schools, which could be found across Europe, provided Jewish boys, usually from relatively poor families, with a predominantly religious education. During class discussion, this image could be contrasted with photograph 1, which shows a Jewish school in the same country (Poland) but which has a clearly more secular ethos. This highlights the diversity of Jewish life even within one nation.

Photograph 8: A Jewish girl walks her dog in Prague, Czechoslovakia, 1938. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Margit Meissner)

This photograph, which represents another common childhood image, shows 15-year-old Margit Morawetz. In answer to the question of what we can learn about her from this image, Margit's elegant clothing suggests that she came from a relatively comfortable background. Indeed, her father had been a banker and lecturer in law at Prague's Charles University prior to his untimely death in 1932. Margit's mother sent her to study in Paris in 1938 and later joined her there in 1939; both women were able to escape the Nazi occupation of France by securing American papers in 1940.

Photograph 9: A Jewish girl on her first day at school in Plauen [pronounced 'Plow-en'], Germany, 1937. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Janine Klipstein Gimpelman Sokolov)

The card asks students what they think the girl is carrying: Ursula Klipstein is shown holding her *Schultüte* ('school cone'). The cone is full of sweets, and was (and still is) traditionally given to all children on their first day of school in Germany. Students would not be expected to know this, unless they come from a German background themselves, but should be able to realise that it is something which marks a special occasion. In its own small way, this photograph is an indication of the thorough integration of the Jewish community into German society in the early twentieth century. In response to the growing anti-Jewish persecution in Nazi Germany, the Klipstein family emigrated in 1939 to Belgium, where Ursula survived the war in hiding.

Photograph 10: A group of Jewish boy scouts in Salonica, Greece, late 1920s. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Jack Beraha)

Although only founded in Britain in 1907, the scouting movement spread quickly across the world. Scouting will be familiar to many students and a number may themselves be members. In answer to the question of what the photograph suggests the boys have been doing, students may surmise that their activities include music (the trumpet held by the boy at the front) and chopping firewood (the axe attached to the belt of the boy on the right). Salonica (Thessaloniki in Greece) was home to the world's largest Sephardic Jewish community, numbering approximately 50,000 people before the Second World War: their Iberian heritage was reflected in the use of Ladino, a Spanish dialect, as their principal language.

Photograph 11: Jewish girls ice skating in Otwock [pronounced 'Ot-votsk'], Poland, 1935. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Eugenia Tabaczynska Shrut)

The card asks students what they think the relationship between the girls is. They may guess from the identical clothing of the girls on the left and right that they are sisters: Ziuta and Gina Szczecinska. Their friend Zosia Perec is standing between them. As well as being another very common childhood scene, this photograph appears to show girls with a secular identity, highlighting the diversity of Jewish life in Poland when contrasted with the boys in photograph 7.

Photograph 12: A toddler with her teddy bear in Vienna, Austria, 1938. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Helga James)

This beautiful photograph of Stephanie Bujakowski is perhaps the most universal of the images in this resource. The card asks what we can learn about her from the photograph. As well as guessing at her age, students may be able to tell that the photograph suggests that she lived in an apartment with a balcony. This, together with the trees in the background, would imply that her family lived in a relatively affluent area. Teachers should be careful, though, to dispel any stereotypes of mythical Jewish wealth. The fact that Stephanie has blonde hair should help to challenge any stereotypes about Jewish appearance.

Photograph 13: Slovak Jewish children on holiday in Lake Balaton, Hungary, 1933. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Magda Herzog Muller)

The card asks what the relationship between these children is. Most students will correctly answer that they are siblings. Heinrich (born 1930) and Alice (born 1932) Muller grew up in Hlohovec [pronounced 'Hlo-ho-vets'], a town in Czechoslovakia. The image is another universally recognisable one which reminds students of the similarities with their own lives. Following the German invasion of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, which led to the creation of an independent Slovakia under an antisemitic government, the Mullers were able to escape persecution by emigrating to Canada.

Photograph 14: Bar mitzvah portrait of a Jewish boy in Brussels, Belgium, 1930s. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Paul Halter)

The card asks students why they think the boy is wearing these clothes, a question which can be used to introduce students to elements of Jewish religious practice. The boy, whose name is unknown, is wearing a tallit (prayer shawl) prior to his bar mitzvah. A bar mitzvah is a coming of age ceremony for boys when they reach the age of 13 in which they read a portion of the Torah in synagogue at the Sabbath service. Jewish girls have an equivalent ceremony, bat mitzvah, at 12 or 13 (depending on the type of Judaism) although in most cases they do not read from the Torah. Whilst students may not be familiar with these rituals or symbols, coming of age ceremonies are common to many religions**.**

Photograph 15: Jewish siblings play in a sandpit in Mannheim, Germany, 1938/9. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Margot Schumm)

Most students are likely to correctly answer the question about the relationship between these children, i.e. that they are siblings. This enables us to realise that the photograph highlights the everyday delights of early childhood but also tells us something about the importance of family in children's identity. The three children, names unknown, are clearly close whilst the fact that their parents chose to photograph this moment reflects a universal desire to record the simple joys of their play.

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