

## Lesson Plans

### Introductory Text for Main Lesson Plan Webpage:

Both of these lesson plans provide a starting point for high school teachers to encourage their students to engage the experiences of Jewish people during the Holocaust. These sources, which are made available for public use by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, can be used to provide insight into the lives of individuals affected by the Holocaust across Europe. Teachers can use the included questions to start student discussions, as the basis for lectures, or in assignment prompts. Through asking and discussing these questions, students will gain the experience of engaging with primary sources in the manner of professional historians, and instructors can tailor the themes of the activity according to their preference. More information about all of these primary sources is available on the *Experiencing History* webpage of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and links to this website are provided in both lesson options.

### **Option 1: “The Holocaust in the East”**

#### Introductory text for Webpage:

The title for this lesson plan comes from Dr. Anika Walke’s 2025 Callahan Lecture by the same name, in which Dr. Walke discussed the efforts to commemorate the experiences of Jewish people in Eastern Europe during the Holocaust. Dr. Walke’s work contributes to the scholarly movement of “de-centering Auschwitz” in Holocaust Studies by acknowledging and memorializing experiences outside of concentration camps and death camps. This lesson plan encourages students to engage with primary sources that shed light on the lives of Jewish Eastern Europeans during the Nazi regime.

#### Image:



(Image from *Experiencing History*, “Trap Door to a Hiding Place.”)

### Background Information:

This image shows a wooden trapdoor that disguised the entrance to a bunker used by the Kramer, Melman, and Patrontasch families during the German occupation of their native town of Żółkiew (ZHOL-kyev), Poland between 1942 and 1944. The trapdoor, built by Artek Patrontasch, blended seamlessly into the floor of one of the bedrooms of the Melmans' house and could be opened from the inside using metal handles. It hid a space that was around fifty square meters at its largest, with a ceiling height of less than four feet.

Source Link: <https://perspectives.ushmm.org/item/trap-door-to-a-hiding-place>

### Themed Discussion Questions:

*Additional context from the Experiencing History website and optional discussion prompts for instructor use are in italics.*

1. Material Culture/Survival of Sources
  - a. What is this object made of? *Wood, metal, flooring—materials that we still use today.*
  - b. How did this source come to be? What does that tell us about its context? *The builder had skill as a woodworker. The builder knew that it was going to be necessary to blend the trapdoor seamlessly with the floor.*
  - c. Why did it survive? Who might have been involved in that? *It was never destroyed. Many people were involved in keeping it a secret. It was later considered important enough to bring to the Holocaust Memorial Museum.*
2. Daily Life
  - a. What might it have been like to have to hide behind this door, like fourteen-year-old Clara Kramer? *The hidden families needed to be absolutely silent, and could not stand up. Things like bathing or using a regular toilet or having privacy were not possible.*
  - b. How did people react to the events they were living through? *Clara survived, and went on to write a memoir in which she described the bunker as a grave. Her sister left the bunker to flee a fire in the house and was denounced by neighbors and murdered.*
  - c. How aware of their historical moment were the people who made and hid behind this door? Is it possible to tell? *We can tell that Artek Patrontasch knew that he had to make the trapdoor blend in with the bedroom flooring, so we can guess he thought it likely that the house would be searched. We know these families had hope that they would survive, because they continued to hide without giving up.*
  - d. What do the objects that we interact with say about our historical moment, and about how we react to it?
3. Presentation in Archives
  - a. Photography makes these objects accessible to us. Is it important to make these objects accessible? Why or why not?
  - b. How does an archive select which photographs to publish, if the archive's resources are limited?

- c. Is it better to present something unusual or something ordinary? How can an archive decide what is “ordinary” or “everyday”?

Further Reading:

Kramer, Clara. *Clara's War: One Girl's Story of Survival*. Harper Collins e-books. 2009.

For Instructors:

The same questions (with small modifications) can be applied to the following two primary sources, which are also from Eastern Europe during the Holocaust. These can be used separately, or introduced together in order to introduce students to Jewish perspectives on the Holocaust in Eastern Europe.

<https://perspectives.ushmm.org/item/petition-of-asna-zhurkovska/collection/jewish-community-documents>

This is a letter written by a Jewish Polish widow, Asna Zhurkovska, to an orphanage in the ghetto in which she lived in 1939. She begged the orphanage to take her children because she believed that the children would be more likely to survive in their care than in hers. The fate of Asna Zhurkovska and her children remains unknown.

<https://perspectives.ushmm.org/item/report-for-the-period-from-july-22-to-september-30-1942/collection/jewish-community-documents>

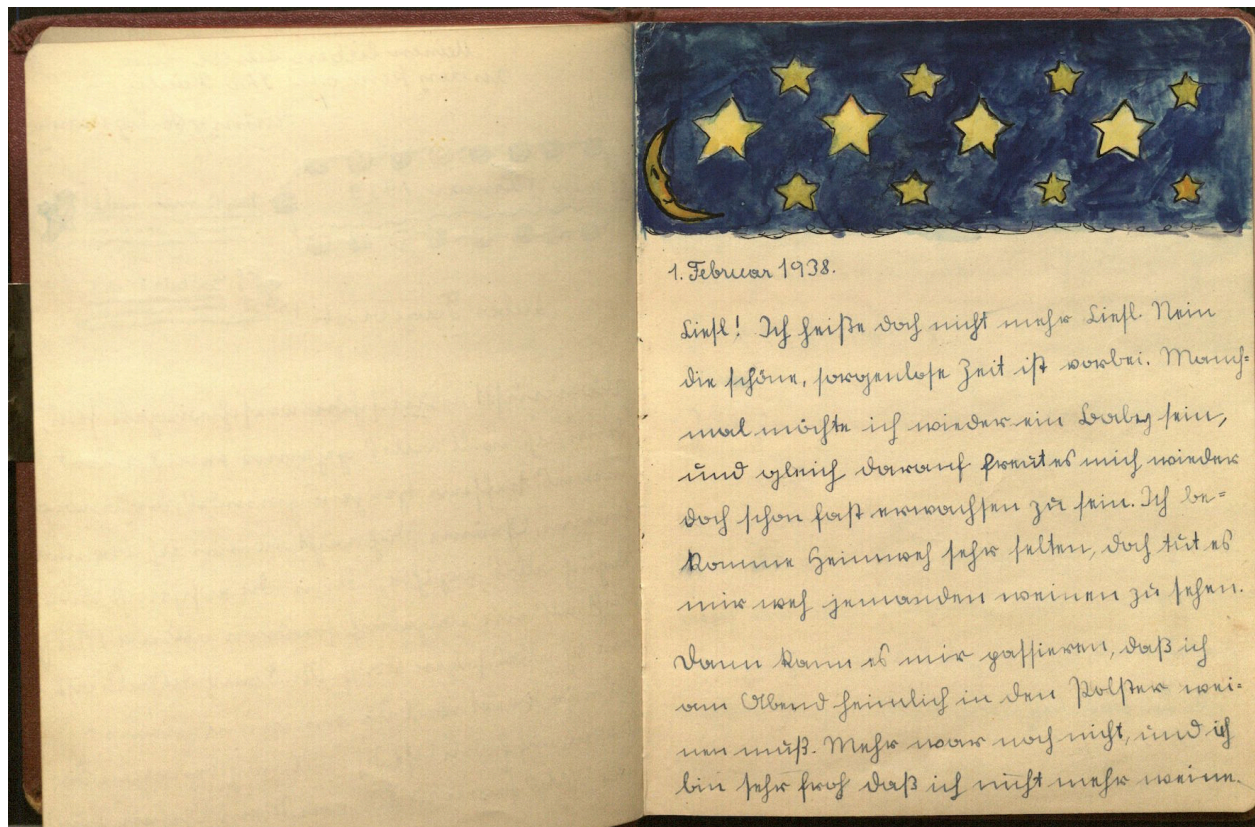
This is a report about the Warsaw ghetto, written by the German-appointed Jewish Council that was in charge of ghetto administration, following the deportation and murder of more than 260,000 Jewish residents of Warsaw. *This source may be more suitable for 11th- and 12th-graders than younger students, both because of the complexity of the language and because of the immediate context of suicide and state-ordered mass murder.*

## Option 2: Diaries of Refugees

Introductory text for Webpage:

This lesson plan encourages students to read and respond to translated diaries of children who were refugees during the Holocaust. The diaries and their translations have been made available through the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's *Experiencing History* website. Instructors can choose one or more of these diaries to use as the basis for a lecture or class discussion, or can lead students in finding points of comparison and contrast between them. Discussion questions and instructor prompts following three different thematic topics are below.

Image:



Caption: "Liesl! But my name's not Liesl anymore. No, the lovely, carefree time is over." (Image from *Experiencing History*, "Diary of Elisabeth Ornstein.")

Background Information:

Elisabeth Ornstein was eleven years old when she and her brother Georg escaped from their home in Nazi-occupied Austria to the United Kingdom and then to the United States. She began to write this diary in 1939, upon her arrival in Britain. Almost every entry is illustrated.

Source Link:

<https://perspectives.ushmm.org/item/diary-of-elisabeth-ornstein/collection/jewish-refugees-and-the-holocaust>



Themed Discussion Questions:

*Additional context from the Experiencing History website and optional discussion prompts for instructor use are in italics.*

1. Material Culture/Survival of Sources

- a. What are these objects made of? *Paper, pencils, and colored pencils: things we continue to use today.*
- b. How did this source come to be? What does that tell us about its context? *The author could write, and it was important enough to them that they did it.*
- c. Why did they survive? Who was involved in that? *Who other than the owner of the journal? Parents, guardians, people involved in the Kindertransport.*

2. Daily Life

- a. What kinds of things do people write about in their diaries or journals? Why? What do you write about? *Remind students that people don't always know they are creating an artifact that other people will read in the future. For some people, writing is a way of thinking through things. For others, it helps them remember experiences.*
- b. How did these young people react to the events they were living through? What was the most important thing to them? How can you tell? *Remind students that the most important thing to someone writing a diary is not necessarily the large-scale historical events that they're living through. Breakfast might be more important at the moment.*
- c. How aware of their historical moment were the authors of these journals? Is it possible to tell? Why or why not? Do you write about the present historical moment? If so, what do you write about?

3. Presentation in Archives

- a. Accessibility: Translation makes these documents accessible to us. Is it important to translate sources like this? Why or why not?
- b. How does an archive select which segments to publish, if resources are limited? *We know from the description that these diaries are longer than the published and translated segments.*
- c. Is it better to present something unusual or something ordinary? *How can you tell if something is "ordinary"?*

Further Reading:

Frank, Anne. *The Diary of A Young Girl*

*If students have already read Anne Frank's diary, it can be used as the starting point for a discussion about reading other journals written by children during the Holocaust.*

For Instructors:

The following links are for other diaries of Jewish children who were refugees during the Holocaust. Their experiences and accounts are very different, but the prompts and questions above can also apply to them, if instructors wish to lead a comparative study or discussion.

Diary of Jacques Berenholc:

<https://perspectives.ushmm.org/item/diary-of-jacques-berenholc/collection/jewish-refugees-and-the-holocaust>

Diary of Susi Hilsenrath:

<https://perspectives.ushmm.org/item/diary-of-susi-hilsenrath/collection/jewish-refugees-and-the-holocaust>