

Jewish Life in Europe before the Holocaust

(information and map courtesy of USHMM, Echoes & Reflections)



(Vera Federman's Jewish elementary school class, Debrecen, Hungary, 1930s ([Holocaust Center for Humanity](#)))

I. Setting the Table part one: Identity (revisited).

To begin this lesson, ask students to think about their “identity.” If they have already completed the recommended “[Exploring Identity](#)” and [Universe of Obligation](#) lessons, ask students to turn and talk, and then share what they understand about the importance of one’s own identity and in relation to the identity of others. Regardless, here are some refresher cues:

- What does “identity” mean to you?
- How do you define and express your identity?
- How does your identity influence your life?
- What role do others (friends, family members, peers, adults) play in your definition and expression of your identity?

- Have you ever experienced judgements or assumptions about your identity from others? If so, how do you feel when others judge, or challenge your concept of yourself?
- How does knowing about your identity inform, or impact how you see and recognize the identity of others – in your classroom, school, city, country, world?

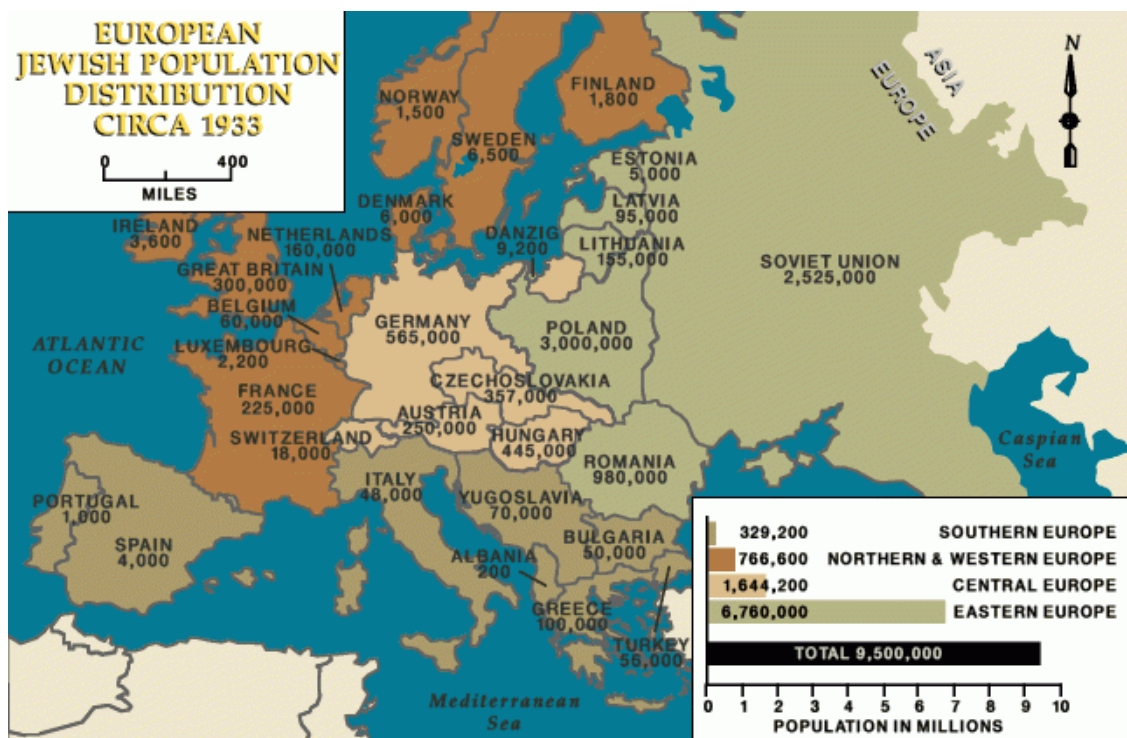
II. **Setting the Table part two: K-W chart.**

Ask students to write what they know about Jewish people living in Europe *before* the Holocaust. Next, they should write what they want to know, and/or what they are most interested in learning about them and their lives before the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933.

What I know....	What I want to know...

III. **Prewar Jewish Life in Europe.**

Review the following 1933 map of Europe, showing the distribution of Jewish people. Then, ask students to read and consider the information provided below, recording key information and facts that surprise you, interest you and troubles you (**S-I-T**).



- Judaism is a monotheistic religion, believing in one god. It is not a racial group. Individuals may also associate or identify with Judaism primarily through ethnic or cultural characteristics. Jewish communities may differ in belief, practice, politics, geography, language, and autonomy.
- When the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933, Jews were living in every country of Europe. A total of roughly 9 million Jews lived in the countries that would be occupied by Germany during World War II. By the end of the war, two out of every three of these Jews would be dead.
- Germany's population in 1933 was approximately 65,000,000. There were just 525,000 Jewish people there, comprising **less than 1% of its population**.
- **In Eastern Europe**, many Jews lived in predominantly Jewish towns or villages, *shtetls*. They often lived separate lives as a minority within the culture of the majority. They spoke their own language, Yiddish (German and Hebrew), attended cultural events in Yiddish, and adults still often dressed more

traditionally, men wearing hats or caps, and the women modestly covering their hair with wigs or kerchiefs.

- **In Western Europe**, Jews made up much less of the population and were much more integrated in the culture and lives of their non-Jewish neighbors. They tended to have more formal education, religion was comparatively less important, and they could be found in all walks of life: doctors, lawyers, farmers, teachers, tailors, seamstresses, factory workers, small business owners, etc. Some families were wealthy, many more were poor. Some children ended their schooling early to work in a craft or trade, while others looked forward to university education.

What Surprises Me....	What Interests Me....	What Troubles Me....

IV. Film and Discussion/Reflection.

View Echoes and Reflections' [*Glimpses of Jewish Life Before the Holocaust*](#) short film(s), then, answer the questions that follow.

- 1) What did you see, or notice that especially caught your eye?
- 2) What surprised you most in this film footage?
- 3) What information do you gain from this footage about life before the Holocaust that might not be conveyed by a written source?
- 4) Write a question to the filmmakers that is left unanswered by the film footage.
- 5) a) Based on what you have seen in the film footage, how was pre-war Jewish life similar to, or different from what you imagined?
b) How was pre-war Jewish life similar to, or different from your life -- with your friends, family ... others?
c) To the extent that you observe differences between yourself and those shown in this film, why is it important to recognize these differences? What value lies in the recognition of differences across cultures, religions, people

of different ethnic or national origins, etc.?

- 6) How does your knowledge that roughly six million Jewish people were murdered during the Holocaust impact what you have seen and learned in this lesson about prewar Jewish life? How does your definition and expression of your own identity contribute to your answer?
- 7) What do *you* believe is the value, or importance of this lesson? What does “empathy” mean to you in this context? Be specific.