Holocaust Memorial Day 2027: A place remembered



KS5 Tutor Time Stimuli and Suggestions

January 2027

A space or a place?



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Look carefully at this photograph.

You are acting as a historian.

Record:

- Notice: **what three things can you see?**
- Think: **what might two details suggest?**
- Wonder: **what question would you like to investigate.**

Remember: Begin with what you can observe, not what you assume.

Look again, closely…



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Look at the photograph a second time.

Complete these three sentences:

I can observe …

This might suggest …

I cannot know from this photograph alone …

Choose one detail to share.

Trochenbrod: a place that disappeared

This landscape is the site of **Trochenbrod**, also known by other names, including Sofiivka and Zofiówka.

Trochenbrod was a Jewish settlement in Volhynia, in what is now Ukraine.

During the Holocaust, Nazi German forces and collaborators murdered its Jewish community. The settlement was subsequently dismantled and ceased to function as the town it had been.

Return to your first observations: **what changes now that you know the place's history?**



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Where was Trochenbrod?

Trochenbrod was a Jewish settlement in Volhynia, in present-day Ukraine.

Sofievka (Trochenbrod) was founded in 1835, after the November Uprising, initially as a farming colony for the dispossessed Jews, and with time developed into a small town. The population grew from around 1,200 inhabitants (235 families) in 1889, to 1,580 in 1897 according to Jewish archives. In the Second Polish Republic, the number of inhabitants reached 4,000. The name Trochenbrod in Yiddish stands for 'Dry Bread' or 'Bread without Butter'

Towards the end of World War I, Trochenbrod briefly became a part of the West Ukrainian People's Republic and subsequently the Ukrainian People's Republic after unification in January 1919. However, during the Polish-Soviet War the forces of the re-emerging sovereign Poland and the Red Army fought over the town. It was ceded to Poland in the Peace of Riga and it became part of the Wolyn Voivodeship in the Kresy Borderlands. Most of the population were engaged in agriculture, dairy farming and tanning.

Look at the map. **A map shows location. What might it not show?**



A place in a changing political world



Trochenbrod's history was shaped by changing political authority.

- Before the First World War, the area was part of the Russian Empire.
- After the First World War and the Polish–Soviet War, it became part of Poland.
- In 1939, the Soviet Union occupied the region.
- In June 1941, Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union and German forces occupied the area.



Remember: Places are more than locations and a dot on a map. The people we meet, the things we do and the experiences we share can give a place meaning – and that meaning can be different for each of us. An example: Our school has a **location**: it is in a particular town or area, on a particular street. It is also a **locale**: a physical setting with classrooms, corridors, a playground and other spaces where people learn, meet and spend time together. Your **sense of place** is what the school means to you — perhaps a place to learn, see friends, feel that you belong, try something new or make memories. Someone else might experience the very same school differently, because their relationships and experiences there are different. Think about **place attachment (person, place, process).**

What counts as evidence of a place?

Imagine trying to reconstruct a town that no longer existed.

What evidence would you need?

Consider:

Maps and photographs.

Written records and recollections.

Personal testimony.

Family and community records.

Later historical research.

For each source, ask:

- **What could it help us establish?**
- **What might it leave unanswered?**
- **It cannot on its own help us to…**

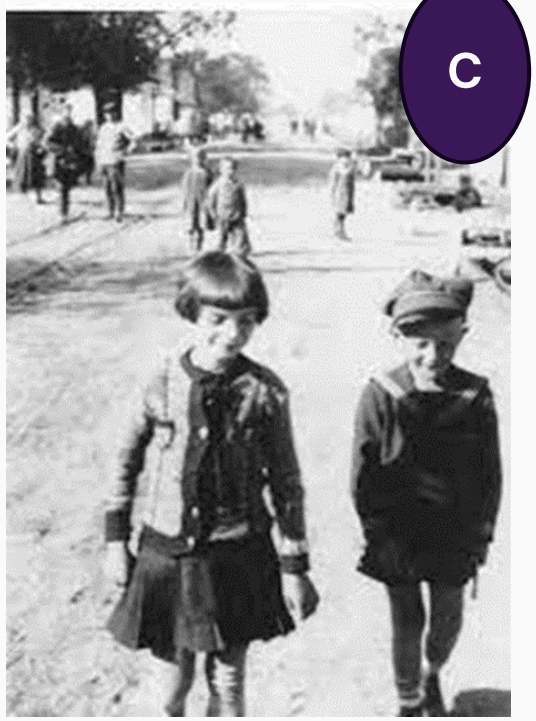
A



B

'Nearly all the Trochenbrod Jews were 'Chassidim'…It was really jolly in the townlet on a Sabbath when a 'rebbe' came.'

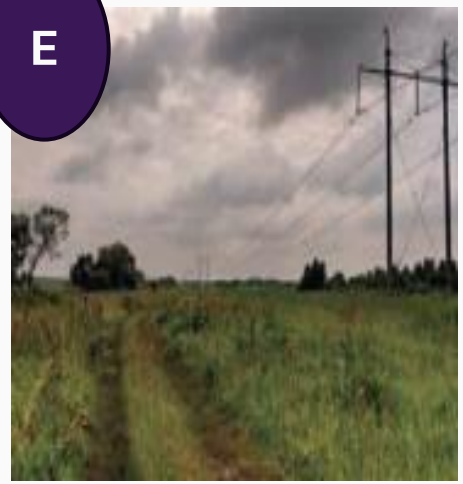
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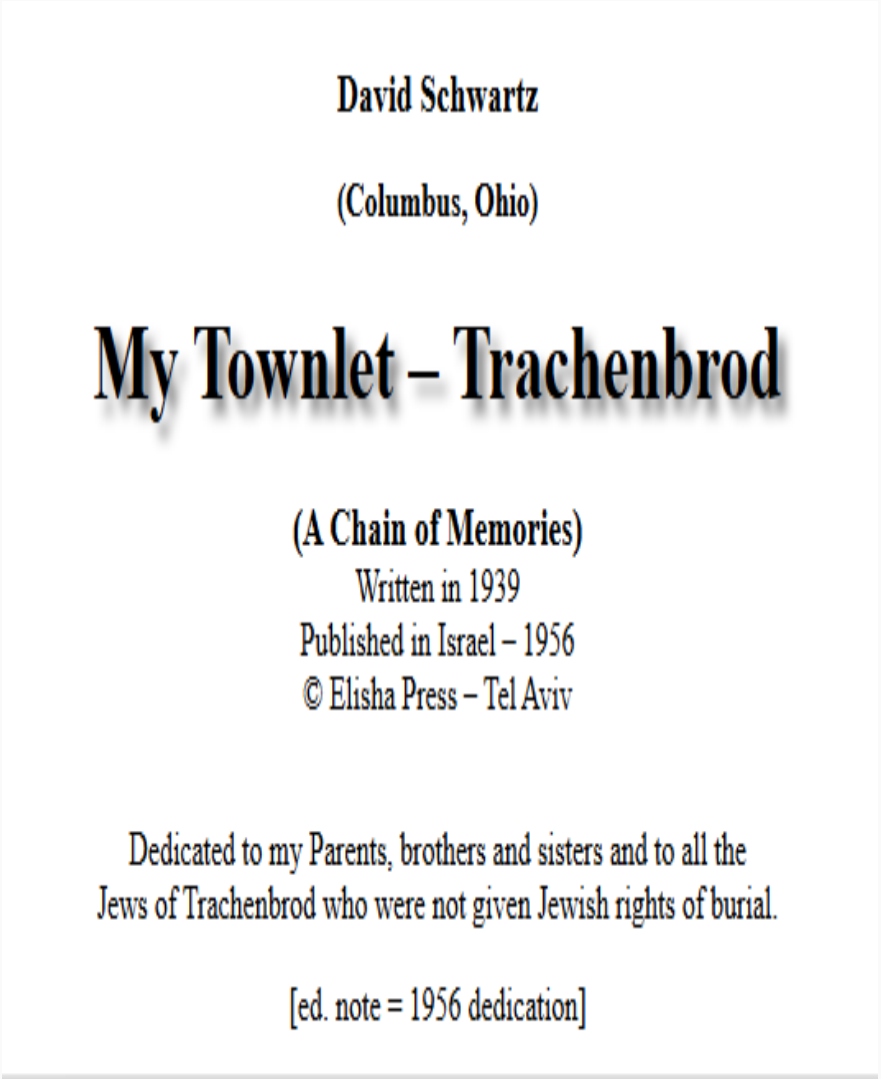


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David Schwartz and the memory of a town

David Schwartz was born and raised in Trochenbrod (also known as Sofievka) and recorded his memories of the town in 1939, before its Jewish community was destroyed during the Holocaust. In his recollections, he described Trochenbrod as a thriving settlement where there were “all kinds of small factories, workshops, and tanneries” and where “The Jews made a good living.” He also remembered the town’s strong religious life, writing that “Nearly all the Trochenbrod Jews were ‘Chassidim’” and that “It was really jolly in the townlet on a Sabbath when a ‘rebbe’ came.” His testimony, later published in Israel in 1956 as *My Townlet – Trachenbrod (A Chain of Memories)*, provides a valuable first-hand account of everyday life in the community before the Holocaust.



David Schwartz

(Columbus, Ohio)

My Townlet – Trachenbrod

(A Chain of Memories)

Written in 1939

Published in Israel – 1956

© Elisha Press – Tel Aviv

Dedicated to my Parents, brothers and sisters and to all the Jews of Trachenbrod who were not given Jewish rights of burial.

[ed. note = 1956 dedication]

What is a Yizkor book?

A Yizkor book is a memorial book created to remember a Jewish community destroyed during the Holocaust.

It may preserve:

Names and family histories

Photographs and documents

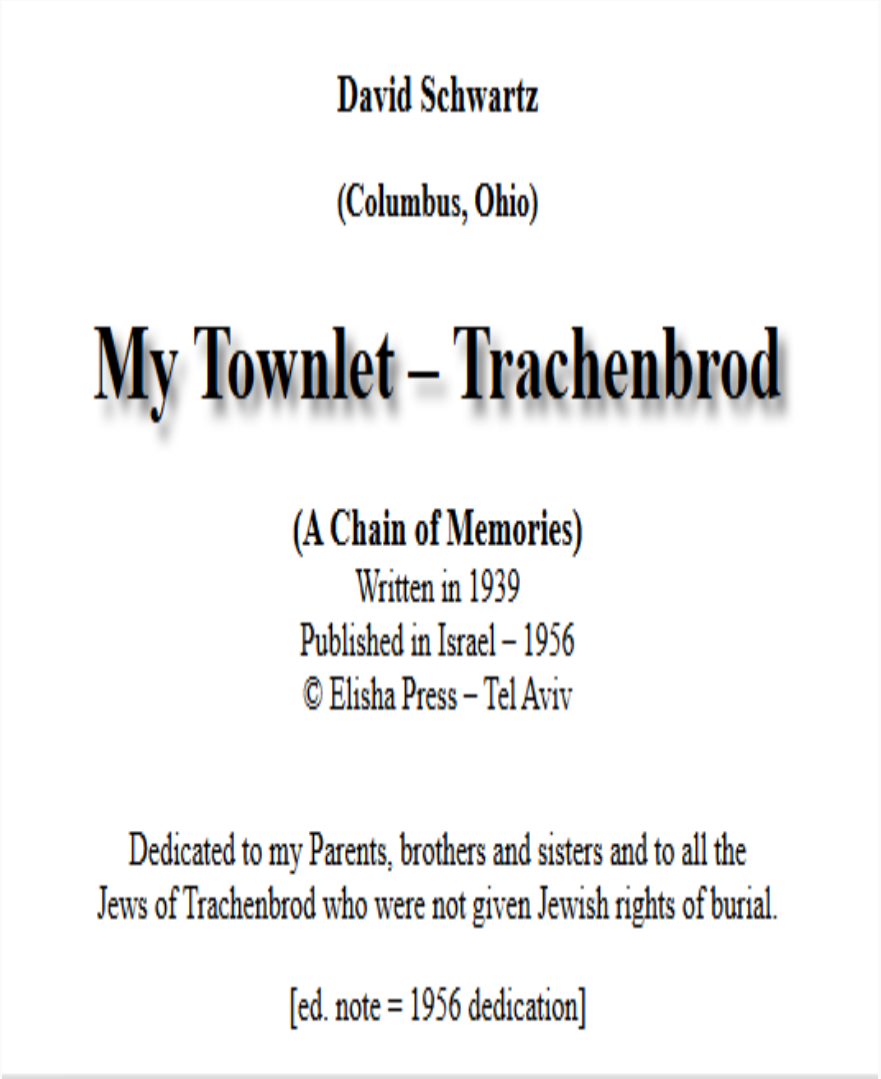
Recollections of everyday life

Accounts of persecution and destruction

Tributes to the people who lived there

These books help preserve community memory. They are also historical sources that must be read carefully.

Look at the dedication**: whom does it remember, and what does it ask readers to do?**



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The Pale of Settlement

Trochenbrod's early history was shaped by the Pale of Settlement, an area of the Russian Empire in which most Jewish subjects were permitted to live.

The Pale was established in 1791. Restrictions affected where Jews could live and, at different times, what work they could undertake.

Many Jewish communities developed within this region. Trochenbrod was distinctive because many of its inhabitants worked in agriculture.

Key idea: the town's history was shaped by both Jewish community life and the restrictions imposed by governments.

Why would the restrictions placed upon Jews matter?



What is a shtetl?

A shtetl was a small town in eastern Europe with a substantial Jewish population and a distinctive Jewish communal life.

Shtetls varied. Their residents were not all alike: people differed in occupation, wealth, religious practice, family circumstances and outlook.

Trochenbrod shared some features of shtetl life, but it was also distinctive as a largely Jewish settlement in which many residents farmed.

Choose the strongest statement:

- All shtetls were identical.
- Jewish communities had shared features but also differed from one another.
- Jewish life was the same everywhere in east

Explain why your choice is strongest.

Before destruction: a living community

Trochenbrod was more than a name on a map.

It was a place of:

- Homes and families
- Work, trade and livelihoods
- Religious and communal institutions
- Streets and meeting places
- Friendships and connections with nearby settlements



Task: choose three features of community life. For each, identify one source that could help us investigate it.

David Schwartz: the street and its people

David Schwartz's *My Townlet – Trachenbrod* preserves a written recollection of the town.

Read the extract carefully.

Look for evidence of:

- The town's layout and buildings.
- Families, institutions and community life.
- What Schwartz chooses to remember.

Then complete:

Schwartz's account helps us understand … because …

'Nearly all the Trochenbrod Jews were 'Chassidim'. Four Rabbis had synagogues named for them in Trachenbrod. There was a Brezner Shul, a Trisker Shul, a Holiker Shul and a Stepener Shul. In addition, various Rabbis would come to Trochenbrod from Koritz, Kashifka, Lutzk, and Makrig and Karlin, and their descendants came as well. It was really jolly in the townlet on a Sabbath when a 'rebbe' came.

There was one long street running through the town and it had several names. From the North to South it was called Barshapas, Luvishis, Shelishter and Fradilach. The railway junction was at Keviritz (Kiwerce). Nearby towns were Lutzk, Kolk, Rojshisht (Roszchiszche), Kovla (Kowel), Stepan, and Rovno…

They had all kinds of small factories, workshops, and tanneries. They were shoemakers, tailors, teachers, carpenters, blacksmiths, locksmiths, painters, bricklayers, foresters, brickmakers and owners of sawmills, wheelwrights, and a glass factory. The Jews made a good living. There were, in addition, all kinds of stores and shops; glaziers, wood dealers, butchers and cattle dealers, who used to drive the cattle up to Warsaw for sale, dealers who supplied geese and eggs to places as far away as Prussia, and contractors who supplied horses, straw and meat to the army'

Everyday life: work, family and connection

A community is more than its buildings. Trochenbrod was almost entirely Jewish except for its postmaster, who was required to be non-Jewish. The post office, was a building which belonged to the infrastructure of the town, connected Trochenbrod to the outside world, was part of an overwhelmingly Jewish community, was staffed by a non-Jewish person and survives in historical photographs/accounts even though the town itself disappeared.

Look at the evidence of work, trade, streets, homes and communal spaces in Trochenbrod.

'The postmistress's son was a friend of mine. They'd invite me at Christmas to celebrate with them. We were good friends with them. I remember going to his house and seeing the Christmas tree and thinking it was so beautiful, so much fun with the ornaments and everything, and the house was decorated and we had cookies. I liked it, but I knew it wasn't our holiday. Maybe I didn't even know it was a holiday, just a celebration of some sort. Anyway, I knew it had nothing to do with us. It was just fun.'

Betty Gold was born Baisa-Ruchel Potash and she lived in Trochenbrod as a child. She describes spending Christmas with her friend Ryszard Lubinski, son of the Polish postmistress (Janina Lubinski) and the only non Jewish child ever to be born in the town of Trochenbrod. The friends are photographed together on Trochenbrod's main street in 1939 (bottom)

- **What do these details reveal about everyday life?**
- **How might people and places have been connected?**
- **Which details are documented, and which are your inferences?**

Think about it**: What might disappear when the people who sustain a community are murdered?**





'The Heavens are Empty: Discovering the Lost Town of Trochenbrod', Avrom Bendavid – Val, published by Pegasus Books, NY.

Not one ‘single story’

A community cannot be fully represented by one voice.

Compare Schwartz’s recollection with Betty Gold’s testimony

Question	**Schwartz**	**Gold**
What does the source reveal?		
Whose perspective is represented?		
What remains uncertain?		

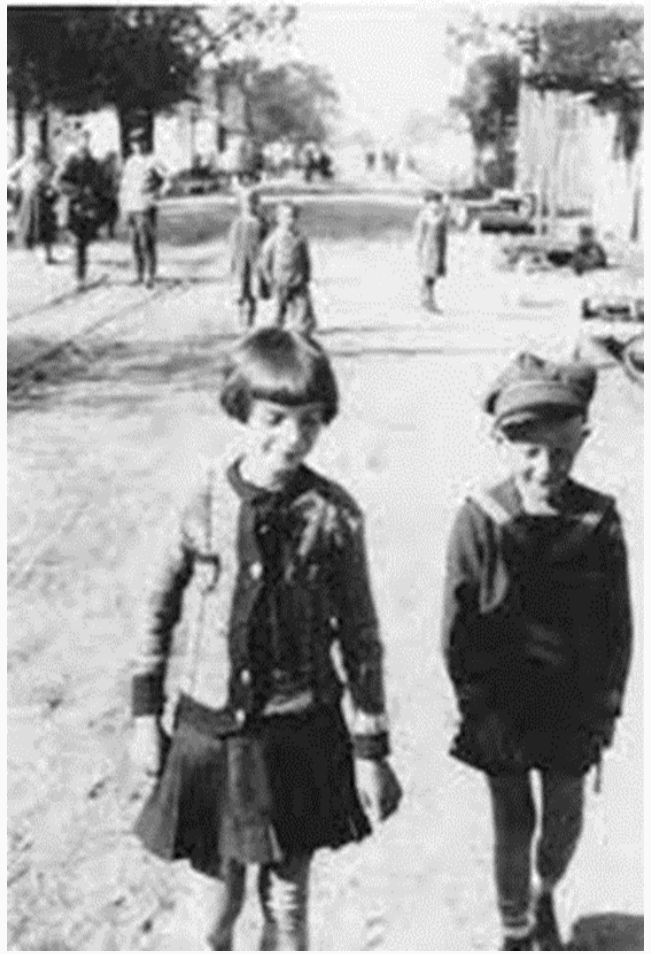
Six million – the scale of the Holocaust

In the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education's research study:

- 73.0% of surveyed students correctly identified that six million Jewish people were murdered in the Holocaust.
- 20.2% underestimated the number.
- Only 13.7% knew that about 90% of Jewish children living in Nazi-controlled Europe were murdered.

These figures measure students' answers – not the proportion of children who survived.

Think–write–share: **Why might knowing the scale matter when we study the destruction of one community, such as Trochenbrod?**



'The Heavens are Empty: Discovering the Lost Town of Trochenbrod', Avrom Bendavid – Val, published by Pegasus Books, NY.

From occupation to mass murder

The destruction of Trochenbrod did not happen in a single moment. Its destruction of Trochenbrod took place within a wider sequence of events.

- 1939: The Soviet Union occupied the region.
- June 1941: Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union.
- After the invasion: German occupation brought escalating anti-Jewish persecution and mass murder.
- 1942: Nazi German forces and collaborators murdered Trochenbrod's Jewish community.

Discuss**: what is the key turning point in this sequence? Why?**



'The Heavens are Empty: Discovering the Lost Town of Trochenbrod', Avrom Bendavid – Val, published by Pegasus Books, NY.

The ‘Holocaust by Bullets’

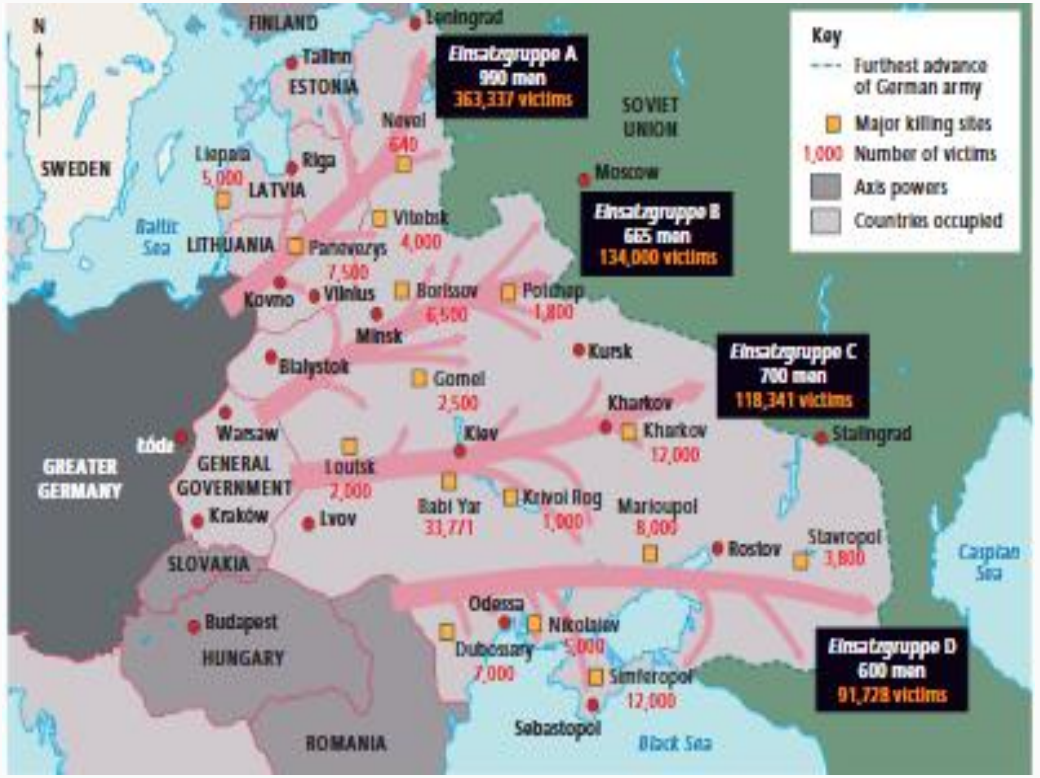
After Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, mass shootings became a central method of murdering Jewish communities across occupied eastern Europe.

The Einsatzgruppen were German mobile killing units that carried out mass shootings. Mass shootings were organised acts of persecution and murder. In many places, Jewish people were ordered to assemble or rounded up, taken or marched to a killing site (often local), murdered by German units and their collaborators and buried in mass graves. The details differed between locations, but the killings were part of the Nazi genocide.

They did not act alone: other German police and SS units, elements of the armed forces, Romanian forces and local collaborators also participated.

The victims included Jewish men, women and children. Other groups were also targeted, though the policies and circumstances differed.

Key question: **What changes when we study mass murder at the places where people lived, rather than only through the history of camps?**



- Approximately a third of the Holocaust’s victims were killed in the ‘Holocaust by bullets’, not killed in camps like Auschwitz.
- By 1944, it is estimated the Einsatzgruppen had murdered around 2,200,000 people.

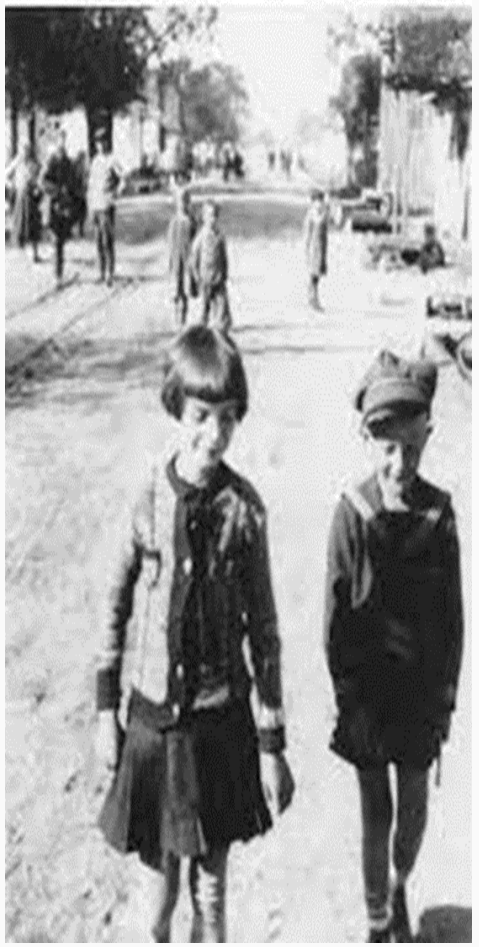
The destruction of Trochenbrod

In 1942, Nazi German forces and collaborators murdered the Jewish community of Trochenbrod in mass shootings.

Thousands of people were killed. A small number survived, including Baisa-Ruchel Potash, later known as Betty Gold, and members of her family.

The destruction continued beyond the killings:

- Buildings were dismantled.
- Belongings were taken away or sold.
- The settlement ceased to function as the community it had been.



'The Heavens are Empty: Discovering the Lost Town of Trochenbrod', Avrom Bendavid – Val, published by Pegasus Books, NY.

What remains of the physical place?

Look again at the landscape from the beginning.

You now know something about the community that once existed here.

Sort these into two groups:

- What the photograph can show
- What historical evidence can help establish

Then complete:

A landscape can show us… but it cannot, by itself, tell us…



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Gerald Szames: a remembered home

Gerald Szames remembers Trochenbrod from his childhood. (https://sfi.usc.edu/sites/default/files/field/image/2023/05/geraldszamesstottilien.jpg)

His account includes memories of:

Family life

His grandfather taking him to a mill

His father giving him sweets

Hiding and surviving in the forest

What can a childhood memory reveal that a map or official record might not?





https://sfi.usc.edu/sites/default/files/field/image/2023/05/geraldszamesstottilien.jpg

A witness to the aftermath

Not everyone who witnessed the destruction of Trochenbrod belonged to its Jewish community.

A non-Jewish local witness, identified in published research as Kyrylo S., described being forced by German authorities to dismantle Jewish homes after the killings.

'After the shooting of the Jews, the Germans requisitioned the inhabitants of three neighboring villages to dismantle the Jewish houses in Sofiivka [Zofiówka]. The Germans believed they would win the war, so they began constructing a farming estate using planks of wood and bricks taken from Jewish homes, synagogues, and a Jewish mill. They even started bringing cattle from the district to this property under construction. I was also forced to do this work and spent about five days in Sofiivka. Of course, I wasn't paid for it. When I arrived, the Jewish houses were nearly empty, as the Germans had already moved most of the Jewish belongings elsewhere. Almost all the buildings had been dismantled. By the time the Russians arrived at the end of the war, only about four Jewish houses remained standing.' (Testimony N°YIU1363LT, interviewed in Prylutske, on December 3, 2011)'

Consider: **What might this witness help us understand? How is this perspective different from Gerald Szames's and what would we need to establish before using this account?**



The Yahad team during the interview with Kyrylo S. ©Les Kasyanov/Yahad – In Unum

Three voices, different perspectives

Compare the evidence from:

- David Schwartz: a written recollection of the town.
- Gerald Szames: a survivor's childhood memories.
- Kyrylo S.: a non-Jewish witness to the aftermath.

For each source, ask:

Question	**What does it help us understand?**
What is recorded?	
Whose perspective is represented?	
What remains uncertain?	

Discuss: How do these sources complement one another?

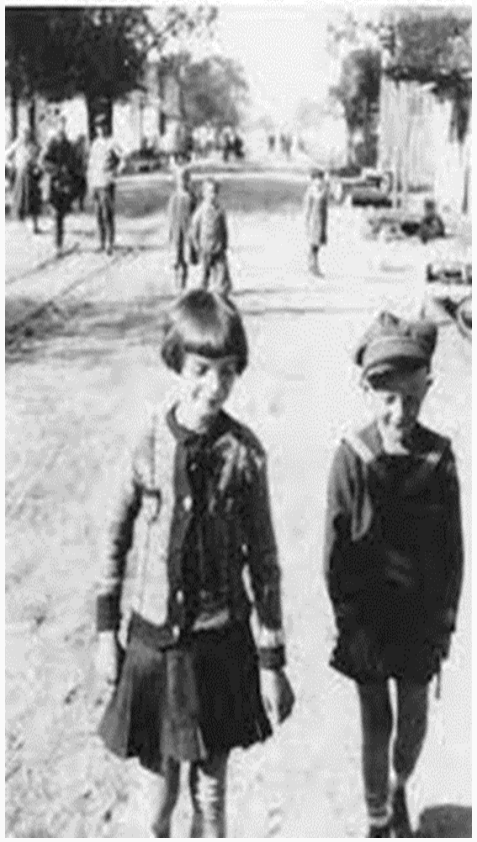
What do the sources leave out?

Historians can reconstruct aspects of a vanished place, but they cannot recover everything.

Using the evidence, identify:

- **One supported claim:** What can we establish?
- **One reasonable inference:** What does the evidence suggest?
- **One unanswered question:** What can we not establish?

Challenge: Why is it important to acknowledge what we do not know?



'The Heavens are Empty: Discovering the Lost Town of Trochenbrod', Avrom Bendavid – Val, published by Pegasus Books, NY.

Four memories of Trochenbrod (1)

On each of the next two slides are two memories from Trochenbrod.

Read each one carefully. the four extracts from the sources.

As you read, note down for each of the four extracts:

L: a detail about the layout or physical place

C: a detail about community life

M: a memory or meaning attached to the place



Taken by Ruchel Abrams in 1930, whilst on a visit from Cleveland, Ohio.

Then choose one detail that changes or deepens your understanding of Trochenbrod.

Four memories of Trochenbrod (2)

Extract 1: *'Trochenbrod was different from all other towns in Europe because everyone who lived there was Jewish. And because it was hidden deep in the forest, this town of 5,000 people was almost unknown beyond the nearby Ukrainian and Polish villages. Government authorities paid little attention to Trochenbrod, and Jewish customs were the only ones that mattered. All of Trochenbrod observed Jewish holidays and celebrated Jewish festivals like one huge family. Children played in the yards and fields, chuckling, yelling in Yiddish, and running up and down Trochenbrod's one long street in complete safety and freedom. At dinner time, the aroma of Jewish cooking filled every corner of the little town and wafted into the surrounding forest.*

By the end of World War Two everything was gone. Everything – Trochenbrod's houses, synagogues, shops and public buildings, as well as its people – had been destroyed. All that remained was a double row of trees and bushes surrounded by a clearing where its farm fields had been.'

Extract 2: *'The postmistress's son was a friend of mine. They'd invite me at Christmas to celebrate with them. We were good friends with them. I remember going to his house and seeing the Christmas tree and thinking it was so beautiful, so much fun with the ornaments and everything, and the house was decorated and we had cookies. I liked it, but I knew it wasn't our holiday. Maybe I didn't even know it was a holiday, just a celebration of some sort. Anyway, I knew it had nothing to do with us. It was just fun.'*

Four memories of Trochenbrod (3)

Extract 3: *'Although there were plenty of poor people in Trochenbrod, they were all very wealthy. Why? Because they felt their lives were rich and they were satisfied. There's a saying, "Want what you have, and then you'll have what you want." Ninety-five percent of Trochenbrod people were like that. They were salt of the earth, as they say. The very concept of stealing was unknown to them – take something that belongs to someone else, what's that?*

The people who read your book, I want to tell them that there was once a Jewish town of worthy people, hard-working people, honest people, trusting people. All they wanted was to raise children who would also be good people. That's what Trochenbrod was.'

Extract 4: '*To me Trochenbrod looked like a street that had been picked up from a city and plopped down somewhere in the wilderness, except that the street was mud. Seeing the street being paved convinced me that what we all expected was starting to happen – Trochenbrod was going to become a city, a Jewish city. Why would I leave it?'*

The responsibility of representation

Imagine creating a museum display about Trochenbrod for someone who has never heard of it.

Stand on a spectrum:



A compelling story A cautious, evidence-led account

Where would you place a display that uses vivid language but leaves out uncertainty?

Explain your position. What responsibilities does a museum curator have?

What responsibilities would you have?

Consider:

- **What you include or leave out.**
- **How you caption photographs and maps.**
- **How you distinguish evidence from inference.**
- **What you say when the evidence is incomplete.**

Discuss**: Can a representation be compelling without pretending to know everything?**

Three layers of a vanished place

Return to Trochenbrod through three connected layers.

1. What was there?

Homes, streets, work, institutions, families and community life.

2. What happened there?

Occupation, persecution, mass murder and the destruction of the settlement.

3. What remains?

Testimony, records, photographs, historical research, physical traces and unanswered questions.

Quick activity: Place one source from today's enquiry into each layer. Explain why it belongs there.



https://vanishedworld.blog/2014/12/28/into-the-nothing/#jp-carousel-1522

Put Trochenbrod back on the map

Some sort of short visual (not map outcome) – short creative writing – a poem – perhaps as acrostic of TROCHENBROD, or other – key thing to bring the place to life, and demonstrate what the void or absence actually means…

Success criteria

- The community is represented as a living place before its destruction.
- Historical claims are supported by evidence.
- The destruction is placed in the context of the Holocaust.
- Different sources are used critically.
- Uncertainty is acknowledged rather than concealed.

Finally, On 27 January 1945, Soviet forces liberated Auschwitz-Birkenau, a Nazi camp complex in German-occupied Poland. The date is now marked internationally as Holocaust Memorial Day.

The Holocaust was the systematic persecution and murder of Europe's Jews by Nazi Germany and its collaborators.

Six million Jewish people were murdered in the Holocaust.

Around 1.5 million Jewish children were murdered.

Millions of non-Jewish people were also persecuted and murdered by Nazi Germany and its collaborators, though the reasons, policies and experiences differed between groups.

In this enquiry, we will explore what happened to the Jewish community of Trochenbrod and reflect on the 'Holocaust by bullets.'

Once there was a town here

Once there was a town here.

What does it mean to remember a place when almost nothing remains?

Complete one sentence:

‘I used to think a place could be reconstructed by …’

‘I now think historical evidence can … but cannot …’

‘One responsibility we have when remembering Trochenbrod is …’



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Acknowledgements

These stimuli draw upon extracts from the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education's materials/resources, 'Who were the six million?'.

https://holocausteducation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Research-Digest-2.pdf

'Understanding the Holocaust: how and why did it happen?', KS3 textbook, by Centre's Stuart Foster, Andy Pearce, Eleni Karayianni and Helen McCord.

'The Heavens are Empty: Discovering the Lost Town of Trochenbrod', Avrom Bendavid – Val, published by Pegasus Books, NY.

Images, as credited within the slides.

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