



## **Resistance and the Holocaust: 'Fighting back'**

A series of lessons for secondary school students

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# Welcome

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Hello again. It's good to have you here. In our previous lesson we:

- Thought about how we would describe 'resistance' during the Holocaust
- Considered some of the factors that impacted people's decisions and actions
- Reflected on the extraordinary circumstances of the Holocaust

In this lesson, we are going to think more about our understandings of resistance.

We'll do so by thinking about what some people did in the Warsaw Ghetto and at Auschwitz-Birkenau. We are going to focus on the idea of 'fighting back': whether we can find evidence of this happening, and if 'fighting back' is an effective way of understanding resistance.

# Welcome

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As you move through the slides for this lesson, you will find icons to help show you what you are expected to do. All of the icons, and their meanings, are shown below.



Help for you



Think about



Approximate time  
activity lasts



Do an activity



Read



Answer questions

# Mordecai & Emmanuel



5-10min

In our last lesson we established that the Jewish men, women and children impacted by the Holocaust were ordinary people. They had had webs of human relationships, and these connections influenced how they saw what was happening around them and what they did about it. We also thought about how these ordinary people were in extraordinary situations, finding themselves in places like camps and ghettos, or being deported or shot.



Mordecai



Emmanuel

Let's learn more about some of the things that people did. On the next few slides, we are going to look at the stories of Mordecai and Emmanuel. These men found themselves in the Warsaw Ghetto – the largest ghetto in all of occupied Europe.

The next slide tells you more about the Warsaw Ghetto, and is followed by Mordecai and Emmanuel's stories.

**Read these slides carefully, then answer the questions that follow.**

# The Warsaw Ghetto: Key facts



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- Created in October 1940
  - All Jewish people in Warsaw had to move into the ghetto by 15 November 1940
  - The overall area of the ghetto was very small
  - Ghetto was sealed: walls were built across streets to separate the ghetto from non-Jewish people
  - At the beginning, around 350,000 people lived in the ghetto
  - People continued to be sent to the ghetto. By April 1941, around 460,000 people were inside
  - Living conditions were extremely bad. Usually at least 8 people lived inside one room
  - Food and medical supplies were very limited. Starvation and disease was widespread
  - Between October 1940 and July 1942, around 90,000 people died from hunger or illness
  - In July 1942, large numbers of people began to be taken from the ghetto to the Treblinka death camp. Around 300,000 people were deported in this way over a few months
  - On 19 April 1943 the Germans tried to clear the ghetto. In response, those left inside the ghetto went into hiding or actively fought back. After 27 days, the resistance movement had been defeated by the Germans



# Mordecai Anielewicz

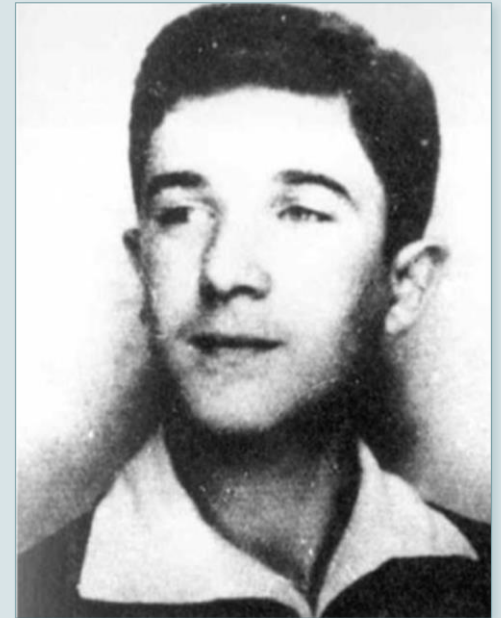
Mordecai Anielewicz was a leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. As the Uprising was taking place, he wrote to one of his friends. Below is some of what he said.

It is impossible to put into words what we have been through. One thing is clear, what happened exceeded our boldest dreams. The Germans ran twice from the ghetto. One of our companies held out for 40 minutes and another for more than six hours... Several of our companies attacked the dispersing Germans. Our losses... are minimal. That is also an achievement. [...] I feel that great things are happening and what we dared do is of great, enormous importance...

It is impossible to describe the conditions under which the Jews of the ghetto are now living. Only a few will be able to hold out. The remainder will die sooner or later. Their fate is decided. In almost all the hiding places in which thousands are concealing themselves it is not possible to light a candle for lack of air...

Peace go with you, my friend! Perhaps we may still meet again! The dream of my life has risen to become fact. Self-defence in the ghetto is a reality. Jewish armed resistance and revenge are facts. I have been a witness to the magnificent, heroic fighting of Jewish men in battle.

On 8 May 1943, after holding out for several weeks with just a few smuggled guns and homemade grenades against German soldiers armed with tanks, machine guns and flamethrowers, 23 year old Anielewicz took his own life rather than surrender.





# Emanuel Ringelblum



Ringelblum's archive, buried in tins and milk churns was discovered under the ruins of the ghetto after the war.



Emanuel was a historian. He led a group who kept a record of daily life and inside the Warsaw ghetto. This secret archive was codenamed *Oneg Shabbat*.

As news reached the ghetto about killings in Vilna, Chelmno and Belzec, Ringelblum tried desperately to make the outside world aware that Jewish people were being murdered. On Friday 26 September 1942, Ringelblum wrote in his diary:

A great day for the Oneg Shabbat. This morning, London radio broadcast to the Jews of Poland. We know about everything: the radio transmitted about Slonim, Vilna, Lemberg, and Chelmno and more.

Thus the Oneg Shabbat has fulfilled its great historical mission, by alarming the world, by telling about our fate...

I do not know who will remain alive from among us, who will be privileged to edit the material we have accumulated. But one thing is clear to us all: Our toil, our efforts, our sacrifice and the constant living in fear, these have not all been in vain.

In March 1943, Ringelblum and his family escaped the ghetto and went into hiding. Ringelblum returned to the ghetto a month later to join the uprising. He was captured but escaped and rejoined his family.

In March 1944 their hideout was discovered. Emanuel, his wife, his 13 year old son, and about 30 other Jews they had been hiding with were taken into the ruins of all that was left of the ghetto, and murdered.

# 'Fighting back' in Warsaw



5-10min



What did you think of Mordecai and Emmanuel's stories?

I'm sure we can all agree these men were extremely brave and courageous. But what can we learn from them, and what do their stories tell us about resistance?

On the next slide is a table. You can copy and paste this into a Word document, print it out, or draw it onto some paper.

**Go back and look again at the slides on Mordecai and Emmanuel. Using these slides, fill the table in as best as you can.** Instead of writing in full sentences, just use bullet-points to help you make notes.



# 'Fighting back'

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NAME	WHAT DID THEY DO?	WHAT WERE THEY TRYING TO ACHIEVE?	DID IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

# Fighting back in camps



People did not just 'fight back' in ghettos. Incredibly, some did so in the death camps too. At Sobibor, Treblinka, and Auschwitz-Birkenau, ordinary people in the most extreme circumstances managed to attack guards, destroy buildings, and even escape.

I want you to meet five incredible people. In different ways, each of these people took part in something that happened at Auschwitz-Birkenau in October 1944. Over the next two slides, read more about these people and the event that took place.



Rosa Robota



Ella Gärtner



Esther Wajsblum



Regina Safirsztajn



Zalman Gradowski



# The Auschwitz revolt

In 1944, the Jewish *Sonderkommando* – prisoners working at the gas chambers of Auschwitz – plotted to fight back against their SS guards. Rosa Robota, a young Jewish prisoner aged just 23 years old, had the task of getting explosives for the *Sonderkommando* to blow up the crematoria buildings.

Rosa persuaded Jewish women prisoners to steal gunpowder from a factory where they worked making weapons for the German army.



Rosa



Ella



Esther



Regina

17 year-old Esther, her 15 year-old sister, Hanka, and their friend Regina smuggled out tiny amounts of gunpowder from the factory, wrapped in pieces of paper or cloth and hidden in their clothing. They gave these little packages to Ella, who then handed them to Rosa. Rosa in turn passed the packages to other members of the Auschwitz resistance, hidden in the false bottom of a food tray. Homemade bombs were made with the gunpowder, small pieces of stone and crumbled brick. These were then smuggled to the *Sonderkommando*.

On 7 October 1944, the *Sonderkommando* attacked their SS guards with hammers, stones and axes. With their homemade bombs they blew up the crematoria then cut the barbed wire surrounding the camp and fled into a nearby wood. Hundreds of prisoners escaped, but all were soon recaptured and killed.

The SS discovered that Rosa, Regina, Ella and Ester had stolen the gunpowder. Despite being tortured they refused to give the names of others in the resistance. The four women were hanged in front of the other inmates. At the last moment of her life, Rosa cried out to the crowd, *Hazak Ve'ematz*: 'Be strong and have courage!'



# Zalman Gradowski



In the death camps, Jewish prisoners led thousands of Jewish men, women and children into the gas chambers. Then they dragged out the dead bodies, pulled gold teeth from their mouths, and burned their bodies. These prisoners were called the *Sonderkommando*.

The *Sonderkommando* knew that the Nazis would try to hide all trace of their crimes, and that they would be murdered to stop them telling what they had seen. So they hid papers in the human ashes they were made to bury, in the hope that one day the truth might be discovered.

After the war, some of these documents were found buried in the soil of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Among them were the writings of Zalman.

Zalman was also one of the leaders of the *Sonderkommando* revolt of 7 October 1944. He was killed after the *Sonderkommando* attacked their SS guards and blew up one of the crematoria in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

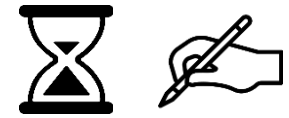
Dear Finder, Search everywhere, in every inch of soil. Tens of documents are buried under it – mine and those of other persons – which will throw light on everything that was happening here.

Great amounts of teeth are also buried here. It was we, the *Sonderkommando*, who have strewn them all over the ground, as many as we could, so that the world should find material traces of the millions of murdered people. We ourselves have lost hope of being able to live to see the moment of liberation...



This aluminium flask was found after the war, buried in the ashes of the Auschwitz-Birkenau crematoria. It contained eyewitness accounts of mass murder, written by the Jewish *Sonderkommando* forced to work in the gas chambers.

# 'Fighting back' in Birkenau



5min+

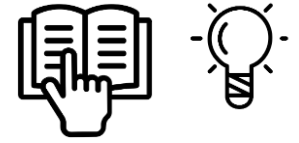
Now you know more about what Rosa, Ella, Esther, Regina and Zalman did, let's think some more about what they did, if it made a difference, and why they may have chosen to act as they did.



NAME	WHAT DID THEY DO?	WHY DID THEY DO IT?	DID IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Return to the table you started to fill in earlier. Using the previous slides, add notes on one person involved in the Auschwitz revolt: Rosa, Ella, Esther, Regina or Zalman.

# Just 'fighting back'?



In this lesson we've encountered powerful evidence of Jewish people who 'fought back'. We've also thought more about the challenges that people faced.

But does 'fighting back' only mean fighting in a physical sense? This is something we'll think about more in our final lesson. To prepare you for that, here is something else that Zalman wrote. Remember: Zalman did not just 'fight back' with violence and weapons. He also buried his writings, never knowing if they would be read. Which of these actions was 'fighting back', do you think?

Dear discover of these writings!

I have a request of you: this is the real reason why I write, that my doomed life may attain some meaning, that my hellish days and hopeless tomorrows may find a purpose in the future.

I pass on to you only a small part of what took place in the hell of Birkenau-Auschwitz. It is for you to comprehend the reality.

[...]

I also ask a personal favour, dear finder and publisher of these writings. Using the address I give here, find out who I am.

UCL CENTRE FOR HOLOCAUST EDUCATION



## Resistance and the Holocaust: 'Fighting back'



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