
Who were the six million?

Exploring Jewish life before the Holocaust

Key Question: Who were the Jewish people of Europe before the Holocaust?

Teaching Aims & Learning Objectives

- To develop knowledge and understanding about the diversity of Jewish life in Europe before the Holocaust
- To develop knowledge and understanding about the long history of Jewish life in Europe and of the important contributions that Jewish people made to their communities and countries
- To recognise the significance of the Holocaust through an exploration of 'what was lost'

Mode: face-to-face / lesson plan

Rationale for the lesson

During the Holocaust the Nazis and their collaborators destroyed Jewish life and communities which had been present in Europe for over 2,000 years. In order to fully grasp the significance of the Holocaust students need to develop an understanding of 'what was lost'. Exploring the long history of Jewish life across Europe and the many forms that this took will ensure that students recognise Jewish people as more than just victims of Nazi persecution and genocide. It will enable them to understand the enormous loss to contemporary world culture which resulted from the destruction of these communities. By exploring the case studies presented in these lessons students will be able to see those persecuted by the Nazis as individuals and will recognise that each 'statistic' was a real person before the Holocaust, living within the context of family, friends and community. UCL Centre for Holocaust Education research indicates that Jewish life in Europe before the Second World War is being taught increasingly in English secondary schools, however there are many instances where it is not and where students have clear misconceptions. Such misconceptions can have serious implications for their further understanding of the Holocaust and its significance.

Key Information for teachers

- These lessons are intended for Key Stage 3 students. They are devised for History classes but could easily be adapted for RE and other subject disciplines. Indeed, a number of the themes raised relating to the role of religion in Jewish life before the Second World War could well be explored and supported in the RE classroom.
- You will need the following accompanying resources:

- Short film: 'Leon on pre-war .mpg'
- Short film: 'Leons_house_mini_edit_RAL_credit.mp4'
- Student copies of slides 14 – 21.
- Short film 'The way we lived' <http://www.iwm.org.uk/learning/resources/the-way-we-lived-exploring-jewish-life-and-culture>
 - Interactive map 'Who were the six million? Exploring Jewish life before the Holocaust.'
Access the map here: <https://holocausteducation.org.uk/who-were-the-six-million/>
- Glossary

Lesson Plan

Overview and timings

The timings of these 'lessons' are approximate and are designed to be flexible to enable teachers to adapt to their school context and to respond to the prior knowledge and understanding of their students. It is suggested that taken together the activities outlined below allow for progression and will enable students to secure their knowledge and understanding across a series of at least two lessons.

Whilst we recommend that you undertake all of the suggested activities with your students, we understand that there may be limits upon curriculum time. If there is only a single lesson available to explore Jewish life before the Holocaust, we advise that lesson 2 would best enable students to achieve the desired learning outcomes. Within the suggested activities, resources and case studies which form this series of lessons there are many opportunities to set independent work for students as preparation for or consolidation of the learning that takes place within the lesson/s.

Lesson one:

The rings and Leon Greenman

What can be said about these objects and their owners?

Show students the picture of the two rings (slide 3). Ask them to consider what can be said about them and their owners. Give them a few minutes in pairs to discuss their ideas, collate their responses and then go on to ask them to think what further questions they might like to ask about the owner's rings. At this point you can show them the wedding photograph of Leon and Elsa in 1935 (slide 4). Ask students what further questions they might now like to ask about this couple.

Introducing Leon's story

Introduce the short film of Leon (slide 5 and .mpg file) by outlining how Leon was Jewish, born in London, and will speak about an experience he had before the Second World War. The film lasts for 2 minutes 30 seconds. Ask students to work out the following:

- Where Leon spent some of his working life (Rotterdam, Netherlands)
- How he met his wife (she came to listen to him sing)
- Where they married and what name he gives to the building (Stepney Green, London, in a 'shul' – a Yiddish word for school, often used as the word for synagogue)
- Where they ended up living and why (Rotterdam, Netherlands, living with Else's grandmother)

Students may need to watch the film twice to get used to Leon's accent. Be sure to allow time to discuss the above aspects of Leon's life and any other questions students have.

Did they have any children?

With the photographs as a source (slide 6), encourage students to consider what they can add to their knowledge and understanding of the Greenman family. After discussing the photograph, briefly narrate the context of the photographs (Additional Information).

Rings revisited 'A note from Leon'

Explain to students that you are going to play them a short clip of film that will link to the beginning of the lesson (slide 7 and mp4 file). It will show Leon's house not long after he died, and what happened when Ruth-Anne, a member of the UCL Centre, found a small box in it which she opened.

Ask students to consider the significance of the rings now they have heard what happened to Else and Barney (slide 8). Has the significance of these objects changed? What would these rings have meant to Leon? What can we infer from Leon's request to have them soldered together about the significance that they had for him?

Rings: from two to many

This image shows a soldier dipping his hands into a crate full of rings confiscated from prisoners in Buchenwald and found by American troops in a cave adjoining the concentration camp (slide 9). The Additional Information section contains text of the original caption that accompanies this photograph. Explore the following with students:

- Who were all these people? What lives did they live before the Holocaust? What do each of these rings/pairs of rings represent?

The lost town of Trochenbrod

Show students the image of the town of Trochenbrod today (slide 10). Invite students to share their initial responses:

- What do you see?

Encourage students to consider what is not in the image.

- What might the spaces represent?
- What impression does the image leave us with?
- Is there any evidence here that something may have existed in this space before?

Explain to students that they are going to find out more about this 'space' and its history. Share the three images with students (slides 11, 12 and 13) of the town's inhabitants in the 1930s. Share the details that we have about these individuals. Students can begin to record some details about this 'space':

- What do we now know about this 'space'?
- What questions do you have?

Provide students with the timeline, map and the written testimonies (slides 14 – 19). Students should respond to the following questions:

- What can we learn about pre-war Jewish life in Eastern Europe from the history of the town of Trochenbrod?
- What can we learn about Jewish life in Trochenbrod before the Holocaust from the images and the written testimonies?
- What questions do you have?

At this point you may choose to share slides 20 and 21 with students. The timeline (slide 21) details what happened to the town of Trochenbrod and its inhabitants during the Second World War and its fate during the Holocaust. It maybe that you wish to revisit or explore this part of the case study with students as you progress through your Holocaust Scheme of Learning (Additional Information)

What do you see now?

Students revisit the initial image of the site of the town of Trochenbrod today (slide 22). Invite students to reflect upon the following:

- What do they see now when they look at this image?
- Has this changed from their initial response, now that they know about the history of this space?
- What does this space represent for them now?
- What does this tell us about what was lost in the Holocaust?
- What questions do they have?

Reflections

Encourage students to reflect upon what they have learnt so far, ask the following questions:

- What do these case studies (Leon Greenman and Trochenbrod) tell us about Jewish life in Europe before the Holocaust?
- What do these case studies (Leon Greenman and Trochenbrod) tell us about who the Jewish people of Europe were before the Holocaust?

Lesson two:

Contextual narratives: map of Europe

Show the map of Europe, explaining that this visually represents the size of Jewish communities in countries across Europe in 1933. You could encourage students to consider how the map reinforces and extends their learning so far.

'The way we lived': Introduction to Jewish life before the Second World War

This short film can be found on the IWM website. It is one of several parts to 'The Way We Lived' series. Weblink: <http://www.iwm.org.uk/learning/resources/the-way-we-lived-exploring-jewish-life-and-culture>. Duration: 4 mins 21 secs.

'The Way We Lived' is a short yet powerful film showing the diversity of Jewish life. The key statement in the film that '*across Europe there were many different ways of being Jewish*' is exemplified by showing the differences. Some retained traditional Jewish identity whilst others assimilated; some were deeply religious, others atheists; some were wealthy, most were not; some were patriotic, while some wanted to leave for a better life in America, or for a new Jewish homeland in Palestine. At the end it also highlights some outstanding Jewish contributors to world culture and thinking: Gustav Mahler, Ida Rubenstein, Marc Chagall, Sigmund Freud, and Albert Einstein.

As students watch the film ask them to identify evidence for the statement that '*across Europe there were many different ways of being Jewish*'.

Interactive map/oral testimony

Direct students to the interactive map resource: '[Who were the six million? Exploring Jewish life before the Holocaust](#)'V found on our website. Share the following with students:

In 1933 9.5 million Jewish people lived in Europe. Jewish people had lived in Europe for over 2,000 years and there were Jewish communities in every European country. The figures on the map show Jewish populations in 1933 in those countries later controlled or occupied by the Nazis.

Using the map you will discover where Jewish people lived and how they lived. You will hear from individuals about their family life and their communities as they were before the Holocaust.

Hover over the following countries to find out more about the diverse and vibrant history of communities, families and individuals: Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Netherlands, Poland.

There are opportunities here for independent student research, paired work or smaller group work. Each country case study contains a summary of the history of its Jewish community and a link to the recorded oral testimony of an individual who lived in this community before the Holocaust. In the case of the Netherlands we have included short written testimony of Leon Greenman. This testimony could be read out by the teacher to model the activity with students. The accompanying questions for each country and each testimony allow students to engage with these materials and develop their knowledge and understanding about the diversity of Jewish life across Europe.

To draw this together, students can reflect upon the following questions:

- Which country had the oldest Jewish community?
- Which country had the largest Jewish community?
- What similarities can you identify between Jewish communities?
- What differences can you identify between Jewish communities?
- Which adjectives would you use to describe Jewish life in Europe before the Holocaust?

Conclusions

Key question: Who were the Jewish people of Europe before the Holocaust?

(Slide 26) Students read the quote and respond to the following:

- Drawing upon the images, case studies and oral testimonies that you have studied, find evidence to support this statement.
- Write your own response to the overall enquiry question 'Who were the Jewish people of Europe before the Holocaust?'

Spaces: What do you see now?

Ask for ideas as to what this map represents and what it reveals.

What do these spaces represent?

You might initially simply draw attention to the visual differences between this slide and slide 24. This is a powerful representation of the numerical impact of the Holocaust on the Jewish populations of Europe. Direct students towards the white spaces within each box and ask what this reveals to us, what it stands in for. It tells us of the scale of the Holocaust, but what does it say about what was lost? Is it possible to see or represent something – or someone – if they no longer exist?

You may also choose to revisit the images from the case studies with the question ‘What do you see now?’

Additional Information

Pedagogical guidance

Throughout these materials we are moving between micro histories, case studies of individuals, families and communities to the macro histories of Jewish communities across continental Europe. Through exploring case studies of individuals, families and communities, placing them within the context of the long history of Jewish communities across continental Europe, students will be able to develop an evidential response to the key question ‘Who were the Jewish people of Europe before the Holocaust?’

It is crucial that individuals and communities are recognised and explored when studying this history to give students an understanding both of the complexity of Jewish life before the Holocaust and to show the human experience within the overall statistics. IHRA recommendations for teaching and learning about the Holocaust state that it is important to ‘Give learners opportunities to see those persecuted by the Nazis as individuals. Educators can find methods to make the scale of the Holocaust and the numbers involved real to their learners. Many people will find it difficult to relate to the tragedy of the Holocaust if it is presented only in statistical terms. Repeated references to ‘the six million’ risk subsuming communities and individuals into a faceless mass and attempts to envision the enormity of numbers can further depersonalize and dehumanize.’

By their nature, the collective resources and case studies which form this series of lessons are selective. Within the constraints of curriculum time and the subsequent space afforded to this important topic as part of any scheme of learning, not every feature, nuance and event of historical significance relating to Jewish life in Europe before the Holocaust can be included in great depth. Collectively, these resources have been selected to enable students to meet the intended learning outcomes in a rigorous way.

Historical context

Lesson one:

The rings and Leon Greenman

Leon Greenman appears throughout the Centre's CPD lesson materials and resources. For more information about Leon and to access both his written and recorded testimony the following resources are available:

- Greenman, L. (2001) *'An Englishman in Auschwitz'*. Valentine Mitchell.
- USC Shoah Foundation I Witness collection holds Leon's recorded testimony, <https://iwitness.usc.edu/sfi/>
- The Jewish Museum, Camden, London, has a permanent exhibition on Leon Greenman. Resources are available on their website: <https://jewishmuseum.org.uk/about-us/history/leon-greenman-2/>

(Slide 6) This family photograph was taken in June 1942 in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. It shows Leon, Else and Barney in a relaxed family pose in a neighbour's garden. In October 1942 – just a few months after the photograph was taken – the Greenman family and Else's grandmother were taken to Westerbork in advance of 'deportation to the East'. They did not know what fate awaited them, but rumours were ominous, and they dreaded deportation. Leon tried to use his British citizenship to avoid his family being deported, but the friends he had entrusted with his papers had – for fear of being caught with Jewish documents – destroyed them.

The lost town of Trochenbrod

(Slide 15) The town of Trochenbrod was located within an area known as the Pale of Settlement – part of the most western reaches of the Russian Empire. The town's very existence can be traced back to the antisemitic measures imposed by Russia's rulers to marginalise, isolate and control Jews living in this part of continental Europe by restricting both the geographical boundaries within which they could live and also the occupations that they were allowed to adopt.

In 1791 Russia's Jewish Pale of Settlement was established in the western regions of the Russian Empire. Most of Russia's Jews lived in this area, they were forbidden to live outside of it. In 1804 a decree was passed which meant that Jews were only allowed to live in the larger towns and cities of the Pale. Those who farmed on unused land were exempt from this rule. Following this, the first Jewish families begin to settle the land that would become the town of Trochenbrod.

Trochenbrod's first baby was born in 1813. With subsequent antisemitic restrictions, the town's population increased further. By 1885 there were over 4 million Jews living in the Pale. Many

lived in shetls, towns or villages with a majority Jewish population. The word 'shetl' comes from the Yiddish 'shtot', which means town. Shetls were Jewish communities within East European towns, essentially a Jewish village within a Gentile town. Trochenbrod had many similarities to shetls across the Pale (home, family, Jewish traditions of primary importance) – what makes it different is that it was a free-standing Jewish town, relatively isolated where most inhabitants were farmers. Jewish inhabitants of the Pale were not merely restricted territorially but also occupationally. In the main engaged in commerce and crafts, very few had the opportunity to work in agriculture, unlike like the pioneering Trochenbroders. Competition led to high levels of poverty within the Pale, and many would seek to emigrate in the final years of the 19th and early years of the 20th century as life in the Pale became even more challenging because of an increasing number of anti-Jewish laws and attacks (pogroms). However, despite all of these challenges, by the 1930s the town of Trochenbrod was thriving.

Being located in the Eastern part of Poland, the town was taken over by the Soviet Union in October 1939. Many Jews fled the Nazis who controlled Western Poland, and this led to around 1,000 new arrivals in Trochenbrod. By the eve of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 the town's population had grown to 5-6,000 inhabitants.

In June 1941, when Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union, the area of present-day Ukraine where the former town of Trochenbrod was located was home to the largest Jewish population in Europe. Whilst the scale of the Holocaust is still being researched there, estimates suggest that at least 1.5 million people were murdered, a quarter of all of the victims of the Holocaust.

Our 2016 student research indicated a widespread belief that most Jewish victims were from Germany and that the killing was centred in Germany – that somehow this was a 'German event' rather than a European wide genocide. It appears that events on the ground in Eastern Europe have not entered the classroom in a significant way. Amongst students there was a lack of knowledge about the Operation Reinhardt camps in Poland responsible for the deaths of approximately 2 million victims of the Holocaust, or of the Einsatzgruppen in the so-called 'Holocaust by bullets', responsible for the deaths of approx. 2.2 million victims. It may be that you revisit the case study of Trochenbrod when you cover this aspect of the Holocaust in your Scheme of Learning (slides 20 & 21), or you may wish to provide students with this context here.

Between August and December of 1942, Trochenbrod's inhabitants were shot in specially dug pits in the forest a few miles away from their homes. The majority were murdered in the course of one day. On 11 August 1942 over 4,500 people were killed. They were murdered by the armed SS group Einsatzgruppen C and local collaborators. The very few who survived did so in hiding. Amongst these were Baisa-Ruchel Potash (Betty Gold) and her family (slide 13). Many of the town's buildings disappeared following the murders – they were dismantled for building materials. The furniture and clothes, the belongings of those murdered, were sold to local villagers. The synagogue was burnt to the ground. Later in the war, before the area was occupied by the Soviets again from 1944, partisans, including some Jewish partisans with

links to the town, destroyed the remaining buildings so that they could not be used by the Germans or their collaborators.

The site of the former town of Trochenbrod lies within the borders of the present-day Ukraine and it remains largely as you see in the images shown in these lesson materials (slides 10 and 22). This image also appears in the Centre's [textbook](#) in Chapter 6.1 'What was lost?' To find out more about the town and its history the following resources are available:

- Bendavid-Val, A. (2010) *'The Heavens are empty. Discovering the lost town of Trochenbrod.'* Pegasus Books.
- Bendavid-Val, A. (2015) *'The Lost Town. Bringing back Trochenbrod'* Bacon Press Books.
- Gold, B. (2014) *'Beyond Trochenbrod. The Betty Gold Story.'* Kent State University Press.

Interactive map/Oral testimony

For supplementary material or to explore Jewish life across Europe in more depth, the following resources are available:

Population figures in Europe 1933: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/jewish-population-of-europe-in-1933-population-data-by-country>

Jewish life in Europe before the Holocaust:

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/jewish-life-in-europe-before-the-holocaust>

Jews in pre-war Germany: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/jews-in-prewar-germany?series=32>

The Holocaust Explained: Life before the Holocaust:

<https://www.theholocaustexplained.org/life-before-the-holocaust/pre-war-jewish-life/survivor-video-accounts/>

Pre-war Jewish life in France: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/france-virtual-jewish-history-tour>

Denmark and the Holocaust: <https://www.yadvashem.org/articles/academic/denmark-and-the-holocaust.html>; <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/denmark>

History of Jews in the Netherlands: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-netherlands-virtual-jewish-history-tour>

History of Jews in Greece: <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/resistance-during-holocaust/jewish-life-greece-holocaust>
<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/greece>

Hungary: <https://www.yadvashem.org/articles/general/jews-of-hungary-during-the-holocaust.html>; <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/hungary-virtual-jewish-history-tour>

Acknowledgements and bibliography

Bendavid-Val, A. (2010) *'The Heavens are empty. Discovering the lost town of Trochenbrod.'* Pegasus Books.

Bendavid-Val, A. (2015) *'The Lost Town. Bringing back Trochenbrod'* Bacon Press Books.

Gold, B. (2014) *'Beyond Trochenbrod. The Betty Gold Story.'* Kent State University Press.

Greenman, L. (2001) *'An Englishman in Auschwitz'*. Valentine Mitchell.

Thanks for use of the following specific resources

Images relating to Leon Greenman, used with kind permission of Ruth-Anne Lenga

Images of the rings at Buchenwald, USHMM

Present day image of Trochenbrod © Christian Herrmann

Interactive map hyperlinks to oral and recorded testimony, British Library Sounds, USHMM, University of Washington: Varon (Laura) interview. Laura Varon Papers, Accession No. 4017-1. Washington State Jewish Archives, University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, OHC 0119

Permissions sought

Images and testimony relating to Trochenbrod, Pegasus Books publishers, NY

Every effort has been made to locate the copyright holders to obtain the appropriate permissions and apply the correct attributions. If you have any information that would help us in relation to copyright, please contact us. © All rights reserved to UCL Centre for Holocaust Education.

Every effort has been made to ensure that website addresses are correct. UCL Centre for Holocaust Education cannot be held responsible for the content of any website mentioned in

these materials. It is sometimes possible to find a relocated web page by typing in the address of the home page for a website in the URL window of your browser.

Centre for Holocaust Education, Institute of Education, University College London, Gower Street, London, WC1H 0AL
Tel: +44(0)20 7612 6437 **fax:** +44(0)20 7612 6126 **email:** holocaust@ucl.ac.uk
web: www.ucl.ac.uk/holocaust/education

The IOE's Centre for Holocaust Education is jointly funded by Pears Foundation and the Department for Education