

Lesson

Duration:

Two 50-minute class periods

## Read and Reflect: Intellectual and Creative Life in Yitskhok Rudashevski's Diary

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### Learning Objectives

In this lesson, students will learn about the intellectual and cultural life of young people in the Vilna Ghetto by reading diary entries by fifteen-year-old Yitskhok Rudashevski and considering a range of surviving archival materials. We encourage educators and students to read the introduction to Yitskhok Rudashevski's diary in *Salvaged Pages*, pages 190–97, before beginning the lesson. It provides valuable information about the writer's life and historical context for a reading of the diary.

### Overview

This lesson was initially drafted by Holocaust educator Lisa Bauman.

**Core diary entries from *Salvaged Pages* used in this lesson:** Yitskhok Rudashevski, [March 10](#), [March 14](#), and [March 18, 1943](#).

During the Holocaust in ghettos and in hiding, some young people were able to pursue intellectual and cultural activities by themselves or with others. Sometimes, these opportunities allowed young people to create, and even psychologically escape, the reality of everyday life. They were always accomplished at a tremendous personal risk.

Yitskhok Rudashevski was a tremendous young writer and thinker. In his diary, he reported on the many creative and cultural activities that allowed young people in the ghetto to learn and thrive in defiance of oppression and restriction.

### Focus Questions

Many creative people express themselves in more than one medium. These different types of records allow us to learn and understand history and the human experience in new and thoughtful ways.

- What can be learned about a community through its cultural and artistic life during the Holocaust?
- What can we understand about Yitskhok Rudashevski's life by learning about his cultural and intellectual activities?
- What role can creative and intellectual pursuits play for those who are living in times of war or as victims of genocide?

## Activities

### Opener: Read a Diary Entry from Yitskhok Rudashevski

Begin by reading aloud to students the following excerpt dated Sunday, December 13, 1942, in which Yitskhok describes a significant cultural achievement in the Vilna Ghetto.

[...]Today the ghetto celebrated the circulation of the hundred thousandth book in the ghetto library. The festival was held in the auditorium of the theater.[...] Hundreds of people read in the ghetto. The reading of books in the ghetto is the greatest pleasure for me. The book unites us with the future, the book unites us with the world. The circulation of the hundred thousandth book is a great achievement for the ghetto and the ghetto has the right to be proud of it...<sup>1</sup>

Discuss with students their initial reactions to this entry. What details surprised them? What do we learn about the Vilna Ghetto and about Yitskhok Rudashevski from this entry? What can we infer about the creative and intellectual life in the ghetto from this entry? What passage stands out to you? Why?

### Main Activity: Close Reading—Exploring the Intellectual and Creative Life of Yitskhok Rudashevski

Throughout this period of the Vilna Ghetto, the intellectual and cultural life of the Jewish community continued. As an adolescent boy, Yitskhok Rudashevski actively participated in many of these opportunities, and his diary is a testament to the important role these endeavors held in his everyday life.

Following a [close reading protocol](#) is one way to help students of all abilities engage with diary entries. This helps students understand the complexity of the content and its emotional weight. As the term is used in many state standards, *close reading* allows students to purposefully and slowly reread text to deepen their comprehension. They can focus their attention on the meaning of the individual words and sentences. They can also pay attention to the overall development of events and ideas.

Close reading usually includes text-dependent questions that call on students to analyze the text in order to draw meaningful conclusions and extract significant evidence. This sort of careful attention to the text allows students to synthesize their learning. They also gain important content knowledge. They can then communicate their understanding to their peers or an outside audience.

The following steps can be used (and adapted) to facilitate the close reading:

- 1. First Read:** Read aloud the assigned entry. Either the teacher or a fluent student reader can read the text aloud. Ask students to circle unfamiliar words as they listen. After this first reading, have students share their circled words with the class. Decide which words are important to define for immediate understanding and which terms you would like students to look up.

2. **Second Read:** Individual read. Have students silently read the entry. They can underline words or phrases that stand out to them as they read. Have students share these selected sections.
3. **Third Read:** Text-dependent questions. Either in small groups or through a facilitated discussion, have students answer the text-dependent questions.

The entries selected to explore the creative life of young Yitskhok Rudashevski are only three of many that could have been chosen from his diary. His intellectual pursuits are richly described throughout this diary.

Begin with the First Read of Yitskhok Rudashevski's diary entry on an [Exhibition in the Vilna Ghetto, March 10, 1943](#), Yitskhok Rudashevski's Diary Entry on a [Celebration in the Vilna Ghetto, March 14, 1943](#), and Yitskhok Rudashevski's Diary Entry on [Studying in the Vilna Ghetto, March 18, 1943](#). These three entries should be read together and in their chronological sequence. Have students underline words or passages they don't understand. Then discuss and clarify terms as a class.

Next, have students complete the Second Read and Third Read using the text-dependent questions below:

- What passages from these entries illustrate the intellectual and creative life within the Vilna Ghetto?
- What do we learn about the Vilna ghetto from these entries? Refer to specific passages in the entries.
- What can we understand about Yitskhok Rudashevski by learning about his cultural and intellectual activities?

## Citations

1 Alexandra Zapruder, ed., *Salvaged Pages: Young Writers' Diaries of the Holocaust*, 2nd edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015) 217–18.

## Assessment

Return to the question “What role did creative and intellectual pursuits play in the lives of some residents in the ghetto?” Have students respond to this question in any written form they choose including, but not limited to, letter, diary entry, poem or short essay. Ask them to cite and integrate at least one passage from Yitskhok Rudashevski's diary entries along with one detail learned through their outside research.

## Extensions

### Deeper Exploration: Cultural Life of the Vilna Ghetto

Exploring Yitskhok Rudashevski's diary can serve as a point of departure to investigate the cultural and intellectual life within the Vilna ghetto. To help students begin to consider the context in which the cultural activity described in the diary occurred, share some background on the [Vilna ghetto](#) from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

View the [Letter from Yehoash, March 10, 1909](#).

In Yitskhok Rudashevski's diary entry on an [Exhibition in the Vilna Ghetto, March 10, 1943](#), Yitskhok writes of Friend Sutzkever and the instrumental role he played in organizing an exhibition in the ghetto with artifacts brought from YIVO. Friend Sutzkever was Abraham, or Avrom, Sutzkever who was an active poet in the ghetto. He was one of several intellectuals directing many cultural activities in the ghetto. In the photo below, he is seated with the child artist Sam Bak.

Have students research Sutzkever and Bak through the YIVO website. Students may also want to explore Facing History and Ourselves.