

Lesson

Duration:

Two 50-minute class periods

Learn the History: Mass Murder in Elsa Binder's Diary

Learning Objectives

In this lesson students will explore the role and policy of mass murder during the Holocaust. By closely reading diary entries of Elsa Binder and comparing her account to the surviving historical documentation, students will gain a deeper understanding of the implementation of the Final Solution in Eastern Europe.

Educators and students are encouraged to read the introduction to Elsa Binder's diary in *Salvaged Pages*, pages 301–306 before beginning the lesson. It provides valuable information about the writer's life and a historical context for a reading of the diary.

Overview

Lesson initially drafted by Holocaust educator Lisa Bauman.

Core diary entries from *Salvaged Pages* used in this lesson: Elsa Binder, [January 13, 1942](#); [March 13, 1942](#)

With the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Germans gained control over a much larger Jewish population. They rapidly began carrying out mass murders in an attempt to realize their ideological goal of ridding Europe of Jews. In Stanisławów, Poland, which fell to German authority in July 1941, the Jewish population faced repressive measures followed by terror, random violence, and ultimately mass murder. Much of the genocide of Europe's Jews took place not in the death camps in Poland, but in communities such as Stanisławów scattered throughout German-occupied Soviet territory.

On October 12, 1941, a pogrom occurred in Stanisławów in which nearly 12,000 Jews were murdered. Two months later the ghetto was established. At this time diarist Elsa Binder began writing in her diary. Among the many subjects she covered, she wrote at length about the events of October 12, 1941, when so many of her friends and acquaintances were murdered by the Germans.

Focus Questions

- How did Elsa Binder learn of the mass murder of the Jews in her community?
- How did Elsa respond to this reality? What questions did the events raise for her?
- How was Elsa impacted after reading her descriptions of her friends and how they died?
- Why was it important to her to recount these events in her diary?

Activities

Opener: Read a Diary Entry from Elsa Binder

Begin by reading the diary entry dated January 12 [1942] in which Elsa Binder records a tragedy now known as the “Bloody Sunday” massacre. On October 12, 1941, Nazis and their collaborators murdered between 10,000 and 12,000 Jews in the Jewish Cemetery outside her town of Stanisławów, Poland (pronounced Stanislaviv). These people were Elsa’s neighbors, relatives, and friends.

Monday, January 12 [1942]

Three months have passed since that memorable Sunday, October 12, 1941. Three months since the great pogrom. No! Since the great butchery that took place in our town. The Safirstein family was still alive three months ago. Cwijka had her parents and sister, Matylda had her family, Sinama had her sister and her family. Zyhava had her aunts and cousins, Gusta had her father, and I had more friends. But what’s my point? I cannot even write down all their names in this short note. They were, they lived.

Today our town is missing twelve thousand Jews, but life has to go on. Piasecki says, “Life is worthless — it starts, then it ends.” What nonsense! That’s the very beauty of life. But when one has to face the terror of this kind of death? And the last common resting place. I cannot write about it today. The painful and vivid memories have come back. [. . .]¹

Ask students to reflect upon Elsa Binder’s entry. How does she describe what occurred in her community? What lines in this entry stand out? What is the effect of reading the names of family and friends lost? What questions has this entry raised for students about the events she describes?

The pogrom that occurred in Stanisławów was not an isolated event. Mass murder of this scale occurred at the hands of the Einsatzgruppen (mobile killing units) and other SS and Police Units in occupied Soviet territories. Read aloud with your students this description of the [Einsatzgruppen and other SS and police units in the Soviet Union](#) from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to help build and deepen the content knowledge of students.

Main Activity: Confronting Mass Murder in Stanisławów

The diary of Elsa Binder offers students the opportunity to consider the constant the fear and uncertainty regarding one’s survival. They knew that mass murder was occurring. They also had to contend with the tragic and pervasive loss of community.

1. Read aloud to the class [Elsa Binder's Diary Entry on a Mass Execution, January 13, 1942](#) and [Elsa Binder's Diary Entry on Ghetto Life, March 13, 1942](#). Ask students to underline passages that stand out to them, whether it be emotionally, historically, or for their literary resonance. After reading, take some time to clarify terms and discuss any questions from the entries.

2. In pairs or small groups have students complete the following:

- Share the passages they underlined from the two entries.
- Identify and share any new historical information within these entries.
- Discuss how and why these examples are historically significant.
- Analyze the photographs in the [gallery below](#) and German Instructions on Summary Executions in Occupied Soviet Union Territory, 1941. What connections can students make between these primary sources and the text? What questions surface? How do the diary entries inform their analysis of the primary sources? Discuss the Focus Questions.

3. Discuss the Focus Questions within the context of the two entries from Elsa Binder's diary and the photographs and document students analyzed.

Citations

1 Alexandra Zapruder, ed., *Salvaged Pages: Young Writers' Diaries of the Holocaust*, 2nd edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015) 314.

Assessment

Assessment: Confronting Mass Murder

Have students watch "Analysis of Nazi Massacres in Latvia" by Scholar David Marwell in which Marwell, scholar and Director of the Museum of Jewish Heritage, describes and analyzes footage of a Nazi mass shooting in Latvia in 1941. Taken by an off-duty Nazi officer, the footage shows many parties involved in the shootings, including victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and enablers. Note: The footage included is graphic and should be used only with the most mature and well-prepared students.

Drawing from these sources and from Elsa Binder's diary, ask students to answer in a short essay the following: "What do we learn about the mass murder of Jews during the Holocaust from Elsa Binder's entry and the short film that Marwell narrates?")

Extensions

Using these two articles as secondary sources, write a summary of the historical events that occurred in Stanisławów on Sunday, October 12, 1941. Cite all quotes parenthetically using MLA format.

- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: ["Stanisławów \(now Ivano-Frankivsk\)"](#)
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: ["Stanisławów", by scholar Nechama Tec](#)