

Lesson

Duration:

One 50-minute class period

Read and Reflect: News and Rumors in Ilya Gerber's Diary

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, students will do a close reading of one diary entry written by Ilya Gerber in which he describes how a rumor starts in the Kovno Ghetto. Once they have read it, talk with students about the impact of rumors on those who shared the news. What effect did rumors have on people? What does this tell us about the emotional state of those in the ghetto?

Educators and students are encouraged to read the introduction to Ilya Gerber's diary in *Salvaged Pages*, pages 326–335. It provides valuable information about the writer's life and a historical context for a reading of the diary.

Overview

This lesson was originally drafted by Holocaust educator, Bonnie Sussman.

Core diary entries from *Salvaged Pages* used in this lesson: [Ilya Gerber, October 19, 1942](#)

As part of Nazi policy during the Holocaust, authorities controlled and limited access to information. As a result, news tended to spread by word of mouth, a notoriously unreliable method. This often caused misinformation and rumors. In the ghettos, where Jews were sealed off from normal means of communication, rumors often took on a life of their own. They sometimes fanned unrealistic hopes, but they more often, caused chaos and fear.

In one diary entry written by Ilya Gerber inside the Kovno Ghetto, he sketches in words the dynamic that existed inside the ghetto when a tidbit of news began to circulate. Through this entry, we can more deeply understand the role news and rumor played in the psychological and emotional well-being of those struggling to survive.

Focus Questions

News and information serve a critical role in helping us navigate our immediate community and our world.

- How does information inform people's decision-making? What is the difference between news and rumor?
- Why might targets of the Nazis have shared information that might not have been true? How did news, whether accurate or not, inform and affect Jews during the Holocaust?

- Think about the relationship between information and hope, or news and despair. What happens to people’s emotional states when public information is limited or unreliable?
- What were the emotional and psychological effects of misinformation on Jews during the Holocaust?

Activities

Opener: Journal Response

Begin the lesson by having students respond in writing to the following questions:

- How does information help people make decisions?
- What is the difference between news and rumor? How can you distinguish between the two?

Discuss their responses. Move on to how the Holocaust affected the creation and the circulation of news and rumor. Have students respond to the following:

- How might news, whether accurate or not, inform and affect Jews during the Holocaust?

Main Activity: Close Read—News and Rumor During the Holocaust

Having students do a close read of the text is one way to help students of all abilities engage with diary entries. They are able to more fully 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 and focus their attention on the meaning of the individual words and sentences. They can also pay attention the overall development of events and ideas.

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

The [Close Reading Protocol](#) teaching strategy can be used and adapted to facilitate close reading.

Read: [Ilya Gerber's Diary Entry on Rumors in the Vilna Ghetto, October 19, 1942](#)

Have students complete their **individual read** underlining passages that express the role news and rumor held in the Kovno ghetto. Ask students to describe what they learned with the class.

Discuss Text-Dependent Questions:

- Identify Ilya’s use of sarcasm in this entry. How does his use of this literary device shape the overall tone and meaning of his entry?

- What does Ilya's mean by his statement, ". . . it seems to me that the Germans are better friends of the Jewish people than the Jews themselves," in his October 19, 1942 entry? Does he mean this literally? What can you infer from the context? What supporting information informs your understanding?
- What is your interpretation of the exchange between the two women in the headline? What role does news and rumor play in their conversation? What text supports your claim?

Deeper Exploration: Understanding the Role of News and Rumor Across Diaries

Writers' diaries reflect different ways in which news or rumors affected a writer and his community. As Ilya Gerber's October 19, 1942, entry illustrates, sharing, believing, and acting on news and rumors could be a matter of life and death. For a deeper understanding of the role of news and rumor during the Holocaust, have students do an independent close reading of several diary entries from the Anonymous Boy, such as [Anonymous Diary Entries on Rumors in the Łódź Ghetto, July 1944](#).

After completing this, discuss with students the similarities and differences between how Ilya Gerber and the Anonymous Boy record their impressions of news and rumor in the ghetto. Do they have similar experiences? When compared side by side, how do these diarists help you understand this topic? Why might there have been so many rumors during this period of time?

Assessment

Ask students to respond to the following guiding question in a short essay. Students should reference several diary entries either from Ilya Gerber or from the Anonymous Boy that support their thesis.

- Think about the relationship between information and hope, or news and despair. Why might there have been so many rumors during this period of time? What happens to people's emotional states when public information is limited or unreliable?