

Lesson

Duration:

Two 50-minute class periods

## Learn the History Across Diaries: Jewish Councils and Jewish Police

---

### Learning Objectives

There is no simple way to consider the role of Jewish Councils, Jewish Police, and the idea of Jewish “collaboration” during the Holocaust. The irrational and violent world that Jews and other targeted groups were forced to negotiate during the years of Nazi authority does not lend itself to a simple reading or classroom exercise to understand how, why, and under what conditions such decisions, or participation within these administrations, were made.

Given this, students will explore the complicated role Jewish councils and Jewish police played within Nazi-run ghettos by comparing specific writings and additional historical sources from three diarists—Yitskhok Rudashevski in the Vilna ghetto, Elsa Binder in the Stanisławów ghetto, and Ilya Gerber in the Kovno ghetto. By engaging in a comparative study based upon the diarists’ accounts, students will consider each experience. Then they will have the opportunity to analyze the complex moral issues raised by their record.

- How does comparing writings across diaries deepen our understanding of the effect Jewish Councils and Jewish Police forces had on the Jewish community as a whole?

### Overview

Core diary entries from *Salvaged Pages* used in this lesson: Yitskhok Rudashevski, the first ghetto days speed by, [Sunday the 18 and 19 \[October, 1942\]](#); Elsa Binder, [December 24, 1941](#); Ilya Gerber: August 26, 1942, [September 18, 1942](#), December 20, 1942

In the ghettos, the German authority forced Jews to organize and maintain everyday life through municipal administrations called Jewish Councils or Judenrat. Under German orders, Jewish Councils were required to recruit and then establish a Jewish police force that would carry out Nazi directives within the ghetto, including deportations from the ghetto to killing sites. This was not a choice. At times Jewish Councils were also tasked with food distribution and regulating rations, organizing forced labor assignments, and generally enforcing all Nazi policies. Depending upon many factors and dynamics, some members of the Jewish Councils and Jewish Police forces had “privileges” not available to other ghetto inhabitants. These circumstances led to divisions within the ghetto and raised difficult questions about survival and responsibility.

## Focus Questions

- How might Jews working for the Jewish Council and Jewish Police force experience daily life differently than other Jews in the ghetto?
- What is particular to each diarists' ghetto experience and how do these elements shape their perspective? Are there common themes that emerge across diarists?

## Activities

### Opener

Because this lesson integrates the perspectives of three diarists' from three different ghetto experiences and the complexity of Jewish Councils and Jewish Police, it is critical for educators and students to spend time engaging deeply with the background resources. Then they should consider the accompanying questions prior to studying the diary entries included in this lesson.

1. Read the introductions of each diarist from *Salvaged Pages*: Yitskhok Rudashevski, pages 190–97; Elsa Binder, pages 301–06; and Ilya Gerber, pages 326–35.
2. Learn about Jewish Councils by reading [Jewish Councils](#). Then discuss the following questions with students:
  - What was the role of the Jewish councils? How were they set up
  - According to this article, what choices were available to the leaders of the Jewish councils
  - The article states that “the members of the Jewish councils faced impossible moral dilemmas.” How did the different leaders described in the article respond to those dilemmas?
3. Learn about Jewish Police by reading the background information in [Jewish Police](#). Then discuss the following questions:
  - What were the duties of the Jewish police? What was their relationship to the Jewish councils? What was their relationship to German authorities?
  - Based on what you have read, what are some of the moral and ethical challenges we face as students of history in studying the Jewish police during the Holocaust?
  - According to the article why did many Jews in the ghettos consider them to be a danger? Based on the article, what choices were available to members of the Jewish police?
  - Based on your understanding of the article, how much power did Jewish police have to change the outcome of events in the ghettos?
4. Gain background knowledge of the German occupation in each of the areas in which the diarists lived. Yitskhok Rudashevski lived in [German occupied Vilna, Lithuania](#), Ilya Gerber lived in [Kovno, Lithuania](#), and [Einsatzgruppen units patrolled German occupied Soviet territories](#) where Elsa Binder lived.
5. Before reading the diary entries, read aloud with students the report taken from meeting minutes electing Jacob Gens to head of the Jewish Council in Vilna. Discuss with students:
  - How does this document complicate your understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the Jewish Council?

- What moral and ethical dilemmas is Jacob Gens documenting in these meeting minutes?
- What does Gens mean when he writes, “All these things that I have told you do not sound sweetly to our souls nor yet for our lives. These are things one should not have to know. I have told you a shocking secret which must remain locked in our hearts”?
- What do the details in this document reveal about the Jewish Councils during the Holocaust?

6. After exploring these resources, have students share out using a [3-2-1 strategy](#).

### **Main Activity: Comparing Entries Across Diarists**

All three diarists wrote about the Jewish Council and Jewish Police in the ghetto in which they were forced to live. Understanding the particular historical context of each ghetto is critical element in understanding why Jewish Councils and Jewish Police remain among the most complicated and difficult aspects of Holocaust history with issues of Jewish “collaboration,” Jewish “corruption,” and Jewish “privilege” being some of the most frequent and problematic claims.

One way to help students of all abilities engage with the complexity of this entry and understand its emotional weight is by following a close reading process. 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. Then they can pay attention to the overall development of events and ideas.

Close reading usually includes text-dependent questions as well. These call on students to analyze the text in order to draw meaningful conclusions and extract real evidence. 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](#) can be used and adapted to facilitate this process. Have students follow this process as they read [Yitskhok Rudashevski's Diary Entries on Jewish Police in the Vilna Ghetto](#), [Elsa Binder's Diary Entry on the Jewish Council in the Stanisławów Ghetto, December 24, 1941](#), and [Ilya Gerber's Diary Entries on Jewish Police in the Kovno Ghetto](#), and analyze the image [Oath Taken by Jewish Police in the Vilijampole Ghetto](#).

The oath reads, "I, a member of the Jewish Ghetto Police in Vilijampole, in the presence of the Chairman of the Altstenrat and the Chief of Police, solemnly take upon myself this conscious oath: to conscientiously fulfill, without conditions, all assignments and orders, regardless of time, person, or danger; to fulfill this oath regardless of personal use, kinship, friendship, or acquaintanceship; to hold in strict confidence all secrets and information that I learn in this service. I pledge to dedicate my energies and all my efforts to the welfare of the Jewish community in the ghetto."

In pairs or small groups have students discuss each diarists' entries with the following prompts in mind.

- What are each writer's opinion of the Jewish Council and Jewish Police? What evidence from the text can they reference to support their explanations?
- What role(s) do the Jewish Councils and Jewish Police hold in the ghetto according to each writer? What evidence can they cite that accounts for these differences?
- Do the diarists share similar or differing viewpoints and experiences with the Jewish Police and the Jewish Councils? What evidence can be referenced to account for these details?
- How do the diary entries further complicate your understanding of the Jewish Police in the ghettos?

## Assessment

### Assessment Paper

Each diarist recorded their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences with the Jewish Council and Jewish Police force in their respective ghettos. As we have learned in this lesson, each ghetto and each Jewish Council and Jewish Police were different. This lesson includes a small selection of resources available to study this difficult history.

1. How would you characterize the different diarists responses to the Jewish Councils and Police?
  - What is each writer's opinion of the Jewish Council and Jewish Police? What evidence from the text can they reference to support their explanations?
  - What role(s) do the Jewish Councils and Jewish Police hold in each ghetto according to each writer? What evidence can they cite that accounts for these differences?
  - Do the diarists share similar or differing viewpoints and experiences with the Jewish Police and the Jewish Councils? What evidence can be referenced to account for these details?
2. Consider what other perspectives and sources you can imagine needing in order to have as complete a picture as possible about these very difficult and morally complicated roles?