

Lesson

Duration:

Two 50-minute class periods

Learn the History: Refugee Experience in Elisabeth Kaufmann's Diary

Learning Objectives

In this lesson students read the diary of Elisabeth Kaufmann, examine other related sources, and then consider the complexity of the refugee experience during the Holocaust. They gain a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, economic, and logistical pressures that refugees faced during World War II and the Holocaust. Educators and students are encouraged to read the introduction to Elisabeth Kaufmann's diary in *Salvaged Pages*, pages 37–41. It provides historical context and valuable information about the writer's life.

Overview

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

Core diary entries from *Salvaged Pages* used in this lesson: Elisabeth Kaufmann, April 28, 1940; May 13, 1940.

When Germany annexed Austria in March 1938, Austrian Jews were suddenly stripped of their rights and entitlements. Living under the constant threat of persecution and prohibited from working, many chose to flee to unoccupied areas hoping to rebuild their lives. In addition to leaving behind their homes, communities, and the comforts of their previous lives, Jewish refugees often met hostility and rising xenophobia in the countries where they sought asylum. [The following cartoon](#) is an example of antisemitic propaganda created in France.

Elisabeth Kaufmann and her family left Austria in the fall of 1938, fleeing to France, a country historically tolerant and accepting of Jews. Faced with an influx of thousands of Jewish refugees from Central Europe, however, French society showed an increasing suspicion toward foreigners and especially Jews.

Focus Questions

Throughout history people have fled hardships in their native countries for a better life elsewhere. Some Jews escaped oppression and death during the Holocaust by fleeing.

- What are the circumstances that surround an individual or family’s decision to leave their home? What are the potential consequences of such a decision?
- What are some of the obstacles refugees must overcome in a new country? Why might people resent or fear refugees coming from another country? Do we have a moral obligation to help those who seek asylum in our country? Why or why not?
- Consider the reasons why people stay, even though life is hard, or why they leave, even though that decision may bring risk, uncertainty, and fear.

Activities

Opener: Read an Entry from Elisabeth Kaufmann’s Diary

France was a destination for many Jewish refugees in Central Europe who were fleeing Nazi oppression. For additional historical background, the United States Holocaust Museum provides a summary entitled [“France Between the Wars”](#) and Yad Vashem has an entry specifically on Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe to France.

After reviewing this background information, discuss the following questions:

1. Why did so many Jews emigrate from Eastern Europe to Paris?
2. Why were Austrians treated differently with regard to this order?
3. France will be treated differently than any other nation conquered by Germany. How is France governed during the period of 1940–1945?

Read the excerpt below from Elisabeth Kaufmann’s diary dated April 28, 1940. By this time Elisabeth and her family had been in France for two years. After the start of World War II in September 1939, an upsurge of xenophobia grew. Those who had originally fled to Paris and other regions in northern France (Germans and Austrians) to escape the Nazi occupation were now feared, considered enemies, and summarily rounded up by French police and sent to internment camps. In this entry, she writes of visiting her brother Peter who was detained in Meslay-du-Maine, an internment camp 150 miles west of Paris.

April 28, 1940 [Meslay-du-Maine]

I should have gone back home this afternoon but Peter and the others asked me to stay. How often does one get permission? Il faut en profiter. [One must take advantage of it.] . . .

It is horrible to be confined for seven months in a limited space, behind barbed wire, without having committed any crime. Seven months without work and nothing useful to do. Seven months without being alone for one minute. Yes, I believe that despite all the deprivations, despite the poor food, and the rough and shoddy accommodations, that is the worst of all. Not to have one minute to oneself.[. . .]¹

Ask students to reflect upon the conditions that Elisabeth’s entry describes. What stands out? What words would you use to describe her entry?

Main Activity: Understanding the Refugee Experience in France

Begin by reading [Elisabeth Kaufmann's Diary Entry on French Internment Camps, May, 13, 1940](#). Discuss the historically significant developments she is recording. What statements stand out? What questions surface? Compare her April 28, 1940, entry with her May 13, 1940, entry. What do you learn and what conclusions can you draw about these weeks in Elisabeth's life?

Elisabeth Kaufmann was also a talented artist. In her sketchbook she captured many experiences visually including visiting her brother at the French internment camp Meslay-du-Maine. View the [Watercolor of Internment Camp from Elisabeth Kaufmann's Diary](#) with students and discuss their thoughts on the painting. After reading and discussing her written and visual entries, ask students to share their thoughts of the differences between reading about this moment and seeing her visual portrayal.

1. Invite students to build a working definition of the term *refugee*. A working definition is one that builds in meaning as students receive information and gain clarity. Discuss the similarities and differences between an immigrant and a refugee. Explain that dictionaries define an *immigrant* as someone who settles in a foreign country and a *refugee* as someone who flees his or her homeland because of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.²
2. Explain to students that Elisabeth Kaufmann and her family became refugees after the German occupation of Austria, their nation of origin. Years later, Elisabeth recorded her testimony at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) recalling her family's first attempt at escape. [Watch Elisabeth's oral testimony from the USHMM](#). What words caught their attention? In their own words, how would they describe Elisabeth's testimony?
3. After discussing this brief video, return to her diary and read aloud the entry dated May 13th, 1940. Select words and phrases from this entry that express Elisabeth's experience of living as a refugee.
4. Have students form small discussion groups and discuss the following questions:
 - In general, what historical circumstances does she choose to document? What details does she note?
 - What are the similarities and differences between oral testimonies and written accounts when viewed on their own? What value do they bring to students of this period when compared side-by-side? How does her written account and her oral testimony deepen your understanding of what it meant to live as a refugee in France in 1940? What questions would you like to pose to Elisabeth Kaufmann if given the opportunity?

Citations

1 Alexandra Zapruder, ed., *Salvaged Pages: Young Writers' Diaries of the Holocaust*, 2nd edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015) 47.

2 *Well-Founded Fear* Frequently Asked Questions, PBS (Accessed April 16, 2015).

Assessment

Deeper Exploration: Comparative Question

After considerable effort and many failed attempts, Klaus Langer of Essen, Germany, was able to legally emigrate to Palestine under the auspices of the Youth Aliyah movement. Elisabeth Kaufmann and her family fled Austria after the Germans occupied it, making their way to France without legal papers. Klaus emigrated without his family and Elisabeth fled with hers.

- Compare and contrast the experiences of Klaus and Elisabeth, considering their type of emigration (with or without proper papers), their particular circumstances, and where they went.
- From what we've read in their diary entries, how did their experiences differ? What challenges did they face when trying to escape? What are the ways in which their experience was similar? To what extent did it matter whether they had legal papers? What are some of the problems that Klaus and Elisabeth both faced, even though their circumstances were different?

Extensions

After considerable effort and many failed attempts, Klaus Langer of Essen, Germany, was able to legally emigrate to Palestine under the auspices of the Youth Aliyah movement. Elisabeth Kaufmann and her family fled Austria after the Germans occupied it, making their way to France without legal papers. Klaus emigrated without his family and Elisabeth fled with hers.

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