Teachers' Discussion Guide

for

ZEGOTA
The Council for Aid to Jews in Occupied Poland
1942-1945

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Before World War II, the largest and most distinctive Jewish community in the world lived in Poland. The presence of Jews in Poland is noted in the earliest written historical records of Poland one thousand years ago. In 1264, their rights were guaranteed by law in the Statute of Kalisz which protected life, property, religion, and equality before the law, including the right to take the oath on the Torah. This legislation, an exemplary protection of minorities even by the standards of today, also included some provisions to regulate the behavior of the Christian majority towards the Jews.

Under these favorable conditions, and because of the widespread persecution of Jews in the rest of Europe, Poland's Jewish community grew into the largest in Europe, with a distinctive culture not only with its own religion but also its own language, customs, dress, and manners.

The Jewish community enjoyed a large degree of autonomy, that is, they were free to regulate their own affairs including the right to their own courts in matters that affected members of their own community. If they wished to, however, individuals could opt to have their case tried in a Polish court.

In 1551, the Polish king, himself elected and responsible to his electors, granted the Jews an even greater measure of self-government through an elected parliament called the Council of Four Lands. By the 1600s, Poland was the largest state in Europe, multicultural, religiously tolerant, and with a wider measure of democracy than elsewhere at that time.

At the end of the 1700s, however, the absolute monarchies around Poland -- Russia, Austria and Prussia (now known as Germany) -- together attacked and conquered Poland, dividing the country among themselves and canceling all Polish laws including the new constitution, the first such constitution in Europe and the second only after the United States. Some of the generals who fought trying to retain Poland's independence also fought in America for the independence of the United States. These included Kazimierz Pułaski and Tadeusz Kosciuszko, the latter a friend of Thomas Jefferson's and a democrat who wrote against the evils of slavery. Kosciuszko's contribution to the struggle for American independence is commemorated by a monument in Lafayette Park facing the White House in Washington, DC and at West Point, and Pułaski is honored at the Fort Pułaski Memorial Monument in Savannah, Georgia as well as in Lafayette Park in Washington DC.

For 125 years after the conquest and partition of their country, the people of Poland had no state of their own. Their schools were closed, the use of their language was restricted, and they were frequently arrested, deported or killed by the occupation forces. In the 19th century, thousands of destitute people, Christian and Jewish alike, left Poland in search of a better life in America. It was not until the end of World War I in 1918 that Poland regained its independence, in large part at the insistence of President Woodrow Wilson who believed in the self-determination of all peoples.
During the brief span between the First and Second World Wars, the newly independent Poland struggled to rebuild social and economic structures at a time when the world was in the grip of the Great Depression. As a multi-ethnic state, it also had to deal with tensions among various ethnic communities as nationalist and pluralist ideologies competed for political dominance.

In any event, their independence was short-lived. Twenty years later, in 1939, Europe was at war again, and for the next five years the people of Poland would endure an occupation marked by the worst crimes against humanity ever known in history.

On September 1, 1939, Nazi Germany attacked Poland. Two days later, England and France declared war on Germany in defense of Poland, but neither country was prepared for war, and at this point, theirs was only a verbal support. They did not, in fact, come to the aid of Poland or engage Germany anywhere until France was attacked in May, 1940. Meanwhile, Soviet Russia, which only recently had signed a non-aggression pact with Poland, broke its promise and, in agreement with Germany, attacked Poland from the east on September 17, 1939. Once again, these two large countries partitioned Poland and began a reign of terror by arresting, deporting and killing civilians -- men, women and children.

Hitler, the leader of the Nationalist Socialist Party in Germany, usually known as the Nazis, ordered his armies to "Kill Poles without mercy, all men, women and children of Polish descent or language..... all Poles will disappear from the world..... it is essential that the great German people should consider it as its major task to destroy all Poles." This, he declared, was the way that the German people would get the extra "living space" he wanted.

Tens of thousands of Polish civilians, Christians and Jews, were shot in the first months of the occupation, 1,700 between December 1939 and July 1940 in Warsaw alone. Sometimes children were specifically singled out, as in the massacres of boy scouts in the city of Bydgoszcz. Hundreds of thousands of people were evicted from their homes and forcibly resettled in other sections of the country, while others were sent to concentration camps and to work as slave laborers in Germany.

200,000 Polish children, who in appearance were considered ideally "German", were kidnapped and given to German families for adoption. Of these, only 15-20 per cent were returned to their parents after the war. And only in occupied Poland did the Germans establish special children's camps; in one of them 12,000 of the 13,000 child prisoners were killed.

The western part of Poland was incorporated into Germany, the first conquered "living space" to be settled by German colonists. It was here that the largest death camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau, was built. Thousands of Poles were arrested and sent to concentration camps such as Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald and Mauthausen, already set up in Germany and Austria.
Others were evicted and deported to central Poland or kept for slave labor.

Jews were treated with extreme brutality from the beginning of the occupation. Jews in the western area were either confined in the ghetto in Lodz or deported to ghettos in central Poland, simply called the Generalgovernment (the word "Poland" was banned and all administration there was controlled by the German occupation forces). In central Poland as well, Jews were either evicted from homes that Germans wanted to take over, or those who were allowed to remain, at least at first, were constantly under attack. Under German rule, they lost all protection under the law, indeed violence against them was encouraged and it wasn't long before criminals and racists knew they could rob and beat Jews with impunity.

Although at first Jewish families were not broken up, they were soon impoverished and suffered terribly from hunger, disease and terror. The Germans set up ghettos -- districts that were designated as "Jewish residential areas" -- and forced all Jews to live there. The boundaries of these ghettos were invariably set in such a way that no parks, gardens or any green spaces were within them, and eventually they were fenced or walled in. Any Jew found outside a ghetto was subject to immediate execution. In the ghettos, Jews were crowded up to 12 to a room, starved, and subjected to the sadistic brutality of the German guards. Hundreds of thousands died of starvation, disease and random murder even before the first systematic killing in death camps began.

The only way a Jew could escape from a ghetto was either by pretending to be a Christian Pole, or by hiding. Neither of these options was easy. To change his identity, a Jew needed documents that would identify him as a Christian: a birth and baptismal certificate from a church; an identification card with a photo issued by German authorities; an employment card, also issued by German authorities, showing that he had an approved job (Poles caught without these cards were immediately deported for slave labor). Besides these cards, a Jew would need a story to match, something that would "prove" that his identity was authentic, and friends and "relatives" to back up his story. Besides that, he would have to know enough about the Christian religion (usually Catholic) and other Polish customs to behave naturally. Most of all, he had to speak the language well enough to sound Polish, and that, for the majority of Polish Jews whose first language was Yiddish, was not the case.

Those Jews who could not take on a Christian identity and try to live a normal, though terrifying, life in the area outside the ghetto walls (then called the "Aryan" side), could only survive outside the ghetto by getting help from non-Jews, usually by being hidden. That was another challenge altogether. Besides the obvious difficulties of hiding someone under the crowded conditions of the occupation and the constant surveillance of German soldiers and police, there was an automatic death penalty imposed on Polish Christians and their families if they were caught helping Jews.
Names of the executed Poles were published to serve as a warning to others.

Yet there existed people capable of extraordinary courage and altruism who tried to help as much as they could. It required a selfless devotion to look after people in hiding. Consider the difficulties. The rescuers had to undertake total care for those under their protection. They had to procure food in secret because the Jews in their care were entitled to no rations, and this food, bought on the black market (i.e. illegally) was very expensive. They had to prepare their food, wash their laundry and, depending on the hiding place, even provide toilet buckets, empty them, and clean them. Then, there was the psychological stress of dealing with fear -- their own and that of the Jews in their care.

It was in such conditions that Zegota was organized in Warsaw in 1942. It was the only government-financed organization in Europe set up specifically to aid Jews. The people who founded Zegota were all rescuers on their own, so they realized that the magnitude of the task required an organization to bring financial and logistical help, as well as moral support and encouragement, to Jews in hiding and to their rescuers. Since the founders of Zegota were also members of the Polish underground (resistance movement), they had contacts with secret organizations that forged identification documents for their own operatives. These were the best quality forgeries, and Zegota was able to get them free.

They could also coordinate their resources. They could contact underground doctors who were willing to risk attending to Jewish patients. They were in touch with helpful social workers, and with orphanages and convents that would take in Jewish children. Zegota actively sought accommodations, offered help building secret hiding places, and even acquired a few apartments that served as temporary emergency quarters for Jews who had just escaped from the ghetto. Zegota agents escorted Jews who came under their protection to their new hiding places. The underground received money sent to Zegota by the Polish Government-in-Exile in England via parachutists, and Zegota couriers delivered this money and documents to Jews in hiding or to their caregivers. Zegota's leaders published underground appeals asking Poles to overcome their fear, to defy the death sentence, and to help Jews. This, they wrote, was both a civic duty and a moral obligation.

Beyond that, Zegota tried to fight the terrible scourge of the blackmailers and denouncers who preyed on the defenseless Jews who tried to escape. These people, whether common criminals or racists, were responsible for the deaths of many Jews and also of Polish Christians who were helping them. Thanks to Zegota's intervention, the underground issued a death sentence on those who denounced Jews. When such sentences were carried out, the names of those executed were published as a warning. Jews and their rescuers were also betrayed by people who broke under torture by the Germans, and by children who revealed information
members of Zegota, including founding member Władysław Bartoszewski, who had been a prisoner at the Auschwitz concentration camp during the German occupation and then spent seven years in prison under the communist regime.

It was a long time before the Polish people could openly speak or write about their wartime experiences, and although Zegota was recognized and honored for its rescue work by the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Institute in Jerusalem, Israel in 1972, it was not a story generally known in the West. In 1995, a monument was erected in Warsaw by the American Friends of Zegota to honor these extraordinary people who went beyond personal resistance and were prepared to lay down their own lives so that others may live.

As it is written in the scriptures:
"He who saves one life, it is as if he saves humanity."
(TALMUD)
"Greater love hath no man than that he lay down his life for a friend.....These things I command you, that you love one another." (Gospel of St. John)
Discussion Guide

1. What were Hitler's war aims in Poland? What did he mean by "living space"? What is meant by an "incorporated territory", and by "occupied territory" or "occupation"? What is "genocide"?

Hitler's orders were: "Kill Poles without mercy, all men, women and children of Polish descent or language. Only in this way can we obtain the living space we need."

By "living space" he meant to take over all Polish territory, kill or deport most Polish people, and bring German settlers to live there.

Western Poland was "incorporated", meaning it was made a part of Germany. Polish citizens were killed, arrested or expelled, their religious, cultural and educational institutions were destroyed, and German colonists did in fact replace the evicted Polish population in this region.

An "occupation" is the control of a defeated country by the conqueror. During World War II, Germany allowed some countries to have local governments provided they obeyed German rules. In Poland, there was no collaborating government and the Germans abolished all human rights, closed high schools and universities, abolished most newspapers and other publishing, closed cultural institutions, and deprived all Polish people of liberty. There was, however, a Polish government-in-exile organized in England. This government communicated with underground civilian authorities in Poland and with the Polish underground Home Army by courier and secret radio transmissions.

Genocide, a word first coined in 1944 by American scholar Raphael Lemkin defined this crime as the "coordinated plan ....aiming at the destruction of the foundations of life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves." Such a plan would include the destruction of "the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of personal security liberty, health, dignity and even the lives of individuals belonging to such groups." This definition was used as the foundation for the United Nations' convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948).

2. What was Nazi Germany's policy toward the Jewish people?

Long before Hitler was elected in 1933, he had written a book, Mein Kampf, in which he expressed his hatred of Jews. The first concentration camp, Dachau, was built in Germany in 1933; the Nuremberg Laws passed in 1935 deprived German Jews of their civic rights; and in 1938, the Nazi party organized a two-day
wave of terror known as *Kristallnacht* (the Night of Broken Glass) when bands of German thugs smashed, burned and looted Jewish homes, synagogues and businesses, beat and even killed Jewish men, women and children. Although all this was known when German armies crossed into Poland, and their brutality against Polish Jews began immediately, no one imagined that their atrocities would reach the point of systematic mass murder. In some areas mass murder was committed by German death squads who shot their victims but the Nazis also constructed special death camps where Jews from all countries of Europe were brought to be executed in large, specially constructed gas chambers. The best known of these camps was Auschwitz-Birkenau which was located in former Polish territory that had been incorporated into Germany after the conquest. Altogether, 6 million European Jews were killed during the Holocaust.

3. What is meant by "Aryan", "gentile", "ghetto"?

According to the Nazis' racial theories, the "Aryan" people were superior to other races. "Aryan" was the name given to people of northern European stock and this group they further graded, ranking themselves at the top. Jews and Gypsies were classified as non-human and were condemned to death. Slavs, the people living to the east of Germany including Poles, Ukrainians and Russians were classed as sub-human. In Poland, German policy included killing all the better educated peoples through starvation and brutal working conditions as well as mass executions to enforce compliance with their orders. In practice, even the poorest and least educated Polish people also fell victim to these policies in the German drive to take over territory and to suppress resistance.

A "gentile" is a non-Jewish person, not necessarily Christian.

During the occupation, the German authorities segregated the Jewish from the gentile population. They evicted Jews from their homes and forced them to live in ghettos, that is, small, overcrowded sections of towns or cities that were enclosed by fences or walls. Christians, living in these areas were expelled and resettled elsewhere to make sure Jews were totally isolated within their designated ghettos.

4. What would happen to Jews who escaped from the ghetto? What was the penalty for Polish Christians who helped Jews?

Jews found outside ghettos were summarily executed by the German forces. The penalty for giving help to Jews was also a death sentence which in Poland was applied to entire families, even infants, and sometimes to neighbors and even entire villages.
5. What kind of help did Jews need in order to survive?

Jews who could "pass" as Poles, that is, they knew the language and customs well, and did not "look" Jewish could, by obtaining forged identification papers, live on the "Aryan" side. They required help to get these documents, and then needed assistance obtaining a place to live and a job. Jews who could not "pass", needed a hiding place. Most Jews in Poland did not speak Polish or spoke it with an accent, they dressed differently, and were not familiar with the customs of the Christian population. To hide them, someone would have to be willing to risk his or her life, and the lives of their families, and also to look after all their personal needs. Since Poles themselves were reduced to an allotment of 669 calories per day (as opposed to 2613 calories per day for Germans) obtaining extra food secretly was difficult, dangerous, and expensive.

6. What kind of people helped?

Individuals from all walks of life, and all types of religious and political persuasions. Catholic clergy played a special role in that priests provided false birth certificates, and convents and monasteries took in Jewish fugitives. Convents and secular orphanages took in children. There is no known case of a convent refusing refuge to a child.

7. Why was Zegota organized and what kind of help did it give?

Zegota was set up by people who were already helping Jews individually and who knew the great difficulties rescuers had to cope with. The founders were also members of the Polish underground and had contacts that enabled them to provide specialized help. Zegota's primary purpose was to provide social welfare such as money, housing and medical aid — not military help.

Zegota distributed about 50 thousand sets of false identification documents provided by secret forgery units of the underground. Zegota agents looked for homes and hiding places, including emergency shelters to enable escaping Jews to get off the streets as quickly as possible. They also had a network of underground doctors who were willing to risk seeing Jewish patients, or even offer temporary shelter in hospitals, often by diagnosing a communicable disease and putting the person in a hospital isolation ward.

One section of Zegota was organized to help get children out of the Warsaw ghetto after locating homes for them. These children also required false documents and stories to match. If they were old enough, they had to memorize their new identities. Zegota rescued about 2500 children in the city of Warsaw.
A network of couriers carried secret messages, documents and money to Jews in hiding and to their helpers.

Couriers of the Polish underground and secret radio broadcasts informed the outside world of the Nazi's genocide of the Jews of Europe. The reports were given to the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) and to journalists, politicians and community leaders in England and in the United States.

Zegota also involved the Polish Home Army in decreeing a death penalty on those Poles who blackmailed or betrayed Jews. When these sentences were carried out, the Home Army published the names of the executed as a deterrent to others.

8. What were the difficulties and risks involved in helping Jews?

The greatest obstacle to overcome was fear, and the grave responsibility of endangering other members of one's family, including one's children. There were also logistical problems, that is, finding suitable hiding places, buying food secretly for people who did not theoretically exist, and the daily strain and stress of living with such danger.

No one knew who could be trusted. Not only were there criminals or racists to contend with, but there was always the risk that someone would break down under torture and reveal hidden Jews and their protectors. Sometimes people were simply tricked into saying something that would make the police suspicious. This was particularly risky where children were involved.

It was heartbreaking for Jewish parents to have to be separated from their children, especially since no one could actually guarantee the safety of the children or their rescuers. Jewish children, already traumatized by the brutal conditions, suffered further pain being taken away from their parents. Jews who knew where relatives or friends were staying could also reveal this information under torture. Christian parents had to deal with the moral dilemma of risking their children's lives including very young children who could not understand the situation.

9. Although the death penalty for helping Jews existed in other occupied countries, only in Poland was this sentence ruthlessly carried out, immediately and on entire families who were shot, hanged, or burned alive, yet knowing this, some people continued sheltering Jews in their homes. Discuss this terror and the possible motivation for defying the death penalty. Can you imagine what your decision would be in such circumstances?

10. What does Bartoszewski mean by "sins of omission?" What are the moral implications of not
offering help to people condemned so cruelly to death? Allied leaders felt their priority was to concentrate on their fight against Hitler and Nazi Germany strictly from a strategic point of view. Should they have changed some of their priorities to bring help to those people in greatest peril by bombing the death camps' gas chambers and crematoria?

11. Among those who helped, including one of the founders of Zegota, were people who had been known as anti-Semitic before the war. They decided to help, they said, because the Nazi policy under the occupation was a moral issue, and not a political or economic one. The majority of Polish Christians and Polish Jews did not know one another, often not even speaking the same language. Discuss anti-Semitism and racism and the importance of bridging separations between communities, getting to know one another, respecting our common humanity and respecting one another’s differences.

12. Although the United Nations Organization did not come into being until after the war, the term "United Nations" was officially used for the first time in "The Declaration of the United Nations" signed by 26 allied governments in January 1942. That year, the Polish Government-in-Exile published a booklet addressed to the United Nations under the title "The Mass Extermination of Jews in German Occupied Poland," but no action was taken to help them. Discuss the responsibilities of the United Nations during World War II, and since then, towards peoples who face persecution and the threat of genocide.

13. Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis has written that "Goodness is as teachable as evil. Putting a human face on altruism is essential." Altruism is defined as having concern for others as a guiding principle in human behaviour. Zegota members say not enough was done to help, but they do not condemn those who didn't help because they were afraid, only those who could have done something but did nothing. Discuss the altruism of Zegota members and what could have been done to help more.

14. How should we honor the Zegota participants in our own communities, even today, 55 years after their service to humanity?
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The Polish Underground Trust, 11 Leopold Road, London W5 3PB

Zydowski Institute Historyczny, The Jewish Historical Institute, 3/5 Tlomackie Street, Warsaw, Poland

Available in Polish:


(English translation in progress)