

Lesson Plan – Jewish Life Prior to WWII

Introduction

Student age range: 14-16

Subject: History

Time required: 50 minutes

Overview:

Learning about Jewish life in Europe prior to World War II is essential for understanding the full impact of the Holocaust. Before the war, Jewish communities across Europe were vibrant and diverse. Studying this period helps students appreciate the depth and complexity of Jewish identity and heritage, and it underscores the magnitude of what was lost during the Holocaust. It also challenges the misconception that Jewish life was defined solely by persecution, offering a fuller, more humanising perspective that honours the lives lived before the tragedy.

Teachers should seek to highlight that there was no single, unifying experience of being Jewish. There were all kinds of Jewish people, living all different kinds of lives.

Students will analyse a map, photograph and video evidence to develop an appreciation for the range of different Jewish experiences.

Essential questions:

- What does it mean to be Jewish?
- What was Jewish life like in Europe before WWII?
- What were the similarities and differences between different Jewish experiences?

Learning objectives:

- Students will understand what Judaism is.
- Students will understand that there was a range of different lifestyles experienced by Jews across Europe prior to WWII.
- Students will understand that Judaism is not a race, and Jews were citizens of the European countries where they lived.

Key issues/concepts:

- Perspectives

Materials:

Worksheet – Jewish Life

Videos of pre-war Jewish Life at [this link](#).

Teaching notes:

Teachers should be aware whether there are any Jewish students in the classroom, and if so, whether they are comfortable talking about their Judaism with the class.

Glossary:

- Judaism
- Orthodox
- Secular
- Integration

Lesson Instructions

ONE – What is a Jew? (5 minutes)

(This step is not necessary if the unit began with a lesson on ‘Introducing the Holocaust’.

[Click here](#) to see a lesson plan for ‘Introducing the Holocaust’.)

Teacher leads student discussion by asking students:

- Do you know what Judaism is?
- Have you ever met any Jewish people?

Teacher summarises discussion by clarifying:

- Judaism is a religion going back around 4,000 years.
- It was the first religion to believe in one god (the same God which came to be worshipped by Muslims and Christians).

- There are many cultures and traditions associated with Judaism, and some Jews feel culturally Jewish, even if they don't believe in all the religious aspects.

TWO – Jewish populations in pre-war Europe (10 minutes)

This activity is included on the [Worksheet – Jewish Life](#).

Teacher establishes focus on Jews in pre-war Europe.

Students view the map on the Worksheet and answer the following:

- Was the Jewish population localised, or spread all across Europe?
- Which two countries had the highest numbers of Jewish people?
- How many Jews lived in Germany in 1933?
- How many Jewish people lived in Europe in 1933?
- What is one new or surprising thing you learned from this map?

THREE – Photograph analysis (10 minutes)

This activity is included on the [Worksheet – Jewish Life](#).

Students view the photograph of the Dutch Olympic Women's Gymnastics team from the Amsterdam Olympics, 1928, on the Worksheet.

Teacher draws attention to the information in the caption: The team won the gold medal. The coach was Jewish, as were five of the team members.

Jewish team members standing in the first row, from left: Helena Nordheim (second), Anna Polak (third), Estella Agsteribbe (fourth), Judik Simons (last). In the second row: Elka de Levie (first from right).

Think, pair, share activity: what does this photograph suggest about Jewish life in pre-war Europe?

Some answers might include:

- Jewish people engaged in sports
- Jewish people were integrated with non-Jews in various ways
- Jewish people came from various places, like Holland

- Jews represented their country – many felt their religion was second to their nationality
- Jewish people looked like anyone else (the five Jews in the photo can't be identified just by looking)
- Not all Jews were orthodox, or very religious (these women are not dressed as conservative Jews)

After discussion, teachers can choose to reveal, at their discretion, that Helena, Anna, Estella and Judik were murdered in the Holocaust. Elka survived.

FOUR – Video activity (25 minutes)

This activity is included on the [Worksheet - Jewish Life](#).

Students consider some of [these family videos](#). Students watch a selection of the videos, for 15 minutes.

While viewing, students complete the highlighting activity on the worksheet – noting aspects of Jewish life as they appear in the film. Ultimately, students should be able to conclude that there were all kinds of different Jews – rich and poor, city and country, educated and not educated, religious and secular.

After viewing, students answer these questions:

1. What evidence did you see that Jewish people came from different walks of life?
2. What different places did the videos come from?
3. Being Jewish was about more than just religious observance. Discuss with reference to the videos.

Extension question: Consider who made these videos. How does this change what may or may not be represented in the films?

FINISHING UP

Homework question for summative assessment: “There were many different ways to be a Jew.” Discuss, making reference to some of the source material you viewed in class.

Modifications:

Step 4 – Video activity: Teachers may instruct students to watch the video for homework prior to the lesson, rather than taking class time for viewing. This will mean they can watch all the clips, not just a sample, and will have more time in class for analysis and discussion.

Related lessons

Before this lesson, we recommend you begin the unit with an introductory lesson about the Holocaust. [Click here](#) to access a lesson plan called ‘Introduction to the Holocaust’.

After this lesson, we recommend you teach about the history of antisemitism, prior to the rise of the Nazi Party. [Click here](#) to access a lesson plan called ‘Antisemitism’.

You can also see a suggested plan for teaching a full unit about the Holocaust at [this link](#).