



Children in the Ghettos: What Can Their Experiences Tell Us?

Grade 10 Canadian History | 50–60 minutes

This lesson can be taught as a **stand-alone primary-source investigation** or paired with [*The Teddy Bear: A Story of Survival*](#) to provide an additional child's perspective on life in a ghetto.

Inquiry Question: How did being forced into a ghetto change the lives of Jewish children and young people?

Context | 5–10 minutes

Briefly explain what ghettos were and why the Nazis established them.

Teacher Background

During the Holocaust, ghettos were designated areas of cities or towns where Jews were forced to live, separated from the non-Jewish population. Many were enclosed by walls, fences, or barbed wire and guarded. Jews generally could not enter or leave freely, although some were permitted or forced to leave temporarily for work. Conditions were deliberately overcrowded, unsanitary, and dangerous, with inadequate food and medical care.

The Nazis and their allies established more than 1,300 ghettos, primarily in occupied eastern Europe. Ghettos were initially used to isolate, segregate and control Jewish populations. They also facilitated the confiscation of Jewish property and the exploitation of Jews as forced labourers. As Nazi policy moved toward systematic mass murder, many ghettos became places where Jews were concentrated before deportation to killing centres or murder in mass shootings. The purpose and conditions of ghettos varied by place and over time.

Pose the inquiry question:

How did being forced into a ghetto change the lives of Jewish children and young people?

Before students see the documents, ask them to **predict several areas of a young person's life that might have been affected**.

If students need prompting, possibilities include: **home and family, food, health, school, work, freedom of movement, safety and relationships**.



Document Investigation | 25–30 minutes

Give each student the complete set of **6 documents**. This is attached as Student Handout 1.

In small groups, students look through all 6 and then **choose 3 documents that give them the clearest picture of life for children and young people in the ghettos.**

At least **1 of their 3 must be either Dawid Sierakowiak or Brigitte Friedman Altman**, so that every group works closely with one of the more substantial sources.

Students record their findings:

Young person	What happened?	What does this reveal about life in the ghetto?	Evidence from the source that supports what you learned

Whole-Class Synthesis | 10-15 minutes

Bring the class back together and gather evidence on the board under broad categories:

Home & Family | Hunger & Health | School | Work | Freedom | Fear & Danger | Deportation & Survival

Groups contribute evidence from the documents they investigated. A document may fit into more than one category, and students can suggest additional categories.

Then ask:

- What experiences appear in more than one account?
- What differences do you notice among the experiences of these young people?
- What do individual stories help us understand that a definition or statistics alone cannot?

Consolidation | 5–10 minutes

Ask students:

If you could tell someone only three things about what life was like for children and young people in the ghettos, what three things would you want them to understand?

Students should support each of their three conclusions with **evidence from the documents**.



STUDENT HANDOUT 1

CHILDREN IN THE GHETTOS

Young People Describe Life in the Ghettos

All of the following documents were taken from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Holocaust Encyclopedia*.

Irena Aronowicz

Source note: This account was reconstructed by Irena from memory immediately after her liberation in 1945.

“Everyone was going in the same direction, rushing toward the same goal, the dirtiest, ugliest quarter of the city, a place with no sewers and paved with cobblestones.... The ghetto.”

—Irena Aronowicz, age 15, spring 1940

What happened afterward: In May 1945, American troops liberated Irena in Mauthausen. Immediately following liberation, Irena set out to recreate her diaries from memory. In 1946, she moved to Palestine where she married Joseph Liebman in 1949. There, she raised a family and wrote novels.

Dawid Sierakowiak

“A student from the same grade as ours died from hunger and exhaustion yesterday. As a result of his terrible appearance, he was allowed to eat as much soup in school as he wanted, but it didn't help him much. He is the third victim in the class.”

—Dawid Sierakowiak, age 16, May 13, 1941

“I'll start my work in the saddlery workshop tomorrow....My student career has been suspended, at least for a while....The main thing now is to make an income and survive poverty.”

[age 17, October 23, 1941]

“All I care is that there is soup in my workshop.”

[age 17, April 3, 1942]

“We are not considered humans at all; just cattle for work or slaughter. No one knows what happened to the Jews deported from Lodz. No one can be certain of anything now. They are after Jews all over the Reich.”

[age 17, May 20, 1942]

What happened afterward: Dawid Sierakowiak died on August 8, 1943, probably of tuberculosis. He had just turned 19 years of age. His father also succumbed to the harsh conditions in the ghetto. His sister Nadia survived until 1944, when she was deported with the last ghetto inhabitants to her death at Auschwitz-Birkenau.



Chaim Kozenicki

"The day of my Bar Mitzvah arrived. I put on the tefillin and I said the blessings. As a gift from my family I received half a loaf of bread. They wanted me to eat it right there and then, in their presence. I refused. I couldn't even imagine for how long they saved it from themselves in order to give it to me. They decided that I had to eat it, and I ate it. I couldn't look them in the eye because I ate their bread." —Chaim Kozenicki, age 13

What happened afterward: On September 1, 1944, Chaim arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau. He was later transferred to the Stutthoff concentration camp, then to Stolp, and back to Stutthoff. The Germans forced the prisoners on barks, small sailing ships which sailed on the Baltic Sea. Chaim was one of the few who survived. He was taken to Sweden to recuperate and soon after, he immigrated to Palestine. Chaim fought in the War of Independence and married a fellow Holocaust survivor. He lives near Tel Aviv. He has two children and is a grandfather. Chaim's older brother survived the war.

Paula Garfinkel

Source note: The passage below is a secondary-source biographical narrative from the USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia, not Paula Garfinkel's own words.

Paula Garfinkel: 1940-44: In early 1940 Paula's family was forcibly relocated to the Lodz ghetto, where they were assigned one room for all six of them. Food was the main problem. At the women's clothing factory where Paula worked, she at least got some soup for lunch. But her family desperately needed to find more food for her younger brother, who was very sick and bleeding internally. From the window at her factory she looked out at a potato field. Knowing that if she was caught, she'd be shot, she crept out one night to the field, dug up as many potatoes as she could, and ran home.

What happened afterward: In 1944 Paula was deported to Bremen, Germany, as a forced laborer. She was freed in the Bergen-Belsen camp in 1945. After the war, she immigrated to the United States.

Anonymous Girl Diarist

"When it's so cold, even my heart is heavy. There is nothing to cook today; we should be receiving three loaves of bread but we will be getting only one bread today. I don't know what to do. I bought rotten and stinking beets from a woman, for 10 marks. We will cook half today and half tomorrow. Does this deserve to be called life?" — Anonymous girl diarist, March 6, 1942

"Beautiful, sunny day today. When the sun shines, my mood is lighter. How sad life is. When we look at the fence separating us from the rest of the world, our souls, like birds in a cage, yearn to be free. Longing breaks my heart, visions of the past come to me. Will I ever live in better times?" — Anonymous girl diarist, March 7, 1942



What happened afterward: In July 1945, a partial diary was found in the area of the ghetto of Lodz, Poland. The diary had no identifiable author. The only clue to her name comes from a note copied into the diary, which reads "Dear Esterka and Minia." Therefore we do not know what happened to its author.

Brigitte Friedman Altman

Source note: Oral testimony.

These trucks bode no good, I mean especially for the little girl. Because at that time there were very few children left in the ghetto. Frantically, the grandmother had put the ch...little girl into the bed that was shared by all three, and had heaped all the blankets and quilts. Well, actually, she had made it so it would look that it was just a made up bed. So first of all this...one of the soldiers or officers confronts me and wants to know why I'm not at my workplace. Fortunately I was dressed. I showed him my work permit but what I said to him I do not re...I don't know. I was stunned, petrified, and my heart was racing. I am sure it could be seen through, through what I was wearing. I think at one time it actually stopped beating. He left me alone. He gave the grandparents a stern look. Perhaps he admonished me not to stay home anymore, that, that this could carry grave consequences. But I really don't remember but he spoke to me sternly, then shoved me away, or out of the way. Grandparents, he left...said something in a harsh language to them, left them alone. And started tearing up the room. I think all three did that, they tore up the room and it didn't take them any time to tear apart the bed clothes, to come upon the little girl. And dragged her out. When they made sure there was nobody else hiding and nothing else was to be found, they dragged her out, towards this truck. And the grandmother...the grandmother ran, ran after them...fell down, fell down to...fell on her knees, begged, pleaded, cried, wailed, followed them out to the truck, to the curb and one of the soldiers either used his gun or a club and hit her and she fell to the ground, she fell down in the street. The truck took off and she was left behind. They took the little girl, there were other children on the truck. I could see that from the window. After I had seen that, I didn't want to see any more.

What happened afterward: During the "Great Action" in October 1941, Brigitte and her loved ones narrowly avoided selection and murder. They were, however, unable to help their neighbors. After a roundup targeting children and the elderly in March 1944, Brigitte escaped from the Kovno ghetto with the help of her father's former employee. She survived the rest of the war in hiding. Soviet forces liberated Kovno in August 1944.