

*The Book Smugglers*  
Curriculum for Educators  
Includes pre- and post-visit activities  
Holocaust Museum Houston  
Spring 2020



## Letter for Educators

This exhibition explores a little known act of resistance and survival. In the Vilna Ghetto – and later during the post-war Soviet Union – a group of people rescued Jewish cultural treasures for future generations.

In *The Book Smugglers*, David E Fishman used Jewish, German and Soviet documents to tell the story of this amazing group of partisans and poets. Risking their lives for books and manuscripts, they made a choice to insure that the “Jerusalem of Lithuania” would not be forgotten. The acts of both spiritual and physical resistance conducted by these men and women challenges the view of Jewish people as passive targets of Nazi aggression. The book and exhibition remind us that violence against the Jewish people didn’t end in 1945. Life under the Soviet Union had new perils to face with courage and cunning.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) has a set of guidelines for teaching about the Holocaust<sup>1</sup>. Three are most relevant here:

### **Translate statistics into people**

In any study of the Holocaust, the sheer number of victims challenges easy comprehension. Show that individual people—families of grandparents, parents, and children—are behind the statistics and emphasize that within the larger historical narrative is a diversity of personal experience. Precisely because they portray people in the fullness of their lives and not just as victims, first-person accounts and memoir literature provide students with a way of making meaning out of collective numbers and add individual voices to a collective experience.

### **Do not romanticize history**

People who risked their lives to rescue victims of Nazi oppression provide useful, important, and compelling role models for students. Given that only a small fraction of non-Jews under Nazi occupation helped to rescue Jews, an overemphasis on heroic tales in a unit on the Holocaust can result in an inaccurate and unbalanced account of the history. Similarly, in exposing students to the worst aspects of human nature as revealed in the history of the Holocaust, you run the risk of fostering cynicism in your students. Accuracy of fact along with a balanced perspective on the history must be a priority.

### **Strive for balance in establishing whose perspective informs your study of the Holocaust**

Most students express empathy for victims of mass murder. However, it is not uncommon for students to assume that the victims may have done something to justify the actions against them and, thus, to place inappropriate blame on the victims themselves. One helpful technique for engaging students in a discussion of the Holocaust is to think of the participants involved as belonging to one of four categories: victims, perpetrators, rescuers, and bystanders. Examine the actions, motives, and decisions of each group. Portray all individuals, including victims and perpetrators, as human beings who are capable of moral judgment and independent decision making.

As you introduce your students to this story, help them consider why the preservation of culture is important and how it is at risk today. Help them realize that a remnant of the past can be used to rebuild for the future.

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<sup>1</sup> For all 10 of the guidelines, see <https://www.ushmm.org/educators/teaching-about-the-holocaust/general-teaching-guidelines>

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## Essential Questions & Objectives for School Tours

### *Booking Information:*

School groups can request to tour this exhibit separately or as an add-on to their regular tour. The exhibit begins with background information that will help students place the experiences of the Vilna Ghetto in context.

This exhibition encourages students to consider the value of culture in a society and why it was important to save it for the future. Lives were risked many times to save the pieces that were rescued.

### *Essential Questions*

- Why is cultural preservation a necessary part of a strong civil society?
- How did Jewish people challenge acts of Nazi aggression?

### *Student Objectives*

- Students will be able to define spiritual resistance.
- Students will analyze choices and choiceless choices made by those in the Vilna Ghetto.
- Students will evaluate the significance of culture in societies.
- Students will use critical thinking skills as they consider the connection of this history to their own world.

### *Relevant High School TEKS*

#### US History Studies Since 1877

(7) History. The student understands the domestic and international impact of U.S. participation in World War II. The student is expected to:

(C) analyze major issues of World War II, including the Holocaust, the internment of Japanese Americans as a result of Executive Order 9066, and the development of atomic weapons;

(D) analyze major military events of World War II, including fighting the war on multiple fronts, the Bataan Death March, the U.S. military advancement through the Pacific Islands, the Battle of Midway, the invasion of Normandy, and the liberation of concentration camps;

#### World History Studies

(12) History. The student understands the causes and impact of World War II. The student is expected to:

(A) describe the emergence and characteristics of totalitarianism;

(B) explain the roles of various world leaders, including Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, Hideki Tojo, Joseph Stalin, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill, prior to and during World War II; and

(C) explain the major causes and events of World War II, including the German invasions of Poland and the Soviet Union, the Holocaust, the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Normandy landings, and the dropping of the atomic bombs.

# BEFORE VISITING: BACKGROUND INFORMATION & ACTIVITIES

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Although the exhibit includes background information at the start of the exhibition, it would be helpful to review this information with your classes before visiting.

### *General Vilna<sup>2</sup> History*

The Grand Duchy of Lithuania was established in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Its capital city was known by several names: Vilna (Hebrew), Vilnius (Lithuanian), and Wilno (Polish). Vilna is located at the confluence of two navigable rivers, making it an excellent location for trade.



It was a part of Poland beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but transferred in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to be a part of the Russian Empire. For these reasons its history represents a great deal of multiculturalism, with occasional pogroms against minority groups, like the Jewish people also taking place. It's important to realize that geography affected this history<sup>3</sup>.

### *The Jerusalem of Lithuania*

Jewish people first settled in Vilna in the early 1500s, living on three streets designated by the authorities for Jewish people. They came to be known as "Litvaks." The stereotypical Litvak was intelligent, unemotional and stubborn.

The Great Synagogue was built in 1572. Over time a square-block-long synagogue courtyard, or *shul-hoyf*, came to have smaller houses of prayer and community institutions. This became the symbolic heart of Jewish Vilna as social and religious meetings took place here.

In the mid-1600s Vilna emerged as the "Jerusalem of Lithuania." According to legend, Vilna gained this nickname because 333 of its residents knew the entire Talmud by heart. The nickname stuck because of the strong religious and cultural life that existed in Vilna. Yiddish was the common language of the Jewish people and writing, printing and music were all central to life in Vilna. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Vilna had five daily Yiddish newspapers.

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<sup>2</sup> Vilna is the name Jewish people use for this city. Its Lithuanian name is Vilnius, which is what it is called today. For continuity's sake, the exhibition and this guide will use Vilna.

<sup>3</sup> "Poland in 1933": <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/map/poland-1933-vilna-indicated>

"Origins of the Cold War: Europe after World War 2"

<https://www.themaparchive.com/origins-of-the-cold-war-europe-after-world-war-ii-1945/1949.html>

## Hebrew vs. Yiddish

Hebrew has long been the primary language used by Jewish people. It is central to the religious observances and reading of the Bible.

Yiddish was the language of Ashkenazi Jews (Jewish people of Central and Eastern Europe). It is a hybrid of Hebrew and medieval German<sup>4</sup>. Within Vilna were two of the most significant Yiddish writers: I.L. Peretz and Sholem Aleichem. Many Americans know Aleichem's work best due to the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*.

## World War II Context

During and immediately after World War I, Vilna changed hands eight times between Poland, Lithuania and the Soviet Union. Like others in Lithuania, the Jewish population was divided as to who should control the city. Leftist Jews supported the Soviets; Zionist Jews supported the Lithuanians. However, Vilna ultimately came under Polish rule.



Between the two World Wars, Vilna's 60,000 Jews constituted 30% of the city's population. However, Jews could not hold civil service jobs and Jewish-owned businesses could not get loans from Polish banks. They were also limited in their ability to participate in local government, holding only 15% of the city's council seats. In April 1919 a pogrom led to the deaths of 36 Jewish people and the desecration of the Jewish cemetery. The Jewish community

sponsored its own hospital, bank, schools and a music conservatory. Nearly 90% of Jewish children attended Jewish-sponsored schools. While most Jews knew Polish, the language of Jewish cultural and public life was Yiddish.

Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression pact in August 1939. As these two nations agreed to partition Poland, an independent Lithuania was created through that process. Nazi Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Thousands of Polish Jews sought refuge in Lithuania, as it was a neutral country at that time.

Lithuania was incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1940. Vilna was made the capital of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. A singular Soviet identity was to be developed. The Zionist movement was silenced. All religious and Hebrew language schools were closed. The five daily newspapers were replaced by one Communist Yiddish newspaper.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://vivo.org/Yiddish-Alphabet> for pronunciation guide on Yiddish.

Under Soviet rule, the Strashun Library was closed to the public. YIVO's leadership was purged and replaced with Communists. The arts were subject to censorship and expected to uphold the new Soviet identity.

### *Nazi Occupation*

On June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Within two days the Germans were in Vilna. Nazi propaganda that linked Judaism and communism increased local antisemitic feelings by blaming the Jews for the Soviet occupation of Lithuania. Jews were required to wear a yellow badge. Lithuanian mob groups, known as "snatchers" or "catchers," began murdering small groups of Jewish people in the nearby forest of Ponar, about 6 miles south of the city (also known as Ponary in Polish or Paneriai in Lithuanian).

The Nazis focused on mass killings of Jewish people in this initial phase of the "Final Solution." *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing squads) entered the area and expanded the shooting operations in the Ponar forest, using Lithuanian auxiliaries. Vilna's Lukiszi Prison was used as a holding center for Jewish people who were to be taken to Ponar. By the end of 1941, the *einsatzgruppen* had murdered approximately 40,000 Jewish people in the Ponar forest.

### *After World War II*

Those who returned to Vilna in the early days after the war found a different city: it wasn't the Jerusalem of Lithuania anymore. The Soviet Union was not interested in ethnic or religious identities: they wanted a singular communist identity to unite the people. Jewish life in the liberated Soviet Vilnius was struggling against bureaucratic strangulation. The Jews were not allowed to have a weekly Yiddish newspaper (while the Polish population was allowed one), the synagogue could hold worship services, but not engage in religious instruction and a theater was not permitted. In 1948, Stalin was infuriated by the Jews' outpouring of support for and identification with the new state of Israel. He viewed this as treason and launched a fierce antisemitic campaign in the fall of 1948. Large-scale arrests of Soviet Yiddish writers began in late December 1948. By February 1949, all the institutions of Yiddish literature had been eliminated, and nearly all its writers were in prison. The most famous ones would eventually be executed on August 12, 1952.

The atmosphere in the USSR gradually became more relaxed after Stalin's death in 1953. Under Nikita Khrushchev's "thaw," there was a token restoration of Jewish culture. This was subject to global events and the wars within the Middle East would lead to periods of strong repression. During the 1980s Mikhail Gorbachev instituted a liberalization policy of *glasnost*; Jews were allowed to establish grassroots societies and organizations, after a forty-year ban on public Jewish life.

In 1990, Lithuania unilaterally declared its independence from the Soviet Union; eventually the Soviet Union collapsed altogether.

## PHOTOGRAPH ANALYSIS ACTIVITIES

1. Use this link to view a poster that announces the celebration of the 100,000<sup>th</sup> book to circulate in the Vilna Ghetto library:  
<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/image/poster-vilna-ghetto-library>.  
You may need to define what is meant by book circulation. Ask students to consider the following:
  - a. Why would people in the Jewish ghetto in Vilna have wanted to check out books? Possible answers: for an escape from their experiences, to be reminded of the past, to teach their children
  - b. Why would the ghetto library have created a poster to celebrate this milestone? Possible answers: to encourage more use of the library, to note that people are “fighting back” by maintaining their educated identity as a citizen of the “Jerusalem of Lithuania,” to encourage donations of more books for people to check out

It might be interesting to ask your school librarian what their circulation numbers are for a point of local reference.

2. Use this link to an article about Avrom Sutzkever on YIVO’s website:  
[https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Sutzkever\\_Avrom](https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Sutzkever_Avrom). Select the 1942 image of Jews sorting books in the YIVO building in Vilna, downloading it if possible so students do not see the caption.
  - a. Use the Notice / Wonder Protocol to have students consider what is happening in this picture.
  - b. What evidence is there that the books / papers are not being seen as valuable by the people who placed them in this room?

## TESTIMONY ACTIVITIES

1. View survivor testimony, such as this from Jack Arnel at the USC Shoah Foundation,  
<https://iWitness.usc.edu/sfi/Watch.aspx?testimonyID=20431&segmentNumber=0&returnIndex=0&contentView=1&pg=2>. The video is more than 3 hours in length, but there is a guide that would allow you to select segments based on the topics. The first 30 minutes are specifically about pre-war life.
2. Use the USHMM website to read more about the Vilna ghetto and hear survivor testimony: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/vilna>



## During Your Visit: Activities

### **Choiceless Choices**

Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer argues that behavior during the Holocaust “cannot be viewed through the same lens we used to view normal human behavior since the rules of law and morality and the choices available for human decisions were not permitted [...] where physical survival under these conditions resulted in ‘choiceless choices’.” In coining this phrase he was specifically referencing extermination camps (killing sites) but the concept can apply to a study of life inside the ghettos.

- What examples of authentic choices do you see in the exhibition? When do these choices take place?
- What examples of choiceless choices do you see in the exhibition? When do these choiceless choices take place?

### **Defining Resistance**

The USHMM writes in its guidelines for teachers, “Words that describe human behavior often have multiple meanings. Resistance, for example, usually refers to a physical act of armed revolt. During the Holocaust, it also encompassed partisan activity; the smuggling of messages, food, and weapons; sabotage; and actual military engagement. Resistance may also be thought of as willful disobedience, such as continuing to practice religious and cultural traditions in defiance of the rules or creating fine art, music, and poetry inside ghettos and concentration camps. For many, simply maintaining the will to live in the face of abject brutality was an act of spiritual resistance.”

- What examples of physical resistance do you see in the exhibition?
- What examples of spiritual resistance do you see in the exhibition?
- At the end of the exhibition, create a definition of resistance in the context of the Holocaust as a group.

### **Graphic Organizer-Based Activities**

These activities are designed for students to complete while in the gallery space by completing the graphic organizers. The students should then do a jigsaw activity within the gallery space itself, a museum classroom or when they get back to school. The graphic organizers can be printed as a two-sided page.

## KNOW ONE STORY

Instructions: Select ONE person to “follow” throughout the exhibition. Complete this organizer and be ready to use it in a discussion following the tour.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Before the War</b>	<b>During WWII</b>	<b>After the War</b>	<b>Quotes / Images of Note</b>
Shmerke Kaczerginski				
Zelig Kalmanovitch				
Rachela Krinsky				
Herman Kruk				
Abraham Sutzkever				
Johannes Pohl				

## CHOOSING RESISTANCE

Instructions: Complete this organizer and be ready to use it in a discussion following the tour.

Find 5 examples of each of these:	1	2	3	4	5
Courage / bravery					
Fear / terror					
Pick ONE of the rescued gems and explain why it is significant that it was rescued:					
After viewing the exhibition, answer this question: Would you risk <i>your</i> life to save a book? Why or why not?					

## Classroom Connections: Post-Visit Activities

There are a variety of ways to connect this exhibition to the classroom. It is suggested teachers choose one or two of these when they return to the classroom. The HMH Education Department would be interested in your students' reactions, should you wish to share them.

### ***Jigsaw & Quote Analysis Activity***

Use the graphic organizers from the tour to conduct a jigsaw activity. After the activity, have the final jigsaw groups complete the quote analysis activity.

### ***Exhibition: What would you smuggle?***

Have student consider what objects in their own houses, places of worship or community that they would want to rescue if danger were present. This link may offer some ideas for which you could do a brainstorm activity or add to the basic concept of a school-based exhibition: <http://www.msp.umb.edu/LocHistoryTemplates/>

Have them take photographs of these objects and write on an index card why those objects should be saved.

In your school's commons space (perimeter of the cafeteria, main lobby, library, etc.), create a photo-based exhibition with printed images and the index cards.

### ***Mandala Reflective Artwork***

Mandala on Vilna: have students complete a Mandala drawing. In the center should be the word "Vilna." On the next set of concentric circles could be information based on a timeline of Vilna's history or the Book Smugglers, using text and colors to denote either one. Have students use the space outside of the Mandala to include quotes about / from the Holocaust or other drawings they believe is important to their reflection on the exhibition.

The Mandalas found here (#3, 5, 6 or 13) could be of good use:

<http://www.mandala-4free.de/en/en-Mandala-easy-01.htm>

### ***Explore Endangered Cultural Heritage***

There are cultural sites that are in danger or have been destroyed. Have students research and report on these

- The Taliban and the Bamiyan Buddhas:  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-31813681>
- ISIS and Iraq & Syria:  
<https://www.newsweek.com/al-nuri-mosque-iraq-mosul-isis-628447>

- UNESCO World Heritage List: *The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) seeks to encourage the identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding value to humanity. This is embodied in an international treaty called the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted by UNESCO in 1972.* Use the UNESCO World Heritage in Young Hands Kit to introduce the ideas of World Heritage Sites <https://whc.unesco.org/en/educationkit/>

***Additional Classroom Options:***

- Local History Primary Source Archive: Much of this exhibition is about rescuing archives. Use this Library of Congress lesson plan to create a primary source archive <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/local/>.
- Design a Book Cover: Ask students to create a book cover based on the exhibition's content: [https://creativeeducator.tech4learning.com/v01/lessons/Design\\_a\\_Book\\_Cover](https://creativeeducator.tech4learning.com/v01/lessons/Design_a_Book_Cover)

## Quote Analysis

Ask students to discuss the following quotes. They could be projected or copied based on the table below.

Quote	What it meant within the exhibition?	What lessons could be taken from it for today?
"Vilna isn't a city; it's an idea." – Wolf Latsky Bartholdy, on a visit to the Strashun library.		
"The first night in the ghetto is like the first night in your grave." – Abraham Sutzkever		
"Ghetto inmates looked at us as if we were lunatics. They were smuggling foodstuffs into the ghetto, in their clothes and boots. We were smuggling books, pieces of paper, occasionally a Torah scroll or mezuzahs." — Shmerke Kaczerginski		
"Our present is as dark as this bunker, but the cultural treasures radiate with the promise of a luminous future." – Shmerke Kaczerginski		
"These might be the last books we ever read. And the books were also, like us, in mortal danger. For many of them, we were their last readers." – Rachela Krinsky		
"If not for the hidden cultural treasures, I don't know if I would have had enough strength to return to my home city. I knew that I wouldn't find my dear ones. [...] But the Hebrew letters I had planted in Vilna's soil sparkled at me from a thousand kilometers away." – Abraham Sutzkever		

## Additional Resources

Within Holocaust Museum Houston

### **Samuel Bak Gallery and Learning Center, In Loving Memory of Hope Silber Kaplan**

Samuel Bak is a child survivor of the Vilna Ghetto. His artwork reflects much of his experiences during the Holocaust.

If you are not able to view his work at HMH, Facing History and Ourselves has an excellent set of resources on the art of Samuel Bak: [www.facinghistory.org](http://www.facinghistory.org)

### **Rhona and Bruce Caress Gallery And Still I Write: Young Diarists on War and Genocide**

This exhibition contains information on Yitskhok Rudashevski's life; he, too, was a child in the Vilna ghetto.

If you are not able to view this exhibition while at HMH, use the book *Salvaged Pages* (ed. Alexandra Zapruder), which includes Rudashevski's diary. The March 10, 1943 entry specifically mentions the work that Sutzkever was doing in smuggling materials from YIVO.

## Bibliography

Fishman, David E (2017). *The Book Smugglers: Partisans, poets and the race to save Jewish treasures from the Nazis*. Lebanon, NH: ForeEdge, and imprint of university Press of New England

Kruk, Herman (2002). *The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania: Chronicles from the Vilna ghetto and camps, 1939-1944*. (Benjamin Harshav, Ed. and Barbara Harshav, Trans.) New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Yad Vashem. "The Jerusalem of Lithuania: The Story of the Jewish Community of Vilna." Retrieved from <https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/vilna/overview.asp>

Yiddish Book Center. "Abraham Sutzkever on Poetry and Partisan Life." YouTube Video. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kofcyfycOFE>

## Possible Historic Connections

There are paralleled histories to consider within the context of this exhibition.

- Oneg Shabbat Archive: <https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/ringelblum/index.asp>
- Jewish Partisans: <http://www.jewishpartisans.org/>
- History of YIVO: <https://www.yivo.org/History-of-YIVO>
- How A Quest to Save Soviet Jews Changed the World: <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130936993>