The Face of the Ghetto: Pictures taken by Jewish Photographers in the Litzmannstadt Ghetto 1940-1944

DOCENT SCRIPT
May – October 2015

SCRIPT OUTLINE

1) Welcome & Introduction to Photography
2) Student Exhibit Exploration
3) The Lodz Ghetto
4) Jewish Photographers
5) Group Activity
6) Jewish Council & Police/Firemen
7) Roma & Sinti
8) Deportations

This script is designed to support you, not to overwhelm you or limit you. We recognize that docents come to this role with unique knowledge and experiences. With that in mind, we encourage you to adapt the script to suit your style and personal experience.

What follows is a model that strives to:
• Make the best use of time (60 minutes),
• Engage students in discussion and interaction with the primary sources and ideas presented in the exhibit, and...
• Respond to the themes outlined by the school program, including:
  a) resistance to dehumanization
  b) the complex role of Jewish leadership
  c) the unique experience of Jewish children in the Lodz Ghetto

As with all the VHEC's educational programming, the goal is for students to leave with a memory of one image or story, and to foster broader outcomes such as social responsibility, critical thinking, and visual literacy.

Reminder: When presenting new ideas to students, be as specific/targeted in your delivery as possible. Remind students that there is no right or wrong answer, and give positive feedback to all participants. For those reluctant to participate, ask “This is what I think, what do you think?”

Apply these guidelines throughout the tour to keep students focused and engaged.
1) WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

Welcome, my name ____________ and I’m a docent (volunteer guide) at the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre.

Can you tell me about your group? **What school** are you from? **Grade**? What are you studying right now?

Has anyone been to the VHEC before? (If so, **what exhibits**?)

Today, we’re going to explore the exhibit, *The Face of the Ghetto: Pictures Taken by Jewish Photographers in the Litzmannstadt Ghetto, 1940-1944.* This travelling exhibit is on loan to us from the Topography of Terror Foundation in Berlin, Germany, and offers a unique perspective on Jewish life during the Holocaust through pictures and quotes from eyewitnesses.

But before we start, who know what a ghetto is? *Closed off, segregated area of a city where Jews lived during the Holocaust*

Photographs are a popular way of documenting daily life.

- What do you like to take pictures of?
- Are some pictures more important than others?
- Do you think there are some things that we should not capture on film?

There’s a saying: “A picture is worth a thousand words.” What do you think this means?

*Photos are very revealing and can offer insight into the values, cultures and ideas of different groups and places throughout history. Photographs provide information about how people dressed, the work they performed, family life and gender roles, and societal makeup.*

Photos mean something very different today than they did during the Holocaust. Most of us have pictures on our phones, computers and in albums. But in pre-digital times, photos were usually taken of special occasions, and not everyone owned a camera. Photographers used film, which was very expensive to process. What photos do you think Holocaust survivors have from before the war?

Follow up: Why do you think they have so few photos?

2) STUDENT EXHIBIT EXPLORATION

Oskar Rosenfeld, a Jewish survivor of the Lodz, described the face of the ghetto in the following way:
Ask a student to read Quote 1 - Student Readings (APPENDIX).

You will now take a few minutes to see some faces of the Lodz Ghetto, a small sample of 12,000 photo slides and negatives hidden before the liquidation (destruction) of the ghetto, and recovered after the war.

Think about which photos stand out to you. In ten minutes, let’s come back here and share our reflections with the group.

Some guiding prompts for discussion:
* What do you see in the pictures? What is it about?
* Do you think the photos were posed or candid?
* What do you think the photographers want us to know about the ghetto? What did they not want us to see?

3) THE LODZ GHETTO (MOVE TO INTRODUCTORY PANELS)

After the Nazis invaded Poland in September 1939, they implemented a number of anti-Jewish actions. Does anyone know what some of them were?

- Jewish children removed from schools, adults from professions
- Forced to wear identifying badges (Yellow Star of David or armband)
- Loss of material items including jewelry, radios, cameras, etc.
- Forced to move into ghettos

How do you think Jews responded to these new laws?

REFER TO: Map of the Lodz Ghetto.

What does this map show us about the geography of the ghetto?

- Very small area, approx. 4km, in poorest part of the city.

The Nazis established hundreds of ghettos across Poland. The second largest ghetto was created in Lodz in early 1940. The city’s name was changed to Litzmannstadt, after a WWI German general. About 180,000 Jews and 5,000 Roma and Sinti people lived in the ghetto between 1940 and 1944.

4) JEWISH PHOTOGRAPHERS

Life continued inside the ghettos – people had families, worked, and children attended school, even for a short time. Many Jews also engaged in resistance.
What does the word resistance mean to you?

The Nazis appointed Jewish Councils (Judenrate) to daily life in the ghetto. They set up hospitals, schools, and other institutions, and organized ghetto industry. Later, the Councils were forced to arrange deportations to camps.

What do you imagine it was like to lead a Jewish Council?

Chaim Rumkowski lead the Lodz Jewish Council. He believed that the more productive the ghetto was, the better chance Jews had of survival. Rumkowski commissioned photographers to take pictures for identification cards, and to document labour productivity, specifically Jews doing work for the German war effort. Mendel Grosman and Henryk Ross were two of these photographers. At great personal risk, they also took photos of everyday life.

What did they photograph? Why did they take these photos, and not others?
- Scenes of everyday life that demonstrated resistance to dehumanization: religious services, education, arts and culture.
- They also secretly photographed executions and deportations.
- They resisted taking photos that dehumanized the Jews, for instance pictures of Jews performing humiliating tasks.

5) GROUP ACTIVITY
Let’s take a closer look look at Grosman and Ross’s pictures. Some of these pictures are on the walls of the exhibit; others are included on the tv screens.

INSTRUCTIONS: Have students form five groups. Each group will be assigned one of the following themes – Education, Arts & Culture, Religion, Play, and Labour. Groups will receive a clipboard with photos. Students will be directed to answer four questions, including:

1) Describe the photos. What do you see?
2) How do you feel about the way people are portrayed in the photos?
3) What do these photos tell us about life in the Lodz Ghetto?

After the students analyze the photos, they should read the accompanying text and think about how it added to their understanding of the theme. Reconvene after 10 minutes. Have students share their responses. Remind them that there are no right or wrong answers, just different interpretations.

Some follow-up questions:
Based on what you’ve seen/read, what was life like for ghetto children?
- Thousands of kids lived in orphanages or the Children’s Colony, or attended 40+ schools until mid-1941 (closed to make room for arrivals from Western Europe)
- People could not protect kids from terrible conditions in the ghetto

What do you think work conditions were like in the ghetto?
- 70,000+ slave labourers worked 10-14 hour days in 100 factories & workshops making products for the German war effort in exchange for meagre food rations

6) JEWISH COUNCIL

In Lodz, more than 70,000 slave labourers worked 10-14 hour days in factories and workshops in exchange for small food rations. A few thousand worked for the Jewish Council as police officers, firemen and administrators.

Bronia Sonnenschein came from Vienna, Austria and worked as Chaim Rumkowski’s secretary. This position likely helped her family stay in the ghetto longer than many others. Bronia, her sister and mother survived several camps and a death march; her father and first husband perished. Bronia was a member of our own community and shared her Holocaust story with students like you for many years.

REFER to Photo: Double wedding of Bronia Sonnenschein and Eric Strauss, shared with Mary Schifflinger and Olek Januk, presided over by Chaim Rumkowski on 18 September 1943. Only Bronia survived the Holocaust.

In a book written many years after liberation, Bronia reflected on Rumkowski:

Ask a student to read Quote 2 – Jewish Council (APPENDIX)

What do you think ghetto residents thought about Rumkowski and Council employees?

Some Jews volunteered for the police force and as firemen. Why would they want to perform this job?
- Some performed job prewar. Work gave access to more food than ordinary ghetto dwellers, and offered some protection for their families.

REFER to Photo: Leon Rozenblat, Commander of the Jewish Police Force.

Ask student to read Quote 3 – Jewish Council (APPENDIX)

How do you think Rozenblat felt about his role in the ghetto?

NOTE: Rozenblat was murdered at Auschwitz by a fellow Jewish inmate.
7) ROMA & SINTI

There is one group of ghetto dwellers not well represented in this exhibit. 5,000 Roma and Sinti people from Austria came to the ghetto in fall 1941 and lived in a guarded “Gypsy camp” without furniture, kitchens or washrooms. They were not allowed to work. Roma and Sinti represented the first large group deported to Chelmno death camp in January 1942.

Why do you think Roma and Sinti were separated from Jews in the ghetto? How do you think their experiences of internment were the same? Different?

REFER to Photos: These photos were taken after the liquidation of the “gypsy camp.” How are these photos different from others in the exhibit?

Why do you think there are so few pictures of this group in today’s exhibit?

8) DEPORTATIONS

Rumkowski could not protect the ghetto Jews forever. About one-quarter died from starvation and disease while the ghetto was in operation. Beginning in 1942, the Jewish Council was forced to help deport residents from the ghetto. The first Jews to be deported to Chelmno were the young, elderly and sick. The rest were deported to Chelmno and Auschwitz. Chaim Rumkowski and his family were on one of the final transports to Auschwitz. They were murdered on arrival.

The Lodz Ghetto functioned until August 1944, longer than any other ghetto in Poland. Very few of its inhabitants survived the Holocaust.

OPTIONAL: Ask a Secondary student to read Quote 4 - Deportations (APPENDIX)

How do you think the Jewish Council responded to the order to deport Jews?

Do you think Jews knew what fate was awaiting them?

Do you think people tried to escape deportation? How?

When the Soviet army liberated the ghetto in January 1945, they found 877 Jews left behind on clean-up duty, including the photographer Henryk Ross. The other photographer, Mendel Grosman, was murdered in April 1945 on a death march.
9) CONCLUSION

Q: What are the most important lessons you have learned today?

Q: Now that you’ve seen the entire exhibit, do you think there is one “face” that best represents the Lodz Ghetto? Why or why not?

Q: 2015 marks the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Jews from Nazi occupation. Why do you think we should still study this history today?

Thank the students for their attention and participation. If there is still time remaining, encourage them to show the group what they believe to be the “face of the ghetto.”
APPENDIX

HOLOCAUST CHRONOLOGY

* What does the term “Holocaust” refer to?

The systematic (step-by-step) and state-sponsored persecution and annihilation (wiping out entirely) of European Jews by Nazi Germany and its collaborators. The word comes from the Greek and means “complete burnt offering.” The Hebrew word, Shoah, means “chaos, destruction, catastrophe.”

* What time period does it refer to?

Start point: 1933 (when Adolf Hitler came to power)
End point: 1945 (when the Allies liberated concentration camps and the German occupation of Europe collapsed).

* How many victims were there? Do you know how many Jewish victims were children?

Approximately 6 million Jews; 2/3 of European Jews. 1.5 million children.

* Were Jews the only victims of Nazism? What about non-Jews?

There were approximately 5 million; these included Roma and Sinti communities (also known as Gypsies), Jehovah’s Witnesses, homosexuals, political opponents, resistance fighters, trade unionists, the physically and mentally disabled, Soviet POWs and other people deemed “inferior” and “undesirable.”

* The Jews were the only group singled out for total annihilation/destruction. Do you know why?

The Nazis had a distorted worldview that saw history as a racial struggle. They considered Jews to be a separate, corrupt and inferior race that was a threat to Germany, “Aryan” purity and power, and therefore a group that must be eliminated.

* Are Jews a distinct race?

No, Judaism is a religious and cultural identity, with Jewish customs, traditions, and faith observed in many different forms.

The Nazis’ racial anti-Semitism (hatred of Jews) built on a centuries-old tradition of religious anti-Semitism that spread the negative stereotype as Jews as the killer of Christ.

Also significant was political anti-Semitism of the late 19th and early 20th century, which singled out the Jews as a threat to the established order of society.

Racial, religious and political anti-Semitism combined to point out the Jews as a target for persecution and ultimate destruction by the Nazis.
STUDENT READINGS

Quote 1 – INTRODUCTION

“Face of the ghetto. Beautiful children, blond, but suffering from rickets and tuberculosis. With a little luck, you can encounter flocks of children with smiling faces, blue-eyed girls with curly, blond hair and reddish-blond boys… The faces of the children are cheerful, their colour sometimes even rosy, but the doctors know more: the majority suffers from rickets and tuberculosis. Most of them are candidates for death. Their color and singing are deceiving. The children are locked in their own section of the ghetto. No one can escape the fate that awaits the prisoners of the ghetto…”

- Oskar Rosenfeld, Lodz Ghetto inmate

Quote 2 – JEWISH COUNCIL

“M. Chaim Rumkowski, a man of 65, a Lithuanian Jew who could hardly speak German, nor really correct Polish, only Yiddish. A man of native intelligence and energy, driven by ambition, rich in ideas and fantasy. Rumkowski is a ‘dictator’ in the Ghetto. His words, regardless of his weakness in speaking the official languages, are understood and accepted. He wanted to build the largest ghetto and succeeded. He would provide labour in order to get food for the ghetto.”

- Bronia Sonnenschein, Secretary for the Lodz Jewish Council and Vancouver Holocaust Survivor

Quote 3 – JEWISH COUNCIL

“I asked the community elders, the rabbis, the scribes. They all said to me: You are doing the right thing. Stay, and make the selections the way you have figured out. I asked the communities in which we divide the ghetto, the elderly, the condemned, the fatally ill: they all agreed with me. If you know a better way than the one I have found, then tell me what it is: Should I stay or should I allow myself to be shot?”

- Leon Rozenblat, Commander of the Jewish Police Force
“Men, women and children, weighed down with their luggage, trotted in a seemingly endless procession. They left the ghetto with ambivalent feelings. Some hoped for a better fate at a new location, while others were unable to conceal their fear about this journey into the unfamiliar. [...] If I had only been able to snatch a window seat so that I could look at the fields and woods passing by, and see the little houses, winding creeks and grazing cows. [...] That was not a passenger train that approached us. It was a long series of freight cars like the ones used to transport cattle. [...] We shouldn’t have left the ghetto. It was too late.”

- Sara Plager-Zyskind, teenaged survivor of the Lodz Ghetto