



A Teaching Unit on the Testimonies of Survival of Two Young Women in the Holocaust

Lesson Plan

Ages: **Students in Grades 10 – 12**

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Rationale

Testimonies written by Holocaust survivors provide a window into the harsh reality of the Shoah for senior high-school pupils. The combination of historical information with the intimate details of how these two authors confront and finally overcome this history presents a powerful personal angle with which the teacher can engage pupils. This unit focuses on two personal accounts of young Jewish women featured in *Stolen Youth*, published by Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, in 2005. For more information on the book, [click here](#).

Educational Objectives

1. Pupils will be exposed to written testimonies of survivors through intensive reading of personal accounts.
2. The suggested work activities on the various chapters will trigger pupil interest in the historical subjects touched on.

Time Frame

Teachers who choose to use both stories should plan on about ten lessons over any time-spread suitable to their class. The first story can be covered in about six lessons and the second in four. Alternatively, a teacher might decide to use only one chapter on a specific subject (all subjects are clearly indicated in the chapter headings following in The Table of Contents).

Access for reading each chapter online will be found next to the heading of each chapter.

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My Escape into Prison and other Memories of a Stolen Youth, 1939-1948

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by Jane Lipski

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Second Story:

A Memoir of Life and the Holocaust

by Francis Irwin as told by Rachel Epstein

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Chapter 2. Two Years in the Hell of Auschwitz (pp.91-98 in the book)

Chapter 3. From the Jaws of Death to a New Life (pp.99-110 in the book)

Note to the Teacher:

1. From the Table of Contents above, the teacher could choose to deal with one or two chapters only if specific subject matter is of special interest to his/her class.
2. Literature and history teachers could be integrated into the teaching of related subjects that emerge constantly from the different chapters.

First Story

MY ESCAPE INTO PRISON AND OTHER MEMORIES OF A STOLEN YOUTH, 1939-1948 Jane Lipski

Note to the Teacher:

This memoir is divided into six chapters, the first five of which are short, permitting teachers to present one chapter per lesson. The teacher could assign each chapter to be read by the pupils for homework before the lesson or devote the first ten minutes of the lesson to reading it in class. Suggestions for classwork and discussion follow each chapter below. The sixth chapter, about twenty-five pages long and entitled Trapped in the Soviet Union, focuses on Jane's imprisonment in Soviet jails after the war before she was released to return home to Poland. It is a searing document but in terms of presenting Jane's story of survival in the Holocaust, it could be omitted. The teacher could orally present these years and conclude with the one page epilogue(pp 297 - 298) that brings the student up to 2003.



Chapter 1: Our Life Before the War pp.237 - 242 (in the book)

To read Chapter 1 online, [click here](#).

Expand on the following statements and questions adding relevant information from your reading.

1. Jane lived in a predominantly Jewish environment.
2. She lived in a moderately traditional Jewish family.
3. The Zionist idea of living in a Jewish Homeland was an important part of her formative years.
4. Describe the history of Bedzin and its Jewish community.
5. What examples of antisemitism are described in this chapter?
6. Overall, how would you describe Jane's first fifteen years before the outbreak of war?

Chapter 2: Poland under Nazi Occupation pp.243 - 246 (in the book)

To read Chapter 2 online, [click here](#).

Discuss in small groups the onset of the Second World War and the effect of the German decrees on the Jewish population. In groups, follow Jane's descriptions to create a short list of the German antisemitic decrees as Jane experienced them and from your list, try to define the breaking point for Jews. The groups can then present their work in turn to the class for general discussion

Chapter 3: The Bedzin Ghetto pp.247 - 252 (in the book)

To read Chapter 3 online, [click here](#).

Jane Lipski describes different difficulties and situations that she encountered in the newly formed ghetto in Spring 1941. Choose two or three themes below that you find most interesting or difficult. Describe how the author relates to each theme of your choice and explain why you chose it.

1. The evacuation to the ghetto
2. Forced labor in the ghetto
3. Health problems
4. The farming experiment
5. First love
6. Selections and deportations from the ghetto

Chapter 4: Resistance pp.253 - 262 (in the book)

Chapter 5: Slovakia pp.263 - 270 (in the book)

To read Chapters 4 and 5 online, [click here](#).

Both these short chapters focus on the brave actions undertaken by the young author and her comrades. Divide the students and ask each group to read one or two of the various resistance efforts described and then present it to the entire class.

Epilogue: pp.297-298 (in the book)

To read the epilogue online, [click here](#).

Jane Lipski's short epilogue provides a "happy ending" to her daunting story of survival. She describes the



different places where she lived and ends with the comforting picture of her extended family including her great-grandchildren. In their testimonial memoirs, many Holocaust survivors note that they have taken revenge upon the Nazis by rebuilding their lives and having families. Teachers may wish to focus on the author's description of her extended family and ask the pupils to relate to the following questions:

- How does the description of her extended family denote the author's "revenge"?
- What does revenge mean to you?
- Does her use of the word change your understanding of it?

Second Story

"REMEMBER TO BE A GOOD HUMAN BEING":

A MEMOIR OF LIFE AND THE HOLOCAUST

by Francis Irwin as told by Rachel Epstein

Note to the Teacher:

This memoir opens with an introduction and is followed by three chapters. The pupils could do all the assigned work on Irwin's story in three to four lessons. The teacher should note that this memoir includes a chapter on life and death in a death camp that was not part of Jane Lipski's story of survival. Prior reading of the material by the pupils might be preferred by the teacher and varying emphases on the different aspects will depend on the class's make-up.

Francis Irwin's introduction, as the subtitle suggests, is a memoir of life before the Holocaust. It is replete with descriptions of Jewish life in the town of her birth, Konskie, which is situated in central Poland. As such, the educational emphasis that Yad Vashem holds as central, that of portraying Jewish life in its natural richness before the Holocaust, is admirably presented by the author in her introduction.

Introduction pp.77 - 82(in the book)

To read the Introduction online, [click here](#).

The following is a short list of aspects of Jewish life in the community as experienced by Francis Irwin, from which the teacher can draw as best suits his/her class in order to illustrate the normal flow of Jewish life before the war.

- the *shul* (synagogue)
- Jewish education
- different professions Jews pursued
- relationships with non-Jewish neighbors
- portrait of a traditional Jewish home including the parents and siblings
- atmosphere around Sabbaths and Festivals
- Jewish ethics as seen in the family's attitude to charity - *tzedekah*

Chapter 1. pp.83 - 90 (in the book)

To read Chapter 1 online, [click here](#).



This chapter covers the outbreak of war, through the establishment of the ghetto, Frances's period of hiding in the woods, her illegal entry into another ghetto and finally her arrest and deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The pupil could deal with any combination of the following suggestions:

1. Describe the path of Frances's survival through the different stages mentioned above.
2. Following are some historical references that appear in the chapter, all of which were central in the unfolding of the Holocaust. The pupil can click on any of the links to obtain further information about each reference. This can be individual research, pair-work or any alternative that suits the teacher's class.
3. The title of the memoir "*Remember to be a Good Human Being*" appears in a specific context in this chapter and represents one of the central tenets of Judaism, that of personal responsibility for our behavior to our fellow human beings. The words are spoken by Frances's father to her as he instructs her to leave the family in the ghetto and go and save herself outside the ghetto.
 - What she remembers is the ethical injunction of her father to her at such a traumatic juncture. Does the absence of any practical advice of the parent to the child in such difficult circumstances not strike you as strange?
 - Working in groups, the pupils can try to understand the difficulty of parents who, understanding the dire reality engulfing them, send their children away in an attempt to save their lives.
 - "Good Human Beings" are evident in the story shortly after Frances flees the ghetto. Describe how she is helped by two of the non-Jews in the town.

For more information on non-Jewish bystanders who helped save Jews during the Holocaust, click [here](#).

Note to the Teacher:

- The teacher can expose his/her class to the parallel story of the Kindertransport to England before the outbreak of the war.
- He/she is invited to point out the stark juxtaposition between the ethical precept expressed by the father to his daughter just before he thrusts her out into a war-torn world outside the ghetto - "Remember to be a Good Human Being" - and the reality imposed by the Nazis in the ghettos and the camp system.

Chapter 2. pp91 - 97 (in the book)

To read Chapter 2 online, click [here](#).

This chapter presents three aspects of life in Auschwitz-Birkenau:

- arrival procedures and elements of the grinding routine of prisoners.
- mental and spiritual survival techniques of prisoners.
- an example of insurrection organized by the underground in the camp



Rosa Robota



After reading the short chapter, the pupils can address the different elements of life in Auschwitz as presented by the author. The teacher will balance the pupils' responses to convey a more comprehensive picture of life and death in this camp.
Chapter 3. pp.99 - 110 (in the book)

To read Chapter 3 online, [click here](#).

Note to the Teacher:

This concluding chapter is longer than the preceding ones and the teacher may want to spread it over two sessions. The period covered extends from January, 1945 until the time of writing the memoir. It opens with the evacuation of Auschwitz and the ensuing death march and ends with Frances's activities in New York on behalf of other Jews in need today.

As such, the chapter closes the circle from the suffering inflicted during the Holocaust, through liberation and the trials and tribulations of Frances and her future husband Reuben, also a survivor, as Displaced Persons before their emigration to a new life in the United States.

Suggestions for foci in this chapter:

- the return to life was a protracted, difficult process.
- solutions after liberation were sometimes haphazard in circumstances that were often chaotic
- the need for and the power of family in the aftermath.

Yad Vashem has a multi-media educational unit published as a CD Rom entitled Return to Life. The subject matter as the name suggests deals with everything contained in this chapter and can be used by the teacher and the pupils in various ways for enriching the learning experience. For more information, [click here](#).

Alternatively, the Yad Vashem site offers a tremendous amount of information that could be used by the pupils for any additional research strategy that the teacher might want to give his/her class connected with different aspects that come out of the two stories. For example, in the Holocaust Resource Center (entered from the Yad Vashem Homepage), the pupil will find thirteen major Gates of Knowledge. If he/she enters Jewish Resistance or Holocaust Survivors, much information can be found here widening the background to the stories just studied.