

VANCOUVER HOLOCAUST EDUCATION CENTRE

*Ruta's*  
CLOSET

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STUDY GUIDE

***Ruta's Closet* Study Guide**

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*Ruta's Closet* written by Keith Morgan with Ruth Kron Sigal.  
London, UK: Unity 1 Press, 2008.

LESSONS & TEXT

**Adara Goldberg**

RESEARCH

**Alice Park**

DESIGN

**Illene Yu**

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# INTRODUCTION

Based on the testimony of child survivor Ruth Kron Sigal, an unpublished memoir by her father Meyer Kron, and other family remembrances, *Ruth's Closet* tells the true story of one Jewish family during the Holocaust in Lithuania. This study guide presents strategies for engaging with the historical context and individual experiences presented in the book, and facilitates discussion around questions about ethical decision-making, human rights and freedoms, and international law.

Ruth Kron Sigal and her family immigrated to Canada in 1951 and re-established their lives in Vancouver, B.C., where they maintained life-long commitments to Holocaust education. For more than 25 years,

Ruth served as Director of the Women's Resource Centre at the University of British Columbia. As a dedicated Outreach Speaker for the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre (VHEC), she shared her eyewitness account of the Holocaust with thousands of students across British Columbia. Ruth passed away in 2008. Ruth's close friend, journalist Keith Morgan, published *Ruth's Closet* in 2011.

One way that Ruth and her family's legacy lives on is through the Kron Sigal Award for Excellence in Holocaust Education at the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre. This award is presented annually to a B.C. teacher who has demonstrated dedication to teaching students about the Holocaust and its important lessons for humankind.

# STUDY GUIDE

The study guide is designed to facilitate engagement with the historical context, eyewitness accounts and themes in *Ruta's Closet*, and is recommended for senior secondary and university students in English and the humanities. The format allows for flexibility to reflect different classroom realities. Most lessons and activities can be interpreted as individual assignments, or undertaken through group work or class discussions. Unless otherwise indicated, students can engage with the lessons sequentially or throughout the reading of *Ruta's Closet*.

In **Jewish Life in Lithuania**, students will examine photographs and other sources to gain an understanding of Jewish life and culture before the Holocaust. Students will also engage with documentary film footage and eyewitness accounts to consider the impact of Nazi occupation on Lithuania's Jews.

**Children in the Holocaust** facilitates student engagement with eyewitness accounts from child survivors of the Holocaust and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to promote critical thinking about children's experiences during conflicts.

Finally, **Responses to Persecution** advances student understanding about human behaviour and ethical decision-making during the Holocaust and the Rwandan Genocide.

The lessons are accompanied by a glossary, a timeline, and a list of recommended resources.

# LESSON 1 JEWISH LIFE IN LITHUANIA

## OBJECTIVES

Students will engage with and analyze primary sources, including photographs and film footage, to develop an understanding of the diversity of Jewish life in prewar Lithuania. Students will also consider the historical significance of the Nazi occupation of Lithuania, and evaluate the impact of Nazi racial law on European Jewry.

## TEACHER PREPARATION

- Make copies of [Readings: Jewish Life in Lithuania](#) and [Occupation of Lithuania](#). Distribute to students at the beginning of class or assign as homework.
- Reproduce copies of [Map: Operation Barbarossa](#). Distribute to students before class or make available electronically.

## PHOTO ANALYSIS: JEWISH LIFE IN LITHUANIA

Explain to students that they are going to examine photographs that depict Jewish life in prewar Lithuania.

In pairs or small groups, students view the pictures in the *Ruta's Closet Photo Gallery*<sup>1</sup> and *The History of the Jewish Community of Siauliai Photo Gallery*.

[http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/valley/siauliai/photos\\_before\\_holocaust.asp](http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/valley/siauliai/photos_before_holocaust.asp)

Based on these photos and [Reading: Jewish Life in Lithuania](#), ask students to respond to the following prompts:

1. Describe what you see in the photographs, including subjects, setting, and activities.
2. Who do you think took the photos?
3. What do you think prompted the photographer to capture this moment?
4. What do the photographs reveal about the society in which they were produced? What information is inferred from the reading?
5. How are the images similar or different from your own family photos?

<sup>1</sup> Keith Morgan with Ruth Kron Sigal, *Ruta's Closet*. London, UK: Unity 1 Press, 2008. 266-273.

## CHARACTER SKETCH: SHAVL'S JEWS

*Ruta's Closet* tells the story of the Kron family and their community during the Holocaust. Ask students to consider one character presented in Chapters 1 – 4, and their role in the memoir. Based on their reading, ask students to prepare a character sketch of the person by answering the following questions:

1. Define the person's age, appearance, ethnicity, and religious identification.
2. What is their educational background or profession?
3. What personality traits do they possess?
4. What is their relationship to the Kron family?

Invite students to share any descriptive excerpts and their character sketches to the class, and encourage a discussion about the diversity of prewar Shavl society.

## READING & DISCUSSION: THE SHAVL GHETTO

Direct students to the maps of the Shavl Ghetto featured on pages 58 and 59 of the memoir.

The Nazi administration swiftly unveiled antisemitic legislation in Shavl:

*"On July 18, there came exactly what the Krons had expected, a list of restrictions similar to those imposed first on German Jews before the outbreak of war.*

*The Mayor had posted a Skelbimas — an announcement — detailing in point form what was proscribed for Jews. The first of eight points pronounced that Jews who had fled Shavl were not allowed to return. Those that did would be arrested as would anybody aiding them. All Jews were ordered to wear a yellow Star of David and obey a strict curfew.*

*But the most disconcerting content was to be found towards the end of the published declaration: all Jewish property was to be registered and real estate sold so that the Jewish community might be moved to a designated area of town — in other words, a ghetto."*<sup>2</sup>

The ghetto was sealed on September 1, 1941 forcing some 5,500 Jews into crowded, unsanitary conditions in the city's poorest suburbs. Starvation, disease, violence, forced labour, and aktions (round-ups) resulted in a high mortality rate.

**Reading & Discussion: The Shavl Ghetto continued on page 6**

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 51.

### *Reading & Discussion: The Shavl Ghetto continued from page 5*

Ask students to identify other text excerpts that explore daily life, including work, education, and family cohesiveness in Lithuania's second largest ghetto. In pairs or small groups, ask students to discuss the following questions:

1. Describe the relocation process of Jews into the ghetto. Was the community aware of what fate awaited them? Where did this information originate?
2. Most of Shavl's Jews obeyed the relocation order. Why do you think so few people tried to resist or escape? What were the obstacles to these actions?
3. How did ghetto residents adapt to conditions under Nazism?
4. What does the memoir suggest about relationships within the Jewish community, and with non-Jewish Lithuanians at the moment of occupation?

## CRITICAL RESPONSE: OCCUPATION OF LITHUANIA

Distribute [Reading: Occupation of Lithuania](#) and [Map: Operation Barbarossa](#) to students before the lesson.

OPTIONAL: Present screening of Chapters II, X and XI in *The Baltic Tragedy*, featuring newsreel and film footage depicting the war on the eastern front, including the military occupation of Lithuania.

<http://history.npo-index.net/archives/239/>

Following the Nazi invasion and collapse of Soviet rule in Shavl, Meyer Kron declares that, "After the events of this past week and the last year I'm sure many Lithuanians would even prefer a German occupation."<sup>3</sup>

For homework, ask students to prepare a 250-word response to this statement.

## EXTENSION: "JERUSALEM OF THE NORTH"

Yiddish was the language spoken by Lithuanian Jews for hundreds of years before the Holocaust. In 1925 in Vilna, a group of scholars established the Yiddish Scientific Institute, a centre dedicated to Yiddish scholarship and Eastern European Jewish culture. The institute transferred its headquarters and collections to New York City in 1940 to escape the Holocaust and adopted the name YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Today, YIVO boasts the largest and most significant collection of materials that speak to the history of Eastern European Jewry, including rescued books, photographs, artifacts, and religious items.

Ask students to explore YIVO's virtual exhibit, *When these streets heard Yiddish* (<http://epyc.yivo.org/home.php>), to consider Jewish life before the Holocaust. Students should break into small groups and prepare an artistic response, dramatic presentation or Prezi about one aspect of Jewish culture: youth; political life; food; Yiddish language; music; or religious life.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ruta's Closet*, 32.

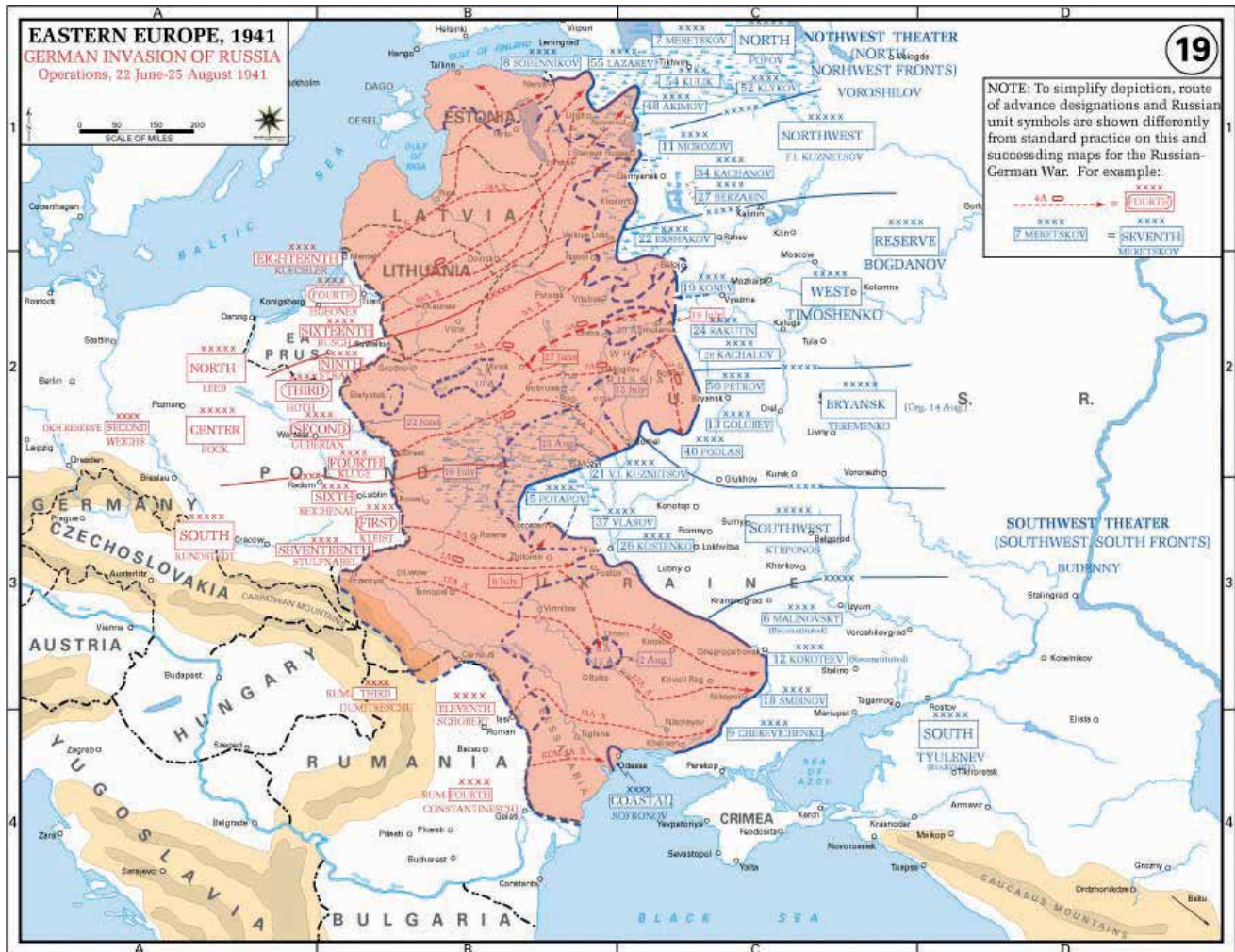
## READING: JEWISH LIFE IN LITHUANIA

The Jewish presence in Lithuania dates back to the Middle Ages. Vilna (now Vilnius), the capital city of Lithuania, was known as the “Jerusalem of the North” and was rich with Jewish cultural, political, religious, and intellectual life. Yiddish was the mother tongue of the country’s Jews, who were active in various political movements, including Zionism. Lithuania’s Jewish community boasted secular and religious educational institutions, libraries, and theatres, and sports organizations.

By the 19th century, the city of Siauliai (Yiddish: Shavl or Shavli) — home to the Kron family — was a commercial and industrial centre, and a centre of Jewish life. Despite strong currents of antisemitism and quotas limiting Jewish participation in certain professions, the Jewish population contributed to various aspects of society as artists, craftspeople, educators, and businessmen.

In 1939, approximately 160,000 Jews lived in Lithuania. This figure increased to 250,000 with the influx of Jewish refugees fleeing from Nazi-occupied Poland after the outbreak of the Second World War. Lithuania maintained its independence until the Soviet occupation of June 1940.

## MAP: OPERATION BARBAROSSA



<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AOperationBarbarossa.PNG>

(Public domain image)

## READING: OCCUPATION OF LITHUANIA

According to the terms of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Non-Aggression Pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, Soviet forces occupied Lithuania in June 1940. After Germany invaded the Soviet Union (including Lithuania) in the summer of 1941 during an attack known as Operation Barbarossa, some non-Jews welcomed the Nazis as liberators who could potentially restore independence for the country. However, for Lithuanian Jews, the Nazi occupation signaled the swift introduction of anti-Jewish decrees — modeled on Germany's Nuremberg Laws — that segregated Jews and stripped them of all rights and freedoms including their citizenship.

On the heels of the German army, the Nazi administration forced thousands of Jews into ghettos, where prisoners lived in cramped conditions and performed forced labour for the German war effort. The Shavl Ghetto was the second largest in Lithuania, after the ghetto in Vilna. With the aid of local Nazi sympathizers, mobile killing units known as *Einsatzgruppen* carried out mass shootings of entire Jewish communities in rural areas of Lithuania. Other Jews were deported to labour and concentration camps throughout Eastern Europe, where the majority perished. Approximately 90% of Lithuania's Jews were murdered during the Holocaust.



*The Kron's attic hiding place. Courtesy of Keith Morgan.*

# LESSON 2 CHILDREN IN THE HOLOCAUST

## OBJECTIVES

Students will develop historical empathy and respond to eyewitness accounts of children who experienced the Holocaust in hiding. Students will also reflect upon the nature of Nazi occupation in Shavli, and assess the evolution of children's rights legislation in the post-Second World War era.

## TEACHER PREPARATION

- Make copies of [Dossier: Reflections on Hiding](#).

## PAIR DISCUSSION: DEPORTATION ORDER

Throughout occupied Europe, the Nazis appointed Jewish Councils (*Judenrat*) to oversee ghetto activities and enforce anti-Jewish regulations. The councils employed doctors, teachers, and police, established infrastructure and industry, and eventually facilitated deportations.

On November 5, 1943, SS officer Heinrich Forster issued the following command to the Shavli Ghetto *Judenrat*:

*"I hereby inform you that I have received the order to take out of the ghetto all the children up to the age of 13 and all the old people and those who are unfit for work... They will be taken to a children's home in Kaunas, and the old people will look after them. All the Jewish children from the camps will be gathered in that place."*<sup>1</sup>

Immediately following the command, children ran to their hiding places. The *Judenrat* dispersed 300 armed guards throughout the ghetto to locate the hidden youngsters and prevent escape.

Referring to Chapters 11 – 13, ask students to respond to the following prompts:

1. Why do you think Forster deceived the *Judenrat* about the deportees' true destination?
2. How did the *Judenrat* respond to the order? What were their options?
3. What does the incident suggest about Jewish leadership under Nazism?

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<sup>1</sup> *Ruta's Closet*, 121.

### EXTENSION: CHILDREN IN HIDING

During the *kinderaktion*, Ruta took her sister, Tamara, to their predetermined hiding space underneath floorboards to escape deportation:

*"For long hours they hid in absolute silence, almost too frightened to breathe. Outside the music blared but they could still hear the screams of their playmates and the barking of the vicious dogs that strained at their leashes.... It was so uncomfortable standing in the closet and so cold. The tiny four-year-old began to fret. Ruta squeezed her sister, desperately trying to warm her... Now she knew it was time to grow up and protect her little sister at all costs. Despite the maturity she was demonstrating, Ruta was petrified, as one would expect of a normal child in her eighth year... For the sisters this was an impenetrable cocoon that would keep them safe from whatever evil was going on outside."*<sup>2</sup>

Other children experienced frightening moments in hiding during the Holocaust. Distribute [Dossier: Reflections on Hiding](#) and ask students to read excerpts from testimonies of child survivors who settled in Canada postwar. Ask students to write a letter to one survivor, describing how they felt after reading their account.

### CLASS DISCUSSION: THE ROUNDUP

When the *kinderaktion* appeared to be over, the Kron sisters emerged from hiding and were apprehended on the street. Ghetto doctor and Kron relative Wulf Peisachowitz witnessed the capture and found the sisters on a truck destined for Auschwitz. Pleading for their lives, he was offered a compromise by the commanding SS officer: "The older one can stay because she can work but the other one must go."<sup>3</sup>

As a class, consider Wulf's dilemma:

1. How did he respond to the officer's offer? What other options did he have?
2. What do you think influenced his decision?
3. What were the consequences of his decision? For Wulf? For Ruta and Tamara?

<sup>2</sup> *Ruta's Closet*, 129-30.

<sup>3</sup> *Ruta's Closet*, 136.

## PERSONAL RESPONSE: RUTA'S RELEASE

After Ruta was released from the transport, some 600 children — including four-year-old Tamara — were deported and murdered upon arrival at Auschwitz:

*"Ruta broke loose from the grip of her unexpected saviour and began to run back towards the truck. Friendly arms foiled her rescue attempt. Wulf took a firmer grip of her hand and, surrounded by other adults, they rushed back towards the Kron home. Long after they had turned the corner out of sight, Tamara continued yelling. Although she was no longer within earshot, Tamara's earlier screams echoed in Ruta's mind...Wulf began to explain to the old man what had happened and why only Ruta survived. Ruta could no longer hear the explanation for Tamara's screams again drowned out the words. Screams that would render conversations inaudible for the rest of her life as she periodically recalled the last time she ever saw Tamara."*<sup>4</sup>

Ask students to write a personal response to this excerpt, considering the impact of the *kinderaktion* on Ruth and her parents.

## INDIVIDUAL RESPONSE: THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Refer students to a summary of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

[http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights\\_overview.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights_overview.pdf)

Legal document: <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

Adopted on November 20, 1989 by the United Nations General Assembly, the *United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child* marked the first comprehensive international legal document to outline not only rights and needs of children as individuals, but also duties and obligations of parents, states and legal guardians.

Ask students to respond to the following prompts to assess the effectiveness of the *Convention*:

1. What is the purpose of the Convention? What are its core principles?
2. Do you think that it is important to distinguish children's rights from those of adults?
3. Who is responsible for enforcing the Convention? Why would a government choose not to ratify this code?

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 136-7.

### CLASS DEBATE: UNITED NATIONS SESSION

One of the core principles of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* is articulated in Article 12.1:

*“State parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the rights to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the view of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.”*

Stage a mock debate at the United Nations as a “4 Corners Debate”. Students assume the roles of international representatives to the UN.

Present students with the statement: *The Convention* encourages too much independence for children and can undermine parents’ rights.

Ask students if they agree or disagree, and to prepare a list of points arguing their position. The teacher should post four signs around the classroom: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree.

Instruct students to stand under the sign that best describes their opinion. Allow students to express and justify their position; encourage debate. Movement between positions is allowed.

Debrief the process. Consider how the debate would shift if argued during another historical era, or from the perspective of citizens with different cultural norms or values.

## DOSSIER: REFLECTIONS ON HIDING

**Alex B.** was born in 1939 in Brussels, Belgium. At the age of two, Alex was separated from his parents and hidden by the resistance. He spent three years hiding with his cousin, Anny, in a Catholic orphanage. In a 2008 testimony, Alex recalled an experience while hiding in the orphanage:

*[When the Nazis were coming for an inspection, the people in charge] would run to the room next door to where all the kids were playing and sitting, and they would remove all the furniture. Then they would pull at the carpet and they would lift doors that were in the wooden floors and then they'd come back to where the children were and they'd pick boys, only boys. They told us that we had to go and hide in the cellars. There were stairs leading down to the cellars. And then we looked in — it smelled awful, we didn't want to go in. I personally was scared of the dark and I said, "I'm not going in there." They said, "Yes, you have to go in there." And then they gave us a little piece of cloth and they said if you have to cry or scream, bite into this little piece of cloth but you have to be quiet, it's a matter of life and death. You cannot make any noise whatsoever.... And this happened quite a number of times while I was in the orphanage.*

Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre Testimony Project: Alex B. Vancouver, B.C., 2008.

## DOSSIER: REFLECTIONS ON HIDING

**Celina L.** was born in 1931 in Zbaraz, Poland. She survived the war in various hiding spaces, including forests and inside the homes of Polish and Ukrainian families. Celina immigrated to Canada as a war orphan after the Holocaust. In a 1983 testimony, Celina recounted her experiences hiding in an attic with relatives:

*We had to lie down, of course there was no space for head movement and there were some openings where we could look out from where we were. And what we saw were the true aktions, these were my first aktions... It really means a gathering up of the Jews with clubs, with guns, with screaming, with violence...*

*Now, you did not go to the bathroom, you didn't drink, you didn't eat, you just lay there. But you lay there happily because you hoped that nobody would recognize that you were there to begin with. The house was ransacked many times, footsteps up and down, up and down, clattering, noises, we were petrified but they never did realize that the chiffonier [chest of drawers] was hiding us.... So these were the most traumatic times of my war years because unless I closed my eyes I saw the roundup of cattle, I saw the roundup procedures, and the blood that was always left on the cobblestones.*

Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre Testimony Project: Celina L. Vancouver, B.C., 1983.

## DOSSIER: REFLECTIONS ON HIDING

**Lillian N.** was born in 1933 in Warsaw, Poland. After being trapped in the Warsaw Ghetto for eighteen months, she escaped and hid under a false identity in Polish villages for the remainder of the war. In a 2010 testimony, Lillian recalled a close encounter with Nazis:

*Germans were coming to the village to investigate everyone [after an incident] and that's when I went into hiding in a hole, in a tobacco hole at the end of the garden near the outhouse, for three days and three nights. And they did come, they came to the house. When they came to the garden I heard the German and I heard the stomping. And I had some branches over the hole, and I have a blanket, and I have a pillow. And my grandmother who pretended to rake leaves would come and throw me a piece of bread, some water, whatever she had. And they came to the edge of that hole, I kid you not, and then they left. I could hear steps receding. How lucky can a person be?*

Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre Testimony Project: Lillian B. Vancouver, B.C., 2010.



*Ona Ragauskas, Ruth Kron Sigal's rescuer. Courtesy of Keith Morgan.*

# LESSON 3 RESPONSES TO PERSECUTION

## OBJECTIVES

Students will examine a range of responses to persecution during the Holocaust and other genocides, and assess the conditions and the consequences of these actions. Students should be prepared to reflect upon the transmission of memory, and consider their personal responses to social injustice that may occur in their lifetimes.

## TEACHER PREPARATION

- Make copies of [Reading: Antisemitism and the Holocaust](#). Distribute to students at the beginning of class or assign as homework.

## ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING: POLICING BODIES

The subject of pregnancy and childbirth emerges in Chapter 7 of *Ruta's Closet*. When the Nazis announced a 'ban' on births by Jewish mothers in Shavl, ghetto doctors, including gynecologist Wulf Peisachowitz, were ordered to "ensure that no more Jews were born in the ghetto after August 5, 1942...if any child was born after that arbitrary date the whole family would be 'removed'..."<sup>1</sup>

Ask students to work independently or in pairs and answer the following questions:

1. Why do you think the Nazi administration introduced the ban? What were the consequences of non-compliance?
2. How did the Jewish Council react to the ban? The ghetto population?
3. How did Dr. Peisachowitz and other ghetto doctors respond to the order? What were their options?

In learning of the doctor's struggle, Gita Kron offers: "Wulf, it's tragic but by extinguishing some lives, you have saved many others."<sup>2</sup>

Ask students to prepare a response to Gita's statement, considering the moral struggle faced by ghetto doctors.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 81.

### GROUP EXERCISE: RESCUE DURING THE HOLOCAUST

Multiple factors and circumstances contributed to the experiences of victim groups under Nazi occupation, and influenced the responses of gentile populations to anti-Jewish persecution. Rescue of Jews by non-Jews was a rare and courageous act. Meyer, Gita and Ruth Kron survived the Holocaust because of Christian helpers. In small groups, assign students the task of creating an identity chart for one individual credited with aiding the family's survival:



Ona Ragauskas



Dr. Domas Jasaitis



Father Adolfas Kleiba



Antanas Ragauskas



Jonas Jocius

1. Describe the aid-giver. What was their role in society?
2. What actions did they take?
3. What do you think motivated their actions?
4. Describe any obstacles or challenges they faced.
5. Name 2 or 3 other courses of action they might have taken.  
How do you think the outcome would have differed in each case?

Engage students in a discussion about the significance of aid-giving and rescue during the Holocaust:

1. Under what circumstances did individuals act?
2. What obstacles did aid-givers and rescuers encounter?
3. Did the helpers possess any shared character traits or values?
4. Should all expressions of aid-giving be recognized as acts of rescue? Why or why not?

### CLASS DISCUSSION: COLLABORATION

While the Nazis were the architects of genocide, the murder of eleven million civilians — including six million Jews — did not occur in isolation. The Holocaust was perpetrated in collaboration with the armies of Axis states, in addition to the involvement of hundreds of thousands who participated in the arrests, deportations, and mass murder of Europe's Jews. A variety of factors, including antisemitism and the nature of Nazi occupation, influenced mass participation in anti-Jewish violence.

In *Ruta's Closet*, the topic of collaboration emerges in Chapters 2 – 4:

*“Within hours of the German entry to Shavl, LAF [Lithuanian Activists’ Front] members began to victimize Jews, robbing some and beating others. Two days later the same groups started to arrest Jewish men, housing them in deplorable conditions in the local jail. After the weekend, when no more could be crammed in, the LAF selected those arrested earlier and took them to the nearby Luponiai woods to execute them. During the next week, 1,200 more Jewish men were murdered...”<sup>3</sup>*

The memoir goes on to pose the question: what motivated the pogrom (organized attack) in Shavl?

Based on these chapters and [Reading: Antisemitism and the Holocaust](#), engage students in a discussion about Lithuanian participation in anti-Jewish actions, and the conditions that informed their collaboration.

## EXTENSION: FAILURE TO RESPOND

On 6 April 1944, a plane carrying then Rwandan president Juvenal Habyarimana was shot down, killing all passengers on board. Hutu extremists blamed the attack on the Rwandan Patriotic Front, part of the Tutsi minority population. This event triggered the murder of 800,000 ethnic Tutsis and Hutu moderates in 100 days.

Roméo Dallaire, the Canadian Force Commander for the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda, reported suspicions of genocidal plans months before the killings began. His warnings and cries for intervention went unheeded. Requests for additional forces and supplies to halt violence were later denied, and his team stripped of the power to intervene.

Ask students to work in pairs and respond to the following questions:

1. What was Dallaire’s response to the crisis in Rwanda?
2. How did he want the United Nations to respond? What was their response?
3. What effect do you think international intervention might have had?
4. Why do you think the UN failed to intervene? Do you think they had an obligation to intervene?

After returning to Canada, Dallaire dedicated his life to social justice causes. He is a retired senator, educator, human rights advocate and founder of The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative.

Students prepare a short journal entry, considering the impact of the Rwandan Genocide on Dallaire and the international community’s responsibility in responding to contemporary cases of genocide.

For more about Dallaire’s life and work, visit: <http://www.romeodallaire.com>

<sup>3</sup> *Ruta's Closet*, 38-9.

## REFLECTION: THE LITERARY MEMOIR

Meaning “memory” or “reminisce,” a memoir is a non-fiction piece of literature that offers a factual account of someone’s life. A literary memoir speaks to a particular historical moment or theme and can be written from multiple perspectives.

*Ruta’s Closet* emerged from an interview Keith Morgan, a Vancouver-based journalist, conducted with Ruth Kron Sigal about her Holocaust experiences. Ruth’s story left a deep impression on Keith, who became convinced that the little-known story of the Holocaust in Shavl, Lithuania must be told. Distinguished British historian Sir Martin Gilbert offered Keith the following encouragement and advice:

*“Keith, you must tell this story and spread it as widely as possible because it is a very important one.... I will help you in any way I can but you must use your journalistic skills to make this story accessible to all, not just academics.”<sup>4</sup>*

Thinking about this statement, ask students to reflect on the following questions after completing *Ruta’s Closet*:

1. What was Sir Martin Gilbert’s advice? How do you think it influenced the way Keith Morgan wrote the memoir?
2. How did the book’s literary style differ from other memoirs?
3. Do you think the fictionalized style was successful in transmitting Ruth’s story? In what other styles could the memoir have been written?

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<sup>4</sup> *Zachor*, Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre, Spring 2015.

## READING: ANTISEMITISM AND THE HOLOCAUST

Antisemitism means prejudice against or hatred of Jews. The term became widespread in the 1870s, but Christian antisemitism, intolerance for the Jewish religion, had existed in Europe for many centuries. Riots against Jewish populations were often sparked by false rumors that Jews used the blood of Christian children for religious rituals. At times, Jews were also blamed for everything from economic conditions to epidemics to natural disasters.

The Nazi party, which was founded in 1919 by Adolf Hitler, argued for the removal of all Jews from Germany. Nazism gained popularity, in part, by disseminating propaganda that blamed the Jews for Germany's loss in the First World War and for the country's economic problems. This false accusation against Jews is particularly striking because Jews composed less than one percent of the German population when Hitler came to power in 1933 and were very integrated into German society.

Unlike Christian antisemitism, which was hatred of Jews based primarily on religion, Nazi antisemitism defined Jews as an undesirable "race." Drawing on eugenics, the Nazi party defined Jews as an "inferior" racial group, rather than a religious one, that threatened the purity of the "Aryan" race.

The Holocaust, the state-sponsored persecution and murder of European Jews by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945, is considered to be history's most extreme example of antisemitism. Prior to the Second World War, Jews were stripped of their German citizenship and discriminated against through antisemitic laws. After the Second World War broke out in 1939, and Nazism spread across Europe, Jews and other "inferior" people, such as Roma and Sinti (Gypsies), Slavic peoples, and homosexuals, were worked to death and murdered in concentration and death camps.

# APPENDIX: GLOSSARY

**Action / Aktion:** German word meaning “action” but used to refer to any non-military campaign. An aktion was an operation undertaken for political or racial reasons. For example, Aktion 14f13 was the code name for the murder of the disabled.

**Antisemitism:** Opposition or hatred of Jews. As a term, it came into widespread use in the 1870s and has come to denote hatred of Jews in all forms throughout history.

**Auschwitz:** A concentration camp established in 1940 near Oswiecim, Poland. In 1942, it became a death camp. It contained a labour camp, the death camp Birkenau, and the slave labour camp, Buna-Monowitz. Up to 1.5 million Jewish men, women, and children were murdered in this camp and 100,000 victims from other ethnic and cultural groups. Only 7650 survivors were found alive at liberation.

**Cattle Car:** Jews were often transported to concentration camps by train in freight cars — sometimes referred to as cattle cars. The cars were packed tight and sealed off, and passengers had no food or water. Many people inside the cars, especially the old and very young, died before the train reached its destination.

**Concentration Camps:** Immediately after assuming power on January 30, 1933, the Nazis established camps where they “concentrated” and imprisoned perceived enemies of the state. Enemies of Nazism included real and imagined political opponents including: Communists, Socialists, trade unionists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Roma and Sinti people, homosexuals and others deemed “anti-social.” The general round up of Jews did not begin until 1938. Before then, only Jews who fit the other categories were interned in the camps. The first three camps in Germany were Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen.

**Deportation:** Initially an effort to rid German occupied territory of Jews, deportation eventually became a means to deliver Jews to concentration camps and implement the Final Solution.

**Einsatzgruppen:** Mobile killing units that followed the German military into Eastern Europe and carried out mass shootings of entire Jewish communities, often with the assistance of local civilian populations.

**Eugenics:** A racial theory that believed observation, family genealogies and intelligence tests could be used to define which groups had “superior” or “inferior” qualities.

**Final Solution:** Nazi codename for the plan to murder Europe’s Jews.

**Ghetto:** A section of the city where all Jews from the surrounding areas were forced to live. Surrounded by barbed wire or walls, ghettos were sealed to prevent people from entering or leaving. Established mostly in Eastern Europe, ghettos were characterized by overcrowding, starvation and forced labour. All were eventually destroyed and surviving Jews deported to concentration and death camps.

**Hitler, Adolf:** Nazi party leader from 1921 to 1945. He became the German Chancellor on January 30, 1933 and President on August 2, 1934. He committed suicide in his Berlin bunker on April 30, 1945 following Germany’s defeat by the Allied powers.

**Holocaust:** The systematic murder of approximately six million European Jews and millions of other “undesirables” by Nazi Germany and its collaborators, 1933 to 1945.

**Jew:** Someone of the Hebrew or Jewish people, who is either born into or converts to Judaism.

**Judenrat:** Jewish Councils set up within the ghettos by German administration to maintain order and carry out the orders of the occupying forces.

**Judenrein:** German for “Free of Jews.” It refers to Hitler’s plan to murder all the Jews of Europe.

**Kinderaktion:** German for “children’s actions.” Refers to organized roundups of children from ghettos that resulted in deportation and imminent death at murder sites or concentration camps.

**Lebensraum:** German for “living space.” It refers to Hitler’s plan to establish an area for the Aryan race in Eastern Europe.

**Liberators:** Soviet, British, Canadian, and American troops who entered the concentration camps at the end of the Second World War.

## APPENDIX: GLOSSARY

**Liquidation:** Refers to the clearing out of Jews and other victims from towns, or camps.

**Molotov-Ribbentrop Non-Aggression Pact:** An agreement signed by Germany and the Soviet Union on August 23, 1939 that divided up European territories for annexation following the outbreak of war.

**Nazi:** Name for the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP).

**Nazism:** The ideology of the National Socialist German Workers Party and the party's system of rule from 1933 to 1945. The ideology included: 1) anti-liberalism and anti-parliamentarianism, 2) anti-communism and anti-socialism; 3) the Führer principle which replaced parliament with a hierarchical dictatorship based on the concepts of leader and follower, command and obedience; 4) nationalism; 5) racism and antisemitism; 6) imperialism; and 7) militarism.

**Nuremberg Laws:** A set of antisemitic laws passed by Hitler and the Nazi government in 1935. They forbid marriage between Jews and Germans. They also took away German Jews status as citizens, and stripped them of their rights. The laws were later implemented in countries occupied by Nazi Germany.

**Operation Barbarossa:** Nazi Germany wages breaks the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and invades former ally, the Soviet Union, in June 1941.

**Pogrom:** A Russian word for physical attacks on Jews, usually accompanied by the destruction of property, murder and rape.

**Righteous Among the Nations:** An award bestowed upon individuals who rescued Jews during the Holocaust by the Yad Vashem Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Israel.

**Roma and Sinti:** Roma (Gypsies) originated in India as a nomadic people and entered Europe between the eighth and tenth centuries. They were called "Gypsies" because Europeans mistakenly believed they came from Egypt. This minority is made up of distinct groups called "tribes" or "nations." Most of the Roma in countries occupied by Germany during the Second World War belonged to the Sinti and Roma groupings.

**Second World War:** The war fought from 1939 -1945 between the Axis and the Allied powers. The war began when Germany invaded Poland in September 1939. Germany surrendered on May 7, 1945. On August 6, 1945, the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan; nine days later, Japan surrendered. The war ended with the signing of a peace treaty on September 2, 1945.

**Shavl:** The Yiddish name for the city of Siauliai and birthplace of Ruth Kron Sigal. During the Holocaust, Shavl was home to Lithuania's second largest ghetto.

**SS:** Abbreviation for *Schutzstaffel* (Defense Protective Units). Originally organized as Hitler's personal bodyguard, the SS was transformed into a giant organization by Heinrich Himmler. Although various SS units were assigned to the battlefield, the organization is best known for carrying out the destruction of European Jewry.

**Swastika:** Symbol of the Nazi party. A cross with equal arms each of which is bent at a right angle. It appeared on Nazi uniforms and flags.

**Vilna:** Known today as Vilnius, the capital city of Lithuania was home to the country's most significant Jewish community before the Holocaust, and site of Lithuania's largest wartime ghetto.

**Yiddish:** The traditional language of Eastern European Jews.

**YIVO Institute for Jewish Research:** An academic centre and archive, established in 1925, dedicated to the preservation of books, documents, and artefacts related to Yiddish and the history of Eastern European Jewry.

# APPENDIX: TIMELINE

## **1914 – 1918**

The First World War is fought all across Europe.

## **1919**

The Treaty of Versailles re-establishes Poland as an independent nation.

## **1925**

YIVO Institute for Jewish Research is established by Yiddish scholars in Vilna, Lithuania.

## **1929 – 1932**

The Wall Street crash and fall of the New York Stock Exchange signals a worldwide economic crisis, The Great Depression.

Headed by Adolf Hitler, the National Socialist German Workers Party (Nazi Party) becomes a major political party in Germany.

## **1933**

Hitler begins to assume power after being democratically elected.

## **1936**

Ruth Kron is born in Shavl, Lithuania.

## **1939**

Tamara Kron is born in Shavl, Lithuania.

**January 16:** Nazi Germany and Lithuania sign a non-aggression pact.

**March:** Germany abandoned its non-aggression pact and annexed Memel-Klaipeda, a region of Lithuania with a significant ethnic German population.

**August 23:** Molotov-Ribbentrop Non-Aggression Pact is signed between Germany and the Soviet Union.

**September 1:** Germany invades Poland; Second World War begins.

## **1940**

**June – July:** Soviet Union occupies and annexes Lithuania.

## **1941**

**June 27:** Nazi Germany wages war against its former ally, the Soviet Union, in Operation Barbarossa. The city of Shavl is subsequently occupied.

**June – November:** The “first stage” of mass murder in Lithuania carried out by Einsatzgruppen (mobile killing units), aided by pro-Nazi Lithuanian helpers. Most Jews in rural Lithuania are murdered in mass shootings.

**July:** A ghetto is established in Shavl, comprising of two separate areas in the poorest sections of the Kaukazas and Ezero-Traku suburbs. Nazis and Lithuanian collaborators murder some 1,000 Jews within weeks of occupation.

**August:** Kron family is ordered into the ghetto.

**September 1:** The Shavl Ghetto is sealed.

## **1942**

**August 5:** Nazis announce a ban on live Jewish births in Shavl.

## **1943**

**November 5:** An estimated 574 children — including four-year-old Tamara Kron — are rounded up during the kinderaktion in the Shavl ghetto and presumably murdered on arrival at Auschwitz.

**December:** The ghetto is transformed into a concentration camp. The “second stage” of killing of Jews unable to contribute to the Nazi war effort begins.

**November 12:** Ruth goes into hiding in the home of Ona and Antanas Ragauskas. Ona was later recognized as Righteous Among the Nations by the Yad Vashem Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority in Israel.

## **1944**

**April – July:** The liquidation of the ghetto begins and the remaining Jews are deported to Stutthof and Dachau concentration camps. Meyer and Gita Kron escape deportation.

**June 6: D-Day:** Allied Invasion at Normandy, France.

**August:** Ruth Kron is reunited with her parents. The Soviet military liberates Lithuania.

## **1945**

**May:** Second World War ends in Europe.

## **1946**

Meyer, Gita and Ruth Kron flee Communist Lithuania and arrive at Feldafing Displaced Persons camp in the US zone of postwar Germany.

## **1951**

**March 11:** Kron family arrives in Canada.

## **1953**

Kron family settles in Vancouver.

## **2008**

Ruth Kron Sigal dies.

# APPENDIX: RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

## SELECTED BOOKS AND ARTICLES

- Bankier, David. **Expulsion and Extermination: Holocaust Testimonials from Provincial Lithuania.** Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2012.
- Donkis, Leonidas, Alvydas Nikzentaitis, Stefan Schreiner and Darius Staliunas, Eds. **The Vanished World of Lithuanian Jews.** Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004.
- Dwork, Deborah and Robert Jan van Pelt. **Holocaust: A History.** New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002.
- Faitelson, Aleks. **Heroism and Bravery in Lithuania, 1941-1945.** Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 1996.
- Issroff, Saul and Rose Lerer-Cohen. **The Holocaust in Lithuania 1941-1945: A Book of Remembrance.** Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2002.
- Katz, Dovid. **Lithuanian Jewish Culture.** Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010.
- Kruk, Herman. **The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania: Chronicles from the Vilna Ghetto and the Camps, 1939-1944.** New Haven, CT: Yale University Press/YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 2002.
- Lithuania and the Jews: The Holocaust Chapter.** Symposium Presentations. Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Washington, D.C., 2005.
- Morgan, Keith and Ruth Kron Sigal. **Ruta's Closet.** London: Unity 1 Press, 2008.
- Oshry, Ephraim. **The Annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry.** New York: Judaica Press 1995.
- Pruchno Lawrence, Marcia. **Resilience: From Shavl to Southfield via Dachau.** CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011.
- Sakowicz, Kazimierz. **Ponary Diary, 1941-1943: A Bystanders' Account of a Mass Murder.** New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005.
- Snyder, Timothy. "Neglecting the Lithuanian Holocaust." **The New York Review of Books Blog.** July 25, 2011 (<http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2011/jul/25/neglecting-lithuanian-holocaust/>)
- Sutton, Karen. **The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania.** Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2008.
- Tory, Avraham. **Surviving the Holocaust: The Kovno Ghetto Diary.** Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Yerushalmi, Eliezer. **Pinkas Shavli: A Diary From a Lithuanian Ghetto, 1941-1944.** Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1958.

## FILMS

- The Baltic Tragedy (1985)**  
Documentary film featuring newsreel and film footage depicting the war on the eastern front.
- Barbarossa: Hitler Turns East. The Russian Front 1941-1945 (2007)**  
Documentary film featuring archival footage of the German invasion of the Soviet Union.
- Partisans of Vilna (2005)**  
Documentary about Jewish resistance fighters in the Vilna Ghetto.

**Secret Lives: Hidden Children and Their Rescuers During WWII (2004)**  
Documentary film about the rescue of Jewish children during the Holocaust.

**Shake Hands with the Devil (2007)**  
Dramatized account of Roméo Dallaire's experiences as a commander for a United Nations unit deployed to Rwanda during the 1994 genocide.

**Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre Testimony Project: Lillian B. (2010)**  
Video testimony of Holocaust survivor Lillian B.

**Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre Testimony Project: Alex B. (2008)**  
Video testimony of Holocaust survivor Alex B.

**Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre Testimony Project: Meyer K. (1984)**  
Video testimony of Holocaust survivor Meyer K.

**Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre Testimony Project: Celina L. (1983)**  
Video testimony of Holocaust survivor Celina L.

**Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre Testimony Project: Ruth S. (1990)**  
Video testimony of Holocaust survivor Ruth S.

## WEBSITES

<http://www.jmuseum.lt>  
Official homepage of The Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum in Vilnius, Lithuania.

<http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/sgc-cms/expositions-exhibitions/orphelins-orphans/english/index.html>  
Virtual exhibit, *Open Hearts – Closed Doors* by the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre, hosted by Virtual Museum Canada.

<http://www.rutascloset.com>  
Official homepage for Ruta's Closet, featuring book excerpts and interviews with author Keith Morgan.

<http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/44/a44r025.htm>  
Complete document of the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the United Nations website.

<http://www.unicef.ca/en/policy-advocacy-for-children/about-the-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child>  
Summary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and its impact on the well-being of children worldwide, on the Unicef Canada website.

<http://www.ushmm.org>  
Official website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

<http://www.vhec.org/index.html>  
Official website of the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre.

<http://www.yadvashem.org>  
Official website of Yad Vashem: The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority.

<http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/valley/siauliai>  
Virtual exhibit, *"Here Their Stories Will Be Told..." The Valley of Communities* by Yad Vashem, focusing on Siauliai (Shavl), Lithuania.

<http://yiddishbookcenter.org>  
Official website of the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts.

<http://yivo.org>  
Official website of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York City.

