THE GHETTO EXPERIENCE – WORKING WITH SOURCES FOR PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL PUPILS, SUPRA-REGIONAL GUIDELINES

Robert Szuchta

We are excluded and separated from the world, exiled from human society

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Chaim Kapłan
Entry in his diary on 17 November 1940

The ghettos in the occupied Polish territories became one of the main instruments of the extermination of the Jewish population. The conditions created for Jews in the ghettos were initially subordinated to German resettlement plans, then to the economic exploitation of the imprisoned, and finally to their deportation and complete extermination in death camps. Ghettoisation was therefore an important part of the process of the Holocaust, as has been repeatedly pointed out by Holocaust researchers (Raul Hilberg, Ruta Sakowska, Christopher R. Browning, Dan Michman).

When teaching about the Holocaust, we should also pay attention to the experience of the ghetto. This obligation is imposed on us by the Core Curriculum for History Teaching. However, it should be remembered that the ghetto is only a fragment of a larger whole, which should be reflected in the skilful distribution of teaching material and in the time allocated by the teacher that can and should be devoted to discussing this topic.

The subject of ghettoisation is one of the most difficult topics covered in school lessons. It is difficult both in terms of content (it requires solid and meticulous preparation on the part of the teacher) and emotionally. When discussing it with pupils, we should focus our attention on the experience of Jewish victims. We raise moral and existential questions concerning people who spent the last months of their lives in inhumane conditions, but often with the hope of survival. Therefore, in order to facilitate the preparation of educational classes with students on the subject of ghettos, I would like to share a few methodological comments that may be useful to you in practice.

It is worth beginning our discussion with a clear and precise definition of the terms that will be used by students, so that all participants in the educational process understand the terms in the same way. **What is a ghetto?**

Ghetto: (ghetto) separate and often (but not always) closed areas created by the German occupation authorities, to which the Jewish population was forcibly resettled, thus isolating them from the rest of the population, subjecting them to a series of restrictions and repressions, exploiting them economically, and finally deporting them to extermination centres. During World War II, most ghettos were located in Central and Eastern Europe, primarily in the occupied territories of Poland.

It is also worth looking at what historical content related to the ghetto is proposed for discussion with pupils in ministerial documents and methodological guides for teachers.

Core curriculum – History – primary school

In chapter 40. Polish lands under occupation.
The student:
[…]
2) presents the extermination of Jews by Nazi Germany and assesses the attitudes of Polish society towards the Holocaust, using the terms: **ghetto**, death camp, **Warsaw Ghetto Uprising**, **szmalcownik**, **Żegota**, and taking into account the figures of Witold Pilecki and Irena Sendler;

Core curriculum – History – secondary school (2018)

The core curriculum for teaching history in secondary schools, both at the basic and advanced levels, does not contain any direct references to the topics of the ghetto or ghettoisation.

It is interesting to note that the core curriculum for history does not include the terms ghetto or ghettoisation, while ghettoisation is mentioned in the core curriculum for geography at the advanced level.

“IHRA Guidelines on Holocaust Education” (2019, p. 18)

2.3.3 The course and progression of the Holocaust in the context of World War II

(…)

● What types of ghettos were there and how were they used for segregation, concentration
and persecution of communities?

(...)

The document points to the need to discuss the types of ghettos and their basic functions: segregation and concentration. It also points to the need to discuss the types of persecution of the Jewish population.

Robert Szuchta, Piotr Trojański, *How to teach about the Holocaust. A methodological guide to teaching about the Holocaust in the humanities in the reformed school*, Centre for Education Development, Warsaw 2012, p. 19

Educational content:
VII. "Jewish closed districts" – ghettos in occupied Europe

1. Plans to concentrate Jews and the objectives of establishing ghettos
2. The largest ghettos in occupied Europe
- Łódź
- Warsaw
3. Everyday life in the ghetto
- The role of the Judenrats
- smuggling
- Hunger
- the other side of life
- civil resistance
4. Liquidation of ghettos
5. Jews on the "Aryan" side

Expected student achievements

The student:
- knows what the Nazis' goals were regarding the concentration of Jews
- treats the process of establishing ghettos as a stage preceding the extermination of Jews
- can name the largest ghettos in occupied Europe
- is familiar with the living conditions of the Jewish population in the ghettos

- can point out the similarities and differences in the situation of the Jewish and non-Jewish populations in countries occupied by the Nazis
- can compare the situation of Jews confined to ghettos and those hiding on the so-called Aryan side

***Exercises with sources for teaching about the Holocaust*, Bogusław Jędruszczak, Wiesława Młynarczyk, Robert Szuchta, Association of the Centre for Research on the Holocaust, Warsaw 2010**

Ghetto
German plans and objectives
Resettlements
Isolation
Marking Hunger
Diseases (typhus)
Judenrat (Jewish Council)
Security Service
The fate of
children
Smuggling
Civil and armed resistance
The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

When discussing the subject of ghettos in school lessons, we suggest doing so on the basis of: **A thesaurus of keywords describing the experience of the Jewish ghetto in occupied Polish territories during World War II.** Keywords are words that reflect the main theme of the content we are interested in, so in the case of the ghetto, these are terms describing the experience of the ghetto and ghettoisation.

Thesaurus of keywords – ghetto (proposal)

Exclusion
Isolation
Overcrowding
Loneliness
Dehumanisation
Hunger
Epidemics
Civil
resistance
Armed
resistance
Institutions
Deportation
"Non-Jewish Poles look at the ghetto"

When discussing the ghetto in school lessons, it is worth remembering[1] :

1. Describing processes and events in as precise and balanced a manner as possible. Use defined, precise terms that are understandable to pupils. Clearly and precisely define the term “ghetto”.
2. Linking the subject of the ghetto to the broader context of global history (World War II, occupation of Polish territory) and regional history (history of the region, locality).
3. Individualising the message, prioritising individual stories over general history and statistics.
4. Avoiding simplifications in the presentation of complex history.
5. Adapting source materials and teaching methods to the age and perception abilities of students. Avoiding drastic source materials in teaching in order to encourage students to learn or arouse excessive emotions in them (sadness, feelings of loss, loneliness and even crying).
6. Encouraging students to search for information about historical events that took place in the region or town where they come from.
7. Encourage students to participate in local forms of commemoration of Jewish communities (the nationwide MHŻP POLIN daffodil campaign, local celebrations of the anniversaries of ghetto liquidations).
8. Avoid excessive (exaggerated) updating of knowledge about the past (comparing the ghetto to the situation of the Palestinian population in Gaza).

It is also worth considering the criteria according to which the sources that students will work with in class can/should be selected. Taking into account various conditions, we should be guided by the following selection criteria:

I. Criterion Didactic (allowing for achieving the educational objectives of the lesson and corresponding to the student's perception capabilities)

- consistent with the topic of the lesson and the specific issues discussed during it
- suitable for the student's age and mental capacity (e.g. not shocking with brutality and violence, which often occur in sources

[1] Based on: "*Guidelines for Teaching about the* Holocaust", International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), 2019, (Polish version available at: https://holocaustremembrance.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Wytyczne-dotyczace-nauczania-o-Holokauscie_0.pdf - accessed on 20 February 2026)

concerning the Holocaust, pupils who are not emotionally prepared for this, i.e. younger or emotionally immature pupils).

- Precisely and clearly defined (this refers to the use of sources whose origin, nature, type, etc. we are certain of and which do not raise any objections from researchers).
- taking into account the personal context, e.g. through the presence of a first-person narrative in the source, which allows the student to empathise with the victim. Good examples are the personal accounts of children written immediately after the war, as well as the daily notes of people living in ghettos, camps or hiding on the so-called "Aryan side".
- diverse in terms of type, but identical in content (e.g. a normative source – a German regulation on resettlement to the ghetto – juxtaposed with an article from the Polish underground press and an excerpt from a personal account on the subject)

II. Substantive criterion:

- taking into account the perspective of the perpetrator, victim, and witness
- diverse in terms of type and genre (documentary, narrative, iconographic, cartographic, statistical and others)
- representative of the issue in question
- authentic and reliable

The above criteria for selecting sources are, of course, not the only ones. They should be treated as a suggestion. When creating their own criteria, teachers should take into account the specific nature of the school, the educational level, the preparation and perceptual abilities of the pupils, as well as their own substantive and methodological competences for teaching difficult topics, which certainly include teaching about the experience of the ghetto.

“Education against anti-Semitism. Learning from the past to understand contemporary challenges. Multimedia educational kit"

Seminar for Teachers, Warsaw, 21 February 2026.

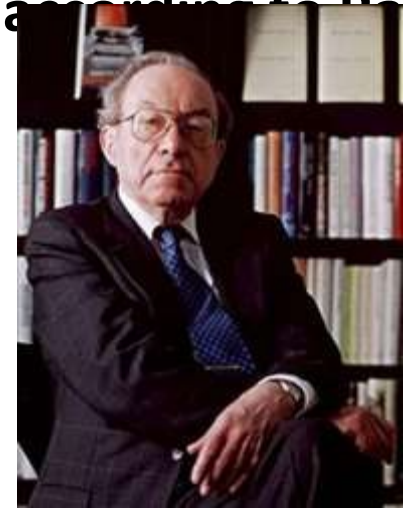
THE GHETTO EXPERIENCE – WORKING WITH HISTORICAL SOURCES – SUPRAREGIONAL GUIDELINES

ROBERT SZUCHTA

Educational Toolkit PAMIĘĆ. EDUKACJA. DZIAŁANIE. MEMORY. EDUCATION. ACTION.

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The place of ghettoisation in the process of the extermination of European Jews according to Raul Hilberg







In accordance with the rules of teaching about the Holocaust, it is important that the issues we discuss are clearly and precisely defined. When teaching about ghettos, we should define this concept precisely. We will use it during the lesson, so all participants should understand it in the same way.

A ghetto (in reference to the Nazi German policy of *the final solution of the Jewish question* during World War II) **is a separate and often (but not always) closed area created by the German occupation authorities, to which the Jewish population was forcibly resettled, thus isolating them from the rest of the population; subjecting them to restrictions, repression and persecution; exploiting them economically; and finally deporting them to extermination centres. During World War II, most ghettos were located in Central and Eastern Europe, including**
all in the occupied territories of Poland (approx. 600). The ghettos were a stage of extermination.

Core curriculum – History – primary school

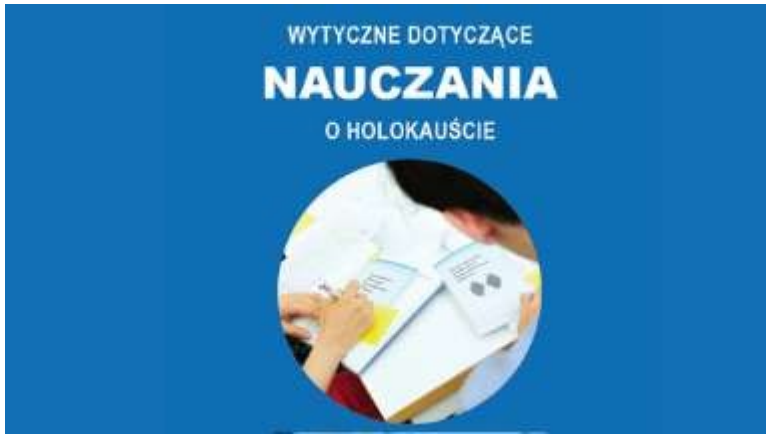
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Core curriculum – History – secondary school (2018)

Core curriculum for teaching history in secondary schools, both at the basic level and
and the extended version does not contain direct references to the subject of the ghetto or

ghettoisation. NOTE: Ghettoisation is discussed in the extended level Geography curriculum.

“IHRA Guidelines on Teaching the Holocaust” (2019, p. 18)



2.3.3 The course of the Holocaust in the context of World War II

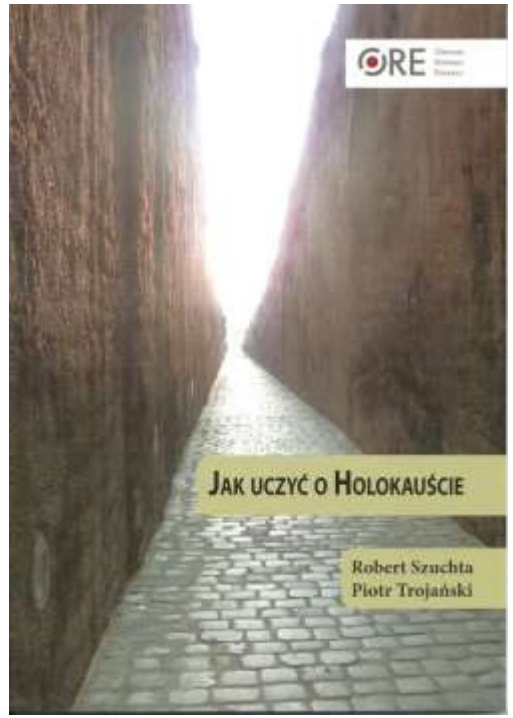
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- **What types of ghettos were there and how were they used to segregate, concentrate and persecute the Jewish community?**

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Robert Szuchta, Piotr Trojański, ***How to teach about the Holocaust. A methodological guide to teaching about the Holocaust in the humanities in*** the ***reformed*** school system, Centre for Educational Development Education Development Centre, Warsaw 2012, p. 19

Teaching content	Expected student achievements
VII. "Jewish ghettos" – ghettos in occupied Europe 1. Plans for the concentration of Jews and the objectives for establishing ghettos 2. The largest ghettos in occupied Europe • Łódź • Warsaw 3. Everyday life in the ghetto • The role of the Judenrats • smuggling • Hunger • the other side of life • civil resistance 4. Liquidation of the ghettos 5. Jews on the "Aryan" side	**Student**: • knows what the Nazis' goals were with regard to concentrating Jews • the process of establishing ghettos as a stage preceding the extermination of Jews • can name the largest ghettos in occupied Europe • knows the conditions of existence of the in the ghettos • can point out the similarities and differences in the situation of the Jewish and non-Jewish populations in countries occupied by the Nazis • can compare the situation of Jews confined to ghettos and those hiding on the so-called Aryan side



Exercises with sources for teaching about the Holocaust, Bogusław Jędruszczak, Wiesława Młynarczyk, Robert Szuchta, Association of the Centre for Research on the Holocaust, Warsaw 2010

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German plans and objectives
Resettlement
Isolation Marking
Hunger
Diseases (typhus)
Judenrat (Jewish Council)
Security Service
The fate of children
Smuggling
Civil and armed resistance
The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising



Thesaurus of key words – ghetto (proposal)

Keywords are words that reflect the main theme of the content we are interested in, so in the case of the ghetto, they are concepts describing the experience of the ghetto and ghettoisation.

Exclusion
Isolation
Overcrowding
Loneliness
Dehumanisatio
n Hunger
Epidemics
Civil
resistance
Armed
resistance
Institutions
Deportation
“Non-Jewish Poles
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8. Avoiding excessive (overblown) updating of knowledge about the past (comparing the ghetto to the situation of the Palestinian population in Gaza).

Based on: "Guidelines for Teaching about the Holocaust", International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), 2019, (Polish version available at: https://holocaustremembrance.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Wytyczne-dotyczace-nauczania-o-Holokauscie_0.pdf - accessed on 20 February 2026)



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