

Lesson: Introduction

Nechama Shneerson, Jewish Survivor Survival and Loss

Target Audience:

Grades 9-12
(Note: Teachers may also find the lesson applicable and suitable for Grade 8)

Curriculum Connections:

American History, World History, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Government, Psychology, and Language Arts

Materials for Lesson:

- “Ghettos” article
- [Map of Ghettos in Occupied Europe](#)
- Elie Wiesel’s *Night* excerpt (Option 1)
- Charlotte Delbo’s *Auschwitz and After* excerpt (Option 2)
- Nechama Shneerson’s 30-minute visual history testimony
- Nechama Shneerson’s biography
- “Survival and Loss” student-activity handout
- Discussion questions
- Testimony glossary

Time Requirement:

1-3 class periods

Student Objectives

- To use viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret Nechama Shneerson’s visual history testimony.
- To develop a basic understanding of ghettoization, which was one aspect of Nazi persecution of Jews.
- To identify persecution of Jews specific to the Kovno ghetto, such as the *Great Aktion*.
- To understand how survival and loss are often interrelated concepts for survivors of the Holocaust.
- To apply the concept of survivor testimony to contemporary events.

Lesson Overview

As Allied troops freed camps, villages, cities, and countries, survivors experienced complex emotions—relief and joy but also deep grief and a sense of devastating loss for their loved ones, homes and communities that were lost to them forever. Teachers will first provide an overview of ghettoization through the use of the article “**Ghettos**.” Then they will introduce the lesson on survival and loss through a quotation from Elie Wiesel’s *Night* or from Charlotte Delbo’s *Auschwitz and After*. Following that, through the use of Nechama’s testimony and the accompanying student activity, students will consider the importance of family as a central, recurring theme and the devastating effects of loss on survivors. Teachers are also encouraged to use the postviewing discussion questions to examine Nechama’s testimony for deeper meaning and contemporary connections.

Standards Addressed

To align this lesson with state content standards, teachers may visit [Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning](#) (McRel) for an ‘Online Compendium’ of K-12 content-area standards, which were selected from various state standards and from professional subject-area organizations. McRel national standards include [Historical Understanding](#), [United States History](#), [World History](#), [Civics](#), [Language Arts](#), and [Behavioral Studies](#).

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Historical Introduction

Assign and/or discuss the “**Ghettos**” article from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s *Holocaust Encyclopedia* to provide students brief background information on the creation of ghettos by the Germans to concentrate and control the Jewish population during World War II. Along with the discussion of ghettos, students may examine the **Map of Ghettos in Occupied Europe**, pinpointing the location of the Kovno ghetto in Lithuania, which is where Nechama and her family were confined.

Previewing Focus

NOTE: Teachers have the option of choosing between two quotations.

OPTION 1: Write on the board the following excerpt from Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor and author, where he recounts the feelings of loss he had after his father died. Wiesel was liberated a few months later.

“I had to stay at Buchenwald until April eleventh. I have nothing to say of my life during this period. It no longer mattered. After my father’s death, nothing could touch me anymore.”

Have students respond to the quote by either free-writing or discussing in small groups. Possible prompts: Why does Wiesel have “nothing to say”? Why did this period in his life not matter? Why does he say, “... nothing could touch me anymore”?

OPTION 2: Write the following lines by Charlotte Delbo, Holocaust survivor and author, on the board:

“There is no wound that will not heal/I told myself that day/and still repeat it from time to time/but not enough to believe it.”

Have students respond to the quote by either free-writing or discussing in small groups.

POSSIBLE PROMPTS: What do you think the author means by ‘that day’? Why does she need to repeat that statement to herself? Why do you think she cannot believe it?

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Transition

Students should see that in both the case of Elie Wiesel and Charlotte Delbo, while they acknowledge their own survival, overwhelming feelings of loss and alienation are also present in equal measures. Teachers should help students to see that for many on the cusp of liberation in the waning days of the Holocaust, survival was not a simple matter. It was often the beginning of a very difficult physical and emotional journey because of the incomprehensible loss that is also central in most survivors' stories. This theme—survival and loss—is prominent in Nechama Shneorson's testimony.

Viewing Activity

Before students view Nechama's testimony, teachers may want to briefly introduce her by quoting from the introductory text card in her testimony:

“Nechama Shneorson was born May 29, 1929, in Kovno (Kaunas), Lithuania. In this interview, Nechama, a Jewish survivor, describes her life in Kovno and the Kovno ghetto, deportation to Stutthof, a concentration camp in Germany, participation in a death march, and liberation by the Soviet Army.”

Hand out “Survival and Loss” activity for students to study before they view Nechama Shneorson's 30-minute visual history testimony. Students should examine the photo to put the name to the face of each of the Shneorson family members prior to watching Nechama's testimony, in which she shares with us the fate of each beloved family member in her family portrait. Teachers may have students do this independently, in pairs or small groups, or as a class. Students should be instructed to focus on Nechama's recurring theme of family as they watch her testimony. The goal of this activity is for students to “meet” Nechama's family prior to watching the testimony so that it personalizes in their minds and hearts Nechama's incomprehensible loss as they view her testimony.

Teachers should note but not share with students that all of Nechama's family, except for her and her oldest sister, Zlata, were killed in the Holocaust. The following is for teachers' use in helping guide students as needed with the captioning exercise in the student activity. Since at the end of Nechama's testimony, she presents this photo and describes it, teachers may prefer to have students allow Nechama herself identify her family members in the photo.

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“My mother (**Ethel**) all the way in the middle on the top, father (**Jacob**) right next to her on the right. My oldest sister (**Zlata**) on her left. Grandma (**Esther**) holding on her lap my little sister (**Genya**). In the middle is Ida and myself (**Nechama**) sitting right on my father’s lap, a child of three.”

It is also useful to have students examine Nechama’s narrative style itself to discuss ways in which her style contributes to the overall poignancy of her testimony.

POSSIBLE PROMPT: How do Nechama’s verbal and nonverbal communication techniques contribute to meaning? (*Sample answer: Many aspects contribute to Nechama’s effectiveness as an interviewee, such as the inflection/modulation/tone/volume of her voice, the tempo/pacing of her narrative, her eye contact, posture, and facial expressions.*)

Postviewing Focus

Teachers will need to determine how much of the “Survival and Loss” activity should be completed individually, in pairs, or in groups. Some students may prefer to share their letters to Nechama privately with the teacher, while others may wish to have a group or class discussion in order to help process the emotions that are evoked as a result of Nechama’s testimony.

Lesson: Discussion Questions

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Discussion Questions

The following comprehension/discussion questions were created for use with Nechama's testimony. They may be used in addition to the lesson or apart from it.

1. What role did being Jewish play in Nechama's life before the German invasion of Lithuania? *(Sample answer: Nechama remembers the specifics of the family celebration of Shabbat and the smell of her mother's cooking.)*
2. Nechama says in her testimony, "In 1939, our parents started to tell us that something is happening terribly between the Germans and the Russians." How do Nechama and her parents perceive these events? *(Sample answer: Nechama's parents were gravely concerned, as they probably expected that Germany's invasion of Poland in September 1939 would lead to war between Germany and the Soviet Union. However, Nechama recalls that she was only a child; she did not think the war would affect her because it was not in her house or her country.)*
3. According to Nechama, during the first year in the ghetto, how did the people try to have normal lives despite the wretched conditions? *(Sample answer: Sometimes, in her experience, people married, had babies, and tried to joke and have fun despite the conditions.)*
4. In her testimony, Nechama makes a reference to a day that had "the worst impact of my life to me personally ..." What happened on that day and how was Nechama personally impacted? *(Sample answer: The children were taken away from the ghetto. Not only was Nechama traumatized by the brutality of what she saw and heard, but she was also frantic to try to save her youngest sister, who was only eight and was certain to be taken. Although Nechama helped save her little sister that day, she remembers the trauma of it and thinks of it as the worst day for her personally.)*
5. Why did Nechama say that sitting in the farmhouse made her feel like she was back in the "real world"? *(Sample answer: The attempts to dehumanize Nechama included taking her away from everything she was familiar with and then taking everything away from her altogether—any small comforts, like being in a home or having large necessities, like food and warmth, being denied her. Just that moment of not being abused, being in a home, and being warm were reminders of the life she was being denied.)*
6. How did Nechama's daily "escape" from the camp help her to survive? *(Sample answer: On one level, she was able to eat and regain her strength, which was literally helpful to her survival. On another level, the ability to escape daily and get away with it was no doubt empowering to her.)*

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7. What was the “most beautiful moment” in Nechama’s life? *(Sample answer: Thinking that it was possible that no one in her family had survived robbed Nechama of the will to live. Although her grief over the loss of her family was never lessened, to find out that she still had a sister—with whom she was later reunited—meant everything.)*
8. “We have to stick together, and whatever will happen, we will try to die together, so that none of us should be left alone.” What message does Nechama’s father want to convey to his family? *(Sample answer: Although his first choice was obviously that the family should survive, in the absence of that choice, her father felt being together as a family was the most important thing, even if their fate was death.)*
9. Nechama has conflicting emotions at liberation. Why? *(Sample answer: Nechama feels her liberation by the Soviet Army is bittersweet—even as she sees some rejoicing and gratitude toward the Soviet liberators around her, she has no idea where any of her family is, she is utterly alone, and for these reasons has no real desire for life at that point.)*
10. Why did it take six months for Nechama and her sister to be reunited? *(Given the end-of-the-war collapse of Germany and the chaos that ensued, without modern forms of technology, it would have been very difficult to locate people who had been separated, especially since there was no proof that they had survived.)*
11. At the end of her testimony, Nechama says, “I want to dedicate this taping to my daughter, Edith Shneorson, and to all the future generations that will come. They should know and never forget, what Hitler did to me, to my family and to six million Jews. That’s all I have to ask, and I’ll be the happiest if they will.” Why does Nechama dedicate a tape about the past to “future generations”? What is it that Nechama wants you to “never forget”? If it would make Nechama “the happiest” if people remember, what might be her underlying fear if people do not remember? What does it really mean to “know and never forget”? In other words, is knowledge enough? Why or why not? *(Sample answer: The implication is that she wants to share the past with people in the future in part to perpetuate her family’s memory. But also there is likely a fear that if people don’t remember, the past could repeat itself. Therefore, it is likely that when Nechama asks that we “should know and never forget,” she is also encouraging us to take what we have learned and use that knowledge to prevent such acts from happening again.)*

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12. Think about other global events where there have been survivors left to tell their stories. What are some examples of these? *(Sample answer: Students can point out other genocides where survivors and/or witnesses have given testimony: Rwanda or Darfur, for example, or they can also think about national events, such as 9-11 or even catastrophic events close to their homes.)*
13. Why do we, as viewers, find stories of survival compelling? *(Sample answers will vary; teachers might want to stress that it's the chance to see history as it unfolds in a person's life that makes it real and touches us emotionally. We also are drawn to stories in which average human beings like us exemplify extraordinary courage and strength. Their ability to survive in spite of all odds encourages us to believe that we too have untapped reservoirs of strength.)*

Biographical Connection

Once students have watched Nechama Shneerson's testimony and completed the activity and/or discussion questions, teachers may wish to print and hand out Nechama's biographical profile for students to read as a closing activity.

SUGGESTED PROMPTS: Compare and contrast how Nechama's story is transmitted through the two forms of media: visual history testimony and written biographic profile. What content information, if any, is unique to each medium? What is the advantage of each medium? Are there any disadvantages? Which medium do you prefer? Why?

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Glossary

The following glossary has been created to assist students and teachers with potentially unfamiliar words, phrases, or concepts in Nechama's testimony.

Challah⁴ Egg-rich yeast-leavened bread that is usually braided or twisted before baking and is traditionally eaten by Jews on the Sabbath and holidays.

Great Aktion² (Ger. *Action*) On October 28, 1941, the Germans staged what became known as the "Great Action." In a single day, they shot 9,200 Jews at the Ninth Fort.

Judaism¹ The tenets of Judaism are outlined by the Torah. A Jew is one who is either born into the people of Israel, thus inheriting his/her status, or voluntarily converts to it. As a culture, as well as a society of laws, beliefs and faith, Judaism is based on the events recorded in the Torah, which was given to Moses and the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. Judaism follows a set of principles as outlined in the Torah. There are several movements in the Jewish religion, for example: Orthodox Judaism, Conservative Judaism, Reform Judaism, Reconstructionist Judaism, Hasidic Judaism, Ultra-Orthodox Judaism and Traditional Judaism.

Kaunas, Lithuania² (German name, Kovno) Between 1920 and 1939, Kaunas, located in central Lithuania, was the country's capital and largest city. It had a Jewish population of 35,000-40,000, about one-fourth of the city's total population. Jews were concentrated in the city's commercial, artisan, and professional sectors. Kaunas was also a center of Jewish learning and had a rich and varied Jewish culture. The city had almost 100 Jewish organizations, 40 synagogues, many Yiddish schools, 4 Hebrew high schools, a Jewish hospital, and scores of Jewish-owned businesses. It was also an important Zionist center.

Kiddush⁴ A ceremonial blessing pronounced over wine or bread in a Jewish home or synagogue on a holy day (as the Sabbath).

Kovno Ghetto¹ (Kaunas, Lithuania) The ghetto in Kovno (the German name given to Kaunas) was established in August 1941. It was situated in the Slobodka suburb of the city. The ghetto had two parts, the small ghetto and the large ghetto, separated by Paneriu Street. The two ghettos were guarded by German police and Lithuanian auxiliaries. Jews were compelled to do forced labor at various sites outside the ghetto. On October 4, 1941, German authorities liquidated the small ghetto. They transferred those Jews fit for work to the large ghetto and shot the remaining Jews at Fort IX. On October 28,

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1941, Germans murdered approximately 10,000 Jews living in the large ghetto. German authorities liquidated the large ghetto in the fall of 1943 and, in the aftermath of the liquidation, deported thousands of Jews to forced labor camps in Estonia. At that time they established a concentration camp known as KL Kauen on the site of the Kovno ghetto. In July 1944, the Germans evacuated the camp, deporting the remaining Jews to the Dachau and the Stutthof concentration camps.

Ninth Fort (Fort IX)¹ (Kaunas, Lithuania) Fort IX was part of the military installation built in Kaunas during the time of the Russian Empire (late 19th century). In the wake of the German occupation of Kaunas (named Kovno by the Germans) in 1941, Fort IX was used as an extermination center for the Jews confined to the Kovno ghetto, and later for those in the Kaunas (Kauen) concentration camp. The Jews, victims of many *Aktions*, were taken to Fort IX and murdered. A special Jewish unit was assigned to dispose of the corpses after the mass executions

Shabbat¹ The Sabbath; the seventh day of the week, which is designated as a day of rest. It is observed by attending synagogue, hearing the weekly Torah portion, and having festive meals. During Shabbat meals, it is traditional to say Kiddush (sanctification over wine), break the bread, say blessings after meals, and sing songs. The holiday concludes with a Havdalah service, which separates Shabbat from the rest of the week. Restrictions during the observance of Shabbat include prohibitions on travel, handling of money, kindling flame, cooking, and carrying objects outside a designated area.

Shoah⁵ A Hebrew word meaning “catastrophe,” referring to the Holocaust.

Shul³ Yiddish word for synagogue, or Jewish house of prayer.

Stutthof² In September 1939, the Germans established the Stutthof camp in a wooded area west of Stutthof, a town about twenty-two miles east of Danzig (Gdansk). The area was secluded: to the north was the Bay of Danzig, to the east the Vistula Bay, and to the west the Vistula River. The land was very wet, almost at sea level. Stutthof was originally a civilian internment camp under the Danzig police chief. In November 1941, it became a “labor education” camp, administered by the German Security Police. Finally, in January 1942, Stutthof became a regular concentration camp. The original camp (known as the old camp) was surrounded by barbed-wire fences. In 1943, the camp was enlarged, and a new camp was constructed alongside the earlier one. It was surrounded by electrified barbed-wire fences. The camp staff consisted of SS guards and, after 1943, Ukrainian auxiliaries. Tens of thousands of people, perhaps as many

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as 100,000, were deported to the Stutthof camp. The prisoners were mainly non-Jewish Poles. There were also Polish Jews from Warsaw and Bialystok, and Jews from forced-labor camps in the occupied Baltic states, which the Germans evacuated in 1944 as Soviet forces approached. Conditions in the camp were brutal. Many prisoners died in typhus epidemics that swept the camp in the winter of 1942 and again in 1944. Those whom the SS guards judged too weak or sick to work were gassed in the camp's small gas chamber. Gassing with Zyklon B gas began in June 1944. Camp doctors also killed sick or injured prisoners in the infirmary with lethal injections. More than 60,000 people died in the camp.

Thorn¹ A women's subsidiary camp of Stutthof. It was opened in July 1944 and closed in January 1945. Its inmates were compelled to dig ditches and work on various construction projects.

Source of Definitions

¹ Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archives Search Terms and Definitions

² United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, online glossary and/or *Holocaust Encyclopedia*

³ Florida Center for Instructional Technology's Glossary

⁴ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary 2009

⁵ *Echoes and Reflections: a Multimedia Curriculum on the Holocaust*

Extension Activities

If time permits, teachers might consider including the following additional activities:

1. Have students research the efforts of Kovno ghetto inhabitants, who attempted to preserve their stories by hiding documents, artifacts, letters, and other pieces of evidence. Have students visit the online exhibit, **Hidden History of the Kovno Ghetto**, at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
2. Have students read or perform the one-act play *I Never Saw Another Butterfly*, which is based on the collection of poetry, of the same name, written by children in the ghetto of Terezin.

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3. Have students read or view testimony from survivors of the **Cambodian** and **Rwandan** genocides to discuss the similarities and differences in their stories and the way they tell them.

References

The following is a list of the full Internet addresses used in this lesson.

1. **Ghettos:** <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005059>
2. **Map of Major Ghettos in Occupied Europe:** http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/media_nm.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005059&MediaId=356
3. **McRel:** <http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>
4. **Hidden History of the Kovno Ghetto:** <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/kovno/>
5. **Cambodian Genocide:** <http://www.hmd.org.uk/resources/cat/3/>
6. **Rwandan Genocide:** <http://www.preventgenocide.org/edu/pastgenocides/rwanda/resources/>

Additional Resources

To learn more about life and death in the ghettos during the Holocaust, as well as information about genocide in general, teachers may wish to consult the following online resources:

1. **Give Me Your Children: Voices from the Lodz ghetto, a twenty-minute video about the Lodz ghetto:** <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/lodz/video/>
2. **Children in the Ghetto, an interactive Website for children:** <http://ghetto.galim.org.il/eng/about/.index.html>
3. **Photographs from the Warsaw ghetto, a collection of photos portraying life and death in the ghetto:** http://www1.yadvashem.org/exhibitions/warsaw_ghetto/home_warsaw.html
4. **Committee on Conscience at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum offers up-to-the-minute information on genocide:** <http://www.ushmm.org/genocide/>
5. **The Genocide Intervention Network empowers individuals and communities with the tools to stop genocide:** <http://www.genocideintervention.net/network>