**Lesson Plan: Yizkor Books and the Shtetls (Small Jewish Towns)**

The following lesson deals with the Yizkor (Memorial) Books of shtetls – small Jewish towns – in Eastern Europe. These books provide us with a unique way to study Jewish life before the Holocaust. They were written by emigrants from these small towns, many of them Holocaust survivors.

In this lesson we will learn about Yizkor Books, their purpose and content. Through reading select passages, we will discover the vibrant Jewish life of pre-Holocaust shtetls.

Teacher Instructions:

The following lesson deals with the Yizkor Books of shtetls in Eastern Europe. The lesson is meant to convey to the students the purpose for which the Yizkor Books were written, and to afford them insight into the daily life and culture of these small Jewish towns. The lesson material is suitable both for online learning via Zoom, and for in-class teaching.

Lesson Objectives:

* Getting to know the Yizkor Books, their content, and their purpose.
* Becoming familiar with everyday life in the Jewish shtetls before the Holocaust by reading passages from Yizkor Books.

Target Audience:

* High school students.

What are Yizkor Books?

Yizkor Books were written in order to document and preserve the memory of primarily Eastern European Jewish communities that were destroyed in the Holocaust.

Most often, the Yizkor Books were written and published by the “Landsmannschaften,” organizations founded by immigrants from a common community, and named after the members' place of birth or former residence. These organizations initiated various activities to help their members and to preserve the memory of their place of origin. Holocaust survivors and immigrants from these former communities were asked to send written texts describing their town and the Jewish life there. These texts were collected and published as the Yizkor Books.

Most Yizkor Books were written primarily in Yiddish and Hebrew, but some were written in other languages as well. Some books are devoted exclusively to a single community, while others are devoted to a number of neighboring communities. Hundreds of Yizkor Books were published, most of them between the 1950s and the 1970s.

Although each Yizkor Book is unique, there are nonetheless certain typical characteristics that tend to appear. These books have no definitive structure, but they often cover three different periods, and are constructed chronologically:

* The period before the First World War (pre-1914)
* The period between the two World Wars (1918-1939)
* The Holocaust period

The books include memories and descriptions of the communities and their everyday life, personal and family stories, depictions of the local Jewish leadership – rabbis and political leaders – and references to religious and educational institutions, including youth movements and political and Zionist activities. Large portions of the books are devoted to the Holocaust. Sometimes the books also include maps of the local city, town, or village, at times drawn from memory by one of the former Jewish residents. Most Yizkor Books include a list of the local Jews murdered during the Holocaust.

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**Lesson Walkthrough**

Introduction:

Use a corresponding PowerPoint presentation

1. Explain to the students what Yizkor Books are.

It is important to emphasize that the contributors to the Yizkor Books were sharing their personal experiences and memories. We know that one person’s memory cannot represent the memories of others, or purport to give a full depiction of life in a given community. On the other hand, personal memories are important resources for portraying everyday life, and may present us with material that is not included in other historical sources. This subject can be discussed with the students.

Activity

In the following activity we will read a passage describing the town of Kolbuszowa. Students will receive a link to a site containing a passage from a Yizkor Book, information about the town, and a number of questions. This activity can be undertaken with the teacher or in small groups, in which students will read and discuss the passage independently.

The link to the activity can be found here, as well as in the accompanying PowerPoint presentation:

The Kolbuszowa Yizkor Book

Guiding questions for the group presentation:

The teacher explains that Yizkor Books were written in order to commemorate the murdered Jewish communities. For those individuals who perished without a proper burial, these books stand in as a gravestone, as well as a memorial to the Jewish towns that were wiped out.

Lesson summary:

Use a corresponding PowerPoint presentation

On the slide is a front-page from a Yizkor Book. Ask the students to explain how the image reflects the reason the books were written.

A large collection of Yizkor Books is available to the public in the library reading room at Yad Vashem. In addition, hundreds of Yizkor Books have been digitized and are available at the following sites:

The New York Public Library: <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/yizkor-book-collection#/>

The Yiddish Book Center: <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yizkor-books>

These books can be downloaded in PDF form.

PowerPoint Presentation

Yizkor Books and the Jewish Shtetls – An Accompanying PowerPoint Presentation

What are Yizkor Books?

Immediately after the Holocaust, emigrants and survivors from Jewish communities that were destroyed during the Holocaust began to publish books commemorating their lost communities. These books are known as the Yizkor Books.

The books are dedicated to the memory of hundreds of Jewish communities that existed in cities, towns, and villages, primarily in Eastern Europe. Their former residents created organizations, the Landsmannschaften, which published the Yizkor Books.

Each book is made up of texts sent to the Landsmannschaften by survivors of the former Jewish communities they represent.

Most of the Yizkor books are written in Yiddish and / or Hebrew, and were published in Israel and the United States between the 1950s and the 1970s.

Yizkor Books come in different sizes, and their contents vary. But some characteristics are common to all of them.

The books include memories and descriptions of everyday life in the Jewish communities, including personal and family stories, depictions of the political and religious leadership, youth movements, and political, Zionist activity. Large portions of the books are devoted to the Holocaust.

Most of the Yizkor Books include lists of community members murdered during the Holocaust. The written descriptions are accompanied by personal photographs, documents, and maps from different periods.

Class activity

This is the front-page of a Yizkor Book for the Jadów Jewish community. How does the picture reflect the purpose for which the Yizkor Books were written?

The Yizkor Book for the Jadów Jewish community.

A passage from the Kolbuszowa Yizkor Book:

The Pinkas from Kolbuszowa (קאָלבסוב) [The United Kobaszhowers, (Brooklyn: Balshon, 1971)].

Information about the town:

Kolbuszowa is a town in South Eastern Poland. Between the two World Wars some 2,500 Jews lived there; about 50% of its inhabitants were Jewish. Most of them earned their living from retail and handcrafts, primarily in the clothing industry. They were also supported by former community members who had emigrated to the United States, as well as by Jewish charitable foundations. Additionally, there were local charitable organizations which provided certain health and welfare services. In Kolbuszowa there were Jewish political parties and youth movements, as well as a training Kibbutz (*Kibbutz Hachshara*), and a chapter of Agudath Israel.

In September 1939, the Germans invaded and began kidnapping Jews, who were sent into forced labor and dispossessed of their belongings. Later, the Jews were subjected to a variety of decrees, and were forced to wear a blue and white armband, with a Star of David. In June 1941, the town’s Jews were forced to resettle in the ghetto area, and in July 1942, most of them were sent to the Belzec extermination camp, where they were murdered.

The following passage, by Shalom Mihilstein from Kolbuszowa, describes the importance of the city market and commerce, as well as some of the various figures who worked there.

Question:

1. The city market, and commerce in general, held a central place in the lives of the local Jews. How is that centrality expressed in the passage?
2. Based on the passage, describe how the market in Kolbuszowa would look.
3. Which figures take part in commerce, and how are they related to one another?
4. Aside from commerce and market day, what else can we learn about everyday life in Kolbuszowa from the passage?
5. In your opinion, why did the writer choose to publish this text? Who was the intended audience?