

TEACHER'S GUIDE

Poland's Important Role in World War II

LESSON PLAN 5

Title: *Poles rescued thousands of Jews despite Hitler's death penalty; Poles warned Allies of Hitler's atrocities; Poland refused to help Hitler while other countries willingly helped.*

Learning Objectives: Students will learn the following:

1. The life-threatening and extremely difficult circumstances under which Poles rescued Jews
2. The two Polish organizations that rescued tens of thousands of Jews in German-occupied Poland
3. The four Polish diplomats who rescued thousands of Polish and other European Jews
4. Poland's Holocaust warnings to the U.S. and other countries
5. The countries that helped Hitler murder Jews
6. The four shameful actions Poland did not participate in while other countries did

Learning Standards Addressed: As determined by Teacher.

Materials: Computer projector; PowerPoint slides, Teacher's Guide

Procedure:

1. Introduction:

- a. Inform students that in this lesson they will learn about the following six important topics:
 - 1) The life-threatening and extremely difficult circumstances under which Poles rescued Jews
 - 2) The two Polish organizations that rescued tens of thousands of fugitive Jews in German-occupied Poland
 - 3) The four Polish diplomats who rescued some thousands of Polish and other European Jews
 - 4) Poland's warnings about the Holocaust to the world
 - 5) The countries that helped Hitler murder Jews
 - 6) The four shameful actions Poland did not participate in

2. Direct Instruction:

- a. **IDENTIFY THE LIFE-THREATENING AND EXTREMELY DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES UNDER WHICH POLES RESCUED JEWS.**

i. Introduction.

1. *As pointed out in Lesson 2, in the first two years of the war, the Germans conducted a mass murder campaign against Poles and set up a number of concentration camps for them. At the same time, the Germans established over 200 ghettos in Poland and forced Polish Jews to relocate into them. The ghettos were areas of towns and cities in which they were imprisoned. In each ghetto, the Germans established a Jewish Council to manage the needs of the people and carry out the orders of the Germans. To maintain order*

within the ghetto and enforce the Germans' orders, the Jewish Councils established Jewish Ghetto Police. Jews from other countries were later sent to these ghettos. Living conditions soon became unbearable as disease and starvation took the lives of many. Polish Jews who refused to enter the ghettos or later escaped from them became fugitives and had to rely on Poles for survival.

ii. **DISPLAY SLIDE 2 (Poles Rescued Jews under Threat of Death).**

iii. **Read the accompanying paragraphs to Slide 2 below.**

1. ***It was very dangerous for Poles to offer aid to fugitive Jews because of the death penalty enforced by the Germans.*** *Anyone who helped a Jew in any way, even offering a glass of water, would be executed together with immediate family. The Germans issued this death penalty only in Poland.*
 - a. *Despite this death penalty, Poles rescued thousands of Jews as many felt it was the Christian thing to do. Israel's Yad Vashem honors individuals who saved Jews from the Germans and the number of Poles, over 7,100, is far more than those of other countries.*
 - b. *The number of Poles who actually aided Jews is estimated at between 700,000 to 1 million. We should ask ourselves if we would risk our own life and the lives of our family to save one or more persons in similar circumstances.*
 - c. *The number of Poles killed by the Germans for aiding Jews is estimated at 50,000. German death squads carried out mass executions of entire villages that aided Jews and some of the annihilated villages became extinct.*
2. ***It was very difficult for Poles to shelter and feed fugitive Jews, not only because of the standing death penalty but also for other important reasons.***
 - a. *Most Polish Jews did not speak Polish, which made communication difficult.*
 - b. *The Germans imposed near-starvation rations on Poles, which made providing food to Jews in hiding difficult. Poles often had to buy additional food on the black market, which was very expensive.*
 - c. *The Germans confiscated the cattle, horses, wheat and potato crops of Polish farmers, and sent everything to Germany.*
 - d. *Most farmers and villagers had little food and living space to share because of the near-starvation rations and confiscation of crops and livestock.*

- e. *In the cities, the Germans conducted block-wide manhunts with dogs to find fugitive Jews. This made sheltering and concealing Jews very difficult as well as dangerous. Such manhunts were only done in Poland.*
- f. *Many people were needed to shelter a single Jew, who then had to be moved constantly to avoid German manhunts. Władysław Szpilman of the movie “The Pianist” was aided by 40 Poles. By contrast, it took only one person to betray Polish rescuers and their Jewish charges, which resulted in their immediate deaths.*

b. IDENTIFY THE TWO POLISH ORGANIZATIONS THAT SECRETLY RESCUED TENS OF THOUSANDS OF JEWS IN GERMAN-OCCUPIED POLAND.

- i. **Introduction.** The two organizations that secretly rescued tens of thousands of Jews in German-occupied Poland were Żegota and the Polish Catholic Church.
 1. **DISPLAY SLIDE 3 (Two Polish Organizations Saved Tens of Thousands of Jews).**
 2. **Read the accompanying paragraphs to Slide 3 below.**
 3. **Introduction to Żegota** (pronounced “Zeh-go-tah”). *At the end of 1942, it became apparent that the U.S. and Britain would not try to stop Hitler’s campaign of mass murder. As a result, in September 1942, two Polish women, Zofia Kossak and Wanda Krahelska-Filipowicz, co-founded Żegota, which was supported by the Polish government-in-exile in London and overseen by the Polish Underground. It was the only such organization in the German-occupied countries that was officially established to rescue Jews. Żegota was the code name for the “Polish Council to Aid Jews” and consisted of Poles and Polish Jews. Despite the ever-present death penalty for aiding Jews, Żegota carried out a number of Jewish rescue actions.*
 - a. *It provided safe houses, food, medical care, money, and false documents so that Jews would be identified as Poles.*
 - b. *Irena Sendler of Żegota’s Children’s Bureau rescued about 2,500 Jewish children and placed them with Polish families.*
 - c. *At least 20,000 Żegota members are estimated to have been executed by the Germans.*
 - d. *An estimated 50,000 Jews were aided by Żegota.*
 4. **Introduction to the Polish Catholic Church.** *The Polish Catholic Church rescued Jewish children on a massive scale by hiding them in convents, orphanages, and rectories. Two-thirds of Polish nunneries took part in the rescue of Jewish children.*

- a. *Priests forged birth certificates giving Jewish children new identities as Polish children.*
- b. *Mother Matylda Getter rescued up to 750 Jewish children and placed many with Polish families.*
- c. *There were just over 10 thousand priests in Poland and around 2,000 died at the hands of the Germans. About 4,000 priests and monks and 11,000 nuns were imprisoned in German concentration camps. An unknown number of priests and clergymen were killed by the Soviets and sent to the gulag camps.*

c. IDENTIFY FOUR POLISH DIPLOMATS WHO SECRETLY RESCUED MORE THAN 10,000 POLISH AND OTHER EUROPEAN JEWS.

- i. **Introduction.** There were also the successful rescues of Jews by Polish diplomats Alexander Ładoś in Switzerland, Tadeusz Romer in Japan, Wojciech Rychlewicz in Turkey, and Henryk Sławik in Hungary, who together saved thousands.
 1. **DISPLAY SLIDE 4 (Four Polish Diplomats Saved Thousands).**
 2. **Read the accompanying paragraphs to Slide 4 below.**
 3. **Alexander Ładoś – Polish Ambassador to Switzerland**
 - a. *Ambassador Ładoś (pronounced “Wah-doash”), together with three members of his staff and two Jewish representatives, falsified Latin American passports and had them smuggled into occupied Poland. The three staff members were **Stefan Ryniewicz** (pronounced “Rin-yeh-vitch”), head of the political branch, Consul **Konstanty Rokicki** (pronounced “Ro-kits-kee), and Attaché **Dr. Juliusz Küh**l (pronounced “Kyool”). The two Jewish representatives were **Abraham Silberschein** (pronounced “Zilber-shine”), a Polish Jew and Zionist leader, and **Rabbi Chaim Eiss** (pronounced “Ice”), leader of Agudat Yisrael in Switzerland.*
 - b. *Rokicki and Küh*l bribed the Paraguayan honorary Consul, Rudolf Hügli, to obtain blank passports, which Rokicki then filled out with the names of Jews provided by Rabbi Eiss. Eiss then smuggled the forged documents back into occupied Poland. The heroic Rabbi died suddenly of a heart attack in November 1943, which then slowed the Ładoś group’s efforts.
 - c. *Because the passports said that the Jewish holders were South American Jews rather than European Jews, they could not be sent to Hitler’s death camps. **In January, 1944, Silberschein reported that about 10,000 people were saved from being sent to the camps.***

4. Tadeusz Romer – Polish Ambassador to Japan

- a. When Hitler attacked Poland in September 1939, a number of Polish Jews fled to Lithuania, which at the time was a temporary safe haven.
- b. Chiune Sugihara (pronounced “Soo-gee-hara”), Japanese Consul in Lithuania, with the help of the Polish Underground in Lithuania, issued false Japanese transit visas to about 3,000 Polish and Lithuanian Jews that enabled them to travel through the Soviet Union to Vladivostok and then to Japan. Also, Jan Zwartendijk (pronounced “Zwahr-ten-dike”), Dutch Consul in Lithuania, issued destination visas to about 1,000 Polish and Lithuanian Jews for the Dutch colony of Curaçao.
- c. **Ambassador Romer** received word from the Polish Underground in Lithuania that Jews were on their way through the Soviet Union to Japan and they needed visas to leave Japan and go to safe countries. **He then provided visas to over 2,000 Jews that enabled them to travel to the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and Palestine.**
- d. The visas issued by Dutch Consul Zwartendijk enabled 1,300 Jews to travel to Curaçao.

5. Wojciech Rychlewicz – Polish Consul in Turkey

- a. **Consul Wojciech Rychlewicz** (pronounced “Voy-chech Rich-leh-vitch”) was an agent of the Polish military intelligence service who prepared reports on Soviet and German activity in Turkey and the Middle East. His most important action was to issue false certificates to thousands of Polish Jews that confirmed them as Polish Catholics. This enabled them to travel to Palestine and to several North and South American countries. **Although the exact number of certificates is not known, a few thousand is considered a reliable number.**

6. Henryk Sławik – Polish Delegate in Hungary

- a. **Delegate Henryk Sławik** (pronounced “Swah-veek”) represented the Polish government-in-exile in London. When the Germans invaded Poland in 1939, Sławik’s name was listed in their “Sonderfahndungsbuch Polen” (Special Wanted Book Poland), which identified over 60,000 Polish intelligentsia who were to be arrested and executed. He escaped to Hungary, where he met with his old friend József Antall, a high-ranking Hungarian official. Antall hired Sławik to help manage a Hungarian government organization that

assisted thousands of Poles and Polish Jews who had fled to Hungary.

- b. When Hitler discovered that Hungary's leader secretly tried to negotiate peace with the Allies in early 1944, he directed the German Army to occupy Hungary. By that time, **Sławik and Antall had issued false Polish passports to more than 30,000 Polish refugees, including 5,000 Polish Jews who received false Catholic baptism certificates.** The two men also established an orphanage in the town of Vac, in which 100 Jewish children lived and survived the war. Officially, the children studied the Polish curriculum; however, in secret sessions, they learned Hebrew and read the Torah.*
- c. Although the Germans occupied Hungary, Sławik refused to leave because his wife had been arrested by the Gestapo. He was soon arrested himself, together with Antall, and was tortured repeatedly for not revealing Antall's name, who also helped Polish Jews escape from Hungary. As a result, Sławik was taken to the Gusen concentration camp in Austria where he was executed in August 1944. József Antall survived the war.*

d. LEARN ABOUT POLAND'S WARNINGS ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST TO THE U.S. AND OTHER COUNTRIES.

- i. Introduction.** The Polish government-in-exile in London was the first to expose the Germans' atrocities. Through the press and diplomatic channels, it tried constantly to inform the Allies, neutral countries, and the international community about what was happening in Auschwitz and other camps as well Hitler's killing of Poles and Jews. Sadly, the U.S. and Britain chose not to intervene, which enabled Hitler to continue his campaign of mass murder.
 - 1. DISPLAY SLIDE 5 (Poland was first to warn of the Holocaust).**
 - 2. Read the accompanying paragraphs to Slide 5 below.**
 - 3. *Although Poland's warnings* were sent over a three-year period, the U.S. and Britain chose not to intervene. Key warnings are shown below.**
 - a. 1940**
 - i. March – Prisoner Witold Pilecki begins reporting on German atrocities against Poles in Auschwitz.*
 - b. 1941**
 - i. May – Polish diplomatic note warns Allies of German atrocities against Poles and Polish Jews.*
 - c. 1942**

- i. *May – Polish Underground sends report about Germans murdering Jews in Polish towns and cities.*
- ii. *August – Jan Karski enters the Warsaw Ghetto and witnesses the horrible conditions and suffering of Jews.*
- iii. *September – Jan Karski enters the Izbica transit camp and witnesses the horrible conditions as Jews await transport to the death camps.*
- iv. *December – Foreign Minister Raczynski sends formal report on Hitler’s mass murders to all UN signatories.*

d. 1943

- i. *February – Jan Karski reports Hitler’s mass murders to British Foreign Secretary Eden, which falls on deaf ears.*
- ii. *July – Jan Karski reports Hitler’s mass murders to President Roosevelt, which also falls on deaf ears.*

e. IDENTIFY THE COUNTRIES THAT HELPED HITLER MURDER JEWS.

- i. **Introduction.** The Germans and their annexed Austrian partners in crime could not have caused the deaths of so many Jews without the help of other European countries. In addition to Germany and Austria, seven collaborating countries arrested their Jews and deported them to the death camps. Seven collaborating countries formed militias that killed their Jews. A number of countries formed SS units that fought for Hitler and prolonged his campaign of mass murder. *As a precautionary note, it should be kept in mind that the word “countries” refers to the **governments of the countries** listed. Some of the countries were allies of Germany while others formed a puppet government that collaborated with the occupying Germans.*

1. DISPLAY SLIDE 6 (Hitler’s Holocaust Helpers).

2. Read the accompanying paragraphs to Slide 6 below.

a. Countries that deported their Jews to the death camps

- i. *France, Holland, Hungary, Slovakia, Belgium, Norway, Bulgaria, Austria, Germany*

b. Countries that formed militias and murdered Jews

- i. *Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Croatia, Romania, Hungary*
- ii. *German and Austrian units also murdered Jews.*

c. Countries that formed SS units that fought for Germany

- i. *Ukraine, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Latvia, Estonia, Italy, France, Croatia, Holland, Romania, Finland, Bulgaria, and others*

f. **IDENTIFY THE ACTIONS THAT POLAND NEVER PARTICIPATED IN.**

- i. **Introduction.** Poland's many courageous actions, extensive human losses, and significant military contributions are facts that are often missing in lessons and books about World War II. One of Poland's courageous actions was its refusal to help Hitler in his mass murder of Polish and other European Jews. It is important for students to understand that Poland did not commit the shameful acts of other countries.

1. **DISPLAY SLIDE 7 (Poland was not a Holocaust Helper).**

2. **Read the accompanying paragraphs to Slide 7 below.**

a. ***In contrast to other European countries, Poles never did the following:***

- i. ***Never formed a collaborationist government that deported Jews to the death camps***
- ii. ***Never formed a militia that killed Jews outright***
- iii. ***Never formed an SS unit to fight under German command***
- iv. ***Never were guards or torturers in Hitler's death camps***

3. **Guided Practice:**

- g. Have students describe how they think they would act if they knew that aiding a fugitive in wartime was punishable by death together with immediate family and:
- i. If one or more fugitives appeared at their home at night and begged for food or shelter

4. **Independent Practice:**

- h. Have students name the two Polish organizations that rescued tens of thousands of Jews in occupied Poland.
 - i. Have students name three of six countries that helped Hitler by deporting Jews to the death camps.
 - j. Have students name four of eight countries that formed militias and helped Hitler murder Jews by killing them outright.
 - k. Have students name at least five countries that formed SS units that fought under German command.
 - l. Have students research a Pole or Polish family who aided Jews. Suggested individuals are Irena Sendler and Irene Gut Opdyke. A suggested Polish family is the Ulma family.
5. **Teacher Assessment:** Write an essay on one of these topics: "Were Poles who rescued heroes or not? What might have been the motive(s) of Poles who rescued Jews?"
6. **Teacher Reflection:** As applicable.

Reference information for Lesson 5 Slides

SLIDE 2: Poles Rescued Jews under Threat of Death

German Decree: Any Pole aiding a Jew will be executed with immediate family. See “Death penalty for the rescue of Jews in occupied Poland” in Wikipedia article titled “Rescue of Jews by Poles during the Holocaust”.

An estimated 700,000 to 1 million Poles aided Jews. From Wikipedia; article titled “Rescue of Jews by Poles during the Holocaust”; paragraph titled “Statistics”.

An estimated 50,000 Poles were killed for aiding Jews. From Wikipedia; article titled “Rescue of Jews by Poles during the Holocaust”; paragraph titled “Punishment for aiding the Jews”. **Aiding Jews was difficult.** From Wikipedia; article titled “Rescue of Jews by Poles during the Holocaust”; paragraph titled “Difficulties”.

SLIDE 3: Two Polish Organizations Saved Tens of Thousands

Żegota – Poland’s official organization to rescue Jews. From Wikipedia; article titled “Żegota”.

Irena Sendler placed 2,500 Jewish children with Polish families. From Wikipedia; article titled “Irena Sendler”. The article notes that Sendler cites the 2,500 figure herself.

Polish Catholic Church – rescued Jewish children on a massive scale. From Wikipedia; article titled “Rescue of Jews by Catholics during the Holocaust”; paragraph titled “Poland and the Żegota Council to Aid Jews”.

Mother Matylda Getter. From Wikipedia; article titled “Matylda Getter”.

SLIDE 4: Four Polish Diplomats Saved Thousands

Alexander Ładoś – Polish Ambassador to Switzerland. From Wikipedia; article titled “Ładoś Group”. There are no exact figures for how many Jews benefited from the Latin American passports scheme but by all accounts, the figure runs into the thousands. In a major study, Jakub Kumoch, former Polish ambassador in Switzerland, has so far identified 3,262 names, of which an estimated 796 survived. However, when one takes into account that family members were also included in many of the passports, the total beneficiary figure may run much higher, perhaps as many as 10,000, of which between 2,000 to 3,000 may have survived. Work on this tabulation is still continuing.

Tadeusz Romer – Polish Ambassador to Japan. From Wikipedia; article titled “Tadeusz Romer”.

Wojciech Rychlewicz – Polish Consul in Turkey. From Wikipedia; article titled “Wojciech Rychlewicz”.

Henryk Sławik – Polish Delegate in Hungary. From Wikipedia; article titled “Henryk Sławik”.

SLIDE 5: Poland was first to warn of the Holocaust

1940 – Witold Pilecki begins reporting from Auschwitz. (From Wikipedia; article titled “Witold Pilecki”).

1941 – Polish diplomatic note warns Allies of atrocities. From Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum; article titled “The role of the Polish government-in-exile”; at <http://www.auschwitz.org/en/history/informing-the-world/the-role-of-the-polish-government-in-exile/>. “On the night of May 3, 1941, the Polish government used a diplomatic note to inform Allied and neutral governments about arrests and mass executions in Poland, deportation to

Auschwitz and other camps, and the conditions there. The note also discussed atrocities committed against Jews in the first 15 months of the occupation.”

1942

- **May** - The report was written by Leon Feiner, a Polish Jew who hid on the Aryan side while working with Jewish leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto. Because Feiner was a member of the leftist Bund political party, it is referred to as the “Bund Report”. Feiner twice arranged for Karski to enter the Warsaw Ghetto. The report was delivered by a courier of the Polish Resistance.
- **Aug & Sep - Jan Karski witnesses Warsaw Ghetto and Izbica transit camp.** From Wikipedia, article titled “Jan Karski”, paragraph titled “Resistance”. (In November, Karski reported his eyewitness accounts to the Polish government-in-exile in London.)
- **December - Polish government reports atrocities to UN countries.** From Wikipedia, article titled “Jan Karski”; paragraph titled “Reporting Nazi atrocities to the Western Allies”.

1943 - Jan Karski meets with President Roosevelt – atrocities ignored. From Wikipedia; article titled “Jan Karski”; paragraph titled “Reporting Nazi atrocities to the Western Allies”.

SLIDE 6: Hitler’s Holocaust Helpers

*As a precautionary note, it should be kept in mind that “countries” refers to the **governments of the countries** that were occupied by the Germans and formed a puppet government under German control or were an ally of Germany. The information below is derived from various sources but relies mainly on the Wikipedia article titled “Collaboration with the Axis powers”.*

Countries that deported their Jews to the death camps. France, Holland, Belgium, and Norway formed puppet governments that collaborated with the occupying Germans. Hungary, Slovakia, and Bulgaria were allies of Germany.

Countries that formed militias that killed Jews. Hitler used Ukrainian units that murdered Jews, the more prominent of which were the Nachtigall Battalion and the Trawniki. The latter took a major part in Operation Reinhard, Reinhard Heydrich’s plan to exterminate Polish Jews. Trawniki also served at extermination camps and played an important role in the liquidation of ghettos in occupied Poland. Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian Auxiliary Police Battalions were used by the Germans to murder Jews in their respective occupied countries. As allies of Germany, Croatia’s Ustase, Romania’s Iron Guard, and Hungary’s Arrow Cross militias arrested and killed Jews in their respective countries.

Countries that formed SS units for Germany. In Hitler’s foreign SS units, most members were country nationals. From Wikipedia; article titled “Waffen-SS foreign volunteers and conscripts”.

SLIDE 7: Poland was not a Holocaust Helper. Various academic sources confirm that Poland did not: (1) form a puppet collaborationist government with the occupying Germans, (2) form a militia that arrested and killed Jews (3) form an SS unit to fight under German command (4) serve as guards or torturers in Hitler’s death camps. Regarding this fourth point, it should be noted that, rather than camp guards and torturers, Poles were camp prisoners and many died in the camps.