“Everyday Heroines”
Jewish Women in the Holocaust
Introduction

The enormous and monumental story of the Holocaust is made up of a human mosaic of individuals and groups: children, teenagers, the elderly, women, men. The focus on the different groups creates a more complete, nuanced and distinct picture of the Holocaust, one that provides a better understanding of the human suffering and of the dilemmas that arose, and how they were dealt with. The number and concept of six million victims is impossible to grasp and understand, whereas the discussion of a specific and clearly defined group may help to bring one particular aspect of the human story into sharper focus. It is hoped that “breaking up” the huge historical account in order to extract the story of various groups and individuals will make it possible to better contend with the complexity of the Holocaust. That is why just as we will discuss the fate of the children in the Holocaust or the dilemmas of young people who belonged to the underground, we will also explore the fate of Jewish women in the Holocaust. Like every other clearly defined group within Jewish society, women too had their own unique dilemmas, in part due to their being mothers and wives.

The anti-Jewish policies throughout the area of Nazi control impacted the Jewish family and created a huge crisis in the traditional division of roles between men and women. A number of facts contributed to a marked reduction in the number of men, many of whom either escaped occupied Poland by fleeing to the east or were abducted for forced labor, arrested or murdered; the men feared going out into the street and the mortality rate was high – all these things led to the broadening of the women’s areas of responsibility and action and increased her influence in the family. Women took on new roles and were forced to confront extreme situations unlike anything they had experienced ever before. One of the most striking aspects of this situation was the women’s ability to adapt and improvise, and their courage.
The women’s adaptability could be seen in their efforts to mitigate the decrees that impacted their family members, the responsibility they took to do whatever they could to maintain the family routine in the home, their efforts to continue to run their household with the increasingly meager means at their disposal, and in their courageous stand vis-à-vis the legal authorities when they were required to represent or protect their men or other family members, a situation that was expressed most strikingly already in Germany in the 1930s. As the historian Emanuel Ringelblum wrote in June 1942 in the Warsaw ghetto:

The future historian will have to dedicate an appropriate page to the Jewish woman in the war. She will take up an important page in Jewish history for her courage and steadfastness. Thanks to her, thousands of families have managed to surmount the terror of the times.

Emanuel Ringelblum, Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto

Raquel Hodara maintains that the Nazis ascribed importance to the subject of gender, even if they subordinated it to their racial doctrine. They knew perfectly well that the murder of women and children was the last taboo of human society. Its removal required greater indoctrination and brutalization than any other crime. Once the final taboo was lifted, anything was possible.¹

In her view, what needs to be written is “a dual look back at history,” that will identify those aspects specific to each gender, while avoiding the drawbacks of an isolationist approach. The purpose of such gender-based history is to describe what may be defined as the female and individual, in an attempt to reach “the human through the feminine.”²


2. Ibid. p. 325.
The individual and day-to-day life lies at the focus of the work of the social historian, in an effort to restore to the victims their human and individual faces.

This book is the first exploration of the unique dilemmas faced by observant and traditional women who sought to preserve and maintain Jewish tradition in the midst of the destruction and despair of the Holocaust.
This lesson aims to present the unique difficulties that mothers in the ghetto experienced and the ways in which they dealt with them, as well as further discussion on the question of what strengths the mothers needed in order to contend with hardships in the ghetto.

**Background:** The reality of life in the ghettos affected the way that mothers functioned. On the one hand, it increased the mother’s natural desire and commitment to care for the needs of her family, especially those of the children, but at the same time, it undermined her ability to function in this reality. The overcrowding, hunger, loss, and constant deprivation had become an inseparable part of the reality of life in the ghettos, turning day-to-day life into an incessant battle for one’s very physical and human existence. The need to obtain food, as well as fuel to heat and cook, to maintain the home and care for the children were translated into an arduous daily battle for each family, but especially for mothers. In this unit, we will discuss how mothers contended with the various hardships they faced in the ghetto.
Lesson Structure

- **Introduction**: Discussion of the special difficulties that mothers faced in the ghetto.
- Discussion of how mothers in the ghetto dealt with:
  - The problem of food in the ghetto
  - The need to go out to work
  - The difficulty in maintaining cleanliness and hygiene in the home
- **Conclusion**:

  “[...] From what magical stream does my mother draw strength for all of this?”

Lesson Plan

Introduction

Irena, who was a young girl in the Lodz ghetto, wrote:

> From what magical stream does my mother draw strength for all of this? She is a beautiful and pampered woman who never did a day of physical work in her life.

Irena Liebman, Yad Vashem Archives 03/3752

- What can we learn from what Irena says about the way her mother functioned in the ghetto?
Read the following data – what, in your opinion are the unique difficulties that mothers faced in the ghettos?

**Lodz Ghetto**

- The average number of calories per day allotted to people doing difficult physical labor was 1,100. There were cases in which the full amount of food was not supplied.
- The cost of a kilogram of bread on the black market at its highest was 1,600 marks.
  - The average weekly salary of a ghetto worker was 15-130 marks per week.
- 1 in every 5 ghetto inhabitants died as a result of the living conditions in the ghetto.
- The percentage of people in the ghetto that were working was 66%-78%.
- Epidemics of tuberculosis, dysentery, and other diseases broke out in the ghetto periodically.
- An average of 8-10 people lived in each room.
- About 63% of the homes did not have bathrooms.
- Fewer than 2% of the homes were connected to gas for cooking.
- The Lodz ghetto existed from May 1940 to August 1944 (more than 4 years).

**Warsaw Ghetto**

- About 440,000 people lived in the Warsaw ghetto.
- The ghetto covered an area of about 2.4% of the city, and about 30% of the population of the city was crowded into it.
- The official food ration for non-workers was 184 calories a day.
- About 80% of the food was smuggled into the ghetto.
- In the summer of 1941, the death rate was about 5,500 people each month.
- According to German figures, 6 to 7 people lived in each room.
- The Warsaw ghetto existed from November 1940 to May 1943 (about 2.5 years).
Shavli (Šiauliai) Ghetto

- On September 1, 1941 the two parts of the Shavli ghetto were officially sealed and fenced off. Lithuanian guards were stationed at its gates and only people with special permits were permitted to enter and exit the ghetto.
- About 5,500 Jews and refugees lived in an area of about 8,000 square meters, meaning that the average amount of living space per person was 1.5 meters. In addition, the ghetto area was repeatedly reduced.
- In January 1943, women represented 65% of the ghetto’s population.
- In September 1943, the inhabitants of the ghetto were categorized based on their fitness for work. Those considered unfit for work were deported from the ghetto and murdered.

Problems of Food in the Ghetto

**Background:** One of the most difficult tasks was the distribution of food to the family members in order to prevent ongoing starvation. The bread and other food products were distributed once every few days and the families had to make do until the next food distribution. The incessant hunger they suffered from caused the adults and children to constantly seek a feeling of satiation, even if only temporarily, sometimes without thought for the coming days. Often it was the women who took the distribution of the rations upon themselves, and they hid them out of consideration for the coming days of scarcity. Women in the ghetto stood for many long hours in lines for food. They were forced to improvise various dishes from the inferior products they were able to obtain, such as potato peels, in addition to the shortage of gas in many ghettos that required the rationing of cooking time according to the size of the family.

A further difficulty faced by the women in the ghetto involved caring for ill family members. The reality of life in the ghetto created a shortage of medications and caused their prices to soar. Often, a family was forced to sell its belongings or ration coupons in order to obtain medications for family members. In many cases, it was the mothers that gave up their own food rations in order to obtain the needed medicines.

The reality that the Germans created meant that it was extremely difficult for the mothers to fulfill their traditional role, forcing them to contend with impossible dilemmas.
In an essay, Josef Zelkowicz, a Jewish journalist imprisoned in the Lodz ghetto describes the terrible hardships he saw while visiting in the homes of people in the ghetto. From one such visit, he describes the following scene:

 [...] Mendel, who, although already fourteen years old, cries like mother’s little baby:
  – Mommy, I’m hungry…
  – Mommy, if you only knew how hungry I am…


This description can be read from two perspectives. From the first, one’s heart is filled with compassion for the 14-year-old boy who is so hungry that he is not ashamed to cry in front of strangers. However, it can also be read from the perspective of the mother and the helplessness she must have felt in this situation. There is nothing more natural than for a mother to care for and feed her children. From the moment a baby is born, his mother takes care of all his needs and keeps him from being hungry, but in the reality of the ghetto, even the most natural thing became impossible.

**Discussion**

Here are some excerpts of testimonies dealing with the subject of food in the ghetto. Hand out the testimonies to the students and after reading them, discuss the dilemmas that arise from them and how to deal with them.

Please note: The purpose of the discussion is to underscore the complexity and problematic nature of the ghetto reality, to bring the dilemmas to the surface along with the difficulty in making rational decisions and the need to maneuver among the various types of difficulties.

The dilemmas dealt with a number of subjects:
• **Obtaining food**
  - How did they obtain food?
  - What was involved in obtaining food (discuss the dangers and moral dilemmas)
  - What issues were caused by the need to obtain food, in addition to the dangers and moral dilemmas?

• **Preparing food under conditions of a shortage of products and staples – the need to improvise**
  - How did they cook food?
  - What dishes did they prepare? What products did they make them from?

• **The distribution of food to the family members**
  - How was the food distributed among the family members?
  - What problems and tensions did the distribution of food create?

Choose a statement from among the testimonies that in your view reflects the main difficulty that the mothers suffered in regard to the subject of food.
Read the testimonies below. Please note the subjects that come up in the testimonies:

- Obtaining food
- Preparing food under conditions of shortage
- The distribution of food to the family members

My mother managed to save the bread by hiding it from us in her bed. We children knew where the hiding place was but she always watched it. We were afraid to take the bread because she knew that if we ate it, there wouldn’t be any food afterwards. [...] Women filled a unique role in the organization and administration of the food. [...] I would say that my poor mother, who was eventually taken to Treblinka, was a genius in the way she managed to do it.

Feygl Peltel (Władka Miedzyrzecki-Meed), born in Warsaw, Poland, 1921, Yad Vashem Archives, 3542 0.3

The apartment was big and contained a large number of rooms, large rooms, with at least 20 people living in each room, and eight to five people living in the smaller rooms. [...] On the other side was the kitchen. The kitchen was shared by all the families living in the apartment, and each family had its own corner and cooking time. And so the women would go to the kitchen carrying the food products with them through all the rooms and then return to their rooms, carrying the warm cooked food in the pot.

Shoshana Rabinowitz, A Mother and Daughter, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 2002, p. 42.
[...] Mendel, who, although already fourteen years old, cries like mother’s little baby:
– Mommy, I’m hungry…
– Mommy, if you only knew how hungry I am…


My siblings fell ill, one after another. The stove was cold and neglected because there was nothing to heat it up with. Mother, who was herself ill, ran around incessantly in an effort to obtain some food to revive us with. When she entered the room with empty hands, without even a cup of hot water, which she got at a neighbor’s, she looked helpless, although she tried to hide her anguish from us.


There were all kinds of methods that families used to live with the food rations they received. There were families in which each member guarded his own ration and ate it whenever he felt like it or whenever it was convenient. And there were families that shared, in which the children allotted from their portion for the parents, and that was seemingly more humane. And there were families that didn’t distinguish between my portion and yours, but continued to share family life. And our family was among the last type, that lived according to the system in which there was no distinction
between what I received and what you received, and if you got more. Everyone brought their ration home, and mother gave each one what she thought needed to be given, and there were no arguments or discussions, so that at that time, I lived at the expense of others in my family.

Alfreda Aizenman, Yad Vashem Archives, 03/5663

[...] “I don’t understand you,” Avraham said one day to Mother, banging his fist on the table. “Everyone is jealous of me because my mother has been working in the kitchen for two months, and you, you haven’t even stolen one potato.” “That’s true, but I give you my bread ration, because I eat soup twice a day,” Mother replied. “All right, but starting tomorrow, I want you to measure the bread in centimeters. You always give Lucie more!” “No, my son, I always divide it into equal parts, but if you want, I’ll measure the bread in centimeters to be sure both pieces are the same.”

The following day, Mother returned from work as pale as chalk. She was close to fainting. From her sleeve, she slid out two potatoes the size of a nut. When Avraham saw them, he kissed her hands. “Don’t do it anymore, Mother. I don’t want you to get sick. You’ll see, the Russians or someone else will liberate us. Don’t cry, little mother, our Pik-Cytryn princess. You’ll see, everything will be all right, the world won’t let us die. Dearest Mother, don’t cry!”

Avraham Cytryn, A Youth Writing Between the Walls, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 2005, pp. 247-248.
Up to David’s illness, we never brought meat into our house because the miserly amount that we were allotted was non-kosher, either pork or horsemeat. But when David fell ill, Mother determined that we had reached a crucial stage and should start using non-kosher meat. At first, only David ate this meat, and we kept two separate kitchens, one kosher and one non-kosher. At the end of a year, however, we found it very difficult to observe punctiliously every rule of Kashrut, and as the two other boys started showing symptoms of ill-health, we gave in and ate from the non-kosher meat.


Mother, despite her fatigue, peeled some potatoes, and, with a little flour and a lot of water, made soup which we ate for supper. The soup was very watery, but it was still important for us to eat something hot before going to bed. Some of the soup Mother reserved for Talka to have as a meal the next day.

Mother decided as always that we would eat the bread we had, but Mother continued to lose weight. Her physical condition kept getting worse. She lost 30 kilos of her weight. We realized at home that Mother wasn’t eating, so that she would have more to give the rest of the family. And so we began to argue amongst ourselves and we insisted with Mother that we would divide the bread up, because otherwise she wouldn’t eat anything and wouldn’t be able to carry on. It got to the point that she could no longer walk and I had to go to work. [...] I think that thanks to that, the family held on for much longer. The emotional support and the fact that each at least ate the portion needed to survive. Mother went above and beyond what was needed to keep the family going. The family atmosphere also continued, the lighting of candles – I have no idea what was used to light them – Shabbat was Shabbat, there were candlesticks, and we made Kiddush.

Dvora Berger, Yad Vashem Archives, 0.3/7033

Babka
A dish made of grated potatoes mixed with a little flour / or grated radish, kohlrabi, etc. / coffee substitute, sweetened with saccharine / with the addition of spices – cooked in boiling water / as a kind of pudding for an hour to an hour and a half. When potatoes were distributed in greater quantities, it served as a pleasant substitute for bread. During periods of famine, this dish would be made of potato peels or a coffee substitute.

Mothers’ Work

Background for the teacher:
Due to the severe hardship in the ghettos, as well as the deportations that were anticipated in many places for those who did not have a work permit, mothers were forced to go out to work, and in many cases, had no choice but to leave their young children for many long hours alone without supervision.

Many women and men did whatever they could to obtain a work permit, which in many ghettos was equivalent to a “life permit” for the entire family. This permit provided protection, albeit temporarily, from deportation. In some of the ghettos, the workers received food of a slightly better quality, part of which they saved for their children. The requirement to work, on the one hand, and the lack of any educational frameworks and supervision for the children, on the other, created enormous difficulty for the parents, and especially for the mothers. It is also worth noting that there were cases in which mothers went out to work on the orders of the Germans.

Re-read the words of Irena Liebman with which we began the lesson:

...From what wondrous spring does my mother draw her strength for all this? She is a beautiful and pampered woman who never did a day of physical work in her life.

With what difficulty was Irena’s mother forced to contend?

My mother was a very quick and hard-working woman who never complained. They took away her sewing machine and she didn’t complain. In the ghetto, people grew and clothing tore. If you look at the pictures, you’ll see that people wore rags. Mother would go from door to door and ask for pieces of fabric to sew and fix all kinds of things. She took very little money so that it would be worth the people’s while. That’s
how she found buyers, and people who began to give her clothing to sew. It was difficult to sew without a machine and she had to sew everything by hand with a needle and thread. When winter came, her hands froze because there was nothing with which to warm them. I remember that a tailor lived across from us and he told my mother that while she was sitting and sewing and freezing and didn’t feel well, he was no longer able to bear it because it was so difficult. He lay in bed all day in order to keep warm. Afterwards, he starved to death. My mother continued to work for pennies, which were barely enough to buy bread. She sewed as long as she had customers. Afterwards, she found work in a laundry.

Esther Zychlinski, Yad Vashem Archives 03.8362

- What difficulties did Esther’s mother have to deal with?
- What characterized the way her mother contended with these difficulties?
- Beyond the physical difficulties, how did the fact that the mothers went out to work affect them?

For instance, I cannot recollect how my mother managed to open a small vegetable store, or where she obtained her wares. Our huge window served as the counter. We placed scales on the windowsill, and some of the passers-by would stop and buy something. We were not particularly enthusiastic about that venture and hampered Mother by acting like stupid snobs. It never occurred to us that Mother was sacrificing her own dignity in an effort to improve a little her ungrateful children’s material circumstances a little.

Sara Selver-Urbach, Through the Window of my Home, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1986, p. 65.
October 3, 1943
The young children are a cause of great concern now in the ghetto. All the parents are forced to leave the home for 12 hours and longer. The toddlers remain at home for many hours without any supervision. The mothers are worried: What is to be done with the children for an entire day?


And I was quite neglected at the beginning because there was no one to watch over me. I was dirty and had lice. I even had ringworm.

Esther Dublin, Yad Vashem Archives 0.3/5492

Sara Selver-Urbach notes that the fact that her mother began to sell vegetables was not “dignified.” It is interesting to try to gain an understanding of why the children felt that this activity offended their dignity. It may be assumed that this was a reflection of the dramatic change that occurred in their world compared to the conditions they had been accustomed to in their home before the Holocaust. Then, their mother had been a homemaker who kept a clean and well-tended home, and now any passer-by could look inside, into the privacy of their neglected home.

The fact that the children still had certain expectations of their mother was due to her efforts to preserve the family norms in which she continued to function as the mother, the leader of the family and its representative to the world. Consequently, what they perceived as a change in her status because of a job that they viewed as inferior harmed their status as well.
Cleanliness

Background: In addition to having to go out to work to help support the family, the mothers also bore the burden of the housework. One of the most difficult tasks was keeping the house clean and doing the laundry. The women did the best they could to preserve the previous habits of cleanliness, however because of the severe shortage of cleaning supplies, keeping the house clean was an almost impossible task. There was a severe shortage of soap, no fuel with which to heat the water for the laundry, and most importantly, after many long hours of hard work and after standing in lines for hours on end to obtain food and in their continuing state of starvation, the women had no strength left to wash the floors of their home or do laundry in the tub. In addition to their physical exhaustion, the women also suffered from emotional exhaustion due to the constant struggle to survive under conditions of extreme hardship, uncertainty as to what the future would bring and concern for the safety and welfare of their families. The condition of the buildings in the ghetto also made it difficult to maintain cleanliness. The ghettos were usually established in the poorest, most squalid parts of the city, whose buildings were old and dilapidated, many lacking proper drainage and sewage systems. A number of families lived in each house and the overcrowding further increased the difficulty involved in maintaining hygiene and cleanliness. The inability to keep the houses clean and maintain personal hygiene had serious implications for the health of the ghetto inhabitants. Disease was rampant and epidemics broke out frequently, contributing to the high mortality rate.

Sara Selver-Urbach describes her home before the war:

*My father was employed in a big commercial firm, my mother was a housewife. We lived in one large room and a kitchen. Our home was filled with light and always sparkingly clean. It seemed to be constantly smiling. Our kitchen was oblong. Its white furniture and shiny red floor lent it a pleasant, holiday mood.*

Why do you think that the cleanliness and order in her home from before the war are so dominant in Sara’s memory?

**Discussion:**

- What difficulties did mothers who tried to keep their homes and family clean in the ghetto encounter?
- How did they deal with these difficulties?

> [...] The housewives are not at fault for the filth in the ghetto apartments. It’s the fault of the walls, which keep crying and wetting the floor with plaster tears [...] it is not the housewives’ indolence that makes the ghetto inhabitants’ sheets and linens so grimy. The conditions forced on them are to blame: there is no fuel to heat the water for laundering the linens, there is no soap, and – this is the main thing – after hours of queuing and days of fasting, people no longer have the strength to squat behind the bucket and scrub laundry in cold water without soap.


- Besides the physical difficulties, what other difficulties did the mother’s face?
- Read Esther Dublin’s testimony again. Why did her situation worsen?
- Some mothers insisted on trying to maintain a certain level of cleanliness, despite the difficulty. What motivated them?
We had no hot water for our laundry, nor fuel to boil it. My hands were not skilled in that chore and the things I washed came out grey and still soiled. With time, we started to itch. To our shame, mother found lice in the seams of our clothes. An embarrassing situation ensued, especially when a strong urge to scratch would seize us in the company of strangers and we had to curb that shameful urge. How to get rid of this affliction? Because of the cold, we could neither wash our bodies properly nor thoroughly launder our clothes. Our room was very damp, the corners actually wet so that, when the frost first set in, the water-drops would turn into glistening icicles.


In the ghetto, Mother proved to be extremely resourceful. Mother, whom I had never seen in the kitchen before the war, who never cleaned, did laundry, polished or washed dishes with her own hands, in the ghetto fought like a tiger to keep our apartment clean. We still had the large, heavy brush that Michia [the servant who had worked in our home before the war] had sometimes used to polish the parquet floors. She even had to polish the floor under the rug! In the ghetto, we no longer had any rugs, but Mother, with Father’s help, continued to meticulously polish the floor…

Mother once asked me to look on the Polish side for wax and a little soap to help us keep ourselves clean.

3. Hanna Avrutski smuggled food into the ghetto.
and healthy. She once asked me to go to a pharmacy and buy a preparation against head lice. “Mother, who has lice?” I asked. “You do, Hanke, and so does Maricia and we have to get rid of them.” But I was too embarrassed to do so… Mother found a can of kerosene somewhere in the ghetto and smeared Maricia’s hair with kerosene with its terrible smell…


**Conclusion**

- The hardships of life in the ghetto affected the mothers. How did they change as a result?
- What values are reflected in the ways the mothers coped with the difficulties of life in the ghetto?

From what magical stream does my mother draw strength for all of this? She is a beautiful and pampered woman who never did a day of physical work in her life.

What in your opinion, based on the testimonies and on the discussions we have had, was the strength from which the mothers drew their ability to contend with the difficulties of life in the ghetto.

One possible answer can be found in Irena’s words:

There must be some great, hidden force, a force of love, a force of tremendous will to hold on and watch out for us.
The aim of this lesson is to become familiar with the unique situation in which religious women found themselves in the ghettos and camps during the Holocaust.

**Background:** Jewish women in the ghettos and camps were forced to contend with challenges that were unique to them as women. However, observant women who wished to abide by Jewish tradition were forced to contend with further difficulty, which resulted from their desire to adhere to those particular Jewish commandments that were unique to women; such as kindling the Sabbath candles or other precepts related to their traditional role as women. The death rate was high and the deportation of the men to forced-labor camps, as well as the Germans’ separation policy in the camps and in some cases, even in the ghettos, created a reality in which many women felt that they had to fulfill certain roles and commandments that were traditionally filled by men.

In this unit, we will try to understand how religious women coped during that period. We will distinguish between two main strategies that guided their actions; preservation and adaptation. Preservation was expressed in their efforts to continue to maintain a religious lifestyle, with everything that this entailed, within the limitations and difficulties imposed upon them by life in the ghettos and camps. Adaptation presents the ways in which they filled the vacuum that was created in their religious, public and private lives.

Please note: All the source texts are available on the accompanying CD.
Lesson Structure

**Introduction:** Discussion of the significance and meaning of the Sabbath and the challenges of observing it in the ghetto.

**Part 1:** A discussion with all the students about lighting candles and keeping kosher in the ghettos.

**Part 2:** Work in groups on testimonies that discuss observing tradition.

Lesson Plan

**Introduction**

- **Discussion:** What do you associate with the Sabbath?
- What is the meaning of the Sabbath to you?
- What associations does the word ghetto evoke for you?

Present the following photographs to the students (each separately):

A woman caring for a baby in a shelter for the deported in the Warsaw ghetto
Distribution of food in the Lodz ghetto

A room in a shelter for refugees in the Warsaw ghetto
People searching for edible roots in the Lodz ghetto (A0338)

Jewish women eating in the street in the Lodz ghetto
The hardship, hunger, privation and overcrowding shown in these photographs undermined the fabric of family life in the ghetto. In the absence of a clearly defined space for each family, the home atmosphere and family intimacy were damaged. The normally festive Sabbath atmosphere appears to contradict everything seen in these photographs.

Discussion:
- Was it possible to observe the Sabbath in the ghetto? How?
- What was the meaning of the Sabbath in the ghetto?

Part 1
Candle Lighting
Read the following excerpts together with the students and then present the photographs that follow (all the sources are available on the accompanying CD):

...And so, Aunt Hannah Rochel has also left us.
I happened to witness the last transport as it was loaded on the train at Marysin. I saw her there together with her Sabbath candlesticks. I cannot forget that scene, as if her whole life was revealed to me at that moment and a wondrous bond connected it to those candlesticks, a bond that shone brightly to illuminate the deeper meaning of her fate.
A sense of destruction and doom hovers. Tomorrow or the day after, we too may be sent off, and I am caught up in a writing fever. I must write about my Aunt Hannah Rochel. I must hurry and write.
At that time, she was already all alone, with no one to support or help her despite her poor physical state. [...] But along with the pain, a kind of stubborn light flashed in Aunt Hannah Rochel’s eyes, an expression of defiance and “Never give in!” [...] She lived in a tiny room. [...] On a crate stood two large, heavy silver candlesticks, intricately and artistically carved in the old style. [...]
Every time I saw Aunt Hannah Rochel bless the candles on Friday night, with her hands covering her face and her lips whispering prayers, I could feel the life embodied in those two candlesticks. I could hear the sighs of sorrow they had absorbed over the generations, and in my mind's eye, I could envision all the tears that had been spilled as the aunts and mothers and grandmothers who had preceded Hannah Rochel said their prayers as they blessed the Sabbath candles.

The polished candlesticks, which sparkled and filled the room with their light, dispelled the gloominess and shone with a special brightness. If not for them, there would have been only a barren and tortured emptiness. The few belongings that she had managed to take with her were gradually exchanged for food supplies. [...] Only the candlesticks remained for her to drown her sorrow in.

[...] She was always busy, making plans for the weekdays, preparing for Sabbath and holidays or other matters usually connected to the Hebrew calendar. [...] 

[...] In the days of the large-scale Aktion, when the Germans hunted for the sick, elderly and children, Aunt Hannah Rochel hid with others in a concealed cellar in the yard of her house. [...] On Friday afternoon, the Germans came to the house [...] and after it had been quiet for some time, Aunt Hannah Rochel decided it was time to come out of the hiding place to see what was happening. “Based on all the signs, the Aktion is over,” she told the other people when she came back, “but to be on the safe side, we’d better spend the Sabbath in the cellar.” The other women agreed with her.

After waiting a little longer, Aunt Hannah Rochel again left the hiding place, this time to get her candlesticks so that she could light the Sabbath candles.

Discussion:

• What difficulties did the Jewish women who wished to strictly observe Sabbath candle lighting encounter?

• Why do you think Aunt Hannah Rochel risked her life to bring the candlesticks to the hiding place?

• Think: What special meaning does the commandment of lighting Sabbath candles have?

Although the commandment to light Sabbath candles was not among the basic requirements that the Jews in the ghettos and camps needed to survive, women made enormous effort to try to carry it out. This raises the question of the special meaning that this act had for them in the special circumstances of the Holocaust period.
On a dark and foggy Sabbath eve in November 1944, we had to go, in our usual squads of five, to work on the twelve-hour night shift. We walked bitterly in our tattered clothing, through kilometers of mud and filth, to the armaments factory. Suddenly, the woman next to me, who was from Sub-Carpathia began to speak: “I just lit the Sabbath candles.”

I listened to what she said with astonishment.

“I saw two electric bulbs and said the blessing on them,” she added.

Another time, on a Friday night in the factory, I saw a woman from Mărmaros, whose job was polishing small iron hoops and rings, take some of the rings and arrange them into candles and candlesticks, as it were, and then cover her face with her hands and silently recite the blessing over the kindling of the Sabbath candles.

Naomi Winkler Munkacsi,
Jewish Religious Observance in Women’s Death Camps in Germany,
Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1967, pg 36

“I’ve got candles! Candles for the Sabbath! Would you like to light Sabbath candles?” one of my fellow workers whispers in my ear.

I could only look at her in astonishment.

“Don’t you believe me?” she continued pleadingly. “I’ve got real Sabbath candles! In the factory, I found grease. I dissolved it here in this box. I’ve got real candles!”
This information set my heart on fire. Can you possibly imagine what it is like to think of seeing the spark of Sabbath candles in a bottomless well of darkness? I forgot the hunger, the SS guards, the high-voltage wire fence, the machine guns surrounding us. I was in a daze.

[...]

That evening she gave me two candles. They were very awkwardly made, but for me they were a priceless treasure. I saw in them my child who had been so brutally torn away from me; I saw in them my own childhood; I saw my mother covering her face with her hands as she said the blessing. I felt as if I had regained part of my lost soul. [...] I hid my precious pair in my bundle of rags, [...]

The Sabbath was still two days away, but the gloom and despair of those hours was threaded through with a shining expectation [...]

That Friday evening after our shift in the factory, fourteen girls gathered in my room to welcome the Sabbath. The room was empty except for an old box and the sleeping sacks that lay on the floor. I placed the candles on the box and asked the girls to say Amen after I made the blessing. They were astonished, but they looked at me with respect and admiration. One of them said, “Just as my mother used to do...” The others only shook their heads, for tears had stifled their voices.

Miriam Weinstock, Candles, Remember, New York, 1993, p. 208-209
Discussion:

- What further meaning did the candle lighting have, based on these testimonies?
- Why did Naomi tell the other women that she was going to light candles?

The purpose of lighting the Sabbath candles is to create a festive Sabbath atmosphere. It is not however a major commandment that appears in the Torah, and leniency would be expected in cases of great deprivation and risk to one's life. Later in this lesson, we will discuss the subject of keeping kosher, a much more stringent precept, for which the penalty is divine punishment by an untimely death, and which embodies many deeply significant aspects of faith. Mothers, whose traditional role was to feed their families, were forced to contend with dilemmas that came up in the context of observing the kashrut laws.

Keeping Kosher in the Ghettos

The forbidden meatballs

One winter day in 1942, Mother somehow managed to obtain a small amount of kosher meat. This was a period when we were truly starving, even for bread, and meat was an extremely rare commodity in our home. Mother asked Grandmother to prepare a lot of meatballs from the meat that she had managed to lay her hands on so that everyone would have the opportunity to taste the delicacy. We children were very excited at the activity in the kitchen, which reminded us of other, better times. Mother was of course busy trying to obtain basic supplies and was not home, and Grandmother, the queen of our kitchen, took it over without question. Wonderful smells began to spread throughout the house and our curiosity was boundless. We could not remember such smells for a long time. Grandma expanded the meatball mixture in every possible way,
with a lot of bread, onions, parsley, garlic – and the mixture continued to grow. Our eyes were glued to what Grandmother was doing, and when she began to roll the meatballs, I asked her to allow me to help her. Grandmother did not accede to my request; she didn’t want to ruin even a single ball.

One frying pan after another of sweet-smelling meatballs filled the clay bowl intended for that purpose, and we were salivating. There were also some potatoes on the side and my mood, along with that of my brothers Joseph and Nathan was very merry. The atmosphere was festive. We waited impatiently for our parents to return so that we could sit down to eat. Our patience was running out. Grandmother barely managed to prevent us from gobbling up the ready meatballs. She didn’t give in to us this time. She insisted that the whole family had to eat together and that it would happen soon.

When Father and Mother finally arrived and we sat down to eat, Mother’s face suddenly went pale. I had never before seen her get so angry at Grandmother. Furiously, she asked her, “What frying pan did you use to fry the meatballs?” Grandmother didn’t even understand why Mother was asking her such a strange question. She was confident that she’d fried the meatballs in the right frying pan and she answered that of course she’d fried them in the meat frying pan. But then Mother pointed to the meat frying pan hanging in its proper place. Grandmother held her head in her hands, it can’t be, she couldn’t have made a mistake, she was sure she’d used the meat frying pan!

Mother carefully examined the frying pans and
declared unequivocally that the frying pan in which the meatballs had been fried was a dairy one and that consequently, we could not eat them because they were no longer kosher. Grandmother looked at us with pity. Her attempts to convince Mother that the dairy frying pan had not been used for at least six months and that consequently, it could be used to fry the meatballs were in vain. She asked Mother not to disappoint the children and to at least allow us to eat the meatballs. Her pleas did not move Mother one iota from her position and to our bitter disappointment, she forbade us to eat the non-kosher meatballs. We had so looked forward to this meal. The house was still filled with the sweet smells, but we had to make do with potatoes while the meatballs were given to our non-Jewish neighbors, because at such times of scarcity, a treasure such as this would never be discarded.

Since then more than fifty years have passed, but the story of the meatballs and the disappointment we felt at being forbidden to eat them at a time when we were so hungry is something I cannot forget. My beloved mother, who was willing to sacrifice everything for us, allowed us to remain hungry because of her deep religious faith.


**Discussion:**

- Why was it so important to the mother which frying pan had been used to fry the meatballs?
- What was the dilemma that the mother faced?
• Imagine what motivated the mother to make the difficult decision to keep her children from eating the meatballs despite the great privation they lived in.4

Up to David’s illness, we never brought meat into our house because the miserly amount that we were allotted was non-kosher, either pork or horsemeat. But when David fell ill, mother determined that we had reached a crucial stage and should start using non-kosher meat. At first, only David ate this meat, and we kept two separate kitchens, one kosher and one non-kosher. At the end of a year, however, we found it very difficult to punctiliously observe every rule of kashrut, and as the two other boys started showing symptoms of ill-health, we gave in and ate from the non-kosher meat.

Sara Selver-Urbach, Through the Window of my Home, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1986, Pg 85

Discussion:
• Why didn’t the family immediately give up on keeping kosher (although at a certain point, a halachic dispensation was given to eat non-kosher food)?
• Why do you think it was so important for the mother to keep a kosher kitchen even under such difficult conditions of starvation?

The commandment to light Sabbath candles and keep a kosher kitchen are traditionally related to women. In the reality of the Holocaust, many of the men were gone and women took upon themselves the roles and commandments traditionally fulfilled by men.

4. According to Jewish law, because the frying pan had not been used for more than 24 hours, the food cooked in it would not have been prohibited, after the fact, and only the pan itself would be forbidden. In fact, people tended to be extremely strict about the separation between meat and milk. It is also possible that in addition to this special strictness, the mother had long-term educational considerations in mind as well.
Hand out the sheets with the texts to the students and ask them to answer the questions after reading them.

Each of the sources tells about the fulfillment of a different commandment during the Holocaust.

**Discuss with all the students:**
- What is the meaning of the commandment described in the excerpt?
- What meaning did the fulfillment of the commandment provide to those that carried it out during the Holocaust?
- Is there any special meaning to the fulfillment of a commandment when women are the ones that perform it?

**Conclusion**
- Is there a difference between these testimonies and those about the lighting of Shabbat candles and keeping kosher?
- In carrying out these actions, women were guided by two different strategies – preservation and adaptation. Imagine a line that has preservation at one end and adjustment at the other. Arrange the coping strategies of the women in these stories along this line – decide whether their action in performing the commandment was closer to preservation or adjustment.
Discuss each of the source texts about the fulfillment of a religious commandment during the Holocaust. Choose three and answer the following questions:

- What do you think is the significance of the commandment described in the text?
- What meaning did the fulfillment of the commandment provide to those that fulfilled it during the Holocaust?
- Is there any special meaning to the fulfillment of a commandment when women are the ones that perform it?

Near the city of Thorn in the vicinity of Danzig, the German Army was preceded by a work camp of women, whose task it was to prepare the area for the army. On Rosh Hashanah they had to dig defense trenches, and while they worked they prayed. So that they would not be surprised by their taskmasters, they stationed guards at the front of each trench, which was triangular in shape, in order to warn them in time if the labor supervisor should come. When they got to the hymn Unetaneh Tokef, the air suddenly trembled from an awesome sound, the like of which had never been heard before, nor was ever to be heard again. Their excessive imagination led them to believe that this was the sound of the ram’s horn of the Messiah.

Naomi Winkler Munkacsi,
*Jewish Religious Observance in Women’s Death Camps in Germany*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1967, p. 35.
Despite the difficult living conditions, the women tried to fulfill all the Jewish laws they could under those circumstances. All kinds of questions came up and they didn’t know how to behave, for example, if there are no men, are the women permitted to organize a prayer quorum to recite Kaddish? It was decided that they should: A quorum was gathered and they recited Kaddish. They went to the synagogue and recited the Psalms. In the meantime, the days when the Selihot prayers were to be said drew closer and their prayer quorum decided to rise at night to say the Selihot. They went to the various houses and awakened all the others. They also fulfilled the commandment of blowing the shofar, with awe and great devotion, and the prayers were led by a young woman who had volunteered to feed the orphans and cared for all those that suffered from hunger. She was also the leader of the group that recited the Psalms.


On the Ninth of Av we were at the Gelsenberg Camp, where we fasted. Our friends who remained at Auschwitz sat on the ground and read the Scroll of Lamentations in Yiddish from the book Tsena Urena (prayer book for women), as was customary. It was very difficult to conceal the matter of the fast from the soldiers of the accursed Hoess, for these wicked people did not let us observe religious customs, and severely punished
anyone caught committing the crime of religious observance or fidelity to tradition. The women from Bukovina, who were at the women’s camp at Bershad, were allowed to move about freely within the city – they went out to the cemetery, circled the graves three times, and, remembering their friends and relatives who had perished in the distant death camps, recited the Kaddish and the other prayers which are customarily said over ancestors’ graves.


At the Reichenbach camp, a special Passover seder was conducted in April 1945. [...] The prisoners [...] swapped their bread rations for flour that forced-laborers had brought from the factory. One night before the festival, they [...] baked matzah. They delivered several matzahs to the women’s camp, since the women had also decided to conduct a festive seder. The women pushed their beds aside and set up a large table in the middle of the room. A rabbi’s daughter seated herself at the head of the table and preformed the seder as prescribed by rabbinical law.

Bella Gutterman, *A Narrow Bridge to Life*, Berghahn Books, p. 186
We had a visitor, our plumber friend, dropping in to repair some pipes. He spotted Rivkah and handed her a small package. [...] No words were exchanged except for a whispered “L’chavod Chanuka.” [...] We held our breath as Rivkah opened the package. It contained two candies, two matches, and, unbelievably, two small candles. [...] When the evening “coffee” rush subsided, Rivkah stepped to the hearth. “It’s Chanukah tonight,” she announced loudly. “Let’s light the Chanukah candles.” Then, as we crowded around the hearth, Rivkah lit one of the little candles and recited the first blessing. [...] The tiny flame flickered across the long, red-brick hearth. In the dim dungeon of Auschwitz a flame was kindled to dispel the gloom.

Now came the second blessing: “Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who did wonders for our forefathers in those days, at this time.” [...] Finally she recited the She-hecheyanu [...] : “Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who has given us life, sustained us, and brought us to this moment.” [...] Bitter thoughts filled us after this. Yes, He gave us life; but what of the others? Aren’t they better off? Why hadn’t we gone with them? Eyes filled with tears; chests heaved with pain.

Then we burst into Maoz Tzur, [...] Now Rivkah mounted the hearth and addressed her audience out loud, fearlessly. “Girls, we share the same bunks [...] the same deathly darkness. But tonight is Chanukah, [...] We lit a candle, and its tiny flame dispels a lot of darkness. [...] The little flame we kindled tonight is kodesh. Every Jewish heart has that sacred flame in it,
a Divine spark that dispels so much of the darkness. […] Our people has lived through many bitter times. Our Temple was defiled, desecrated. […] It seemed that everything was […] ruined – that there was no more pure oil left with which to light the sacred menorah. But in the midst of the devastation, a small vial of pure oil was found and the eternal light rekindled. Then, by a miracle, that bit of oil lasted for eight full days, […] For us, too, there is always a little pure oil left to keep the flame burning.

“We’ve been beaten, tortured, and killed. Pharaoh, Haman, the Romans, the Crusaders – they all sought to destroy the Jewish people. They failed; God helped us throughout history. He will help us now, too […] and soon we will see the redemption. The torch the Jews carry in the darkness of night will never be extinguished. Great nations come and go, but the Jews will exist forever. Am Yisrael chai!” Her last words reverberated through the heavy silence.

The girls, almost a thousand in number, remained crowded around the hearth. They were tattered, walking skeletons with teary, bulging eyes. But their torn hearts were rekindled with hope and pride.