



With permission from The Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum,  
Vilnius, Lithuania

### Lectures for Youth in Physics, Chemistry, and Literature

Examine this poster. To whom are the lectures directed?

Read the sources and discuss the following questions:

- What, in your opinion, motivated the ghetto's Youth Department to conduct these lecture series?
- What would cause youth to attend these lectures and generally to bother learning in the ghetto?
- How do the following excerpts reflect the ruptures and difficulties of ghetto life?
- What challenges did educators face in the ghetto?
- Why, in your opinion, does Dworzecki emphasize that "30 meters from where a gemarah test was taking place, an SS man stood guard at his watch"?

The first schools within the ghetto opened immediately upon the ghetto's creation. The ghetto had two elementary schools, with 700-900 students aged 5-12. In addition, the ghetto had a religious school, a high school and nursery schools. Subjects taught included Yiddish and Hebrew, religious studies, Jewish history, general history, math, geography and science.

*“For me, the drive to learn was a rebellion against the present, in which learning was hated and working prized. I was determined to live in the future, and not the present. If of 100 children in the ghetto my age, ten could learn, I had to be among them, to take advantage of this opportunity. “*

*Yitzhak Rudashevsky, Diary of a Vilna Youth (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1969), pp. 88-89.*

**Yitzhak Rudashevsky (1927-1943):** a teenager in the Vilna ghetto who left behind a sensitive description of war events. Rudashevsky, an only child, lived relatively well with parents concerned for his continuing education. When the German Army occupied Vilna, he was not yet 14. After the ghetto was liquidated, Rudashevsky went into hiding with his family. After two weeks, however, their hideout was discovered and the family was sent to Ponary, where they were murdered.

*“Mira Bernstein, the onetime principal of the Reali Gymnasium in Vilna, marched together with her pupils on the day they were forced into the ghetto.*

*“[...] That evening, Mira gathered the children and read them a story by Sholem Aleichem.*

*“[...] Each morning, Mira would count the children, and each morning there would be fewer. At night the murderous hand would claim victims, but the next morning the learning continued.”*

*Avraham Sutzkever, Vilna Ghetto (Tel Aviv: Sichvi Publications, 1947), p. 84.*

**Mira Bernstein (1908-1943):** a graduate of the Yiddish Seminary for Teachers in Vilna, the only one of its kind in Poland between the two world wars. She taught in schools in Vilna. In 1939, she was appointed principal of the Yiddish *Gymnasium*. With the establishment of the ghetto, Bernstein became an important figure in organizing the ghetto’s educational system, running programs under difficult conditions as long as the ghetto existed. Among other projects, she staged children’s plays and was active in the ghetto’s “Youth Club.” Bernstein was also a member of the ghetto underground, but toward the time the ghetto was to be liquidated, she did not leave through the sewers, as others did, fearing that due to her poor health she would be a burden to the others. She was murdered in Majdanek.

**Avraham Sutzkever (1913-2010):** a poet and partisan. During the Nazi period, he wrote more than 80 songs and poems. Sutzkever was active in selecting content for the ghetto theater productions. The Germans forced him to sort Jewish literary works that had been found in libraries throughout the city, and he and his friends smuggled books, manuscripts and artworks into the ghetto in order to save them. At the same time, Sutzkever assisted in acquiring arms for the underground. With the liquidation of the ghetto, he joined the partisans in the forests. Toward the end of the war, he helped bring Nazi war criminals to justice. He later made *aliya*.



*"In the period following the ghetto's establishment, a cultural struggle broke out regarding the character and essence of the schools, their educational aims, the choice of teachers and the curriculum. It was a struggle for the soul of the ghetto child: What would be the national and collective goals toward which children would be educated, that would comprise their spiritual legacy were they to be freed? Questions arose as to the extent the ghetto school should emphasize Hebrew, Yiddish, Eretz Israel, Tanach Bible studies, Jewish and world history; which periods and which heroes demanded the special attention of the educators. It was determined that that the language of instruction for all schools and all classes would be Yiddish. However, Hebrew language and literature would be taught as well, emphasizing the language's great value to the Jewish nation and culture in all its generations. Jewish history would be a central subject in school, studied in parallel with world history. Tanach would also be a fundamental subject in the school system."*

*Meir (Mark) Dworzecki, The Jerusalem of Lithuania in Revolt and in the Holocaust (Tel Aviv: Mifletet Poalei Eretz Yisrael, 1951), pp. 216-217.*

*"The ghetto had a network of schools, in which about 3,000 children learned. These schools included religious studies; while not mandatory, in practice all the children sat in on these lessons. The Charedi [ultra-Orthodox] parents, however, chose to create special schools, where they would receive the distinct religious scholarship... Classes were held at times of day that would enable attending the general schools as well. Teachers and public figures in the ghetto did not consider the religious schools competition for the more general-curriculum schools, but rather a complement to them... From time to time, public tests were conducted. They would sit children around tables. The rabbi sat in the middle, testing them on the material they had learned, and even invited guests who could ask questions. At the end of the test would be a seudat mitzvah [festive meal]. I was present at one of these tests on the Talmudic topic of "Yiush Shelo Mida'at" (giving up hope unknowingly). About thirty meters away from this gemarah test, an SS man stood guard at his watch."*

*Dworzecki, The Jerusalem of Lithuania, pp. 222-223.*