

Activity 4: Jewish Life in Pre-War Europe: Identity, Diversity & Commonality

Jewish Life in Europe Before the Holocaust

When the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933, Jews were living in every country of Europe. A total of roughly nine million Jews lived in the countries that would be occupied by Germany during World War 2. By the end of the war, two out of every three of these Jews would be dead, and European Jewish life would be changed forever.

In 1933, the largest Jewish populations were concentrated in eastern Europe, including Poland, the Soviet Union, Hungary, and Romania. Many of the Jews of eastern Europe lived in predominantly Jewish towns or villages, called *shtetls*. Eastern European Jews lived a separate life as a minority within the culture of the majority. They spoke their own language, Yiddish, which combines elements of German and Hebrew. They read Yiddish books and watched Yiddish films and plays. Although many younger Jews in larger towns were beginning to adopt modern ways and dress, older people often dressed traditionally, the men wearing hats or caps, and the women modestly covering their hair with wigs or kerchiefs.



Group portrait of children in front of a private home in the town of Eisiskes. The Jews of this shtetl were murdered by the Einsatzgruppen on 21 September 1941. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives #I6712.

Courtesy of The Shtetl Foundation. Copyright of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Activity 4: Jewish Life in Pre-War Europe: Identity, Diversity & Commonality

Jewish Life in Europe Before the Holocaust

In comparison, the Jews in western Europe—Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Belgium—made up much less of the population and tended to adopt the culture of their non-Jewish neighbours. They dressed and talked like their countrymen, and traditional religious practices and Yiddish culture played a less important part in their lives. They tended to have had more formal education than eastern European Jews and to live in towns or cities.

Jews could be found in all walks of life, as farmers, tailors, seamstresses, factory hands, accountants, doctors, teachers, and small-business owners. Some families were wealthy; many more were poor. Many children ended their schooling early to work in a craft or trade; others looked forward to continuing their education at university level. Still, whatever their differences, they were the same in one respect: By the 1930s, with the rise of the Nazis to power in Germany, they all became potential victims, and their lives were forever changed.

Sources

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Holocaust Encyclopaedia: Jewish life in Europe before the Holocaust* <<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/jewish-life-in-europe-before-the-holocaust>> [accessed 15 February 2022]

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Group portrait of children in front of a private home in the town of Eisiskes*. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives # 16712 (2015) <<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1059863>> [accessed 15 February 2022]