



**NOTE THIS HAS NOT YET BEEN TESTED WITH CLASSROOMS.
THE GUIDE WILL BE UPDATED ONCE TESTING IS COMPLETE.**

Yitskhok Rudashevski: A Teenager's Account of Life and Death in the Vilna Ghetto

Teacher Resources

This online, interactive exhibit focuses on a contemporaneous diary written by Yitskhok Rudashevski, a young teenage boy who lived in Vilna, Poland. He was an only child born in 1929 into a large extended family. His father worked for a liberal, left leaning Jewish newspaper called *Vilner Tog*, and his mother was a seamstress, a skill that enabled the family to stay alive while they were in the Vilna Ghetto. Rudashevski, a gifted observer and writer, kept a diary during this period. It is the focus of this exhibition. The exhibition is organized chronologically except for the Prologue which describes how the diary was found after the war.

This exhibition is divided into 7 parts and contains a wealth of information about the period leading up to, during, and after WWII. Seen through Rudashevski's eyes, the exhibition links his personal diary—a window into life in the Vilna Ghetto—to the larger picture of the world at war. The exhibition has links to many primary source materials including newspapers, historic documents, photographs, and personal testimonies about survival and treachery, including artifacts from the YIVO Archives that Rudashevski himself used while in the ghetto. The exhibition is organized chronologically following Rudashevski's life in Vilnius as he recorded it in his diary from 1941 to 1943. The diary ends just before Rudashevski and his family were found and murdered by the Nazis. Fortunately, his cousin Sore Voloshin escaped from the Gestapo at the last moment and lived to return to the family's hiding place in the ghetto after the war. She found Rudashevski's diary in their hiding place before they were captured. Note that chapter 7 of the story is a visualization of everything that happened from a little before when the diary was found and what has happened since. If you need to engage your students or if they have special needs, then start with the last chapter of the exhibition – 7, Epilogue. It is a good hook for engaging students of all skill levels in the story. You may say something like – “See how interesting this story is... Let's go back to the beginning and explore it in depth.”

This is a rich resource to use as a part of your study of WWII. It contains a wide range of primary source materials on events that were happening all over the world leading up to and during WWII – some link to the events in Rudashevski's life; some can be used as background material and information. Please take full advantage of all the materials included in this exhibition. You can make copies of anything in this exhibition, including all the artifacts, for your class, or your students can download the sections they need to study.

INSTRUCTIONS:

The **2 buttons on the right-hand side of the screen** contain important and enriching information relevant to the subject matter being covered in the section of the exhibit open on your screen. Each section has different artifacts and resources. The translation of Rudashevski's diary appears in every artifacts section of the exhibition so your students can access it easily.

Artifacts Button

- Rudasheski's complete diary in English translation, as well as the original in Yiddish – available in every artifacts section of the exhibition
- 2 short video lectures about the Jews of Vilna
- A long video documents the stories of several Jewish women who were resistance fighters, fighting alongside male partisans against the Nazi army during WWII
- Text of an interview with the famous Jewish resistance fighter and poet Abba Kovner. In it he explains why he was able to see how the Germans were manipulating the Jews while the Jews in the ghetto could not see how they were being manipulated.
- Photographs (including one of Abba Kovner with his small band of resistance fighters)
- Printed materials, newspapers, letters, books, photographs, and more

Moral Choices Button

There are one or more questions raised about moral choices in each of the **7 chapters of the exhibition**. These choices are designed to lead to a serious discussion of the events that occurred in that chapter. We all make moral choices every day:

- to help a friend with homework or go to see a movie
- to pretend not to see a beggar on the street
- to stick up for a friend even if they aren't popular
- to go without something so that someone else can have it
- to tell a lie so as not to get into trouble
- to try to help someone even if the chances of making a difference are slight

The moral choices raised in each section often had far more serious consequences. They are designed to lead to a class discussion. Use them as you see fit. Some will lead to a discussion of why empathy is so important.

The ** button on the left-hand side of the screen, above the timeline with world events**, links to actual newspaper headlines and articles about historic events of the time.

 Pressing this icon will link your students to newspaper headlines and articles on world events

linked to World War II in Europe/Asia during the year posted; other primary source documents about major events not directly linked to the War in Europe but relevant to the broader history of the time.

The exhibition itself centers on Rudashevski's remarkable diary and is a way to make the events leading up to WWII and during WWII more relevant and understandable to your students.

Part 1 – Prologue – Diary is found after Vilnius is freed from German occupation.

Part 2 – Introduction to daily life in Vilna before the war; Rudashevski's childhood and school; his father's work and politics within the Jewish community in Vilna; Rudashevski's classmates' sense of the future.

Part 3 – A rotating globe documents what was happening in the world in the second half of the 1930s, and focuses on the economy and immigration policies in several countries, showing how the world's doors were closed to immigrants.

Part 4 – The beginning of WWII 1939-1941 told using several passages of Rudashevski's diary. Germany declared war on Poland in 1939 and divided it with the Soviet Union. Germany controlled the western half of Poland and the Soviet Union the eastern half of Poland. Some Jews in Vilnius, like Rudashevski, were happy under Soviet rule; others suffered. There were about 100,000 Jews living in Vilnius, many having fled east from German-occupied Poland. However, in Operation Barbarossa (the German invasion of the Soviet Union that began on June 22, 1941), the Nazis, along with the Lithuanians under them, took over the eastern half of Poland and set up a ghetto in Vilnius. In some cases the process of murdering the Jews began simply by shooting individuals or groups; in other cases, by creating an illusion that the Jews would eventually find a suitable place to work or live if they possessed the correct official certificates and work skills.

By constantly sorting Jews into groups and crowding them into smaller and smaller spaces and then moving the groups around, the Nazis were able to disorient the people and make those they selected for murder less visible. By the end of 1941 the Nazis, with the help of Lithuanians, had murdered almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the Jews that had been living in what was then Vilna, Poland, in 1939. Groups of Jews were secretly marched to the Ponar forest where they were shot and buried in the lime pits. Rudashevski and his family survived this terrible period, but his grandmother was killed. Parts II and III of this chapter are seen through the eyes of Rudashevski as recorded in his diary.

Part 5 – Late 1941-1943: The Quiet Period – About 20,000 Jews including some children were still alive at the end of 1941. The surviving Jews provided services to the Nazis, from working in factories to sewing and cleaning, and thus were able to protect their families from being murdered. Some diary entries in the exhibition have been made into animations, video dramatizations, and a graphic novel, so even struggling readers can participate. The Nazis established a council of Jews, the Judenrat, which acted as a liaison between the Gestapo and the Jews in the ghetto, and a Jewish Police, which provided the police needed to control life in the ghetto but also carried out other Nazi orders, such as going to other towns to take Jews into ghettos. Some Jews felt they served a good purpose by having some of their own preventing graft and excess violence against Jews by the Nazis, but others thought of them as traitors. During this period the Jews

in the Vilna Ghetto tried to make a small Jewish haven for Jewish life and culture.

Part 6 – Late 1943 – After the Soviet victory in the battle of Stalingrad, the Germans rushed to liquidate the concentration and death camps as well as the ghettos of Eastern Europe, as they wanted to hide their crimes. News of the Nazis’ killing spree spread around the Vilna Ghetto. When everyone was ordered to report to the gates, the ghetto inhabitants knew it meant death. Rudashevski and his extended family, including Sore Voloshin, hid in a *maline* (a hiding place) in the old Jewish Quarter. At the same time, rumor spread in the ghetto that the Soviets were coming to free the Jews in the ghettos. All in the ghetto hoped that the Soviets would come before they were found by the Gestapo. Rudashevski’s diary records, for the first time, the anxiety he felt. He and his family were able to hide from the Gestapo for eleven days. But when the family finally ran out of water, one member offered to get more of it and was followed. That is how they were discovered by the Gestapo. Only his cousin Sore Voloshin miraculously escaped after they were arrested by slipping through a partially open door in the Gestapo building and fleeing to the forest where she hid with partisans until the end of the war. After the Soviets freed Vilnius, Sore returned to their *maline* in the ghetto and found her cousin’s diary on the floor where he left it.

Part 7 – Post WWII – The story of how the diary was found, what happened to it, and the aftermath of World War II.

HOW TO USE THIS EXHIBITION:

Time Frame: It can take from **1 to 5 classroom periods** to go through the entire exhibition. You can assign the viewing of the exhibition and a review of the resource materials at home and then conduct discussion in class. You may want your class to read the entire diary (50+ pages), or you can settle for just the sections quoted or turned into parts of a graphic novel, videos, and animations in the actual exhibition, as well as watch the excerpt video of Jewish partisans; watch/listen to one or both lectures on the Jews in the Vilna Ghetto (45 minutes with discussion time included); read Kovner’s explanation about why the Jews didn’t realize in time what was happening to them (about 30 minutes plus discussion time); or just pick and choose what best fits your class’s needs. It depends on how deeply you and your students wish to explore this exhibition and the extensive primary source materials it contains.

This Exhibition: Rudashevski’s diary is presented through images, texts, and primary source materials, with some parts of the diary dramatized, some parts of the diary animated, and some parts of the diary turned into a graphic novel. There are extensive background materials linking the diary to significant historic events. Primary source materials can be found in both the artifact sections, available through a button on the right, and the date linked **i** button for concurrent world events on the left. The exhibition also includes a full English translation of Rudashevski’s diary as well as the original Yiddish version, an interactive map of the world documenting the worldwide prejudice against Jews in the 1920s and 1930s, 2 informative short lectures that provide background information on events that are covered in the exhibition, photographs, a wide variety of historic documents, newspaper headlines and articles in **i**, film clips, historic objects, a video interview of former freedom fighters, a translation of an interview with Abba Kovner who led the partisans in their fight against the Germans in the forests east of Vilnius in which he

explains why he thinks the Jews did not fight back, and other primary source materials. The final chapter, 7, explains the path of the diary and the aftermath of World War II through images.

It can be used as an introduction, full curriculum, or enrichment to the study of World War II and the Holocaust or just the Holocaust and/or how prejudice has and continues to lead to the torture and death of millions of people around the world today.


The extensive collection of primary source materials can facilitate students' research skills, and essay and report writing skills. This is an excellent opportunity to use alternative teaching methods to build your students' knowledge of World War II – its causes, the historic event, and the consequences.

You can engage your students by having them turn Rudashevski's diary into a graphic novel. Note: It is easiest to do this by dividing the diary (**downloadable in one click from the artifacts section of any chapter**) into as many parts as you have students and then have each student complete their section. Teachers have also used this exhibition to help develop empathy in their students. (See more information on this at the end of the curriculum guide.)


Students can view this exhibition on their laptops, tablets, or cell phones for independent research OR teachers can open it on a Smartboard to facilitate their instruction and control of classroom discussions.

Important Note: If teaching from a Smartboard, **open all the windows you plan to use before class in separate tabs.** This exhibition contains a great deal of information. **It takes time to download everything** even with highspeed internet.

Before beginning, review all sections – throughout the exhibition there are opportunities for students to click on texts to access more supporting information embedded in the virtual museum exhibition.

Note the following: The **changing timeline** and  on the left side of screen links events in Vilna/Vilnius to events happening before and during World War II not only in Europe, but all around the world as well as many other important historic events that happened before and during WWII. The historic documents highlighted are newspaper headlines.

The two icons on the right side of the screen link to ARTIFACTS  and MORAL CHOICES .

Click ARTIFACTS  to locate: time-linked primary resource materials including the entire Rudashevski diary (*available in every chapter*), relevant lectures and essays by scholars, translation of an interview with Abba Kovner the Jewish leader of the Jewish partisans who fought the Nazis alongside Soviets and Poles in the forests east of Vilna, letters, photographs, short and long video clips, and objects. Many of the text documents are translated into English. **These primary source materials are an excellent resource for student use as they research more deeply the subject matter covered by this virtual museum exhibition!**

Click MORAL CHOICES . The moral choices selected reflect some of the choices that people described

in this exhibition had to make. The moral choices change in each section of the exhibition as new events occur. The choices are designed to encourage your students to question how they would have reacted to the difficult situations faced by those living at the time of the event. You can use these to either conduct a serious discussion about moral actions or as a prompt for your students to use to write a short essay on the theme of moral choices.

Teacher Guide

Below is a summary of each chapter and several ways to use each of them to enhance your study of WWII and the Holocaust – the causes, the events, and the terrible consequences of hate.

Chapter summary, key question, and follow-up activity for each section in this exhibition.

1. PROLOGUE

Sore Voloshin Finds Yitskhok Rudashevski's Diary

Key Question: Why would people be interested in saving a diary written by a teenage boy trapped in the Vilna Ghetto during WWII?

Follow-up Activity: Discuss with your class.

Moral Choice Question: Why do we need to study history?

2. INTRODUCTION

Vilnius Over Time

Part I. Click on ⓘ 1929 – The New York Stock Exchange Crashes – The crash affected economies all around the world.

Note: If you have limited time skim the rest of Part I.

Part II. 1938 Schools – Point out how they were not very different from US schools at that time. Note: Most Jewish students were at least bilingual in Yiddish and Polish. Many knew more languages, such as Russian. Most could only write in Yiddish.

Key Question: Why did the Jewish students in Vilna speak so many languages? What did this say about events affecting the students' lives?

Read Sore Voloshin's letter where she mentions gas attack drills.

Key Question: Why would they need to think about this?

Part III. 1939 Politics in Vilna – Rudashevski's father worked for the left leaning Jewish newspaper *Vilner*

Tog – Have your students skim **i** **context box – Polish political parties before WWII**. Note people in Vilna had political views ranging from the far left to the far right.

Key Question: How would this have affected the thinking of Jews and non-Jews living in Vilna at that time?

Context box on Pogroms and newspaper text by Trotsky. Additional points to explain the wide range of political views of Jews and non-Jews in Vilna just before WWII.

Part IV. 1939/40 – Germany Invades Western Poland.

Key Question: The students' essays about how they saw themselves in a year display 3 very different points of view, ranging from very optimistic to realistic. They also display the different political ideologies of the students and the type of information they consumed. How does one's ideology and the type of news they receive shape their view of current events?

3. THE WORLD Rotating Globe

Have students turn the map and click on various countries. Discuss.

Key Question: How would this have affected Jews feeling unsafe in Vilna?

Note: Several people working in embassies in Spain, Poland, Hungary, Lithuania, and other European countries risked their lives creating exit visas and other documents to help many Jews escape. Many Jews in central Europe escaped to Shanghai during WWII because the Japanese, who were occupying the city, did not have antisemitic feelings and so they just interned the Jews in concentration camps in Shanghai with all the other Europeans.

Moral Choice Question: What would you risk in order to save a life? Would you risk more to save 10 lives? 100 lives?

4. THE WAR BEGINS World War II Arrives in Vilna (Sept. 1939-June 1941)

Part I. The Outbreak of the Second World War and Soviet Occupation – Have class read all of Part I up to “Never was life so happy and carefree as in the Soviet summer of 1941.” Be sure to have students also read the short summary of the start of WWII and click on **Context box: German-Soviet (Ribbentrop-Molotov) Pact**.

Key Questions:

- What was the impact of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact?
- Why were some citizens of Vilna happy to welcome the Red Army?
- Why were some not happy when the Lithuanians took over the city?

- How did Rudashevski feel about the Lithuanians?
- Why didn't Rudashevski and his classmates feel actual fear?
- Why were they only annoyed when the language of instruction changed?

Part II. German Invasion (June 1941 – September 1941) as described in Rudashevski's diary. Read the entire text!

Key Question: Why did Rudashevski feel life in the city changed right after the arrival of the Nazis?

Read Context box: What do Lebensraum, Manifest Destiny, Nuremberg and Jim Crow laws have in common?

Key Question: What did these four ideas have in common? How do they relate to what the Nazis did to the Jews? Discuss with students.

Read Context Box: The Lithuanian Uprising.

Key Questions: Why did the Lithuanians rise up in rebellion? Why did they help the Germans in the slaughter of the Jews of Vilnius? How do you feel about this?

Part III. Into the Ghetto (September 1941-December 1941)

Read the following texts written by Rudashevski describing how he and his family were forced to move into the Ghetto.

“It is the 6th of September. It dawned a beautiful, sunny day. The streets are cordoned off by Lithuanians. There is an anxious feeling. Jewish workers are allowed through. A ghetto is being created for the Jews of Vilna. At home we are packing. The women go around wringing their hands, weeping as they see their homes looking like after a pogrom. I walk around, weary from lack of sleep, among the bundles. I see how overnight we are uprooted from our homes. Soon we get a glimpse of the first image of going to the ghetto.

It is an image from the Middle Ages. A big black mass of people moves, harnessed to their big bundles. We understand that it will soon be our turn. I look at the disorderly room, at the bundles, at the overwhelmed, despairing people. ... The small number of Jews in our courtyard begin to drag their bundles to the gate. Christians stand nearby and look on. Some Jews hire Christian boys to help them carry the bundles.

A package was suddenly stolen from a neighbor. The woman stands in distress among her bundles. She has no idea what to do. She weeps and wrings her hands. Suddenly, weeping fills the air, everyone is weeping. People cry looking at the bundles they do not know what to do with. One woman's bundle has split open. Eggs began to scatter...

The sun, as if ashamed of what people are doing down below, let the sky cloud over. It began to rain. We too are carried along with the stream of Jews with bundles. Shavler Street was streaming with Jews

with bundles, moving slowly. It is the first great tragedy. People are harnessed to the bundles they drag along the pavement. People fall. Bundles are scattered. In front of me a woman is bowed under her bundle. From the bundle a thin string of rice pours onto the street.

I walk along heavily loaded and wearing multiple layers of clothes. Lithuanians drive us forward, won't let us rest. I do not think about anything - not about what I am losing, not about what I have just lost, not about what lies in wait for me. I do not see the street or the passersby. I feel only that I am exhausted. A feeling of being insulted and a pain burn inside me. I feel like crying. It is the ghetto gate already. I feel that I have been robbed, that they have robbed me of my freedom, taken me away from my home and away from the familiar Vilna streets that I love so much. Everything is being torn from me.

At the gate there is a crush of people. At last, I am on the other side of the [ghetto] gate. The stream of people shoves me into a gate flooded with parcels. I throw off the bundles, which are cutting into my shoulders. I locate my parents and here we are, in our ghetto home. It is evening, very dark and rainy. The little streets ... which make up the ghetto, look like anthills. They teem with people. Those who have arrived begin to settle in, each in his own little bit of space.

Additional Jews keep streaming in without interruption. We settle into our space. In addition to the four of us, there are 11 people in the room. The room is dirty and muddy. It is cramped. The first ghetto-night. Three of us lie on two doors. I do not sleep. My ears are filled with the lamentation of this day. I hear the uneasy breathing of the people with whom I have so suddenly been thrown together, people who have suddenly been uprooted from their homes just like me.”

Key Question: Why would the Nazis want to move the Jews from one ghetto to another?

“It is a cloudy, muddy day. A wet snow is falling. It will take a long time till we reach the gate because the inspection there is very thorough. All around us there is weeping. People are saying goodbye to their close kin who are staying behind here in the ghetto in malines. We learn that old people who are written down as parents are not allowed to pass through the gate. Grandma cannot go with us. We are desperate. In the maline in our courtyard they are not letting anyone in. They are already shut tight. What can we do? Meanwhile the stream of people has started to budge and our labor unit is passing through the gate. The stream of people has carried us along. We quickly say goodbye to Grandma – forever. We leave her standing in the middle of the street and run to save ourselves. I will never forget her two pleading hands and eyes which begged us “take me with you!”

Key Questions: Why did the Nazis force Rudashevski’s family to leave the grandmother behind? Can you describe the guilt the family must have felt when they had to leave the grandmother? What would you have done?

Read the following text from Rudashevski’s diary:

“Dozens of people plead with those standing in line, the chosen ones, to inscribe them onto their yellow certificates. For inscribing they offer, gold, money. Our neighbors in the house go into a maline. We go

with them, into a three-story small warehouse on Shavler Street 4. There are steps between the levels. The stairs between the first and second levels have been removed. The entrance has been boarded up. The maline consists of two storage levels. In the middle there is a hole in the wall of a dwelling that is adjacent to the upper story of the maline. The hole is cleverly concealed by a kitchen cabinet. Soon we crawl through the hole of the maline as well. A lot of people have gathered in the two levels of the maline. They shuffle along by candlelight like ghosts along the cold, bare cellar walls. The whole maline is filled with anxious murmuring. A mass of imprisoned people. Each person begins to settle into his little corner, or on the stairs. People place pillows, bundles on the hard bricks and boards and fall asleep. The candles begin to go out and everything is wrapped in darkness. All you hear is the snoring of the sleepers, the sighing and restless murmuring. There's not enough air to breathe. The odor of a cellar, of people squeezed together. From time to time someone lights a match. By its light I see people lying like rags in dirt, on the bricks. I think about what a helpless, broken creature man can turn into. I don't know what to do with myself."

Key Question: Why did families hide in *malines* in the ghetto?

By the end of the many *aktions* in the Vilna Ghetto in 1941, only half of the ghetto's initial population remained. Life then gradually became "normalized."

5. THE QUIET PERIOD 1941-1942

The German goal was not only to exterminate the Jewish people, but to erase Jewish culture altogether. Resistance through maintaining Jewish culture was a way to fight Nazi tyranny. Rudashevski chronicles many such acts of resistance in his diary. Do you see what he describes in his diary as acts of resistance? Explain your point of view and include quotes from the diary to support your opinion.

Click Environment – Look at the images, read the short texts – parts of Rudashevski's diary have been turned into a graphic novel describing different environments in the ghetto.

Key Question: The atmosphere of the ghetto was decidedly grim. Inhabitants tried to make homes in the ruins of a city that had once flourished. Do you think the graphic novel's representation of Rudashevski's diary captures the feeling of daily life in the ghetto after the mass killing of Jews ended? Explain your feelings and cite examples.

Click on Schools – After the *aktions* were over a school system was quickly established throughout the Vilna Ghetto. Students of all ages were able to study secular, religious, vocational, and artistic subjects in dedicated spaces. Education provided hope in even the most desperate days in the ghetto, distracting students from their suffering and offering them a way to think positively and plan for a future after the war.

Key Question: Do you think that the establishment of schools was effective? Did it prepare the children and young adults for what came next? What would you have done differently?

Read Context Box: Judenrat.

Key Questions: What was the Judenrat? Why didn't Rudashevski approve of them? How do you feel about the Judenrat? Why?

Moral Choice Question: Is it better to face the truth and try to prepare for what might happen or to try and keep hope alive as long as possible?

Click the **artifacts button on right side of the screen and then click on the text of Abba Kovner's interview** to pull it up. Have students pull up and read the interview on their computers or pull it up to your smartboard and have the entire class read it together. Discuss his views on what and why the Germans conducted *aktions*.

Note: Kovner was hiding with several other Jewish partisans in a nunnery outside of Vilnius at the time of the creation of the ghetto. In disguise, he was able to move around and observed what the Nazis were doing from outside the ghetto. Those in the ghetto were **too afraid they were going to be killed** to clearly see how they were being manipulated by the Nazis. Being outside allowed Kovner to see the Nazis' plan but, there was nothing he could do about it.

Kovner organized a small group of partisans to fight the Nazis. They fought alongside Russian and Polish resistance fighters in the forests east of Vilnius until the end of the war. After the war he moved to Israel and became a famous Jewish poet.

6. THE END OF THE VILNA GHETTO

Key Question: How did the Jews in the Vilna Ghetto feel when news reached them that 5 small ghettos in the Vilna region had been liquidated?

Key Questions: On March 25, 1943 Rudashevski wrote: "Jews from the neighboring town are beginning to arrive... School doesn't make any sense. All of us are depressed. The mood is gloomy." Why would the arrival of Jews from other ghettos upset him?

Why was the defeat of the Germans at the battle of Stalingrad a bad sign?

What was the final solution the Nazis' planned?

Rudashevski stopped writing in his diary when he heard Jews were being asked to report to the front gate. It meant death for all Jews in the ghetto in the killing pits of Ponar. But Rudashevski kept it with him. When he and Sore and the rest of the family hid for the last time in a *maline* on September 23, 1943, he still had his diary with him. The family was able to hide for about 10 days before they ran out of water. When someone went outside to find water they were all discovered. The only member of the family to escape was Sore. She is the one who found Rudashevski's remarkable diary after the war.

7. THE END OF THE STORY AND A NEW BEGINNING

This final section is a visual summary of the story of the diary – how it was found saved – and the aftermath of WWII. Use this as a review of the story or to start with as an introduction to the story.