

The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous

Żegota – Council for the Aid to Jews

During the Holocaust there were rescuers of Jews in every country occupied by the Germans. Rescue activities took many forms and involved individuals and networks. This unit of study focuses on one network of rescuers in Poland, *Żegota*, the Council for the Aid to Jews. As you study the Holocaust with your students, we urge you to spend some time on rescue activities. In April we commemorate the Warsaw ghetto uprising. This is an appropriate time to include a unit of study on *Żegota*, which began and focused its efforts in Warsaw.

The format for this unit of study begins with an introduction which will provide you with a brief history of *Żegota*. We also include the necessary tools to introduce this subject to your students. The unit is designed to be covered in one or two classroom days.

Materials include:

1. Historical Background
2. Essential Questions
3. Student Outcomes
4. Suggested Approaches
5. Documents for Suggested Approaches (three rescuer stories)
6. Bibliography
7. Timeline
8. Webography and Videography

Hopefully your students will come away from this unit not only with factual knowledge, but also with an understanding of rescue activities during the Holocaust. Thank you for your continued efforts in helping others to learn about and understand the Holocaust in general and the work of *Żegota* in particular.

“Whoever saves a single life is as if one saves the entire world.”
- Talmud

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Historical Background

On September 1, 1939 Germany invaded Poland, and World War II began. Within three weeks Poland surrendered, and on September 28 Warsaw – the country’s capital – came under German rule. The authorities imposed a harsh occupation on the citizens of Warsaw (and Poland, generally) and took immediate steps to eliminate opposition, rounding up political leaders, members of the intelligentsia, and priests. They “terrorized the population in various ways – by arrests, murder in the streets, public and secret executions, deportations to concentration camps, and random seizures of persons for deportation to forced labor in the Reich.”¹ The people of Poland also suffered economic hardship in the face of German restrictions on commerce and transportation. The conditions were dire and the outlook was desperate. In 1940 the Polish Minister of Information assessed the situation as follows: “It can be stated that never yet in the whole history of Europe has there been so great an oppression of a whole nation coupled with so deep a penetration of destructive methods into the very life springs of a nation.”²

With local opposition removed and with the general population in distress, the Nazis turned their attention to the Jews. When the war broke out, Poland had the largest concentration of Jews in Europe – approximately 10% of its population.³ Warsaw alone was home to 375,000 Jews, the largest Jewish community in Europe and 29% of the city’s population.⁴ Like their fellow Poles, Jews in Warsaw were persecuted from the beginning of the occupation, but the first official anti-Jewish decrees came in November 1939. Jews had to wear white armbands with a blue Star of David, had to post signs on their shops identifying them as Jewish, and were banned from traveling on trains and from going to school.

Further decrees constrained Jews’ economic affairs. They were forced to obtain special permits to buy or lease Jewish enterprises, to deposit all their money in blocked bank accounts, and to provide detailed lists of all the items in their homes.⁵ These regulations diminished the economic and physical wellbeing of the Jews and enabled the Germans to plan for their wholesale exclusion from the Warsaw community.

On October 12, 1940 – the Jewish holiday, Yom Kippur – the Germans issued a decree calling for the establishment of a ghetto – a section of the city to which the Jews would be restricted to live, isolating them from the non-Jewish population. About 450,000 Jews from the city and the surrounding region were forced to move into an area of 1.3 square miles.⁶ In mid-November, the ghetto was sealed, surrounded by a brick wall over 10 feet high and topped with barbed wire. A few heavily guarded gates permitted access to the ghetto, but the Jews inside were forbidden to leave. On account of the cramped conditions, poor sanitation, and limited access to food and medicine, disease and starvation claimed thousands of lives each month. Ghetto inhabitants also fell victim to random acts of violence by both German and Polish authorities. Life in the ghetto was horrible and became an increasingly difficult struggle for survival.

In July 1942, mass deportations of Jews from the Warsaw ghetto began. Most were sent to the Treblinka extermination camp northeast of the city, where they were murdered in the gas chambers. Horrified by the Germans' persecution of the Jews, a group of Polish citizens - in September 1942 – formed an underground organization devoted to stopping the Nazis. The Council for the Aid to Jews, or *Żegota*, was started by people of different political ideologies (both liberals and conservatives) and different religious backgrounds (both non-Jews and Jews) who were united by their shared humanitarian beliefs and their determination to help Jews.⁷

Initially, *Żegota's* efforts were directed by Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, who at the time, was president of a conservative Catholic organization, and Wanda Kraheńska-Filipowiczowa, who was a liberal Democrat. They began their efforts in September 1942 and with the help of volunteers in Warsaw, Krakow, and Lwow, they aided 180 Jews, primarily children, during their first two months of work. By December, the leaders had linked up with the official resistance movement in Poland, and *Żegota* became a branch of the underground's activities. Political actors from both sides of the ideological spectrum and operatives from the two Jewish underground organizations active in “Aryan” – or Christian – Warsaw participated in *Żegota's* activities, which expanded to Lublin, Radom, Kielce, and other places around Poland.⁸ Rather than establish a regional network of its own, however, *Żegota* drew on the resources of existing underground organizations.⁹

The assistance took several forms. *Żegota* “provided Jews with hiding places, forged documents, foster homes for Jewish children, medical attention, and money, and appealed to the

Polish government in exile to persuade Poles to help Jews.”¹⁰ Distributing forged documents – such as birth certificates – to Jews who managed to escape from the ghetto was perhaps the most crucial service that *Żegota* provided. With a Christian birth certificate, a Jew could obtain a *Kennkarte*, an identification card that allowed one to pass as a Pole and to gain access to food rations, jobs, and everyday street privileges.¹¹

In Poland, the majority of births and deaths were registered by priests. In order to help the members of *Żegota*, sympathetic priests furnished hundreds of legal birth certificates and then destroyed the death certificates. The gender and age of the deceased non-Jew were matched, as well as possible, with a living Jew.¹² In addition to giving out these real certificates to Jews, *Żegota* obtained an underground press for printing counterfeit documents and false identity papers.¹³ The organization carried out all of its activities in secret, for getting caught carried fatal consequences. The punishment for aiding a Jew was death, and the guilty party’s entire family was murdered as well.

A special unit of *Żegota*, the Children’s Bureau, was established in July 1943 to deal with the plight of Jewish children in the Warsaw ghetto. In response to the mass deportations that began the previous year, Irena Sendler, the Bureau’s director, and her colleagues began smuggling children out of the ghetto and hiding them on the “Aryan” side. “By the end of 1943, the Children’s Bureau had found places for more than 600 children in municipal, relief, and church institutions and several hundred more in private homes. In total some 2,500 children were registered by the Warsaw branch alone.”¹⁴ To Poles who struggled under the added financial burden that concealing a Jew carried, *Żegota* gave money to help cover costs.

After the Warsaw Uprising of August 1944, *Żegota* relocated to Milanówek, a town near Warsaw, where it continued its secret activities on a smaller scale.¹⁵ It is estimated that by the end of the war *Żegota* helped approximately 40,000-50,000 Jews.¹⁶ *Żegota* was honored by Yad Vashem, Israel’s Holocaust authority, which planted a tree for the rescue network in the Garden of the Righteous.

Works Cited

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3. Nechama Tec, *When Light Pierced the Darkness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
4. Gutman.
5. *ibid.*
6. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Ghettos," <<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005059>> (16 March 2004).
7. Debórah Dwork, ed., *Voices & Views: A History of the Holocaust* (New York: The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, 2002).
8. *ibid.*
9. Gutman.
10. Donald Niewyk and Francis Nicosia, *The Columbia Guide to the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).
11. Debórah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt, *Holocaust: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002).
12. *ibid.*
13. Ellen Land-Weber, *To Save a Life: Stories of Holocaust Rescue* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).
14. Dwork, *Voices & Views*.
15. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Portrait of Zofia Kossak-Szczucka," <<http://www.ushmm.org/research/collections/index.php?content=search>> (16 March 2004).
16. Dwork, *Voices & Views*.

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Essential Questions

1. What forms did rescue take in Poland?
2. What were the consequences if caught participating in rescue activities?
3. What motivated individuals to become involved with saving Jews?
4. Why did *Żegota* want the world to know what was happening to the Jews?

Student Outcomes

The student will.....

1. understand that despite the extreme danger of rescue attempts under German occupation, both non-Jews and Jews overcame the hardships they faced each day and organized help for others.
2. recognize that rescue and resistance are viable choices in the face of genocide and oppression.
3. determine and express ways in which rescuers can serve as role models for our own lives.

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Suggested Approaches

1. Using the historical background and the rescue stories of Władysław Bartoszewski, Irena Sendler, and Walter Ukalo, explore the various ways in which members of *Żegota* helped Jews. Compare and contrast the roles of these three rescuers.
2. The activities of Irena Sendler and the Children's Bureau became an important part of the work of *Żegota*. Discuss the risks involved in rescuing children from the Warsaw ghetto.
3. Listed below are quotes taken from *The Path of the Righteous: Gentile Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust* by Mordecai Paldiel. Divide the class into groups and give each group a quote to discuss. How does each quote apply to *Żegota*? Bring the groups together and have them share their ideas. Also have them consider how the quotes are relevant to other instances in history of rescue and resistance.

“My family taught me that what matters is whether people are honest or dishonest, not what religion they belong to.”

Irena Sendler, Poland

“I did nothing special and I don't consider myself a hero. I simply acted on my human obligation to the persecuted and the suffering...”

Wladyslaw Kowalski, Poland

“I was scared to death, like everyone else. But I made up my mind right then and there: If I can help, I will...My mother always taught me that God made everyone the same; He doesn't care if they're Jews or not, because everyone has the right to live.”

Mary Szul, Poland

Supplemental Activities

1. Have students write reflective essays about rescuers, those of *Żegota* in particular, and create a class publication for distribution.
2. Have students assume the role of reporter and write newspaper accounts of *Żegota*.

Władysław Bartoszewski

Warsaw, Poland... 1939 – Władysław Bartoszewski was 17 in 1939 when the Germans invaded Poland. He participated in the defense of Warsaw and was arrested on September 19, 1940 and sent to Auschwitz. Released in 1941, he joined the Polish underground known as the Home Army or the AK. He also belonged to the Catholic underground organization, Front for the Rebirth of Poland.

Władysław Bartoszewski was chosen as a member of the *Delegatura*, the Polish government-in-exile on Polish soil. As a member of the *Delegatura*, Bartoszewski was a leader of *Żegota*, the Council for the Aid to Jews, which was responsible for saving 40,000 to 50,000 Jews.

Bartoszewski worked for the freedom of the Jews and the Poles. From August 1 to October 2, 1944, he participated in the Warsaw uprising. He was then a member of the Bureau for Information and Propaganda of the Central Headquarters of the Home Army. Władysław Bartoszewski transmitted reports on Nazi terror and the situation of the Jews to the Polish government-in-exile.

Following the war, Bartoszewski was imprisoned by the Polish government for eight years (1946 to 1954). In 1965 he was awarded the medal of “Righteous Among the Nations” by Yad Vashem. He was appointed Poland’s ambassador to Austria in 1990 and from March to December 1995, served as the Minister of Foreign Affairs and in June 2000 was reappointed Minister of Foreign Affairs. Władysław Bartoszewski is currently the Chairman of the International Council of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.

Władysław Bartoszewski is in his 80s and lives in Warsaw.

Irena Sendler

Warsaw, Poland... 1942 – During the Holocaust, Irena Sendler worked for *Żegota*, a unit within the Polish underground established specifically to help Jews in hiding. As a health worker, she had access to the Warsaw ghetto, and between 1942 and 1943 she led hundreds of Jewish children out of the ghetto to safe hiding places.

Some children, after being sedated, were carried out in potato sacks; others were placed in coffins. Still others entered a church in the ghetto that had two entrances. One entrance opened into the ghetto, and the other opened into the “Aryan” or Christian side of Warsaw. They entered the church as Jews and exited as Christians.

In time, the Germans became aware of Irena’s activities, and on October 20, 1943, she was arrested and imprisoned by the Gestapo. But no one could break her spirit. She withstood torture, refusing to betray either her associates or any of the Jewish children in hiding. Sentenced to death, Irena was saved at the last minute when *Żegota* members bribed one of the Germans to halt the execution. She escaped from prison and was pursued by the Gestapo for the rest of the war.

Irena Sendler did not think of herself as a hero. She said, “I want the Jewish community to know that there was resistance and a spirit among the Jews in the ghetto.”

Irena Sendler died at the age of 98 in May 2008 in Warsaw, Poland.

Walter Ukalo

Brody, Poland... 1942 – In 1942, the deportation of the Jews of Brody had begun. The Ukalo family offered shelter to their neighbors, Dorothy and her infant daughter, Sabina, along with Dorothy's step-mother, sister, and brother-in-law. They stayed for several months, until it became too dangerous. Walter's father, Gregory, was killed by the Germans at the end of 1942 because he was suspected of hiding Jews. By that time Walter had moved the Jews who were hiding in the Ukalo home to another location. At one point, Dorothy and Sabina moved back to the Brody ghetto where Walter continued to bring them food.

Walter smuggled Dorothy and Sabina out of the ghetto and once again took them into his home until he had to find them another place to stay. This time Walter found a Ukrainian peasant who agreed to provide shelter for Dorothy and Sabina. Since the peasant was so poor, Walter brought him firewood and food. In addition to Dorothy and Sabina, Walter persuaded the peasant to hide Dorothy's sisters, Bronia and Regina.

In 1943, Walter joined *Żegota* and operated out of the Lwow branch where he worked with Władysława Choms, who was known by the Jews as the "Angel of Lwow." Walter was introduced to Mrs. Choms by Klara Chotiner, a Jew, who Walter had hidden along with her baby. Walter worked tirelessly for *Żegota*, traveling the countryside looking for Jews and supplying them with false papers, money, clothing, and shelter. Through *Żegota*, Walter was able to obtain papers that said he was disabled, which allowed him to spend all his time pursuing rescue activities. Walter worked for *Żegota* until the end of the war.

Walter Ukalo died several years ago.

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Timeline

1939

- September 1 Germany invades Poland, and World War II begins.
- November First anti-Jewish decrees are issued in Warsaw.

1940

- October 12 Order for the creation of the Warsaw ghetto is issued.
- November 15 The Warsaw ghetto is sealed with approximately 450,000 Jews inside.

1942

- July 22 Large-scale deportations of Jews from the Warsaw ghetto to the Treblinka extermination camp begin.
- September *Żegota*, the Council for the Aid to Jews, an underground organization based in Warsaw, is established.
- December *Żegota* joins with the official resistance movement in Poland, with *Żegota* becoming one branch of the underground.

1943

- April 19 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising begins as Germans attempt to deport the ghetto's remaining inhabitants to Treblinka. Armed resistance continues for nearly four weeks.
- July Children's Bureau of *Żegota* is established, directed by Irena Sendler.
- December 31 By the end of 1943, the Children's Bureau of *Żegota* has found places for more than 600 Jewish children.

1944

August

After the Polish uprising in Warsaw, *Żegota* moves its headquarters to the town of Milanówek, 20 miles west of Warsaw, and resumes its help to Jews needing assistance.

1945

January 17

Warsaw is liberated by the Soviet Army.

1965

Władysław Bartoszewski and Irena Sendler are recognized as Righteous Among the Nations.

1978

Walter Ukalo is recognized by Yad Vashem as a Righteous Among the Nations.

1993

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum opens and includes an exhibit on *Żegota*.

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Webography

The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous

www.jfr.org

The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous website features stories of rescuers, information on the work of the Foundation, and study guides on rescue.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

www.ushmm.org

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's website provides information about the museum, a historical overview of the Holocaust, educational information, an annotated videography, and a comprehensive listing of Holocaust organizations associated with the museum.

Yad Vashem: The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority

www.yadvashem.org

Yad Vashem's website, sponsored by the Holocaust Martyrs and Heroes Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem, Israel, offers information about events at Yad Vashem and how one can access information from the museum's photo and film archives. Information is also provided about Yad Vashem's Holocaust education program for school children.

Videography

Żegota – A Time to Remember

52 min, VHS

This documentary about the history of *Żegota* includes some of those involved in the organization's activities, both Christian rescuers and Jewish survivors. They recount their war time experiences in Poland.

Żegota: The Council for Aid to Jews in Occupied Poland, 1942 – 1945

28 min, VHS

Eli Wallach narrates this documentary about *Żegota*, which explores the plight of the Jews of Poland and the conditions under which *Żegota* rescuers tried to help. Members of *Żegota*, Jewish survivors, and Polish and Jewish historians are featured in this documentary.