



Eva Kuper

A Beacon of Light



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CLASSROOM INSTRUCTIONS



LENGTH

1-2 class periods (90-120 minutes)



AGE APPROPRIATENESS

14+



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will learn about the Holocaust by analyzing a written Holocaust survivor testimony and engaging with historical primary sources. Students will explore key themes such as the Warsaw ghetto, deportation, escape, rescue, and hiding. They also will need to synthesize information and practice oral communication with peers.



MATERIAL NEEDED

All necessary materials are in this workbook. Students may complete the activity digitally or in hardcopy.

BACKGROUND READING



Eva, age seven, after the war. Bielsko (Poland), 1947.
Courtesy of Eva Kuper and the Azrieli Foundation.

BIOGRAPHY:

Eva Kuper was born on February 13, 1940, in the suburbs of Warsaw, Poland, to Abram, who worked as a chemist, and Fela, who worked in a bank. Before her first birthday, Eva and her parents were forced into the Warsaw ghetto, where they lived for about two years. Beginning in the summer of 1942, many Jews in the ghetto, including Eva's mother, were rounded up and deported to the death camp of Treblinka. Fearing for their lives, Eva's father decided that he and Eva had to leave the ghetto, and they managed to escape through the sewers. Eva's father thought it would be safer if they went into hiding separately. With the help of a family friend, Eva was placed with strangers who took good care of her. She spent most of her time in hiding being cared for by Catholic nuns at a farmhouse that was part of a convent. After the war, Eva was reunited with her surviving family members, and in 1949, she immigrated with her father and her new stepmother to Montreal, Canada, where she grew up "practically Canadian." Although Eva's family did not speak about the Holocaust, their experiences during the war profoundly shaped her life. Eva started sharing her story in the 1990s and continues to speak to students in Quebec to this day. Eva eventually returned to Poland for a visit in 2005 and was reunited by chance with one of the nuns who had saved her, Sister Klara.

Eva Kuper is a Holocaust survivor who immigrated to Canada in 1949 and now lives in Quebec. You can learn about her experiences by reading her memoir, "A Beacon of Light".

Below is some background information that will help you understand Eva's story.

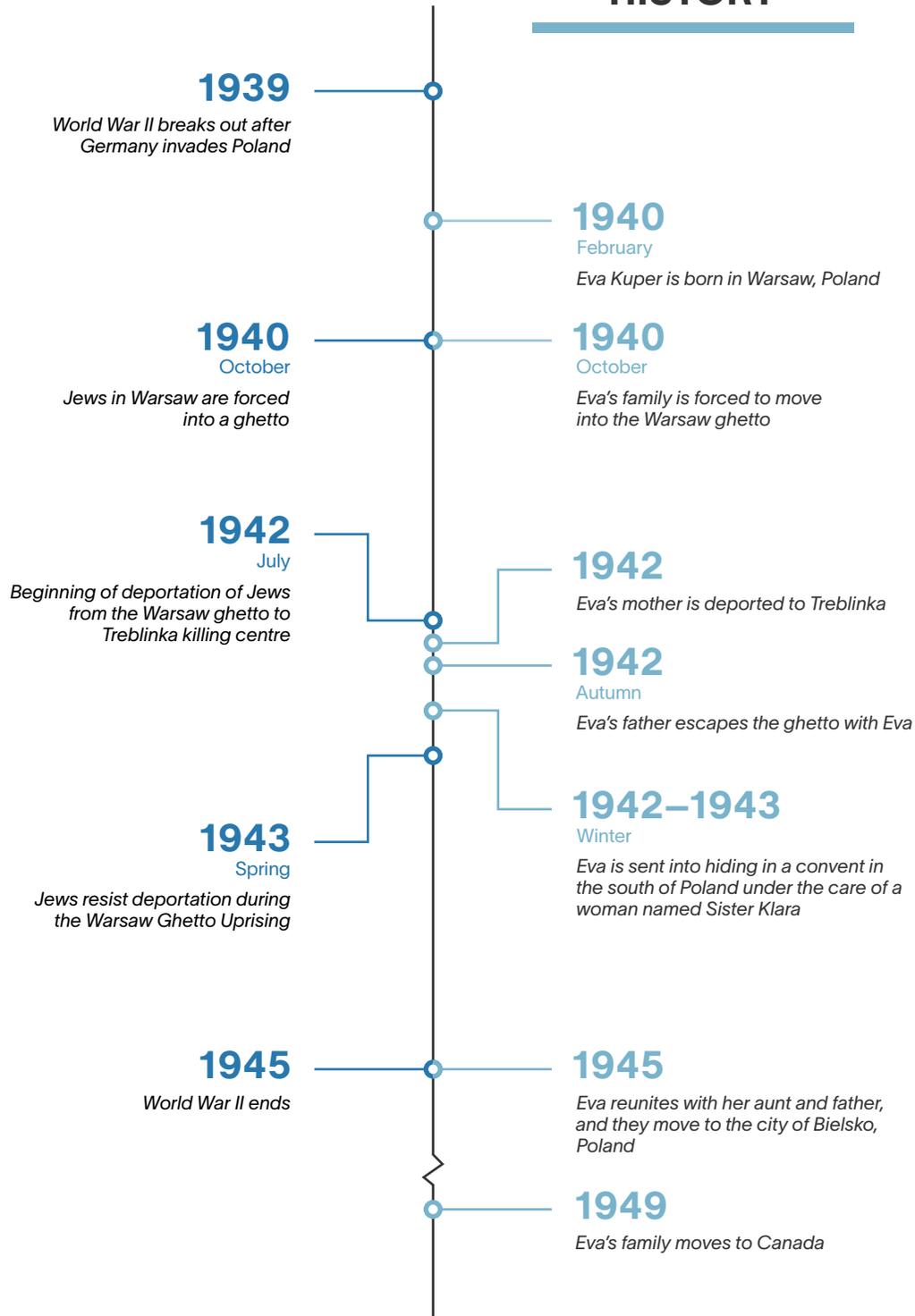
HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

Poland is a country in Central Europe, located between Germany and Russia, that had a large Jewish population before World War II. Jews faced antisemitism and discrimination in Poland, including restrictions on where they could work or attend school, but many also participated in Polish culture and society. World War II began with the German invasion and occupation of Poland in September 1939. Immediately, the German occupiers began to persecute Jews and force them into ghettos – small walled-off areas guarded by Germans. Warsaw was the capital of pre-war Poland, and the Warsaw ghetto (established in October 1940) was the largest ghetto in Nazi-occupied Europe. In July 1942, the Nazis began to deport the Jews in Warsaw to Nazi camps and killing centres in Poland, including Treblinka. In April 1943, when the Nazis entered the ghetto to deport the remaining inhabitants, about 750 organized ghetto fighters launched an uprising, while the other inhabitants took shelter in hiding places and underground bunkers. The resistance fighters were defeated after a month. Some Jews in Poland tried to hide with friends or used false identity papers, hoping they could stay undetected until the war ended. Many children were hidden with non-Jews, and often convents and other religious sites were used to hide children. Liberation came to Warsaw in early 1945. Approximately 3,000,000 Polish Jews were killed in the Holocaust, including Eva's mother.

TIMELINE

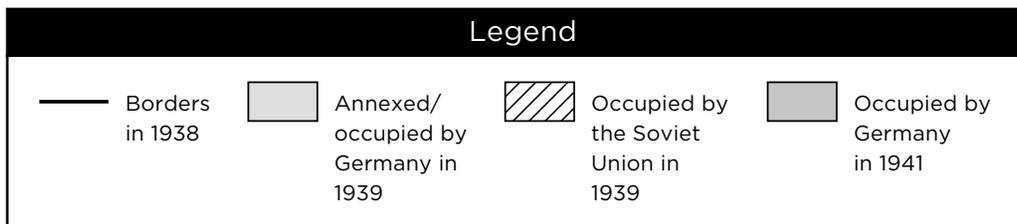
HISTORICAL DATES

EVA'S PERSONAL HISTORY



MAP

OCCUPIED POLAND, 1939–1945



A BEACON OF LIGHT

To my mother, Fela Kupferblum, who was murdered at Treblinka; to my father, Anthony (Abram) Kuper, who against all odds escaped with me from the Warsaw ghetto; and to my two rescuers, Hanka Rembowska and Sister Klara Jaroszyńska, two women of uncommon courage and goodness.

My parents, Fela and Abram, were both born in a beautiful town in Poland about two hundred kilometres southeast of Warsaw called Sandomierz, where 40 per cent of the city's population was Jewish. My family was extensive and very much a part of the life of the city. My paternal grandfather, Solomon, owned a shoe store that was located on the ground floor of the building in which his family lived and was very involved in the Jewish community. My maternal grandfather, David, owned a mill in partnership with his brother. My parents were distant cousins and grew up together, but my mother's family was financially more comfortable than my father's. My father had three brothers — Stanisław (Stach, or Stasiak), Leon and Moniek, and two sisters, Mina and Zosia (Sophie); my mother had a sister,

Gucia (Gertrude), and two brothers, Hilek (Henry) and Leon. My father's parents did their best to educate all their children, but my father, as the oldest son, was the only one who had a university education at that time. As a Jew, he was not admitted to university in Poland to study chemical engineering and was sent to Belgium to study. My mother was trained as a teacher, but was also not able to work in her profession because she was Jewish and, therefore, worked in a bank.

In 1936, when my father returned from Belgium, my parents were married and they moved to Warsaw, where my father eventually started a small business as a chemical engineer, preparing the dyes for furs. He liked to play the lottery and on one occasion won a considerable sum of money. The money from the lottery made

it financially possible to start a family, and I was born in 1940. My parents moved to a lovely new apartment in a suburb of Warsaw known as Bielany, where there was a lot of green space and fresh air for their new baby. They bought new furniture and settled into life in their new community. There was a small grocery store in the neighbourhood where my father would often stop to pick up whatever was needed at home. He made friends with the owners, the Rondio family, who were ethnic Germans. Mr. Rondio was employed as a policeman and his wife ran the store. One day, when my father stopped at the store, he found some men packing up the stock on the shelves. When he asked Mrs. Rondio what was happening, she tearfully explained that she had not been able to pay some debts and therefore her stock was being taken in payment. My father quickly offered to help by giving her the needed funds. This generosity sealed what would become an important friendship.

Unfortunately, the times were becoming increasingly turbulent as the world neared the beginning of World War II. The war broke out in September 1939 when Germany invaded and occupied Poland. The following year, the **Nazis** began to gather the Jews into a designated area of Warsaw: the **ghetto**. Initially there were two ghettos — the small one where people lived and a larger one in which were found the commercial establishments, stores and factories as well as living quarters. The Poles and others who had occupied the area before it became a ghetto were forced out, and soon the ghetto was separated from the rest of the city by an encircling ten-foot-high wall topped by barbed wire.

When we moved to the ghetto, my parents left their new furniture with the Rondios, not wanting to take it to the squalor of the ghetto and still believing that the situation was only temporary and that they would soon return to their former life. The ghetto was unbelievably crowded, so we considered ourselves fortunate to secure a whole room for our small family, which now included five people — the three of us, as well as my mother's cousin and one of her daughters. My cousin's other daughter, Regina, was my mother's closest friend, and she worked as a guard in the ghetto prison. There was a phone in the cellar of our building that could be used to make calls, but not receive them. My father arranged with Regina that if an emergency arose, he would alert her by phone at the prison.

It is well documented that life in the ghetto became unbearable. The crowded conditions contributed to repeat outbreaks of many diseases, and the lack of



Eva's mother, Fela (right), with her cousin Regina Bankier.
Courtesy of Eva Kuper and the Azrieli Foundation.



Nazis: Members of the National Socialist German Workers' Party, or Nazi Party, a far-right political party established in 1920. Under the leadership of Adolf Hitler, the Nazi Party controlled Germany from 1933 to 1945.

Ghetto: A confined residential area for Jews. Beginning in 1939, the Nazis forced Jews to live in crowded and unsanitary conditions in designated areas — usually the poorest ones — of cities and towns in German-occupied Eastern Europe. Ghettos were often enclosed by walls and gates, and entry and exit from the ghettos were strictly controlled. The largest ghetto was located in the city of Warsaw, where approximately 400,000 Jews were forced to live beginning in October 1940. The ghetto's horrific conditions led to the death of 83,000 people from starvation and disease. Mass deportations from the ghetto to the Treblinka killing centre were carried out between July and September 1942. Following an uprising by ghetto resistance fighters in April 1943, the remaining Jews were killed or deported.

food, clean water and decent sanitary conditions made life extremely difficult. It was not long before people began to die by the thousands. Yet at the same time there were others who, because of smuggling or paying off guards to look the other way, enjoyed a standard of living equal or even superior to conditions before the war. My father described peering into a restaurant one night only to hear music and see wine, champagne, fine delicacies and sumptuous decor. How could this be going on in the face of the horror experienced by the masses?

My father, as a chemist, worked in one of the German factories in the large ghetto. Because he was a key person, he enjoyed a somewhat privileged status, but we still had very little. He recalled that, at the beginning, there were corpses laid out in the street each morning for collection by carts belonging to the Jewish Burial Society. Even then the Jewish community was somewhat organized, with the Nazis forcing the Jewish community leaders to do their dirty work. Some did it to save themselves at least temporarily; others could not. The number of corpses increased dramatically,

and each morning one could see masses of bodies awaiting collection. These corpses contributed to the diseases that ran rampant among a terribly compromised population. Eventually, huge holes were dug and bodies were buried in mass graves in an attempt to curb the spread of disease to some extent.

My father continued to work and, having some means, brought as much food as he could into the small ghetto from the large one. He would distribute the food to the neighbours and help as many people as he could. Years later, he remembered that I, as a small child, sat on the broad sill at the open window, handing out food to starving children waiting there who had distended abdomens and limbs that looked like sticks.

The Nazis would shoot people with little or no provocation. By the summer of 1942, at first every few weeks, then every few days, the Nazis would order the Jewish "authorities" to round up one hundred or two hundred or more people for transport or "resettlement," as it was called. The Jewish authorities could not refuse and the quota had to be met, or they themselves were forced to join the ranks of those who



Eva's family in pre-war Sandomierz (Poland).
Courtesy of Eva Kuper and the Azrieli Foundation.

were “resettled.” One morning, all the men in our section of the ghetto were ordered to report to the yard at the **Többens factory**. My father had to go. The men were kept locked up with no explanation for several hours. It was only on his release and return to our room that my father found the entire area where we lived cleared of women and children. Everyone was gone! My father ran to phone Regina to alert her about what had happened and then ran to the **Umschlagplatz**, the loading platform where people were being herded by the hundreds onto cattle cars. He tried to find us but was prevented by the guards, who would not let him come near. He felt that if our family was being “resettled,” he wanted to be with us. He persisted in trying

and eventually was threatened by a Nazi with a gun. Meanwhile, Regina had raced to the loading yard and, incredibly, arrived in time to see my mother and me being loaded into one of the cattle cars. The timing was crucial. Had she arrived a moment earlier or later, she would not have seen us. She began to scream that I was her child, and maybe because she wore a uniform, or maybe because they still needed her at the prison, my mother was permitted to pass me hand-to-hand until I was thrown off the train into Regina’s arms. A true miracle! My father found Regina sitting in her room, crying, with me on her lap. Regina, unfortunately, was not ultimately spared. As soon as she and others like her were no longer useful, they met the same fate as my mother.

The moment when my mother made the heroic decision to save me haunts me to this day. The natural inclination of mothers is to hold their children close when sensing danger or catastrophe. What did that decision cost her? How insightful of her to predict the horror that awaited those on the train, many of whom still believed the German “resettlement” story. How broken her heart must have been as she handed me off, believing that even that small chance was better than what awaited her.

My father began to plan our escape from the ghetto. At this time, however, I became sick with dysentery, which is very serious for a young child. Day after day, he watched as I got progressively sicker. He had three diapers that he washed repeatedly and put back on me, wet. I became dehydrated and lapsed into semi-consciousness. My father’s friend Dr. Kalinowski came to see if he could help. Without a “physiological solution,” he said, I would die within a few hours. In desperation, my father turned to the manager of the Többens factory where he worked, begging the manager, who was not Jewish and had access to the city outside the ghetto, to get the solution. He agreed and, within a few hours, I began to revive. Saved again! Once I recovered a



Eva’s mother, age twenty-seven. Sandomierz, Poland.
Courtesy of Eva Kuper and the Azrieli Foundation.



The Többens textile factory, established in 1941 by Walter Többens and Fritz Emil Schultz, had two locations in the ghetto and, at its height, employed 15,000 Jewish slave labourers. The ghetto factories were part of a larger network of the company.

Umschlagplatz (German): A collection point, used to refer to the areas where the Nazis assembled Jews for deportation to death camps. The term is most often used in connection to the Warsaw ghetto.



Baby Eva with her parents, Fela and Abram. Warsaw, Poland, 1940.
Courtesy of Eva Kuper and the Azrieli Foundation.



Aryan is used in this term as a synonym for non-Jew, but usually the word Aryan was used by Nazis to denote those with "pure" German blood.

little, it was definitely time to escape.

Each time there was a roundup, people scurried around searching for a place to hide. During one of the roundups, my father, with me in his arms, stood in the water-filled cellar of a factory building, along with a dozen others, while people were apprehended up above. The people hiding with us warned my father that, should we all survive the night, he would not find shelter among them again. It was too dangerous to hide with a small child whose cries could jeopardize the lives of everyone. My father knew the dangers and always carried two cyanide pills in his pocket, determined to kill both of us rather than be taken alive by the Nazis.

We had to leave the ghetto immediately, before another roundup. My father was convinced that the sewers were our only chance. He arranged with his sister Sophie, who, using false identity papers, was on the so-called **Aryan** side, to have someone pick us up once we emerged outside the ghetto. My father told me that the trip through the sewers was unimaginably horrible, with filth and rats as big as cats everywhere. It took two and a half hours.

When we emerged, a sorry sight I am sure, my aunt's friend took us to the home of the Rondios, who welcomed us warmly. Mr. Rondio, though he considered himself a Pole, had been badly treated by the Poles, who naturally distrusted and hated anyone German. Thus, the Rondios had moved into a German section of the city. They felt that they would not be suspected of hiding Jews, so they were not worried about having us there. Since we, in my father's words, "looked like death" and were pale as ghosts from being hidden so much, they had us lie on the floor of their dining room where the sun could warm our faces and help us look more normal. They fed us and helped us to catch our breath from the terrible ordeals we had lived through. They were very distressed to hear about my mother and to get a first-hand account of life in the ghetto. In spite of their willingness to offer us shelter, my father felt strongly that although we were not safe anywhere, he did not want to jeopardize their safety and very lives by our presence in their home.

My father turned to Dr. Lande, who had been the pediatrician who looked after the children of the fur trade union members. He had known my parents since my birth, and my father was sure that he would be sympathetic to our plight. He begged Dr. Lande to find a safe place for me; since my father could not work and hide his remaining family while caring for a young child, I could not be safe with him. Dr. Lande agreed and told my father that he would be in touch with him in a few days.

True to his word, he placed me with Hanka Rembowska, an artist and illustrator of children's books who was a wonderful woman already caring for a little girl, Zosia, who, although not Jewish, had been orphaned by the events of the war. Hanka, who was suffering from tuberculosis, took care of us until she became too sick to do so. The antibiotics used to treat tuberculosis today were not yet known in 1942. Dr. Lande then took us to a farmhouse about 450 kilometres away in Zakopane in the Tatra Mountains, in the southernmost part of Poland.

My own somewhat vague memories begin in the farmhouse, which was located on a hill overlooking the town. There were many nuns, one priest and many blind children, all boys except for Zosia and me.¹ Times were very hard and there was not much food. I remember potatoes. All the children sat in a large circle outside, peeling potatoes. Since the boys could not see, they would peel as best as they could, then pass the potatoes to Zosia and me to remove the missed spots before putting them into the big pot filled with water, in the middle of the circle. Potatoes were the staple of our diet. There was also a cow that I loved. I remember going to get the cow from the pasture at the end of the day when it was time to bring her home for milking. I would hold the thick cord around her neck and pat her soft fur. That milk and the bit of butter that could be made from it were the only wholesome parts of our diet. I also remember sitting around a long rectangular table at meal times with all the other children, the nuns and the priest. The priest sat at the head of the table with me on his left side. He was the only one who would get a small square of butter for his bread. He would butter a piece of bread, cut it in half and pass me one half under the table. He did not have enough to go around. I was the lucky one. I was always very small for my age, marked for life by those early years of hunger and deprivation.

Whenever the Nazis invaded the village to renew their supplies and take whatever they wanted, someone would run up the hill to warn the nuns. Perhaps it was not because they knew that a Jewish child was being hidden there. It was good to know when the Nazis were around so that anything of value, such as food and supplies, could be hidden before it was confiscated. Whenever this happened, I would also be hidden. I remember vaguely being outside in the pasture, in a hole that had been excavated for that purpose. I would climb in, a board would be placed over the opening and the sod would cover the board. I sat quietly in there until the danger passed. Strangely enough, I

don't remember being frightened. I have no idea what might have been said to me to make it feel okay. I was used to being quiet. Somehow, I was made to feel safe, which is unbelievable to me now, since when I imagine placing my children or my grandchildren in such a situation, I am terrified at the psychological damage that would result. I lived in this farmhouse for three years and through to the end of the war.

After the war, my aunt Sophie found my name listed at one of the agencies that were compiling names of people who had been found. Not being sure that it was really me, Sophie did not tell my father, but came alone to get me. I don't remember this well, but my recollections do not match what she remembers. I remember her coming toward me as I led my beloved cow home for milking. She tells me that she found me in the **convent** building. I do not remember my feelings at being spirited away by my aunt, whom I did not remember at all. I do remember not being eager to leave my familiar and safe life, but I did not put up a fuss ... hardly surprising, since I had long ago learned to be a quiet and accepting child. She recalls that the first thing I said to her was how lucky I was that I could see, since the other children were blind. Oddly enough, I don't even remember the meeting with my father, which must have been emotional.

After the war, we lived in a city called Bielsko, now known as Bielsko-Biała. My father was the director of a government fur-dyeing plant. He had an important position and, by the standards of the day, we were quite well off, having a housekeeper, a chauffeur and other servants. Of course, having a chauffeur in those days was not the same luxury it is today. All automobiles were old, somewhat reconditioned, and you could hardly travel a kilometre without some mechanical failure befalling you. My father was the least handy person alive... the chauffeur was a necessity if we were to have a car. My

¹ The farmhouse was part of a convent connected to an Order that was established in 1918 by Elzbieta Czacka, a blind Polish nun of the Congregation of Franciscan Sisters Servants of the Cross. The Order had a facility in Zakopane during the war, and currently has residences in Laski, Poland, as well as Ukraine, Italy, Rwanda and South Africa. It is dedicated to the education and well-being of blind children.



Convent: A Christian community, especially of nuns, that has taken religious vows; also the location where such a community lives.

aunt Sophie, who had lost her husband during the war, lived with us in a lovely apartment. I remember that she was beautiful and lived life to the fullest, since everyone who had survived the horrors of the war tried to get the most out of life. There were parties, card games, outings, holidays and friends.

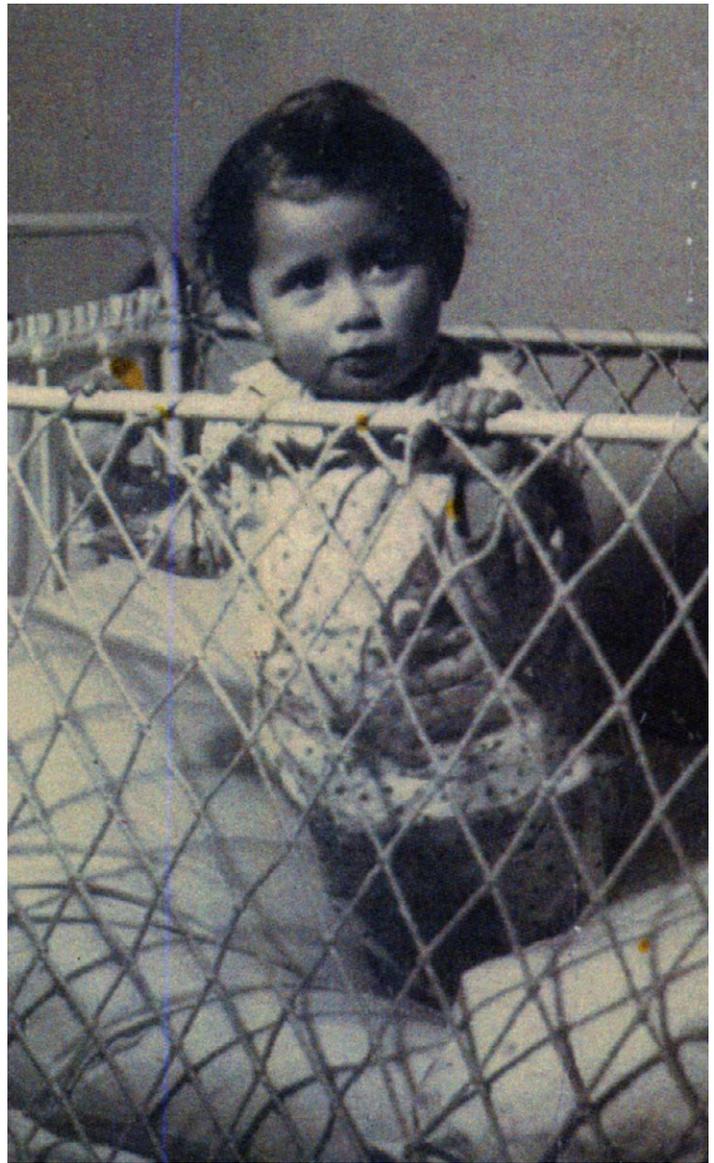
Even after the war, there was still a great deal of **anti-semitism** in Poland. We lived as non-Jews, using my father's assumed wartime name of Kornacki, since it was not safe to live openly as Jews. I went to school where, among other subjects, I learned **catechism**. I had my First **Communion** at the age of six, went to weekly confession and felt purified by the experience. My father never went to church, so I went with our housekeeper, whom I loved.

In 1948, my father met a woman named Barbara and remarried, and he had to do some finagling to secure a passport and exit visa for my stepmother when our immigration to Canada was imminent. He had already arranged for our passports before his marriage. He felt that life as Jews in Poland would continue to be difficult, and I am sure that he was tired of the need for vigilant deception.

It was only on the ship crossing the Atlantic that my father told me that I was Jewish. It would have been dangerous to share this secret with a young child. I had learned in school that the Jews had crucified Jesus and that they were evil. I was horrified to learn that I was one of "them." It took many years before I became comfortable with the idea and many more before I felt pride in my heritage and in my people.

After the initial period of adjustment learning the new language and culture, I began to feel Canadian, just like all my friends. Since I was young and had an aptitude for languages, I learned to speak English without a Polish accent, and my life in Poland quickly began to fade in my memory.

My parents spoke little about the Holocaust and their experiences during the war. They did not want to burden me and wished for me to grow up without the horror of those memories. I asked few questions and was not terribly interested in the few stories that they did tell. I knew that my parents suffered from sleeplessness and flashbacks whenever they spoke of their experiences. I am sure that the spectre of the Holocaust remained with them even though I heard little about it. Nevertheless, the Holocaust, the loss of my mother and the deprivations of those years have had a profound effect on me and my family, even my children and grandchildren. My youngest daughter, Felisa, is named for my mother and since childhood she has



Eva as a baby. Warsaw ghetto, circa 1940.
Courtesy of Eva Kuper and the Azrieli Foundation.



Catechism: A summary of Christian doctrine that is presented in a question-and-answer format and used to teach the principles of the faith.

Communion (also Holy Communion, Eucharist): The ritual that takes place at the end of the Christian Mass when the faithful commemorate the Last Supper of Christ by consuming consecrated bread and wine. In the Catholic tradition, a child typically takes Communion for the first time at around seven years old, during a special ceremony called the "First Communion."

Antisemitism: Prejudice, discrimination, persecution or hatred against Jewish people, institutions, culture and symbols.



Eva, age seven, after the war. Bielsko, Poland, 1947.
Courtesy of Eva Kuper and the Azrieli Foundation.

had an abiding interest in that part of our past. When she reached young adulthood, Felisa was always keen to hear the stories, even though they were very difficult to hear and to tell. I had an uncle and aunt who spoke of the war years incessantly. Felisa was eager for me to go to Poland with her to retrace our family's history. I had no interest in going back. I had no fond memories and no love for the Poles or for researching the terror of those years.

Yet in 1998, I was approached by the **Shoah Foundation** to videotape my wartime experiences as part of the living testimony project initiated by Steven Spielberg, a request that started my own return to these past events. To prepare for the taping, I listened to audiotapes that I had begged my father to make for me about six months before he died. In them, he tells the story of how I was saved, recalling to the best of his ability, and with great pain, the events and horrors of those times. These tapes were the raw material from

which this chronology emerged.

Beginning with the videotape, I began to prepare myself to approach my legacy of being a child survivor, a hidden child. My interest in this part of my life was reborn, and I became involved in Holocaust education



Shoah Foundation (USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education): A project founded by Steven Spielberg in 1994, after making the Holocaust film *Schindler's List*, to record and preserve the testimonies of Holocaust survivors in a video archive. In 2006, Spielberg partnered with the University of Southern California, and in 2013 the foundation expanded its archive to include testimonies from survivors of other genocides. The foundation now has more than 55,000 video testimonies, has established a Center for Advanced Genocide Research and provides educational programming.

at the school of which I was the principal — the Jewish People's and Peretz School in Montreal — and subsequently at the Hebrew Foundation School. In 2003, at a family gathering following the **bar mitzvah** of my cousin David's son Sam, the idea of a trip back to Poland with my husband, Harvey, and my cousin Joseph and his wife, Edith, was born. My daughter Felisa was very keen to make this trip with me, and eventually the plan evolved into spending two weeks tracing our roots with my husband and my cousins, after which Felisa would join me for twelve days to continue to search for my past and that of our family.

The evening before our departure on August 23, 2005, I attended a meeting of *Auberge Shalom pour femmes*, where I am active on the board and the executive. I took a seat near a former colleague and commented that I hoped that the meeting would not take long, since I was leaving the next day for a month-long trip to Prague, Budapest and Poland. Surprised, she told me that she too would be visiting Poland, in October. She gave me the name of an American, Yale Reisner, who was the director of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, and she gave me his telephone number. I took it but did not think that I would need his help since I had researched convents in Zakopane on the internet and had arranged an appointment with a nun in the one where I thought I had been hidden.

On arrival in Warsaw, however, I decided to phone Yale and told him a little about my history. He was eager to meet with me, so we trekked down to the institute to see him. He was busy but we decided to wait and visited the Jewish museum that was also housed in the former Jewish public library in Warsaw. After several hours, we were finally able to meet with Yale. I elaborated on my story, telling him that although my memory of the time in the convent was vague, I did know that there were blind children there. He bolted out of his seat and picked a book off his shelves. It was the Polish version of Ewa Kurek's published doctoral thesis, *Your Life Is Worth Mine: How Polish Nuns Saved Hundreds of Jewish Children in German-Occupied Poland, 1939–1945*. Flipping through the pages, he came upon this paragraph:

Congregation of Franciscan Sisters Servants of the Cross: Polish order established in 1918 for the purpose of caring for the blind. In 1939, 106 sisters worked in 18 homes. In Zakopane, Sister Klara Jaroszyńska saved the life of a little Jewish girl.

We were all speechless. This had to be the right convent, and the little Jewish girl had to be me!

The next day, armed with the telephone number, I tried to contact the convent in Warsaw, with no success. My husband returned to Canada, and while I waited for my daughter to arrive, I continued trying to get in touch with someone at the convent. Eventually I managed to contact a Sister Jana Pawła who was in Laski, twenty-five kilometres outside of Warsaw. Laski is the main establishment of this Order, where they continue to look after three hundred blind children to this day. I briefly told her the reason for my call and tentatively asked if it could be possible that someone who had been in Zakopane during the war was still alive. She was very warm and interested and told me the most astounding news: Sister Klara, then ninety-four years old, was alive and in Laski. Twice in two days, I was speechless, which does not happen often. I literally could not breathe. I recovered to ask about Sister Klara's state of health. Sister Jana Pawła assured me that, in spite of the fact that Sister Klara was herself now blind, her mind was clear, her memory intact and accurate and her sense of humour ever present. I was more than delighted, and we arranged a visit to Laski the very same day — September 8, 2005. Felisa was incredulous at this development, and we were both very excited.

We met Sister Jana Pawła in front of the convent's beautiful chapel situated in a forested area full of flowers and greenery. We entered the chapel for her to say a brief prayer, and then she led us to the house where Sister Klara lived, cared for by other nuns. Sister Klara, supported by Sister Rut, her close friend and archivist for the Order, came out of the house and opened her arms to embrace me. I went to her and we held each other close. Everyone was crying. I led her gently to a bench where we sat together, holding each other. She began to talk, recalling those terrible years.

She remembered me well and with great love. She told me that I was a tiny, dark-haired, bright-eyed little girl with whom she instantly fell in love. She recalled that I had come to the convent as a result of her meeting with Hanka Rembowska, whom she knew. Hanka had pleaded with her to take her little girls, as she had become too ill to look after us. Sister Klara told me that while they were speaking, I had been holding Hanka's



bar mitzvah (Hebrew; son of the commandment): The time when, in Jewish tradition, boys become religiously and morally responsible for their actions and are considered adults for the purpose of synagogue and other rituals. Traditionally this occurs at age thirteen for boys.

hand, but I soon dropped it and ran to Sister Klara, putting my arms around her and asking her to pick me up. When she did, and I cuddled into her shoulder, she simply could not refuse. Sister Klara corroborated my own sketchy memories of that time and added detail and information previously unknown to me. Hearing her stories was a very emotional experience for me. Those three years in the convent had been an empty space in my life. I knew no one who could tell me what had happened and what I had been like as a three-year-old child under those difficult conditions.

Sister Klara described me as being the size of a two-year-old, bright, intelligent and very cooperative. She told me that I was very gentle with the other children, most of whom were blind except for Zosia and Sister Klara's three nieces. She told me that I was the smallest child they had in their care and everyone's favourite.

Sister Klara validated many of my memories and corrected others. She told me that when news reached her that the Nazis were nearby, if time allowed, I had indeed been hidden in a hole, but one that had been excavated beneath the earthen floor of the cellar. A board and a mat covered the hole, and a small table was placed on top. If time did not allow, she would put me into bed together with her little niece who, along with her mother and two other siblings, had taken refuge in the convent to escape the bombardment of Warsaw. Sister Klara's sister had three children, two of whom had blond hair, but one had darker hair more like mine. The two of us would hide under her covers and pretend to be sleeping until the danger passed.

I asked Sister Klara how she found the courage to risk the lives of the other children, the nuns, her own sister and her children for the sake of saving one child. She said, "I had to do it. It was right, and besides, God sent you to me, so there really was no choice." It was so simple, yet so very brave. She confessed to being very frightened many times. She told me that she used to carry me because I was so small, and when anyone approached, she would tell me to cuddle down into the fur collar on her coat and pretend to be asleep. I always wore a hat to cover my dark hair when outside the convent. She told me that I had a sense of the danger and always complied when told to. In a letter that followed from the correspondence we began after my visit, Sister Klara wrote that she loved me from the moment she met me. She recalled that the times she held me in her arms were moments of peace, as she felt that when I was so close to her, she could and would protect me from anything.

I feel that I was given life four times: the first when I was born; the second time when my mother passed

me hand-to-hand and I was thrown from the cattle car going to **Treblinka**; the third time when I survived the near-death illness of dysentery; and the fourth time when Sister Klara agreed to hide me.

The miracle of finding Sister Klara came about because of so many coincidences and so many near misses. What if I had not gone to my meeting and learned about Yale Reisner? What if something had not compelled me to wait to see him for over four hours? I now believe that all these events were indeed beshert, destined.

I had no idea that I had been fortunate enough not only to find shelter and protection at the convent, but also to be so loved. During this very special visit, I felt as if a missing piece of my life had been put back in place. Sister Klara's sweetness and her beautiful smile as she remembered me at the convent was precious and meaningful to me. The fact that my daughter was there to witness, photograph and cry with us was an additional gift to both of us. I am convinced that the love and kindness of Sister Klara and the other nuns at that time is largely responsible for helping me to be the person I am today. After the loss of my mother and the separation from my father, it was the Sisters who taught me what it meant to love and be loved. It is a gift I treasure and benefit from every day of my life.

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On October 10, 2007, Sister Klara, along with fifty-three other Poles who had been instrumental in saving Jewish lives, was honoured by the Polish government in a special ceremony at the Grand Theatre in Warsaw.² The president of Poland greeted each recipient and personally pinned on medals of honour. The director of



Treblinka: A Nazi death camp in German-occupied Poland about eighty kilometres northeast of Warsaw, established in 1942. Treblinka was the third death camp built specifically for the implementation of Operation Reinhard, the planned mass murder of the Jews in occupied Poland. The first large-scale deportations to Treblinka were from Warsaw and began on July 22, 1942. Inmates of the camp staged an uprising in August 1943 and hundreds of prisoners escaped, but the majority of them were caught and killed. Treblinka was dismantled in the fall of 1943. Approximately 900,000 Jews and unknown numbers of Poles, Roma and Soviet POWs (prisoners-of-war) were killed in Treblinka.

² Sister Klara had been officially recognized as Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem in 1981.

Yad Vashem attended, as did many dignitaries from the diplomatic core. Two children's choirs sang — one made up of youngsters from Polish schools, the other of Israeli children. At that time, 800 **Righteous** Poles were still alive, out of more than 6,000 who had been recognized. Obviously, all of them are in their very senior years. When I spoke with Sister Klara the week before the ceremony she said to me, with her dry wit, "All my life, I was a simple, humble person. Now that I am old, they have made me a hero." It is a great pity that people like Sister Klara, who were great heroes in spite of terrible danger to themselves and those around them, had to wait over sixty years to be recognized. It is, however, better late than never.

On October 20, 2010, my dear Sister Klara died, surrounded by her family and friends. She did not suffer long and died peacefully in her own bed. Her death left a large, empty space where her presence had been for me, but I am eternally grateful for the five years we had together, the depth of the long-distance relationship we forged, the four visits we shared and the frequent telephone conversations that kept our love for each other alive. I am also very grateful to Sister Rut Wosiek,

Sister Klara's friend and mine, who made the telephone calls possible and arranged each visit since 2005.



Yad Vashem: Israel's official Holocaust memorial centre and the world's largest collection of information on the Holocaust, established in 1953. Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, is dedicated to commemoration, research, documentation and education about the Holocaust. The Yad Vashem complex in Jerusalem includes museums, sculptures, exhibitions, research centres and the Garden of the Righteous Among the Nations.

Righteous Among the Nations: A title given by Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem, to honour non-Jews who risked their lives to help save Jews during the Holocaust. A commission was established in 1963 to award the title. If a person fits certain criteria and the story is carefully checked, the honouree is awarded with a medal and certificate and is commemorated on the Wall of Honour at the Garden of the Righteous in Jerusalem.



The first reunion between Eva and Sister Klara Jaroszyńska. Laski, Poland, 2005.
Courtesy of Eva Kuper and the Azrieli Foundation.

ACTIVITY 1

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY ACTIVITY EVA KUPER

Read Eva's memoir, *A Beacon of Light*, to find the answers to these biographical questions.

1. Eva's parents were born in the city of _____, Poland, where _____ of the population was Jewish.

2. Why did Eva's father go to university in the country of _____, and why couldn't Eva's mother work as a _____ in Poland?

3. Eva was born in February 19 _____. Later that year, in the month of _____, Eva and her family were forced to move into the Warsaw ghetto. In your own words, how does Eva describe life in the Warsaw ghetto?

4. The Nazis began deporting Jews from the ghetto in the summer of 1942. How was Eva saved from this fate?

5. After she recovered from a disease called _____, Eva and her father escaped from the ghetto by passing through the sewers. Who helped them with their escape?

6. Eva's first hiding spot was with a woman named _____ , and then she was moved to a convent in the Polish town of _____. Who cared for Eva and the other children at the convent?

7. After the war, Eva was found by her aunt _____. She was reunited with her father, and they lived in the city of _____ , Poland. Why did they continue to hide their Jewish identity?

8. In 19 _____ , Eva's father remarried, and the following year they immigrated to _____. On the journey, Eva's father told her an important secret about her identity. What did he tell her and how did she react to the news?

9. In 1998, Eva was approached by an organization called _____ to talk about her experiences during the Holocaust. How did opening up about her past impact her life?

10. In September of 2005, Eva returned to Poland and met someone from her past. Who did she meet?

ACTIVITY 2

PRIMARY SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH ANALYSIS: THE WARSAW GHETTO

Re-read pages seven to ten of Eva's memoir. Examine these photographs from the Warsaw ghetto that illustrate themes that Eva describes in her memoir and answer the questions.

PHOTOGRAPH 1



People lined up at a public kitchen in the ghetto. Warsaw, Poland, circa 1940-1943.
Yad Vashem Photo Archive, Jerusalem. FA33/1867

1. What do you see in the photograph?

2. What historical events from the Holocaust were occurring when the photograph was taken?

3. What part of Eva's memoir do you think about when looking at this photograph, and why?

4. What questions come to mind when you look at this photograph?

PHOTOGRAPH 2



Jews being deported from the Warsaw ghetto in **cattle cars**. Warsaw, Poland, circa 1942-1943.
Yad Vashem Photo Archive, Jerusalem. 1605/23

1. What do you see in the photograph?



Cattle cars Freight cars used to deport Jews by rail to concentration camps and death camps. The European railways played a key logistical role in how the Nazis were able to transport millions of Jews from around Europe to killing centres in occupied Poland under the guise of “resettlement.” The train cars were usually ten metres long and often crammed with more than a hundred people in abhorrent conditions with no water, food or sanitation. Many Jews, already weak from poor living conditions, died in the train cars from suffocation or illness before ever arriving at the camps.

2. What specific historical events from the Holocaust were occurring when the photograph was taken?

3. What part of Eva's memoir do you think about when looking at this photograph, and why?

4. What questions come to mind when you look at this photograph?

ACTIVITY 3

RESCUE ACTIVITY WORKSHEET

Many people helped Eva to survive. In the first column is a list of everyone who helped save her life, including her family and friends as well as strangers. Fill in the chart below with information about who rescued Eva and what they did to help her.

NAME	RELATIONSHIP TO EVA	ACT OF RESCUE
The Rondio family		
Regina		
Sophie Kuper		
Dr. Lande		
Hanka Rembowska		
Sister Klara and the nuns of the Congregation of Franciscan sisters		

Discussion questions:

1

**What do you notice about the people who helped Eva?
Do they have anything in common?**

2

What do you think motivated the people who risked their lives to help Eva?

ACTIVITY 4

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

Consider the title of the memoir: *A Beacon of Light*.
How do you think it expresses the author's experience?

2

Eva was a very young child during the Holocaust, so she has limited memories of this period.
How does she learn about what happened to her and her family during the Holocaust?

3

At a very young age, Eva was separated from her father and sent to live with Catholic nuns, who protected her during the Holocaust.
What effect did living in a Catholic setting have on her life?

4

Now that you've studied a particular Holocaust testimony, how will this knowledge affect your life? Is everything you learned about specific to the Holocaust period, or are there universal themes?

