

The Songs They Sang

*A musical narrative
of the Vilna Ghetto.*

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE



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This resource provides an historical accompaniment to the documentary and soundtrack of ‘*The Songs They Sang*’.

The documentary tells the story of Jews living in the Vilna Ghetto during World War II and their struggle for survival. Writing and singing music became a relief from the despair of the Ghetto and the constant fear for their lives.

The songs document their personal losses and their responses to the brutal regime unfolding around them. Vilna was renowned as a cultural hub prior to World War II and many residents of the ghetto were famous musicians, writers and intellectuals. Each piece gives a rare insight into life in the Vilna Ghetto. Many of the musicians who wrote them were killed before the end of the War.

The re-arrangement and recording of the songs allows them to continue as important primary sources documenting the Holocaust.

Key Terms

<u>Ghetto</u>	An area of a town where a specific minority group is required to live. Ghettos are often overcrowded with run-down buildings and facilities.
<u>Vilna/Vilnius/Wilna</u>	Location of the Vilna Ghetto. It is now known as <i>Vilnius</i> , but has also been referred to as <i>Wilna</i> .
<u>Ponar Forest/ Ponary Forest</u>	A forest approximately 10km from Vilna. It was the site of the Ponar massacre where Jews from the Vilna Ghetto were slaughtered by the Nazis.
<u>Empathy</u>	To understand the feelings of another person.
<u>Holocaust</u>	The government sanctioned persecution and mass murder of Jews and minority groups such as Gypsies and homosexuals during World War II
<u>Genocide</u>	Systematic murder of a group based on their race, culture or religion.
<u>Partisan</u>	A resistance fighter/supporter of the people

Historical Context of *The Songs They Sang*

Before the War

Before WWII, Vilna was a major religious and secular center of Jewish culture and education. Known as “The Jerusalem of Lithuania” it was the spiritual centre of Eastern European Jewry.

Vilna was renowned for its rich cultural and religious life, educational institutions, libraries and theatres; intellectuals, poets, authors, artists, craftspeople, educators, rabbis and gifted Talmudic scholars.

The Jewish community of Vilna had flourished for hundreds of years, but was almost completely destroyed during the Holocaust.

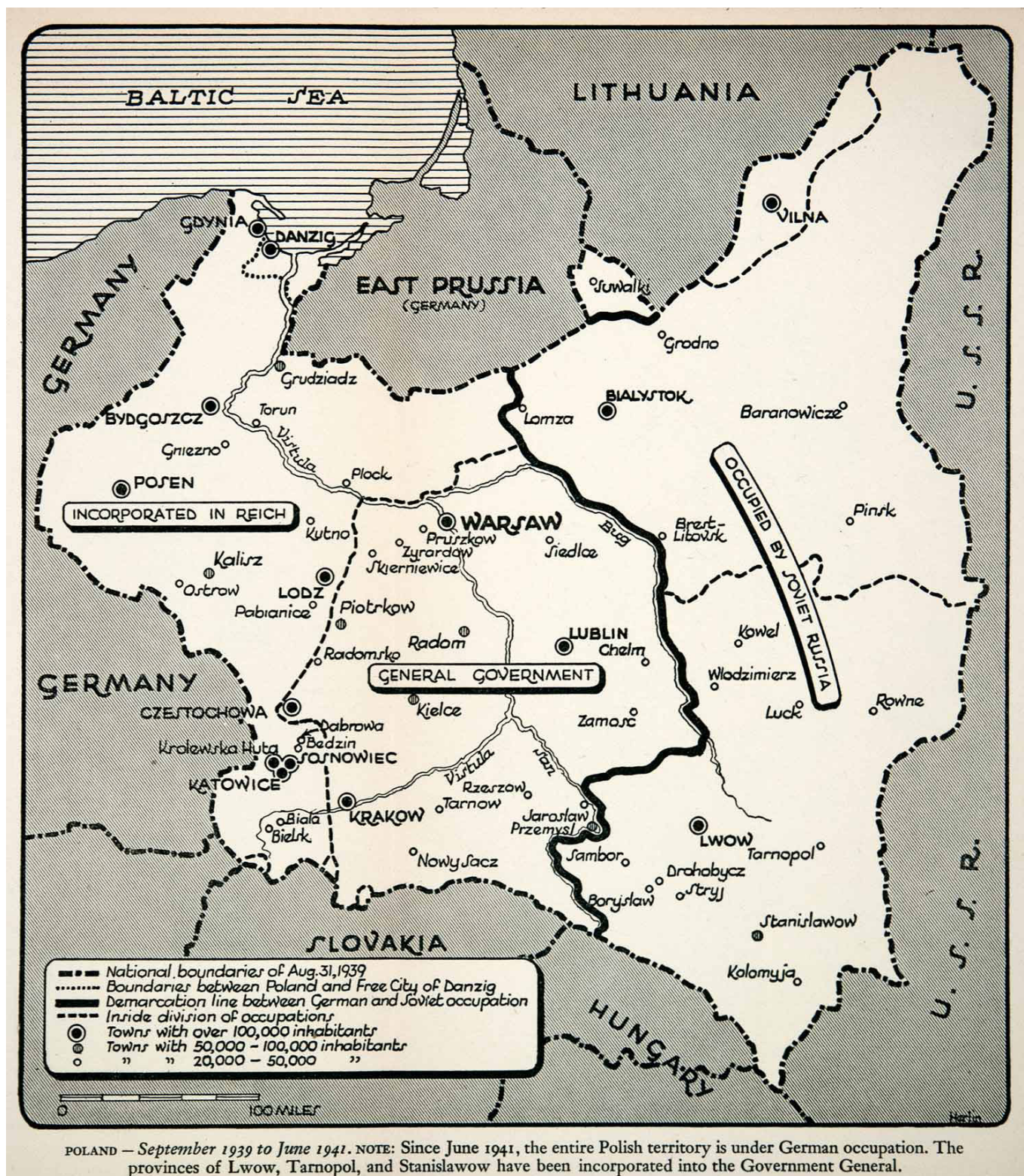
The Vilna Ghetto

The Vilna Ghetto was located in what was previously part of Poland, but is now the capital of modern day Lithuania (source 1). On contemporary maps, Vilna is written as *Vilnius*. The Jewish population of Vilnius on the eve of the WWII was around 60,000.

German troops invaded Vilna on 26 June 1941. Over the course of the summer, German troops and Lithuanian police killed more than 20,000 Jewish people living in Vilnius in a rapid extermination program. The remainder were placed into ghettos to hold and control the Jewish population (source 2).

All Jews were forced from their homes and commanded to live in a small area of streets and buildings of Ghetto 1 and Ghetto 2 as shown in source 3. Those considered incapable of work were concentrated in the second ghetto.

Ghetto 2 was liquidated within six months and all inhabitants executed. Ghetto 1, became known as the Vilna Ghetto, was unsanitary, leading to diseases, and the residents were forced into unpaid labour. Many individuals formed groups as part of a resistance movement known as the United Partisan Organisation. The Ghetto was ‘liquidated’ by the Nazis in 1943 by sending all residents to the Vaivara Concentration Camp in Estonia, slaughtering them or sending them to death camps in Poland. It is estimated that approximately 55,000 Jews lost their lives as a result of the German occupation of Vilna.



Source 1: Map of Poland, 1939–1941

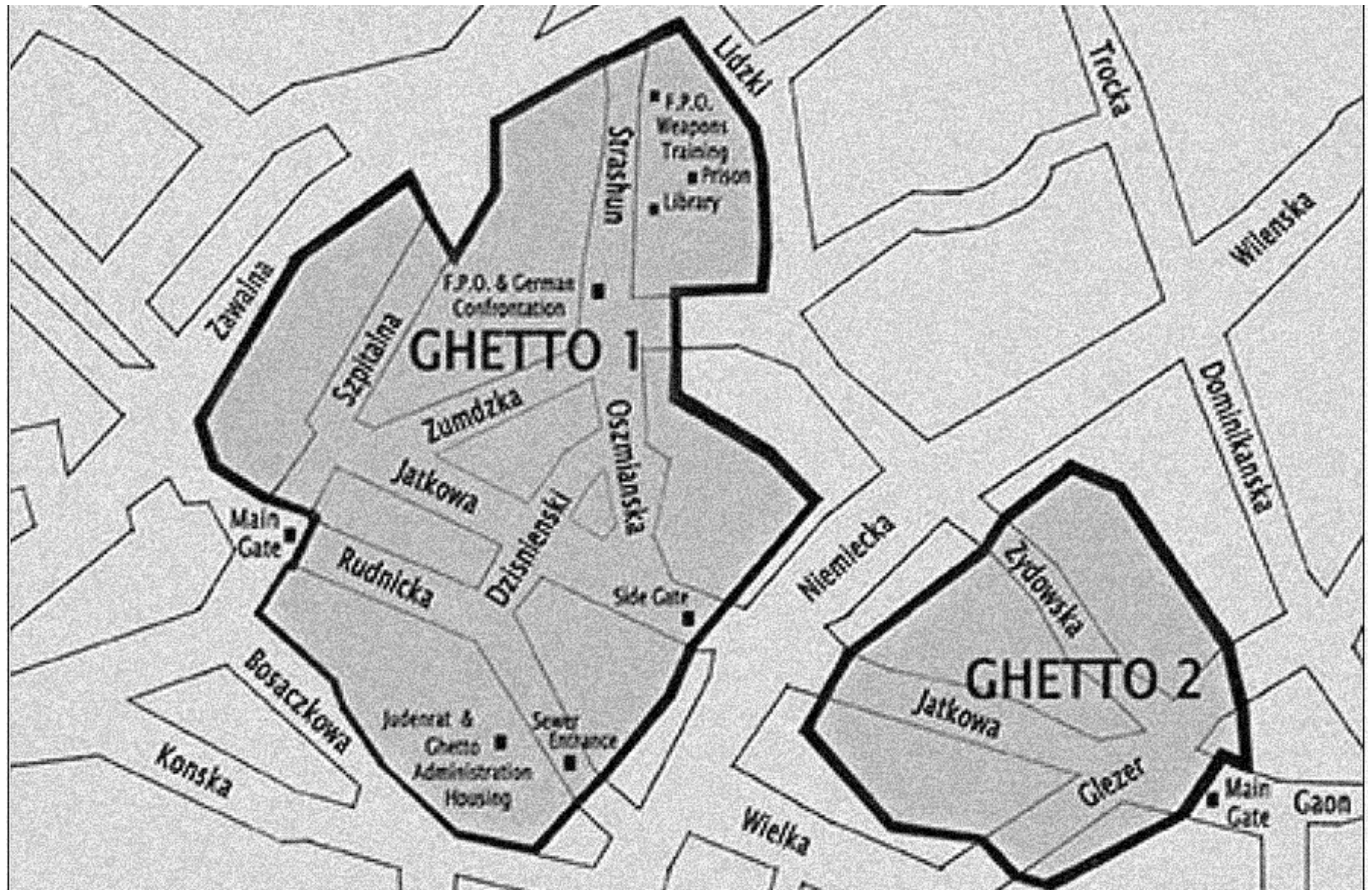
Chronicles of the Vilna Ghetto, <http://www.vilnaghetto.com/>



Source 2: Nazis invading Vilna June 30, 1941
Chronicles of the Vilna Ghetto, <http://www.vilnaghetto.com/>

Response

- What do you notice about the crowd in this image? What is their response to the invasion? Why do you feel they are responding in this way?



Source 3: Vilnius Ghetto
Chronicles of the Vilna Ghetto, <http://www.vilnaghetto.com/>

History in Lyrics

The following lyrics, taken from the CD of *The Songs They Sang*, point to the hardships experienced by the Jews of the Vilna Ghetto. These lyrics are put into wider historical context and linked to primary source images and documents.

Exclusion, Discrimination and Forced Labour

It's One, Two, Three / Tsu Eyns, Tsvey, Dray

“forbidden for us now this sidewalk”

Lyrics – Leyb Rozenthal/Rosenthal (1916–1943)

As part of the process of discrimination and exclusion during World War II, Jews were forced to wear a yellow ‘Star of David’ on their clothes. They were banned from public transport and certain public spaces. Many shops refused to serve them.

Vilna Ghetto survivor Deborah Zuben remembers that:

“We couldn’t go to work, we couldn’t go to school, we couldn’t walk on the footpath, we walked in the gutter” (*The Songs They Sang*).

Jewish people also had to carry their identification papers at all times and were punished if not able to produce them.

This document was produced by the *arbeitspolizei* (work police) and relates to the arrest of a sixteen-year-old Jew who was working without his papers. His occupation is listed as *Feldbauleitung* which literally translates to field construction manager (a very unusual occupation for a sixteen-year-old). This would have been a forced-labour position where Jews were allocated manual labour work in fields or factories supporting the Nazi war effort.

ARBEITSPOLIZEI
GHETTO-WILNA
DARBO POLICIJA
VILNIAUS GHETTO

4. August 42
Nr. 83

Arrestbefehl

An den Leiter

Der Untergenannte ist in Arrest zu empfangen:

- 1/ Name und Vorname. Horlowski Jechiel
- 2/ Alter. 16 Jahre
- 3/ Adresse. Str. 13/14
- 4/ Arbeitsstelle. Feldbauleitung
- 5/ Grund des Arrestes. ohne Passierschein
- 6/ Arrestdauer. bis 6. VIII 42

4264

Leiter

Source 4: Vilna Ghetto Document, 1942
Chronicles of the Vilna Ghetto, <http://www.vilnagheto.com/>



Source 5: Vilna Ghetto, forced labour
Chronicles of the Vilna Ghetto, <http://www.vilnaghetto.com/>

These women at the Vilna Ghetto are being subjected to forced labour. The picture shows them washing items at a makeshift laundry. All have the 'Star of David' pinned to their clothes.

Response:

- We still have identification papers today. What types of identification might you carry and what purposes do they serve?
- Nazis used the power of identification against Jewish people. How did they do this and why?
- Do some online research – what were the 'Nuremberg Laws'?
- Do some online research – what were the 'Nuremberg Trials'?
- Just prior to the outbreak of World War II, much 'anti-Jewish legislation' was passed into law. Read the article 'Anti-Jewish Legislation in Prewar Germany' (<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005681>) and fill in the table below.

Legislation

Why did the Nazi party implement these legislations? What was their purpose?

Removing all Jews from public service.

The city of Berlin forbade Jewish lawyers and notaries to work on legal matters.

The mayor of Munich disallowed Jewish doctors from treating non-Jewish patients.

The Nazi government revoked the licenses of Jewish tax consultants.

Firing Jewish civilian workers from the army.

Preventing Jewish actors from performing on the stage or screen.

These 'Nuremberg Laws' excluded German Jews from Reich citizenship and prohibited them from marrying or having sexual relations with persons of "German or German-related blood".

Displacement and Dispossession

Does It Have To Be This Way? / Tsi Darf Es Azoy Zayn?

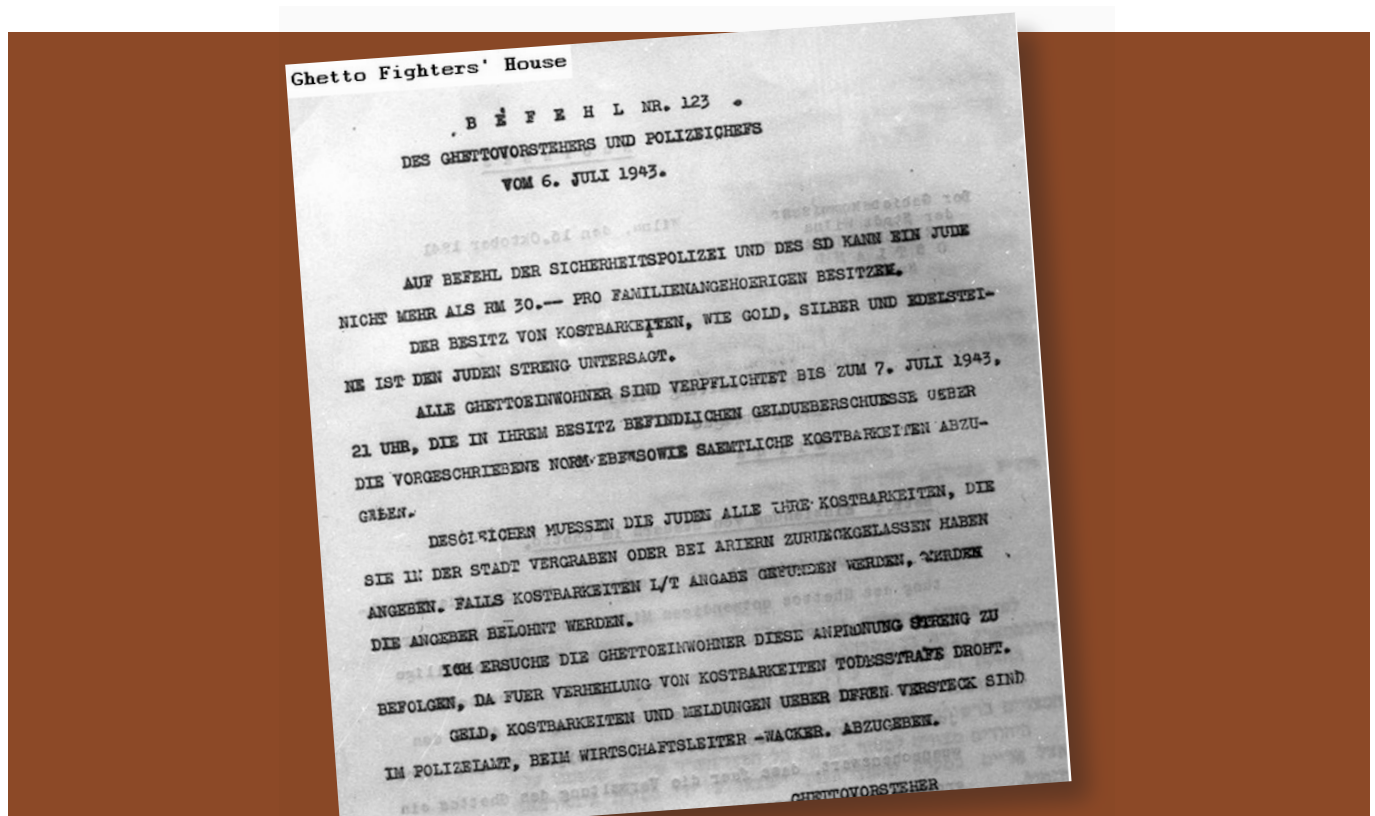
“Oh, why for them my house to live in.
For me no bed, no warmth to know”
Lyrics – Kasriel Broydo (1907–1945)

I Long For My Home / Ikh Benk Abeym

“My home is marred for me.
My home is barred for me,
I wander all about
And I must do without.
If I now only had my humble home”
Lyrics – Leyb Rozenthal/Rosenthal (1916–1945)

During the Holocaust, the family homes of many Jewish people were occupied by German soldiers. Vilna Ghetto survivor Simon Malkis remembers families being evicted from their own homes and only being able to take the things they could carry with them. After the end of World War II, many properties were left unclaimed due to the death of whole families, people fleeing as refugees to other countries or the loss/destruction of ownership papers.

Source 6 is a document from the Ghetto commander giving police permission to confiscate any valuable possessions from the Jews living in the Ghetto. The specific instructions tell the Ghetto residents to hand over gold, silver and precious stones by 9pm on 7 July 1943. Failure to comply would result in death.



Source 6: An order confiscating valuables from Jews in the Vilnius Ghetto
Chronicles of the Vilna Ghetto, <http://www.vilnaghetto.com/>

Response:

- In Australia today, where do people invest most of their money?
- If you and your parents had to leave your home suddenly, how accessible would your finances be?
- During times of war and persecution, people often put their money into gold or jewellery.
Why do you think this is?

The Ghetto

Ghetto / Geto

“Hard to view the world through crowded dwellings,
Tall gates of ghetto walls all light dispelling”

Lyrics – Kasriel Broydo (1907–1945)



Source 7: Ghetto in Vilnius
Chronicles of the Vilna Ghetto, <http://www.vilnaghetto.com/>

The Ghetto was a crowded and demoralising place to live. Many residents turned to music and literature to raise their spirits; an initiative unsupported by the Nazis. Vilna Ghetto survivor Deborah Zuben remembered that:

“The two hours [of the concert] brought us forgetfulness about all the other trouble...every song was always finished with hope and belief that we will survive”
(*The Songs They Sang*).

Inhabitants of the Ghetto were initially divided on whether performance was appropriate in their current situation. One group posted signs around the Ghetto reading: “*In a graveyard you do not do theatre.*” As the concerts gained momentum, they became more crowded. It is estimated that in 1942 more than 38,000 Jews in the Ghetto attended concerts and theatre shows. The writing of music in particular became a way to collectively mourn those killed by the Nazis.

Death and Separation of Family Members

Song Of An Unknown Partisan / Lid Fun Umbakantn Partizan

“Your dear father is forever lost,
Taken from us, bitter is the cost.
On a street dragged and tied,
In a gas chamber he died”

Lyrics – unknown

Mother / A Mame

“Everything, dear daughter, you can get for money
Only a mother - you cannot buy her...
Oh how good it is, just to be together!
Oh how bitter it is to live without her.”

Lyrics and Music – Chayeles Posnanski (Dates Unknown)

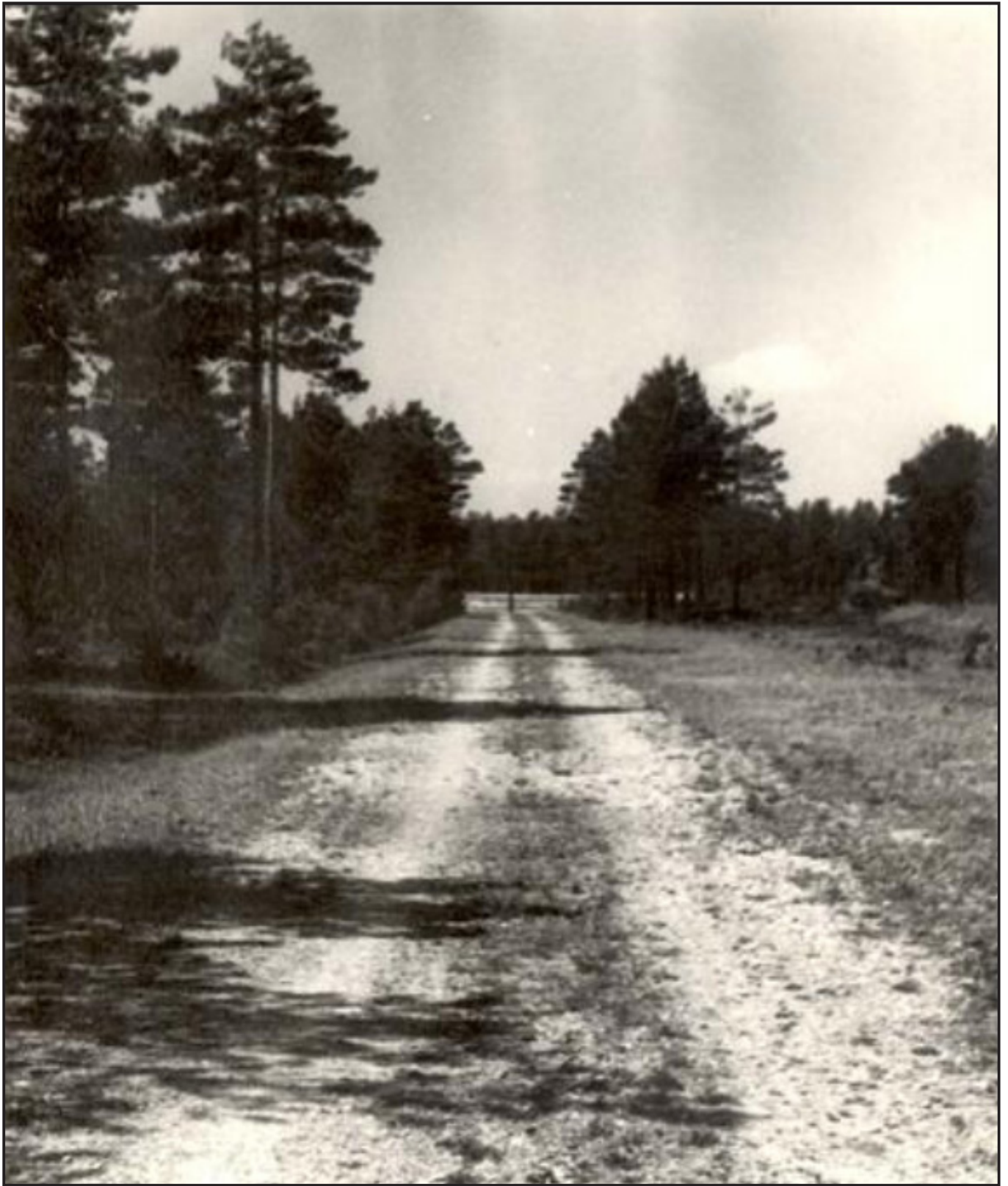
Death and separation were common themes in the songs of the Vilna Ghetto. The song *Mother* was written by a fifteen-year-old girl named Chayeles Posnanski who did not survive the war. Families were often separated and sent to different concentration camps. Those who could not be put to use in the Nazi factories were often put to death in gas chambers. Vilna Ghetto survivor Deborah Zuben recalls that:

“All of a sudden, Jewish people started to disappear off the streets” (*The Songs They Sang*).

She later found out that most, particularly older people and children, were taken to Ponar Forest and shot.

Response:

- Why do you think that the Partisan lyricist of the first song does not identify himself?
- Why were older people and children often the first to be executed?



Source 8: The Road to Ponary
Chronicles of the Vilna Ghetto, <http://www.vilnaghetto.com/>

Ponar Forest

Quiet, Quiet / Shtiler, Shtiler

“All roads lead to Ponar now
There are no roads back”

Lyrics – Shmerke Kaczerginski (1908–1954)

The Ponar Forest is located just outside the town of Vilna. In *The Songs They Sang*, Vilna Ghetto survivor Frania Bracorskajc speaks about her happy memories of the Ponar Forest before World War II as a place for picnics and summer holidays. During the war, the word ‘Ponar’ took on another and more sinister association as a place of death. People began to disappear from the Ghetto and it was later discovered that they were taken to the Ponar Forest and shot. Source 9 shows a large hole dug in the Forest. Jews were ordered to stand at the edge and then shot so that they fell into the pit.



Source 9: Ponary Execution Pit
Chronicles of the Vilna Ghetto, <http://www.vilnaghetto.com/>

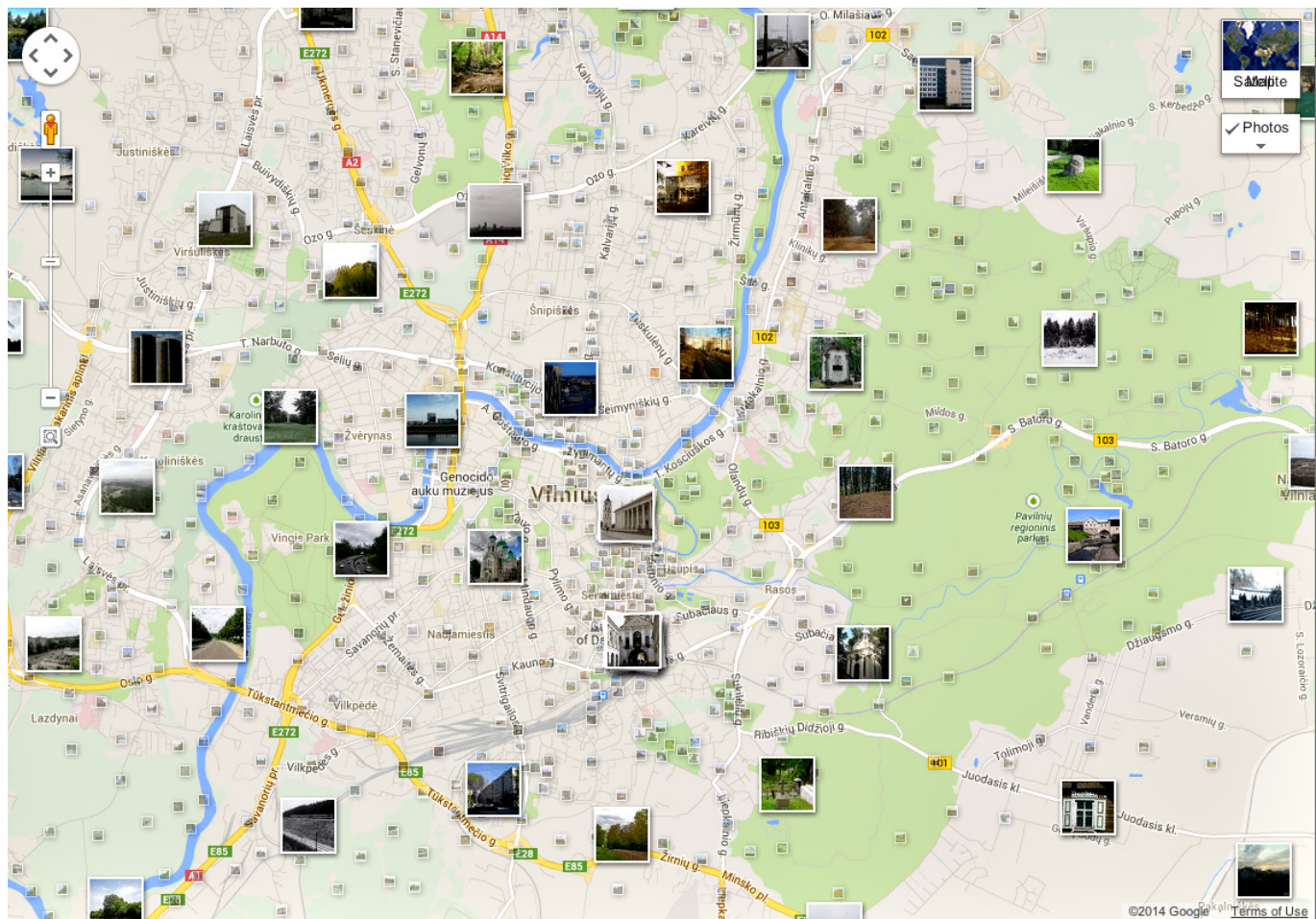


Source 10: Ponary Exhumations in 1944
Chronicles of the Vilna Ghetto, <http://www.vilnaghetto.com/>

Source 10 shows the exhumed bodies of those slaughtered in the year after the liquidation of the Vilna Ghetto.

Response:

- Each photograph is taken and kept for a reason.
Why do you think the images of Source 9 and 10 were taken?
Was it for the same reason?



Source 11: Google Map of Vilnius

By looking for Vilnius or the Ponar Forest on Google Maps, you can see from the many pinned images that these continue to be important places of remembrance.

Step 1: Go to Google Map Maker

<https://www.google.com.au/mapmaker>

Step 2: Type in **Vilna** into the search bar

Step 3: In the top right hand corner of the map you will see a box called **satellite**. In the menu below click **photo**.

Ponar Forest Memorial Analysis Task



Source 11: Vilna Ghetto memorial in the Ponar Forest
Chronicles of the Vilna Ghetto, <http://www.vilnaghetto.com/>

Section A: (150 words)

Describe the monument. Include reference to the following aspects:

- Shape
- Any symbolic images or sculptures
- What materials is it made from? e.g. wood
- Is there any writing on it? Which languages are used?
- Why do we build monuments?

Section B: (150 Words)

How is a song different to a monument as a memorial of the victims of the Vilna Ghetto?

Song Task

Section A:

Drawing on what you have watched, heard and read, write your own poem or piece of music about the Holocaust. Like the music on *The Songs They Sang* it should include a combination of historical information and emotional response.

Choose three sources to help you develop your song or poem. They should include:

- An image
- A document
- A personal account

You can use the 'Resources' list on the following page to source these.

Your piece can take the perspective of either a person involved in the Holocaust or a contemporary reflection on the past.

Section B: (Minimum 200 words)

Write a short response explaining how you drew on your historical sources to develop your poem or song. Make sure you include reference to:

- Your choice of theme (which aspect of the Holocaust did you choose to focus on and why?)
- How your three sources informed your creative process.



Source 12: *The Songs They Sang*. Photographer: Marcus Thomson

Resources

The Songs They Sang

www.thesongstheysang.com

Website with information on *The Songs They Sang* documentary and soundtrack.

Chronicles of the Vilna Ghetto

<http://vilnaghetto.com/>

A range of primary sources relating to life in the Vilna Ghetto.

Yad Vashem

<http://www.yadvashem.org/>

A website and facility dedicated to the documentation, research, education and commemoration of the Holocaust.

Jewish Holocaust Centre, Melbourne

<http://www.jhc.org.au/>

A Holocaust research centre in Melbourne. Also suitable for school excursions.

Music and the Holocaust

<http://holocaustmusic.ort.org/places/ghettos/vilna/>

Further information about the role of music during the Holocaust with song lyrics and audio clips.

The Vilnius Ghetto: Jewish Life in Vilnius/Vilna

<http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/ghettos/vilnius.html>

A website with further information about Ghettos of the Holocaust.

Vilna

<http://www.eilatgordinlevitan.com/vilna/vilna.html>

Primary sources relating to Vilna during the German occupation.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington

<http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/>

Teaching strategies and resources on the Holocaust.

History Curriculum Links

Historical Knowledge and Understanding

An examination of significant events of World War II, including the Holocaust and use of the atomic bomb (ACDSEH107)

Historical Skills

- Use chronological sequencing to demonstrate the relationship between events and developments in different periods and places (ACHHS182)
- Use historical **terms** and **concepts** (ACHHS183)
- Identify and locate relevant sources, using ICT and other methods (ACHHS186)
- Identify the origin, purpose and context of primary and **secondary sources** (ACHHS187)
- Process and synthesise information from a range of sources for use as **evidence** in an historical argument (ACHHS188)
- Identify and analyse the perspectives of people from the past (ACHHS190)
- Identify and analyse different historical interpretations (including their own) (ACHHS191)
- Develop texts, particularly descriptions and discussions that use **evidence** from a range of sources that are referenced (ACHHS192)
- Select and use a range of communication forms (oral, graphic, written) and digital technologies

The full Australian History Curriculum document can be accessed here:

<http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/humanitiesandsocialsciences/history/Curriculum/F-10>

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