

Global Jewish  
Peoplehood  
Learning Series

The Past, Present  
and Future of  
Jews in Poland –  
Transforming the  
Power of Memory.

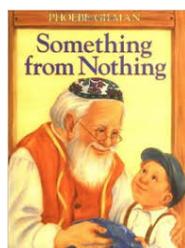
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## The Past, Present and Future of Jews in Poland – Transforming the Power of Memory

Opening text: from the story *Something from Nothing* by Phoebe Gilman, adapted from a Jewish folktale



When Joseph was a baby, his grandfather made him a blanket...to keep him warm and cozy and to chase away bad dreams. But as Joseph grew older, the blanket grew older too. One day his mother said to him, "Joseph, look at your blanket. It's frazzled, it's worn, it's unsightly, it's torn. It is time to throw it out." "Grandpa can fix it," Joseph said. Joseph's grandfather took the blanket and saw it. "Hmm," he said as his scissors went snip, snip, snip. His needle flew in and out and in and out. "There's just enough material here to make..." ... "a wonderful jacket. Joseph put on the wonderful jacket and went outside to play. But as Joseph grew older, the wonderful jacket grew older too. One day his mother said to him, "Joseph, look at your jacket. It's shrunken and small, doesn't fit you at all. It is time to throw it out!" "Grandpa can fix it," Joseph said. Joseph's grandfather took the jacket and saw it. "Hmm," he said as his scissors went snip, snip, snip. His needle flew in and out and in and out, "There's just enough material here to make..." ...a wonderful vest. Joseph wore the wonderful vest to school the very next day. But as Joseph grew older, the wonderful vest grew older too. One day his mother said to him, "Joseph, look at your vest! It's spotted with glue and there's paint on it too. It is time to throw it out!" "Grandpa Can fix it," Joseph said. Joseph's grandfather took the vest and turned it round and round. "Hmm," he said as his scissors went snip, snip, snip His needle flew in and out and in and out, "There's just enough material here to make..." ...a wonderful tie. Joseph wore the wonderful tie to his grandparents' house every Friday. But as Joseph grew older, his wonderful tie grew older too. One day his mother said to him, "Joseph, look at your tie! This big stain of soup makes the end of it droop. It is time to throw it out!" "Grandpa can fix it," Joseph said. Joseph's grandfather took the tie and saw it. "Hmm," he as his scissors went snip, snip, snip. His needle flew in and out and in and out, "There's just enough material here to make..." ...a wonderful handkerchief. Joseph used the wonderful handkerchief. He kept his pebble collection safe. But as Joseph grew older, his wonder handkerchief grew older too. One day his mother said to him, "Joseph, look at your handkerchief! It's been used till it's tattered, it's splotched and it's splattered. It is time to THROW IT OUT!" "Grandpa can fix it," Joseph said.



Joseph's grandfather too, the handkerchief and saw it "Hmm," he said as his scissors went snip, snip, snip His needle flew in and out and in and out, "There's just enough material here to make..." ...a wonderful button. Joseph wore the wonder button on his suspenders. It hold his suspenders to hold his pants up. One day his mother said to him, "Joseph, where is your button? Joseph looked, It was gone! He searched everywhere but he could not find it. Joseph ran down to his grandfather's house. "My button! My wonderful button is lost!" His mother ran after him. "Joseph! Listen to me." "The button is gone, finished, kaput. Even your grandfather can't make something from nothing. Joseph's grandfather shook his head sadly. "I'm afraid that your mother is right," he said. The next day Joseph went to school. "Hmm," he said, as his pen went scritch scratch, over the paper. "There's just enough material here to make... a wonderful story.

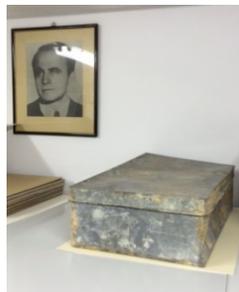
Questions:

- How does this folktale relate to the story of Jews in Poland?
- Who does the mother represent? (only looking ahead, wants to move on and forget the past)
- Who does the child represent (only looking back, clinging to the past, afraid to move forward)
- Who does the grandfather represent (you need to do both – use the past to inform the future, can only move ahead by changing perspective)
- Who are the mothers/Josephs/grandfathers in your family and community?

How do we build an inclusive and nuanced story of Jewish life in Poland before, during and after the Holocaust with seemingly nothing but memories? (by being the grandfather and "reshaping" the memories)

To help us answer this question, we will look at examples of three different kinds of memories: individual, family and community.

## 1. Personal stories – the importance of collecting and documenting firsthand accounts, as they are happening.



Emanuel Ringelblum was a historian, scholar and leader of Poland's Jewish historical society. He launched the Oneg Shabbat Archive in the first few months of the war, collecting reports and testimonies by Jews who had come to the ghetto. He was determined to record a complete description for future historians. He collected data about towns, villages, ghettos and the resistance movement, documenting the cultural, scientific, literary and artistic lives. They documented deportation and extermination of Polish Jewry, sending information to the Polish underground to help expose Nazi atrocities. The Oneg Shabbat Archives were preserved in three milk cans. One of the sites was uncovered in 1946 and a second in 1950; the other has yet to be located. The archive materials and Ringelblum's own written chronicles constitute the most comprehensive and valuable source of information we have, concerning the Jews in German-occupied Poland and the significance of the events taking place.

A Poem from the Archives

Small Antiques  
by Miriam Ulinover

Once there were three girls as beautiful as gold,  
who bragged about the rare antiques each of them possessed;  
"I have a flowered head scarf", the first said to the others—  
"embroidered with cross stitches by my own grandmother."  
"I have a jeweled needle"— the second proudly stated—  
"from my great grandmother with small diamonds decorated."  
Only the third girl laughed silently with pride,  
And quietly opened the door to an alcove inside;  
"The dearest small antique of all, is mine alone, right here—  
my great grandmother herself of more than a hundred years!"

Miriam Ulinover was a very popular poet in Lodz before she was taken to Auschwitz and killed in 1944

Questions:

- How are Emanuel Ringelblum, his archivists, and the historians who study the Oneg Shabbat Archives giving us something from nothing?
- Why was it important for Emanuel Ringelblum to include this poem in the archives?
- What do we learn from this poem, or from anything written during the war years, that we would not learn from reading post-war survivor accounts?

## 2. Family stories – what can we learn from a family home?



From the Mi Polin “Mezuzah from this House” project

Poland had 3.5 million Jewish inhabitants before World War II; there was at least one mezuzah in almost every Jewish house. Today there are only a few traces of these millions of mezuzot. The traces are witnesses for the Jews of Poland, an emptiness and symbol of those who passed away. The Mi Polin “Mezuzah from this House” project makes bronze casts of these traces that commemorate the Jewish lives in pre-war Poland.

Questions:

- How is the “Mezuzah from the House” project giving us something from nothing?
- How is the mezuzah a symbol of using the past to shape the future of the Jewish people in Poland?

### 3. Community stories – reclaiming the sacred mission of Jewish space



The Auschwitz Jewish Center (AJC) is located less than two miles from Auschwitz-Birkenau. It is the mission of the AJC, in the shadow of the camps, to juxtapose the enormity of the destruction of human life with the vibrant lives of the Jewish people who once lived in the adjacent town and throughout Poland. The AJC's mission is also to provide all visitors with an opportunity to memorialize victims of the Holocaust through the study of the life and culture of a formerly Jewish town and to offer educational programs that allow new generations to explore the meaning and contemporary implications of the Holocaust. Seminars such as *How Can I Fight Prejudice and Understanding Evil are offered* to Polish and international students as well as law-enforcement officers, linking the intolerance and irrational hatred that caused the Holocaust to current issues of the growing immigrant population in Europe.

#### Questions

- How is the Auschwitz Jewish Center giving us something from nothing?
- What does it mean to take a symbol of death and evil and turn it into a place of education and hope?



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## **Wrap up.**

Answer one of the following questions, and share with the group:

- What are you taking away from this learning session?
- What do you know about the idea of memory that you didn't know before?
- What do you now understand about Jewish life in Poland that you didn't know before?

Thank you for the opportunity to learn together!