A PROJECT WITNESS MICROSHORT STORIES LESSON PLAN

THE WEISSMANDL RESCUES

He helped stop the deportation trains, and taught strangers to saw their way to freedom. He could not save his own family. He did not abandon them.

GRADES 9–10

EPISODE SUMMARY

About This Film



Rabbi Michoel Ber Weissmandl (1903–1957), chief strategist of the Bratislava Working Group. Source: USHMM / YIVO, archival portrait.

Rabbi Michoel Ber Weissmandl (1903–1957) was a brilliant Torah scholar, born in Debrecen, Hungary, who made his life in Nitra, Slovakia. Beginning in spring 1942 he worked alongside his relative Gisi Fleischmann. She led the clandestine Bratislava Working Group (*Pracovná skupina*), and he served as its chief strategist. To halt the deportation of Slovak Jews, the group bribed the SS adviser in Bratislava, SS-Hauptsturmführer Dieter Wisliceny, with tens of thousands of dollars. It also forged letters in the name of a Swiss official who did not exist, so that the scheme would appear to carry the backing of powerful international organizations. Abraham Fuchs's account records the invented name as "Ferdinand Roth." For nearly two years, the deportation trains from Slovakia stopped. Historians document that outcome; they continue to dispute whether the bribery is what caused it.

When the deportations resumed, the Nazis arrested Weissmandl, his wife, and their five children on 7 September 1944 and took them to the Seréd' transit camp. There Weissmandl distributed hand-saws and emery wires to strangers about to be loaded onto the trains, teaching them to cut through the cattle-car locks. In October he and his family were sealed inside a car bound for Auschwitz. In the dark he sawed through the lock with a wire he had hidden in a loaf of bread. He begged his wife and children to jump with him. Then he jumped. But no one else jumped.

His wife and five children were murdered at Birkenau. A righteous Slovak Christian, Julius Natali, found Weissmandl and hid him until liberation. He wept day and night for the rest of his life. He also rebuilt his father-in-law's Nitra Yeshiva on a farm in Mount Kisco, New York, founding it there in 1949. It still teaches today.

TIME	MATERIALS	CONTENT ADVISORY
45 min core / 90 min with extensions	Device to play the 90-second film; Student Handout (this packet). Printing is optional if you are projecting.	The Holocaust; the murder of a family, conveyed through absence and silhouette, never graphically; the moral dilemma of negotiating with the SS. No violence on screen. Birkenau appears only as architecture: empty rails, a closing door, a distant gate, smoke.

TEACHER NOTE

Two disciplines govern this lesson. First, credit is shared: Gisi Fleischmann led the Bratislava Working Group; Weissmandl was its chief strategist. Second, distinguish the film's causal assertion from historical evaluation. The final narration says that bribery and forged letters put a stop to deportations for two years. Historians dispute that causal link. Students should identify what the film claims, then ask what evidence would establish it. The loss of his wife and five children remains central; do not turn rescue and grief into a simple success story.

LESSON AT A GLANCE · PACING

Minute-by-Minute

The lesson runs two ways. Use a single 45-minute period or a 90-minute block. Both view the film twice (once for feeling, once for detail) and include the 60-second retrieval check before Reflect.

45-MINUTE SINGLE PERIOD

MIN	SEGMENT	WHAT HAPPENS
0–5	Before Viewing	Vocabulary preview; students write 2–3 sentences to the Anticipation prompt.
5–12	View	Watch the 90-second film **twice. First for feeling, then for detail.**
12–27	Analyze · Step 2	Discuss the comprehension / analysis questions; students cite what the film actually shows.
27–38	Create · Step 3	Begin the writing task (letter / MEAL paragraph / essay); finish for homework.
38–41	Retrieval check	60-second low-stakes recall (match term→definition; order the geography).
41–45	Reflect & close	Exit prompt; one breath to close. “I’m not sure yet” is allowed.

90-MINUTE BLOCK

MIN	SEGMENT	WHAT HAPPENS
0–10	Before Viewing	Vocabulary preview; Anticipation write; name the two disciplines (shared credit; documented outcome vs. contested cause).
10–20	View	Watch **twice. First for feeling, then for detail.** Pause briefly in between.
20–45	Analyze · Step 2	Comprehension, analysis, and sourcing questions; small-group then whole-class.
45–70	Create · Step 3	Draft the writing task in class using the graphic organizer / planner; brief peer feedback.
70–78	Going Deeper	Short look at the Extension prompt or a primary source.
78–82	Retrieval check	60-second low-stakes recall (match term→definition; order the geography).
82–90	Reflect & close	Reflection writing; paired share; one breath to close.

DRIVING QUESTION

What is rescue when you can save strangers but not your own family?

Weissmandl helped stop the deportation trains for two years and handed saws to strangers so they could cut their way to freedom. When his own wife and five children were sealed in the cattle car with him, he sawed the lock open and begged them to jump. Then he jumped. His family did not jump. His family did not jump. This lesson sits with the distance between rescue at scale and the loss he could not prevent, and with the discipline of holding what the record documents apart from what it cannot settle.

LESSON OBJECTIVES · GRADES 9–10

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. **Analyze** the difference between a *documented outcome* (the deportation trains stopped for nearly two years) and a *contested cause* (whether the Working Group's bribery and forgery caused it), citing at least two of the group's methods.
2. **Explain** how shared leadership worked in the Bratislava Working Group. Gisi Fleischmann led it; Weissmandl was its chief strategist. Say why crediting both matters.
3. **Construct** a 150–200-word argumentative paragraph (MEAL structure) on whether it was right for the Working Group to negotiate with, and bribe, an SS officer responsible for tens of thousands of deportations, supported by evidence from the film and historical context.

STEP 1 OF 4

Watch



An archival image evoking the wartime Slovak Jewish leadership. The clandestine Bratislava Working Group (Pracovná skupina) was led by Gisi Fleischmann, with Weissmandl as chief strategist. Archival reference, not a verified photograph of the Working Group.

Vocabulary Preview

Bratislava Working Group

A secret Jewish–Christian rescue network in wartime Slovakia (its Slovak name was *Pracovná skupina*). Gisi Fleischmann led the group; Rabbi Weissmandl was its chief strategist. Its goal was to stop the deportation of Slovak Jews to Nazi camps.

Deportation

The forced removal of people from their homes, loaded onto trains and sent to Nazi concentration and death camps.

Transit Camp

A holding camp where prisoners were gathered before being shipped onward to a death camp. Seréd′, in western Slovakia, was the transit camp where Weissmandl was held after his arrest.

Rescuer / "Upstander"

A person who uses their own safety or position to protect someone in danger, instead of standing by. Julius Natali, a Slovak Christian, hid Weissmandl until liberation. *A note on the word:* historians caution that the "bystander vs. upstander" binary can flatten hard choices made under terror; many prefer *rescuer* or, for those honored by Yad Vashem, *Righteous Among the Nations*.

Yeshiva

A Jewish academy for the study of Torah and Talmud. After the war Weissmandl rebuilt his father-in-law's Nitra Yeshiva on a farm in Mount Kisco, New York.

Slovak Ransom (local bribery)

The Working Group's *local* effort inside Slovakia in 1942–1943: it bribed the SS adviser in Bratislava, SS-Hauptsturmführer Dieter Wisliceny, with tens of thousands of dollars and forged official-looking letters. This effort coincided with the pause in deportations. The trains from Slovakia stopped for nearly two years. That the trains stopped is documented; whether the bribery is what stopped them is disputed.

Europa Plan

The *larger* 1943 proposal, which was separate from the local Slovak bribery, sought to ransom the remaining Jews of all Nazi-occupied Europe by paying the SS a very large sum (figures of two to three million dollars are cited). Unlike the local Slovak effort, the Europa Plan mostly failed: the negotiations collapsed and the sweeping rescue it envisioned never came.

Forgery

The making of false documents to deceive. The Working Group forged letters in the name of a Swiss official who did not exist, so its ransom scheme would appear to come from powerful international organizations. Abraham Fuchs's account preserves that name as "Ferdinand Roth."

Anticipation

THINK ABOUT IT

For almost two years, the Bratislava Working Group prevented Nazi deportation trains from leaving Slovakia. The group bribed an SS officer and forged letters from an official who did not exist. Here is the part historians argue about: we know the trains stopped, but we do not know for certain that the bribe is *why*. What does it mean to give credit for an outcome when the cause is disputed? Write two or three sentences before we watch.

View the Microshort · 90 Seconds

Show the film in full. Time permitting,

view it twice: once for feeling, once for detail.

On the first pass students simply watch (no writing); on the second they look for a specific choice such as a sound, an image, or a line of narration. The goal is full, attentive viewing.

Watch: projectwitness.org/videos/microshort-ep6-weissmandl

Scan with any phone camera, or paste the link above into a browser.

STEP 2 OF 4

Analyze



A cattle car of the kind used to deport prisoners from the Seréd' transit camp. In a sealed car like this, Weissmandl sawed through the lock with a wire hidden in a loaf of bread. Archival reference.

Text-Dependent Analysis

1. The final narration describes bribery and forged letters as "putting a stop to deportations from Slovakia for two years." What cause does this wording assert? Distinguish that film claim from the documented pause and the historical dispute over its cause. What additional evidence would help evaluate the claim?
2. The Working Group used bribery, forgery, and delay rather than weapons. How does the film present resistance as intellect and nerve? Point to one image. You might choose the envelope of cash sliding toward an SS sleeve, the forged "Ferdinand Roth" letter, or the wire hidden in a loaf of bread.
3. Gisi Fleischmann led the Working Group; Weissmandl was its chief strategist. How does the film share the credit between them, and why does that matter?
4. Think about the wire in the loaf and the saws pressed into strangers' hands. How does the film use small physical objects to carry an enormous story in only 90 seconds?

Historical Sourcing

5. SS-Hauptsturmführer Dieter Wisliceny was responsible for tens of thousands of deportations. The film shows him only as a sleeve or a gloved hand. It never gives him a face, and never makes him a partner. Why do you think the filmmakers made that choice?
6. The film does not tell us how many people hid in the Bratislava bunker with Weissmandl, because the sources disagree (some accounts say sixteen, others about seventeen). Why might careful filmmakers leave a disputed number out entirely?
7. What kinds of evidence would historians need before they could confirm the claim that the bribery is what caused the two-year pause in deportations?

STEP 3 OF 4

Create



A loaf of Slovak country bread. Weissmandl hid an emery wire-saw inside a stale loaf, then used it to cut through the cattle-car lock in the dark. Archival reference.

Argumentative Paragraph · MEAL Format

SS-Hauptsturmführer Dieter Wisliceny was directly responsible for tens of thousands of deportations. The Bratislava Working Group bribed him and forged letters to buy time for the Jews of Slovakia. Write one well-developed argumentative paragraph using the MEAL structure (**M**ain claim, **E**vidence, **A**nalysis, **L**ink) that answers the following:

PROMPT

Was it right for the Working Group to negotiate with, and pay, a mass murderer if doing so might save lives? Make a claim and support it with evidence from the film and historical context. Hold the discipline: the deportation trains stopped, but historians dispute whether the bribe is why.

Your paragraph should be 150–200 words. Underline your main claim sentence. Circle your evidence.

STEP 4 OF 4

Reflect

⏱ 60-SECOND RECALL · LOW STAKES

Quick check before you reflect

Match each term to its meaning. Say it to a partner or jot it down. Nothing here is graded.

- **Documented outcome** · the deportation trains stopped for ~2 years
- **Contested cause** · whether the bribery is *why* they stopped
- **Gisi Fleischmann** · led the Working Group
- **Weissmandl** · the group's chief strategist

Order the geography. Put these places in the order they appear in Weissmandl's story: *Auschwitz · Nitra · Seréd' · Bratislava · Mount Kisco (New York)*.
(Answer, for the teacher: Nitra → Bratislava → Seréd' → Auschwitz; then the escape and rebuilding → Mount Kisco, New York.)

Sentence Frame Reflection

Complete the following sentence frame as a written reflection. You may write as many sentences as you need to complete each thought. The frame is a starting point, not a limit. Be specific. The strongest reflections name something particular, not just a general impression.

> *"This story complicated my understanding of rescue because ____. I used to think a rescuer was someone who ____. Now I realize it can also mean ____. One question I am still sitting with is ____. It is all right not to have this fully figured out. 'I'm not sure yet' is an acceptable answer."*

Teacher note: Two threads are genuinely unresolved here and should stay open: whether the bribery caused the two-year pause (contested cause), and whether bargaining with the SS was right. Let students hold the tension rather than resolving it. "I'm not sure yet" is an acceptable answer.

Share your reflection with a partner. Where do your reflections overlap? Where do they diverge? What might explain the difference?

“He could not save them. The yeshiva still teaches.”

Project Witness, *The Weissmandl Rescues* (end card). The Nitra Yeshiva in Mount Kisco, New York, founded 1949, operates today.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Going Deeper

Research Essay · The Bratislava Working Group

SCOPE

This is a multi-day research project, not a single-period extension. Plan for at least 3 class periods plus homework time.

The Bratislava Working Group was a rare Jewish–Christian rescue network operating inside a Nazi-aligned state. Research one dimension of it. The choices below cover its leadership and members, its methods, and its outcome:

- Gisi Fleischmann led the group and was murdered at Auschwitz in 1944.
- Andrei (Andrej) Steiner was the group's sole surviving member, interviewed at age 101.
- The Europa Plan was the attempt to ransom Europe's Jews from deportation.
- How the Seréd' transit camp worked, and who passed through it.

Write a 1-page summary of what you found. Where the sources disagree, say so plainly rather than choosing a side the evidence cannot settle. The dispute over whether the bribery caused the two-year pause is one example.

APPENDIX

Standards Alignment

CODE	WHAT IT REQUIRES	WHERE THIS LESSON MEETS IT
RI.9-10.1	Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis, including inferences.	Step 2 text-dependent analysis and the MEAL paragraph require evidence drawn specifically from the film and the historical record.
RI.9-10.3	Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of events, including the order, how points are introduced, and the connections drawn between them.	Students analyze how the final narration draws a cause-and-effect connection between bribery, forged letters, and the pause, and explain what further evidence is needed to evaluate that connection.
W.9-10.1	Write arguments to support claims using valid reasoning and relevant, sufficient evidence.	Step 3 MEAL argumentative paragraph on whether it was right to bribe the SS, built with the in-packet MEAL graphic organizer.
D2.His.14.9-12	Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.	The lesson foregrounds the difference between a *documented outcome* (the trains stopped) and a *contested cause* (whether the bribe stopped them).
D2.His.16.9-12	Integrate evidence from multiple relevant sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument.	Historical-sourcing questions ask what evidence would be needed before the causal claim could be confirmed.

Also aligned (Grades 9–10): Florida B.E.S.T. ELA.910.R.2.1, ELA.910.R.3.2, ELA.910.C.1.3; SS.912.W.7.6 · Texas TEKS ELAR 9.6(A), 9.8(A); WH.15(A–D) · California HSS 10.8.1–10.8.6 · CASEL: + Responsible decision-making.

This lesson supports the Holocaust education mandates of more than 25 U.S. states. It addresses New York DASA goals around interfaith rescue and moral courage under persecution.

PRIMARY & ARCHIVAL SOURCES

On Rabbi Weissmandl and the Bratislava Working Group

Abraham Fuchs, *The Unheeded Cry: The Gripping Story of Rabbi Michoel Ber Weissmandl*. This is the primary published account of the wire-saw distribution at Seréd' and of the Europa Plan. Available via weissmandl.org.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Holocaust Encyclopedia. Sources used include the Weissmandl portrait (photograph, USHMM / YIVO, LCID 77484) and the entries on the Auschwitz Protocols and the wartime debate over bombing the rail lines to Auschwitz.

Project Witness, *In the Footsteps of the Giant: The Life and Leadership of Harav Michoel Ber Weissmandl* (2019 documentary; producer Ruth Lichtenstein), and its primary-interview archive, including Andrei Steiner, the Working Group's sole surviving member, and the children of Julius Natali. Yad Vashem entries on the Bratislava Working Group and on rescue in Slovakia.