

Context card 1: Jewish life in Poland before the war



A Jewish school in Warsaw, the capital city of Poland

The central characters in the novel *After the War* came from Poland. Many of the child Holocaust survivors known as ‘**The Boys**’, upon whom these characters are based, also came from Poland. In 1939, when Nazi Germany invaded Poland leading to the outbreak of the Second World War, approximately 3.3 million Jewish people lived there.

In 1933, 9.5 million Jewish people lived in Europe. Jewish people have lived in Europe for over 2,000 years. Throughout history Jewish people have suffered from **persecution** and **discrimination**. The reasons for this are complex. By the year 1000CE many Europeans were Christian. Some early Christians incorrectly claimed that Jews had killed Jesus. Lies continued to be spread about Jewish people and they were wrongly blamed for crises and problems that people faced. Jewish people settled in Poland as they were welcomed in the 13th century but they would, at times, face discrimination and persecution driven by anti-Jewish beliefs.



At the start of the 20th century Jewish people in Eastern Europe increasingly moved into towns and cities. By 1939, Jewish people made up one third of the population of Warsaw, Poland's capital city. Most Jews continued to live in smaller towns and villages called *shtetls*. Life in shtetls was more traditional, people spoke *Yiddish* and were more likely to observe religious and cultural customs. The majority of Jewish people were not wealthy and they worked in all kinds of jobs. Some Jewish people were religious, but not all were and amongst religious Jews there were different beliefs.

Many Jewish people identified with the country in which they lived and this was no exception in Poland. As a result of economic difficulties and high unemployment across the world, life had become more difficult in Poland for both Jews and non Jews. In this atmosphere, **prejudice** and discrimination against Jews in Poland was increasing, even before the outbreak of war.

Many of 'The Boys' have memories of their childhood before the outbreak of the war. In many cases they were the only surviving witnesses to pre-war Jewish life in their town or village.

