

Who Will Write Our History?
New Perspectives on the Warsaw Ghetto Archives

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Until now, the Warsaw Ghetto archives were known only to a few specialists. The American historian Samuel Kassow presents them in a new light—as the work of a team whose mission was to describe the daily life of a community as it was being exterminated.

Reviewed: Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write our History: Emanuel Ringelblum and the Oyneg Shabes Archive*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2007. French translation: *Qui écrira notre histoire ? Les archives secrètes du ghetto de Varsovie. Emanuel Ringelblum et les archives d'Oyneg Shabes*, translated by Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat, Paris, Grasset, 2011 [2007], 595 p., 25 €.

At first glance, the reaction to the French publication of Samuel Kassow's book, *Who will Write our History: Emanuel Ringelblum and the Oyneg Shabes Archive*, has been surprising. The media appeared to discover the existence of these documents – powerful testimonials of the life and death of Polish Jews during the Second World War – for the first time. Assembled in the Warsaw Ghetto by a small group of intellectuals and historians, then buried on the eve of the 1943 uprising, this archive was exhumed only after the death of its authors, including that of historian Emanuel Ringelblum, the project's main architect.

30,000 Pages of Documents

This rich collection, comprising more than 30,000 pages—written mostly in Yiddish and Polish—recounting daily life in the Warsaw Ghetto and other areas of occupied Poland, has emerged from the shadows in recent years, even if French editors have been and still are always behind in publishing translations that have already appeared elsewhere. We had the volume *Chroniques du désastre* (Chronicles of the Disaster),¹ which included a number of documents from this archive. The anthology entitled *L'Enfant et le Génocide*² (The Child and

¹ *Chroniques du désastre. Témoignages sur la Shoah dans les ghettos polonais*, texts translated from the Yiddish and presented by Nathan Weinszok, preface by Georges Bensoussan, Geneva, Metropolis, 1999.

² *L'Enfant et le Génocide. Témoignages sur l'enfance pendant la Shoah*, ed. Catherine Coquio and Aurélia Kalisky, Paris, Robert Laffont, Bouquins collection, 2007.

Genocide) also relied on documents relating to the fate of young people found in the *Oyneg Shabes* papers. Testimonials by several of the Warsaw ghetto's major figures, including Ringelblum's diary, were published and reedited in the 1990s in often incomplete or truncated editions.³ Most importantly, the first two volumes of the archives themselves, prepared by the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, where they are located, were translated into French in 2007.⁴ Unfortunately, the publication of the third volume is for now at a standstill, despite the fact that the Jewish Historical Institute in Poland has already published five volumes and predicts that some twenty volumes will be necessary to publish the entire archive.

Some of these texts are thus already known, at least to specialists. But the critical success of Kassow's book is perhaps best explained by the fact that it is far more than a straightforward presentation of the archives. It allows us to relive the daily lives of men and women who were brought together by one man's mad undertaking. It was Emanuel Ringelblum's decision to tirelessly collect narratives and documents, first as a testimonial aimed at surviving members of the Jewish community, then, when the certainty of annihilation ended all hope that future generations would exist, to make sure that the world learned their fate and heard the story of those who had been murdered. As the historian Isaac Schiper, a founder of the social history of the Jewish peoples and Ringelblum's mentor (who remains, however curiously absent from the *Oyneg Shabes* group, the existence of which he must have known) confided with incredible foresight when he was deported to Majdanek in the summer of 1943:

Should our murderers be victorious, should *they* write the history of this war, our destruction will be presented as one of the most beautiful pages of world history ... But if *we* write the history of this period of blood and tears—and I firmly believe we will—who will believe us? Nobody will *want* to believe us, because our disaster is the disaster of the entire civilized world (p. 210).

Kassow, who is well-versed in the languages of Central and Eastern Europe in addition to being a brilliant historian of the region, does not limit himself to displaying his deep knowledge of the archives, which he mastered while contributing to their complete indexation. Without hyperbole but with great compassion, he sketches the portrait of a historian who is poorly known, as well as that of the "band of comrades" who assisted him in his task. Finally, by publishing numerous unpublished excerpts from the archives, he allows the actors to speak in their own voices – those who produced the narratives, testimonials, and literature of daily life in occupied Poland, as well as those who collected them – until the very moment of extermination.

From Committed Historian to the *Oyneg Shabes* Archive

³ One might mention in particular Adam Czerniakow, *Carnets du ghetto de Varsovie. 6 septembre 1939-23 juillet 1942*, translated from the Polish by Jacques Burko, Maria Elster, and Jean-Charles Szurek, prepared and annotated by Jean-Charles Szurek, Paris, La Découverte, 1996; Janusz Korczak, *Journal du ghetto*, translated from the Polish by Zofia Bobowicz, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1998; Abraham Lewin, *Journal du ghetto de Varsovie. Une coupe de larmes*, Plon, 1990; Emanuel Ringelblum, *Chronique du ghetto de Varsovie*, Paris, Payot, 1995 [a reedition of the English version dating from 1958 that is for the most part incomplete]; Hillel Seidman, *Du fond de l'abîme. Journal du Ghetto de Varsovie*, translated from the Yiddish by Micheline and Nathan Weinstock, with a scholarly apparatus by Georges Bensoussan and Micheline and Nathan Weinstock, Paris, Plon, Terre humaine collection, 1998.

⁴ *Archives clandestines du ghetto de Varsovie (archives Emanuel Ringelblum)*, vol. 1, *Lettres sur l'anéantissement des Juifs de Pologne*; vol 2, *Les Enfants et l'enseignement clandestin dans le ghetto de Varsovie*, Paris, Fayard/BDIC, 2007.

In the first part of the book, the author describes Ringelblum's career up to the moment when he created the group on November 22, 1940, six days after the confinement of 400,000 Jews from Warsaw and neighboring regions to a mere 307 hectares in the city center. We learn about the man as well as his intellectual mentors, his ideological influences, and his social milieu. In his trajectory, left-wing Yiddishism played an important role, specifically the version represented by Ber-Borochov, the founder of socialist Zionism, for whom Yiddish was the indispensable bond that would unite Jewish workers of different countries. Ringelblum, born in Galicia in 1900, like so many other Jewish historians (including Meir Bałaban, Filip Friedman, and Isaac Schiper), was the son of a grain merchant, an heir to the Jewish Enlightenment who was committed to providing his children with a Jewish as well as a secular education. As an adolescent, as was true of many young people of his generation, Ringelblum joined the Zionist organization in his hometown of Buczacz, before turning to left-wing Zionism at high school in Nowy Sącz, in the middle of the First World War. In Warsaw, which meanwhile had become the capital of the new Poland, he turned to history, almost by default: the *numerus clausus* denied him entrance to the medical school, which had hitherto been his goal.

The years of his academic training were precisely those of the great renewal of Jewish historiography, with men like Bałaban and Schiper, who incorporated Jewish into Polish history and called for "history for the people" – emphasizing the cultural, social, and economic life of the various Jewish social groups, with a desire to reach a wide audience. It was only natural that Ringelblum would be enthusiastic about the scholarly project known as YIVO which, in Vilnius in the 1920s, sought to treat the Yiddish language with the consideration it deserved, while also promoting the historical, sociological, and anthropological study of Jewish society. He became the pillar of the institution's historical branch for Warsaw, creating a "Circle of Young Historians" that advocated a secular Jewish culture and history "from below," which would bring the Jewish and Polish people closer together through greater reciprocal knowledge of one another's past. The methods the group developed—an interest in micro-history and gathering documents with the help local amateur groups or through anonymous writing contests – would subsequently be widely used by the *Oyneg Shabes* group in the ghetto.

Finally, Kassow reminds us of the social activism in which Ringelblum was engaged as early as the 1930s, notably his involvement with Jewish charity organizations like *Joint*, which testifies to his concern for the poor. His association with *Aleynhilf*, the Jewish mutual aid society, would be his main cover in the ghetto, while also guaranteeing him a valuable network of correspondents for gathering documents. This is the network of collaborators that Kassow presents: from editorial assistants to patrons who financed a largely underground operation, hidden as much from the Jewish governing organizations in the ghetto as from German occupation forces.

In the ghetto, one found a "wide spectrum of prewar Polish Jewry: wealthy businessmen and poor artisans, rabbis and communists, Yiddishists and Polish-speaking intellectuals, teachers and journalists, economists and leaders of youth groups" (p. 146). Lively debates were common in this diverse group, the inner circle of which gathered at Ringelblum's every Saturday – hence its code name, *Oyneg Shabes* ("the joys of Shabbat"). The debates pertained to the goals of their research as well their views of other Jews in the ghetto. For example, the writer and talented polemicist Yehoshua Perle adopted an accusatory stance when replying to a survey of intellectuals about the likely fate of Polish Jews after the

war. He was terrifyingly pessimistic, denouncing the moral decline he saw underway in the ghetto: “[The Germans] shut the Jews with the hope that they would kill one another. And they have been proven right: we bury each other alive” (p. 194).

Traces of Life, Voices from the Grave

The survey on the future of the Jews after the war was part of a much larger project, begun in mid-1941 and entitled “Two and a Half Years” (i.e., since the start of the war). Ringelblum and his collaborators still believed that Polish Jews would survive the conflict. Consequently, daily life under the occupation had to be recorded and taught, with the hope that this would contribute to changing postwar Jewish society. This ambitious mission required, in the first place, studying the ghetto itself: women, children, corruption, religious life, the Jewish police, as well as social and economic life. There were also studies of Jewish-German and Polish-Jewish relations, in addition to essays and reports on the experience of the Jewish villages (*shtetlekh*), which were particularly dear to Ringelblum, who saw them as bastions of Jewish popular culture. Data was gathered through studies, such as those of refugees from the villages that were deported to the Warsaw Ghetto, but also through correspondence with family and friends in the provinces. The ghetto’s mailman, Peretz Opoczynski, provided valuable help in assembling these documents.⁵

At the very moment when the scale of the project began to grow, troubling news reached Warsaw about massacres in the east, in the zones that shifted from Soviet to Nazi hands in the summer of 1941. Soon, the group received the testimony of Szlamek, who had escaped from Chelmno, where the first Jews were killed in gas trucks. Information from Sobibor and Treblinka soon followed. The news led the armed Jewish resistance to accelerate its preparations, while also changing the group’s priorities: now, its task was to gather documents on the extermination program, in order to inform the underground Polish press, which they hoped would spread the word beyond Poland. When on June 26, 1942 Ringelblum heard a program on the BBC concerning the fate of Poland’s Jews, he was satisfied that he had done his duty. Needless to say, this was not enough to end the extermination of Europe’s Jews, including those of the Warsaw Ghetto, who were rounded up in the summer of 1942. Much of the group was decimated. The archives were hidden in a dozen trunks buried in a ghetto cellar.

The ghetto’s social life ebbed significantly, but the survivors, led by Ringelblum, continued their work. In this context, every piece of paper, every document became critically important, such as the little notes left by those waiting for trains to Treblinka, pleading for last-minute mercy. The group obtained statistics about daily deportations and drew up a table of the Jewish population following the Great Deportation. The group’s ties to the armed Jewish resistance also grew deeper. But Ringelblum realized that he would not be able to save his family if he remained in the ghetto any longer. After burying a second cache of archives in milk drums, he escaped with his wife and son in February 1943, shortly before the uprising. Hiding with other Jews in a bunker in Warsaw’s Aryan neighborhoods, he kept a diary and

⁵ The most complete edition of these reports from the ghetto appeared in Polish in 2009: Peretz Opoczynski, *Reportaże z warszawskiego getta*, translated and presented by Monika Polit, Warsaw, Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów et ŻIH, 2009.

continued to write various articles, including a stunning essay on Jewish-Polish relations⁶—until one day in March 1944, when, following a denunciation, his hiding place was discovered by the Germans. All the occupants were arrested and taken to Pawiak prison, where they were most likely executed.

The second part of the book, consisting primarily of the archives themselves, is not quite as novel from the standpoint of current historiography, which, particularly in Polish and English, has drawn heavily on them.⁷ Yet it remains deeply moving, particularly when Kassow considers “individual disasters” – what individuals felt at the moment of losing their loved ones, while awaiting almost certain death. In these cases, historical analysis yields to a more poetic tone, which is perhaps better suited to grasp the indescribable. Poetry was read with great fervor in the ghetto’s workshops and apartments. In the archives, one finds powerful pieces by Władysław Szlengel, whom Ringelblum dubbed the “poet of the ghetto,” as well as by Yitzhak Katzenelson, Hebrew literature’s “favorite son,” who, in the ghetto, turned to Yiddish and the Jewish masses. In the archives, the verses of the author of the renowned *Song of the Murdered Jewish Nation*, written at the Vittel concentration camp (where he was interned thanks to fake Latin American papers, which did not, however, save him from deportation) are found side by side those of poets whose names are lost to history, such as the anonymous author of a poem entitled “Where is God?” :

Angels and demons
break the commandments
It’s dark and gray
Has God gone away?
With purpose and order
a people is murdered
the greatest law broken
Where is God?⁸

“If None of Us Survives, at Least Let That Remain”

These are the final words that Ringelblum wrote, in a letter in which he asked his friend Adolf Berman to see to it that the New York YIVO learned of the archives’ whereabouts. The ghetto’s historian was swallowed up by the Shoah, as were all the group’s other members, with the exception of his secretary, the latter’s wife, and the journalist and writer Rachel Auerbach. It was thanks to the latter’s efforts that the archives were partially discovered and unburied in 1946 and 1950. In communist Poland, however, it was difficult to access them, and even more so to work on or circulate them without being subject to censorship, which is why it took so long for them to be properly studied. Samuel Kassow’s book is unquestionably one of the most thorough studies of the archives to date. Its rich bibliography, with references and sources in several languages – notably Yiddish, Polish, Russian, and Hebrew—as well as its detailed endnotes will be greatly appreciated by specialists.

⁶ Emmanuel Ringelblum, *Polish-Jewish Relations During the Second World War*, edited and annotated by Joseph Kermish and Shmuel Krakowski, translated from the Polish by Dafna Allon, Danuta Dabrowska, and Dana Keren, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1992.

⁷ See for example Joseph Kermisz, *To Live With Honor and Die With Honor! Selected Documents From the Warsaw Ghetto Underground Archives “O.S.” (“Oneg Shabbath”)*, Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 1986; Jacek Leociak, *Text in the Face of Destruction. Accounts From the Warsaw Ghetto Reconsidered*, Warsaw, ZIH, 2004 [1997].

⁸ <http://poetryinhell.org/tradition-faith-protest/unknown-where-is-god/>

But the book is above all a stirring homage to the documents and to those who collected them, which bring back to life Jewish voices immersed in their daily routines, with all their questions, doubts, and anxieties, free of any teleological bias. It also highlights Ringelblum's profoundly historical approach and his extremely prescient sense that "everything is history." There is no doubt, as Kassow observes, that had Ringelblum survived, he would have encouraged the study not of victims, but of men and women who were "part of a living and resilient nation" (p. 388). These studies, which only appeared several decades following the war's end, are indispensable to whosoever would begin to understand the tragedy of the Shoah.

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