

Who Will Write Our History? Rediscovering a Hidden Archive from the Warsaw Ghetto

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‘Earth, earth, do not cover our blood and do not keep silent’.

In December 1941, as the Nazis systematically and mercilessly liquidated the Riga ghetto, the pioneering Russian-Jewish historian Shimon Dubnow was fatally trapped. As around 30,000 Jews were rounded up for slaughter, legend has it that Dubnow was heard saying repeatedly, ‘*Yidn, shreibt un fershreibt!*’ [‘Jews, write and record!'].⁽¹⁾ He did not know that just 350 miles away, one of many his disciples, Emanuel Ringelblum, was doing precisely that amidst the hell of the Warsaw ghetto. Ringelblum, an historian who had cut his teeth in the early years of the Polish Second Republic, was vital to the founding of the *Oyneg Shabes*, the archive set up in 1940, which sought to document and record Polish Jewry’s daily trials of endurance in the Warsaw ghetto.⁽²⁾ In *Who Will Write Our History*, Samuel D. Kassow relates a remarkable story, suffuse with determination, sorrow and anguish, whose focus resides beyond the interminable sufferings contained within the ghetto’s walls. For Ringelblum, the *Oyneg Shabes* was not simply directed at inscribing the history of the Warsaw ghetto, but that of Polish Jewry itself, in all its extraordinary diversity and vivacity. He and his colleagues attempted, in total secrecy, to compile ‘a record that told the entire truth’, in order to ensure that Polish Jews ‘would be remembered as they were and not as the elegists’ of the future might prefer to see them (p. 198). Were it not for the *Oyneg Shabes*, Ringelblum and his fellow archivists were greatly anxious that ‘posterity would [only] read the records of the killers, [and] forget the voices of the victims’ (p. 333).

Akin to Dubnow, Ringelblum was not driven by sentiment, nor even, in the earliest years of the *Oyneg Shabes*, by a grim pessimism for Polish Jewry’s future. Born in Galicia, Austrian Poland, in 1900,

Ringelblum carried a life-long commitment to Jewish history and Yiddish culture, and, in the intellectually fecund years of the Second Republic, concentrated his studies on Jewish-gentile relations in Poland over many centuries. Always practical and methodical in his research, Ringelblum's work was ideologically influenced and shaped by his political outlook. A member of the Marxist Zionist group, *Left Poalei Tsiyon*, he was a secular Jew for whom the everyday was absolutely paramount. Whilst other Jewish historians concentrated on examining the experiences of the so-called 'Sabbath Jew', Ringelblum's interests were dedicated to the Jewish masses. In instigating the *Oyneg Shabes* in the first few months of the ghetto's existence, Ringelblum therefore drew upon a wealth of knowledge, as well as considerable experience in collecting material and organising projects, all with the goal of writing about the life of the ordinary Jew.

Of course, there was nothing ordinary about the circumstances in which the *Oyneg Shabes* archive was founded. In October 1940, less than a year after the Polish capital had succumbed to the Nazi onslaught, the imminent erection of the Warsaw ghetto was announced. It followed many months of special decrees aimed at limiting Jewish life in Poland, including the compulsory wearing of arm-bands that identified one as a Jew. By mid-November 1940, approximately almost 400,000 Jews, 30 per cent of the city's population, crowded into an area representing just 2.4 per cent of its space (p. 107). Shortly thereafter the ghetto was sealed and access to the 'Aryan' part of the city was forbidden. This presented enormous challenges to the economy of the ghetto, but most especially the already precarious situation regarding food. Legally limited by decree to just 184 calories per day, the ghetto's inhabitants were forced to smuggle food from the outside. From the outset, finding food was to be one of the greatest of all challenges for the Jews of the Warsaw ghetto.

Ringelblum was bonded to various self-help stratagems that tried to feed the ghetto and organise other forms of relief, all of them aimed at structuring and regulating life amidst unbridled chaos, interference and unpredictability. As a member of *Aleynhilf*, the ghetto's self-help organisation that operated a network of soup kitchens and the like, Ringelblum headed its so-called 'Public Sector'. It coordinated the activities of the hundreds of 'house committees' in the ghetto, composed of small groups, often connected to a particular housing block. As a Kassow points out, the *Aleynhilf* functioned as a outlet for the remnant of Warsaw Jewry's intellectuals, welfare workers and journalists, who, under its remit, collectively attempted to 'maintain a sense of communal responsibility and social solidarity in the ghetto in the face of growing obstacles' (p. 94).

For Ringelblum the historian, his links to the *Aleynhilf* and its contributors were crucial, since it meant that he was tied to a network of collaborators who would prove invaluable in the compilation of the *Oyneg Shabes*. These included two members of the *Poalei Tsiyon*, Eliyahu Gutkowski and Hersh Wasser, who acted as the archive's secretaries. Wasser and his wife Bluma were two of only three people connected to the archive that managed, despite all odds, to survive the war. Others working for the archive included those whom Kassow has deemed 'protectors', individuals who raised money and tried to keep leading members of the archive alive; amongst them were the businessman Shmuel Winter, Shie Rabinowitz, a Bundist and Lipe Bloch, a Zionist. Contributors and *zamlers* ('collectors', who gathered material and documents) included Rabbi Shimon Hubberband, who provided a link to the religious community in the ghetto, and Rachel Auerbach, a Yiddish activist and contributor to literary journals in the Warsaw of the inter-war period. Auerbach also survived the war. There were many other contributors, some of them eternally without names, but each representative of the political, social and religious diversity that was Polish Jewry.

Notwithstanding the struggles of daily survival, the hunger, the threat of death that pursued every Jew in the Warsaw ghetto, Ringelblum and his colleagues were thorough and ambitious chroniclers. The remit of their research, intensely planned and detailed, took in such diverse components of the ghetto as the vitally necessary soup kitchen, regarded by Auerbach, as a 'microcosm of human relationships and human choices' (p. 137), the changing role of women in a world where male functions had been rendered less significant, as well as the activities of the greatly despised *Judenrat*, the Nazi appointed Jewish committee that controlled the ghetto. Ringelblum and his colleagues were also incredibly skilful in the individual testimony and various, apparently ephemeral, items of material culture they collected. These ranged from publications from the underground press (in Warsaw and elsewhere), drawings and sketches, sweet wrappers, tram tickets,

ration cards, theatre posters, invitations to concerts and lectures (all were held in the ghetto), and photographs, of which 76 survived (p. 213).

In late 1942, Ringelblum initiated the 'Two and a half-years project', the guidelines for which are included in the appendix (pp. 393–5). The aim was, in Ringelblum's own words, to provide 'a photograph of life. Not literature but science' (p. 226). Indeed, in modern historiographical terms, the guidelines for the project were remarkably methodological and included 81 separate headings for an analysis of the Warsaw ghetto alone. It encompassed studies of women, children, religious and intellectual life, corruption in the ghetto and German-Jewish relations. The finer detail picked out such topics as bribery and theft in the ghetto, its physical structure (which altered during the years of its existence), the collating of street songs and beggars' chants, the function and dysfunction of the ghetto economy, and *shtetl* testimony, which comprised the compilation of memories and accounts of life in the towns outside Warsaw in the early days of the war. The 'Two and a half-years project' also considered the future for Polish Jewry – Ringelblum hung onto every shred of optimism until way beyond the moment it became irrelevant – and garnered diverse opinions on the topic, reflective of assorted forms of pessimism and optimism.

However, at the moment that Ringelblum was planning the 'Two and a half-years project' project, the tide of fate irrevocably altered the future for Poland's Jews, as the Nazis set in motion the Final Solution. The earliest hints of the realities of the deportations East came to the Warsaw ghetto and the *Oyneg Shabes* via those arriving from outside, who had often slipped loose from the Nazi net. In this regard, perhaps the most significant testimony was provided by 'Szlamiek' (the rest of his name is unknown), who miraculously escaped from the death camp at Chełmno. Szlamiek witnessed the gas vans of Chełmno in action, having been selected to dig the graves of the victims. The terrible events to which he bore witness were recorded by the *Oyneg Shabes*, each word a testament to the meticulous process by which the Nazis undertook to murder an entire people *en masse*.

By this stage, February 1942, the realisation that the Nazis intended to annihilate Polish Jewry altered the urgency of the *Oyneg Shabes*, which was now documenting genocide. It provided evidential material for the underground press, both Jewish and Polish, which would, it was hoped, be able to smuggle it out of Poland to an unsuspecting outside world. Reports compiled by the *Oyneg Shabes* were received, for instance, by the Polish government-in-exile, located in London. In June 1942, the archive members prepared a report entitled the '*Gehenna* [hell] of Polish Jewry', which found its way, via the assistance of various groups and individuals, to the BBC. On 2 June 1942, a BBC news broadcast reported that 700,000 Jews had been murdered by the Nazis, a moment that was considered by Ringelblum as a vindication of the work of the *Oyneg Shabes*. According to his diary, the archive had 'performed a great historical mission' and he was thus hopeful that Poland's remaining Jews would be saved (p. 299). Subsequent events, however, were immediately to render Ringelblum's optimism unfounded (though he did not accept this), as the *Oyneg Shabes* undertook to tabulate the escalating deportations from the ghetto throughout 1942. It also counted those who were shot in the streets of the ghetto, and even when the Nazis sealed off part of the ghetto, leaving its final members crammed into just a few streets, the archives 'still attempted to be systematic in counting the daily tally of death and deportation' (p. 308). There is somewhat of a grim irony here, of course, given the Nazi propensity to documenting and recording their crimes.

As the members of the *Oyneg Shabes* were gradually picked off one-by-one by the Nazis, through deportation or execution on the ghetto's streets, Ringelblum went into hiding in the 'Aryan' sector of the city, yet, despite the desperate conditions, the hunger and enveloping destruction, he continued to write and record. It was in March 1944 that he and 40 others were betrayed. There is no record of Ringelblum's final fate, though it is likely that he and his family, from whom he refused to part, were shot in Warsaw's Pawiak prison.

Just a little over two years after Ringelblum's murder, a team of investigators excavated the rubble of what was once the Warsaw ghetto. Amongst them were Hersh Wasser and Rachel Auerbach. They were searching for the *Oyneg Shabes*, which had been hidden in three caches, in tin boxes and milk cans, below various streets in the ghetto. In 1946, they were to find just one cache, which had suffered some devastating water

damage. Four years later, Polish builders uncovered the milk cans, which, since they had been welded shut, gave up their contents more or less intact. The third cache was almost completely destroyed. These humble containers carried not only Ringelblum's ambitions and achievements, but an astonishing source of evidence about the life of Warsaw Jewry. Here was Polish Jewry as it truly was, recorded by its own hand, not simply a memory conjured up by others. In May 1942, Abraham Lewin, a contributor to the *OyNEG Shabes* had urged the earth not 'to keep silent' (p. 172). As the earth beneath the ghetto yielded up the archive, it indeed gave voice to those who had been lost.

It is impossible to gainsay the significance of this book and there is very little to criticise in terms of organisation, synthesis, context and content. (Although, as an historian of Central and Eastern Europe, I was somewhat puzzled and occasionally irritated by the inconsistent use of Polish orthography; I would happily concede that this is a minor quibble, but, in the wider aspect, I do feel it is about time that publishers became better acquainted with Slavonic diacriticals and alphabets.) Kassow has utilised an array of sources in order to relay his narrative, providing a crucial contextualisation in the early part of the book, which gives some insight into the vibrancy of Polish Jewry in the inter-war years, especially in the intellectual and political arenas. So much that has been written about the Holocaust dwells on the mechanics of murder, the struggles of the ghettos, which, whilst essential, sometimes obscures or underwrites the broader picture and experience of European Jewry. For Kassow, to know about Ringelblum and his life before 1939 is just as significant as what followed. In this aspect, this book is as much about the life of Warsaw Jewry as its death.

The author is grateful for a very thoughtful review.

Notes

1. This story may, of course, be apocryphal, though it has been repeated by various biographers. Some claim Dubnow's words were: 'People, do not forget, people, tell the story, people, write it down!', see: V. E. Kel'ner, *Missioner istorii. Zhizn' i trudyi Semena Markovicha Dubnova* ['Missionary of History. The Life and Work of Semen Markovich Dubnow'] (St. Petersburg, 2008), p. 652. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *OyNEG Shabes* - 'Joy of the Sabbath', the archive's code name; its members often met on a Saturday afternoon. [Back to \(2\)](#)

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