Introduction

September 18, 1946. After weeks of preparation and planning, searchers had finally begun to dig under the rubble of Nowolipki 68 in the ruins of the former Warsaw Ghetto. They were looking for the buried Oyneg Shabes Archive. It was not an easy job. In the Warsaw Ghetto, the Oyneg Shabes—led by the historian Emanuel Ringelblum—had included dozens of men and women who documented and recorded Jewish life under the Nazi Occupation.[1] But this secret "sacred society," as Ringelblum called the Oyneg Shabes, shared the grim fate of Warsaw Jewry.

Only very few of Ringelblum's coworkers in the Oyneg Shabes survived the war. The journalist and writer Rachel Auerbach was one. Another was Hersh Wasser, who had been its secretary, and his wife, Bluma. Wasser himself had stayed alive by the slimmest of margins. In 1943 he jumped from a Treblinka-bound train. In 1944 Germans discovered his hideout in north Warsaw and killed three of his friends in a short, intense gunfight. But, once again, Wasser and his wife survived. Without Wasser directing the search, it is unlikely that the archive would have surfaced.

The diggers moved carefully. It was slow and dangerous work. Where the Warsaw Ghetto had once stood was now a scene of total destruction. Auerbach compared the painstaking efforts to locate the street and the building to an "archeological expedition."[2] Jews and Poles worked side by side. They dug deep tunnels under the debris, built ventilation shafts, and pushed long metal probes through the rocks and bricks. And then a probe hit something solid: a tin box covered in clay and tightly bound in string—and then nine more.

That September day Rachel Auerbach was in Lodz. For many weeks she

worried over the fate of the archive. In one of her last meetings with Emanuel Ringelblum in the Warsaw Ghetto, the historian told her, with quiet confidence, that his comrades had hidden the "legend," as he called it,[3] and that it was safe "from fire and water." No matter what happened to them, the world would know about the final chapter of Polish Jewry and German crimes.

But Ringelblum's greatest fear was that no one would survive to tell the story and the world would never know about the archive. It was just six days before the Germans discovered his hideout when Ringelblum sent a letter to his close friend, Adolf Berman, asking him to make sure that news of the archive's location somehow reached the YIVO—the Yiddish Scientific Institute—in New York City.[4] "If none of us survives, at least let that remain."[5]

Now Auerbach wondered if it had all been in vain. Was the archive really there? Perhaps it burned down during the ghetto uprising. Maybe looters, looking for money or gold, had stumbled upon the precious documents and destroyed them.

But a sudden instinct told her that today would be the day. She hopped on a train to Warsaw and, upon arriving, rushed from the train station to the Jewish Historical Institute on Sienna Street. The moment she arrived she saw the excited staff—they had found the archive!

But initial euphoria, Auerbach recalled, quickly gave way to anxiety and depression. They could hear water in the boxes, and the boxes themselves were covered with a thick greenish mold. Would anything be readable? Experts from Polish libraries and museums stepped in to show the staff of the Jewish Historical Institute how to unpack the materials and how to dry the paper. Finally, they opened the first box. Auerbach and Wasser exchanged looks. The box contained the telltale notebooks that Eliyahu Gutkowski, one of the secretaries of the Oyneg Shabes, had distributed in the Warsaw Ghetto for essay assignments and reports.[6]

Another box contained a poignant message—the last wills and testaments of those who buried the precious cache of documents in the basement of Nowolipki 68. Before the war, the building had housed a Ber Borochov school, a secular Yiddish elementary school named after the hero of the Left Poalei Zion (LPZ), Ringelblum's political party. After the mass deportations to Treblinka began on July 22, 1942, Ringelblum and Wasser told the director of the school, Israel Lichtenstein, to bury the archive.[7]

Lichtenstein had been in charge of the "technical section" of the Oyneg Shabes. Since the start of the organization, only he knew the physical location of the essays and documents. Ringelblum had taken great care to ensure that, if he himself or other leaders of the archive fell into German hands, the secret would be safe.

Lichtenstein recruited two young members of the movement—David Graber and Nahum Grzywacz—to help him. As they worked against time to bury the archive—who knew when the killers would appear?—they wrote down their last messages for future generations. Here is what Graber, nineteen years old, wanted the world to remember:

> What we were unable to cry and shriek out to the world we buried in the ground. . . . I would love to see the moment in which the great treasure will be dug up and scream the truth at the world. So the world may know all. So the ones who did not live through it may be glad, and we may feel like veterans with medals on our chest. We would be the fathers, the teachers and educators of the future. . . . But no, we shall certainly not live to see it, and therefore I write my last will. May the treasure fall into good hands, may it last into better times, may it alarm and alert the world to what happened . . . in the twentieth century. . . . We may now die in peace. We fulfilled our mission. May history attest for us.[8]

The next day, August 3, 1942, Graber hastily penned a postscript:

> Neighboring street besieged. We are all feverish. Mood tense, we prepare for worst. We hurry. Probably soon we will do our last burying. Comrade Lichtenstein nervous. Grzywacz somewhat afraid. Myself indifferent. In my subconscious, a feeling I shall get out of all trouble. Good day. We must only manage to bury [the boxes]. Yes, even now we don't forget it. At work until the last moment.
>
> Monday, August 3rd, 4 PM

Israel Lichtenstein's testament recorded pride in a job well done. He was sure he had hidden the archive well; only Wasser would know where to find it. "I do not ask for any thanks, for any memorial, for any praise," wrote Lichtenstein. "I only wish to be remembered." And Lichtenstein's thoughts then turned to his wife, the gifted artist Gele Sekstein,[9] and his beloved twenty-month-old daughter, Margalit.

> I wish my wife to be remembered, Gele Sekstein. She has worked during the war years with children as an educator and teacher, has prepared stage sets, costumes for the children's theater . . . both of us get ready to meet and receive death.
>
> I wish my little daughter to be remembered. Margalit is 20 months old today. She has fully mastered the Yiddish language and speaks it perfectly. At nine months she began to speak Yiddish clearly. In intelligence she equals children of 3 or 4 years. I don't boast. People who witness it and tell me so are the staff teaching at the school at 68 Nowolipki

> Street—Dr. Pola Follman, Mrs. Blit Herzlich, Mrs. Zagan and others. I don't lament my own life or that of my wife. I pity only this little nice and talented girl. She too deserves to be remembered.

All these testimonies also contained short autobiographical sketches. On the brink of death, as they buried the tin boxes on that hot summer night, Israel Lichtenstein, his wife, Gele Sekstein, and the two young men who helped them left their individual markers, touching reminders of personal lives and concerns. Gele Sekstein wrote: "My father was a shoemaker. His children from his first wife are not respectable, they are underworld people. My mother, on the other hand, came from a prestigious line—the Landau family. Because of a deformity—one of her hands was paralyzed—she had to marry my father. She did not have a good life and died young." Eighteen-year-old Nahum Grzywacz wanted to remind whoever found the archive that, because his family was poor, he was not able to finish his education. As he was writing his last testament, he suddenly heard that the Germans had blockaded his parents' building. "I am going to run to my parents and see if they are all right. I don't know what's going to happen to me. *Remember, my name is Nahum Grzywacz*"[10] (emphasis in original).

These last-minute testaments—with their poignant combination of personal and collective concerns—offer important insights into the entire Oyneg Shabes project. Clearly Lichtenstein, Grzywacz, and Graber drew comfort and meaning from the conviction that they were fulfilling a national mission of the highest importance. But part of that mission was to remind future generations that they were individuals. Understanding and memory had to focus not only on the collective catastrophe but also on the individual lives that the Germans were about to destroy. Similarly these were people who, like many other Polish Jews, had a deep sense of political commitment and intellectual engagement. Grzywacz, Graber, and Lichtenstein had been members of the same left-wing political party; Gele Sekstein had devoted her artistic talents to the struggle for secular Yiddish education and a better life for poor Jewish children. To understand and appreciate the Oyneg Shabes Archive, one must not forget that it grew out of this culture of dedication and concern.

Gele Sekstein, Israel Lichtenstein, and their little daughter did not die that week. Thanks to a well-constructed hideout in the same building where Lichtenstein hid the archive, they got a nine-month reprieve. One letter that survived in the archive shows how Sekstein doggedly fought to stay alive. On September 22, 1942, she sent a letter to "Hershel," one of the Jewish directors of Bernhard Hallman, a German woodworking enterprise in the ghetto. Sekstein was asking for a precious "number," a piece of paper that proved that she

worked in a shop. Perhaps it might save her and her beloved child from the next roundup. Sekstein reminded Hershel that before the war she had been a noted artist whose work had even won financial support from the Polish Ministry of Education. And just one year ago her work with the ghetto's children had been recognized by Adam Czerniakow, the president of the Warsaw Judenrat, or Jewish Council, the administrative body that the Germans required Jews to form in each ghetto.

> I think I am now the last surviving Jewish painter . . . and perhaps one of the very few Jewish creative artists [writers, painters] who are left.
>
> In the future, I think, the Jewish people should not consist only of tailors, carpenters and shoemakers. There should also be creative artists and cultural figures. Therefore it is important to save the Jewish artist so that (after the war) he'll be able to help rebuild the Jewish people with the help of the pen and the brush. . . . I ask for little. Just give me a chance to live so that I can keep Jewish art alive."

At the bottom of the letter Sekstein noted that nothing came of her request.[11]

Still Sekstein and her husband somehow managed to hold on. In the fall of 1942 the news of German defeats at El Alamein and Stalingrad even gave them fleeting moments of hope. They lived to see the first armed Jewish resistance to the Germans in January 1943.[12] Then, in April 1943, time ran out. The night before the ghetto uprising began on April 19, a Monday, Emanuel Ringelblum had seen Lichtenstein in Brauer's Shop on Nalewki Street. When the battle began, Lichtenstein and his friend, Natan Smolar, another well-known figure in the LPZ, tried to make it back to their hideout on Nowolipki 68. They were never seen again.[13] Gele Sekstein and Margalit probably perished at the same time.

Sometime in February 1943 Lichtenstein buried a second part of the archive in two large aluminum milk cans.[14] He hid them under the same building, Nowolipki 68. Polish construction workers found them in December 1950. There was yet a third part of the archive, with valuable materials on the Jewish resistance, that was buried under Świętojerska 34 on April 4, 1943.[15] Intense searches under the building yielded nothing but a few charred pages of a diary kept by Shmuel Winter, a wealthy businessman who had helped raise money for the Oyneg Shabes in the ghetto.[16] Everything else had vanished.

STONE UNDER HISTORY'S WHEEL

The milk cans found in 1950 contained an essay written in Polish that tried to explain the place of the written word in the Warsaw Ghetto. The writer,

Gustawa Jarecka, had been a leftist author before the war with little interest in Jewish matters. Incarcerated in the ghetto with her two small children, Jarecka found a job working for the Judenrat. The Oyneg Shabes then recruited her to copy Judenrat documents for the secret archive.[17]

Like most of the other documents in this second part of the archive, this one, titled "The Last Stage of Resettlement Is Death," was written sometime after September 1942, when a lull in the deportations had begun. There were no illusions now about German plans for the Jews; the Jews remaining in the Warsaw Ghetto knew that they were living on borrowed time.

But Ringelblum continued the work of the Oyneg Shabes. As the dazed survivors asked themselves how long their reprieve would last, Ringelblum, Gutkowski, and Wasser fanned out through the shrunken ghetto to seek out essays and documents. They asked Jarecka to write about what she had seen. She began by trying to describe what it meant to write in the face of death. Indeed, she had only a few more months to live. In January 1943 she and her two children were deported to Treblinka.

"We have nooses fastened around our necks," Jarecka recorded. "When the pressure abates for a moment we utter a cry. Its importance should not be underestimated. Many a time in history did such cries resound; for a long time they resounded in vain, and only much later did they produce an echo. Documents and a cry of pain, objectivity and passion do not fit together," Jarecka admitted. And the written word itself evoked mixed feelings:

> The desire to write is as strong as the repugnance of words. We hate words because they too often have served as a cover for emptiness or meanness. We despise them for they pale in comparison with the emotion tormenting us. And yet in the past the word meant human dignity and was man's best possession—an instrument of communication between people.

Perhaps the written word would also help bring the killers to justice:

> These documents and notes are a remnant resembling a clue in a detective story. I remember from childhood such a novel by Conan Doyle in which the dying victim writes with a faint hand one word on the wall containing the proof of the criminal's guilt. That word, scrawled by the dying man, influenced my imagination in the past. . . . We are noting the evidence of the crime.

Jarecka admitted that "this will not help us." But nevertheless she found a small shred of solace as she wrote. Future generations might read her essay; historians might learn lessons:

> The record must be hurled like a stone under history's wheel in order to stop it. . . . One can lose all hopes except the one—that the suffering and destruction of this war will make sense when they are looked at from a distant, historical perspective. From sufferings, unparalleled in history, from bloody tears and bloody sweat, a chronicle of days of hell is being composed which will help explain the historical reasons for why people came to think as they did and why regimes arose that [caused such suffering].[18]

Jarecka, therefore, had many important reasons to write. Through the written word one could confront the terrible present with dignity of the past and recapture the themes and symbols of prewar culture. In the face of horror, language could simultaneously frustrate and console. To write was to assert precious individuality even on the brink of death. To write was to resist, if only to bring the killers to justice. To write was to complete the defeat of the killers by ensuring that future historians would use the victims' cries to change the world.

During the Holocaust hundreds of individuals wrote. They wrote diaries, laments for murdered children, essays, poetry, and fiction. In a death cell in a Krakow prison, Gusta Davidson Draenger wrote a diary on toilet paper.[19] In Krematorium III in Auschwitz, Zalman Gradowski, a member of the Sonderkommando, wrote about his conversations with victims in the anteroom of the gas chamber and buried his notes in a glass bottle.[20] In Estonia, just a few hours before his execution in the Klooga concentration camp in September 1944, Herman Kruk wrote the last entries in his diary and buried them on the spot.[21]

Some individuals decided to write entirely on their own. Others wrote because they were encouraged to do so—by a political party, a youth movement, or an underground ghetto archive. There were underground archives in several ghettos, but by far the largest was the Oyneg Shabes, organized by Emanuel Ringelblum in the Warsaw Ghetto. More than anyone else it was Emanuel Ringelblum who encouraged individuals to write, who organized and conceptualized the archive, and who transformed it into a powerful center of civil resistance.[22]

Ringelblum was a historian who, to borrow Jarecka's metaphor, tried to cast a stone under the wheel of history. He was the product of a left-wing secular culture that embraced the study of Jewish history and Yiddish literature as the building blocks of a new Jewish identity that affirmed national pride even as it reached out to the wider world. Ringelblum was absolutely convinced that the story of Jewish suffering, no matter how terrible, was a universal story and not just a Jewish one. And evil, no matter how great, could

Workers at ZIH around a table examining part 2 of the excavated archive.
Photograph courtesy Yad Vashem.

Street scene in Warsaw Ghetto. *Ringelblum Archive, courtesy Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.*

Jewish police, Czerniakow, street children. *Ringelblum Archive, courtesy Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.*

Goldin's "Chronicle of a Single Day." *Ringelblum Archive, courtesy Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.*

Warszawa, dnia 15 lipca 1942 r.

Nie jesteśmy skłonni obiecywac, nie mając pewności.

Pewni jesteśmy, że godzina pięknej bajki myśliciela i poety da wzruszenie - "najwyższego szczebla" drabiny uczuć.

Przeto prosimy na sobotę dn. 18 lipca 1942 r. godz. 4,30 pp.

Dyrektor Domu Sierot

/ Z nienapisanej recenzji "Żywego Dziennika"/

.... Pierwszy prawdziwie artystyczny spektakl od 1939r.

Coś więcej niż tekst - bo nastrój;
Coś więcej niż emocja - bo przeżycie;
Coś więcej niż aktorzy - bo dzieci;

/ - / Władysław Szlengel

Wejście bezpłatne.

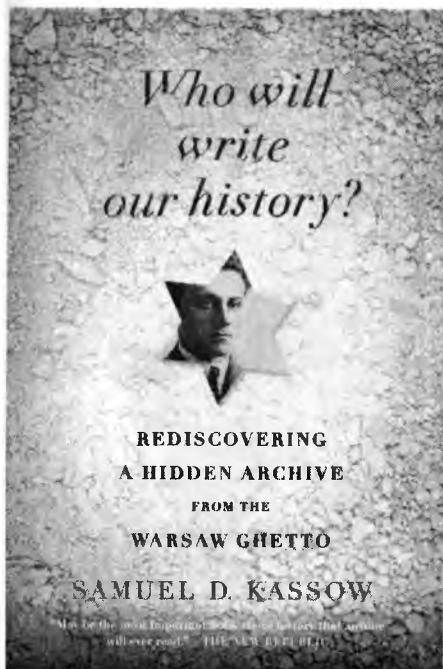
Invitation to children's play at the Korczak orphanage, July 15, 1942. *Ringelblum Archive, courtesy Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.*

Sketches of street scenes by Rozenfeld. *Ringelblum Archive, courtesy Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.*

Who Will Write Our History?

Rediscovering a Hidden Archive from the Warsaw Ghetto

by Samuel D. Kassow



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Unearthing the archive, 1946. *Courtesy Yad Vashem*

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An excerpt from one of the recovered documents:

"What we were unable to cry and shriek out to the world we buried in the ground.... I would love to see the moment in which the great treasure will be dug up and scream the truth at the world. So the world may know all. So the ones who did not live through it may be glad, and we may feel like veterans with medals on our chest. We would be the fathers, the teachers and educators of the future.... But no, we shall certainly not live to see it, and therefore I write my last will. May the treasure fall into good hands, may it last into better times, may it alarm and alert the world to what happened...in the twentieth century.... We may now die in peace. We fulfilled our mission. May history attest for us."
—David Graber, 19 years old

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