

Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History? Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive*, Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007, pp. 523.

by *Peter Klein*

One of the most prominent holdings in the archive of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw is the so called Oyneg Shabes Archive, a collection consisting of more than 30.000 sheets of paper. When on September 18, 1946, during excavation work in the ruins of a former ghetto school on Nowolipki Street, a group of searchers, including one Hersh Wasser, found ten tin boxes of documents that had been hidden there in August 1942, two weeks after the start of the German operation to deport the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto to the killing centre Treblinka. This was the first and more extensive cache of the secret ghetto archive. The second was discovered on December 1, 1950, when Polish construction workers found milk cans encased the foundation of the building. They had been concealed there in late January 1943, when the Jewish Fighting Organization (ŻOB) took arms in response to a German attempt to resume deportations. A third cache, which had been taken to Świetojerska Street 34 on the eve of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising on April 19, 1943, remains missing. Hersh Wasser found only scattered and heavily damaged pages from the diary of Shmuel Winter. Winter, previously a wealthy merchant and, in 1925, one of the founders of the Jewish Scientific Institute (YIVO) in Vilna had published widely on Jewish folklore and Yiddish language. When he arrived in the Ghetto, he became a member not only of the Yiddish cultural organization (IKOR) but also acting member of the Department of Provisioning and Supply (ZZ), a semi-autonomous Organization affiliated with Czerniakóws Judenrat. Winter also contributed to and sponsored the Oyneg Shabes Archive, maintained contact to the Jewish underground and supported the Jewish Self Help (Aleynhilf). Although the loss of Winters daily entries and margins is irreplaceable, the archive uniquely documents Jewish life in the Warsaw Ghetto.

In the Jewish Historical Institute the material is registered as “Ring. I + II”, a reference to historian Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum, whose role in forming a secret historical society called “Oyneg Shabes” (meaning Joy of the Sabbath as members often met on Saturday) and conceiving the extraordinary research project on everyday ghetto life cannot be overestimated. Samuel D. Kassows book *Who will write our history* focuses on Ringelblums life in interwar Poland, the lives of

Oyneg Shabes members and contributors as well as the posthumous historical sources.

Born in 1900 in the east Galizian town of Buczacz, at the time a part of the Austrian Empire, Ringelblum, along with his family, moved south to Kolomyja and then west to Nowy Sącz at the start of the First World War. It was in Nowy Sącz, in the shadow of the Carpathian Mountains, where 19 year-old Emanuel finished high school and came into contact with the local Poalei-Zion Left branch. In 1920, when the Polish metropolis was becoming an intellectual melting pot for a nation that has been divided for more than a century, Ringelblum began to study history at the Warsaw University. His political and scholarly interests shaped in direction of exploring the Jewish masses as an integral, Yiddish-speaking part of Polish society and not as assimilated Polish-speaking participants in the Catholic society. This perspective means historical scholarship in secular Yiddish life and modern cultural, economic, and social history. To promote this new, self confident claim, and to earn a living, Ringelblum devoted himself to educational work with the Poalei-Zion Left's youth movement. During a scholarly visit at YIVO, and later back in Warsaw, he taught history in secondary schools. Moreover, he was active in the Poland Branch of the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). Here he encountered Yitzhak Giterman, director of the JDC in Poland, who seems to have transformed the young historian into a sharp and dextrous administrator in cultural organization and self help. Proof of this is found in Ringelblum's November 1938 visit to the camp at Zbąszyń, where some six thousand Polish Jews who had just been expelled from Germany were stranded in a camp. In addition to providing emergency relief, Ringelblum encouraged the refugees to take over many camp duties – and promoted the use of Yiddish. In short: He managed self-help in accordance with his understanding of Polish Jewry a historical protagonist.

Prudently for the structure of the study, the author decided not to emphasize the outbreak of the Second World War in a separate chapter. Instead, Kossow integrates the German bombing and capture of Warsaw into the narrative of “Organizing the Community.” With this, Ringelblum's engagement as head of the Public Sector of the Aleynhilf, his JDC-supported efforts on behalf of the vitally necessary soup-kitchens, and the foundation of the Oyneg Shabes in his apartment one week after the ghetto was sealed in November 1940 is read as a continuation of his social and academic life. But against the background of daily survival and hunger, Ringelblum's position as head of the Public Sector made him the subject of suspicion and accusation. When he complained to the Judenrat of haggling over jobs or corruption in the Jewish police, the grass-root house committees accused Aleynhilf officials to do so in

the soup-kitchens. Oyneg Shabes, by contrast, may have represented for Ringelblum the harmonious collaboration of a collective – the “brotherhood” in his own words, of which he had dreamt. After founding the group, Ringelblum steadily and methodically assembled a “band of Comrades” from a broad spectrum of prewar Polish Jewry: successful merchants and writers, rabbis and Communists, teachers and economists and impoverished refugees. A small inner circle, the executive committee, decided what to study and what to collect and raised money. The larger group contributed essays and reports to the archive. Isolated from all of them save for Ringelblum and his secretaries Eliyahu Gutkowski and Hersh Wasser was Israel Lichtenstein, a former editor and at the time a teacher in the ghetto, who, together with two students, concealed the documents in the school on Nowolipki Street and later buried them. The surviving documents are a kaleidoscope view of social and cultural life in the ghetto. It includes Rachela Auerbach’s report on a soup-kitchen, the ghetto poetry of Władysław Szlengel and Yitzhak Katznelson, Szymon Huberband’s essays on religious life and Gela Seksztajn’s drawings. Ringelblum’s slogan - “Nothing is unimportant, collect as much as possible” - is reflected in a variety of items as tram tickets, ration cards, theatre posters, invitations to lectures and 76 photographs. Of the fifty to sixty members of Oyneg Shabes, only three survived: Rachela Auerbach, who had interviewed and recorded the words of the Treblinka refugee Abraham Krzepicki, and Ringelblum’s secretary Hersh Wasser and his wife Bluma, who had interviewed “Szlamek”, the refugee from Chełmno. These testimonies made Ringelblum anxious that posterity would read only the record of the killers and forget the voices of the victims, but Hersh Wasser made sure after the war that this did not happen.

Samuel D. Kassow’s study is a stylistically well-written and clearly organized synthesis of Ringelblum’s scholarly life and ideas. Drawing on a wide range of documents and contextualized with the rich cultural and political life of Polish Jewry, he convincingly portrays the historian on his way to creating a unique heritage. He restores the names of all those, who contributed to this self-scholarly project and describes their individual fates. It is fortunate for the historian Emanuel Ringelblum, his “band of Comrades” and their secret archive that they have found such an excellent historiographer in Kassow.

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