XV

Scribes of the Warsaw Ghetto

We come now to the bleakest chapter in Jewish history. By the winter of 1940, the largest concentration of Jews in all of occupied Europe was in the Warsaw ghetto. Here, the Nazis launched the second phase of their war against the Jews. Here, as well, the multilingual culture of the Jews became one of their most sustained—and sustaining—means of defense.

Some have argued—quite erroneously—that no adequate response to the Holocaust could come about until one generation after the catastrophe. This feeling was not shared by those who were living, writing and performing in the ghettos. It *is* true, however, that it has taken almost two generations for their work to be published—even in their original language(s), let alone in translation.

Besides its sheer volume, the extraordinary range of what was written in the ghettos is a measure of its importance. We find jokes, legends and messianic signs (Huberband), psychological and documentary fiction (Goldin, Opoczynski), private journal entries (Kaplan), a satiric feuilleton (Perle); a lament (Auerbach) and, of course, the expository prose of its major historian, Emanuel Ringelblum. More to the point: ghetto writings provided an internal focus that is fundamentally different from that of the postwar period. Overwhelmingly, the story told by Holocaust survivors—both in print and, more recently, in videotaped interviews—is an *individual* saga that is studied in the light of universal theories of human behavior.

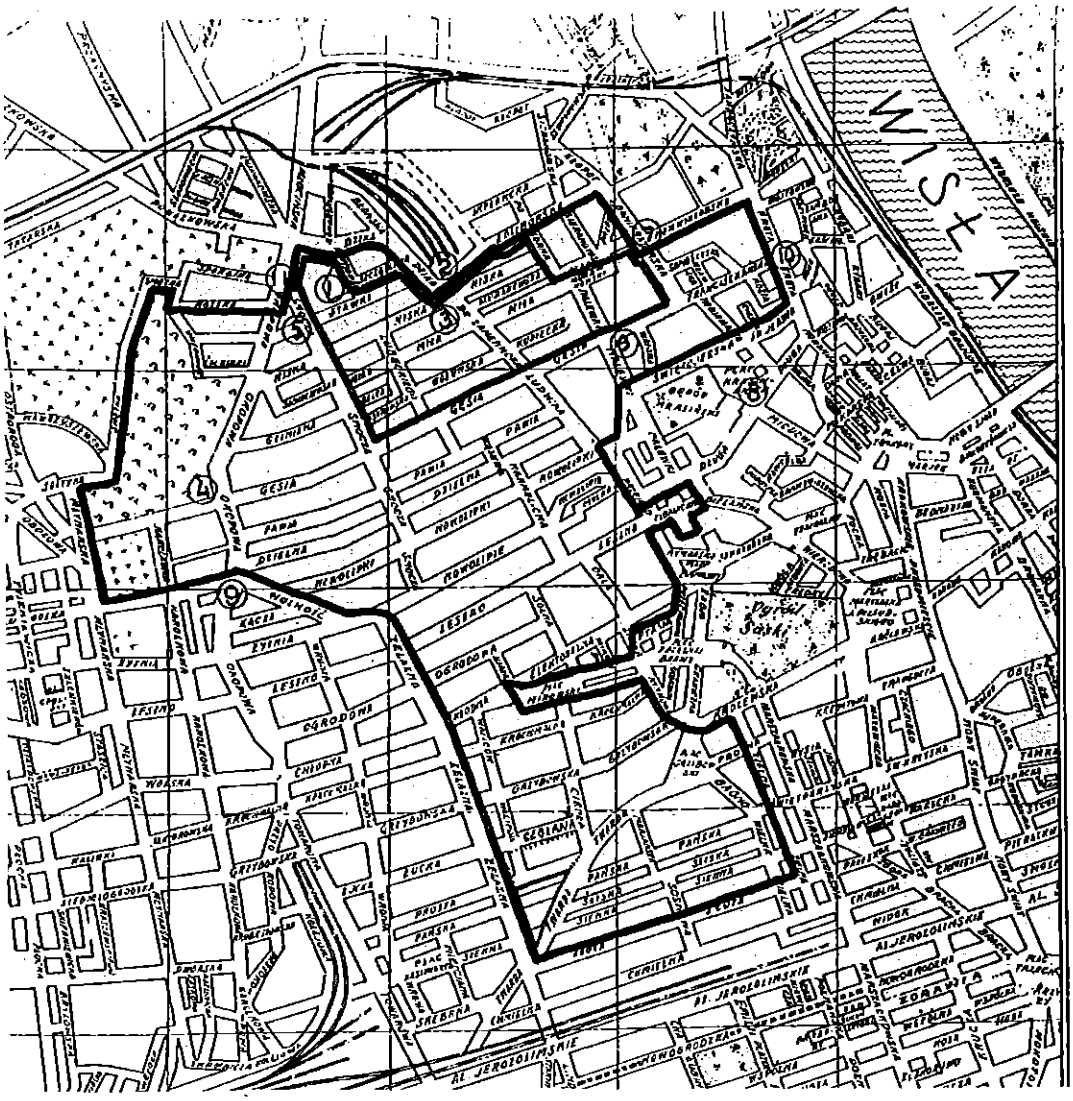
Ringelblum's agenda was to probe the life of the *collective* against a specific social-historical backdrop. Our question is: How did they survive? The staff of *Oyneg Shabbes* asked: How did they perish? In his retrospective overview (**71**), Ringelblum emphasized that the central achievement of the ghetto archive was its collection of monographs on the destruction of Jewish cities and towns. Not one of them has yet been published!

There is another major difference as well. Overwhelmed by their losses, the survivors soon realized that bringing the external enemy to justice was far more important than settling old internal accounts. *All* the victims assumed an aura of holiness; through an act of voluntary self-censorship, the stories of betrayal and internecine warfare were suppressed, reinterpreted or forgiven. This act of self-discipline was eloquent testimony to the collective ethos of eastern European Jewry, which survived the destruction of the culture itself.

How different this was from the response of ghetto writers themselves! Here, so much of the anger was still directed at the enemy within—at the communal leadership, at the growing class of smugglers, at one's political opponents. Anticipating this phenomenon, Ringelblum instructed his staff to assure informants that none of the material would be used during wartime. One should write "as if the war were already over." Because of this tactic, he concluded, the material collected would be "of great importance for the future tribunal which, after the war, will bring to justice offenders among the Jews, the Poles, and even the Germans." *Even* the Germans!

Despite Ringelblum's own political agenda (which made him extremely conciliatory toward the Poles, for instance), he did provide "future historians" with multiple perspectives on the same events. Whereas he and his staff considered the Jewish smugglers the unsung heroes of Warsaw, Chaim Kaplan viewed them as the scum of the earth. Whereas Kaplan and Perle and most of the Jewish intelligentsia hated Adam Czerniakow, the head of the Warsaw Judenrat, as much as they hated the Germans, Ringelblum preserved Czerniakow's diary so that he might tell his own story.

The materials preserved in the *Oyneg Shabbes* Archive also validate another point of Ringelblum's: that life in the ghetto changed "with cinematic speed." Take the concept of the "Other Side." In Opoczynski's reportage on the first months of the German occupation (**73**), it meant crossing over the Polish border into the putative freedom of the Soviet Union. After the establishment of the ghetto, in November 1940, it meant escaping to the Aryan Side of the city where one could survive only with forged papers, a flawless Polish accent, an "Aryan" appearance and lots of money. The meaning of the ghetto also changed. In the folk mind (judging from the legends that Huberband recorded), the ghetto was a safer place to be than among the Poles, but when the first eight Jews were publicly executed for illegally crossing over to the Other Side (on Novem-



2. From *The Jews of Warsaw, 1939–1943; Ghetto, Underground, Revolt* by Yisrael Gutman (Indiana University Press, 1982)

ber 17, 1941), Kaplan recorded the shock and despair of the entire population. In 1940, the worst indignities that the Jews of Warsaw experienced were the hated *paruvkes,* or fumigations, of their apartments, with forced baths in the middle of winter (as described by Opoczynski). Two years later, in March 1942, Kaplan would describe the mass graves of the emaciated dead in the Gęsia cemetery. Then, within a few months, a whole new vocabulary would come into being: the *Umschlagplatz,* or round-up point for the *Great Deportation* of some 275,000 Jews to the *Treblinka death camp;* the *blockades* set up to trap the inhabitants of various streets; the German-owned *shops,* where the survivors of the Great Deportation were set to work; the *number* that each had to be assigned; and finally, the underground *bunkers* used during the *Uprising* and the *Final Liquidation* of the ghetto.

For all that the description of events required a new vocabulary, the same events elicited a desperate search for analogies. As before, the greater the catastrophe, the more it was made to recall the most ancient archetypes. But this time, ghetto writers could draw on the whole modern tradition of Jewish response, not only on ancient and medieval sources.

Some analogies were subtler than others. The fast-talking, aggressively self-confident Pearl, who dominated Opoczynski's narrative **(73)** as she did the entire tenement courtyard, was a close cousin of the garrulous women in Sholem Aleichem's fiction. Though it was the men who made all the momentous decisions about whether or not to leave for the Soviet Union, Pearl and the landlady represented (in turn) the ingenuity and staying power of the Polish-Jewish "collective." The tenement, in fact, was a kind of shtetl-in-miniature, and the tenement committee was a latter-day *kahal* (see chap. VIII). As a member of the tenement committee himself, Opoczynski believed that for all the corruption, self-interest and fractiousness, the self-governing committees would weather the Nazi storm. Thus, no matter how cruel the fumigating brigades were, the victims still emerged from the baths with a self-deprecating joke. Yet Opoczynski knew enough about the centrifugal impact of wartime to give the last word to Pearl's cynical husband.

At the other extreme was Leyb Goldin **(74)**, who marshaled all the literary and ideological evidence at his disposal to deny that culture could in any way mitigate even one minute's worth of hunger. Yet at the end point of this bitter narrative, when the only proper analogy for the starving ghetto was to a zoo, he witnessed an operation to save the life of a ghetto child and was forced to admit that this was something that animals would never do.

For Chaim Kaplan **(75)**, the Hebrew pedagogue and former instructor of Bible, all the horrors of the ghetto were naturally filtered through the words of Job and the Prophets, Bialik and the modern secular Jewish writers. As he, too, approached the point of no analogy, especially upon

learning about the liquidation of the Lublin ghetto, his writing became more heavily ironic and impassioned. What sustained him throughout was the act of writing itself, which he elsewhere described as *melekhet hakodesh*, a holy task analogous to the building of the Tabernacle.

In Yehoshue Perle's tour de force (**76**), all hallowed concepts became grist for the satirist's mill. The *kehillah kedoshah*, or holy congregation, was now perverted into a collaborationist Judenrat, and the Chosen People were now reduced to a few thousand "numbered" Jews working as slave labor for the Germans.

Thus, there were two poles of response: Some saw the destruction of European Jewry as the dark culmination of all previous analogies; others saw it as a terrible new beginning, as an archetype that as yet lacked its own name. These two positions emerged with absolute clarity after the ghetto was destroyed. For Rachel Auerbach (**78**), looking back from the Aryan Side of Warsaw, the turning point had been the Great Deportation in the summer of 1942, which she was able to recapitulate with great epic skill. What unlocked the memory of those weeks of unsurpassed terror and what probably enabled her to write in the first place was the liturgy. From a Jewish woman's perspective, this liturgy began with Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel and ended in the recitation of *Yizkor* four times a year in her grandfather's synagogue back home in Galicia.

For the anonymous writer (**77**), also in hiding on the Aryan Side, the turning point had come not with the Uprising, which he seems to have been part of, but with the systematic destruction of the entire ghetto simply for the sake of killing its few thousand underground Jews. For this, the only analogy was the cinema: At one moment he was reminded of a Chaplin film, but upon seeing the whole ghetto in flames, he knew that no cinematic imagination, no matter how extravagant, had ever encompassed a Holocaust.

knows what he has to do, yes, already knows . . . just now he has begun to live . . . the real life of the war . . . his own life.

1941

74 Chronicle of a Single Day

LEYB GOLDIN

How differently my song would sound
If I could let it all resound.

—paraphrase of *Monish*°

A celebrated mock-heroic poem by I. L. Peretz, first published in 1888.

Tired, pale fingers are setting type somewhere in Cracow:
"Tik-tak-tak, tik-tak-tak-tak. Rome: the Duce has announced . . . Tokyo: the newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* . . .° Tik-tik-tik-tak . . . Stockholm . . . Tik-tik . . . Washington: Secretary Knox has announced . . . Tik-tik-tik-tak . . . And I am hungry.

A major Japanese daily.

It's not yet five o'clock. At the door of the room, a new day awaits you. A quiet breeze. A puppy wants to play with you—jumps up at your neck, over your body, behind your back, nuzzles up, wants to tease, to get you to go out and play. A discordant orchestra of sleepers breathing. As one begins, another—a child—interrupts right in the middle. And a third—and a fourth. The conversations in one's sleep are over, complaints satisfied. From time to time someone groans in his sleep. And my brain is bursting, my heart is sick, my mouth is dry. I am hungry. Food, food, food!

The last portion of soup—yesterday at twenty to one. The next will be—today at the same time. The longest half, already endured. How much longer to go? Eight hours, though you can't count the last hour from noon on. By then you're already in the kitchen, surrounded by the smell of food; you're already prepared. You already *see* the soup. So there are really only seven hours to go.

"Only" seven hours to go; it's no joke. Seven hours—and the fool says "only." Very well then; how does one get through the seven hours—or the nearest two? Read? Your brain won't take it in. All the same, you pull the book out from under the pillow. German. Arthur Schnitzler. Publisher so-and-so. Year. Printer. "Eva looked into the mirror." You turn the first page and realize you've understood no more than the first sentence: "Eva looked into the mirror."

You've reached the end of the second page. Didn't understand a single word. Yesterday the soup was thin and almost cold. You sprinkled in some salt, which didn't dissolve properly. And yesterday Friedman died . . . of starvation. Definitely of hunger. You could see he wouldn't last long. And there's a gnawing in my stomach. If you only had a quarter of a loaf now! One of the quarter loaves over

there, a square-shaped quarter loaf, like the ones in that display window, by that table. Oh, brother! You realize that you've jumped up, the idea was so delicious. There's some name or other on page four of the novella: Dionisia. Where she's from, and what she wants—you don't know. There! A quarter of a loaf! There! A bowl of soup! You would make it differently. You would warm it through until it began to boil. So that a spoonful could last five minutes at least. So that you would sweat as you ate. So that you would blow at the spoon, not be able to swallow the soup all at once! Like that!

Maybe it isn't nice to think about oneself in this way—only about oneself, oneself. Remember once; preached a thousand times: the century of the masses, of the collective. The individual is nothing. Phrases! It's not me thinking it, it's my stomach. It doesn't think, it yells, it's enough to kill you! It demands, it provokes me. "Intellectual! Where are you, with your theories, your intellectual interests, your dreams, your goals? You educated imbecile! Answer me! Remember: every nuance, every twist of intellectual life used to enchant you, entirely possess you. And now? And now!"

Why are you yelling like that?

"Because I want to. Because I, your stomach, am hungry. Do you realize that by now?"

Who is talking to you in this way? You are two people, Arke. It's a lie. A pose. Don't be so conceited. That kind of split was all right at one time when one was full. *Then* one could say, "Two people are battling in me," and one could make a dramatic, martyred face.

Yes, this kind of thing can be found quite often in literature. But today? Don't talk nonsense—it's you and your stomach. It's your stomach and you. It's 90 percent your stomach and a little bit you. A small remnant, an insignificant remnant of the Arke who once was. The one who thought, read, taught, dreamed. Of the one who looked ironically from the dock directly into the eyes of the Prosecutor and smiled directly into his face. Yes, stomach of mine, listen: such an Arke existed once. Once, once, he read a Rolland, lived side by side with a Jean-Christophe, admired an Annette, laughed with a [Colas] Breugnon.° Yes, and for a while he was even a Hans Castorp, by some writer . . . Thomas Mann.°

The last three names are of characters in novels by Romain Rolland (1866–1945).

In Mann's The Magic Mountain.

"I don't understand, wise guy. Haven't you eaten?"

Yes, stomach, sure, I ate but I didn't know I had eaten. Didn't think I was eating.

"Do you remember, buddy, the first day in jail? You sat in solitary confinement, bewildered, sad; they had just thrown you, like a piece of old clothing, into a pantry. For two days you didn't eat, but didn't feel the least hunger. And suddenly the peephole opened in the door: 'Good evening, Arke! Keep it up! *Grunt się nie przejmować, dobrze się odżywiać* (keep your spirits up and eat well)!° Listen, Arke, in the corner, behind the radiators, there's bread and bacon. The main thing, brother, is to eat—the next installment comes tomorrow, on the walk.' Remember?"

In Polish in the original.

And yesterday Friedman died. Of starvation. Of starvation? When you saw him naked, thrown into the large—the gigantic—mass grave (everyone covered his nose with a handkerchief, except for me and his mother), his throat was cut. Maybe he didn't die of hunger—maybe he took his own life? Yes . . . no. People don't take their own lives nowadays. Suicide is something from the good old days.

At one time, if you loved a girl and she didn't reciprocate, you put a bullet through your head or drained a flowered phial of vinegar essence. At one time, if you were sick with consumption, gallstones or syphilis, you threw yourself from a fourth-floor window in a back street, leaving behind a stylized note with "It's nobody's fault" and "I'm doing the world a big favor." Why don't we kill ourselves now? The pangs of hunger are far more terrible, more murderous, more choking than any sickness. Well, you see, all sicknesses are human, and some even make a human being of the patient. Make him nobler. While hunger is a bestial, a wild, a rawly primitive—yes, a bestial thing. If you're hungry, you cease to be human, you become a beast. And beasts know nothing of suicide.

"Brilliant, my pet, an excellent theory! So how long is it, wise guy, till twelve o'clock?"

Shut up, it'll soon be six o'clock. Another six hours and you'll get your soup. Did you see the burials yesterday? Like dung—that's how they drop the dead into the grave. Turned the box over and flipped them in. The bystanders get such a livid expression of disgust on their faces, as if death were taking revenge for the aura of secrecy. For the various irrelevant, unnecessary things that had been tied on to him, now, out of spite, he let down his pants and—here! Look at me, kiss my ass. Like a spoiled child, who's sick of endearments. And do you know, Brother Stomach, how I imagined death when I was a child? I remember when I was four and five, I went to a kindergarten. They played the piano and split their sides laughing and spoke Hebrew. And I remember there was a funeral in the same courtyard. I only saw the hearse entering the courtyard, and soon after, cries and laments. I fancied that the man in the black coat and stiff hat wanted to drag a woman into the hearse, and she didn't want to go, and in fact it was she who was making the noise, and she threw herself on the ground, and he took hold of both her arms, and she was sitting and sliding along, and shouting and screaming. How do you like that, my little stomach? You don't answer—are you asleep? Well, sleep, sleep, the longer the better. At least until twelve o'clock.

Food, food. It isn't my stomach talking now—it's my palate and my temples. Just half a quarter loaf, just a little piece of crust, even if it's burnt, black, like coal. I jump off the bed—a drink of water helps, it provides an interruption. On your way back to bed you fall—your feet are clumsy, swollen. They hurt. But you don't groan. For the last few months you've got used to not groaning, even when you're in pain. At the beginning of the war, when you were lying in bed at night and thinking about the whole thing; or in the morning, when you had to get up, you often emitted a groan. Not now. You're like a robot now. Or maybe, again, like a beast? Perhaps.

Die? So be it. Anything is better than being hungry. Anything is better than suffering. Oh, if only one could use arithmetic to reckon *when* one would breathe one's last! That woman in the courtyard, from No. 37, who died, had been starving for six weeks. Yes, but she ate nothing, not even soup once a day. And I do eat soup. One can go on suffering for years in this way—and maybe kick the bucket tomorrow. Who knows?

I realize that I'm still holding the book. Page seven. Let's see if I can get through it. I turn the pages. Somewhere, on one of the pages, my eye spots the [German] word *Wonne*. Ecstasy. A piquant, magnificent erotic scene. A few pages earlier they

were eating in a restaurant. Schnitzler gives you the menu. No, no, don't read it. Your mouth becomes strangely bitter inside, your head spins. Don't read about what they ate. That's right—just as old people skip descriptions of sex. What's the time? Half past six. Oh, how early it still is!

But it's possible that tomorrow or even today I'll give up the ghost. The heart is a sneak—you never can tell. Maybe I'm lying here for the last time and feeling so sluggish for the last time. So slow to get dressed. And handing in a soup ticket for the last time and taking a new one for tomorrow. And the cashier, and the waitress, and the janitor by the door—they will all look at me with indifference, as they do every day, and not know at all, at all, that tomorrow I won't come here anymore, and not the day after tomorrow and not the day after that. But I will know, and I will feel proud of my secret when I am with them. And perhaps in a few months, or after the war is over, if statistics are made of the diners who died, I'll be there, too, and maybe one of the waitresses will say to another: "D'ya know who else died, Zoshe? That redhead who insisted on speaking Yiddish, and whom I teased for an hour and, just to fix him good, didn't give him his soup. He's been put in the box too, I bet."

An indecipherable part of the manuscript.

And Zoshe, of course, *won't* know, as if she would remember such a thing—and then you will have such a high, high [. . .].° Maybe it will already have been poured; oh, how magnificently Thomas Mann describes it in *The Magic Mountain*.

I remember his thoughts, the way he delineated them. Never has their brilliant truth appeared so clear to me as it does now. Time—and time. Now it stretches like rubber, and then—it's gone, like a dream, like smoke. Right now, of course, it's stretched out horribly, horribly, it's really enough to kill you. The war has been going on for a full two years, and you've eaten nothing but soup for some four months, and those few months are thousands and thousands of times longer for you than the whole of the previous twenty months—no, longer than your whole life until now. From yesterday's soup to today's is an eternity, and I can't imagine that I'll be able to survive another twenty-four hours of this overpowering hunger. But these four months are no more than a dark, empty nightmare. Try to salvage something from them, remember something in particular—it's impossible. One black, dark mass. I remember, in prison, in solitary confinement. Days that stretch like tar. Each day like another yoke on your neck. And in the evenings, lying in the dark, reviewing the day that had passed, I could hardly believe that I had been in the bathhouse that day—it seemed that it was at least four or five days ago. The days passed with dreadful slowness. But when I went through the gate on that side of the street, all the days ran together like a pack of dogs on a hunt. Black dogs. Black days. All one black nightmare, like a single black hour.

A Christian Pole.

At the prison gate friends were waiting—I don't remember all of them. But I remember Janek.° Yes, Janek. I forgot all about him. Not long ago, last year, I met him. Half naked, in rags, he was tinkering with the gas pipe in a bombed-out house halfway along Marszałkowska Street. He called to me. And out of the blue, as if twelve years hadn't gone by since we met last, he gave me our standard greeting, "Know something?"

"No. And you?"

"Me neither. But it's OK."

Then the supervisor came up and left. So maybe, maybe I should write to Janek. Write to him: Listen, brother, I'm having a hard time. Send me something. Write,

then? By all means, write yet more openly: if you could provide me with a quarter of a loaf every day—ah, a little quarter loaf. Yes, when I'm dressed I'll write to him. It may be difficult to send the note but I'll write to him.—A little quarter loaf. And if you can't, then let it be an eighth.

Somewhere in the world people are eating as much as they want. In America sits Hershel eating his supper—and there is bread on the table, and butter, and sugar and a jar of jam. Eat, Hershele, eat! Eat! Hershel, eat a lot, I tell you. Don't leave the crust, it would be a waste, and eat up the crumbs from the table! It tastes good, you become full—true, dear Hershel?

And somewhere in the world there is still something called love. Girls are kissed. And girls kiss in return. And couples go walking for hours in the gardens and the parks and sit by a river, such a cool river, under a spreading tree; and they talk so politely to each other, and laugh together, and gaze in such a friendly way, so lovingly and passionately, into each other's eyes. And they don't think about food. They may be hungry, but they don't think about it. And they are jealous and become angry with each other—again, not eating. And all this is so true, and it is all happening in the world—far away from here, true, but it is happening, and there are people like me over there. . . .

"Sick fantasies!" interrupts the scoundrel, my stomach; he's woken up, the cynic. "What a dreamer! Instead of looking for a practical solution, he lies there deluding himself with nonsensical stories. There are no good or evil stomachs, no educated or simple ones, none in love and none indifferent. In the whole world, if you're hungry, you want to eat. And by the way, it's all nonsense. There are good providers for their stomachs, and there are unlucky wretches like you. You can groan, you idiot, but as far as filling me up—damnation, what's the time?"

Ten past eight. Four hours to go. Not quite four whole hours, but let's say four, and if less, that's certainly to the good. I slowly draw on my pants. I no longer touch my legs. I touched them until, not long ago, I measured them with my fist, to see how far they'd shrunk. No more. What's the point?

And Friedman has died. Tying my shoelaces reminds me of the dozens of dangling genitalia there in the large common grave. And young girls stood around, holding their noses with handkerchiefs, and looked at the islands of hair. Again—is it because animals have no shame? Yes, so it seems, at the cemetery—funeral notices of rich men, of doctors, of good citizens . . . there is no end of rickshaws, and an easily recognizable crowd gathers—no poor people there. In other words, this kind of person dies too, though they have enough to eat. One doesn't die of hunger alone. Things even themselves out. They'd better get the message.

"Tell me, friend, are you starting up with your stories again? It's already time to go. Maybe the soup will be earlier today. Move, my dear!"

In the air and heat of early fall the street is full of the smell of sweat and the smell of corpses, just as in front of the ritual cleansing room at the cemetery. Bread, bread everywhere. It costs the same as yesterday. You want to go to a stall, feel, pinch the fresh whole-wheat bread, satiate your fingertips with the soft, baked-brown dough. No, better not. It'll only increase your appetite, that's all. No, no—just as you didn't want to read what the lovers ate in the restaurant on the quiet Viennese street. And fish roe is cheaper. Cheese—the same price. Sour cream is now in season—but it's expensive. Cucumbers are cheaper, and onions are at the same price. But they're bigger today than yesterday.

Cheerful tomatoes, full of joie de vivre, laugh in front of you, greet you. Trips into the mountains, rucksacks, shorts, open shirts, wild, joyous songs of earthly happiness rising into space. When, where? Two years ago, altogether two years. Tanned faces, black hands and feet. And hearty laughter, and brooklets of unexpected spring water, and bread and butter sandwiches with sweet tea; and no armbands on your sleeves, no mark of being a *Jude.*

Bread, bread, bread. *Razowka. Sitkowka. Vayse sitka. Hele sitka. Tunkele sitka. Walcowka.* First-class bread. *Beknbroyt.*°

There are no English or American equivalents for these breads. They are roughly listed in order of desirability.

Bread, bread. The abundance of it dazzles your eyes. In the windows, on the stalls, in hands, in baskets. I won't be able to hold out if I can't grab a bite of breadstuff. "Grab? You don't look suspicious," says he, my murderer. "They'll let you near, they'll even put it in your hand. They'll trust you. They can see you aren't one of the grabbers."

Shut up, buddy, you've forgotten that I can't run. Now *you're* the wise guy, hah?

"You're a goner, you are, my breadwinner," says he. "Just take a look at those two having their identity papers checked at the gate.° Look at the color of their faces. You can bet they've eaten today, and they'll damn well eat again, soon. But look over there—they're waiting for the car to pick them up. If you were a *mentsh,* you'd have looked after me earlier on, and you'd be eating like a human being, and *not* have swollen legs. And you'd also be able to wheedle yourself in and go along for the ride. They give you half a liter of soup and a loaf of bread a week. Too bad you're such a *shlemazel!*"

These were the Palatzovka workers who reported for duty at the gates of the ghetto to be taken to their work places outside the ghetto.

Wrong again, you argue with him, your stomach. To begin with, there isn't soup every day. Often enough they come back without eating. And they're not treated with kid gloves either. Sometimes they get pushed around. You take your chances. But now, you're guaranteed the soup in the kitchen, you have a ticket. And for doing nothing, and without working. Well, where could you be more secure?

The secondhand dealers by the gates look at you, at everybody, according to the value of the jacket you're wearing, and expertly value the pants that will be pulled off you tomorrow—whether you're dead or alive. A light breeze carries a torn fragment from the wall: "Four hundred grams of black salt. Chairman of the Judenrat." Go to him, perhaps? Something rises in your memory: a committee, a hall, not very large, a bell, a carafe of water. You recognize him: a tall figure, a fleshy Jewish nose, a bald head. A small bow tie. Yes, *he* is now the chairman. Maybe you really should go to him? Write to him: Honored sir, I do not request much of you. I am hungry—you understand?—hungry. So I request of you (and remind him here of your becoming acquainted, in 1935 I think—does he remember?). Therefore, I request of you, Mr. Chairman, that you see to it that I receive a piece of bread every day. I know, much honored sir, that you have a thousand other things to do—what importance at all can it have for you that such a wreck of a person as I am should kick the bucket. All the same, Mr. Chairman of the Judenrat—

You stumble over something on the ground. You nearly fall. But no, your two feet keep their balance. On the ground, across the sidewalk lies a mound of rags with a . . . a green, hairy lump of wet dirt that was once a face with a beard. Now for the first time you realize that the calls, "Hello, hello," were to you. At first you

Expletive omitted by the author.

didn't look around because Jews don't have names anymore—all Jews today are called . . . °; but now one of those secondhand dealers is standing by you. Didn't I see that I nearly stepped on a corpse? Philosopher! As if his jacket hadn't been sufficiently creased and disheveled? Must I add insult to injury? The shoes have been pulled off by someone and sold; at least leave the pants! What use is it to tell him that I was just thinking about the Chairman of the Judenrat. The gatekeeper walks slowly, lazily, from the gate, carrying bricks and an old, excrement-stained sheet of newspaper, ties it round the dead body and walks slowly away, and that's it.

According to some clocks, old and crippled, it is already eleven o'clock. You get a liking for the ones that tell you it's later. Those big ones are haughty and not in any hurry, and you hate them. Another hour, no, stand around and wait . . . standing is also a way of passing the time. Another hour. A few dozen minutes—they count for something too! It's nothing, indeed, but if you were eating a good old piece of bread, eh? What would you do, for example, if you were now to be given a slice of bread—would you eat it right away, or would you keep it for the soup to make it more filling? I think you'd keep it. And if the soup was late, and it came out much later, let's say, would you also wait? Enough stories for the time being, don't make a fool of yourself. You'd devour it like a wolf. Oh, how you'd demolish it!

"Just a little bit of bread. . . ," the refrain of all the criers, from the sidewalks, from the cobbles, a little bit of bread. Oh, you jokers! Don't you know that I too want nothing more than a "little bit of bread"?

"My father's dead, my mother's in hospital, my elder brother's missing—a little bit of bread. . . ."

You've eaten today, you bastard, haven't you?

"Small children at home—a little bit of bread." And I would so gladly add my voice: I'm hungry, hungry, hungry. Another hour till soup, another hour—you understand? "A little bit of bread! ! ! !"

The soup was *not* late today. The steam is already in the air. Plates are already being rattled. The manager is already shouting at the waitresses, the assistant manager is already measuring the length of the hall with his tiny feet and nodding his plump head from side to side as in a puppet show. The second assistant manager is already shouting at some diners. The day of soup giving is already begun. There are more people here than yesterday, just as yesterday there were more than the day before. Poor fellow! They're starting to hand out the soup from *that* table. So you'll have to sit here until it reaches you. How do you like that—you can eat your heart out.

Time—and more time. You remember the days when the kitchen announced, indifferently, and you thought, vengefully, "There's no meal today." How bitter were the words on the door: "Today's tickets are valid for tomorrow." How hideously long were those days and nights. And yet it seems to you that that pain was nothing compared with the half hour that you still have to wait.

The opposite table is already in a state of grace. Peaceful quietness—they are already eating. And it somehow seems to you that the people at that table feel superior to you, worthier. Someone or other takes from his bosom a quarter sheet of newspaper and unwraps it, uncovering a thin, round piece of bread. Unlike

you, they don't gobble the soup directly; first they stir it, wrinkling up their noses in disgust—just as they do every day, because it's thin; start at the side, where it's shallow; chew for a long time, slowly; pretend to be looking around, as if the soup were of secondary importance and the main thing—the ceiling. After the first few spoonfuls they add salt. They play with the soup as a cat plays with a mouse. And after the soup their faces wear an expression of near-religious bliss.

And it hasn't reached your table yet. And—are you only imagining it?—somehow the people sitting here all have such long faces, not-having-eaten faces, with swollen ghetto spots under their eyes, which give the face a Mongolian look. You think of a master of world literature, a Tolstoy, a Balzac, a Wassermann. How they made a fuss over people, they chiseled every feature, every move. "You seem to be somewhat pale today!" one of these geniuses would write, and the world was enraptured. "You seem to be somewhat pale today," and women dabbed their eyes with handkerchiefs, critics interpreted and serious, business-like gentlemen, owners of textile factories or partners in large, comfortable manufacturing businesses beneath white marble signs felt a quiver in their cheeks—reminiscent of the first kiss, fifty years ago. "You seem to be somewhat pale today"—ha, ha! If someone *today* were to read or write, "You seem somewhat pale today," when the whole world is deathly pale, when everyone, everyone has the same white, chalky, lime-white face. Yes, yes, it was easy for *them* to write. They ate, and knew that the readers were going to eat and that the critics were going to eat. Let these masters *now* show their true colors and write!

"Why don't you eat?" What is this? Everyone around you is eating; in front of you, too, there is a bowl of steaming soup, glistening and glittering with delicious splendor. You were looking across at the people and saw nothing. And did she take the ticket? No, you're still holding it in your hand. What's going on? Should you call? Turn it in? You've already finished with the helping, while around you people are smacking their lips, spitting, sipping as a cat sips milk, and grumbling, exactly as if they weren't eating. And that scoundrel over there, who has such a full plate, full of fried onions sits there sniveling—you could just faint. It's all right, they're hungry, everyone may eat any way he likes. I'm probably comical too when I eat my soup. And there are some who tilt the plate so convulsively and scrape together the last drops . . . and submerge their whole face in the plate and see nothing else, as if it were the entire earth, the world. Can she possibly have given you the soup without a ticket? You steal a glance—the date is right. She simply didn't notice in the confusion. No, don't give it to her. Revenge. And she will realize it maybe; maybe not. It can't be—maybe, maybe to get another helping? And say nothing? But she did it on purpose. You know what, Arke? If a *man* sits down at your table now to eat his soup, you'll take the risk; if a *woman*, it's a bad omen, and you won't give up the ticket.

You stare hard. On one side a mother is now sitting with a child. A waitress hurries past, the mother says to the child, loudly, with a smiling, ingratiating look: "Wait, wait, the lady will soon bring you some thick soup." The bench squeaks, someone has sat down. That person is hidden from view; you see a bit of white toast. A fragment of a second: man or woman?—man or woman? A woman! Apparently—a pair of eyes—a mummy, eyes without expression. A woman, a woman, damn it. This means not turning in the ticket, not taking another bowl of soup? Too late, that's the way you set it up. But now the soup is better and

better, thicker, hotter. How do you know? That's the way it always is. The later the better. Though it's not so certain. But this time—yes. And so once again, from the beginning. Man or woman, man or woman?

There is movement around you. People come and go, sit down, speak. Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew, German. First here, now there, like a rocket, a question flutters with an exclamation: "Who, him? I saw him only yesterday! Who, her? She ate here only the day before yesterday! They are talking about those who have died, one of hunger, another from "that" louse and today's sickness. And they whisper so mysteriously in each other's ears: "Don't shout—so, died at home, unannounced." But above all other conversations, one theme—we won't be able to survive it. There's such a winter coming. If the war lasts through the winter. Last year we still had something. Parcels were still arriving, it wasn't sealed so shut. What are they splitting hairs about? Whether we will survive or not. What can people do, when they are sentenced to death and know the exact time of the execution? Thus the French aristocrats in the prisons during the great Revolution gambled at cards, acted in plays, until the man in the tricolor came in and called out the names, and "The guillotine is waiting." Yes, you see? But they weren't hungry and weren't threatened with starvation. Yes, indeed, this is really the main point. Well, and during the more recent Russian Revolution? But why am I getting involved in these great stories—man or woman, man or woman?

At this point she showed up, the waitress, and automatically began taking tickets. Everyone held them out, you as well. It's over. And now you dip your spoon in the bowl, in the second bowl of soup—you understand? It really is thicker than the first. Now you can afford to play with it, to eat graciously, like all the rest, and not gobble. You don't eat in whole spoonfuls. Sometimes you spit out a piece of chaff, like a VIP.

In the street the smell of fresh corpses envelops you. Like an airplane propeller just after it's been started up, which spins and spins, and yet stays in one place—that's what your feet are like. They seem to you to be moving backwards. Pieces of wood.

They were looking, weren't they? Involuntarily, you cover your face with your arm. And what if they find out? They can, as a punishment, take away your soups. Somehow it seems to you that they already know. That man who's walking past looks so insolently into your eyes. He knows. He laughs, and so does that man, and another and another. Hee, hee—they choke back their stinging laughter, and somehow you become so small, so cramped up. That's how you get caught, you fool. A thief? *Only* unlucky. That one soup can cost you all the others.

A burning in your left side. Your arm, your leg, your heart; not for the first time, but this time it's stronger. You must stop moving. You feel someone is watching. It's already too late to respond. A director of social assistance, in a rickshaw,° is riding down the street. A former acquaintance. Yes, he looked at you; yes. You notice when someone's looking—it's your nature. Always, when you see him traveling past, you look at him, wanting to catch his eye, and always in vain. Today it's the other way around: *he* noticed *you*. Maybe . . . maybe he already knows.

The major means of conveyance in the Warsaw ghetto; a symbol of luxury.

The director is already far away. Behind him are dozens of rickshaws. But the burning remains. Why the devil did you have to be in the street just *now?* Others go past, actually touch you and don't recognize you, or pretend not to. And he—

saw you from up there in his rickshaw and pierced you with a glance. What will happen now?

By a gate, in a narrow crack, a cucumber. A whole one, untouched. It seems that it fell from a housewife's shopping basket. Mechanically, without thinking, you bend down, take it, no disgrace, no joy. You deserve it. Just as a dog deserves a bone. A bittersweet cucumber. From looking at the skin you can already taste the sweetness of the seeds. It's not healthy. Typhus? Dysentery? Nonsense. For thirty centuries, generations of scholars have devoted their brilliant abilities, their youth, their lives to extorting from Nature the secrets of vitamins and calories—in order that you, Arke, by a gate in Leszno Street should munch on a cucumber you found, which someone lost, or threw down for you.

Bracketed ellipses indicate indecipherable parts of the original manuscript.

What? It's impossible to [. . .]?° Oh, if you only tried . . . if you only tried . . . if you only tried to beg. The first housewife that comes along . . . make a piteous face. . . . So what? Better people than you are out begging. Should I list them for you? You don't want to? Then, don't! If you don't want to, you don't have to—he stopped at L[. . .].

You feel that today you have fallen a step lower. Oh, yes, that's how it had to begin. All these people around you, apparently, began like that. You're on your way [. . .] The second soup—what will it be tomorrow?

It's getting dark. The darkness thickens; you could cut it with a knife. It would be good to buy some bread now, it's cheaper. It would! A round-bellied prostitute gives irises to two of her friends. On their lime-white faces, all skin and bone, the rouge and color on their spear-sharp eyebrows look ghostly.

A small group of people stand on the sidewalk and look across at the other side, from where a long beam of light falls. It's the children's hospital. Low down, on the first floor, in a wide, high window, a large electric lamp hangs over a table. A short woman in a white mask moves something very quickly with her hands. Around her, other women, also in masks. A calm hurry. And everything—to the table, to the one who lies on the table. An operation. You've never seen one before. At the movies, in a book, in the theater, yes, but in life, no. Strange, isn't it? You've lived some thirty-odd years, seen so much—and now you're seeing an operation for the first time; and it has to be in the *ghetto!* But why, why? Why save? Why, to whom, to what is the child being brought back?

And suddenly you remember that dead Jew, whom you nearly tripped over today. What's more, you now see him more clearly than before, when you were actually looking at him. Somewhere, years ago, there was a mother who fed him and, while cleaning his head, knew that her son was the cleverest, the most talented, the most beautiful. Told her aunt, her neighbors his funny sayings. Sought and delighted in every feature in which he resembled his father, his father. And the word *Berishl* was not just a name to her, but an idea, the content of a life, a philosophy. And now the brightest and most beautiful child in the world lies in a strange street, and his name isn't even known; and there's a stink, and instead of his mother, a brick kisses his head and a drizzling rain soaks the well-known newspaper around his face. And over there, they're operating on a child, just as if this hadn't happened, and they save it; and below, in front of the gate stands the mother, who knows that her Berishl is the cleverest and the most beautiful and the most talented—Why? For whom? For whom?

And suddenly (you—a grown, tall man, a male) you feel a quiver in your cheek,

in your hands, all over your body. And your eyes become so rigid, so glassy. Yes, that's how it must be. This is the sign—you understand?—the equation, the eternal Law of Life. Maybe you are destined now, of all times, in your last days, to understand the meaning of this meaninglessness that is called life, the *meaning of your hideous, meaninglessly hungry days.* An eternal law, an eternal machine: death. Birth, life. Life. Life. Life. An eternal, eternal law. An eternal, eternal process. And a kind of clarity pours over your neck, your heart. And your two propellers no longer spin round in one spot—they walk, they walk! Your legs carry you, just as in the past! Just as in the past!

Somewhere a clock is striking dully: one, two, half past. Four-thirty, three-thirty, five-thirty? I don't know. Here there is no sunrise. The day comes to the door like a beggar. The days are already shorter. But I—I, like the fall, autumnal, foggy dawns. Everything around you becomes so dreamy, lost in thought, longing, serious, blue-eyed, concentrated in itself. Everything—people, the world, clouds—draws away somewhere, prepares for something responsible that carries a yoke, something that connects everything together. The gray patch that stands in the corner of the room with open arms—that's the *new day.* Yesterday I began to write your experiences. From the courtyard came the shouts of the air-raid wardens telling people to turn out the light. There's a smell of *cholent.* How come? It's Thursday, not the Sabbath [. . .]. A forest, a river, the whistle of a train, an endless golden field. Kuzmir, Tatrn[. . .]. The Lithuanian border. This longing, this wound will never go away, it will stay forever, even if today, tomorrow should once again [. . .]. Let it be in the city itself, go, go—go forever, without stopping, at least see the bank of the Vistula, at least see just the city. The city that you know. The happiness of quickly turning a corner, then [. . .] the hundredth. With an open jacket, with happy, swift steps. *Your city,* your second mother, your great, eternal love. The longing pierces your heart. It remains.

Somewhere they are typing [. . .]. They're reporting. It is reported from Brussels . . . Belgrade, Paris. Yes, yes, we're eating grass. Yes, we're falling in the streets without a word of protest—we wave our hands like this, and fall [. . .]. Each day the profiles of our children, of our wives, acquire the mourning look of foxes, dingoes, kangaroos. Our howls are like the cry of jackals. Our hymn, *papierosy, papierosy* (cigarettes, cigarettes) is like something from a nature reserve, a zoo. But we are not animals. We operate on our infants. It may be pointless or even criminal. But animals do not operate on their young!

Tokyo. Hong Kong. Vichy. Berlin. General number of enemy losses: six thousand eight hundred and forty-nine. Stockholm. Washington. Bangkok. The world's turning upside down. A planet melts in tears. And I—I am hungry, hungry. I am hungry.

Warsaw ghetto, August 1941
(Ringelblum Archive, Part 1, no. 1486)

76 4580

YEHOSHUE PERLE

A round number. At first glance it looks silly and seems to have no specific meaning. A detached number such as this can be likened to those gray people who go through life alone and die without confession.

But if an arithmetician or a stargazer were to take a good look at this number, he might arrive at some ingenious conjecture, or discover some esoteric numerological computation, from which fools would later infer either the Apocalypse or the Coming of the Messiah.

Sober minds, if they consider it, will probably take it to be the Identity Number of a policeman, a railroad porter, a prisoner or—pardon the proximity—a dog, or the devil knows what else. But that this foolish number should be a substitute for the name of a living person, who was never a policeman, a railroad porter, a prisoner or even a dog—that will be difficult to believe.

People will also not believe that great suffering and pain cry out from the number, and so does the disaster of the people from whom it is my lot to be descended.

And yet the impossible has become possible. It happened in the year 1942, in the month of Tishre, in the land of Poland, in the city of Warsaw. Under the savage rule of Amalek—may his name and memory be blotted out; with the consent of the Jewish *kehillah*—may its good deeds stand it in good stead in this world and in the next.

May it merit eternal life, the Warsaw Jewish *kehillah*. For it was the *kehillah* that favored me with the number: *four thousand five hundred and eighty.*° It was the *kehillah* that cut off my head—my name—and set a number in its place. I go around with it and live; it has become "me."

Upon arrival in the Warsaw ghetto in 1941, Perle secured a job in the clothing department of the Judenrat run by Shmuel Winter. In 1942, again with Winter's help, Perle was joined to a shop of ersatz honey and candies, which exempted him from immediate deportation.

It may be worth recounting how I, a Jew, on a rainy day in Tishre, turned into a number. I won't brag. Like everyone else I entered the world headfirst and fell into it without a name. For eight whole days, in accordance with Jewish law, I lived not only without a name, but also without a number. Someone living in the year 1942 won't want to believe that, although I possessed no number, my dear mother was not afraid to hold me nor to give me warm milk from her beautiful breast. She was not afraid to warm me with her young body, to caress me, to worry over me, as a mother—and Jewish into the bargain—can worry over her firstborn son, the one who will recite the *Kaddish*.

Eight days later, as is the custom among Jews, they made a blessing over me and said: "May his name in Israel be, etc."

A person's name is like a living organism; it has flesh and blood. You can't feel it or see it, but you can't live without it. I wore it, this name of mine, as a lovely woman wears a still lovelier string of pearls. It was mine, entirely mine. I had, after all, inherited it from my grandfathers and great-grandfathers. I absorbed it, together with my mother's blood, together with the sweat of my overworked father.

My name lived in the same house with me. Under the same roof, in the same bed. It was I, and I was it. It learned to walk with me, learned to speak, just as I did. If I was called, it pricked up both ears. If I suffered, it suffered too. It rejoiced with my joy, wept with my tears, laughed with my laughter and dreamed with my dreams.

But don't think that my name was a slave to me, that it didn't have a say and a will of its own. On the contrary, when I fell into a melancholy mood and started thinking about the world to come, my name asked to have *this* world. And just as my mother wished that I should survive her, so my name wanted to survive me.

I don't know and wouldn't swear that my life was rich with good deeds; I also don't know whether I was virtuous. I do know that when a wicked moment came upon me (for we are all but human) and I wanted to injure myself, my neighbor and my enemy—my name stood up and sternly warned me not to do it.

"You must not put me to shame," it said. "If people point their finger at you, their finger will reach me first. I am the phylactery on your forehead. Without me you may shout 'I am Solomon,'° and nobody will believe you. And if you want to know, I'll whisper a secret to you: I no longer belong only to you. Your life wanted me to be in the public domain. And if indeed I am in the public domain, no blemish may appear on me."

Based on a rabbinic legend about King Solomon trying to reclaim his throne from Ashmedai, king of the devils.

That's how my name spoke out. And I wouldn't be honest if I convinced myself that my name had no blemish at all. I lived with it for fifty-three years, kept pace with it for over fifty-three years. How could it be possible, in the course of half a century, for a person not to make one false step? My name was present. I saw it exposed to humiliation. I suffered with it and was silent. Not until later, when I realized that it wanted to survive me, did I make an effort for it to rise up.° And it rose and shone, just as my first new little gaberdine once shone, the coat that my father had sewn for me for Passover.

A possible reference to Perle's shift in style midway into his career.

And let people interpret it as they wish. Let them say it is pride, self-delusion: my name also shone from *her*.° She loved both me and my name. Just as she bore with proud pleasure her majestic head of hair, so did she bear my name with proud pleasure. To her it was the loveliest, the cleverest. She caressed and drew it out. I often didn't recognize it, so strange did it sound. But when I heard it issuing from her pure lips, with all the delight she put into it, I heard it anew, fresh, bathed in her young laughter.

A reference to his wife Sarah, who committed suicide in 1926.

Cruel fortune willed that in her youth she should carry it with her to the grave. It lies there, together with my letters to her, which accompanied her as she had instructed. The name has turned to stone in the tablet that guards her grave. And I believe with absolute faith that, just as I cannot forget her name here, so she cannot forget my name there.

And can one forget one's own name? For fifty-three years it has grown with me, for fifty-three years it has lived with me, for fifty-three years it has blossomed, put down roots, branched out into a child and a child's child. Whosoever looks at times into a holy book knows that one name can destroy a world. And one name can also create a world. The Torah is called the Law of Moses—is named after Moses. Homer's name is written on the Iliad.

It is true that there are names that must be cursed, obliterated from the human

stock. But there are names that the human race blesses and will bless as long as it exists.

My name is not great; humanity has no reason to bless it. It also has no reason to curse it. But unimportant as this name of mine may be, I did not give the Warsaw *kehillah* any right to take it away and set a paper number in its place. Amalek, may his name and memory be blotted out, gave the order; and the head of the *kehillah*, whose learning and wisdom are known throughout the Jewish Diaspora, carried it out—to the letter.°

Perle's attack on the new head of the Judenrat, Marek Lichtenbaum, is gratuitous. The Judenrat had no influence on the Nazi policies.

Instead of me, there roams about beneath the desolate walls of the ghetto—which that same head of the *kehillah* has had built—a big number, printed in black and white: an arrogant creature, an aristocrat among numbers.

This number—is the former "I." This number is my former name. I have no idea what they will do in 120 years, when I'm given a Jewish burial (I believe that may happen). The Angel of Death will take a trip down and knock on my tombstone: "*Mah shimkho?*" "What is your name?" . . . How will I answer him then?° That my name is Four Thousand Five Hundred and Eighty? But won't he look at me as if I'm crazy? I also don't know what they'll do about the people who come after me. They'll read in chronicles about the city of Warsaw in the year nineteen hundred and forty-two and will certainly be surprised that it was possible for a living number to be transformed into a dead number.

Based on the belief that when you die, you have to report your name to the angel of the grave.

I would like to tell them, the people of the future, that we—who are not reading history on paper but making it with our blood—are not surprised in the least. What is there in it that could surprise us? Our soul has been torn out, our body raped, our Holy Ark spat into, our Torah of Moses trampled by soldiers' boots.

Amalek, may his stock be obliterated from human memory, gave the order; and the Warsaw *kehillah* carried it out. Of three times a hundred thousand living Jewish souls it was granted that some thirty thousand ciphers of the Chosen People be left, stamped and sealed with the seal of the head of the *kehillah* himself—whose name will one day be used to frighten children in their cradles.

My name and all that is me also found favor in the eyes of the VIPs and were metamorphosed into a number. And just as Sholem Aleichem's Motl, the son of Peyse the Cantor, runs around barefoot and happily proclaims, "I'm alright, I'm an orphan," so I walk around in the tenement courtyard on Franciszkanska Street, which has become the great wide world, and proclaim:

"I'm alright, I'm a number."

I'm leading a life of luxury. The aristocratic number gives me dignity, importance. It elevates me above the rubbish heap where the other thirty thousand or so are swarming—and persuading themselves that they alone are worthy to remain members of the Chosen People Club.

My number receives a quarter of a clayey loaf of bread a day and some very tasty grits consisting mostly of boiled water, a potato that someone has already stolen from the pot and a few grains of cereal that chase about and can never, poor things, catch up with one another. What's more, from time to time they dole out to my number a stale egg with a drop of blood on it,° a lick of honey and, once in a blue moon, a scrap of aging meat that—even if you were to hack it into pieces—would by no means have the flavor of old wine.

The blood would render the egg unkosher.

I'm all right; I'm a number. I'm inscribed in the Community Register of the Holy Congregation of Warsaw. The clever head of the *kehillah* likes turning the

pages of the Register. Someone else, in his place, would perhaps read out the Mosaic Curses. He would perhaps hear the weeping of the children who have died, even before they began to live. He would perhaps take cognizance of the roaring of three times a hundred thousand souls, slaughtered on the altar of Amalek, who rush around and do not allow a single one of these classified, happy ciphers of the Chosen People to rest.

But he only sees numbers, the clever head of the Holy Congregation of Warsaw. And, as he is the ruler of the numbers, and as he is not obliged to feed numbers for nothing, he issues edicts every other day and sends out polite notices:

"Thus-and-thus, dear number, I decree that you shall present yourself at six o'clock tomorrow, to help build the bleak wall that confines you as with a chain, and wants to strangle and choke you. You must wall yourself up. You must also come and wash away the blood of your mother and your father, whom Amalek deigned to slaughter, gladly assisted by the loyal crew. And if there is still something left in your father's house, or in your own house, you must help Amalek to steal it and bring it to him as a precious gift.

"If you are recalcitrant, if you will not come forward—" warns my good head of the *kehillah*—"if you do not wall yourself up with your own hands, if you do not bring Amalek the candlesticks that your dead mother used when she blessed the Sabbath candles, if you do not bring him the diamond brooch with which your mother adorned herself for the blessing of the New Moon; if you do not offer him the pillow on which your child slept, I shall erase you from the Register and you will cease to be a number."

That's how my head of the *kehillah* warns me every day. To tell the truth, I'm delighted by these fearsome warnings that I'll stop being a number: I'll become "I" again! I'll get my name back! To put it simply—I'll rise from the dead. Since the world began, not a single Jew has risen from the dead: the Messiah hasn't arrived yet. I'll be the first resurrected Jew. So why shouldn't my heart rejoice? On the other hand, I remember that if I stop being a number there's an executioner's ax waiting for me. No longer being a number means good-bye to the clayey quarter loaf each day, good-bye to the smell of the year-old egg, good-bye to the little room they allotted me to live in, good-bye to the potato that other people steal from my plate of grits, good-bye to honor; no longer an aristocrat, no longer of the Club of the Chosen.

Without a number I'll be like my neighbor, who was once as clever as I and as learned as I, as polite as I—maybe more polite. But evil fortune willed that he should not find favor, not be metamorphosed into a number; he kept his name. His beautiful human name. But a beautiful human name has the same value today as a beautiful human heart, or a beautiful human virtue. Today the beautiful human hearts, the beautiful human virtues lie bleeding among the scraps that lie scattered in the desolate Jewish courtyards.

My neighbor's honest name doesn't get the quarter of a loaf, doesn't taste the flavor of a little grits, has nowhere to lay its head, hides itself in holes together with cats and stray dogs. My neighbor's name has been erased from the Communal Register. The friends of yesterday, who have numbers, no longer say good morning to him, no longer sit with him at the same table, no longer pray with him in the same house of prayer. He has become a leper, this neighbor of mine, with the honest name and without the paper number.

And how should I not value my number? How should I not worry about it? I do indeed worry about it, as a mother worries about her only child. I guard it as one guards the apple of one's eye. I have a little velvet bag, embroidered with a Star of David, and I carry my number next to my heart. I sleep with it, I eat with it. My dreams are woven around it, with it, of it.

And if I were young today and my number was also under thirty, a woman would surely appear and say tenderly: "Dear little number!"

And she would pamper it: "Darling number, my crown!"

And would use affectionate diminutives: "My numberkin!"

Because I was born under a lucky star. I'm alright—I'm a number.

But in order to become a number, my fifty-three years had to be jabbed at until they bled. Jabbed at, mocked, raped. In order for me to become a number, they had to destroy my house first. Destroy it, tear it up by the roots. Under my number lie three times a hundred thousand Jewish martyrs. Three times a hundred thousand Jewish lives, that Amalek slaughtered with the consent of the head of the *kehillah* and his servants. From under my fortunate number leaps out the cry of tens of thousands of poisoned, strangled Jewish children. In the dark nights I hear the great weeping of the mother of all mothers, our Mother Rachel. She walks across the desolate fields and wraps her dead children in burial sheets.° With her beautiful, delicate hands she washes the blood off her sons and daughters. But can she wrap *all* of them in burial sheets? Can she wash them *all*? Blood cries out; and the earth, in all its length and breadth, is dissolved in lamentation.

Based on Jeremiah 31:15.

They lie, the slaughtered creatures, naked and shamed, scattered and spread, impurified for burial, without a *Kaddish*, without a gravestone, violated by the murderous hands of Amalek, with the consent of the holy congregation of Warsaw.

I'm alright, I'm a number.

Warsaw ghetto, end of 1942
(Ringelblum Archive, Part 2, no. 1245)

77 The Ghetto in Flames

ANONYMOUS

On April 19, 1943, armed units entered the ghetto to begin its final liquidation. This was the signal for the uprising to begin. Most of the fighting took place in the central ghetto, which had been turned into an underground network of bunkers. In the northern ghetto, where the large German factories (called "shops") were located, the hiding places were neither widespread nor particularly sophisticated, so that opportunities to go into hiding for a long period were far more limited. Most of the "shop" workers, moreover, were convinced that as "productive labor," they would be spared. On April 21, Többens, the owner of the largest factory, issued the deportation order to the managers of the sixteen major "shops." Three days later, Himmler ordered the entire ghetto burned to the ground, even if it meant destroying all the factories and machinery.

the water in tin cans from the cellar to the roof and the other to pass the emptied tins back down to the cellar.

I was handed a pair of goggles and took my place on the roof. Facing me was my former home, where I had once had a bed and a pillow on which to lay my head and which was now bursting with flames that were swallowing everything inside. The two of us on the roof had to make sure that every spark that landed there was put out immediately, for the tarred surface was extremely flammable. Because the smoke was heavy, we had to relieve each other frequently.

We were surrounded by a sea of fire. The greatest film directors have not yet succeeded in capturing such a scene; it roared and crackled and shot flame; it deafened us so that we couldn't hear a thing, not even the others shouting to us. We were working with our last measure of strength, we were fighting with superhuman endurance. And we were winning.

After laboring a whole night, we succeeded in saving the building. By morning the danger of being engulfed by the fire had passed.

We looked around us. Of the five hundred who had escaped to this place from neighboring houses, many had died in the fire, suffocated by smoke in the cellars. And we who survived—were we really saved? For the moment, we didn't think about this. Everyone was hard at work, removing flammable material from the house, especially from the paper storeroom: an entire warehouseful of paper had to be thrown into the courtyard and burned. We were all exhausted, our eyes smarting.

And then a bright, sunny day dawned and revealed to us the incinerated houses of the ghetto, of the murdered city.

And let this remain for a memory.

Sunday, the twenty-fifth of April, 1943. In the evening, the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw was set on fire, and tens of thousands of men, women and children perished in the flames; those who tried to escape the fire were shot on the streets and those who miraculously did escape were hunted and tormented for weeks, for months, until they too were annihilated.

And when later, searching through one of the cellars full of suffocated people, I came upon children whose mouths gaped like black, scorched holes and women whose closed fists clutched hair torn from their heads, I wept and clenched my own fists and remembered the millions of clenched fists all over the world, raised against Hitlerism and Fascism.

The Aryan Side of Warsaw, 1943

78 Yizkor, 1943

RACHEL AUERBACH

I saw a flood once in the mountains. Wooden huts, torn from their foundations were carried above the raging waters. One could still see lighted lamps in them; and men, women and children in their cradles were tied to the ceiling beams.

Other huts were empty inside, but one could see a tangle of arms waving from the roof, like branches blowing in the wind waving desperately toward heaven, toward the river banks for help. At a distance, one could see mouths gaping, but one could not hear the cries because the roar of the waters drowned out everything.

And that's how the Jewish masses flowed to their destruction at the time of the deportations. Sinking as helplessly into the deluge of destruction.

Cf. Ps. 137 (3).

And if, for even one of the days of my life, I should forget how I saw you then, my people,° desperate and confused, delivered over to extinction, may all knowledge of me be forgotten and my name be cursed like that of those traitors who are unworthy to share your pain.

Every instinct is revealed in the mass—repulsive, tangled. All feelings churning, feverish to the core. Lashed by hundreds of whips of unreasoning activity. Hundreds of deceptive or ridiculous schemes of rescue. And at the other pole, a yielding to the inevitable; a gravitation toward mass death that is no more substantial than the gravitation toward life. Sometimes the two antipodes followed each other in the same being.

Who can render the stages of the dying of a people? Only the shudder of pity for one's self and for others. And again illusion: waiting for the chance miracle. The insane smile of hope in the eyes of the incurable patient. Ghastly reflections of color on the yellowed face of one who is condemned to death.

Condemned to death. Who could—who wished to understand such a thing? And who could have expected such a decree against the mass? Against such low branches, such simple Jews. The lowly plants of the world. The sorts of people who would have lived out their lives without ever picking a quarrel with the righteous—or even the unrighteous—of this world.

How could such people have been prepared to die in a gas chamber? The sorts of people who were terrified of a dentist's chair; who turned pale at the pulling of a tooth.

And what of them . . . the little children?

The little ones, and those smaller still who not long ago were to be seen in the arms of their mothers, smiling at a bird or at a sunbeam. Prattling at strangers in the streetcar. Who still played "pattycake" or cried "giddyup" waving their tiny hands in the air. Or called, "pa-pa." O, unrecognizable world in which these children and their mothers are gone. "Giddyup."

Even the sweetest ones: the two- and three-year-olds who seemed like newly hatched chicks tottering about on their weak legs. And even the slightly larger ones who could already talk. Who endlessly asked about the meanings of words. For whom whatever they learned was always brand new. Five-year-olds. And six-year-olds. And those who were older still—their eyes wide with curiosity about the whole world. And those older still whose eyes were already veiled by the mists of their approaching ripeness. Boys who, in their games, were readying themselves for achievements yet to come.

Girls who still nursed their dolls off in corners. Who wore ribbons in their hair; girls, like sparrows, leaping about in courtyards and on garden paths. And those who looked like buds more than half opened. The kind to whose cheeks the very first wind of summer seems to have given its first glowing caress. Girls of eleven, twelve, thirteen with the faces of angels. Playful as kittens. Smiling May blossoms.

And those who have nearly bloomed: the fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds. The Sarahs, the Rebeccahs, the Leahs of the Bible, their names recast into Polish. Their eyes blue and gray and green under brows such as one sees on the frescoes unearthed in Babylon and Egypt. Slender young *fräuleins* from the wells of Hebron. *Jungfraus* from Evangelia. Foreign concubines of Jewish patriarchs; desert maidens with flaring nostrils, their hair in ringlets, dark complected but turned pale by passion. Spanish daughters, friends of Hebrew poets of the Middle Ages. Dreamy flowers bent over mirroring pools. And opposite them? Delicate blonds in whom Hebrew passion is interwoven with Slavic cheerfulness. And the even brighter flaxen-haired peasants, broad-hipped women, as simple as black bread; or as a shirt on the body of the folk.

It was an uncanny abundance of beauty of that generation growing up under the gray flag of ghetto poverty and mass hunger. Why was it that we were not struck by this as a portent of evil? Why was it that we did not understand that this blossoming implied its own end?

It was these, and such as these, who went into the abyss—our beautiful daughters. These were the ones who were plucked and torn to bits.

And where are the Jewish young men? Earnest and serious; passionate as high-bred horses, chomping at the bit, eager to race. The young workers, the *ḥalutsim*, Jewish students avid for study, for sports, for politics. World improvers and flag bearers of every revolution. Youths whose passion made them ready to fill the prison cells of all the world. And many were tortured in camps even before the mass murder began. And where are the other youths, simpler than they—the earthen roots of a scattered people; the very essence of sobriety countering the decay of idealism at the trunk. Young men with ebullient spirits, their heads lowered like those of bulls against the decree spoken against our people.

And pious Jews in black gaberdines, looking like priests in their medieval garb: Jews who were rabbis, teachers who wanted to transform our earthly life into a long study of Torah and prayer to God. They were the first to feel the scorn of the butcher. Their constant talk of martyrdom turned out not to be mere empty words.

And still other Jews. Broad shouldered, deep voiced, with powerful hands and hearts. Artisans, workers. Wagon drivers, porters. Jews who, with a blow of their fists, could floor any hooligan who dared enter into their neighborhoods.

Where were you when your wives and children, when your old fathers and mothers were taken away? What happened to make you run off like cattle stampeded by fire? Was there no one to give you some purpose in the confusion? You were swept away in the flood, together with those who were weak.

And you sly and cunning merchants, philanthropists in your short fur coats and caps. How was it that you didn't catch on to the murderous swindle? Fathers—and mothers of families; you, in Warsaw. Stout women merchants with proud faces radiating intelligence above your three chins, standing in your shops behind counters heaped with mountains of goods.

And you other mothers. Overworked peddler women and market stallkeepers. Disheveled and as anxious about your children as irritable setting hens when they flap their wings.

And other fathers, already unhorsed, as it were. Selling sweets from their wobbling tables in the days of the ghetto.

What madness is it that drives one to list the various kinds of Jews who were destroyed?

Grandfathers and grandmothers with an abundance of grandchildren. With hands like withered leaves; their heads white. Who already trembled at the latter end of their days. They were not destined simply to decline wearily into their graves like rest-seeking souls; like the sun sinking wearily into the ocean's waves. No. It was decreed that before they died they would get to see the destruction of all that they had begotten; of all that they had built.

The decree against the children and the aged was more complete and more terrible than any.

Those who counted and those who counted for less. Those with aptitudes developed carefully over countless generations. Incomparable talents, richly endowed with wisdom and professional skill: doctors, professors, musicians, painters, architects. And Jewish craftsmen: tailors—famous and sought after; Jewish watchmakers in whom gentiles had confidence. Jewish cabinet makers, printers, bakers. The great proletariat of Warsaw. Or shall I console myself with the fact that, for the most part, you managed to die of hunger and need in the ghetto before the expulsion?

Ah, the ways of Warsaw—the black soil of Jewish Warsaw.

My heart weeps even for the pettiest thief on Krochmalna Street; even for the worst of the knife wielders of narrow Mila, because even they were killed for being Jewish. Anointed and purified in the brotherhood of death.

Called khesedlekh in Warsaw slang.

Ah, where are you, petty thieves of Warsaw; you illegal street vendors° and sellers of rotten apples. And you, the more harmful folk—members of great gangs who held their own courts; who supported their own synagogues in the Days of Awe; who conducted festive funerals and who gave alms like the most prosperous burghers.

Ah, the mad folk of the Jewish street! Disordered soothsayers in a time of war.

Ah, bagel sellers on winter evenings.

Ah, poverty stricken children of the ghetto. Ghetto peddlers; ghetto smugglers supporting their families; loyal and courageous to the end. Ah, the poor barefoot boys moving through the autumn mire with their boxes of cigarettes, "Cigarettes! Cigarettes! Matches! Matches!" The voice of the tiny cigarette seller crying his wares on the corner of Leszno and Karmelicka Streets still rings in my ears.

Where are you, my boy? What have they done to you? Reels from the unfinished and still unplayed preexpulsion film, "The Singing Ghetto," wind and unwind in my memory.° Even the dead sang in that film. They drummed with their swollen feet as they begged: "Money, ah money, Money is the best thing there is."

A Nazi propaganda film made in the ghetto in May 1942.

There was no power on earth, no calamity that could interfere with their quarrelsome presence in that Jewish street. Until there came that Day of Curses°—a day that was entirely night.

The Tokhekha, 1.

Hitler finally achieved his greatest ambition of the war. And finally, his dreadful enemy was defeated and fell: that little boy on the corner of Leszno and Karmelicka Streets; of Smocza and Nowolipie; of Dzika Street. The weapons of the women peddlers reached to every market square.

What luxury! They stopped tearing at their own throats from morning until night. They stopped snatching the morsels of clay-colored, clay-adulterated bread from each other.

The first to be rounded up were the beggars. All the unemployed and the homeless were gathered up off the streets. They were loaded into wagons on the first morning of the Deportation and driven through the town. They cried bitterly and stretched their hands out or wrung them in despair; or covered their faces. The youngest of them cried, "Mother, mother." And indeed, there were women to be seen running along both sides of the wagons, their headshawls slipping from their heads as they stretched their hands out toward their children, those young smugglers who had been rounded up along the walls. In other of the wagons, the captives looked like people condemned to death who, in the old copperplate engravings, are shown being driven to the scaffold in tumbrils.

The outcries died down in the town, and there was silence. Later on, there were no cries heard. Except when women were caught and loaded onto the wagons and one could hear an occasional indrawn hiss, such as fowl make as they are carried to the slaughter.

Men, for the most part, were silent. Even the children were so petrified that they seldom cried.

The beggars were rounded up, and there was no further singing in the ghetto. I heard singing only once more after the deportations began. A monotonous melody from the steppes sung by a thirteen-year-old beggar girl. Over a period of two weeks she used to creep out of her hiding place in the evening, when the day's roundups were over. Each day, looking thinner and paler and with an increasingly brighter aureole of grief about her head, she took her place at her usual spot behind a house on Leszno Street and began the warbling by whose means she earned her bit of bread. . . .

Enough, enough . . . I have to stop writing.

No. No. I can't stop. I remember another girl of fourteen. My own brother's orphan daughter in Lemberg whom I carried about in my arms as if she were my own child. Lussye! And another Lussye, older than she, one of my cousins who was studying in Lemberg and who was like a sister to me. And Lonye, my brother's widow, the mother of the first Lussye, and Mundek, an older child of hers whom I thought of as my own son from the time that he was orphaned. And another girl in the family, a pianist of thirteen, my talented little cousin, Yossima.

And all of my mother's relatives in their distant village in Podolia: Auntie Bayle; Auntie Tsirl; Uncle Yassye; Auntie Dortsye, my childhood's ideal of beauty.

I have so many names to recall, how can I leave any of them out, since nearly all of them went off to Belzec° and Treblinka or were killed on the spot in Lanowce and Ozieran in Czortkow and in Mielnica. In Krzywicze and elsewhere.

A death camp in Poland.

Absurd! I will utter no more names. They are all mine, all related. All who were killed. Who are no more. Those whom I knew and loved press on my memory, which I compare now to a cemetery. The only cemetery in which there are still indications that they once lived in this world.

I feel—and I know—that they want it that way. Each day I recall another one of those who are gone.

And when I come to the end of the list, segment by segment added to the segments of my present life in the town,° I start over again from the beginning, and always in pain. Each of them hurts me individually, the way one feels pain when parts of the body have been surgically removed. When the nerves surviving in the nervous system signal the presence of every finger on amputated hands or feet.

I.e., hiding on the Aryan Side.

Not long ago, I saw a woman in the streetcar, her head thrown back, talking to herself. I thought that she was either drunk or out of her mind. It turned out that she was a mother who had just received the news that her son, who had been rounded up in the street, had been shot.

"My child," she stammered, paying no attention to the other people in the streetcar, "my son. My beautiful, beloved son."

I too would like to talk to myself like one mad or drunk, the way that woman did in the Book of Judges° who poured out her heart unto the Lord and whom Eli drove from the Temple.

A reference to Hannah's prayer in 1 Sam. 1, not in Judges. Eli did not drive Hannah from the Temple.

I may neither groan nor weep. I may not draw attention to myself in the street.

And I need to groan; I need to weep. Not four times a year. I feel the need to say *Yizkor* four times a day.

Yizkor elohim es nishmas avi mori ve'imi morasi . . . Remember, Oh Lord, the souls of those who passed from this world horribly, dying strange deaths before their time.

And now, suddenly I seem to see myself as a child standing on a bench behind my mother who, along with my grandmother and my aunts, is praying before the east wall of the woman's section of the synagogue in Lanowce. I stand on tiptoe peering down through panes of glass at the congregation in the synagogue that my grandfather built. And just then the Torah reader, Hersh's Meyer-Itsik, strikes the podium three times and cries out with a mighty voice so that he will be heard by men and women on both sides of the partition and by the community's orphans, boys and girls, who are already standing, waiting for just this announcement: "We recite *Yizkor*."

The solemn moment has arrived when we remember those who are no longer with us. Even those who have finished their prayers come in at this time to be with everyone else as they wait for the words, "We recite *Yizkor*."

And he who has survived and lives and who approaches this place, let him bow his head and, with anguished heart, let him hear those words and remember his names as I have remembered mine—the names of those who were destroyed.

At the end of the prayer in which everyone inserts the names of members of his family there is a passage recited for those who have no one to remember them and who, at various times, have died violent deaths because they were Jews. And it is people like those who are now in the majority.

Aryan Side of Warsaw,
November 1943