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Who Will Write Our History?

Emanuel Ringelblum,
the Warsaw Ghetto, and the
Oyneg Shabes Archive

SAMUEL D. KASSOW

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The Warsaw Ghetto 1940 - 1943



Principal Public Institutions

- 1 Judenrat
- 2 Order Authority (Jewish Police)
- 3 Jewish Prison (Gęsiówka)
- 4 Pawiak Prison
- 5 Courts
- 6 Labor Department (Arbeitsamt)
- 7 Post Office
- 8 Supply Authority
- 9 Office to Combat Usury and Profiteering
- 10 Berson and Bauman Hospital
- 11 Czyste Hospital
- 12 The Great Synagogue
- 13 Nożyk Synagogue
- 14 Moriah Synagogue
- 15 Ż.T.O.S.
- 16 Centos
- 17 TOZ
- 18 ORT
- 19 Toporal
- 20 Center for Professional Studies
- 21 Orphanage (Janusz Korczak, director)
- 22 Oyneg Shabes Archive
- 23 Deportation Center
- 24 Umschlagplatz



- (Jewish residential zone), according to the German decree of August 7, 1940
- Ghetto borders on November 16, 1940 (the date the ghetto was established)
- Border changes during February-April 1941
- Ghetto borders on July 22, 1942 (the beginning of the mass deportation)
- Area of the ghetto remaining on April 19, 1943 (the first day of the uprising)
- Gates of the ghetto
- Overpass
- Principal public institutions
- Locations of fighting during the uprising of January 1943
- Positions and bunkers of the Jewish fighters during the uprising of April-May 1943
- Churches
- Railroad

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Monday, August 3rd, 4 PM

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

I wish my wife to be remembered, Gele Sekstein. She has worked during the war years with children as an educator and teacher, has prepared stage sets, costumes for the children's theater . . . both of us get ready to meet and receive death.

I wish my little daughter to be remembered. Margalit is 20 months old today. She has fully mastered the Yiddish language and speaks it perfectly. At nine months she began to speak Yiddish clearly. In intelligence she equals children of 3 or 4 years. I don't boast. People who witness it and tell me so are the staff teaching at the school at 68 Nowolipki

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

I think I am now the last surviving Jewish painter . . . and perhaps one of the very few Jewish creative artists [writers, painters] who are left.

In the future, I think, the Jewish people should not consist only of tailors, carpenters and shoemakers. There should also be creative artists and cultural figures. Therefore it is important to save the Jewish artist so that (after the war) he'll be able to help rebuild the Jewish people with the help of the pen and the brush. . . . I ask for little. Just give me a chance to live so that I can keep Jewish art alive."

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

Still Sekstein and her husband somehow managed to hold on. In the fall of 1942 the news of German defeats at El Alamein and Stalingrad even gave them fleeting moments of hope. They lived to see the first armed Jewish resistance to the Germans in January 1943.¹² Then, in April 1943, time ran out. The night before the ghetto uprising began on April 19, a Monday, Emanuel Ringelblum had seen Lichtenstein in Brauer's Shop on Nalewki Street. When the battle began, Lichtenstein and his friend, Natan Smolar, another well-known figure in the LPZ, tried to make it back to their hideout on Nowolipki 68. They were never seen again.¹³ Gele Sekstein and Margalit probably perished at the same time.

Sometime in February 1943 Lichtenstein buried a second part of the archive in two large aluminum milk cans.¹⁴ He hid them under the same building, Nowolipki 68. Polish construction workers found them in December 1950. There was yet a third part of the archive, with valuable materials on the Jewish resistance, that was buried under Świętojerska 34 on April 4, 1943.¹⁵ Intense searches under the building yielded nothing but a few charted pages of a diary kept by Shmuel Winter, a wealthy businessman who had helped raise money for the Oyneg Shabes in the ghetto.¹⁶ Everything else had vanished.

STONE UNDER HISTORY'S WHEEL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

not be placed outside history. However painful their sufferings, the Jews were still a part of universal history, not outside it.²³ The archive not only recorded crimes; it was also part of the struggle for a better future.

Shortly after the searchers unearthed the first part of the Oyneg Shabes Archive, the Polish-Jewish historian Nachman Blumenthal—one of the first to study the materials—stressed what he believed to be Ringelblum's extraordinary ability to rise above political passions and preserve his objectivity.²⁴ Blumenthal also praised the fact that Ringelblum—unlike others caught in the Nazi hell—had resisted the temptation to engage in meta-historical speculation or to embrace mystical, religious, or political sentiments. Ringelblum just wanted the facts. He was, Blumenthal wrote, an exemplar of historical objectivity: "He stepped out of his own persona [er tut zikh oys aleyn fun zikh]" in order to serve pure truth.

Blumenthal, however, is only partly right. Much as Ringelblum cared about facts and "objectivity," he could not entirely step out of who he was and forget the politics and ideology that shaped him. To the very end Ringelblum remained a dedicated member of the LPZ. One could see the impact of that political legacy in his Yiddishism, in his love of the Jewish masses, in his reading of modern Polish history, and in his complex attitude toward the Soviet Union. His political legacy made it very difficult for him to evaluate fairly figures like Adam Czerniakow, the head of the Warsaw Judenrat. And one does not have to look hard to notice Ringelblum's less than positive attitude toward the Bund.²⁵ No, Ringelblum did not entirely abandon his political beliefs.

Just as religious Jews believed in the coming of the Messiah, Ringelblum hoped that after the war a better social order would arise on the rubble of European capitalism. But it would not happen automatically. Historical knowledge and awareness would arm the struggle for a better world. And therefore one finds a certain creative tension between his political beliefs and his determination that the Oyneg Shabes be objective and fair.²⁶

Long before the war one could observe a similar tension between Ringelblum's commitment to objective scholarship and his conviction that Jewish historians had a national mission—a conviction that marked the work of an entire generation of young Jewish historians in Poland. For Ringelblum and his peers, their love of history did not lead to a traditional academic career; they were fortunate to find jobs as high school teachers. But as this study will show, they were convinced that the Jewish historians had to shoulder crucial national and political responsibilities. Historians would inspire Polish Jewry to fight for equal rights. They could have a major impact on Polish-Jewish re-

lations: Poles would realize that "the Jews" were not an undifferentiated "other" but a diverse and complex national group with deep roots in Poland.

As this book will demonstrate, Ringelblum followed in the footsteps of two great historians, Simon Dubnow and Isaac Schiper.²⁷ Dubnow pioneered the modern study of East European Jewish history, and Schiper, along with Meyer Balaban, led the study of Jewish history in interwar Poland and both served as mentors and teachers for younger historians. Like Dubnow, Ringelblum believed that historical consciousness could provide a cultural bulwark for secular Jews who rejected both religion and assimilation. As Dubnow admitted in his autobiography, if he could not bring himself to believe in religion, then at least he could find comfort in the record of the Jewish people, how they overcame adversity and how they maintained their national identity. But in order to compile that record, Jews had to collect and protect the raw materials of Jewish history—documents and chronicles.²⁸

Long before organizing the Oyneg Shabes, Ringelblum heeded Dubnow's call. Living in the Diaspora under the sovereignty of others, Ringelblum argued, the Jews would never own their past unless they claimed it and protected it themselves. In his earliest published writings, in the mid-1920s, he complained that Gentile historians had shown little interest in Jewish history, and assimilationist Jewish historians distorted that history to make their case that Jews were a religion, not a people. Meanwhile, he emphasized, community records and documents disappeared, folklore vanished, and national cohesion atrophied. Unlike German Jewry, the hard-pressed Polish-Jewish community, he complained, had done little to set up historical societies, collect documents, or provide financial support for Jewish historians. It was time, Ringelblum pleaded, to change the Jews' attitude toward their history and to develop a rich social history comprising the material culture, economic structure, and folk customs of the Jewish masses.²⁹

Ringelblum's emphasis on social history tried to redress what he believed to be a long-standing imbalance in Jewish historiography, with its focus on what rabbis wrote, on what the rich did, on apologetic briefs for why Jews deserved to be accepted by the Gentiles. To set the record straight, the historian had to organize armies of collectors (*zamlers*) to collect the raw materials.³⁰ He had to encourage provincial Jews to start writing local histories. Indeed, a central goal of the historical section of the Yiddish Scientific Institute, founded in 1925, was to organize the "doing of history," to encourage *zamlers* to collect material, youth to write their autobiographies, and ordinary Jews to believe that their lives were worth studying. Jewish historians not only had to be scholars, they also had to involve the wider community in a common

effort.³¹ Even as a young history student at Warsaw University in the 1920s, Ringelblum joined with others in gathering and assembling documents and artifacts of Jewish history in order to sharpen national consciousness and defend Jewish claims to a distinct national identity.

Together historians and amateurs would create a new canon, a new set of texts that would both legitimize the ongoing creation of a secular national identity and undermine previous, idealized notions of "one Jewish People" (*klal yisroel*) united by religion and suffering. Clear models for such a project had emerged during the First World War. Key examples were the *Vilna Zamlbikher* (almanacs) and the *Vilna War Chronicle* that appeared between 1915 and 1923.³² These almanacs and chronicles—running to many hundreds of pages—documented almost every aspect of Vilna Jewish life during a period of upheaval and war. Articles and reports brought together the past and the present: studies of traditional synagogue architecture alongside reports on new schools and soup kitchens, articles on Jewish social psychology right beside compilations of jokes and folklore, studies of new secular schools next to accounts of the Jewish book trade and publishing. The chronicles also published diaries as well as copies of official announcements and proclamations during the years when Vilna was occupied by Poles, Germans, Soviets, and Lithuanians.

This collective effort brought together religious and secular Jews, Hebraists and Yiddishists, Zionists and Bundists. By documenting the creativity and resilience of Vilna Jewry in a time of crisis, these texts highlighted the emergence of a new Jewish community and new leaders who replaced older elites that had either fled Vilna or failed to meet the challenges of wartime leadership. Implicit in these texts was the conviction that Jewish national life had outgrown traditional frameworks. Jews in Eastern Europe were too diverse, energetic, and spontaneous to fit into the procrustean bed of traditional religion or the framework of narrow ideology. The key message of these texts was that the Jews were a people, not just a religious group. The first *Vilna Zamlbukh* appeared in 1916 at a time when Vilna was under German occupation and when Jews were fighting to secure recognition as a nationality. The stakes were high: recognition for Jewish schools, permission to run a separate Jewish network of relief organizations, equal treatment with the Poles. The *zamlbikher*, which at first glance seemed little more than a collection of miscellanea, in fact became a critical weapon of national self-defense.

Implicit in the *zamlbikher* was the belief that the emerging Jewish nation in Eastern Europe was a work in progress, the sum total of what the Jews, as a people, did. Perhaps one can go further and say that hundreds and thousands of documents were each small building blocks that both recorded and facili-

tated the construction of a new popular consciousness. Clearly what would later become known as "*alltagsgeschichte*," the "history of everyday life," was already a major component of this process of documentation that traced the growth of an extraterritorial Jewish nation in Eastern Europe. This concern with the details of everyday life and material history would carry into the work of the Oyneg Shabes.

In his provocative study *Zakhor*, Yosef Khaim Yerushalmi stressed the tension that he believed existed between this emerging sense of history and a Jewish collective memory that used salient archetypal events to highlight covenantal time, blur the distinction between past and present, and underscore God's special relationship with the Jewish people. The modern historian was serving up something very different from this collective memory. Jewish historians worked with facts and strove for objectivity. God receded to the background, and the Jews, in the mind of the historian, became a people to be studied like any other.

The historian does not simply come in to replenish the gaps of memory. He constantly challenges even those memories that have survived intact. Moreover, in common with historians in all fields of inquiry, he seeks ultimately to recover a total past—in this case the entire Jewish past—even if he is directly concerned with only a segment of it. No subject is potentially unworthy of his interest, no document, no artifact beneath his attention.³³

Although Yerushalmi's thesis has had its critics, Yerushalmi's description of the historian's task—to recover a total past and to retrieve every possible document and artifact—is strikingly similar to Ringelblum's description of the Oyneg Shabes.

The Oyneg Shabes Archive includes an anonymous document by an orthodox Jew that questioned whether Ringelblum's concern with gathering material for history was worth the effort:

History does not teach a thing. We Jews are an unhistorical people.

History has seven faces. Her true face is hard to discover. Jews have no history, all of it is only myth. We are worried about gathering material for history? Forget it. Fight hunger. Only a myth will remain of the present time. Will it be the myth of Sodom or the myth of Abraham's charity?³⁴

What mattered for this author, to put the question in Yerushalmi's terms, was collective, covenantal memory, not history.

But Ringelblum would not have agreed. The Jews, he believed, needed not

myth but history. The Oyneg Shabes was not concerned with elegizing a dead people. During the early phase of the occupation, before anyone suspected the possibility of mass murder, Ringelblum, to borrow an oft-used phrase, sought to create a "usable past" for a living people. At first Ringelblum saw opportunities for the socially committed historian: to reverse the debilitating linguistic assimilation of the prewar years; to discredit the Jewish bourgeoisie and expose those elites who had failed to meet the test of wartime leadership; to document the resilience of the Jewish masses; to prove that in a moment of trial the Jews had once again proven their loyalty to Poland; to use history and sociology to create a meaningful base for Jewish secular culture and to continue a work in progress—a new iconography of the Jewish urban experience—that would take its place alongside the iconography of the shtetl. The Oyneg Shabes also saw itself as engaged in active resistance: it spread the truth about German atrocities.

Yet tension existed between this faith in history and the grim reality of the unfolding catastrophe. How does a historian—who sets out to document a living community—register its destruction? If it made sense to capture a "total past" while there was still hope that Polish Jewry would survive, then what was the point of the archive after the grim efficiency of the Final Solution became all too apparent? True, just as for Jarecka, the act of writing and gathering material afforded some meager consolation. Certainly the Oyneg Shabes could help damn the killers after the war, even if it could do little to save the victims. But Ringelblum continued the archive, even after all seemed lost, for yet another reason: his innate belief that nothing was "unimportant." The ultimate surrender, the ultimate act of despair, was a failure to record what one saw. As everything collapsed all around, many Jews in the ghettos held even more tightly to their prewar ideals and hopes—if nothing else, these provided an anchor and a beacon. Ringelblum the radical did not renounce his faith in a world revolution that would sweep away the capitalist system. Ringelblum the historian did not give up his hope that historians still had something to tell a postwar world, to teach lessons that would prevent another genocide.

Ringelblum was someone who turned his weaknesses into strengths. Before the war some regarded Ringelblum's historical work as overly descriptive. Compared to Isaac Schipper or Ringelblum's close friend, Rafael Mahler, Ringelblum was seen as a competent journeyman but not as a theorist or path-breaker. One person who worked with him closely before the war considered him, somewhat unfairly, more of a facilitator than an original thinker.³⁵ I consider these claims in more detail elsewhere in the book. But one

might ask whether Ringelblum's own sense of the historian's craft, and perhaps his own realization of his strengths and weaknesses, made the archive—a collective enterprise—possible. In a very real sense, the Oyneg Shabes reflected a kind of humility on Ringelblum's part. Clearly he had his own biases and agendas, but clearly he knew that in addition to creating a vital historical record he was "facilitating" the work of future historians. "Collect as much as possible," he told Wasser. "They can sort it out after the war."³⁶

From the very beginning Ringelblum understood the need to encourage writing "from inside the event," writing that would not be skewed by the distorting lens of retrospective recollection and selective memory. To collect material, to gather impressions, and to write them down immediately—these were the watchwords of the Oyneg Shabes. Memory was tricky, Ringelblum insisted, especially in the ghetto. Under the pressure of unprecedented events, Jewish society changed at lightning speed. In wartime, months turned into days and years into months. By December 1939 the tough prewar days seemed like a picnic. A year later, after the Jews were herded into a ghetto, the prewar period of the German occupation evoked a kind of nostalgia. After the deportations to Treblinka began in July 1942, then even the ghetto hell of 1941–42 seemed like the "good old days." Ringelblum realized, even before he was aware of the Final Solution, how quickly trauma would efface memories of all that had preceded it, how unimportant the "everyday" would seem when viewed through the prism of greater suffering. Thus it was all the more vital to capture the "everyday" of Jewish society under German occupation, to meld thousands of individual testimonies into a collective portrait.

In one of Cecylia Stapakowa's interviews with ghetto women, part of an Oyneg Shabes study project, we read that "in the tragic destructive chaos of our present-day life we can nonetheless observe flashes of creative activity, the slow development and birth of forces that are building a base for the future."³⁷ This was written in the spring of 1942. Had she survived, would she have written this after the war? Some of the most vivid materials of the Oyneg Shabes Archive were reportages written by Peretz Opoczynski about features of ghetto life such as the mail and compulsory disinfection baths that humiliated the ghetto population and ruined their belongings. But had Opoczynski waited until the fall of 1942 to write about these events, would they have seemed all that important? Compared to Treblinka, how could one complain about a real disinfection chamber? But it was precisely these microcosms of ghetto life—the post office, house committees, baths, street humor—that would help serious historians reconstruct and interpret the past and understand Jewish society under the Nazi occupation.

Over time Ringelblum realized more and more clearly that survivors' accounts would overshadow the prewar past. The "before" would be erased by the "after." As he confronted the unfolding disaster he fought all the harder to preserve the "Now" and the "Before," to keep the a posteriori label of "victim" from effacing who the Jews were before the war. In a very real sense he saw history as an antidote to a memory of catastrophe which, however well intentioned, would subsume what had been into what had been destroyed.

In a 1981 article Yehuda Bauer pointed out that research on the Jews during the Holocaust focused on the questions of collaboration and resistance while neglecting the "intermediate organizations" in the ghettos, those that occupied the space between the Jewish Councils (*Judenräte*) and the resistance organizations.³⁸ But it was precisely these intermediate organizations that had the closest daily contact with ordinary Jews in certain ghettos. The Oyneg Shabes was embedded in, and grew out of, the single most important of these "intermediate organization," the *Aleynhilf* (literally, "Self-Help") that Ringelblum took part in organizing in the Warsaw Ghetto (see chapter 4). Unlike the *Judenräte*, which were often mistrusted, or the fighting groups, which necessarily included a hand-picked elite drawn mainly from the youth movements, intermediate organizations like the *Aleynhilf* had a broader social base. The record of their activities offers insight into several key issues. How did various groups in the Jewish population perceive their situation at various stages of the German occupation? What was the interplay between relief and grass-roots social mobilization? How did new leaders emerge? What was the role of the prewar Jewish leadership in the ghettos? How does one define and discuss "civil resistance"? We should also remember the real differences between ghettos and concentration camps. In the former there was still a semblance of "social space" that permitted more choice. A major focus of the Oyneg Shabes was the study of these intermediate organizations.

This book sets out to examine who Emanuel Ringelblum was—as far as the sources allow—and to explain how his personality and convictions determined the development of the Oyneg Shabes. But its story is as much about Polish Jewry as it is about a single individual. Had he survived, Ringelblum would have been the first to insist that Holocaust historiography consider not only the perpetrators and the bystanders but also the silenced voices of the victims. To hear those voices requires an understanding of who they were before the war, the cultural milieu and the political battles that shaped Ringelblum and the values of the Oyneg Shabes.

Ringelblum's formative years were spent in Galicia, where a disproportionate number of Polish-Jewish historians were born. To what degree did

the specific circumstances of Galician Jewry shape his development? He remained a lifelong member of the radical Marxist political party, the Left Poalei Zion. How did Ringelblum reconcile this radical Marxism with his commitment to objective historical research? He played a growing role in the social welfare activities of the Joint Distribution Committee, becoming, in the late 1930s, a full-time employee. Can one find a direct line between the grass-roots organizing Ringelblum did for the Joint and his role as a social organizer in the Warsaw Ghetto? He also became an increasingly prominent member of the Yiddish Scientific Institute. How did the institute's research methods influence the Oyneg Shabes Archive? And, finally, Ringelblum was a committed historian. How did he modify his understanding of his mission as a historian as the war progressed?

Unfortunately available sources do not permit a comprehensive personal biography of Emanuel Ringelblum. Those who knew him best are now dead. Some of his friends wrote about him, but hagiography is not biography.³⁹ Some elderly survivors remember Ringelblum, but they were too young at the time to have been part of his close circle. There is little material on Ringelblum's childhood. One searches in vain for more than a few sentences about his wife, Yehudis (Judita), or his son, Uri. In his voluminous ghetto diary he clearly avoided writing about himself. Nachman Blumenthal, perhaps rightly, complained that Ringelblum went too far in his attempt to write himself out of his ghetto narratives, but this reticence sprang as much from the cultural milieu that shaped him and the values he professed as from personal modesty.

As a "public intellectual," Ringelblum is remembered today because of the Oyneg Shabes Archive. But he had also achieved a great deal before the war, even though he was hardly a first-rank figure. He worked in three major settings: the YIVO, the Joint Distribution Committee, and the Left Poalei Zion, his political party.

The 1930s were a hard time for Polish Jewry, but Ringelblum stood out for his inveterate optimism. And he believed that what he did mattered. The YIVO, he was convinced, had an important mission, and he believed that the Joint Distribution Committee might make a difference in the economic struggle being waged by Polish Jewry. Although the LPZ lost much of its mass support during the 1930s, Ringelblum retained his unwavering faith in its ideals. In 1934 Melekh Ravitch, a noted Yiddish poet and the secretary of the Yiddish Writer's and Journalists Union, was preparing to leave Poland permanently. By chance he encountered Ringelblum in the street and told him that he, too, should leave as quickly as possible. Ringelblum laughed and told Ravitch that he was staying. Polish Jewry had a future!⁴⁰ This opti-

mism may have seemed foolhardy in 1934, but in the Warsaw Ghetto it served Ringelblum well.

As the war raged on, those Ringelblum most respected or admired had either left or were killed. He understood that now there was no one else to turn to. The time had come to fulfill an enormous national and human responsibility. With the Oyneg Shabes, Ringelblum won his place in history.

CHAPTER 1

From "Bichuch" to Warsaw

GALICIA

Was it just a coincidence that more Jewish historians came from Galicia, part of the Hapsburg Empire, than anywhere else in Eastern Europe? Lwów produced Meyer Balaban, Philip Friedman, and Naran Gelber. Tarnów was the home of Isaac Schiper and Salo Baron. Rafael Mahler, Ringelblum's lifelong friend, and Artur Eisenbach, his future brother-in-law, grew up in the small town of Nowy Sącz. They all came from a region that differed in many important ways from Jewish Lithuania and Congress Poland, just across the Russian border. They were the products of a cultural milieu that combined excellent Polish education with strong Jewish nationalism. Hapsburg rule was milder, educational opportunities greater. During Ringelblum's formative years, Galician Jewry was undergoing a fateful process of redefinition and self-examination.

Emanuel Ringelblum was born in Buczacz (Bichuch in Yiddish) in eastern Galicia on November 21, 1900. Once a part of Poland, the province passed under Hapsburg rule in 1772 before it became part of the new Polish republic in 1918-19. The area of Buczacz was also known as Podolia.

The Buczacz of Ringelblum's childhood was a pretty town, surrounded by wooded hills and nestled in a bend of the river Strypa. High up overlooking the town was an old empty castle, "der puser shlos," where, according to tradition, the legendary Polish King Sobieski staged a daring ambush of Tatar invaders. On Saturday afternoons young couples would explore the countless tunnels that lay underneath the castle.¹ The great Hebrew writer Shmuel Yosef Agnon—Ringelblum's cousin—grew up in Buczacz and left a beautiful description of his birthplace in the story "B'tokh iri" (In my town).² Domi-

The Different Voices of Polish Jewry

about the future of Yiddish culture in Poland. But as she redacted her wartime writings, she realized that here, too, she had been overly pessimistic. During the war she had written about the last days of such Yiddish cultural figures as the librarian Lev Shor, the poets Hershele, Kalman Lis, and Joseph Kirman, the actors Miriam Orleska, singers like Marysia Eizenshtat, composers like Yankel Glatshteyn. After the war, as she reread her essays on the Warsaw Jewish cultural elite, she asserted that this new generation of writers, poets, artists, and singers would have taken the place of those who had gone before—if only the Germans had not killed them all. Furthermore, she wrote, her work in the *Aleynhif* was an epiphany. The Jewish masses had more strength than she had believed, and they would have provided a deep reserve of people and spirit to counteract assimilation and cultural decay.

This was her way of keeping faith with a band of comrades who had almost all perished.

Between the outbreak of the war and the summer of 1942 Ringelblum had managed to assemble a group of teachers, rabbis, scholars, writers, businessmen, and idealistic young people. This group, for all its differences, represented the finest traditions of Polish Jewry. It reflected the extraordinary cultural ferment that had transformed so much of East European Jewry in the first decades of the twentieth century.

One of the strengths of the Oyneg Shabes derived from its collective character. Ringelblum conceived the archive, probably wrote most of the questionnaires, and his views certainly carried great weight. But a sense of shared purpose clearly animated the Oyneg Shabes. This was not a group of disciples but, as Ringelblum himself wrote, a collective imbued with a common ideal. Over time as the archive evolved it was able to capitalize not only on its ability to organize and define topics but also on its success in drawing on the diverse talents of its members and in encouraging their individual creativity.

Based in the *Aleynhif*, the archive had conduits to all sectors of the Jewish community and sources that brought in information from all over occupied Poland. The members of the Oyneg Shabes, whatever their political differences, worked under the most difficult circumstances to leave a record for future generations. True to the legacy of Peretz, Dubnow, and Ansky, these *zamlers* worked to the very end to ensure that future generations would view Polish Jewry through the prism of history rather than hagiography and elegy. In good times and bad, Polish Jewry spoke in many different voices; the men and women of the Oyneg Shabes did all they could to record those voices and ensure their survival until someday someone would listen.

In a diary entry of May 1942 Rachel Auerbach reported that German film crews were busy in the ghetto. This time they forced young girls and elderly men to undress together in a Jewish ritual bath. Just a few weeks before, the German movie makers had lined Jews up before a table loaded with food and ordered them to eat—but not before they stepped over hungry children who were begging at the door.¹ Meanwhile, all over occupied Europe, the German propaganda ministry was showing "The Eternal Jew," a film that compared Jews to rats and that showed them living in filth. The Nazis wanted to inscribe for future generations the image of Jews as a depraved and unscrupulous race of subhumans.

The German film crews arrived in the Warsaw Ghetto just in time. Within a few months the Great Deportation began. The Jews were unable to resist the murder machine, but they did foil the Nazi plan to destroy their traces and blot out their memory.

A generation earlier, in the middle of the First World War, the Yiddish writer Y. L. Peretz had urged his fellow Jews to document their wartime experiences. A nation that had pride and self-respect did not leave the writing of its history to enemies. Jews, Peretz warned, had to ensure that future historians would work with Jewish sources and not depend on hostile documents and testimony.² Until early 1942 the Oyneg Shabes, like Peretz in the First World War, had believed that the end of the war would see a revitalized Jewish community in Poland with the archive a buttress to national self-awareness and a means to create a "usable past" for the future. But by the spring of 1942 the workers of the Oyneg Shabes began to realize that, instead, they

might be writing the last chapter of the eight-hundred-year history of Polish Jewry. Nonetheless their work had a purpose. Even if they did not survive, they could still determine what that last chapter would say and who would write it. Their work and sacrifice would create a record that would bring the killers to justice. They might still leave a legacy for future generations.

In the summer of 1943, in the Majdanek concentration camp, Isaac Schipper told a fellow inmate that,

Everything depends on who transmits our testament to future generations, on who writes the history of this period. History is usually written by the victor. What we know about murdered peoples is only what their murderers vaingloriously cared to say about them. Should our murderers be victorious, should they write the history of this war, our destruction will be presented as one of the most beautiful pages of world history, and future generations will pay tribute to them as dauntless crusaders. Their every word will be taken as gospel. Or they may wipe out our memory altogether, as if we had never existed, as if there had never been a Polish Jewry, a ghetto in Warsaw, a Maidanek. Not even a dog will howl for us.

But if we write the history of this period of blood and tears—and I firmly believe we will—who will believe us? Nobody will want to believe us, because our disaster is the disaster of the entire civilized world. . . . We'll have the thankless job of proving to a reluctant world that we are Abel, the murdered brother.³

Ringelblum, more optimistic than Schipper, had no doubt that the world would believe what had happened—if confronted with the proper evidence. He intended to amass a record whose thoroughness, objectivity, and sheer scope would force "future generations" to look the truth in the face.

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE OYNEG SHABES

The Oyneg Shabes Archive was the largest secret archive in Nazi-occupied Poland, but it was not the only one. In the Vilna Ghetto, Jewish librarians and writers—for example, Herman Kruk, Avrom Surzkever, and Shmerke Kaczerginski—gathered and buried books and documents.⁴ In the Bialystok Ghetto, a young resistance leader, Mordecai Tenenbaum, who had almost certainly learned about the Oyneg Shabes during his brief stay in the Warsaw Ghetto, set up a ghetto archive and incorporated it into the Jewish underground organization.⁵ In the Lodz Ghetto, Ghetto Elder Chaim Rumkowski established an archive as a separate department of the ghetto administration—and seemed to turn a blind eye as it became a major center of testimo-

ny and documentation.⁶ There was also a secret archive in the Kovno Ghetto, working closely with the Judenrat.

After the war much of the material gathered by these archives survived. Most of the Lodz Ghetto Archive was unearthed from a dry well and from a secret burial place under the former ghetto fire department. (The Germans discovered a third cache and destroyed it.) In 1944 Avrom Surzkever and Shmerke Kaczerginski returned to Vilna and dug up many of the documents they had buried—as well as Kruk's important diary. In Bialystok Mordecai Tenenbaum had entrusted the archive to a sympathetic Pole. The Pole disappeared but, miraculously, many of the archive's documents surfaced after the war.

Countless individuals worked on their own to record what they saw. In hundreds of ghettos, hiding places, jails, and death camps, lonely and terrified Jews left diaries, letters, and testimony of what they endured. For every scrap of documentation that surfaced after the war, probably many more manuscripts vanished forever.

But the secret archives could accomplish much more than solitary individuals. They drew their strength from the collective energy of dedicated workers who could pool their talents and establish a hierarchy of priorities and objectives. The more diverse the archival staff and the greater the range of their prewar political and cultural backgrounds, the more likely it was that the archive would develop fruitful contacts and sources of information. Archives, although not entirely free of politics, generated a sense of common purpose that helped allay political rivalry. A collective could mobilize financial resources and gain the protection of important people in the Jewish Councils or social welfare organizations more easily than individuals. In some ghettos the official Jewish leadership and the archival staffs came together in a complex relationship fraught with mutual suspicion and mutual need. Ghetto leaders might feed the archive important documents—even as they concealed others.

In some important respects the Oyneg Shabes Archive resembled the archives in other ghettos. All collected documentation and testimony, and all worked in varying degrees of secrecy. Many leaders had earned respect before the war and claimed some authority in the ghetto community. In Lodz, for instance, Henryk Naftalin had been a prominent and esteemed attorney. Herman Kruk had headed one of the largest Yiddish libraries in Poland, the Bund's Grosser Library in Warsaw; in the Vilna Ghetto he not only organized the library but turned it into a major institution of the ghetto's cultural life and used it as the base for his documentation project.⁷ Avrom Surzkever and Shmerke Kaczerginski had already made their mark in prewar Vilna as

CHANGING PRIORITIES: THE EVOLUTION OF THE OYNEG SHABES

Ringelblum's sweeping and ambitious agenda for the Oyneg Shabes outstripped in scope and ambition those of other archives. Over time this agenda came to embrace the collection of artifacts and documents, the study of Jewish society, the gathering of individual testimony, the documentation of German crimes, and the alerting of the outside world to the German mass murder. These goals often overlapped and were pursued simultaneously by the archive.

The Oyneg Shabes Archive collected both texts and artifacts: the underground press, documents, drawings, candy wrappers, tram tickets, ration cards, theater posters, invitations to concerts and lectures. It took copies of the convoluted doorbell codes for apartments housing dozens of tenants. There were restaurant menus advertising roast goose and fine wines, and a terse account of a starving mother who had eaten her dead child. Carefully filed away were hundreds of postcards from Jews in the provinces about to be deported to an "unknown destination." The Oyneg Shabes preserved the poetry of Władysław Szlengel, Yitzhak Katzenelson, Kalman Lis, and Joseph Kirman. It preserved the entire script of a popular ghetto comedy, "Love Looks for an Apartment," and long essays on the ghetto theaters and cafés. The first cache of the archive also contained many photographs, some seventy-six of which survived.¹²

The Oyneg Shabes retained hectographed readers used in the ghetto schools and reports that nurses wrote in the ghetto orphanages. After July 22, 1942, the archive collected the German posters announcing the Great Deportation, among them one promising that anyone who voluntarily reports for deportation will be given three kilograms of bread and a kilogram of marmalade. Crammed into the milk cans of the second cache were penciled notes whose shaky handwriting betrayed the desperation of their authors. These scraps of paper—smuggled out of the Umschlagplatz—were frantic appeals for a last-minute rescue. Among the last documents buried in the second cache were posters calling for armed resistance.

The Oyneg Shabes commitment to comprehensive documentation went hand in hand with another important commitment, namely, postwar justice. Its model in this regard was Eliyahu Chetnikover, who had established the remarkable archive that documented the Ukrainian pogroms of 1919–1921. The evidence amassed by Chetnikover had helped acquit Shalom Schwarzbard, who in 1926 had assassinated Ukrainian leader Semyon Petlura and was subsequently tried for murder in a French court. This quest to gather evidence

promising young poets in the literary group Yung Vilne, and if few people outside his youth movement, Dror, had heard of Mordecai Tenenbaum before the war, in the Białystok Ghetto he headed the Jewish resistance, acquiring authority and status that gave the archive legitimacy.⁸

But there were also important differences between these other archives and the Oyneg Shabes. In Łódź, Vilna, and Białystok the archives enjoyed varying degrees of official "cover" and encouragement, and received financial help—some more than others—from the official ghetto leaders, who in turn used the archives to convey information and tell their side of the story. The Oyneg Shabes, on the other hand, had only minimal contacts with the Judenrat. Indeed, it saw itself as an integral part of the ghetto's alternative community.

In the Łódź Ghetto the archive functioned simultaneously as an official department and as a semi-clandestine organization. But it was obvious that the archive staff did not feel free to criticize Rumkowski or gather any material it wished.⁹ In the Vilna and the Białystok ghettos, the archives were not under Judenrat control. However, both Jacob Gens, the commandant of the Vilna Ghetto, and Ephraim Barash, the head of the Białystok Judenrat, maintained contact with the archives. Barash gave Mordecai Tenenbaum financial help and a place to work and handed over valuable Judenrat records even as he withheld other particularly sensitive documents.¹⁰ In Vilna relations between ghetto commandant Jacob Gens and Herman Kruk were quite cool. But Gens knew about Kruk's diary and archive, and he occasionally sought him out in order to tell his side of the story.¹¹

The Oyneg Shabes, on the other hand, gave the Judenrat a wide berth. (Shmuel Winter was an "exception that proved the rule.") Ringelblum noted that more than once the Oyneg Shabes had passed over potential recruits just because they had connections to the Judenrat. Ringelblum and Judenrat president Adam Czerniakow had little in common. Ringelblum knew that Czerniakow was keeping a diary, and Ringelblum's name was in Czerniakow's address book, but there is no evidence that they shared any confidences or that Czerniakow called Ringelblum in for the kind of secret meetings that took place in Vilna or Białystok with Gens and Barash. The Oyneg Shabes did interview the Judenrat officials Israel Milejowski and Henryk Rozen as part of its survey of Jewish leaders and intellectuals (see below), but here, too, no evidence suggests that either Milejowski or Rozen knew that this was an Oyneg Shabes project.

explained why the archive collected enormous amounts of material from as many localities as possible. At first glance much of this material was repetitious. But it did confirm, town by town and village by village, exactly what the Germans did, when they did it, who gave the orders, and who helped them do it. If the Oyneg Shabes did not keep these testaments, then who would?

In time the Oyneg Shabes, unlike most of the other archives, also acquired a new role as a center of "civil resistance."¹³ Eventually the Oyneg Shabes turned into an information center of the Jewish underground, disseminating news about the extermination of Polish Jewry via the Polish underground abroad, issuing bulletins, and warning surviving Jews to drop their illusions about German intentions.

Priorities of the Oyneg Shabes constantly shifted to reflect changing circumstances. Broadly speaking, the Oyneg Shabes went through different periods. From the outbreak of the war until the establishment of the ghetto, Ringelblum kept his notes, gathered information, and scouted out potential collaborators.

When the ghetto was established in the fall of 1940 the work of the archive, paradoxically, became easier. Fear of German searches lessened; the Nazis, intensely following the activities of the Polish underground, seemed to have little interest in what Jews said or wrote. Thus, in addition to the "social space" created by the house committees and the Aleynhilf, a new kind of "cultural space" emerged in the ghetto that made it easier for Ringelblum to develop the archive.

One manifestation of this "cultural space" was the expansion of a large and varied underground press published by the political parties and youth groups.¹⁴ The archive made the collection of these newspapers a major priority; indeed, without the Oyneg Shabes, very few newspapers and pamphlets would have survived. Like the archive, they provide priceless information about life in the ghetto, political debates, Polish-Jewish relations, and how Jews followed the military situation.

The underground press and the archive covered many of the same themes: daily life in the ghetto, complaints about Judenrat and police corruption, escalating mortality from hunger and disease, problems in the labor camps, events in the provinces, the plight of children and refugees, street humor, and ghetto folklore. Ultimately a complementary relationship developed between this underground press and the Oyneg Shabes. The press put our edited versions of reports for the archive. Several members of the executive committee of the Oyneg Shabes—including Hersch Wasser, Eliyahu Guttowski,

and Shmuel Breslav—also edited underground newspapers. In October 1941 it was the underground press that began to publish the first accounts of mass executions. By the spring of 1942 the Oyneg Shabes would publish an underground bulletin of its own, full of information about the oncoming "Final Solution."

While the archive itself had to remain secret, it indirectly benefited from the ability of the underground press to disseminate information, remind readers of prewar values and moral codes, and foster a community. The flow of information disseminated by the underground newspapers helped create an awareness of the need to record what was happening, and their moral and political exhortations bolstered a determination to use this testimony to bring to justice not only Nazi perpetrators but also Jews who had failed the moral tests of national solidarity and honesty. The underground press, through its articles on the military situation, became the major source of information in the ghetto about the war. Even when things looked bleakest, such as after the fall of France in June 1940, the underground press furnished commentaries that kept hope alive.

By the fall of 1941 a new period began when the Oyneg Shabes decided to institute a major study of Jewish life under the Nazi occupation—the "Two and a Half Years" project, as noted earlier. No sooner had the Oyneg Shabes begun this project than news began to arrive about Nazi massacres, first in the eastern territories, then in Chelmno, and then in the provinces surrounding Warsaw. Racing against time to complete the "Two and a Half Years" project, Ringelblum and the staff now faced a new challenge—to gather and disseminate information about the Nazi killings.

As we have seen, the Oyneg Shabes Archive was uncovered in two separate caches: the first in September 1946 and the second in December 1950. The first cache covered the period from the beginning of the war until August 3, 1942, the day Lichenstein Grzywacz and Graber buried the documents.¹⁵ A third cache, never found, was buried under Świątowska 34 and would have documented the critical months of March and early April 1943, when the ghetto was preparing for armed resistance. Despite dogged searches, it was never found.¹⁶

Unfortunately the physical condition of the first and second parts of the archive differed considerably. The first part had been packed into boxes of tin or sheet zinc. Lichenstein did not have the time to weld them shut, and water seeped into all the boxes.¹⁷ Many documents that had been written in ink were illegible, and many photographs were destroyed. Paper clips corroded, further damaging the materials. Much of the first part of the archive was cov-

ered with a thin fungus. The whole collection required years of painstaking restoration work, which remains incomplete. Indeed, only in the late 1980s, thanks to a grant from the United States Memorial Holocaust Museum, were major resources available for physical restoration.¹⁸

The second part of the archive, discovered in December 1950, had been packed in aluminum milk cans which protected the contents from water seepage. Therefore the condition of these documents was much better. The materials of the second cache reflected the vastly different conditions that the Oyneg Shabes faced after the onset of the Great Deportation. The archive was no longer in a position to conduct the careful studies of ghetto life begun in 1941. The children were gone, along with the schools, orphanages, and house committees. On the other hand, compared to the first cache, the second contained a much higher proportion of official records: Judenrat documents, German correspondence and orders, and records of the *Aleynhilf*. Before the onset of the Final Solution, Ringelblum did not assign priority to the collection of German documents or even Judenrat materials. The Germans, he figured, would preserve these records in their own files. But after the Great Deportation began the Oyneg Shabes tried to collect as many official records and Judenrat materials as possible. Ringelblum also asked Yitzhak Zuckerman to procure archival materials from Michał Weichert's Jewish Self-Help Society, whose central offices were in Krakow.¹⁹ The second cache contained as much material as the archive was able to gather about Treblinka, the Great Deportation itself, and the reactions of the surviving Jews. It documented psychological transformations that marked the ghetto inhabitants after the conclusion of the first stage of the extermination process in September 1942: anger at the Jewish police and the Judenrat, shame at the lack of resistance, determination that "the next time" the Jews would fight back. The Oyneg Shabes painstakingly documented the world of the "shops" that had replaced the ghetto after the Great Deportation. The second cache also contained important materials about the first armed confrontation between the ŻOB and the Germans in January 1943. And as the last members of the Oyneg Shabes faced death, they put their own personal documents in the second cache: university diplomas, personal writings, and so on. Ringelblum left the entire manuscript of his unpublished "History of Warsaw Jewry," and Opoczynski left many of his prewar writings.

Neither Wasser nor Auerbach believed that the ten boxes of the first cache contained all the material that the Oyneg Shabes had collected by August 1942. Even taking into account documents that had been damaged by water, they still believed that Lichtenstein and his young helpers must have buried other boxes.²⁰ Indeed, certain essays that Ringelblum cited in his essay on the

Oyneg Shabes did not turn up.²¹ In his letter to the YIVO written on March 1, 1944, Ringelblum mentioned "more than twenty [*ksyzy tendliki*]" boxes. We will probably never know the answer.

WORKING IN SECRET

The Oyneg Shabes staff was small enough to ensure efficiency and secrecy but large enough to fan out all over the ghetto in search of material. Ghetto teachers brought in children's essays in neat copybooks, and postal workers submitted the last postcards sent by provincial relatives before their deportation to an "unknown destination." In the pestilential refugee centers Oyneg Shabes interviewers risked their health to collect firsthand accounts of brutal expulsions and of the desperate efforts to hang on to life in overcrowded former synagogues and schools that often housed hundreds of starving people. The staff of the Oyneg Shabes interviewed Jewish intellectuals about the future of the Jewish people, and children about their dreams for "after the war." When refugees arrived in the Warsaw Ghetto from the Soviet-occupied zone, the Oyneg Shabes spared no effort to obtain their testimony.

The Oyneg Shabes quickly established a distinct organizational framework. The executive committee supervised the everyday work of the archive. Grouped around the executive committee were a few dozen writers and copiers. One list of Oyneg Shabes workers in Hersch Wasser's handwriting includes thirty-seven names and addresses.²² Many of those listed had no recorded writings in the archive and were probably copiers. The list was far from complete; missing were such names as Kon, Winter, Giterman, Landau, Auerbach, and Szpakowa. Judging by who was included and who was absent, a plausible assumption might be that those on the list were receiving regular payments from Wasser but not those with sufficient means or stable employment.

Ringelblum and the executive committee, at their customary Saturday meetings to discuss the activities and plans of the archive, formulated questionnaires that were used to guide the "Two and a Half Years" project, and presumably they discussed the recruitment of new members. The committee probably reviewed the inventories of archival materials that were compiled by Hersch Wasser and Menachem Kon's account book of income and expenditures.²³ By 1942 the executive committee as a whole, rather than individual Oyneg Shabes members, often met with refugees and survivors, and heard firsthand accounts of the escalating mass murder.²⁴ The executive committee must have approved the decision to issue an Oyneg Shabes underground publication in the spring of 1942 that publicized the German killings. At the

height of the Great Deportation in August 1942 the executive committee met to decide the eventual destination of the archive, the YIVO in New York City.²⁵

Secrecy was paramount. The staff constantly worried that the slightest mistake, the smallest misjudgment could destroy the entire project. Prospective recruits were carefully scrutinized.²⁶ The archive rejected some potentially valuable contributors because of their links to the Judenrat, to the Jewish police, or to the "Thirteen."²⁷ Perhaps this explains the absence of the great historian Isaac Schiper as a member or contributor to the archive: Ringelblum noted with some consternation in his diary that Schiper had accepted invitations for dinner with Abraham Gancwajch, the leader of the "Thirteen."

The few diaries left by members of the Oyneg Shabes clearly revealed the importance of secrecy. In the hundreds of pages of the Ringelblum diaries, the Oyneg Shabes is barely mentioned—and then only in the most roundabout way. In the diary Hersh Wasser kept in the Warsaw Ghetto, he refers to "interesting OS meetings" and nothing more. Abraham Lewin in his diary also avoided any discussion of the inner workings of the archive. Rachel Auerbach had known the writer Peretz Opoczynski before the war and would see him from time to time in the Warsaw Ghetto. She learned only after the war that Opoczynski was, like herself, one of the major contributors to the Oyneg Shabes.

After the onset of mass extermination, when personal survival appeared more doubtful than ever, Ringelblum decided to write about the archive in an essay contained in the cache of documents discovered in 1950. That essay, along with terse memoirs by Hersh Wasser and postwar essays by Rachel Auerbach, constitute the only sources on the archive written by insiders. Considering that only three members survived the war, such a paucity of sources is not surprising.

Underpinning the activities of the Oyneg Shabes was a group of copiers and transcribers.²⁸ Sometimes authors would hand over compositions to the Oyneg Shabes, which would then be copied. Another category of materials consisted of interviews that were conducted by an Oyneg Shabes member. Depending on the interviewer and the circumstances, these ranged from almost verbatim transcripts to loose paraphrasing.²⁹ The archive tried to make multiple copies of each document to safeguard the information, whether the document was an original composition or the transcript of an interview. Copies were sometimes typed and sometimes handwritten. Of course photographs, posters, or original artifacts could not be copied. Coded letters in various alphabets or symbols appear on the front of documents, as well as ab-

breviations that refer to various members of the Oyneg Shabes. Certain symbols, for instance, designate "transports" of documents that Hersh Wasser classified, organized, and transferred to a hiding place.³⁰

After the war, when the archive was unearthed, it became very difficult to distinguish between originals and copies. In the first cache many copies survived but the originals did not. Documents often had names or initials, but in many cases it was impossible to know whether these names referred to the original author or to the name of the person who made the copy or who transcribed the interview. Thus, after the war, certain essays thought to have been written by Rabbi Huberland were actually his transcriptions of what he heard from a second party. After the war Hersh Wasser identified authorship of certain documents, but these notations were not always correct.³¹

To ensure secrecy, Ringelblum and the staff decided to build a "firewall" between the inner circle of the Oyneg Shabes and Lichtenstein's group, the three men who would receive physical custody of the materials, and, at a signal, bury them. As the materials from Wasser slowly piled up in the hideout in the school, Lichtenstein and his teenaged helpers would read the documents and discuss what they meant. Just before he helped bury the first cache on August 2-3, 1942, David Graber, nineteen years old at the time, recalled,

My own work was rudimentary—I would pack and hide the material.

But nevertheless it was so interesting. There was so much variety, so

much that one could learn. Until late into the night we would sit with

Comrade Lichtenstein, look through the documents and talk . . . First

were the photographs of Jews being beaten . . . there were many photo-

graphs. Then came the reports of the lives of Jews in the provinces, in

Lodz. This was hard to read. . . . How horrible was the report about the

gassings in Chelmno, told by Granowski. We were so shaken . . . that we

could not work the whole next day.³²

It is now clear that when they buried the first cache of the archive on the night of August 2-3, 1942, they worked in great haste. Staring death in the face, they had no time to classify the materials or to sort out copies from originals, which should have gone in different boxes to increase the chances of survival. In fact, when the boxes were opened, many documents were jumbled together, copies along with originals.³³

From the very beginnings of the archive, the entire staff of the Oyneg Shabes knew they had to risk their lives to collect information. As noted earlier, it was especially perilous to go into the disease-ridden, squalid, and overcrowded refugee centers, and many members of the Oyneg Shabes indeed came down with typhus. Some such as Rabbi Huberland and Peretz Opocz-

zynski recovered, but others, like Bernard Kampelbacher, died. Still, despite the dangers, the Oyneg Shabes was a godsend for many of Ringelblum's recruits. It provided a moral lifeline, an occupation, and a reason to go on living. Members felt needed and part of a community.

The staff of the Oyneg Shabes had to find a way to gather material without compromising security. The far-flung activities of the Aleynhilf provided excellent cover, since practically the entire Oyneg Shabes—and especially the inner circle—worked in this organization. The Aleynhilf's activities allowed members to gather descriptions of practically every forced labor camp in the General Government and helped to camouflage one of the archive's most important projects, the collection of information on events in cities and towns outside Warsaw and in the Soviet-occupied zone. Under the guise of ascertaining the needs of the refugee population, Hersh Wasser and others arranged hundreds of interviews, investigating each interviewee's background and, Ringelblum noted, often waiting until the interview ended to make notes.³⁴

The soup kitchens were another major resource from which the Oyneg Shabes gathered material. Rachel Auerbach would identify "clients" who could provide important information, and Ringelblum would send useful individuals to the kitchens for extra food.

Public writing contests proved another excellent source of material and provided a welcome degree of subterfuge. In January 1942 the "Jury and Executive" of a writing contest (which actually consisted of key members of the Oyneg Shabes staff) announced a public competition on a number of themes: a monograph on Jewish life in a city; Polish-Jewish relations; Jewish converts to Catholicism in the ghetto; schools; children; bribery and corruption; smuggling; any particular aspect of the ghetto economy; house committees; entertainment and dissolute behavior in the ghetto; the refugee shelters; the September 1939 campaign; and the Jewish police. There were other themes as well, but much of the document is illegible. The "jury" also announced that it would consider themes that were not on the list.³⁵

The prizes, ranging from one thousand zlotys for first place to one hundred for sixth place were a significant incentive at a time when a common wage was four to six zlotys a day. The jury reserved the right to divide prizes. Still another competition invited young people to write about their life in the ghetto: essays, diaries, edited correspondence, or even fiction from working youth, middle-class youth, members of the intelligentsia, and students.³⁶

The executive committee, and especially Menakhem Kon, collected the money that the Oyneg Shabes needed to function. Expenses included paper and supplies, honoraria for essays, and money to buy food and medicine for

key members of the project. There were also many extraordinary expenses that could not be anticipated. For example, when "Szlamek" escaped from the death camp in Chelmno in January 1942, it was Hersh Wasser who took him in hand, found him a place to stay in the Warsaw Ghetto, and then sent him to the provinces. Kon recorded that the Oyneg Shabes gave Szlamek payments totaling about one thousand zlotys in February and March 1942. Further, in 1942 and 1943 the Oyneg Shabes published information bulletins in Yiddish and in Polish—presumably at its own expense.

One account ledger for the Oyneg Shabes, in Menakhem Kon's handwriting, lists disbursements of at least 55,298 zlotys between November 1940 and July 1942.³⁷ Other account books probably existed, as the archive continued to work after July 1942. This one extant account book establishes that the archive was spending at least 2,500 zlotys a month and probably much more. Most of the disbursements seem to have been small regular payments to the members of the archive plus periodic purchases of paper and ink and other incidentals. On August 28, 1941, the book recorded an outlay of 390 zlotys to procure tin boxes—no doubt for storing the documents.

There is no question that many—perhaps most—of the archive's expenses were also tacked into the much larger budget of the Aleynhilf, as most of the Oyneg Shabes worked there. Although their salaries were meager, these were monies the archive did not have to account for. The same held true of food. As we have already seen, Ringelblum, Gutkowski, or Wasser would send up to sixty people a day to Rachel Auerbach's soup kitchen. It is likely that the kitchen on Leszno 40 was not the only one the Oyneg Shabes used.

Where did the Oyneg Shabes get its funds? Although Yitzhak Gierman was on the executive board, Hersh Wasser insisted in his postwar account that the Oyneg Shabes received no direct help from the Joint Distribution Committee. Wasser's memory must have failed him, since Kon's account ledger shows several payments of 750 zlotys from the Joint as well as regular income from the "SPS" (perhaps the Aleynhilf?). Kon's ledger also showed regular and sizable donations from three individuals in particular: Shmuel Winter, Shie Rabinowitz, and Alexander Landau.

Ringelblum kept reminding the men and women of the Oyneg Shabes that they "had to work badly." In other words, the collaborators had to remember that "the best was the enemy of the good." Given the conditions in the ghetto, it was pointless to pretend that writing, research, and interviews could meet the prewar standards of a university or a scholarly journal. And security came first. If getting a particular piece of information proved too risky, then it was better to forgo the opportunity.

As time went on Ringelblum worried that too many Jews were becoming

complacent about alleged German lack of interest in their political activities and in the underground press. Ringelblum was present at a noisy meeting of the Hashomer Hatzair held a short distance from German gendarmes. The cheers and singing could easily be heard outside the building, and the whole scene reminded Ringelblum of a raucous prewar rally. He began to fear that the Germans might indeed care about this clandestine activity, especially if they suspected a possible connection between the Jewish and the Polish secret press.³⁸ At any rate, the Germans shattered the widespread sense of false security on the night of April 17–18, 1942, when they suddenly descended on the ghetto in the late hours of a Friday evening with lists of names. The lists seemed random, although later many Jews believed that many of the victims had been connected in some way to the underground press. Small groups of Gestapo agents knocked on apartment doors, politely asked certain individuals to come with them, and then shot them in the street. The bodies were left lying in pools of blood. One of the most prominent victims, as we have seen, was Ringelblum's longtime comrade from the YIVO and the IKOR, the Oyneg Shabes activist Menakhem Linder. Yitzhak Zuckerman, a future leader of the Jewish Fighting Organization, narrowly escaped the same fate. That evening Ringelblum had been planning a lecture in Rachel Auerbach's soup kitchen on the subject of martyrdom (Kiddush Hashem) in Jewish history. Forewarned that something was afoot, he abruptly cancelled the lecture.³⁹

What would the Germans do next? If they were onto the underground press, surely they would be doubly anxious to track down the secret archive. At least one member of the Oyneg Shabes executive committee, Menakhem Kon, urged Ringelblum to leave the Warsaw Ghetto as soon as possible.⁴⁰ Ringelblum ignored these pleas, but the archive decided to lay a false trail to deceive the Germans. Shortly after the April massacre, the Oyneg Shabes put out the word that it had stopped its activities. Then, in absolute secrecy, Ringelblum and the executive committee invited a much smaller cadre to continue working.

The onset of the Great Deportation in July 1942 threw the Oyneg Shabes into temporary disarray, but Ringelblum and his staff soon regained their bearings. Although the Germans deported many important members, much of the core group survived the first phase of the deportation, which halted on September 12, 1942. Even during that terrible summer the Oyneg Shabes held meetings and charted its future course of action. It now began to pay special attention to documenting the deportation process. When the first escapees from Treblinka appeared in the Warsaw Ghetto, the Oyneg Shabes sat them down to give detailed accounts. When the temporary lull began in September 1942 the Oyneg Shabes resumed its work, composing more questionnaires

and learning as much as possible about the state of mind of the remaining Jews. The archive paid special attention to the "shops." It also began to issue an informational bulletin in Polish, *Wiadomości*. Sometime in February 1943 Ringelblum ordered the burial of a second cache—the milk cans that were found in 1950.⁴¹

The archive had failures as well as successes. The great musicologist Menakhem Kipnis had amassed a large archive of Jewish folk songs and cantorial compositions, but the Oyneg Shabes could not persuade him to part with it; it disappeared when he boarded the boxcars for Treblinka.⁴² Menakhem Linder had kept a valuable diary. Ringelblum tried to get it after his murder, but his widow had already burned it.⁴³ Joseph Kaplan also kept a diary, but for a long time he hesitated to let the archive copy it because of confidential material on Hashomer Hatzair. Finally, he agreed to let the archive copy excerpts. Before this could be done, however, the Germans murdered him, and all trace of the diary was lost.⁴⁴ And there were other gaps. Jonas (Yanosh) Turkow wrote an essay for the archive on theater in the Warsaw Ghetto, but he did not give the archive all the material he had gathered. Ringelblum had heard that the great historian Meyer Balaban was writing an autobiography, but somehow no one on the Oyneg Shabes was close enough to Balaban to ask for a copy. Ringelblum noted that Isaac Schiper was working on various historical studies, but, as far as we know, the archive never tried to procure any copies. Shmuel Winter kept a diary that he did not give to the Oyneg Shabes. Burned fragments surfaced in the assumed hiding place of the missing third cache after the war. There were other puzzles that will probably never be explained.

One of the greatest setbacks for the Oyneg Shabes was Ringelblum's failure to secure the collections and archives of the folklorist Shmuel Lehman. Lehman was one of the pioneer Jewish folklorists in Poland and had traveled to the farthest corners of Eastern Europe in search of material.⁴⁵ He was something of an eccentric and favored bizarre headgear. In the slums of Jewish Warsaw, where he would pay pickpockets, pimps, and a wide assortment of street characters to sing him their songs, the tough characters on Stawki Street liked to call him "Der yold in der kapelyush" (The weirdo with the hat). In 1923 Lehman published a classic collection of songs of the Jewish underworld. He generally collected more than he published. After the start of the war in 1939 Lehman began to supplement his already large file on Polish-Jewish relations with new material on how the war had affected mutual perceptions of these two peoples.

Ringelblum, Isaac Schiper, the poet Irzik Manger, and other Jewish intellectuals deeply appreciated Lehman's talents. According to Wasser, Lehman

Traces of Life and Death

TEXTS FROM THE ARCHIVE

was present at the meeting on November 22, 1940, in Ringelblum's apartment that formally created the Oyneg Shabes Archive. Obviously Ringelblum nurtured hopes that Lehman would play a prominent role in the archive, but he soon became sick. Both Ringelblum and Gitterman helped support him in the ghetto, and Rachel Auerbach, who had been one of his best informants on Jewish rural folk culture, would visit him regularly.

When Lehman died Ringelblum organized a dignified funeral. He bitterly remarked in his diary that, Czerniakow, when told of Lehman's death, did not even know who he was.

Shortly after Lehman's death Ringelblum went to his apartment and asked his widow for Lehman's folklore archives. Unwilling to share the secret of the Oyneg Shabes, Ringelblum could only say that he would protect the materials but could give no details. Lehman's widow refused to entrust the collection to Ringelblum. Thus none of Lehman's writings showed up in the Oyneg Shabes Archive. It was all lost.⁴⁶

The archive suffered other defeats. Once the mass deportation to Treblinka began Ringelblum would rush members of the Oyneg Shabes to the empty and looted apartments of writers and artists, hoping to find papers and manuscripts. More often than not, these efforts proved fruitless. Yet despite such setbacks, and spurred on by Ringelblum, the Oyneg Shabes prepared for even greater tasks: the study of the ghetto and the chronicle of catastrophe.

Determined to document the Jewish experience in the war, the Oyneg Shabes collected artifacts, texts, and testimonies that reflect an ongoing tension between prewar ideals and escalating chaos; between a yearning for collective solidarity and rampant social fragmentation; between idealism and debasement; between continuity and rupture—material as disparate and varied as the experiences of the Jews who gathered and wrote them. There were outlines of studies that were never completed, sketches of projects cut short by the Great Deportation; fragments and pieces remain the only traces of individuals who vanished forever. Taken together, these materials tell a collective story of steady decline and unending humiliation, interspersed with many stories of quiet heroism and self-sacrifice. The postwar reader sees Polish Jewry disappearing in an ordeal where the todays were worse than the yesterday but still better than the tomorrows: from the siege of Warsaw to the early days of the occupation; from the imposition of the ghetto to the Great Deportation; from the Great Deportation to the final months of the ghetto. It is a collective story composed of hundreds of smaller narratives, accounts of everyday horrors from different individual perspectives, yet illuminated by moments of reprieve, of dignity and courage.

As the situation became increasingly desperate many individuals broke, collapsing into depression, anger, rage, shame, and fear. The members of the archive were not immune. Yet somehow, no matter how bad things became, the collective enterprise of the Oyneg Shabes went on, flexible, inventive, and determined to make sure that nothing escaped its attention.

71 OYNEG SHABES

EMANUEL RINGELBLUM

During three and a half years of war the Ghetto Archive was run by the group called *Oyneg Shabes*. This curious name originated from the planning sessions of the group, which took place on the Sabbath; the whole institution was dubbed *Oyneg Shabes* for reasons of secrecy. I was the one to lay the cornerstone of the Archive in October 1939. At that time the atmosphere in Warsaw was very oppressive. Every day brought new ordinances against the Jews. People were afraid of political reprisals; they dreaded searches of a political nature. They feared the files of the *Regierungs-Kommissariat* and the *Defensywa*.

The scare dragged on for months but proved groundless. The Germans were not looking for individual "criminals." Their aim, which they achieved, was the collective. They aimed at whole groups and professionals, not individuals. In the first months of occupation, especially in January of 1940, mass arrests occurred, and there were probably also mass executions of the intelligentsia. The arrests were made according to a roster of the groups concerned (The Doctors' Association, The Engineers' Union, etc.). They were not linked with any particular searches. In general, the Germans did not carry out any investigations at all but took the easiest course and shot all who fell into their hands.

The frequent and thorough searches that were actually carried out were aimed at something altogether different: finding foreign currency, gold, diamonds, valuables, merchandise and the like. Such searches have been going on during the entire three and a half years of war and continue to this day.

We have dwelt on the nature of the searches because it greatly affected the survival of written documents from the war period. During the earliest months the socialist literature in libraries and private dwellings was destroyed. The exiled German writers, such as Thomas and Heinrich Mann, [Lion] Feuchtwanger and [Emil] Ludwig, also suffered. Anticipating searches, people were afraid to write. The terror kept mounting, but as we have said, the targets were whole groups and classes. The Germans did not care what the Jews did in their own homes. So the Jews began to write. Everyone wrote: journalists, writers, teachers, community activists, young people, even children. The majority wrote diaries, in which daily events were illumined through the prism of personal experiences. A great deal was written, but the largest part by far was destroyed along with the end of Warsaw Jewry in the Deportation. All that remained was the material preserved in O.S. [*Oyneg Shabes*].

I began collecting contemporary materials as early as October 1939. As director of the Jewish Self-Help (at that time it was the coordinating committee of the

Literally:
Enjoyment of the
Sabbath; here, a
Friday evening
gathering in honor
of the Sabbath.
The *Defensywa*
(Polish Secret
Political Police)
kept a file on left-
wing party
activists that fell
into the Germans'
hands.

Author
(1884-1958) of
The Jew Suss and
other historical
novels.
Author
(1881-1948) of
many historical
biographies, e.g.,
Napoleon.

welfare organizations), I was in active daily contact with the life around me. News reached me about everything that was happening in Warsaw and its suburbs, because the coordinating committee was an outgrowth of the Joint, where delegations came from the provinces almost every day and told about the harsh experiences of the Jewish population in their areas. In the evenings I recorded the mass of information I had heard during the day and supplied footnotes of my own. As time went on, these records grew into a sizeable book, several hundred closely written pages, which provides an overview of that period. After a while I replaced these daily recordings with weekly and monthly reports. I did this when the staff of *Oyneg Shabbes* had grown into a large body.

Already in the first months of my work with *Oyneg Shabbes* I chose several people, but no great advantage came of this. It was not until I enlisted the cooperation of the young historian Rabbi Shimon Huberband¹ that *Oyneg Shabbes* acquired one of its best coworkers. Unfortunately, however, Rabbi Huberband kept his records in the form of marginal notations inside various religious books so that they should pass for textual emendations. Not until later did he let himself be convinced that no danger accrued in his recording everything rather than using the cryptic method he had first employed.

In May 1940 I felt that the time had come to give this very important work a broad social base. Because I had made a good choice of personnel, the work started off in the right direction and was carried on with appropriate scope. The staff of *Oyneg Shabbes* then elected as its secretary Hirsch Wlasser, who continues in this post up to the present.² Through his political activities, Comrade W., himself a refugee from Lodz, had acquired the experience necessary for this kind of work. His daily contact with hundreds of refugees delegates from every part of the country made it possible to produce the hundreds of monographs on cities, which are the most important treasure in the *Oyneg Shabbes* project.

Our genial comrade, Menakhem [Mendel Kon, a social and cultural activist] brought the finances up to the required standard. A rich cultural life began developing in Warsaw. Beneficial public readings, special forums and concerts were given. This provided a basis for extending and deepening the work of *Oyneg Shabbes*.

The instituting of the ghetto, the confinement of the Jews within walls, gave the archival work still greater opportunities. We became convinced that the Germans cared very little what the Jews did amongst themselves. Meetings were held in an atmosphere and on subjects that would not have been possible before the war. In every house committee, soup kitchen and meeting place of a social institution, people could say anything that came into their heads without the slightest interference. The Jewish informers of the Gestapo were busy searching for rich Jews, warehouses full of goods, smuggling, etc. They took little interest in politics. We reached the point where illegal editions of work of all political leanings were published with almost complete freedom. People read them openly in cafes, collected money for the press fund, debated with rival publications: in short, they behaved almost as they had before the war. It is not surprising that in this "freedom" that prevailed among the prisoners of the ghetto, the work of *Oyneg Shabbes* had favorable opportunity for development. The project branched out. Dozens of people joined the staff of *Oyneg Shabbes*, some full time, others part time. The work extended its range but remained conspiratorial.

¹The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee was founded in 1914. Isaac Gitterman, who headed the Polish office, was a close friend of Ringelblum's.

²See 72.

³A Left Labor Zionist who survived and helped retrieve the Archive after the war.

In order to give our work a legal sanction, we announced to some dozens of writers, teachers and intellectuals that we were holding a contest and offering money prizes. These prizes, which were funded by the joint with a single cash payment, enriched the Archive with a series of valuable works, such as the work on the Yiddish theater in wartime by Jonas T[urko]w. [the well-known writer, stage director and actor]; the monograph on Jewish life in Lemberg under Soviet rule, by [the Zionist activist] Esther M[angel] and her husband Sh[ayeg]l; the history of a Jewish family during the war by the poetess Henryka Lazawert; and the monograph on the Kampinos labor camp by Rabbi Huberband.

[Syneg] S[habbes] branched out so widely, and so much valuable material was assembled, that it seemed to all of us that the time had come to make, if not a synthesis, at least a summing up of various problems and important phenomena in Jewish life. If this plan had been realized, it would have been a highly important contribution to the history of the Jews in the days of Hitler. It is to be greatly regretted that only part of the projected work was carried out. We lacked the peace and quiet necessary for a project of such scope and size. The authors who undertook to work on one chapter or another did not have the opportunity to bring their work to a conclusion. More than one writer went to [his or her death at] the *Unschlagplatz* (Mrs. Slopak, Rabbi Huberband, [Helena] Szereszewska); more than one was killed by a bullet (Menahem Linder, Shmuel Breslav, Yoysel Kaplan); more than one crossed to the Other [Aryan] Side.

The plan was familiarly known as "The Two-and-a-Half Year Plan" because it was intended to provide a survey and summing up of Jewish life in Warsaw during two and a half years of war. The plan was divided into three [in fact four] parts: a general section, an economic section, a cultural-scientific-literary-theatrical section and one dedicated to social welfare. The work, which was started at the beginning of 1942, was directed by an editorial board consisting of the present writer, along with Menahem Linder and Lipa B[lo]ch.

The present writer took on [the task of writing] the first and third sections; Linder, the economic section; and Lipa B., social welfare. The work was intended to have a semi-legal character. New forces joined the project, professionals from various walks of life. The work was designed to be more than one hundred printed pages long and one of the most important documents of the war. We wanted to hold our coworkers' attention to certain guidelines and set the direction for them to follow. By this we did not mean to impose any particular approach on the writers of the articles. Articles were written on the Jewish Police, on corruption and demoralization in the ghetto, about social activities, the school system; there was a questionnaire on the life and work of Jewish creative artists during the war, a questionnaire on the state of the different Jewish-Polish relations, smuggling; a questionnaire on the state of the different artisan groups, youth, women, etc.

Seeing that it was difficult to elicit the work that had been assigned to the various authors, we introduced the principle that each author was obliged to give us the source material that he collected in connection with his work; for example, the biographies of young people on which one author was supposed to base his article on youth. In this way interesting material was amassed on various aspects of our wartime situation.

In the course of our work, our experience as to how such a project should be carried out was greatly enriched. Many authors had already made much progress

Survived the war and wrote extensively on Jewish cultural life in the Warsaw ghetto.

She actually survived.

Breslav and Kaplan, active in Hasidic movement, were shot by the Gestapo in September 1942.

Economist M. Linder (born 1911) was shot in the Action of April 18, 1942. Bloch (born 1889) was active in the democratic wing of the General Zionists and headed the Keren Kayemet in Poland. He died in Mauthausen.

A Jewish literary critic who wrote in Polish.

in their assignment, but just when the two and a half years [of the "plan"] was about to turn into three, a new disaster descended upon [the heads of] the Warsaw Jews, a disaster that cost us three hundred thousand victims—the Deportation.

The work of *Olyneg* [*Shtabbes*], along with the whole of our social and economic life, was disrupted. Only a very few comrades kept pen in hand during those tragic days and continued to write about what was happening in Warsaw. But the work was too sacred and too deeply cherished in the hearts of the *Olyneg* [*Shtabbes*] coworkers; the social function of *Olyneg* [*Shtabbes*] too important for the project to be discontinued. We began to reconstruct the period of the Deportation and to collect material on the slaughterhouse of European Jewry—Treblinka. On the basis of reports made by those who returned from various camps in the province, we tried to form a picture of the experiences of Jews in the provincial cities during the time of the Deportation. At the moment of writing, the work is proceeding full force. If we only get some breathing space, we will be able to ensure that no important fact about Jewish life in wartime shall remain hidden from the world.

There were two classes of coworkers in *Olyneg* [*Shtabbes*]: full time, who dedicated themselves entirely to the project, and part time, who wrote on a one-time basis about their personal experiences in their city or town and then ended their connection with *Olyneg* [*Shtabbes*].

Everyone appreciated the importance of the work that was being done. They understood how important it was for future generations that a record remain of the tragedy of Polish Jewry. Some realized that the collection of writings would also serve to inform the world about the atrocities perpetrated against the Jewish population. There were several part-time coworkers who became so involved in the project that they stayed on full time.

Of the several dozen full-time staff, the great majority were self-educated intellectuals, mostly from proletarian parties. We deliberately refrained from drawing professional journalists into our work, because we did not want it to be sensationalized. Our aim was that the sequence of events in each town, the experiences of each Jew—and during the current war each Jew is a world unto himself—should be conveyed as simply and faithfully as possible. Every redundant word, every literary gilding or ornamentation grated upon our ears and provoked our anger. Jewish life in wartime is so full of tragedy that it is unnecessary to embellish it with one superfluous line. Second, there was the matter of keeping a secret; and as is well known, one of the chief failings of journalists is that they reveal secrets. A few able journalists might have been enlisted as time went on, had they not sought contact with the Gestapo informer [Abraham] Gancwajch,⁹ and although this relationship was not of a "professional" nature, it nonetheless made it impossible for us to associate with the journalists in any way.

Those who helped us with a single piece of work were ordinary people, who had lived the whole of their daily lives in their hometowns. Upon arrival in Warsaw with the horde of 150,000 refugees, they continued to lead their [fellow] townspeople in the so-called *landsmannshaftin*¹⁰ organized by the refugee center of the Jewish Self-Help. After a day of hard work at the Committee, distributing bread or performing other kinds of assistance, these delegates of the *landsmannshaftin* spent the evening writing—according to our plan—the history of their town, or they related it to our coworkers, who later wrote it up. This was very arduous work. In the terrible overcrowding of the ghetto, the refugees lived in [housing] condi-

Gancwajch headed the Office to Combat Lsuy and Profiteering in the ghetto, which was subject directly to the Germans. He wed with the Judenrat for control of the ghetto and fell from power in July 1941. An organization of Jews hailing from the same town or region.

tions that simply cannot be described. To preserve secrecy under such conditions was a difficult task. It was cold in the winter nights; last winter most of the Jewish houses did not have electricity. Writing necessarily has attendant risks and inscribable difficulties, and to obtain the chronicle of a town required long weeks and months of exertion. It demanded much effort to encourage my coworkers not to be distracted by all these obstacles and to do their work. Let me complete the picture by adding that at the beginning there was a fear of being discovered by the Gestapo informers. More than one manuscript destined for Olyneg S[habbes] was destroyed as the result of a search in a tenement.

As we have mentioned, our coworkers were mostly [just] ordinary people. Among them were talented individuals whom we spurred on to literary creativity. Had these people not died of hunger or disease, or in the Deportation, we would have been enriched with their new writing talent. And new literary energy would have been infused into a field that was so neglected among us [eastern European Jews]—the writing of memoirs. Because most of our coworkers were suffering great hunger in Warsaw, that city of pitiless Jews, Olyneg S[habbes] had to provide for them. We lobbied the social institutions to supply them with food parcels. Olyneg S[habbes] strove to give a comprehensive picture of Jewish life in wartime—a photographic view of what the masses of the Jewish people had experienced, thought and suffered. We did our best to arrange for specific events—in the history of a Jewish community, for example—to be described by an adult and by a youngster, by a pious Jew—who was naturally concerned with the rabbi, the synagogue, the Jewish cemetery and other religious institutions—and by a secular Jew, whose narrative emphasized other, no less important factors.

Typhus, which claimed thousands of victims among the Jewish population of Warsaw, was rampant among our coworkers. This was not surprising. Our people worked among thousands of refugees, who constituted the largest contingent of its victims. Our people came into contact with returnees from the labor camps, who were the principal carriers of typhus among the population. No one was immunized against typhus because no one could afford a five-hundred- to six-hundred-zloty injection.

Rabbi Huberland, Hirsh W. and Perez O[poczynski] recovered from typhus. A whole group of our coworkers died of it. [. . .]

Comprehensiveness was the chief principle of our work. Objectivity was the second. We aspired to present the whole truth, however painful it might be. Our depictions are faithful, not retouched.

The atrocities of the Germans against the Jewish population predominate in our work. However, quite a lot of material reveals humanity on the part of Germans. There are constant indications, both in the completed essays and in the oral reports, that we must be objective even in the case of our deadly enemies and give an objective picture of the relationship of Germans and Jews.

The same can be said of Polish-Jewish relations.⁹ Opinions prevail among us that anti-Semitism grew significantly during the war, that the majority of Poles were glad of the misfortunes that befell the Jews in the Polish towns and cities. The attentive reader of our material will find hundreds of documents that prove the opposite. He will read, in more than one report on a town, how generously

See Ringblum's
Polish-Jewish
Relations during
the Second World
War (Jerusalem:
Yad Vashem,
1974).

See 73.

the Polish population behaved toward the Jewish refugees. He will encounter hundreds of examples of peasants who, for months on end, concealed and fed Jewish refugees from the surrounding towns.

In order to ensure the greatest possible objectivity and to obtain the most exact, comprehensive view of the events of the war as they affected the Jews, we tried to have the same events described by as many people as possible. By comparing the different accounts, the historian will not find it difficult to reach the kernel of historical truth, the actual course of an event.

Our coworkers wrote the truth; and they had an additional reason for doing so. We assured everyone that the material, insofar as it concerned living people, would not be exploited for immediate use. Therefore, everyone should write as if the war were already over. He should fear neither the Germans nor those *kehillah* members who were attacked in a report on a given city. Because of this, the material of *Olyneg* [Shabbes] is 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.

The war changed Jewish life in the Polish cities very quickly. No day was like the preceding. Images succeeded one another with cinematic speed. For the Jews of Warsaw, now closed in within the narrow confines of a shop, the ghetto period seems like a paradise and the pre-ghetto period an unreal dream. Every month brought profound changes that radically altered Jewish life. It was therefore important to capture at once every event in Jewish life in its pristine freshness. What a quantum leap from the pre-Deportation shop to that which came after! The same is true of smuggling, and of social and cultural life; even the clothes Jews wore were different in the different periods. *Olyneg* [Shabbes] therefore tried to grasp an event at the moment it happened, since each day was like decades in an earlier time. We succeeded in doing this with many of the events. What greatly aided us in this task was that some of our own coworkers kept diaries in which they not only recorded the facts and happenings of day-to-day life but also evaluated noteworthy events in the ghetto.

As we have already said, the work of *Olyneg* [Shabbes] was secret. We had to find ways of hiding the collected materials. In establishing contact with the hundreds of refugees from the province, we were afraid of falling foul of one of the several hundred agents of the "thirteenth," which was then at the height of its "glory." Fortunately, this danger was averted as a result of the extreme cautiousness of *Olyneg* [Shabbes] operations. We had a principle: before entering into relations with anyone, we found out first about his character, social and political past, etc. Not until we had this information would we sit down and talk with the person to obtain the news we needed. Very few people knew the real purpose of the conversations we conducted with them. Very often, especially in the last months before the Deportation, our coworkers did not record the facts they had heard in the presence of the informant, but did so afterward. This method of recording lessened the authenticity of the material, but there was no other way to keep the work as secret as it had to be.

In writing the monographs, we duped people into thinking we were collecting data on their native towns for use by the *landsmannshaft*. Most people played innocent and pretended not to understand what our work was for. Because of the secrecy that had to be employed in the *Olyneg* [Shabbes] work,

Ringelblum uses this word as a synonym for the *Interrat*.

The popular name for Gancwajch's Office to Combat Usury and Profiteering, see previously.

however far-reaching that work might be, it was still narrow in comparison with the vast treasury of news and facts that could and should have been assembled during the war. "We have to work badly" was the watchword of *Olyneg* *S[habbes]*. We had to do all we could to prevent the precious treasure of *Olyneg* *S[habbes]* from becoming an open secret.

For this reason we avoided all contact with people from the *kehillah*, even those among them who were honest. An atmosphere of Gestiapo seeped from the walls of the Jewish Council. We were afraid to have any dealings with it; that is why we are so poor in its official materials.

What sort of material is preserved in the *Olyneg* *S[habbes]* Archive? The most important treasures are the monographs on cities and towns. They contain the experience of a given town from the outbreak of war to the deportation and liquidation of its Jewish community. The monographs, which were written according to our outline, encompassed all aspects of life: economic life, the relationship of Germans and Poles to the Jewish population, the *kehillah* and its activities; social welfare; important episodes in the life of the community, such as the arrival of the Germans, pogroms, expulsions and acts of atrocity perpetrated during Jewish holidays; religious life; work and matters connected with it (labor camps, the obligation to work, impressment of labor, the Labor Department of the *kehillah*, relationship of Germans to Jews at work); etc.

Such was the appearance of a monograph in its general outline. Few monographs, however, conformed to the preceding outline in reality. The authors wrote in various ways. But all the monographs express the tragic sufferings of the Jews in the Polish cities. The monographs were written with a sense of compassion. It is often remarkable with what epic stoicism the authors relate the most tragic facts about their [own] towns. This is the stoicism of the graveyard, the stoicism born of painful ordeals and of the resignation that follows these ordeals. This is the stoicism of people who know that anything can be expected from the Germans, that there is no cause for surprise at the indescribable savageries that have been perpetrated.

The greatest number of monographs comes from former Congress Poland. The other regions of prewar Poland are meagerly represented. This is because all the monographs were written in Warsaw, and most of the refugees there had come from former Congress Poland. From Galicia, in particular from Lemberg, we began to receive news only after the outbreak of the Russo-German war, when people who had left in September 1939 or in the following months began returning to the capital. The same applies to Vilna, Slonim, Grodno, Rowno, etc., cities in the occupied eastern territories. From those areas, too, we received news from returnees. An especially large amount of information was brought by the wave of people returning from Bialystok and the Bialystok region.

Because of the conditions of conspiratorial work with people who had never before engaged in historical research, there is no complete record of what exists in the materials of *Olyneg* *S[habbes]*. Therefore, it is hard for me to tell how many monographs on cities we possess. It is certain at any rate that they can be numbered in the hundreds. On some cities there are several monographs or even several dozen.

Apart from comprehensive monographs, we sought accounts of single, significant episodes in the various cities. We elicited the accounts from those who were involved

The historic
heartland of
Poland set apart
from the rest of
the Russian
Empire after the
Congress of Vienna
in 1815.

in the episode in question directly or indirectly, as participants, witnesses or people associated with the episode in some other way. For example, to this category belong the account of the execution of fifty-two Jews from Nalewki 9 after a Jewish underground hero had killed a Polish policeman; and the account of the Savoy Restaurant execution of seven dozen Lodz Jews," etc. We always endeavored to give the description of each happening the stamp of directness, of true experience. That is why the materials of *Olyneg* [Shabbes] are so deeply imbued with subjective elements and why the narratives are often highly dramatic. The monographs on the cities are not free from this subjective approach.

In order to elicit the most direct report possible of a writer's or narrator's experiences, we dispensed with a set protocol in many cases and told him to relate what had happened in whatever order he thought best. Most of these narratives have the character of *tales of wandering*. A hair-raising example of this genre relates the death march of eight hundred Jewish POWs, of whom half were murdered on the way from Lublin to Biala.

Another narrative of a journey, by a Jewish Red Army soldier who originally came from Warsaw, has its beginnings as far away as Orsha. This route is marked everywhere by rivers of Jewish blood, spill on the fields of White Russia, the Ukraine, Podolia and Galicia. Another account of the mass slaughters of Jews in the southern parts of Russia is to be found in the wandering narrative of a young man from Warsaw, who stayed to Mariupol in the Crimea.

"Blood-red Highways"—this is the name we can give to all the tales of wandering of Jewish men and women, young people and children, who roamed constantly from the time the Germans approached their homes until they found a place of rest and settled in a spot from which they could wander no farther. All the highways are stained, like Jewish history, with drops of blood shed by the Gestapo murderers or the Wehrmacht.

An important section of the *Olyneg* [Shabbes] project is on the labor camps where thousands of young Jews died. Except for the ghettos, the labor camps are one of the most effective instruments to destroy the Jewish population, robbing it of its best elements: the young people and men of working age. This is not the place to describe the labor camps, but one thing may be said: with a few minor exceptions, the labor camps were designed not for labor but to bring about the death of their inmates. Of those who did not succumb to the dreadful working conditions and inadequate nourishment, those who were not shot or tortured to death by the notoriously inhumane camp guards, most perished after their return home. A great portion of the blame rests on the Judenrats, which did very little to provide for the camp inmates or to keep alive those who returned. Of all the Jewish councils, the Warsaw *kehillah* was the worst in its relationship to the camp inmates. *Olyneg* [Shabbes] succeeded in collecting a rich supply of material on almost all the labor camps, at least the major ones. Among the most important and comprehensive is the exhaustive description of the labor camp at Kampanos, where, on the notorious "Hill of the Dead," over fifty young Jews were buried, shot or tortured to death by the camp guards. This account, compiled by Rabbi Huberland, is one of the most important documents on Nazi brutality toward Jewish laborers.

The section of narratives under the heading "Experiences in Prisons and Concentration Camps" is a meager one, not because few Jews spent time in these places, but for the simple reason that from the very outset, as a rule, a Jew did

On November 1, 1939, the Germans arrested fifteen Jewish social activists at the Astoria café in Lodz. All of them were shot.

Published in English as Kiddush Hashem: Jewish Religious and Cultural Life in Poland During the Holocaust (New Jersey and New York: Ktav Publishing House & Teshuva University Press, 1987). Appeared in Hebrew translation in Kiddush Hashem (Tel Aviv, 1969).

not come out alive. Thousands of Jews were sent to Auschwitz, but not a single one returned. The one document relating to these victims is the telegram to their families, bearing the standard form message that the "guilty party" is dead and his property can be picked up at a specified place. I knew two people who had returned from Dachau. One of them was afraid to relate the slightest thing; the other—incidentally, a very interesting personality described by Rachel Auerbach in her diary—died of hunger.

Those who returned from the prison were [also] so intimidated that they were afraid to tell us the smallest detail. I was able to convince two former prisoners to relate their experiences. One of them was Meyelekh Shteynberg, an activist of the Left Labor Zionists. A printer by occupation, he had earned a large income before the war managing the Left Labor Zionist newspaper *Arbeiter-tsaytung*, on account of which he had been imprisoned in Polish jails more than once. Now too, in wartime, he was imprisoned in the Pawlak⁶ for his previous crimes. By playing the role of a simpleton, he succeeded, with great good fortune, in being released from jail. Comrade Shteynberg, together with his family, died during the Deportation.

O[yneg] S[habbes] also preserved materials from the Polish-German war of 1939. The Jewish population remembered well the sufferings of Jews in Germany and other occupied countries. They had a clear presentation of what Hitler had in store for the Polish Jews. For this reason, the Jewish soldiers fought with extraordinary heroism. This is acknowledged by many leaders of the Polish Army. It was very important for future history, and for the mutual relations of Jews and Poles, to collect the account of *experiences of Jewish soldiers* in the German-Polish war. The collected materials illustrate a crisis in the mood of the Polish population, and for a short time it liberated itself from the plague of anti-Semitism. Defeats on the battlefield and the need to find a scapegoat led to the resurgence of anti-Semitism; for example, in Warsaw it gave rise to the emergence of a new Jablonna,⁷ i.e., the segregation of Jews from the common military divisions and setting up of unnamed Jewish battalions, detailed to work on fortifications.

This mood of anti-Semitism, which was already manifest in the dying days of the Polish State, was roused to full activity in the POW camps, where Jewish soldiers suffered far more from their Polish comrades [in arms] than from the German guards. A host of such facts is recounted in the personal narratives of the Jewish POWs in Germany. The best is by Daniel Filigelman; it is entitled *Die Waren in Deutschland gefangen*.

These narratives inform us of the highly gratifying fact that the Jewish POWs won themselves a reputation in Germany as a diligent and desirable element. "You came to Germany as damned Jews and you are returning home as blessed children of Israel." Such were the words of praise with which a German characterized the changed attitude toward the Jewish POWs. This may well be the main reason why the Jewish soldiers were freed from captivity, whereas the Poles remain imprisoned up to this day.

It is impossible to list all the topics covered by the work of O[yneg] S[habbes]. They are as numerous and variegated as our life. We attempted many subjects but did not find suitable coworkers for all of them. It can, however, be asserted with confidence that there is no important phenomenon of Jewish life in wartime that was not mirrored in the materials of O[yneg] S[habbes]. A subject such as smuggling,

A Tsarist-built prison situated in the ghetto and used by the Germans to imprison Poles, Jews and other political prisoners.

Town near Warsaw where, in 1920, an internment camp was set up for Jewish soldiers and officers of the Polish Army.

Abbreviation for
dekagrams.

which is always extremely important in wartime, is represented in O[yneg] S[habbes] by the work of Comrade T[itelman]. In this work we see the tremendous scope of smuggling in Warsaw: during the whole period of the ghetto's existence it saved the four hundred thousand members of the Jewish community from dying of starvation. If the Jews of Warsaw had had to live on the official ration of eighteen deka° of bread a day, all trace of Jewish Warsaw would long since have vanished. Smuggling caused the loss of several Jewish lives every day and, on the eve of the Deportation, a dozen or dozens of lives a day. In the liberated Poland of the future a monument should be set up to smuggling, which, by the way, also saved the Polish population of the city from dying of hunger.

Comrade T[itelman]'s work on smuggling portrays its folkloric aspects—argot, customs, etc.—rather than its economic significance.

O[yneg] S[habbes] was in general somewhat unsuccessful in the economic field. Good plans were set up on various economic topics, with detailed outlines, but very few of these were carried out, owing to a lack of suitable coworkers. Economic problems [also] require a tranquil mind. They require time, and the right materials, based on comprehensive investigations: we had neither time nor the proper working conditions. Nonetheless, we did manage to elicit a few valuable articles. One of these, by Comrade W[inkle]r, deals with the *ability of a society in wartime to adapt itself to altered economic conditions*. The author shows how the Jews, in the intolerable conditions of the ghetto, built up a whole series of branches of production to serve the so-called Aryan side. The astonishing skill that the Jews displayed in obtaining raw materials and creative ersatz materials testifies to the tremendous ingenuity of the Jews in finding a way out of the most difficult situations. It is proof of the vitality of the Jewish population, which not only created this production but developed smuggling to a level at which the total production could get "abroad" [i.e., the Aryan side, the consumer].

Of the fragmentary projects in the economics section, we should mention the work of Comrade G[utkowski]° on *the foreign currency trade*—another wartime phenomenon of great importance. Comrade G. succeeded in fathoming the deepest secrets of the foreign currency trade. He describes not only its economic aspect but also its folkways, the argot of the money changers and their customs. He gives highly important tables, which illustrate the fluctuating rates of exchange throughout almost the entire period of the war. It will be an interesting project for the future researcher to find in the events of world politics, in the occurrences in the surrounding Jewish and Polish life and in yet other factors the key to these fluctuating rates of exchange. Incidentally, we learn from the work of Comrade G[utkowski] the "secret" that a foreign currency factory existed on Pawia Street, where "hard ones" (gold dollars) and "pigs" (gold rubles) were forged. After the war, the national banks of the countries in question will no doubt be kept busy dealing with the currency "Made in the Ghetto."

Among fragmentary articles on the subject of the *kehillah*, we find one on *The Jewish Mail*, which was resurrected after a hiatus of more than a hundred years. One of the "mailmen" was the Yiddish journalist, Peretz O[poczynski], who describes for us the hard work of a Jewish mailman and the relationship of the Jewish population to the mailmen, who often had to collect the tax from their neighbors, which the *kehillah* had decreed as an extra payment to be made on correspondence and also on parcels.

Eliyohu
Gutkowski
(1900–1943), an
active Labor
Zionist in prewar
Łódź. Edited the
information
bulletin of O.S.
together with
Hirsh Wasser.

In English in the
original.

Also incorporated
into 73.

See 73.

Ringelblum himself
was instrumental
in setting them
up.

There are a few articles on the topic of *sanitation*; one of them, by the journalist Perez [Opoczynski], is dedicated to one of the ten plagues of the ghetto, the plague of *Disinfection Brigades*. The writer depicts a *paruwke* [delousing] in a poverty-stricken Jewish tenement. The second article, by a member of the Disinfection Brigade, is like a final confession. The author admits and proves, with concrete facts, that the Disinfection Brigades were disseminators of typhus, as a result of the corruption and demoralization that prevailed among them. Perez [Opoczynski] reaches the same conclusion.

The same Perez [Opoczynski] conducted an interesting experiment, which, unfortunately, has not yet been concluded. He wrote "The History of a Warsaw Tenement during the War." The starting point was the story of the House Committee, set against a background of the general condition of the tenement and its residents. The work, originally quite restricted in scope, grew into the history of a whole tenement courtyard and its inhabitants, beginning on the eve of the war and continuing through the bombing of Warsaw, the entry of the Germans, the flight [and wanderings on the way] to Russia and so forth. This microcosm may serve as an introduction to the history of Warsaw, the macrocosm.

"The History of the House Committee at 23 Nalewki" described the establishment and activities of one of the most interesting institutions in wartime Poland. The House Committees were transformed from social welfare organizations into institutions of a public nature, which fulfilled many different administrative functions. Apart from this, the House Committees played a cultural and social role in introducing various cultural events and entertainment. There was no aspect of Jewish life in wartime that was not associated with the House Committees. They provided for refugees who had returned from the camps, supported various children's institutions, took care of domestic sanitation, procured practical assistance for neighbors, solved various disputes between neighbors and, most important, took responsibility for the fate of impoverished neighbors, for whom the House Committee was the address to turn to in case of need.

Dr. Celina Levin has portrayed one of the oldest and best organized House Committees, which for many months ran its own kitchen and, during the bombing, even bought its own generator for a sum of seven thousand zlotys.

The writer Perez [Opoczynski] describes the activities of another House Committee at 24 Leszno.

In the social welfare section, we should mention the work of the writer Rachel Auerbach on the public kitchen at 40 Leszno. Describing the establishment of this kitchen and depicting its patrons, she comes to the melancholy conclusion that the Jewish Public Kitchen, which at times served up to a hundred thousand diners, i.e., a quarter of the Jews of Warsaw, did not save a single person from dying of hunger. And that is why there was such a rapid turnover of diners in the kitchens. While one group took its place in the mass graves of the Warsaw cemetery, the kitchen was filled with a new wave of diners from among the newly returned refugees or the pauperized, whose only food from then on was the thin soup of the People's Kitchen. Among the characters at the public kitchen at 40 Leszno, the most memorable was the man from [?], a refugee from Germany, whose health was ruined in the notorious Dachau Camp. He was not helped by the five or six helpings of soup that the head of the kitchen, the writer Rachel Auerbach, forced into him every day. Deprived of fats and other life-giving nour-

Gf. 74.

The name is
missing.

ishment, his organs refused to go on working. Despite all the efforts of Rachel Auerbach, he died of hunger.

This death proved clearly that social welfare can exist only when it has vast financial means at its disposal and can substantially help the needy: social welfare activities of minimal scope are a wasted effort.

A rich area of Olyneg [Shabbes] was the diaries. We have already mentioned that during the present war everyone has been writing something, particularly diaries. Some wrote their diaries in a finished form, while others contented themselves with brief notes that could be written up after the war. Most of these diaries were destroyed during the Deportation or because their writers were dragged off to the Umschlagplatz and the writings they left behind were destroyed along with the rest of their property. Other diary writers also, because of the continual blockades and need to relocate from one street to another, often lost the greater part of their manuscripts. It is safe to estimate that dozens if not hundreds of diaries were lost, for it should be remembered that only a small fraction of those who wrote diaries admitted to it. Most of them kept it a secret.

The diary of the Hebrew writer and teacher [Chaim Aaron] Kaplan, written in Hebrew, amounted to thousands of pages and contained a mass of information about what happened each day in Warsaw. Kaplan was not a man of broad interests, but the experiences of every ordinary Warsaw Jew, his sufferings and feelings, his thirst for revenge, etc., are all faithfully conveyed in Kaplan's diary. It is precisely the ordinariness of the writer that makes the diary important. I asked Kaplan more than once to give his manuscript to the Archive, on the guarantee that it would be returned to him after the war. Most reluctantly he was persuaded to let us copy the manuscript. But this was very difficult. A part remains in the Olyneg [Shabbes] Archive. The complete manuscript was lost during the Deportation, together with the author, who was taken to the Umschlagplatz [. . .].

The head of the Warsaw Jewish Council, the unfortunate [Adam] Czerniakow, kept a logbook on everything that happened in the ghetto during his tenure. The diary or, more correctly, logbook is undoubtedly very interesting, for Czerniakow was in daily contact with the German authorities and also with the Polish municipal authorities, and, as chairman of the *kehillah*, he held the reins of Jewish daily life in his hands.

Professor Mayer Balaban began writing his memoirs during the war, starting with his early childhood. His son, Alexander Balaban, informs me that his father's memoirs reached the war years, on which he wrote a considerable amount. The diary is on the Aryan Side.

The famous Polish-Jewish writer for children, and no less a famous pedagogue, Dr. Janusz Korczak (Dr. Goldschmidt) kept a diary, which is on the Other Side. In this diary, Dr. Korczak, who was a master writer in Polish, has unquestionably left a monument to the tragedy of the Jewish children, whom the German occupation deprived of air, sun, school and bread.

Many materials for a diary were collected by the well-known singer and journalist [Menakhem] Kipnis. After Kipnis's death we endeavored to obtain these materials for Olyneg [Shabbes]. However, his widow would not give her consent. She was taken to the Umschlagplatz, and no trace of the materials remains. The same thing happened to the diary of the journalist Krinski, who was taken during the Deportation.

The diary was
published in
English translation
by the Holocaust
Library in 1978.

See The Warsaw
Diary of Adam
Czerniakow (New
York: Stein and
Day, 1978).

See 75.

My daily—later, weekly and monthly—recordings survive. Later these were especially important for the first year of the war, when others did not keep diaries. The weekly and monthly reports supply not only data on the most important events of this period but also an evaluation of them. Because of my social activities, these evaluations are important documents, as they express what the surviving remnant of Jewish society thought about the current questions of its life.

An important document is the diary of Abraham [Levin]. The author has kept his diary for the past year and a half and poured his entire literary creativity into it. Each sentence in the diary is planned. Comrade Levin puts into it everything that is reported, not only about Warsaw, but about the harsh sufferings of Jews in the provinces. Even in the period of the Deportation, when he suffered the terrible loss of his wife Luba, he kept his diary daily, in conditions that seemed impossible either for work or for creativity. Because of the purity and conciseness of style, the exact rendering of facts and its profound content, the diary can qualify as an important literary document that should certainly be published after the war. It was written in Yiddish until the Deportation, and in Hebrew thereafter.

The Deportation, which began on July 22, 1942, marked the start of a new era in the history of the Warsaw Jews. The work of Olyneg [Shabbes] also changed in character. There was an interruption of several months in our activities. At a time when one was in constant danger of being caught [and sent off] to Treblinka, workers continued to keep their diaries during the Deportation and note down their daily experiences. As soon as things settled down a bit, we started our work afresh. But it was not possible to write monographs on cities that [?].

The staff of Olyneg [Shabbes] made up and continue to make a coherent group, inspired by a united spirit, guided by a single idea. Olyneg [Shabbes] is not an association of scholars who compete and struggle among each other, but a coherent group, a brotherhood in which each helps the others and strives toward the common goal. For months on end the pious Rabbi Huberland sat next to the Left Labor Zionist Hirsch Wlasser] and the General Zionist Abraham L[evin] at one table. And yet we worked together, in harmony. Olyneg [Shabbes] did not forget its coworkers. The faithful father and provider was the ailing Menakhem K[on], who saved both Hirsch Wlasser] and Rabbi Huberland from dying of typhus, who cared about the sick child of Comrade G[urkow]ski and who greatly aided the writer and the journalist Perez O[poczyn]ski, who was always suffering from hunger. The quiet dove, Daniel Fligelman, would have died long since had it not been for the constant and affectionate help of our dear Comrade Menakhem. There were countless occasions on which he pressed me to leave Warsaw after the bloody night of April [18], 1942. Every coworker of Olyneg [Shabbes] knew that his effort and pain, his difficult toil and tribulations, the risk he ran twenty-four hours a day in the clandestine work, carrying materials from one place to another—that all this was for the sake of a noble ideal and that, in the days of freedom, society will correctly evaluate and award it the highest honor of free Europe. Olyneg [Shabbes] was a brotherhood, an order of brothers, who wrote upon their banner, "Readiness for Sacrifice; Loyalty of One to Another; Service to Society."

End of January 1943

The so-called
Night of Blood,
when fifty-two
Jews of a wanted
list of sixty were
shot by the
Germans. This
Aktion was
ostensibly aimed at
stopping the
underground press.

Linguished
sentence in the
original.

A Hebrew edition
was published by
the Ghetto
Fighters' House in
1969.