

A Stone Under History's Wheel: The Oyneg Shabes Archive

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Faculty Introduction

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Brianna's paper, "A Stone Under History's Wheel: The *Oyneg Shabes* Archive," was inspired by a documentary on a heroic team of underground archivists operating in Poland during the Holocaust, and by her own identity as a mother of two young children. Using a collection of documents preserved by these secret archivists themselves and a variety of work on the Warsaw Ghetto and those involved, Brianna tells a vibrant story of how these underground archivists—especially women, mothers of Jewish children—understood what was happening to them and responded by preserving a detailed record of the life and culture of their community for their surviving children. The *Oyneg Shabes* archive is not well known outside of eastern Europe and is itself extremely difficult to study and understand, and Brianna's presentation of the work of those involved in it brings to light its importance in a new and very sympathetic way.

Abstract

The *Oyneg Shabes* was a secret society of Jewish academics within the Warsaw ghetto who documented the Jewish experience during World War II. The following research paper examines the founder of the *Oyneg Shabes*, Jewish activist-historian Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum, and gives archival evidence of the suffering of the Jewish people at the hands of their Nazi oppressors and their ultimate triumph over genocide. The Ringelblum Archive was unearthed in 1946 and contained thousands of letters, propaganda posters, essays, interviews, pictures, and more. This surviving archive is one of the most effective forms of resistance against Nazi persecution because the *Oyneg Shabes* gave a voice to the hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children whom the Nazis attempted to permanently silence. The *Oyneg Shabes* Archive combated the Nazis' version of the war. This research paper was written to shine a light on the archive that the *Oyneg Shabes* sacrificed their lives to preserve.

On September 18, 1946, ten tin boxes were unearthed from the rubble that was once the Warsaw Ghetto.¹ These boxes contained a portion of the *Oyneg Shabes* Archive, also known as the Ringelblum Archive, which held upwards of thirty thousand letters, essays, interviews, propaganda posters, poetry, and more. This archive is one of the most effective and impressive resistance projects initiated by the Jews during the Holocaust. Members of a secret society, the *Oyneg Shabes*, sacrificed their lives to ensure that the information they recorded about the day-to-day lives of the Jewish community in the Warsaw Ghetto survived the war. *Oyneg Shabes* translates to “the pleasures of the Sabbath,” which referred to the members’ weekly Saturday meetings and comments on the group mindset about their mission. The illusive group preserved everything, from the mundane to the atrocious, because the act of putting pen to paper was a form of resistance against Nazi persecution that kept the group’s members human during an inhumane time. Rather than allow

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the Nazi propaganda teams to cement a one-sided, biased account of ghetto life, the *Oyneg Shabes* tasked itself with

recording the Jewish perspective of the Holocaust for future generations to unveil. Without knowing if their voices would ever be heard, the *Oyneg Shabes* risked their lives to chronicle the Jewish experience. Thanks to their sacrifice, historians have a deeper understanding of the social and cultural impact of ghetto life for the condemned Jewish people.²

Ghettoization was part of the Nazis’ “Final Solution to the Jewish problem.”³ What was designed to divide and conquer, gave birth to the largest amalgamation of Jewry in Europe. The Warsaw Ghetto was sealed in November of 1940 and Jewish activist-historian, Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum, knew something of historical importance was occurring. In the same month the ghetto was sealed, Dr. Ringelblum gathered a small group of approximately sixty Jewish academics and founded the *Oyneg Shabes* secret society. One of those members was journalist Rachel

¹ Norman J. W. Goda, *Jewish Histories of the Holocaust: New Transnational Approaches* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014), 174.

² Goda, *Jewish Histories of the Holocaust*, 175.

³ Doris L. Bergen, *War & Genocide: a Concise History of the Holocaust* (Vancouver, B.C.: University of British Columbia Crane Library, 2017), 111.

Auerbach. She was one of three surviving members of the secret society and is credited with initiating the excavation of the buried Ringelblum Archive after the war.⁴

Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum was born in Buczacz, a predominantly Jewish town in eastern Galicia in what was then the Austrian Empire, on November 21, 1900. Ringelblum's father, Fayvish Ringelblum, a respected grain trader in the Buczacz Jewish community, was determined that his children have adequate education in both Jewish and secular studies.⁵ During Ringelblum's youth, he saw his community turn from assimilation and what some have called pliant Hasidism to radical Marxism, Yiddishism, and Zionism.⁶ In September 1914, after World War I began, Russian troops crossed the Austrian border into Galicia. After hearing the atrocities that the Jewish community suffered at Russian hands, thousands of Jewish refugees fled their homes and headed westward.⁷ At the age of fourteen, Emanuel Ringelblum was uprooted from his home and had his first taste of wartime oppression.

The week that Ringelblum turned seventeen, the Bolsheviks overthrew Imperial Russia and established a Soviet state that promised equality for all, including Jews.⁸ While many Jews looked to Moscow for salvation, others aligned themselves with Zionism. It was during the fervor of revolution that Ringelblum moved to Warsaw and joined a political party called the Poalei Tsiyon Party (Workers of Zion Party).⁹ The Poalei Tsiyon Party believed that Zionism and Communism were equally compatible and together would create a pro-Jewish future for the world's most oppressed people. Emanuel Ringelblum obtained his doctorate at the University of Warsaw in 1927. He wrote his doctoral thesis on the history of the Jewish people of Warsaw during the Middle Ages.¹⁰ It was Ringelblum's upbringing in the shadow of wartime oppression and the

⁴ Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History? Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive* (Indiana University Press, 2007), 1.

⁵ Kassow, *Who Will Write*, 17-18.

⁶ Kassow, *Who Will Write*, 20-22.

⁷ Kassow, *Who Will Write*, 22.

⁸ Goda, *Jewish Histories of the Holocaust*, 175.

⁹ Goda, *Jewish Histories of the Holocaust*, 175.

¹⁰ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Emanuel Ringelblum and the Creation of the Oyneg Shabbat Archive*, (Holocaust Encyclopedia), Accessed July 1, 2021.

wake of political revolution that solidified his passion for activism within the Jewish community, but it was his dedication to documenting and preserving history that became his most effective Nazi countermeasure.

Before the onset of World War II, Dr. Ringelblum played three important roles within his community: political activist, community organizer, and historian. These three roles, combined with his traumatic experiences during World War I, intermingled to produce a man who was determined to create an underground resistance movement after his community was ghettoized.¹¹ Once his people were locked behind the ghetto's gates, Ringelblum's lifetime of preparation served his community well. It was Ringelblum's high post in the *Aleynhilf*, Warsaw's major Jewish relief organization, that gave him access to people and information.¹² Through his work with the *Aleynhilf*, Ringelblum was able to organize soup kitchens, schools, housing assignments, orphan relief aid, welfare projects, and ultimately create his secret society: the *Oyneg Shabes*.

When faced with history's most heinous acts of violence against humanity, the members of the *Oyneg Shabes* valued the beauty of preserving the truth and leaving behind evidence that would prove to future generations the oppression that they faced. Amongst the group's collection, there are texts written by men and women, Orthodox Jews and free-thinkers, philosophers and ordinary people, children and teachers, all of which reflect the diversity and vigor of the Jewish society in the Warsaw Ghetto.¹³ Ringelblum believed that nothing seen, heard, or recorded was unimportant and as such, he charged his members to collect as much as possible.¹⁴

Ringelblum thought that writing "from inside the event" would prevent distorted accounts due to retrospective recollection and selective memory.¹⁵ It was his hope that future generations could sort out the information after the war. Ringelblum's dedication to detail, which influenced the *Oyneg Shabes* mission, can be seen in his diary entry in November 1941. He writes:

¹¹ Goda, *Jewish Histories of the Holocaust*, 175.

¹² Kassow, *Who Will Write*, 90.

¹³ The Oneg Shabbat Archives, *Let the World Read And Know*, The Oneg Shabbat Archives (Yad Vashem), Accessed November 9, 2020.

¹⁴ Kassow, *Who Will Write*, 12.

¹⁵ Kassow, *Who Will Write*, 13.

The most terrible thing is to look at the freezing children, children with bare feet, bare knees, and tattered clothes, who stand mutely in the streets and cry. Today in the evening I heard the wailing of a little tot of three or four years. Probably tomorrow morning they will find his little corpse.¹⁶

Even when documenting something as appalling as the starvation of freezing children, Dr. Ringelblum was dedicated to recounting the heinous truth as he saw it. He was able to separate the inherent emotional pain of his present circumstances to give future generations a full understanding of the severity of life inside the Warsaw Ghetto. He was not alone in documenting tragedy.

Here are the haunting words of David Briner, an eighteen-year-old survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto, transcribed by an unknown member of the *Oyneg Shabes* group in December of 1942:

Look at me and you might think that I've always been a looter, a wild boy. I was considered a quiet, reliable boy. What I want to experience is revenge.¹⁷

After losing his entire family, Briner confesses that he survived the ghetto alone by one thing: looting. Briner's testimony is one of the **...the archive as a whole is a collection that speaks to the spirit of Jewish perseverance.** thousands that survived in the hidden *Oyneg Shabes* archive and gives historians a first-hand account of the desperation of the ghettoized Jews. Although this story is the tale of one man's painful path of survival, the archive as a whole is a collection that speaks to the spirit of Jewish perseverance.

Ghettoization was a calculated measure to concentrate all the Jews from rural Polish territories into designated urban isolation areas.¹⁸ With hundreds of thousands of people crammed into small areas and food

¹⁶ Kassow, *Who Will Write*, 261.

¹⁷ Jürgen Matthäus and Emil Kerenji, *Jewish Responses to Persecution, 1933-1946* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), Document 3-31, 123.

¹⁸ Bergen, *War & Genocide*, 111.

being a scarce commodity, starvation became a primary problem in the ghetto.¹⁹ In 1940, an unknown visitor of the Warsaw Ghetto described the rampant starvation of children:

On the streets children are crying in vain, children who are dying of hunger...children swollen with hunger, disfigured, half-conscious, already completely grown up at the age of five, gloomy and weary of life.²⁰

The extremes that the children of Warsaw had to endure were an affront to humanity. David Briner and others stole from the family homes of those who had already been deported from the ghetto. During the mass deportations from the Warsaw Ghetto, specifically the Miła Street selection, Briner lost his mother, father, five sisters, four brothers-in-law, three nephews, and brother. Alone, he began to focus his attention on acquiring any-and-all food he could get his hands on and as much alcohol as he could drink.²¹ He did what he had to do to survive. Briner was determined to live after the death of his entire family.

By breaking in and looting the abandoned houses of the already deported families, Briner was able to procure left-behind valuables that he could

“Can all this be forgotten? What do I do now?...Should I save money? Money is worthless.”

sell to survive. His unyielding depression after the loss of his family can be felt in his testimony. It bitterly ends:

“Can all this be forgotten? What do I do now? So, I eat and drink. Should I save money? Money is worthless.”²² Briner’s account, along with the thousands that were found in the hidden *Oyneg Shabes* archive, is a valuable addition to the story of the Holocaust as a whole.

The Nazis told their side of the story boldly to the world. In 1940, all over Europe the Nazis were broadcasting a film called *The Eternal Jew*. This disgusting propaganda piece compared the Jewish people to rats and justified genocide.²³ In 1942, the Nazis sent scores of propaganda

¹⁹ Bergen, *War & Genocide*, 113.

²⁰ Bergen, *War & Genocide*, 111-112.

²¹ Matthäus, *Jewish Responses to Persecution, Document 3-31*, 121.

²² Matthäus, *Jewish Responses to Persecution, Document 3-31*, 123.

²³ Goda, *Jewish Histories of the Holocaust*, 174.

teams to film the ghettos to tell the world about the “Jewish Problem.” Not only were the Nazis perfecting their master plan to systematically eradicate European Jews, they were also controlling the narrative of the war through propaganda. The Nazis used cruel visual aids to demonize the “others” within Germany and other parts of the world, including occupied Poland, justifying the need for racial cleansing.²⁴ Stories such as Briner’s counteract the Nazis’ propaganda and humanize the people the Nazis deemed worthless.

David Briner’s testimony is proof of the spirit of Jewish perseverance. While he is but one man, his story aligns with all of those who documented their struggle and hardship during Nazi oppression. Hundreds of thousands of people were shuffled through the ghettos to certain death, Briner is just one man out of millions.²⁵ The unidentified *Oyneg Shabes* activist who transcribed Briner’s story must have been compelled to document it because of its rawness. This man lost everyone he knew in the prime of his youth and became an “unkempt, raggedy, shabby” looter, but he survived.²⁶ The account of a “wild boy’s” survival is the legacy of the *Oyneg Shabes* and a valuable piece of the collective history of not only Jewish, but human perseverance.

Auerbach recorded the initial response of Abram Jakub Krzepicki when he first exited the boxcar that brought him to the Treblinka Death Camp in August of 1942: “So Many Clothes! But Where Are the People?”²⁷ For the Jews in the boxcar with Krzepicki, the mountain of ownerless clothing that awaited them at the entrance of Treblinka meant one thing: death. Treblinka was the final destination for thousands of Jewish people who were selected to be deported from the Warsaw Ghetto. Auerbach’s record of Krzepicki’s first-hand account is one of the thousands that survived from the hidden *Oyneg Shabes* archive. This document gives historians a priceless, first-person perspective of the Jewish response to the horrors of the Treblinka Death Camp.

24 Bergen, *War & Genocide*, 61,64, 84.

25 Bergen, *War & Genocide*, 113, 180.

26 Matthäus, *Jewish Responses to Persecution, Document 3-31*, 121.

27 Matthäus, *Jewish Responses to Persecution, Document 4-2*, 127.

“A Fugitive from Treblinka” begins with the collective shock and confusion as hundreds of Jews are herded from their transport to their respective deaths, and ends with Krzepicki’s own admitted callousness towards his fellow campmates when he becomes a leader in Treblinka’s corpse yard (the area adjacent to the gas chambers and crematoria where the bodies were buried in mass graves and where he was forced to work). This short essay takes readers into the mind of a death camp survivor and escapee. It is a raw telling of Mr. Krzepicki’s thoughts and experiences. He describes the sights and smells of ten thousand bodies piled into hastily made ditches, so many in fact, that he thought there couldn’t be any more Jews left for the Nazis to kill.²⁸

It was during her time in the ghetto that Auerbach met Krzepicki, the fugitive from Treblinka.²⁹ Already tasked with chronicling everything she saw and heard by *Oyneg Shabes* leader Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum, Auerbach recognized the importance of interviewing the man who had been to Treblinka and lived to tell the tale.³⁰ Krzepicki’s story was rare: he had been at the death camp for eighteen days before he was able to escape and find his way back to the Warsaw Ghetto.³¹ With the mass deportations taking place, the Jews within the ghetto knew their final destination was Treblinka. Thousands were deported; Krzepicki came back. He was able to report to his fellow Jews what awaited them: death.

Documents such as Auerbach’s “A Fugitive from Treblinka” are invaluable: they detail a first-hand account of traumatic historical events. When it was written, Krzepicki’s horrific account of bodies piled on top of each other in the ditches of Treblinka’s corpse field answered the inevitable question of what awaited the Jews after the ghetto.³² It answered the question of where thousands of Warsaw’s mothers, fathers, children, and grandparents went and assured the remaining Jews in the ghetto that their families were not coming back. Today, the piece is still just as relevant. While the document may no longer be the harbinger of death for all who hear it, it is still a powerful account of the feelings of fear and hopelessness the Jews experienced during their persecution.

²⁸ Matthäus, *Jewish Responses to Persecution, Document 4-2*, 129.

²⁹ Matthäus, *Jewish Responses to Persecution, Document 4-2*, 127.

³⁰ Roberta Grossman, *Who Will Write Our History?*. (Good Docs), Accessed September 11, 2020.

³¹ Matthäus, *Jewish Responses to Persecution, Document 4-2*, 127.

³² Matthäus, *Jewish Responses to Persecution, Document 4-2*, 128.

Krzepicki answered the question, “Where are the people?” He answered it for those who remained in the ghetto in 1943 and he answers the question today. The Treblinka Death Camp was liberated in July of 1944 by the Soviet Red Army, but before the Soviets arrived, an estimated 925,000 Jews, as well as

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a smaller unknown number of non-Jewish people, lost their lives there.³³ Krzepicki miraculously escaped. Not only did he survive the death camp, but his story survived the war. The *Oyneg Shabes* group risked their lives to preserve stories like Krzepicki’s. Priceless documents, such as this one, were saved by the sacrifices made by the *Oyneg Shabes* group.

In some tragic cases, the *Oyneg Shabes* members were tasked with reporting on their own end. In September of 1942, Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum asked the Polish-Jewish writer Gustawa Jarecka to write a report on the Great Deportation that damned over 300,000 Jewish souls to the Treblinka Death Camp.³⁴ Jarecka was only able to write her introduction before she and her family were caught up in the deportations. In December of 1950, when the second cache of the *Oyneg Shabes* archive was discovered in two buried milk cans, Gustawa Jarecka’s introduction was found. It read:

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, in order that one may understand the historical reasons that shaped the human mind in this fashion and created government systems which made possible the events in our time through which we passed.³⁵

33 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Treblinka*, (Holocaust Encyclopedia), Accessed November 9, 2020.

34 Goda, *Jewish Histories of the Holocaust*, 185.

35 Goda, *Jewish Histories of the Holocaust*, 185.

Her final hope was that the records that she, and others like her, collected and wrote would one day speak the truth for the future to hear. Gustawa Jarecka's sacrifice was not in vain. The introduction for her report on the Great Deportation perfectly summarizes the *Oyneg Shabes* mission. The members of the *Oyneg Shabes* chronicled life in the Warsaw Ghetto, not for themselves but for future generations. They sacrificed themselves in hopes that their brutal history would not repeat.

The *Oyneg Shabes* Archive was a stone under history's wheel, effectively counteracting the Nazi narrative of World War II. Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum was convinced that the story of Jewish suffering was a universal story that would transcend nationality, race, time, and space. To be human is to suffer. The Nazi persecution and mass murder of the Jewish population was undeniably evil; but evil, no matter how great, cannot be placed outside of history.³⁶ This archive is an integral part of human history. Although history is written by the victors, this archive serves as evidence that the Jewish people were not victims of the Holocaust, but were victorious over the Holocaust. They faced evil and survived. The persecuted Jews in Warsaw, as well as the millions of people who were affected by the Holocaust, were all a part of the universal story of humanity and the *Oyneg Shabes* were the authors of that story.

Oyneg Shabes members recorded the atrocity as it was happening, but the archive is not merely one of gloom and doom: the *Oyneg Shabes* Archive serves as a reminder of the strength and perseverance of the Jewish people. It is proof that the Jews were not led like lambs to the slaughter. The Nazis intended to erase an entire race of people from the history books but they failed. The Jews resisted. They endured and survived, and thanks to the sacrifice of the members of the *Oyneg Shabes* their story survived as well. This collection is one of the most important historical finds of the twentieth century because it gives historians a clearer view of the events that took place during World War II. The stories, essays, questionnaires, photographs, and other pieces of documentation within the hidden archive are strands of evidence, woven together to create a whole picture of the Holocaust, not just a one-sided account through the lens of Nazism. The *Oyneg Shabes* hurled their stone, and the wheel of Nazi-oppressive history was broken forever. ■

³⁶ Kassow, *Who Will Write*, 7-8.

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Student Biography

Brianna Moore is a recent *summa cum laude* graduate history major from Sam Houston State University. Brianna chose to complete her senior seminar with Dr. Jadwiga Biskupska and was allowed to research any topic under the umbrella of World War II. Early on in the semester, she saw a documentary directed by Roberta Grossman entitled “Who Will Write Our History?” This film detailed the struggle of the *Oyneg Shabes*, a secret society who sacrificed their lives documenting the Jewish experience under Nazi occupation in the Warsaw ghetto. After watching the documentary, Brianna was so moved she decided to focus her research on the *Oyneg Shabes* and their hidden archive. Since graduation, Brianna has accepted a teaching position at Humble High School teaching 10th grade World History.