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“Animated by one spirit, imbued with one idea.” Emanuel Ringelblum and the underground archive of the Warsaw Ghetto

In the autumn of 1940, the Germans established a ghetto in Warsaw. It was marked out in the so-called Northern District, mostly inhabited by Jews, and separated from the rest of the city by a high brick wall.



Approximately 140 thousand Jews and 113 thousand Poles were forced to move. Some moved inside the enclosure, while others left the area. On 16 November 1940, the gates of the Warsaw ghetto were closed. Almost 395 thousand Jews were crammed into an area of about 400 ha. Among them was Emanuel Ringelblum – a historian, educator, and social activist, initiator of the creation of the Warsaw Ghetto underground archive.

Resistance from within the ghetto

The establishment of the Warsaw ghetto, although somewhat expected, surprised many people. Rumors about it had been circulating in Warsaw since the beginning of 1940. Nonetheless, it was an extremely difficult moment for the local Jewish population once these rumors materialized and they were required to move there with their relatives, consequently, forcing them to abandon the lives they had led thus far. There was the illusion that it was only a temporary change and soon, with the swift end of the war, everything would return to its former order. With time, people adapted to the conditions prevailing there, previously known organizational structures were reconstructed, and efforts were made to function as normally as possible. Even despite the cramped conditions all around, the progressing impoverishment of the population, hunger and diseases that were decimating the Jews closed behind the walls.

Already in the first months of the war, Jews took up various forms of resistance, also engaging in underground activities. It was not an armed struggle but rather a so-called grassroots movement. The

legislation imposed by the Germans and the living conditions in the ghetto meant that the focus was on organizing social assistance and health care. Jewish political parties resumed activity in the underground. Similarly to the leaders of social organizations, they operated by providing aid for the needy and developed a network of civil resistance. This is how information on current events, including the occupant's activities or the needs of the Jewish community, was obtained and transmitted. It wasn't long before leaflets and underground press were also distributed. The existence of household committees and underground networks made it possible to hide people, for example, those at risk of arrest or forced displacement.

Opposing the bans of the occupation authorities was treated as a form of resistance. These included secret education as well as manifestations of cultural and religious life. Artists continued to paint, musicians performed in public, and literary works were also created. Places were established where cultural life flourished. Concerts were organized, often with charity goals in mind. During the main Jewish holidays, prayer gatherings were organized. Scientific activity was a special form of resistance. Despite the real difficulties of the occupation, some scientists continued their research and even started new projects, e.g. studies on hunger. The activity of the historian Emanuel Ringelblum occupies a special place among these operations. On his initiative, a secret archive was set up in the Warsaw ghetto.

Emanuel Ringelblum was born on 21 November 1900, in Buczacz, in the family of Fajwisz and Muna née Heler. He had three siblings. When

he turned 12 years old, his mother died. After the outbreak of World War I, the family moved to Nowy Sącz together with Fajwicz's second wife. There, Emanuel passed his matriculation exam. He graduated from school in 1920 and then moved to Warsaw, where he planned to continue his education. Due to *numerus clausus*, he did not get in to study medicine at the University of Warsaw. At that time, he was associated with the Poale Zion party, and more specifically with its left-wing faction. Two years later, he began studying history; he graduated in 1927 and obtained a PhD in philosophy for his dissertation entitled *Jews in Warsaw from the earliest times until 1527*. In the interwar period, he was involved in historical research, education, and philanthropy. He published books, sources, popular and scientific articles; he also wrote encyclopedic entries. Among other organizations, he was involved in the Trade Union of Teachers of Jewish Schools in Poland and the Union of Jewish Writers, as well as the Curriculum Committee for Teaching History at the Central Organization of Jewish Education. He was also an employee of the relief organization Joint (*American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee*). In August 1939, he took part in the 21st Zionist Congress in Geneva. Despite being offered to stay in the West, out of a sense of civic duty, among other reasons, he decided to return to his country. At that time, no one foresaw what would happen to the Jewish community and what would happen to him.

Almost from the beginning of the German occupation, Emanuel collected documents and other materials on the situation of the Jewish population. From September 1939, he also kept systematic records in

the form of a journal-chronicle. In it, he described both his own experiences and what concerned the Jews in Warsaw, as well as writing down the stories of refugees and displaced persons arriving in the city. Aware that unprecedented events were taking place before him, from the summer of 1940, Ringelblum, together with a group of other people involved, attempted to set up an informal organization whose task would be to document the everyday life of Jews during the occupation. Emanuel Ringelblum with his wife Judyta and son Uri found themselves in the Warsaw Ghetto in the autumn of 1940. That is when the project took on its final shape. The group operated under the code name Oneg Shabbat, meaning “the joy of Saturday”, and in the years 1940-43, it comprised about 50-60 people.

Versatility and objectivity

The circle of people associated with Oneg Shabbat was diverse. It was made up of social activists, teachers, writers, journalists, economists, people from traditional, Zionist and leftist circles, women and men. Among the people involved in Oneg Shabbat's work were Rachela Auerbach, Bluma Wasser, Cecylia Słapakowa, and Gela Seksztajn-Lichtensztajn. Ringelblum wrote in his journal about the special nature of the initiative:

“The collaborators of Oneg Shabbat have been and are still today a uniform corporation, animated by one spirit, imbued with one idea. Oneg Shabbat is not an association of scientists competing with each other and fighting each other, but a uniform corporation, a fraternal union in which everyone helps each other and strives to achieve the

same goal. For many months they sat at one table: the pious rabbi [Szymon] Huberband, next to the leftist Poale Zionist – Hersz Wasser, and the general Zionist – Abraham Lewin. Nonetheless, cooperation was harmonious.”

The members of the group met in the building at 3/5 Tłomackie Street, next to the Great Synagogue, where the Main Judaic Library and the Institute of Judaic Sciences were located. Ringelblum emphasized that “versatility was the main principle of our activity. Objectivity was the second principle that guided us.”

The aim of this undertaking was initially to document everyday life, the persecution of the Jewish population, as well as social, political, and underground activities. They pursued a methodical approach of running it. The activities included record-keeping and documentation, conducting surveys, obtaining accounts, describing the everyday life of the ghetto and its inhabitants, and collecting literary works and other forms of artistic activity in the district. Furthermore, they collected journals and diaries. The documentation contained various forms: leaflets, posters, announcements, food and registration cards, official letters, and even tram tickets. The collection also includes photographs. Underground archives, although on a much smaller scale, were also created in several other ghettos, e.g. in Białystok, Kaunas, Łódź, and Vilnius.

Gradually, Ringelblum and his collaborators began researching and describing selected issues, such as the situation of Jewish women; the fate of Jews in the countryside; the situation of Jews in the Polish

countryside, as well as in areas under the occupation of the USSR; the fate of Jewish children and youth; the life of the ghetto streets; or the role of the Judenrat and the Jewish police. Other areas where observations and records were also made were German-Jewish and Polish-Jewish relations during the occupation. From the spring of 1942, much emphasis was placed on describing both the emerging Jewish resistance movement and – which is particularly important – on documenting German mass crimes against Jews. Over time, reports were created on the liquidation of subsequent Jewish communities, conducted under the so-called Operation Reinhard (the extermination of Jews from the General Government area and *Bezirk Bialystok*). Information collected by Oneg Shabbat about the Holocaust was sent to the West through Jewish organizations and Polish institutions (for instance, they cooperated with the Government Delegation for Poland).

The so-called “Great Action” (*Grossaktion* Warsaw) – the deportation of the Jewish population from the Warsaw ghetto to the extermination camp in Treblinka, started on 22 July 1942 – stopped the works carried out by Oneg Shabbat. In July/August, some documents of the underground archive of the Warsaw Ghetto were hidden. Ten metal boxes with documents were buried in the basement of the Bera Borochowa school at 68 Nowolipki Street. Not all of Ringelblum's collaborators survived the deportations. Those who managed to survive continued the work after they ended. Another portion of the collected materials documented life in the ghetto after the deportation and murder of approx. 300 thousand Warsaw Jews in the extermination camp in Treblinka. The documents sealed in metal cans were hidden in

February 1943.

“Kryisia”

Emanuel Ringelblum's family managed to avoid deportation during the Great Action. His son Uri was most probably transferred to the so-called Aryan side in the summer of 1942. For about six months, he hid in Teresa Nowakowska's apartment in the Praga district. In February 1943, after the first armed uprising in the ghetto, when it became clear that the Germans would soon begin the complete liquidation of the ghetto, Emanuel and his wife managed to escape beyond its borders. This was possible thanks to the help of Barbara Temkin-Bermanowa and her husband Adolf Berman, who were active in the underground. He and his son were hiding in a bunker called “Kryisia”, a hideout at the back of the Wolski family's house, located at 81 Grójecka Street. The bunker had an area of almost 30 m², and nearly 2 m high, and inside there were two rows of metal bunks. Thirty-eight people were hiding there; therefore, the conditions were difficult, and the accumulation of so many people in one place generated conflicts.

In a sense, Emanuel Ringelblum distanced himself from the everyday life of the bunker's inhabitants. He focused there on documenting, making notes about the Polish-Jewish relations during the occupation. He intended to continue this research after the war. During his stay in the hideout, he was still involved in underground activities and sometimes went out to meet his collaborators. During one of these outings, he was arrested and taken to a labor camp in Trawniki. Members of the Home Army were among those who helped to get him

out of there. He returned to Warsaw and for some time he hid separately from his family. After a while, however, he returned to "Kryisia". He continued to work there academically, describing what he had experienced and what he had seen in Trawniki. He maintained correspondence with Berman and handed over historical essays that he had written. In his correspondence, he referred to the current events in the hideout, wrote about his work, and shared his fears of whether his work and that of other people from Oneg Shabbat would be noticed by the world after the war.

Despite the proposal to change hiding places, Ringelblum and his family remained in the bunker at 81 Grójecka Street until the end. As a result of denunciation, "Kryisia" was discovered by the Germans on 7 March 1944. The Jews who had been caught there, as well as the owner of the property and his nephew, were taken to Pawiak prison. The bunker was blown up by the Germans with grenades. The Ringelblum family and all the other Jews hiding there were imprisoned, interrogated, and then shot in the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto a few days later.

The work of Emmanuel Ringelblum's life, which was the documentation of the fate of the Jewish population during the occupation, survived its initiator. After the war, two out of the three parts of the documentation collected by Oneg Shabbat were found. These collections are kept in the archives of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. It is one of the most valuable collections of materials documenting the Holocaust. In 1999, the Ringelblum Archive was entered on the UNESCO World

Cultural Heritage List.

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