



Secret Shaves:

*How the
"Sabbath Delight"
Hid an Astonishing
Archive*

By Beryl Lieff Benderly

For most American Jews, “Oyeg Shabbat,” or “Sabbath delight,” is a joyful social gathering held right after Shabbat services. But the phrase that evokes family, friends and festivity is also associated with a little-known historical chapter involving danger, suspense, courage, tragedy and ultimately, inspiring vindication that emerged from the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto.

“Oyeg Shabes,” the phrase in Yiddish, served as the code name for a band of daring and dedicated Polish Jews who created what Culture.pl, a leading national cultural institution in present-day Poland, calls “one of the world’s greatest monuments to human resistance and heroism in the face of ultimate evil.”

That monument isn’t a statue or building but the Ringelblum Archive, a collection of some 6,000 documents and artifacts that extensively document Jewish life in Nazi-occupied Poland from 1940, when Jews were forced into the Warsaw Ghetto, to April 19, 1943, the eve of the epic uprising by outnumbered, outgunned Jewish fighters.

Brought together by historian Emanuel Ringelblum, about 60 clandestine chroniclers — historians, writers, artists and other intellectuals — risked their lives to create, collect and preserve as wide an array of materials as possible, in direct defiance of the German occupiers. Totalling some 35,000 pages, these included reports, articles, essays, interviews, surveys, poems, stories, diaries, drawings, paintings, photographs, newspapers, posters, concert programs, school assignments and even such ephemera as streetcar tickets and candy wrappers that the group ultimately hid from the Germans by burying them in the ground.

Among thousands of observations, laments, hopes, accounts and recollections by Jews ranging from prominent intellectuals and social scientists to school children: Wladyskaw Szlengel, whom Ringelblum called “the poet of

the ghetto,” left a tribute to an ordinary housewife sent to Treblinka so abruptly that “she did not finish the soup” she was making for her husband and son. He wrote:

*For heroes — poems and rhapsodies!!!
For heroes — the homage of posterity
Their names etched in the plinths,
For them a monument of marble.
But who will tell you, the people of the future
Not about bronze or mythic tales/But that they took
her — killed her.
That she is no more.*

In a long poem, Yitzchak Katznelson imagined a heroic Hassidic rebbe climbing into a boxcar full of Jewish corpses to find God weeping over them. The rebbe “sat in a dark corner, in silent pain, and he listened to God’s sobs ... [He] Stayed still, and did not offer a word of comfort.”

Both excerpts appear in “Discovering a Hidden Archive from the Warsaw Ghetto,” historian Samuel Kassow’s definitive account of Oyeg Shabes.

The Nazis expected the world to know about Polish Jewry only through Germany’s vicious anti-Semitic propaganda. Ringelblum and his comrades thought otherwise. Jews, they decided, not those who hated, slandered and ultimately murdered them, would be the ones to tell the story of both the rich and varied life and the ruthless destruction of the Jewish people of Poland. Oyeg Shabes undertook this unprecedented task “in one of the deepest



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Warsaw's Jewish Historical Institute (The Emanuel Ringelblum Historical Institute), where the Ringelblum Archive is housed.

circles of hell during one of the darkest hours in the history of mankind," Culture.pl continues.

The record that the group produced "remains one of the most astonishing research projects in human history," the Polish website adds. "An attempt to write history from within the most terrible event of the 20th century, it gave a voice to victims of the

Holocaust, preserving a record of a world doomed to destruction." Through limitless courage and ingenuity, with full recognition that they would likely not survive and finally with a crucial dose of luck, the ad hoc historians ultimately succeeded in defying the dictum that the victors write history.

Burying History

To preserve their priceless assemblage of irreplaceable materials from the Nazis, Oyneg Shabes leadership entrusted a handful of members with the task of packing the papers into metal containers and burying them for safekeeping in several places within the Ghetto. Only three members survived the war, but one of them, Hersh Wasser, the group's secretary, knew where the materials had been buried. He and the other survivors — his wife, Bluma, and journalist Rachel Auerbach — led a postwar drive to find the hidden treasure

under the ruins of the Ghetto, which the German army had systematically burned block by block in revenge for the uprising, obliterating streets and reducing buildings to rubble. This made the search,

in Auerbach's words, akin to an "archeological expedition," complete with tunnels and shafts dug under the devastation.

A still-standing church steeple provided a landmark that, along with prewar street maps and photographs, suggested where to dig. On Sept. 18, 1946, a team of excavators struck historical gold, unearthing the set of metal boxes that contained one of the three caches of hidden documents. In 1950, construction workers happened upon the aluminum milk cans protecting a second cache. A third cache remains undiscovered, despite strong suspicions of its whereabouts.

With much of the archive recovered, the testimony of the murdered Jews rather than the lies of their Nazi conquerors forms the accepted narrative of Polish Jewry under German occupation. The archive received international recognition in 1999 from UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), including it in its registry of the Memory of the World. It described the archive as "absolutely unique, both in terms of its origin and its historic value," having been "collected by victims of the Holocaust in order to pass on information about the Holocaust to future generations."

Oyneg Shabes members certainly had no illusions. "We have nooses fastened around our necks," wrote the author Gustawa Jarecka, in one of the unearthed documents, as quoted by Kassow.

Still, Jarecka and her colleagues believed they were "noting the evidence of the crime," just as Sherlock Holmes had in Arthur Conan Doyle's novel, "A Study in Scarlet." That book's "dying victim," Jarecka notes, "writes ... one word on the wall containing proof of the criminal's guilt." Even though the effort probably "will not help us," she believed that "the record must be hurled like a stone under history's wheel in order to stop it."

As Jarecka's hope of arresting the inevitable shows, Ringelblum and his cohorts wanted to reach people of their own time as well as future generations. Alerting the outside world to both the Nazis' genocidal intentions and the growing slaughter of Jews across Poland was a pressing goal. Starting in 1942, Oyneg Shabes issued Yiddish-language bulletins, which are also in the archive, detailing expulsions and killings of Jews in numerous towns as well as rumors and reports about their



Photo credit: wikimedia.orgs

In defiance of the Nazis, academic Emanuel Ringelblum (1900-1944) recruited historians for a secret mission, to preserve documents that would convey a true and accurate record of Jewish life in the Warsaw Ghetto.



Photo credit: wikimedia.org

Krochmalna Street in the Warsaw Ghetto, 1941.



Photo credit: wikipedia.org

Buried in various Warsaw Ghetto locations, these aluminum boxes and milk cans were used to store the materials collected by the Oyneg Shabes group.

fate in camps where some were being sent. The group also fed information to the Polish underground in hopes of getting it to the Allied powers.

“Friday 16 June was a great day for the Oyneg Shabes,” Ringelblum confided to his diary on that date in 1942, as quoted in Kassow’s book. “Today at dawn we heard a British radio broadcast about the Polish Jews [that] mentioned everything we know so much about,” specifically the many expulsions and massacres. “For months we have been suffering as we thought the world was indifferent to our tragedy, which is unprecedented in history,” he continued. The BBC’s report, however, confirmed that Oyneg Shabes had “performed a great historical mission . . . It alerted the world to our fate and perhaps rescued hundreds of thousands of Polish Jews from extermination. The near future will show whether these hopes [of rescue] will come true.”

The People’s Historian

Why did so grave and heroic an effort call itself by such an apparently frivolous name? To safeguard the organization’s security, the leaders arranged that the great majority of those recruited to contribute knew the identities of only a very few other conspirators. A central coordinating group, however, met on Saturdays at the office of the Ghetto’s major social service agency, Aleyhilf (Self-Help) and used the name of a Shabbat celebration to disguise their real purpose. The building where they gathered, then the Main Judaic Library building, and since 1947 the Jewish Historical Institute, houses the archive today.

Ringelblum, the lead organizer, was born in Galicia in 1900 and grew up in a cultural milieu that “combined excellent Polish education with strong Jewish nationalism,” writes Kassow. An “atmosphere rich in Jewish folk tradition” gave him a lifelong love

of Yiddish language and culture. In his teens he became active in the Labor Zionist political movement Po’ale Tzion (workers of Zion), eventually joining the Left Po’ale Tzion wing that strongly favored Yiddish and Yiddish culture as expressions of Jewish nationalism. These influences combined to guide his life’s work.

At the age of 20, he began history studies at the University of Warsaw, where he and other Jewish students organized the Young Historians Circle, which grew to about 40 members. To earn his doctorate in 1927, he presented a dissertation that was the first scholarly treatise on the history of Warsaw’s Jewish community. Though Jewish scholars had little possibility of landing university positions, Ringelblum remained active in Jewish historical circles, publishing his dissertation, a number of articles in Polish and Yiddish and a second book on Warsaw’s Jewish history. Meanwhile, he supported himself as a secondary school teacher. For the young historians, history studies were not mere academic exercises but a way of serving the Jewish community and helping to “defend Jewish honor by demonstrating that Jews lived in Poland by right and not by sufferance,” Kassow writes in the YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe.

For Ringelblum and his cohorts, the study of Jewish history properly focused on the everyday life of ordinary Jews, not, as had earlier generations of historians, on the doings of famous rabbis. The historian’s sources, Ringelblum believed, should include the testimony and experience of a broad range of community members, forming what he called “history of the people and by the people,” according to Kassow. An association, the Yiddish Research Institute (now known as YIVO), which was devoted to documenting the Jewish experience in Eastern Europe, strengthened this point of view. This dedication to capturing and recording the lives of everyday Jews eventually found expression in the work of Oyneg Shabes.



Photo credit: The Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw

A self-portrait by Gela Seksztajn (1907-44), an artist who was confined to the Warsaw Ghetto, and who was involved in the Oyneg Shabes group's clandestine activities. Much of her work is preserved in the Ringelblum Archive.



Photo credit: The Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw

The 36 bound volumes of the Ringelblum Archive, containing letters and poems, posters, fine art, graphics, photographs and more.

In 1932 Ringelblum went to work, first as an editor and then as a relief worker and community organizer, for the American Joint Distribution Committee, a relief organization founded during World War I to aid European Jews impacted by that conflict. Working for the “Joint,” he helped develop Jewish community institutions and, later, organized social services for Jewish refugees. The skills this job taught him would prove central to organizing Oyneg Shabes. Once the Germans invaded Poland in 1939, Ringelblum focused on relief work for the Jews of Warsaw, especially as director of Aleynhilf, the primary social service organization in the Ghetto. He used his position there to hire many intellectuals and artists who needed a means of supporting themselves.

Aleynhilf thus served as a clandestine recruiter for Oyneg Shabes, which Ringelblum started as a separate project in November 1940. For the first year or so, he believed that the work of his growing band of skilled observers documenting the life of the Jewish community would strengthen Jews’ position in postwar Poland. But once he realized the Nazis’ true plan for the Jewish community, Oyneg Shabes reoriented its efforts to recording — and attempting to forestall — the annihilation of Polish Jewry and warning the outside world.

In the Ghetto’s final months, Oyneg Shabes members desperately attempted to sequester the archive and to evade the Nazis. Ringelblum ultimately hid with his family and other Jews in a bunker on land owned by a sympathetic Pole. Betrayed to the Germans, the entire group was murdered in March 1945.

The Wassers narrowly escaped death through a series of fortunate accidents. Auerbach was able to leave the Ghetto and survive on the “Aryan” side of the city, disguised by false identity papers and what was said to be a “non-Jewish” appearance. But the work she had begun with Oyneg Shabes continued after the war, first in Poland and, after she immigrated to Israel in 1950, during a long career at Yad Vashem as a leader in the effort to record and organize the testimonies of Holocaust survivors, including preparing them for use as evidence in the 1960 trial of Adolf Eichmann. She died in 1976 at the age of 73.

“What we were unable to cry and shriek to the world we buried in the ground,” wrote 19-year-old David Graber — one of the three men who carried out the burial of the first tranche of documents — in a last will he composed in the final days of the Ghetto. Kassow further quoted him in his book. “I would love to see the moment when the great treasure will be dug up and scream the truth to the world.” Knowing how unlikely that outcome was, he hoped the treasure would “fall into good hands, ... last into better times, [and] alarm and alert the world to what happened.” His work complete, “we may now die in peace. We fulfilled our mission. May history attest for us.”

Almost 75 years after the diggers raised the Oyneg Shabes archive from the earth, it continues to fulfill Graber’s hope and Ringelblum’s vision. “Out of [Ringelblum’s] initiative, his humanity, and ... the great national and humanitarian fire within him,” Auerbach wrote in a memoir published posthumously, “grew a great national project ... an example for Jewish generations, a model of Jewish humanism, of Jewish creative life, young and eternal.”

B'nai B'rith in Poland, Before the War

By Cheryl Kempler



Photo credit: wikimedia.org

Rabbi Moses Schorr



Photo credit: wikimedia.org

Dr. Meir Balaban



Photo credit: wikimedia.org

Rabbi Marcus Braude

After World War I, the Polish government extended permission for B'nai B'rith to officially organize lodges there in 1924. Composed of former German and Austrian Lodges now located within Poland's borders, District 13 boasted a membership of over 900; its president was Cracow attorney Leon Ader. During the next 14 years, helping the poor and disaster relief victims took precedence over the lodges' mission to improve education for Jewish children. As Poland adopted stringent anti-Semitic measures, its government shut down the lodges in 1938.

From 1927 until the Great Depression, District 13 supported the Society of the Advancement of Judaic Studies in Poland and the Institute for Jewish Learning, the teaching academy and research center today housing the Emanuel Ringelblum Archives. Three B'nai B'rith officers were its founders and administrators: Moses Schorr (1874-1941) and Marcus Braude (1869-1949), Zionist rabbis and educators, and Ringelblum's teacher, Meir Balaban (1877-1942), a folklorist and historian. Their discoveries illuminated new perspectives on Jewish identity.

An authority on ancient Eastern languages, Schorr was also a scholar of Polish Jewish history. A member of the Sejm (senate) and the Warsaw University faculty, he led the city's largest synagogue. As District 13's vice president, Rabbi Schorr supervised cultural programs and published its monthly periodical from 1930 to 1935. His letters and essays about B'nai B'rith explore the concept of fraternity and reveal his conviction that the organization should benefit all people.

Schorr fled Warsaw in 1939, but he was arrested by the Soviets in the Ukraine. Despite Polish and American interventions for his release, he died in an Uzbek prison camp in 1941.

Descended from a prestigious family of printers, Balaban, professor of Jewish history at the University of Warsaw, discovered centuries-old manuscripts, ecclesiastical and municipal records from which he constructed a comprehensive survey of Eastern European Jewish life. His publications include: "The Jews of Lvov in the 17th Century" (1916); "The Jews of Lublin" (1919) and the two-volume "History of the Jews of Cracow" (1931), partially funded by B'nai B'rith. He succeeded Schorr as Warsaw's Brotherhood Lodge president.

Balaban continued his research and writings in the Warsaw Ghetto, where he died in December 1942.

Rabbi Braude, a founder and Grand Mentor of Lodz's Montefiore Lodge, was also active in numerous progressive educational and Zionist organizations. The three secular secondary schools he established also aimed to introduce Jewish culture to assimilated students; he himself authored the textbooks for classes conducted in both Hebrew and Polish. He was also involved in elevating teaching standards for rabbinical academies. Braude, who was married to the sister of philosopher Martin Buber, witnessed the destruction of his life's work in education, but many of his pupils later went on to teach and disseminate his ideas in Israel, where he himself lived from 1940 until his death. 