

The Ringelblum Archive and the Difficulty of Listening to the Voices of Victims

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Since 2010 I have devoted the majority of my professional life to the Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto (the Ringelblum Archive or *Oyneg Shabes* – “Joy of the Sabbath,” – the codename for the archive), first as an editor of documents from the Archive, then as coordinator of the full Polish edition of the collection, and now as the coordinator of the full English edition. The collection, numbering 35,000 pages of diverse materials – interviews, memoirs, testimonies, literary works, letters, school essays, official documents, drawings and photographs – is undoubtedly one of the key collections of primary sources relating to the Holocaust, especially for socio-demographic changes in the ghettos.

The Archive actively strove to record voices of those outside the mainstream narrative of traditional Jewish history; those on the bottom rungs of ghetto society. Many of these people were among the approximately 100,000 ghetto inhabitants who died of hunger and illness before the beginning of deportations to Treblinka. These voices were not shaped by post-war reflection on the Holocaust or even post-ghetto experiences in camps or in hiding.

Most of the documents included in the Archive can be classified as micronarratives of everyday life, where the life of the ghetto is presented through the eyes of individual residents. “During this war every Jew is a separate, individual world,” wrote Emanuel Ringelblum. Thus, the voices contained in the Ringelblum Archive, one of the most emblematic documentation undertakings of World War II, are often far from heroic. Instead,

they are raw and painful. They speak of the everyday reality of impoverished ghetto streets: crime, prostitution, inequality. A fragment of Ringelblum's diary regarding the activity of *Oyneg Shabes* reads: "The main principle of our activity was to be comprehensive. Our second principle was objectivity. We were trying to tell the whole truth, no matter how bitter. Our photographs are faithful, unretouched."

The truth contained in the "unretouched photographs" was for many post-war years hidden from everyone except a small circle of historians dealing with social history of the Warsaw Ghetto. Few were able to decipher the heavily damaged, mainly Polish and Yiddish-language manuscripts. Moreover, almost all documents from the Archive, which were published in Poland, Israel or United States in the immediate post-war period were strictly censored, both for political reasons and by their editors who saw it as a way of safekeeping the "appropriate" memory of the Holocaust. This affected even the most famous part of the Archive, Ringelblum's *Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto* (1983). The only available translation into English is a heavily redacted version, with passages regarding gendered violence, issues relating to Jewish administration of the ghetto, but also Polish violence against Jews in wartime Warsaw removed (unsurprising considering that they were translated from censored books published in post-war Poland).

The full academic edition of the Ringelblum Archive is now available in Polish and I am privileged to be leading a team preparing English editions of subsequent volumes. This not only will be a crucial step in better understanding the depth of socio-demographic changes taking place in the ghettos of occupied Europe, but also an important educational tool, supplying a wealth of primary sources to be used in classrooms at all levels.

An indication of how timely and important the Archive is, is that *Oyneg Shabes* documents are increasingly discussed in papers presented during the HEF symposiums and conferences. I have found Lessons and Legacies Conferences a supportive and informative environment to speak about very difficult topics dealing with sexual violence and experiences of women in the Warsaw ghetto, many based on documents from the Archive, and ways in which they were silenced in postwar publications of the *Oyneg Shabes* materials.

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