

Holocaust in the archives. Writing for an astonished posterity

Samuel D. Kassow
Who Will Write Our
History: Emmanuel
Ringelblum, the War-
saw Ghetto, and the
Oyneg Shabes Archive.

Bloomington: Indiana
 University Press 2007.
 523 pages.

Sascha Feuchert,
Erwin Liebfried &
Jörg Rieck (eds.)
Die Chronik des Gettos
Lodz/Litzmannstadt.

Four parts + 1 vol. sup-
 plementary material. Göt-
 tingen: Wallstein Verlag,
 2007. 523 pages.

Friday 26 June was a great day for the Oyneg Shabes. Today at dawn we heard a British radio broadcast about the Polish Jews. It was mentioned everything that we know so much about: Slonim and Vilna, Lemberg and Chelmno. For months we have been suffering because we thought that the world was indifferent to our tragedy, which is unprecedented in human history. (...) But now it is clear that all these efforts have achieved something.

The person writing this in his diary on June 26, 1942, is Emmanuel Ringelblum, the founder of the Oyneg Shabes Archive in the Warsaw ghetto. For months, Ringelblum and his colleagues had tried to smuggle out documentation concerning the ongoing mass-murder of Polish Jews by the Nazis. By putting together an intricate puzzle of often conflicting testimony, they had managed to get a surprisingly precise picture of what was going on in the extermination camps.

Much has been written on the Warsaw ghetto – on the starvation, the poverty, the corruption, the violence; and of course on the revolt that broke out in April 1943, during which a handful of minimally armed, but tactically skilled and extremely motivated members of the resistance succeeded in keeping the German occupying forces at bay for months, until the SS forces finally leveled the entire ghetto to the ground.

THE RESISTANCE WORK OF Oyneg Shabes is at first glance not as spectacular. Reports were requested, and documents of various kinds were collected. Not only official communications, but also seemingly irrelevant things like streetcar tickets, candy wrappers, theater posters, ration books, as well as menus from the restaurants where the privileged (and corrupt) elite of the ghetto could afford to eat while begging orphans starved or froze to death outside on the street. Nor was the work of the Oyneg Shabes archive a one-man operation, but rather a collective action in which every one of the collaborators followed their own leads and wrote on the basis of their own convictions, which makes the work more difficult to depict in a clear-cut way. How the group

was assembled, and what internal contradictions it masked, is seen in Samuel D. Kassow's book, the first detailed study of Oyneg Shabes, and of what it means to engage in a process of information gathering in the middle of an ongoing genocide.

Oyneg Shabes means "the celebrators of the Sabbath", and up until the mass purges of the summer of 1942, it defined its mission as one of primarily documenting the "bad times" Polish Jews were now experiencing. The *Judenrat* the Nazis established was, however, not trusted, so information was instead sought at the voluntary self-help organizations that were still active in the ghetto. It was precisely the dissident character of Oyneg Shabes that is important in understanding the deeper driving forces behind the archive work, Kassow believes. There was, quite simply, a fear that if nothing was done, the history of the Warsaw Ghetto would end up being written exclusively by those who had an interest in falsifying it.

EMMANUEL RINGELBLUM'S own career as a historian was relatively modest before the archive was founded in 1940. He was active early on within the left faction of Poale Zion, the part of the Zionist Left Party that supported the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. Ringelblum was seeking, precisely like the party's founder, Ber Borechov, an amalgam of the universalism of Marxism and the attempt of Zionism and Yiddishism to discover a historic mission for the Jewish working masses. The people must find their clear anchoring, Ringelblum contended, in their own concrete historical situation, and in their own language (Yiddish). During the inter-war period, which was a heyday for Yiddish culture in Poland, he was one of the driving forces behind YIVO, the institute for scientific research on Yiddish that was founded in Vilnius in 1925, and was the founder of the branch dealing with history.

As a historian in his own right, Ringelblum was not particularly original; mostly he was a gifted compiler. But he possessed an unfailing organizational talent, and an ability to keep a cool head in sensitive situations, which would serve him well later, during the occupation.

OYNEG SHABES WAS NOT the work of Ringelblum alone, but without him the archive would never have come to be, writes Kassow. Kassow's own picture of Oyneg Shabes is one of a gigantic choir, where far from all the voices – not even the majority of them – were intellectuals. Contributing with essays and papers were people from all walks of life, everyone from daycare personnel to doctors; even a few representatives of the ghetto's odious police force were recruited as writers. Slowly, the voices are silenced one by one. A contributor who submits an article to the archive one day can be shot to death or deported the next.

Ringelblum spent his final months on the run, hidden by a Polish family. His last works include an essay on the relationship between Jews and Poles during the war. He was now writing in Polish, as if to indicate that his mission was no longer to document the past but to show what a future understanding of history should



look like. In March of 1944, an informer points out the bunker where he was hiding and Ringelblum and his wife and young son are arrested and murdered by the Nazis.

Oyneg Shabes was not the only archive of its kind in Nazi-occupied Poland. As Kassow points out, within the Eastern European Jewish communities there was a centuries-old tradition of storytelling in the form of chronicling, known as *pinkesim*.

It is in such a context that we must also see the *Chronicle* that was written in the ghetto in Lodz.

The ghetto in Lodz (or Litzmannstadt, to which the Nazis renamed the city) was the largest in Poland after the one in Warsaw. But conditions in the two ghettos could not have been farther



ILLUSTRATION: RAGNI SVENSSON



STEVE SEM-SANDBERG
 Author and critic. Has published a dozen novels, investigative stories, and collections of essays. *Theres* (1996), a novel about the journalist and RAF terrorist Ulrike Meinhof, has been translated into several languages.

apart. In the Warsaw ghetto, power factions fought against one another under almost Mafia-like conditions. In Lodz, just one single man ruled, Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, appointed by the Nazis as the Jewish Elder, with almost dictatorial powers. Rumkowski helped the Nazis build up a network of industries and manufactories, almost all of which received orders from the German armaments industry. In Lodz, slave labor came to guarantee survival.

THE AUTOCRACY IN LODZ is also that which controls how the history of the ghetto is told. Around the beginning of the year 1941, Rumkowski had already had an archives department set up, and instructed it to draw up a list of various events in the ghetto. That is how the *Chronicle*

begins: as a kind of report-writing, with continuing announcements about the delivery of food supplies, food rations, weather conditions, and more.

But in the fall of 1941, when the Nazis began to deport Jews to Lodz from the German-speaking parts of the Reich, something happened. Along with the transportations from Berlin, Prague, and Vienna, there followed established Jewish writers and journalists, many of whom soon succeeded in gaining work in the archives division of the ghetto. Between factual statements and the obligatory presence of Rumkowski's speeches in the *Chronicle*, there now begins to appear reports from the ghetto's industries, surprisingly critical insights into people's wretched housing conditions; but also satirical short notices, gossip. Under the recurring headline "*Man hört, man spricht...*", one can read in disguised form how various factions within the "ghetto hierarchy" battle over power and influence.

The Lodz Chronicle is a classic example of how a form is established as an instrument of control, be-

longing to those in power, but is taken over and undermined by those who are intended to use it. That this took place is largely to the credit of two journalists – Oskar Singer and Oskar Rosenfeld. Singer came from Prague, Rosenfeld from Vienna. Both were accustomed to working under censorship. One might, for example, read somewhere in the *Chronicle*: "In tomorrow's edition, we will report on the lives of the dead." (As if there were in fact hundreds of thousands of devout readers of this Archive Journal, as opposed to not even one.)

That devices like those were far from simply rhetorical became clear when the rumors about the extermination camps in Chelmno and Auschwitz began making their way into the ghetto. Now it became clear that it isn't any

European universities. Visions and branding names

imaginary newspaper reader that the *Chronicle* writers are addressing, but rather an entirely real posterity. – “*Ein wenig kompliziert sind die Sachen für den erstaunten Leser unserer Nachwelt*”, we for example see in the *Chronicle* on July 2, 1944, with an increasingly resigned and bitter irony when the deportations to Auschwitz had begun.

The *Chronicle*'s writers lived and worked in a present of constant uncertainty. But they *thought* in a historical imperfect. In this way, the daily registering of murder and abuse also becomes part of a mental survival strategy. The moment you have someone to turn to, be it only a “dismayed” posterity, the possibility arises of imagining an end to the whole madness.

BECAUSE OF THE SIZE of the *Chronicle*, 3,000 closely printed pages, it has previously been available for a wider public only in an abridged English edition. Since last year, however, the full text has been available in German in five volumes, with an additional volume containing supplementary material. *Die Chronik des Getto Litzmannstadt* is the result of a unique and entirely unprecedented cooperation between German and Polish researchers who each sought, on their own, to make sense of the different text versions and, in the explanatory notes, to elucidate questions and problems ranging from internal power relationships to linguistic peculiarities. A whole teeming world is revealed, characterized primarily, of course, by the Nazi reign of terror, with deportations, forced labor, hunger and suffering; but also an irrepressible will to live. As one of the co-editors, Jörg Riecke, writes, the most important purpose of the documentation *The Ghetto Chronicle*'s writers are engaged in is not to fasten history on paper, but to hold onto common sense and reason in a time when reality itself seems to be falling apart. If you can collect trolley tickets and go through the tiny calorie content of a soup ration, you are, after all, still human.

steve sem-sandberg

The review has been published in Dagens Nyheter (Stockholm).



The Rector's Hall in Vilnius University.

PHOTO: VIDAS NAUJIKAS, VILNIUS UNIVERSITY (FROM THE BOOK "UNIVER-CITY")

Bo Larsson (ed.)
Univer-City: The Old Middle-Sized European Academic Town as Framework of the Global Society of Science – Challenges and Possibilities.

Lund: Sekel Bokförlag
 2008. 472 pages

THE UNIVERSITY IS UNIQUE among our civilization's institutions: it makes the true content of European culture evident and tangible. No other institution in our society is as old as the university; none has changed so drastically during the course of its existence. It remains, moreover, extremely dynamic. Indeed, its durability is linked to its versatility (in this regard, it is rewarding to compare the university to the two-thousand-year-old institution of the Catholic Church!). The university has survived revolutions and modernization, it has been subject to both the wisdom and the stupidity of reformers, it has given way to political repression, and yet it has endured. It has continued to exist as an institution, even if the centuries have brought changes to both its contents and its structure. The university's ability to survive is indubitable. It is, clearly, the surest means of developing a civilization, of bequeathing a cultural legacy from generation to generation, quite aside from its functions in research and teaching. Universities, and their associated libraries, are the most visible expressions of our collective memory. They set us apart from other beings, as humans; they are, at the same time, the collective expression of our visions of the future. (The museum, a younger institution than the university, has been more exposed to the proclivi-

ties of the times. As a result, museums have been more frequently subjected to changes in structure, contents and spatial aesthetics.)

THE UNIVERSITY, WHICH originated in Plato's Academia, soon made its triumphant way over Egypt (Alexandria), around the Mediterranean and up into Northern Europe. Ever since the middle ages, the meaning of academia has, as concept and institution, been identified with specific place names. Bologna (1088), Paris (1150), Oxford (1167), Prague (1347), Heidelberg (1386), Rostock (1419), Uppsala (1477), Tartu (1632) stand as *branding names* for learning, for science and research, for academic and for student life. Universities became identified with the towns in which they were seated. Patronymics, by contrast, were associated with outstanding achievements in the sciences rather than with any particular university as an institution. Not until 1810, when the Prussian idealist