

Samuel Kassow's *Who Will Write Our History?*

Clara Weiss
25 July 2015

Who Will Write Our History? Rediscovering a Hidden Archive from the Warsaw Ghetto, by Samuel Kassow, Indiana University Press 2009, 523 pages.

It is rather unusual for a book to be reviewed several years after its first appearance. However, Samuel Kassow's *Who Will Write Our History?*, which first appeared in 2007, is a major work of historical scholarship that should be welcomed by readers of the *World Socialist Web Site*. Kassow's history of the Oyneg Shabes underground archive in the Warsaw Ghetto combines remarkable objectivity with a deep compassion for the tragic fate of Warsaw's Jewry during World War II.

The Oyneg Shabes [Joyful Sabbath] was the largest underground archive in Nazi-occupied Poland. It was set up by a group of Jewish teachers, writers, rabbis and historians under the guidance of the Jewish-Polish historian Emanuel Ringelblum. Between the beginning of the war and the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943, the Oyneg Shabes collected thousands of documents on the Nazi persecution of Polish Jewry. It gathered diaries and essays, conducted thousands of interviews with prisoners of the ghetto and collected several surveys about the composition of the ghetto population. Of the three hidden caches of the archive, only two could be found after the war.

Nevertheless, the 6,000 documents (comprising between 25,000 and 30,000 pieces of paper) to this day remain the single most important documentary basis for any historical study of the annihilation of Polish Jewry. As of yet, very little of it has been published, and most of it only in Hebrew, Polish or Yiddish.

In *Who Will Write Our History?*, Samuel Kassow, professor of history at Trinity College, Connecticut, presents not only the history of the archive and some of its key documents, but also tries to outline the cultural climate and political convictions of the pre-war period that underlay the heroic efforts of the Oyneg Shabes during the war.

Ringelblum and the Left Poalei Tsiyon

Emanuel Ringelblum was born in 1900 to an impoverished Jewish family in the Galician town of Buchach, then part of the Habsburg Empire (today it forms part of Ukraine). Since Jews in Galicia, unlike in the Russian Empire, enjoyed access to higher education (they were restrained only by their financial means), Galicia was home to a relatively well-educated Jewish intelligentsia that was at the same time fervently nationalistic. After the foundation of the Second Polish Republic, Ringelblum left Galicia for the new Polish capital, Warsaw, to study history.

The Warsaw of the 1920s was a politically tumultuous city and home to Europe's largest Jewish community. Here, Ringelblum emerged as an important figure of working class politics and historiography in inter-war Poland. In a detailed, objective and complex chapter, Kassow describes the left-wing Jewish politics that shaped Ringelblum's outlook as a historian.

With its large Jewish population—which included not only the most oppressed layers of the working class, but also many different petty-

bourgeois layers—Poland became the center of a variety of Jewish political organizations.

Next to the Bund, which split from both the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks in 1903, the most significant Jewish organization was the Poalei Tsiyon. The party was founded in the early 1900s. Its chief ideological influence was the Labor Zionist Ber Borochov. Attacking the Bolsheviks' position on the Jewish question, Borochov argued that the Jewish proletariat needed its own nation-state in order both to conduct the class struggle against the bourgeoisie and to fight national oppression.

After the seizure of power by the working class in October 1917, the Bolshevik government for the first time granted full civil rights to a substantial part of Eastern European Jewry. (See also: Anti-Semitism and the Russian Revolution). In response to these developments, the Poalei Tsiyon split into a left and a right wing in 1920. (Borochov himself had turned against the revolution before his early death in December 1917.) The right wing opposed the Revolution and was oriented toward gathering support from British imperialism for the foundation of a Jewish nation-state in Palestine. In Palestine, the Right Poalei Tsiyon became the basis for David Ben-Gurion's Ahdut HaAvoda (Labor Unity), the predecessor of the Israeli Labor Party, which played a major role in the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948.

By contrast, the Left Poalei Tsiyon (LPZ), whose own members in Russia supported the Bolsheviks in the Civil War, defended the Soviet Union and advocated world revolution. The LPZ's claim to admission to the Third International (Comintern) was rejected by Lenin, however, as the party refused to break with the ideology of Ber Borochov. The Left Poalei Tsiyon continued to support the foundation of a Jewish nation state in Palestine, albeit on a "socialist basis." Central to the organization's political and cultural work was its emphasis on the significance of Yiddish culture, based on the language of the impoverished Jewish masses of Eastern Europe.

Overall, the LPZ stood significantly to the left of the better known and larger Bund, which opposed the seizure of power by the working class in 1917 and continued to work within the Second International. Many members of the LPZ and its youth organization, *Yugnt* (Youth), defected to the Communist Party of Poland in the late 1920s and early 30s, and both organizations often worked together closely.

Given the extraordinary impoverishment of substantial sections of Jewish workers and intellectuals and the growing anti-Semitism under the regime of Józef Piłsudski in Poland, both left-wing organizations enjoyed significant support. The Bund and the LPZ oversaw impressive networks of newspapers, ran their own schools and were active in numerous self-help organizations and trade unions. As Kassow points out:

For a young person who lived in a cellar in Lodz's impoverished Balut or Warsaw's Smocza Street, groups like the Bund and the LPZ were far more than mere political parties. They represented a

road to self-respect and human dignity, a way to strive for 'something better.' (p. 35)

However, the LPZ politically did not survive the rise of Stalinism in the Soviet Union. Kassow only hints at the impact of the changing nationality policies in the Soviet Union; the Moscow Trials; the murder by Moscow of the entire leadership and most of the membership of the Polish Communist Party, whom Stalin suspected of sympathizing with his main political opponent, Leon Trotsky; and then the dissolution of the Polish Communist Party by Stalin in 1938. One could add to this list the anti-Semitism that was used by the Stalinist bureaucracy in its struggle against the Left Opposition from the mid-1920s onward. Facing a deep political and financial crisis that began in the early 1930s, the LPZ rejoined the World Zionist Congress in 1937, on the eve of World War II.

Ringelblum became a member of the Poalei Tsiyon shortly before the party split, and then joined the left faction. He remained within the party until the end of his life. During the 1920s and 30s, Ringelblum played a leading role in the party's youth organization, *Yugnt*, and focused much of his work on the education of poor Jewish youth in the LPZ's *Ovnt kursn far arbiter* (Evening classes for workers).

As Warsaw was gradually replacing St. Petersburg as the center of Eastern European Jewish scholarship, Ringelblum, along with historians such as Isaac Schiper and Bela Mandelsberg, founded the *Yunger Historiker Krayz* (Young Historians' Circle). Influenced by both Marxism and Zionism, these historians emphasized that historical research was a weapon in the national struggle for emancipation of the Jewish people and for combatting the growing anti-Semitism in inter-war Poland.

Ringelblum stressed the significance of *zamlng* (collecting material). In his opinion, the study of history had to be a collective project, engaging as many people as possible. In fact, the Jewish historians were so poor and politically isolated that they relied to a great extent on the Polish-Jewish community in order to continue their work. Ringelblum also worked as a community organizer in collaboration with the Joint Distribution Committee, a Jewish relief organization headquartered in the United States, trying to help impoverished Polish Jews who came under increasing political and economic pressure during the 1930s.

The Oyneg Shabes in the Warsaw Ghetto

Ringelblum's convictions as a politician and a historian underlay much of his work during the war, when Poland, with its Jewish population of over 3 million, became the main site of the annihilation of European Jewry.

In November 1940, the Nazis established the Warsaw Ghetto, the largest of its kind in Eastern Europe. Over 400,000 people (around 30 percent of the city's population) were crowded into just 1.3 square miles (2.4 percent of the city of Warsaw). The meager food rations (184 calories per day) forced the great majority of the population to starve. Typhus and other diseases spread under conditions of extreme overcrowding and a lack of hygienic facilities. An estimated 80 percent of the many children in the ghetto were poor. By July 1942, before the beginning of the Great Deportation, around 100,000 people had died of hunger and disease.

To ameliorate the deplorable conditions and poverty, numerous political and social activists founded the so-called *Aleynhilf* (Self-Help). The different political parties that supported the *Aleynhilf* set up their own soup kitchens, many of which became sites of the ghetto's underground press. The *Aleynhilf* soon also came to play a major role in the house committees that had initially been formed spontaneously. Ringelblum was a leading figure in the *Aleynhilf* and, under the cover of the self-help organization, established the Oyneg Shabes in early 1941. (The term Oyneg Shabes means Joyful Sabbath in old Hebrew; the name signifies that in the beginning, the staff always met on the Sabbath.)

The Oyneg Shabes consisted of some 60 members with very different

professional, political and personal backgrounds. Kassow introduces some of the outstanding representatives of the Oyneg Shabes in brief biographical sketches. They included the important Yiddish writer Gustawa Jarecka (1908–1943); the teacher Abraham Lewin (1893–1943), like Ringelblum a member of the LPZ; the businessman and Yiddishist Shmuel Winter (1891–1943); Yitzhak Giterman (1889–1943), a left-wing Zionist and head of the Joint Distribution Committee in Poland; the writer and journalist Peretz Opoczynski (d. 1942); as well as the economists Menakhem Linder (1911–1942) and Jerzy Winkler (d. 1942). Only three members of the Oyneg Shabes were to survive the war.

In late 1942, Ringelblum wrote about the staff of the Oyneg Shabes:

Each member of the Oyneg Shabes knew that his effort and pain, his hard work and toil, his taking constant risks with the dangerous work of moving material from one place to another—that this was done in the name of a high ideal.... The Oyneg Shabes was a brotherhood, an order of brothers who wrote on their flag: readiness to sacrifice, mutual loyalty, and service to [Jewish society]. (quoted, p. 145)

The staff of the archive collected thousands of documents about the Nazi persecution of the Jews. Striving to present as complete a picture of Jewish society in the Ghetto as possible, they investigated, among other things, the role of smuggling for the economy of the ghetto and of Poland. They also organized essay contests to gather material about the destruction of shtetls (traditional small Jewish villages) by the Nazis and on Polish-Jewish relations during the war.

The economist Menakhem Mendel Kon (1881–1943), also a member of the archive, wrote:

I consider it a sacred duty for everyone, whether proficient or not, to write down everything he has seen or heard from others about what the Germans have done.... It must all be recorded without a single fact left out. And when the time comes—as it surely will—let the world read and know what the murderers have done. When the mourners write about this time, this will be their most important material. When those who will avenge us will come to settle accounts, they will be able to rely on [our writings]. (quoted, p. 154)

Another major motif for the work of the archive was to preserve documents of Jewish life and resistance, and the legacy of the Jewish intellectual elite. As Kassow notes:

Only twenty-five years separated the birth of modern secular school systems in Hebrew and Yiddish from the Nazi onslaught. Yet this short period had produced a new intelligentsia of East European Jewish writers, teachers, economists, and journalists—an intelligentsia cut down so quickly, exterminated so totally, that Ringelblum feared that it would be totally forgotten. (p. 366)

Basing himself on the work of the Oyneg Shabes, Kassow paints a complex picture of Ghetto society with its massive social inequality and different political tendencies. He analyzes different positions on the *Judenrat* (Jewish Councils), as well as the behavior of the Jewish policemen and the population's attitude toward them.

Kassow also describes the different moods within the ghetto's population by providing numerous quotations from diaries and other testimonies. Witnessing the stunning brutality and barbarity of the Nazis—whom Abraham Lewin aptly called “twentieth century Huns”—many inhabitants of the Ghetto became deeply demoralized and pessimistic. In light of this unprecedented break-down of civilization, they started questioning the viability of the values and convictions of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.

Ringelblum, too, struggled not to succumb to despair. Like many, failing to understand the impact of Stalinism in the 1920s and 30s, he struggled to comprehend the total collapse of the German working class in the 1930s. However, despite relapses into despair, Ringelblum until the end retained faith in the world revolution and human progress. In a conversation with Hersh Wasser, one of the three survivors of the archive's staff, Ringelblum stated:

I do not see our work as a separate project, as something that includes only Jews, that is only about Jews, and that will interest only Jews. My whole being rebels against that. I cannot agree with such an approach, as a Jew, as a socialist, or as a historian. Given the daunting complexity of social processes, where everything is interdependent, it would make no sense to see ourselves in isolation. Jewish suffering and Jewish liberation and redemption are part and parcel of the general calamity [*umglik*] and the universal drive to throw off the hated [Nazi] yoke. We have to regard ourselves as participants in a universal [*almenshleker*] attempt to construct a solid structure of objective documentation that will work for the good of mankind. Let us hope that the bricks and cement of our experience and our understanding will be able to provide a foundation. (quoted p. 387)

Following the German invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, the Nazi regime escalated its anti-Jewish policies throughout Eastern Europe. In early 1942, the Nazis began deporting Jews from the Łódź Ghetto to the death facility Chełmno. Soon, major deportations started in Kraków. Shtetl after shtetl was wiped out and its population murdered. The scale of the Nazi murder of Jews was difficult to comprehend even for Ringelblum, who had access to much information from all across Europe.

On the basis of material forwarded to the Polish underground by the Oyneg Shabes, the BBC broadcasted in late May 1942 one of the first major news accounts of the evolving genocide. Soon thereafter, on July 22, 1942, the Great Deportations from the Warsaw Ghetto began. Within months, most of the ghetto's population was rounded up, brought to the notorious *Umschlagplatz* and deported to Treblinka, where they were all gassed. The Oyneg Shabes analyzed the impact of the Great Deportation in a break-down of the ghetto's population by sex and age from November 1942. It found that 99 percent of the children between the ages of one and nine and almost 88 percent of the population over 50 had been murdered. Before the deportation there had been 51,458 children. By November 1942 there were only 498. In total, an estimated 265,000 Warsaw Jews were murdered between July 22 and September 21, 1942.

The archival material hitherto collected was buried in three milk cans in the first weeks of the Great Deportation. Several staff members, including Abraham Lewin and Peretz Opoczynski, nevertheless continued writing their diaries, even as their own families were at least in part sent to their death in Treblinka.

After the deportations, the mood within the ghetto changed dramatically. With almost everyone having lost much of their family, there were not only marked signs of social disintegration but also an increasing

determination to offer resistance to the Nazi murderers. Many of the Oyneg Shabes members were involved in the preparations of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of April-May 1943. In its Polish and Yiddish bulletins (*Wiadomo?ci* and *Miteylungen*) the Oyneg Shabes warned Polish Jewry about its impending annihilation, calling upon the Jews to fight against the occupiers.

In response to the uprising, which was spearheaded by 200 youths, the Nazis set the ghetto on fire and razed it to the ground. Ringelblum and his family managed to escape before the destruction of the ghetto and eventually found refuge in a bunker (*Krysia*), where a Polish professor Wolski hid them along with over 30 other Jews. In March of 1944, the hide-out was discovered by the Germans (presumably because Wolski's girlfriend betrayed him). Wolski himself and several of his family members were shot. Ringelblum was most likely tortured by the Gestapo and then taken to the ruins of the Ghetto with his family and other prisoners. When offered a way out of Poland by the Yiddish writer Yekhiel Hirschhaut without his son and wife, he refused. A few days later, Ringelblum was shot together with his family, Hirschhaut and all other prisoners in the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto.

Even in the last months of his life, Ringelblum continued his work. Kassow highlights the enormous achievement of Ringelblum's essay on Polish-Jewish relations. Although written under the most difficult circumstances imaginable, the essay is impressively objective—Ringelblum's credo was to write “sine ira et studio” (without hate and jealousy)—and remains one of the most important works on this subject. It tackles questions such as the anti-Jewish pogroms by sections of the Polish population that were not to be raised by historians after 1945 for many decades.

Samuel Kassow deserves great credit for bringing the history of the Oyneg Shabes and several of its towering figures to the attention of a broader, international audience. Meticulously researched and consistently objective in its account, *Who Will Write Our History?* is an important scholarly achievement.

One of its chief merits consists in the detailed description of the political and intellectual culture in pre-war Poland that shaped Ringelblum's concern for historical truth. In contrast to the embittered anti-Communism among historians of 20th century Poland in particular, Kassow takes a serious and objective approach toward the politics and ideology of the Left Poalei Tsiyon and its members. If anything, one might object that Kassow's account puts too little emphasis on the devastating impact of Stalinism on the labor movement in Poland.

While Kassow himself clearly sees Ringelblum's orientation toward Marxism to be his greatest weakness as a historian, this book shows that it was largely the impact of Marxism and the Russian Revolution that inspired the impressive objectivity, honesty and also the optimism which marked Ringelblum's work.

That it took more than six decades for the first comprehensive history of the Oyneg Shabes to be written and published says a lot about the political and intellectual climate following the re-stabilization of capitalism after the defeat of the German Reich in 1945. (One might also mention that, to this day, little original research into the Holocaust in Poland has been put forward by non-Jewish German historians.) Emanuel Ringelblum, in particular, has gained far too little attention from scholars and among a broader readership, both in Poland and internationally.

Upon its publication in 2007, the book met with well-deserved critical acclaim. Indiana University Press and its main editor, Janet Rabinowitch, are to be credited with producing a meticulously edited work. By now, it has been translated into several languages, including German and French. Moreover, a film based on the book is currently being planned. The volume's success shows that the subject matter and the manner of its presentation are striking a deep chord.

Who Will Write Our History? stands out all the more in an ideological

climate where, under the impact of post-modernism, the rejection of historical truth and the study of history as a science are all too prevalent.

Asked about the main message of his work, Samuel Kassow stated in a radio interview from 2009:

I think the legacy [of the Oyneg Shabes and Ringelblum] is that in times of disaster one can resist not only with guns but also with paper and with pen. Ringelblum and many other Jews understood that if the Germans would win the war, they would determine how the Jews would be remembered, that they would control the sources, they would control the memory and the image. Jews in the Ghetto, historians in the Ghetto, even if they understood that they would probably not survive ... still believed it was important to leave time capsules, to leave sources, so that posterity would remember Polish Jewry, its last chapter, on the basis of Jewish sources. The real message is that history is important. It's important to conserve documents, it's important to conserve a record. It's not just for antiquarians, it's not just for librarians, but it's really about the future of an entire people. And on a more general level, it instills a healthy respect for preserving the sense of the past.

It speaks to the great legacy of the Oyneg Shabes that, on the basis of their work, Kassow was able to bring to life in his book political and intellectual traditions and figures that fascism sought to obliterate. On many levels, *Who Will Write Our History?* is one of the most significant history books of recent years and deserves the broadest possible readership.

An introduction into some of the material from Oyneg Shabes is provided online by Yad Vashem.

Works by Emanuel Ringelblum published in English:

Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto, Ibooks 2006.

Polish-Jewish Relations During the Second World War, Northwestern University Press 1992.

The diary by the Oyneg Shabes member Abraham Lewin, covering the months April 1942 to January 1943, is also available in English:

A Cup of Tears. A Diary of the Warsaw Ghetto, ed. by Antony Polonsky, Basic Backwell 1989.

The author also recommends:

Socialism and historical truth

[17 March 2015]



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact