

Who Will Write Our History: Emanuel Ringelblum and the Warsaw Ghetto archive on the screen

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Written, directed, and produced by Roberta Grossman

Who Will Write Our History, a film about the historic Warsaw Ghetto Archive “Oyneg Shabes,” headed by Polish-Jewish historian Emanuel Ringelblum (1900-1944), was recently screened as part of the New York Jewish Film Festival at Lincoln Center.

Roberta Grossman’s film will run as well at select movie theaters in New York and Los Angeles over the next two weeks. Arte, the Franco-German television network, and German broadcaster ARD are also airing the work.

Who Will Write Our History is based on the remarkable book of the same title by Professor Samuel Kassow, who teaches history at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut.

Amid an international resurgence of the extreme right, this film about the Oyneg Shabes’s courageous struggle to preserve the historical truth about the political and cultural traditions of Polish Jewry and its annihilation at the hands of the Nazis is of great importance.

The Oyneg Shabes [Joyful Sabbath] archive, founded by Ringelblum and compiled in the Warsaw Ghetto (which existed from October 1940 to May 1943) in the face of the constant threat of discovery and death, includes an extraordinary range of historical materials. (The documents were stored in milk cans and metal boxes, and buried in three places in the Ghetto.)

Among the materials are diaries written by professional journalists and historians such as Rachel Auerbach and Ringelblum, as well as those kept by ordinary people and children who took to writing in the Ghetto to document the crimes of the Nazis; items and documents of everyday Ghetto life; documents about the destruction of Polish Jewry in the death camps and through mass shootings; dozens of newspapers, among them the only surviving documents of the Trotskyists in the Warsaw Ghetto and other political tendencies; as well as various documents about religious and cultural life in the Ghetto.

The film narrates the history of the Ghetto archive through the eyes of Auerbach, a brilliant journalist, one of only three survivors of a staff of 60 people.

Reenactments of the period are blended with historical

footage and interviews with leading historians in the field, including Kassow, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Karolina Szymaniak.

The viewers learn about the first months of the war in Poland, the establishment of the Warsaw Ghetto, justified to the Polish population in Nazi propaganda as a way to protect the latter from the allegedly disease-ridden Jewish population; the horrifying conditions in the Ghetto itself, the mass deportations to Treblinka in the summer of 1942; and the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and final Nazi massacre of 1943.

Who Will Write Our History unfolds most of its story based on documents and diaries that were gathered through the Oyneg Shabes. Passages from the documents are read over reenactments of scenes from the Ghetto. Along with Ringelblum’s diaries and notes on the Ghetto we hear from Auerbach, who was working in a soup kitchen for the starving Ghetto population and was carefully taking down her observations for Ringelblum; from Hersh Wasser, who was fighting severe hunger as he continued collecting documents as one of Ringelblum’s executive secretaries; and from Abraham Lewin who, along with his family, fell victim to the deportations in the summer of 1942.

The reenactments are well done, with Polish actors in the roles of Ringelblum (Piotr Glowacki) and his wife (Karolina Gruszka), Auerbach (Jowita Budnik), Wasser (Piotr Jankowski), Lewin (Wojciech Zielinski) and Rabbi Shimon Huberband (Gera Sandler). The performers speak both Polish and Yiddish, the native language of much of Polish Jewry at the time, to recreate the atmosphere of the period and emphasize the protagonists’ commitment to the Yiddish language and culture. The passages quoted in the film to illustrate both the significance of the archive and the horrors of the Ghetto are powerful and moving.

However, *Who Will Write Our History* has serious limitations bound up with the filmmakers’ political and social orientation. Both artistically and in terms of the documents selected, the film focuses on appealing primarily to the moral sentiments and emotions of the viewers, without challenging their more conventional (and generally uninformed) political and

ideological assumptions and prejudices. The historical context for the Holocaust as a whole is hardly touched upon, with only a few of the most basic facts and dates mentioned. This is combined with an almost complete omission of the politics and traditions represented by the Oyneg Shabes and Ringelblum.

The Oyneg Shabes did not arise in an intellectual and political vacuum. It grew out of a rich political and historiographical culture that had emerged in the inter-war period under the combined impact of the 1917 Russian Revolution and the rise of Jewish nationalism and Yiddish culture.

The tradition within the Polish Jewish intelligentsia of fighting anti-Semitism through investigating and writing about the history of Polish Jewry—a tradition explored in great detail in Kassow's book and that informed the work of the Oyneg Shabes—is basically not addressed in the film at all. (There are only a few minutes devoted to this issue at the beginning of *Who Will Write Our History* and a brief remark about the YIVO Institute, the Jewish Scientific Research Institute, which was founded in Vilna in 1925, and to which Ringelblum and many of his coworkers belonged.)

Ringelblum sought to include representatives from all political and cultural tendencies in the Oyneg Shabes's work to preserve historical truth, but there is no question that he and several other leading figures were socialists and Marxists. In the film, Kassow briefly mentions that Ringelblum and Wasser were members of the Left Poalei Zion (LPZ), a socialist Zionist party, and that Ringelblum was "very, very Marxist," but neither the content of those political and theoretical views, nor their relation to the archivists' activities in the Ghetto are discussed.

Overall, three of the five figures that the film quotes at length—Ringelblum, Lewin and Wasser—were convinced socialists, yet the term "socialist" is not mentioned once. Instead, their project is implicitly presented as only being oriented toward the preservation of Jewish national memory. This is historically inaccurate.

Ringelblum and other socialist Zionists were adherents of a specific tendency of cultural and political nationalism, but they were miles apart from the present-day, right-wing strands of Zionism and opposed to viewing the history of the Jews through a purely national lens. The orientation of Ringelblum toward the Jewish masses was informed as much by the powerful influence of socialism and the Russian Revolution—which, since 1905, had been closely intertwined for Eastern European Jewry with the struggle for the national, political and social emancipation of the Jews—as it was by cultural nationalism. (His party, the LPZ, had supported the October Revolution in Russia and many of its members fought in the ranks of the Red Army.)

As Kassow acknowledges in his book, Ringelblum never renounced his dedication to socialist revolution and explicitly stated about the work of the Oyneg Shabes, "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." (Quoted in Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History?* Indiana University Press 2007, p. 387)

One can imagine that the filmmakers were under considerable pressure, both financial and political, to downplay as much as possible this aspect of the work of the Oyneg Shabes and Ringelblum. However, the omission of Marxist and socialist politics from the discussion of Ringelblum and the Oyneg Shabes comes at a major cost. It not only distorts the historical picture of the archive, but also diminishes the lessons that viewers of *Who Will Write Our History* can draw from the work of the Oyneg Shabes for the contemporary struggle against the far right.

The present-day resurgence of fascism and anti-Semitism has been facilitated by the almost willful indifference of the academic community in Europe and the United States to ongoing efforts by prominent German professors, most notably Jörg Baberowski of Berlin's prestigious Humboldt University, to justify the crimes of Hitler and the Nazi regime. Underlying the silence is the fear that outspoken opposition to fascist apologetics carries with it a connotation of left-wing and socialist sympathies that academics are frequently all too anxious to avoid.

Despite this weakness, Grossman's *Who Will Write Our History* is an important contribution to making the historic work of the Oyneg Shabes known to a mass audience. It should be seen widely and will help, one hopes, generate greater interest in Kassow's book and, most importantly, a broader discussion about the significance of historical truth in the struggle against the dangers of fascism.

For the German and French version of the film, click here.

The film will be shown on the German public broadcaster ARD on January 25, 2019.

For information on showings of the film in the United States, click here.

For the review of Samuel Kassow's book, see: Samuel Kassow's Who Will Write Our History?

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