

‘Two and a half years of war.’ Unfinished research project in Warsaw ghetto

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On January 22, 1942 in Warsaw a commission consisting of a historian, a clerk and an economist, announced a contest. A jury was especially interested in hardships of everyday life during the war, in social changes and situation of particular social groups that have experienced the biggest transformation of their previous social roles — for example children. They encouraged ordinary people to participate and substantial financial prizes were announced.

This description might ring a bell for those who are familiar with the methods of research and document gathering of YIVO (Jewish Scientific Institute) in Vilna and with the history of Polish sociology, especially so called ‘personal documents method,’ or ‘Polish method.’¹ But unlike many others, this particular project was forgotten by social scientists² and its sociological roots were

¹ K. Lebow, *The Conscience of the Skin: Interwar Polish Autobiography and Social Rights*, “Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development” vol. 3, no. 3, Winter 2012, p. 298

² In her article about wartime Polish sociology, Antonina Kłoskowska briefly mentions secret learning for youth in the ghetto. She considers period of World War II to be almost lost for collective sociological work and focuses on individual works of leading academics who

neglected. Other projects, many of which were conducted much earlier than the one in question, and that were similar to it in many respects, became sociological classics. Materials gathered during this particular research were mostly fascinating for historians.

The contest that I have mentioned above was announced in the Warsaw ghetto during the World War II and it was part of the research project entitled 'Two and a half years of war.' I will try to explain why was it forgotten and why it should be, in my opinion, reappreciated. But let us take a step back to see the fuller picture.

In the beginning of the Second World War, Polish Jewish historian, political and social activist Emanuel Ringelblum decided to create underground archive that would collect materials and testimonies concerning the life of Jews in Warsaw and other cities of the Second Polish Republic under German occupation. For this purpose, he established the clandestine group called in Hebrew "Oneg Shabbat," The Joy of Saturday, for that was the day when group was meeting. The group created Underground Ghetto Archive (now most commonly referred to as Ringelblum Archive³). They started working together and collecting documents probably as early as in spring of 1940, few months before Warsaw Jewish district was sealed and separated from the rest of the city. The archive contains both documents created independently of "Oneg Shabbat" activities and those prepared by or for the group. It consists of a huge variety of documents: underground ghetto press, German orders, ration cards, poems, reports, literary sketches and many more.⁴ Some of the documents are formal (statistics, official documents), others are personal (letters, diaries). Members of the group themselves were analyzing conditions in Warsaw ghetto and those studies were characterized by their interdisciplinary approach to the subject (sociological, ethnographical, economical and historical methods were used⁵).

pursued their research during the war. There is also no mention of research in Warsaw ghetto in Stefan Nowakowski's account of this period. See: A. Kłosowska, *Wojna i socjologia*, „Kultura i Społeczeństwo” no. 2/1989, vol. 33, pp. 10-15; S. Czarnowski, *Druga wojna światowa i jej społeczno-kulturowe odbicie w społeczności socjologicznej*, „Kultura i Społeczeństwo”, no. 2/1989, vol. 33, pp. 165-179

³ Great historical value of the archive itself had been recognized and it was inscribed on UNESCO Memory of the World Register in 1999. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/memory-of-the-world/register/full-list-of-registered-heritage/registered-heritage-page-9/warsaw-ghetto-archives-emanuel-ringelblum-archives/> [access date: 19.12.2016]

⁴ S.D. Kassow, *Kto napisze naszą historię? Ukryte Archiwum Emanuela Ringelbluma*, [transl.] G. Waluga, O. Zienkiewicz, Warszawa 2010, pp. 146, 202-203.

⁵ R. Sakowska, *Wstęp*, [in:] *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Getto warszawskie: lipiec 1942 — styczeń 1943*, ed. R. Sakowska, Warszawa 1980, p. 7.

Documents gathered by the Archive had been buried in 1942 and 1943 in the area of Warsaw ghetto and uncovered after the war in 1946 and 1950 and today they constitute one of the most important collections of documents for the research on the Holocaust in Poland⁶. Nevertheless, it never became a source for sociologists, while I argue that it can and even should be regarded as one of the ‘social archives’ that were so popular in Poland before and also after the war⁷.

Ringelblum and others saw things changing rapidly and were haunted by a premonition of the worst to come: each month brought news of German terror and new atrocities committed against the Jews.

Each month brought deep changes that were radically transforming the life of Jews. We had to catch every phenomenon when it was still vibrant with life ... “Oneg Shabbat” was trying to record every phenomenon immediately, because every day was like tens of years in previous times”⁸

— recalled Ringelblum in 1942. Collecting however turned out to not be enough for him and his collaborators, who wanted issues of ghetto life to be investigated in the academic manner as they were happening. This why in the autumn of 1941, “Oneg Shabbat” started the research program entitled “Two and a half years of the war.”

Important factor in conceiving such a large-scale project might have been that few years earlier Ringelblum tried to do something similar. As a special envoy of American Joint Distribution Committee to Polish village of Zbąszyń, where Polish Jews expelled from Nazi Germany were deported in 1938, he interviewed refugees about their tragic experiences. Materials gathered then, though very rich, were never investigated due to time limits and although Ringelblum tried to preserved Zbąszyń archive, all documents were lost during the war. Maybe that this academic failure provoked him and other “Oneg Shabbat” members, to start thinking about analyzing the documents they were gathering during the war.

Another factor might have been the assumption, that testimonies might not be enough.

The goal of “Two and a half years” was to create an extensive, academic monograph devoted to various aspects of Jewish life under the German occupation (1939–1942) — hence the title. The study was to be divided in 4

⁶ B. Engelking, J. Leociak, *Getto warszawskie. Przewodnik po nieistniejącym mieście*, Warszawa 2013, p. 17

⁷ See more: K. Lebow, *Autobiography as complaint: Polish social memoir between the world wars*, “Laboratorium,” 2014. 6 (3)

⁸ E. Ringelblum, *Kronika getta warszawskiego*, [transl.] Adam Rutkowski, Warszawa 1983, p. 480

parts: general, economic, cultural-scientific and devoted to social care⁹. For each part, list of detailed subjects to be covered was prepared. They included studies on particular social groups: e.g. ‘situation of children,’¹⁰ ‘situation of women,’¹¹ on relations between different sections of society: e.g. ‘Jewish-Polish relations,’ ‘Jewish-German relations’¹² and on social phenomena: e.g. corruption and theft.¹³ They were interested in German restrictions imposed on Jewish ownership and German reactions to terror directed at Jews. Ringelblum and his collaborators managed to prepare questionnaires for interviews on many specific subjects and ordered detailed studies on various issues that were to be included in the final monograph. For the majority of subjects, theses for research were prepared.¹⁴ In many cases those theses were indeed used for conducting interviews and preparing studies — for example of Jewish life in small towns during the war.¹⁵

There were 3 main editors of the monograph (Ringelblum himself, economist Menachem Linder and activist Lipe Lejzer Bloch) — their task was coordination of works and edition of the final monographs. They were also responsible for recruiting people who could contribute to the project by providing studies on detailed subjects. Some topics were researched by the constant co-workers of “Oneg Shabbat,” while others were supposed to be examined by people from outside the circle, who had inside-knowledge about various issues of interest. They were to be found through previously mentioned contests. Participants were encouraged to propose their own research subjects that could be approved by the jury and included in the final monograph. Coordinators were also responsible for money-raising among sponsors especially for this research program.¹⁶

⁹ S.D. Kassow, *op. cit.*, pp. 204, 214

¹⁰ *Projekt konkursu faktograficznego na opracowanie wybranych tematów z życia Żydów w czasie wojny* [in:] *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy. vol. 11 Ludzie i prace „Oneg Szabat”*, [eds.] A. Bańkowska [and] T. Epszstein, Warszawa 2013, p. 116

¹¹ E. Ringelblum, *Konspekt opracowania dotyczącego kobiety żydowskiej*, [in:] *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Ludzie i prace*, pp. 136-137

¹² *Tezy opracowania o stosunkach żydowsko-niemieckich*, [in:] *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Ludzie i prace*, pp. 118-119. There are questions in this particular outline that focus strongly not only on events, but also on relations between social groups: e.g. ‘What did these Germans know about Jews before [the war]?’ or ‘What do they say about deportations, crimes or about gassing?’

¹³ *Tezy do tematu: korupcja — złodziejstwo*, [in:] *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Ludzie i prace*, pp. 174-177

¹⁴ A. Bańkowska, T. Epszstein, *Wstęp*, [in:] *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Ludzie i prace*, p. L

¹⁵ *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Testimonies from Generalgouvernement*, ed. by A. Bańkowska, Warszawa 2012.

¹⁶ In the cashbooks of “Oneg Shabbat” one finds entries pertaining directly to “Two and a half years of war”. See more: *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Ludzie i prace*, pp. 10-48. Moreover, Ringelblum mentions special subsidy from Joint for this purposes. Ringelblum, *Kronika*, p. 473

Unfortunately, works on ‘Two and a half years of the war’ had been slowed down by the flow of information concerning slaughter of Jews and deportations in towns outside of Warsaw, and by deportations from Warsaw ghetto itself to Treblinka death camp, that started in the summer of 1942.¹⁷ Research ceased to be a priority for “Oneg Shabbat” at this point — it became most important to protest and preserve documentation that was already gathered. Nevertheless, some works on ‘Two and a half years’ continued in the autumn of 1942 after more than 85% of the ghetto’s inhabitants were already deported. Description and analysis of social processes during deportation to Treblinka were to become a part of the project, but such study was only drafted, and like many others belonging to ‘Two and a half years,’ never completed.¹⁸

The goals of the program were academic: to edit and systematize the material that “Oneg Shabbat” gathered until this moment and to provide the analytical frame that would allow draw a full image of life under the Nazi occupation and organize documents. *Full* meant in this context: including different perspectives on selected subjects, to capture the ghetto as it was perceived by various social groups.

At the very core of the project was the focus on the experience of ordinary people and treating them as valuable informants on their own lives and social phenomena that they were experiencing every day — which means they were providing SOURCES for analysis within “Two and a half years” project framework. Similar goals and approach were very characteristic of YIVO that was a one of the first academic institutions to introduce data extracted from personal documents in its research. Including voices of “ordinary people” was a part of YIVO’s political agenda: Institute wanted to capture the society of Eastern European Jews, their everyday life, customs and language as those issues were standing at the center of the *doykayt* [hereness] ideology. Specific Jewish culture was to be both captured and reinforced as YIVO’s leadership saw it as chance of creating new, modern, but yet regional and unique, Jewish identity. All this aligned with leftist political views — which did not mean that Institute supported any particular party.¹⁹ Ringelblum was a long-time YIVO’s collaborator and he was certainly influenced by those ideas. Case of “Oneg Shabbat” group and “Two and a half years” project is much more complex, but one has to bear in mind YIVO’s

¹⁷ L. Jockush, *Collect and Record!: Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe*, New York 2012, p. 35

¹⁸ *Plan opracowania o przebiegu akcji likwidacyjnej getta warszawskiego*, [in:] Archiwum Ringelbluma. Ludzie i prace, pp. 198-203

¹⁹ K. Kijek, „Między uniwersalną nauką a narodową polityką. Charakter projektu badań nad Młodzieżą Żydowskiego Instytutu Naukowego (JIWO) w Polsce Międzywojennej”, unpublished doctoral dissertastion, Institute of History, Polish Academy of Sciences., pp. 30-34

heritage when analyzing Ringelblum's war-time projects. *Doykayt* was no longer the most political agenda, but giving voice to the "ordinary people," the folk, was certainly central for the circle of intellectuals who conceived the project I am analyzing.

Important question regarding testimonies pertains to the issue of testimony itself. Witnesses were not relating their experiences freely, but rather answering questions that researcher asked them. It shows us an interesting duality or maybe even ambiguity of "Oneg Shabbat's" concept. "Ordinary people" were main informants, but it was researchers who structured their narratives by preparing questionnaires, questions and so on. In other words, their accounts were restricted in some sense and listening to their voices was not a goal *per se* of the project. Of course, we can do a similar thing about any project that explores personal narratives, but it is important to stress a visible conceptual difference between "Two and a half years" and, for example, "Polish peasant in America" (that used a freely structured narrative to analyze experience of an emigrant) or YIVO's youth research (where main restriction imposed on participants was the form of their narrative: autobiographies). One of the reasons for it might be stress that "Oneg Shabbat" put on COMPARABILITY of diverse voices. Another might be that Ringelblum's team was more interested in events and processes rather than in the narrating self, her/his feelings and subjective judgments. This can easily be observed in the case of several testimonies of refugees from various towns who reached Warsaw ghetto and gave account of what happened to their communities during the war²⁰. All those testimonies are lined along similar themes; answer similar questions and some of them repeat the structure of the original questionnaire. It would probably be too much to say that final testimonies were standardized, but they were definitely quite comparable to each other.

Preserved outcomes for 'Two and a half years of war' are diverse. For some subjects partial or even full studies were saved, for other topics there exist only fragments of questionnaires that give only vague picture of the direction in which Ringelblum and his collaborators were heading. Among detailed aspects of life in Warsaw ghetto to be researched within the framework of 4 main parts of the monograph "Two and a half years of war" there were for example: situation of children, Jewish life in the city, shelters for refugees, smuggling, corruption, Jewish-German relations, lives of artists and academics and many more.

In this paper I argue that except for its undoubted historical value, materials preserved from 'Two and a half years' can also be methodologically

²⁰ For example see several testimonies included in the following volumes of the full publication of Ringelblum Archive: vol. 6, *Testimonies from Generalgouvernement*; vol. 8, *Areas incorporated into the Reich: the Danzig-West Prussia Reich District, Regierungsbezirk Zichenau, the Province of Upper Silesia*, ed. by Magdalena Siek, Warszawa 2012.

inspiring and that their value for social sciences should be recognized. “Oneg Shabbat” was on one hand methodologically creative and innovative, but on the other — many of the methods used for the project in question were rooted in pre-war sociology, both Polish and Jewish. Some of them found continuation after World War II: especially in Holocaust studies. Ringelblum’s group attempt to preserve linguistic realm of testimony, spoken word, we might say oral history might be a good case here.

We can see ‘Two and a half years’ as a part of a more general process in Central Europe — academic interest in the lives of poor and suffering. Great Depression of 1930s left many people poor, unemployed, and their bad situation drew sociologists’ attention to current social problems and people’s life situation (Lazarus, Marienthal study). It was no different in the Second Polish Republic. Polish sociological specialty of interwar period was ‘personal documents method’ — starting from the works of Znaniecki on Polish peasant in America, then various projects — for example of Ludwik Krzywicki or Józef Chałasiński — in which diaries and autobiographies of disadvantaged social groups were gathered. Similar processes can be traced in the interwar Jewish social sciences (YIVO’s action of collecting autobiographies of young people might be a good case here) and historiography (for example, Ringelblum’s academic interest in the lives of the ‘forgotten’ Jews: women, poor etc.²¹)

As Katherine Lebow shows, 1930s were the period of increased scholarly interest in the experience of ‘ordinary people.’ Their tales were being gathered also in Great Britain, USA and USSR²². It had a lot to do with politics and ideological affiliations of scholars. It was also the case of Ringelblum and his predominantly leftist, or in some cases Marxist, friends.

The methodology used by researchers preparing ‘Two and a half years of war’ was diverse: “Oneg Shabbat” team prepared detailed questionnaires for interviews that were supposed to be the starting point for research on many issues;²³ they conducted oral interviews; they were planning demographic and economic data quantitative analysis — we may say that they were constantly putting quantitative and qualitative data against each other in order to present as full picture of reality as possible. The project ‘Two and a half years of war’ is a part of interwar period intellectual traditions (application of personal documents method; interest in everyday life and in experiences of ordinary people; appliance

²¹ S.D. Kassow, *Emanuel Ringelblum przed wojną: człowiek i historyk*, „Zagłada Żydów”, vol. 3/2007, p. 215.

²² K. Lebow, *Autobiography as complaint*, p. 23

²³ *Tezy do opracowanie o stosunkach żydowsko-niemieckich*, [in:] Archiwum Ringelbluma. Ludzie i prace, pp. 118-119.

of ethnographic and sociological methods²⁴). Its approach to issues that were the subject of the planned study is also very characteristic of social sciences.

They referred to methods developed by the Institute for Jewish Research YIVO, which Ringelblum cooperated with before the war.²⁵ YIVO created interdisciplinary program of research on Jews in Poland and Eastern Europe: it consisted of ethnography, psychology, linguistic studies, sociology, statistics, economy and history. YIVO supported the researchers and encouraged them to engage 'ordinary people' in the research and process of gathering materials.²⁶ It's methodology was visibly in line with other current sociological trends in Europe and Poland of that time.

"Oneg Shabbat" collaborators were undoubtedly inspired by those traditions of interwar Jewish social sciences and by ideas of Florian Znaniecki or Ludwik Krzywicki, both of whom developed sociological methodology for the purpose of analysis of personal narratives of 'ordinary people.'²⁷ Some of Ringelblum's collaborators were personally connected to either YIVO or the above-mentioned circle of Polish social researchers, others were simply open to knowledge and theories from the area of sociology, going beyond borders of traditional historiography. Most of them were not historians but rather writers, ethnographers, journalists, ethnographers, economists trained rather in social sciences than history. But regardless of their professional backgrounds, one of the central methodological problems of the work of all main "Oneg Shabbat" collaborators was the issue of objectivity. Why was it so important?

As mentioned before, the main goal of 'Two and a half years of the war' was to edit and systematize the material that "Oneg Shabbat" gathered; to create scientific monograph that would contain different perspectives and that would give the most exact picture of both events and human attitudes. What does it mean — exact picture? Ringelblum himself used words 'distanced,' 'scientific,' he also pointed at the aim of showing how complex war-time reality was, by including multitude of perspectives on events. He wrote in 1943:

We tried to include the descriptions — for example of one Jewish agglomeration — by adult and a youngster, by religious ... and by secular Jew ...

²⁴ 'What experiences do we have from those two and a half years? What dark sides of life had been revealed to us in that time?', was noted in one of the outlines for research. See: *Zbiór materiałów pt. 'Dwa i pół roku wojny,'* [in:] *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Ludzie i prace*, p. 156.

²⁵ S.D. Kassow, *Kto napisze...*, pp. 168-169, 214; K. Kijek, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-37.

²⁶ See more: C. Kuznitz, *YIVO and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture Scholarship for the Yiddish Nation*, Cambridge 2014.

²⁷ K. Lebow, *The Conscience of the Skin*, p. 298.

Comprehensiveness was the main rule of our activity. Objectivism was the second one. We wanted to depict the truth, no matter how bitter it was.²⁸

How come that a creator of the project that was so strongly focused on personal narratives, individual accounts and testimonies defined “objectivity” as his main academic goal? This puzzle is easier to solve when we look at the interwar activities of YIVO, that Ringelblum was closely connected with. As Kamil Kijek points out, many researchers affiliated with YIVO — and many other institutions focused on social research — fell in the similar trap. On one hand, researchers were fascinated by the idea of social knowledge that would be clear, rational and progressive, but on the other they seemed indifferent or blind to the fact that their choice of research subjects, methods of analysis and social sensitivity were bringing them closer to some particular, in most cases, leftist political ideas²⁹. On other words, many socially and politically engaged researchers of social life were little critical of assumption of “objectivity.”³⁰

Nevertheless, we can defend Ringelblum’s idea of the bird-eye view of the ghetto society by moving focus from his use of the word ‘objectivity,’ and by putting accent on its contextual meaning, which would rather be ‘comprehensiveness,’ emerging from the multitude of voices and perspectives included in the research. If we do so, we could argue that ‘Two and a half years of war’ contributes to the ever-ongoing discussion of representativeness and objectivity of description in qualitative sociology, even though Ringelblum wrote those words before real discussion on ‘representativeness’ in sociology even fully started. Ringelblum’s words can also make us aware once again of the problematic status of “objectivity” and other positivistic categories in social sciences.

‘Representativeness problem’ is closely connected with the concept of ‘objectivity.’ In other words: full picture is never full because it is constructed from a limited number of documents or voices. Nevertheless, the very attempt to include more perspectives on researched issues can be valuable — the picture might never be full or objective, but it can be more “inter-subjective,” more comprehensive. At the very core of “Two and a half years of war” project is the important switch from ‘objectivity’ towards ‘inter-subjectivity.’

Ringelblum and his collaborators were in fact writing history of their own times using methods that are a part of social sciences tradition, with a strong focus on social life. The archive they had created is open to both historical and sociological interpretations — in fact it is a challenge to those divisions. Why should history deal only with the past (if it can be captured as it unveils as well),

²⁸ Ringelblum, *Kronika*, p. 479

²⁹ K. Kijek, *op. cit.*, p. 35

³⁰ *Ibid.*, s. 68

and why should sociology limit itself to analyzing the present (if it can illuminate certain past phenomena as well)?

‘Two and a half years of war’ project had never been completed. Nevertheless among some 35 000 pages of documents in Ringelblum Archive, many can be found that are in fact connected to the planned monograph and would have had become parts of it. Some of them are complete studies on smaller subjects; some are only first drafts that give us only blurred picture of what the final material might have looked like. By looking at them, matching questionnaires and theses with draft answers given, we are able to see some picture of what ‘Two and a half years’ could be — though this picture is blurred and full of white spots.

Why was this project forgotten in history of social sciences? The answer to such question is never easy and in this case it might be even more complicated. Part of the truth is certainly that sociology still did not find way to deal with the Holocaust and it fails to make its tragic history a part of sociological, and not just historical, reflection. As Zygmunt Bauman points out, Holocaust was and continues to be a challenge for social theories and it is not properly addressed³¹. Another point is that sociology more and more rarely addresses past processes as its research subject. It seems that social scholars found it easier to confine Holocaust research to historians, who focused on events and dates rather than social aspects of the wartime reality. In historiographies of the Holocaust we rarely find sociological explanations of human behaviors, instead historians escape difficult questions by focusing of “resistance” (including “civil resistance” into the category), “perpetrators” *etc.*³²

Materials from “Two and a half years” project were also of no big use for post-war trials against German perpetrators and administration of Warsaw ghetto. It seems that they were simply not conceived this way: historical value of the documents was more important to “Oneg Shabbat” than their potential juridical uses. Ringelblum refers several times in his chronicle to “the future historian” who will edit and analyze the material that “Oneg Shabbat” gathered.

³¹ Z. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1989.

³² See for example: Stefan Stach’s article on Jewish Historical Institute during stalinist period, *The Spirit Of The Time Left Its Stamp On These Works: Writing The History Of The Shoah At The Jewish Historical Institute in Stalinist Poland*, in: „Remembrance and Solidarity. Studies In 20th Century European History”, ed. by D. Michman and M. Weber, no. 5, December 2016, pp. 185-213

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‘Two and a Half Years of War.’ Unfinished Research Project in Warsaw Ghetto

Abstract

In 1940, a Warsaw historian and activist Emanuel Ringelblum established Underground Ghetto Archive that collected materials and testimonies concerning the life of Jews in Warsaw and other Polish cities under German occupation. Apart from the collecting focused on the late 1941 and early 1942, archivists were conducting research project ‘Two and half years of the war,’ the aim of which was to prepare a monograph devoted to the various aspects of Jewish life during the war. Among detailed problems to be investigated, many dealt with social life during the war. The project went beyond borders of historiography; its main goal was the analysis of current reality and it was rooted in the intellectual traditions of interwar Jewish and Polish sociology. The aim of this paper is to present ‘Two and a half years’ project from the sociological perspective; to focus on its innovative methodology and to stress that the project was developed in response to the extreme, war-time situation, simultaneously with events, requiring researchers to be flexible and to go beyond their ordinary ways of thinking.

Keywords: personal documents method, Holocaust, Warsaw Ghetto.

