

# Rachel Auerbach's "Yizkor, 1943"

## A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

### Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <https://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/rachel-auerbachs-yizkor-1943>.

### Introduction

Rachel Auerbach, a writer from Poland who wrote in both Yiddish and Polish, is perhaps best known for her role in the Warsaw ghetto, first as an organizer of the soup kitchens in the ghetto and later as part of the Oyneg Shabes, the ghetto's underground archivists led by Emanuel Ringelblum. One of the few members of the group to survive the war, Auerbach helped with the post-war search for the documents that the archivists had buried and hidden, and at both Warsaw's Jewish Historical Institute and Israel's Yad Vashem she collected and organized survivor testimonies.

In March 1943, Auerbach escaped from the Warsaw ghetto and began working for the Jewish underground, the Jewish resistance group fighting the Nazis. While living outside of the ghetto, she continued to write, and in November 1943 she wrote "Yizkor," which is her only piece to be translated into English. Written after the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and subsequent destruction of the ghetto, Auerbach's "Yizkor" mourns the loss of Warsaw's Jewish community, which had been the largest in Europe prior to the war. This kit provides teachers with resources for teaching this piece of literature, as well as more general information about life in the Warsaw Ghetto.

*Cover image:* Rachel Auerbach and Hirsch Wasser unearthing part of the Ringelblum Archives, September 1946. This image is from the photo archives of Yad Vashem, The World Holocaust Remembrance Center.

### Subjects

Eastern Europe, Holocaust, Memoir, Women Writers, Yiddish

### Reading and Background

- The full text of "Yizkor, 1943" is available online at *Tablet Magazine*.
- Several Jewish institutions have published biographies of Auerbach, including *YIVO* and the *Jewish Women's Archive*. Most recently, Auerbach was one of the main figures in the film *Who Will Write Our History*, which was based on Samuel Kassow's book, *Who Will Write Our History?: Rediscovering a Hidden Archive from the Warsaw Ghetto*.
- The title of the essay, "Yizkor," is taken from the memorial service Jews recite four times a year to honor their loved ones who have passed away. For more information on the prayer, reference this page on *My Jewish Learning*.

### Resources

#### 1: Video excerpts, Yitzhak Goskin's "A Day in Warsaw," 1938.

Auerbach's essay is a lament for those who were lost and the culture that was lost as a result of the Warsaw Jewish community being sent to the ghetto and then deported. This film produced by Yitzhak Goskin in 1938 captures everyday life in Jewish Warsaw on the eve of the Holocaust. The film gives viewers today a sense of the life that was lost just a few years later.

**Suggested Activity:** Before watching the two film excerpts, have students write a description of what they imagine Warsaw looked like in 1938 before the Nazis invaded Poland. How would they describe the differences between Jewish and Polish neighborhoods? What would they expect to see in the streets of Jewish Warsaw—for example, how would people dress, what would they be doing professionally, and how would they be interacting?



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After students watch the film clips, have them write a short paragraph comparing what they saw in the film with the assumptions and expectations they wrote about above. How does the film align with or differ from Auerbach's description of Jewish Warsaw?

**Source:** *A Day in Warsaw*, prod. by Yitzhak Goskin. Poland, 1938. Used with permission from the National Center for Jewish Film, Brandeis University.

## 2: Map of the Warsaw Ghetto, 1940.

In "Yizkor," Auerbach mentions a number of specific streets within the Warsaw Ghetto.

**Suggested Activity:** Find the streets Auerbach mentions on this map. Which ones can you find? Which ones are missing? What does the legend teach you about life in the ghetto? What does this map tell you about the size of the ghetto? Why do you think Auerbach mentions the street names in her essay even though so much of the ghetto had been destroyed in the April 1943 uprising before she wrote her essay?

**Source:** "Warsaw: Maps," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed July 2, 2019, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/gallery/warsaw-maps>.

## 3: Image, Umschlagplatz Memorial, Warsaw, Poland, 2017.

The Umschlagplatz Memorial, dedicated in 1988, is located on the site from which Jews were deported from the Warsaw ghetto to Nazi death camps. Upon entering the marble memorial, one can read some of the common names of Jews who lived in the ghetto.

**Suggested Activity:** Looking at the names, what can you learn about the Jews who lived in the ghetto? Which names are familiar? Which languages do you think the names are in? What do the various languages tell you about the diversity of the ghetto?

Auerbach mentions a number of names throughout "Yizkor, 1943," both names that were common for Jews living in Warsaw, as well as names that are specific to individual people, including her relatives. Ask students to think about the many names included in Auerbach's essay and why she may have included them. Why do you think the designers of the Umschlagplatz Memorial chose to honor the memory of the Warsaw ghetto Jews in the way that they did?

**Source:** Untitled photograph of the Umschlagplatz Memorial, by Rachel Rothstein, 2017.

## 4: News report, Jewish Telegraphic Agency, December 22, 1941.

Auerbach's lament focuses a good deal on the children in the Warsaw ghetto. Below is a report from the Jewish Telegraphic Agency about the conditions of the children in the ghetto in 1941.

**Suggested Activity:** Read through the report and focus on Auerbach's description of the children in the Warsaw ghetto in "Yizkor." Based on both sources, how would you say children's experiences in the ghetto were different from adults' experiences? Do you notice any differences between the descriptions in the report and those in Auerbach's essay? If so, how do you account for those differences?

**Source:** "Swarms of Starving, Ragged Children Roam the Warsaw Ghetto," December 23, 1941, JTA Archive, <https://www.jta.org/1941/12/23/archive/swarms-of-starving-ragged-children-roam-the-warsaw-ghetto>, accessed July 2, 2019. This image may not be reproduced without the written permission of Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

## 5: Prayer excerpt, Yizkor, traditional Jewish memorial service.

Judaism has a variety of rituals related to mourning deceased loved ones. The Yizkor service, which is held four times a year (on Yom Kippur, on the last day of Pesach (Passover), on the second day of the holiday of Shevuos, and on the holiday of Shemini Atzereth), is an important, solemn service during which Jews reflect on and remember their departed loved ones. The service includes general prayers, as well as prayers for specific people, including departed parents, children, spouses, siblings, and other relatives and friends.

There is also a section of the Yizkor service in which people say a prayer for those who are not necessarily their friends or family,

but who have died “for *Kiddush Hashem* [the Sanctification of God’s Name].” Auerbach references this section at the end of her essay by writing, “At the end of the prayer in which everyone inserts the names of members of his family there is a passage recited for those who have none to remember them and who, at various times, have died violent deaths because they were Jews. And it is people like those who are now in the majority.”

**Suggested Activity:** Read through this section of the prayer as well as the section, added after the war, for the victims of the Holocaust. Why do you think the rabbis included these sections? What is meant by “*Kiddush Hashem* [the Sanctification of God’s name]”? In what ways do these sections differ from the sections for particular family members? In what ways does the section for Holocaust victims differ from the more general section for people who died for the sanctification of God’s name?

What is the significance of Auerbach titling her essay after the traditional Jewish mourning service? What are the implications of her statement that the *majority* of mourning that has to be done now is for people “who have none to remember them and who, at various times, have died violent deaths because they were Jews”? How does this potentially change the Yizkor ritual for Jews?

**Source:** Yizkor. Source sheet compiled by Sadie Gold-Shapiro using [sefaria.org](https://sefaria.org), 2020.

## 6: Images, Rachel Auerbach and Hirsch Wasser unearthing part of the Ringelblum Archives, 1946, and opening milk cans containing the second part of the Archives, 1950.

Before escaping from the ghetto, Auerbach was part of a secret group led by historian Emanuel Ringelblum known as the Oyneg Shabes. Because the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto did not know if they would survive the war, and they wanted to be sure that future historians knew what the ghetto conditions were like, Auerbach and her fellow members collected stories and everyday artifacts (like candy wrappers and theater tickets), which they buried in three parts. However, at the end of the war, Warsaw was in ruins and it seemed to be an impossible task to find the buried boxes and milk cans which contained the archive material. Auerbach understood that, in addition to writing “Yizkor, 1943,” another important way to honor the memory of those who were killed was to find the hidden archive.

At the third anniversary commemoration of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Auerbach said, “Remember! A national treasure is buried in the ruins. The Ringelblum Archive is there. Even if the ruins reach five stories high, we must find the Archive.” After much digging, they were able to uncover parts of the archive.

**Suggested Activity:** Look closely at each of these two photographs. How would you describe the postures and the expressions on the faces of the people in the images? What kinds of objects do you think they are holding and looking at? What do you see in the background?

Using a small box, create an archive, either as a class or individually, that will tell your story to future historians. Collect examples of everyday materials from your life, and write journal entries that describe your days. In what ways is this project similar to what the members of the Oyneg Shabes did? How is it different?

**Sources:** Photograph, Rachel Auerbach and Hirsch Wasser unearthing part of the “Ringelblum (‘Oneg Shabbat’) Archives,” September 1946, Image 43447, Yad Vashem Archive, accessed January 27, 2020, [https://photos.yadvashem.org/photo-details.html?language=en&item\\_id=43447&ind=15](https://photos.yadvashem.org/photo-details.html?language=en&item_id=43447&ind=15).

Photograph, Opening of milk cans with the second part of the Ringelblum Archive, 1950. This photo appears courtesy of the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, Poland.