

Yizkor, 1943

A story of life in the Warsaw Ghetto

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The Ringelblum Archive cataloged the awe-inspiring endurance of the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto against the murderous cruelty of the Nazi occupier, mass starvation, and disease. A collection of diaries and eyewitness accounts, sociological surveys, poetry, public notices and wall posters, theater tickets, chocolate wrappers, and other documents of a life and a place that were anything but ordinary, the Archive was compiled by dozens of researchers and writers working under the direction of the historian Emanuel Ringelblum, who hoped to preserve the memory of his doomed community. On the eve of the Ghetto uprising, the Archive was buried in three metal milk cans and some metal boxes. Over six weeks of fighting, the Nazis used dynamite, bombs, artillery shells and flame-throwers to reduce the Ghetto to rubble.

Ringelblum and his wife Yehudit and son Uri went into hiding in a bunker on the "Aryan" side of Warsaw, where they were discovered by the Gestapo on March 7, 1944. They were taken to Pawiak Prison where they were tortured and shot, along with the Poles who had sheltered them. In August 1944, the Polish population of Warsaw rose up against the Nazis, who then leveled the rest of the city.

Miraculously, the Ringelblum Archive survived the destruction of the Warsaw's Jewish population, the physical destruction of the Ghetto, and then the obliteration of the rest of Warsaw. On Sept. 18, 1946, 10 metal boxes containing a portion of the Archive were found beneath the rubble of the ruined city. On Dec. 1, 1950, two of the milk cans were discovered in the cellar of a destroyed house on Nowolipki Street, along with a note from 19-year-old Dawid Graber, which read, in part: "What we were unable to scream out to the world, we have concealed under the ground. One thing I am proud of, namely in these disastrous and horrible days I had been chosen to help bury the treasure, in order that you may know of the tortures and murders of the Nazi tyrants."

The third milk can, which contained the records of the Jewish underground and fighting organizations in the Ghetto, has never been found.

The miracle of the milk cans, which are among the very small number of irreplaceable physical objects in the patrimony of the Jewish people, was made possible in large part by the courage of Rachel Auerbach, a gifted young writer and philosophy student from Lvov, who helped Ringelblum compile the Archive and then to bury it. After the war, Auerbach returned to Warsaw, where she helped to recover the objects she had buried—which included manuscripts by her prewar boyfriend, poet Itzik Manger—and thereby to restore a part of the memory of the Jewish people that would have otherwise been lost. In 1950, she emigrated to Israel, where she worked as the founder and director of the Department for the Collection of Witness Testimonies at Yad Vashem and trained several generations of archivists and researchers, while continuing to publish her own journalism, historical essays, and books.

The essay below is one of the few of Rachel Auerbach's essays that have been translated in English. It was written by Auerbach when she was in hiding after the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto, with the aim of informing other Poles of the fate of Poland's Jews. —David Samuels

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I saw a flood once in the mountains. Wooden huts, torn from their foundations were carried above the raging waters. One could still see lighted lamps in them; and men, women, and children in their cradles were tied to the ceiling beams. Other huts were empty inside, but one could see a tangle of arms waving from the roof, like branches blowing in the wind waving desperately toward heaven, toward the river banks for help. At a distance, one could see mouths gaping, but one could not hear the cries because the roar of the waters drowned out everything.

And that's how the Jewish masses flowed to their destruction at the time of the deportations. Sinking as helplessly into the deluge of destruction.

And if, for even one of the days of my life, I should forget how I saw you then, my people, desperate and confused, delivered over to extinction, may all knowledge of me be forgotten and my name be cursed like that of those traitors who are unworthy to share your pain.

Every instinct is revealed in the mass—repulsive, tangled. All feelings churning, feverish to the core. Lashed by hundreds of whips of unreasoning activity. Hundreds of deceptive or ridiculous schemes of rescue. And at the other pole, a yielding to the inevitable; a gravitation toward mass death that is no less substantial than the gravitation toward life. Sometimes the two antipodes followed each other in the same being.

Who can render the stages of the dying of a people? Only the shudder of pity for one's self and for others. And again illusion: waiting for the chance miracle. The insane smile of hope in the eyes of the incurable patient. Ghastly reflections of color on the yellowed face of one who is condemned to death.

Condemned to death. Who could—who wished to understand such a thing? And who could have expected such a degree against the mass? Against such low branches, such simple Jews. The lowly plants of the world. The sorts of people who would have lived out their lives without ever picking a quarrel with the righteous—or even the unrighteous—of this world.

How could such people have been prepared to die in a gas chamber? The sorts of people who were terrified of a dentist's chair; who turned pale at the pulling of a tooth.

And what of them ... the little children?

The little ones, and those smaller still who not long ago were to be seen in the arms of their mothers, smiling at a bird or at a sunbeam. Prattling at strangers in the streetcar.

Who still played “pattycake” or cried “giddyup” waving their tiny hands in the air. Or called “pa-pa.” O, unrecognizable world in which these children and their mothers are gone. “Giddyup.”

Even the sweetest ones: the two- and three-year-olds who seemed like newly hatched chicks tottering about on their weak legs. And even the slightly larger ones who could already talk. Who endlessly asked about the meanings of words. For whom whatever they learned was always brand new. Five-year-olds. And six-year-olds. And those who were older still—their eyes wide with curiosity about the whole world. And those older still whose eyes were already veiled by the mists of their approaching ripeness. Boys who, in their games, were readying themselves for achievements yet to come.

Girls who still nursed their dolls off in corners. Who wore ribbons in their hair; girls, like sparrows, leaping about in courtyards and on garden paths. And those who looked like buds more than half-opened. The kind to whose cheeks the very first wind of summer seems to have given its first glowing caress. Girls of eleven, twelve, thirteen with the faces of angels. Playful as kittens. Smiling May blossoms. And those who have nearly bloomed: the fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds. The Sarahs, the Rebeccahs, the Leahs of the Bible, their names recast into Polish. Their eyes blue and gray and green under brows such as one sees on the frescoes unearthed in Babylon and Egypt. Slender young fräuleins from the wells of Hebron. Jungfraus from Evangelia. Foreign concubines of Jewish patriarchs; desert maidens with flaring nostrils, their hair in ringlets, dark complected but turned pale by passion. Spanish daughters, friends of Hebrew poets of the Middle Ages. Dreamy flowers bent over mirroring pools. And opposite them? Delicate blondes in whom Hebrew passion is interwoven with Slavic cheerfulness. And the even bright flaxen-haired peasants, broad-hipped women, as simple as black bread; or as a shirt of the body of the folk.

It was an uncanny abundance of beauty of that generation growing up under the gray flag of ghetto poverty and mass hunger. Why was it that we were not struck by this as a portent of evil? Why was it that we did not understand that this blossoming implied its own end?

It was these, and such as these, who went into the abyss—our beautiful daughters. These were the ones who were plucked and torn to bits.

And where are the Jewish young men? Earnest and serious; passionate as high-bred horses, chomping at the bit, eager to race. The young workers, the halutsim, Jewish students avid for study, for sports, for politics. World improvers and flag bearers of every revolution. Youths whose passion made them ready to fill the prison cells of all the world. And many were tortured in camps even before the mass murder began. And where are the other youths, simpler than they—the earthen roots of a scattered people; the very essence of sobriety countering the decay of idealism at the trunk. Young men with ebullient spirits, their heads lowered like those of bulls against the decree spoken against our people.

And pious Jews in black gaberdines, looking like priests in their medieval garb: Jews who were rabbis, teachers who wanted to transform our earthly life into a long study of Torah and prayer to God. They were the first to feel the scorn of the butcher. Their constant talk of martyrdom turned out not to be mere empty words.

And still other Jews. Broad-shouldered, deep-voiced, with powerful hands and hearts. Artisans, workers. Wagon drivers, porters. Jews who, with a blow of their fists, could floor any hooligan who dared enter in their neighborhoods.

Where were you when your wives and children, when your old fathers and mothers were taken away? What happened to make you run off like cattle stampeded by fire? Was there no one to give you some purpose in the confusion? You were swept away in the flood, together with those who were weak.

And you sly and cunning merchants, philanthropists in your short fur coats and caps. How was it that you didn't catch on to the murderous swindle? Fathers—and mothers of families; you, in Warsaw. Stout women merchants with proud faces radiating intelligence above your three chins, standing in your shops behind counters heaped with mountains of goods.

And you other mothers. Overworked peddler women and market stallkeepers. Disheveled and as anxious about your children as irritable setting hens when they flap their wings.

And other fathers, already unhorsed, as it were. Selling sweets from their wobbling tables in the days of the ghetto.

What madness is it that drives one to list the various kinds of Jews who were destroyed?

Grandfathers and grandmothers with an abundance of grandchildren. With hands like withered leaves; their heads white. Who already trembled at the latter end of their days. They were not destined simply to decline wearily into their graves like rest-seeking souls; like the sun sinking wearily into the ocean's waves. No. It was decreed that before they died they would get to see the destruction of all that they had begotten; of all that they had built.

The decree against the children and the aged was more complete and more terrible than any.

Those who counted and those who counted for less. Those with aptitudes developed carefully over countless generations. Incomparable talents, richly endowed with wisdom and professional skill: doctors, professors, musicians, painters, architects. And Jewish craftsmen: tailors—famous and sought after; Jewish watchmakers in whom gentiles had confidence. Jewish cabinet makers, printers, bakers. The great proletariat of Warsaw. Or shall I console myself with the fact that, for the most part, you managed to die of hunger and need in the ghetto before the expulsion?

Ah, the ways of Warsaw—the black soil of Jewish Warsaw.

My heart weeps even for the pettiest thief on Krochmalna Street; even for the worst of the knife-wielders of narrow Mila, because even they were killed for being Jewish. Anointed and purified in the brotherhood of death.

Ah, where are you, petty thieves of Warsaw; you illegal street vendors and sellers of rotten apples. And you, the more harmful folk—members of great gangs who held their own courts; who supported their own synagogues in the Days of Awe; who conducted festive funerals and who gave alms like the most prosperous burghers.

Ah, the mad folk of the Jewish street! Disordered soothsayers in a time of war.

Ah, bagel sellers on winter evenings.

Ah, poverty-stricken children of the ghetto. Ghetto peddlers; ghetto smugglers supporting their families; loyal and courageous to the end. Ah, the poor barefoot boys moving through the autumn mire with their boxes of cigarettes, “Cigarettes! Cigarettes! Matches! Matches!” The voice of the tiny cigarette seller crying his wares on the corner of Leszno and Karmelicka Streets still rings in my ears.

Where are you, my boy? What have they done to you? Reels from the unfinished and still unplayed preexpulsion film, “The Singing Ghetto,” wing and unwind in my memory. Even the dead sang in that film. They drummed with their swollen feet as they begged: “Money, ah money, Money is the best thing there is.”

There was no power on earth, no calamity that could interfere with their quarrelsome presence in that Jewish street. Until there came a Day of Curses—a day that was entirely night.

Hitler finally achieved his greatest ambition of the war. And finally, his dreadful enemy was defeated and fell: that little boy on the corner of Leszno and Karmelicka Streets; of Smocza and Nowolipie; of Dzika Street. The weapons of the women peddlers reached to every market square.

What luxury! They stopped tearing at their own throats from morning until night. They stopped snatching morsels of clay-colored, clay-adulterated bread from each other.

The first to be rounded up were the beggars. All the unemployed and the homeless were gathered up off the streets. They were loaded into wagons on the first morning of the Deportation and driven through the town. They cried bitterly and stretched their hands out or wrung them in despair; or covered their faces. The youngest of them cried, “Mother, mother.” And indeed, there were women to be seen running along both sides of the wagons, their head-shawls slipping from their heads as they stretched their hands out toward their children, those young smugglers who had been rounded up along the walls.

In other of the wagons, the captives looked like people condemned to death who, in the old copperplate engravings, are shown being driven to the scaffold in tumbrils.

The outcries died down in the town, and there was silence. Later on, there were no cries heard. Except when women were caught and loaded onto the wagons and one could hear an occasion in-drawn hiss, such as fowl make as they are carried to the slaughter.

Men, for the most part, were silent. Even the children were so petrified that they seldom cried.

The beggars were rounded up, and there was no further singing in the ghetto. I heard singing only once more after the deportations began. A monotonous melody from the steppes sung by a thirteen-year-old beggar girl. Over a period of two weeks she used to creep out of her hiding place in the evening, when the day's roundups were over. Each day, looking thinner and paler and with an increasingly brighter aureole of grief about her head, she took her place at her usual spot behind a house on Leszno Street and began the warbling by whose means she earned her bite of bread ...

Enough, enough ... I have to stop writing.

No. No. I can't stop. I remember another girl of fourteen. My own brother's orphan daughter in Lemberg whom I carried about in my arms as if she were my own child. Lussye! And another Lussye, older than she, one of my cousins who was studying in Lemberg and who was like a sister to me. And Lonye, my brother's widow, the mother of the first Lussye, and Mundek, an older child of hers whom I thought of as my own son from the time that he was orphaned. And another girl in the family, a pianist of thirteen, my talented little cousin, Yossima.

And all of my mother's relatives in their distant village in Podolia: Auntie Bayle; Auntie Tsirl; Uncle Yassy; Auntie Dortsye, my childhood's ideal of beauty.

I have so many names to recall, how can I leave any of them out, since nearly all of them went off to Belzec and Treblinka or were killed on the spot in Lanowce and Ozieran in Czortkow and in Mielnica. In Krzywińce and elsewhere.

Absurd! I will utter no more names. They are all mine, all related. All who were killed. Who are no more. Those whom I knew and loved press on my memory, which I compare now to a cemetery. The only cemetery in which there are still indications that they once lived in this world.

I feel—and I know—that they want it that way. Each day I recall another one of those who are gone.

And when I come to the end of the list, segment by segment added to the segments of my present life in the town, I start over again from the beginning, and always in pain. Each of them hurts me individually, the way one feels pain when parts of the body have been surgically removed. When the nerves surviving in the nervous system signal the presence of every finger on amputated hands or feet.

Not long ago, I saw a woman in the streetcar, her head thrown back, talking to herself. I thought that she was either a drunk or out of her mind. It turned out that she was a mother who had just received the news that her son, who had been rounded up in the street, had been shot.

“My child,” she stammered, paying no attention to the other people in the streetcar, “my son. My beautiful, beloved son.”

I too would like to talk to myself like one mad or drunk, the way that woman did in the Book of Judges who poured out her heart unto the Lord and whom Eli drove from the Temple.

I may neither groan nor weep. I may not draw attention to myself in the street.

And I need to groan; I need to weep. Not four times a year. I feel the need to say Yizkor four times a day.

Yizkor elohim es nishmas avi mori ve'imi morasi ... Remember, Oh Lord, the souls of those who passed from this world horribly, dying strange deaths before their time. And now, suddenly I seem to see myself as a child standing on a bench behind my mother who, along with my grandmother and my aunts, is praying before the east wall of the woman's section of the synagogue in Lanowce. I stand on tiptoe peering down through panes of glass at the congregation in the synagogue that my grandfather built. And just then the Torah reader, Hersh's Meyer-Itsik, strikes the podium and cries out with a mighty voice so that he will be heard by men and women on both sides of the partition and by the community's orphans, boys, and girls, who are already standing, waiting for this announcement: "We recite Yizkor."

The solemn moment has arrived when we remember those who are no longer with us. Even those who have finished their prayers come in at this time to be with everyone else as they wait for the words, "We recite Yizkor."

And he who has survived and lives and who approaches this place, let him bow his head and, with anguished heart, let him hear those words and remember his names as I have remembered mine—the names of those who were destroyed.

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.

—Aryan Side of Warsaw, November 1943

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Rachel Auerbach (1903–1976) was a writer and essayist in Yiddish and Polish.