

Who Will Write Our History

<https://whowillwriteourhistory.com>

Reviewed by Sister Grace Marie Del Priore, Felician Sisters of North America Provincial Archive

The 2018 documentary *Who Will Write Our History* tells the story of Oyneg Shabes, the secret archives of the Warsaw Ghetto. Directed by Roberta Grossman and distributed by [Abramorama](#), it is a moving and thought-provoking documentary and one of the first major films about this archives. The film had a limited release run in theaters in 2018 and it was an official selection at Jewish and international film festivals, winning best documentary multiple times.¹ It includes original footage and reenactments based on materials from the Oyneg Shabes Archive. For example, the words of Rachel Auerbach, journalist and member of the Oyneg Shabes group, were recorded by three-time Academy Award-nominee Joan Allen and those of Emanuel Ringelblum by Academy Award-winner Adrien Brody. The personal writings of other members of Oyneg Shabes are also quoted extensively in the film. The documentary is based on American historian Samuel Kassow's book *Who Will Write Our History?: Rediscovering a Hidden Archive from the Warsaw Ghetto*, which tells the story of Emanuel Ringelblum and his efforts to preserve the memory of the Jewish people during World War II. Kassow, consulting scholar for the film, was interviewed by Grossman in the documentary.

By 1939, Jewish refugees from the Polish-German front of the war had flooded the city of Warsaw, swelling the population to almost 500,000. The refugees were forcibly moved into a section of the city that measured 1.3 square miles. Residents with jobs outside the city borders were suddenly unemployed. The food supply was intentionally meager, and as a result, the price of food on the black market was dramatically inflated. Many in the ghetto died from starvation and typhus.² *Who Will Write Our History* chronicles the work of Oyneg Shabes in the Warsaw Ghetto.³ Ringelblum was a historian and respected member of the Jewish intelligentsia. He documented the war in his diary, recognizing that it was an unprecedented time in history. Ringelblum believed that Jewish history is not only that of rabbis and philosophers; it is the history of all Jews. He witnessed the Nazis document life in the ghetto with cameras and films, which the German propaganda

¹ "Home page," *Who Will Write Our History*, accessed October 12, 2020, <https://whowillwriteourhistory.com>.

² Israel Gutman, *Resistance: The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1998), 118–119, 200.

³ The name can be spelled several different ways, due to the translation from Yiddish. The documentary identifies it as Oyneg Shabes, the spelling its founder, Emanuel Ringelblum, used.

unit used to spread anti-Semitic messages. Ringelblum wanted to write the history of the war from the Jewish perspective. He gave select members of the community journals in which to record their eyewitness accounts. The group comprised sixty people who met on the Sabbath, which was the origin of their name. Oyneg Shabes means “Joy of the Sabbath.”

Ringelblum assisted refugees as part of the Joint Distribution Committee.⁴ Later, he initiated Jewish Self Help, an outreach group in the Warsaw Ghetto. He worked to ameliorate the deprivations of the ghetto and founded a society for the advancement of Yiddish culture.⁵ Additionally, he started a soup kitchen that he asked Rachel Auerbach to run. Auerbach, a respected journalist and member of Oyneg Shabes, agreed, but ultimately came to the conclusion that, due to the woeful lack of food available, it had not actually helped anyone.

Ringelblum called this group “the sacred society” and the archives a “legend.”⁶ It is also known as the Ringelblum Archive. In the book, Kassow quotes Ringelblum: “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].”⁷ He wanted to create an archives about life in the ghetto. This was for posterity, but also for the present. Oyneg Shabes functioned as a research center; the essays and papers it produced conveyed both information and perspective about what was happening.⁸ Ghetto institutions published these writings, and the Oyneg Shabes intended to organize the materials into a volume towards the end of 1941.⁹ The scholarly activity was a tool for reaching their goal. As Ringelblum wrote, “The Oyneg Shabes is not a group of researchers who compete with one another but a united group, a brotherhood where all help one another.”¹⁰

The members of Oyneg Shabes took great risks. They were forbidden to take photographs in the ghetto. Accusing the Nazis of crimes was punishable by death. Because their activities carried great risks, they had to be extremely cautious: only three members knew where the physical documents were kept. When they were buried later on, only one member knew the location. This way, if the Gestapo arrested a member of the Oyneg Shabes, the individual would not be able to give

⁴ “Ringelblum, Emanuel,” Yad Vashem, accessed October 14, 2020, https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205830.pdf.

⁵ “The Voices,” Who Will Write Our History, accessed October 12, 2020, <https://whowillwriteourhistory.com/about-the-film/voices-and-treasures-of-the-oyneg-shabes/>.

⁶ “Who Will Write Our History? – Samuel Kassow,” Yad Vashem, accessed October 12, 2020, <https://www.yadvashem.org/education/educational-materials/books/who-will-write.html>.

⁷ Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History?: Rediscovering a Hidden Archive from the Warsaw Ghetto* (New York: Vintage, 2009), cited in Yad Vashem, accessed October 14, 2020, <https://www.yadvashem.org/education/educational-materials/books/who-will-write.html>.

⁸ “In a Ceremony Today . . .,” Yad Vashem, accessed October 14, 2020, <https://www.yadvashem.org/press-release/15-september-2003-09-43.html>.

⁹ “Let the World Read and Know,” Yad Vashem, accessed October 14, 2020, <https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/ringelblum/index.asp>.

¹⁰ “Who Will Write Our History? – Samuel Kassow,” Yad Vashem.

them any information. Oyneg Shabes created a record of the thriving Jewish community in Warsaw. The gathering and safekeeping of archival materials was crucial to their purpose and action. They were keeping a record of Nazi crimes but were also leaving a legacy when they realized their deaths were imminent.

The creation of records is seen in the documentary through reenactments. Actors portray residents of the ghetto writing, drawing, and taking photographs. They saved poetry, literary pieces, photographs, works of art, and diaries. They also kept reports, interviews, official and underground newspapers, religious documents, and German pronouncements. They memorialized their daily life and death, reflecting the value of ordinary people. They saved information about the homeless, refugees, the role of women, and children. They preserved records about illnesses, smuggling, and the experience of hunger. They interviewed witnesses of mass shootings and overheard plans of deportation. They documented the cultural life in the ghetto: the underground schools, literature, and theaters. They gathered testimonies that expressed the varying perspectives about life in the ghetto.

More significantly, they documented the actions of the Jewish Police against their own people. The Oyneg Shabes was one of a few places with records about this; even contemporary writings on the Holocaust do not mention it.¹¹ They also documented the fate of Jews throughout Poland through interviews with the ghetto's refugee population and saved records about the Great Deportation when they began to be deported to concentration camps. Detailed reports were written about various events of the war that occurred in different places.¹² More than 30,000 pages of material were saved. It is the largest collection of documents detailing the fate of Jews under Nazi rule.

The Oyneg Shabes Archive documents the voices, culture, and beliefs of a marginalized and persecuted people. It was their way of resisting and asserting themselves so they would be heard and remembered. They refused to be voiceless. Which groups are longing to be heard? How are different voices and perspectives documented in our archives? Whose voices are we preserving or suppressing with our policies? These questions are part of our awareness in our contemporary times.

During the Great Deportation in August of 1942, members of the Oyneg Shabes buried the first cache of documents in milk cans and tin boxes. As the "Final Solution" was implemented and deportations continued, more members were killed. Those who remained persevered in their work. In February 1943, a second cache was buried in another location. They also used the information to make their voices heard. After distributing a clandestine bulletin to the ghetto about the Nazi plan, the Oyneg Shabes sent all the information they had to the Polish Underground, who smuggled it out of the country to London, where the news was broadcast on BBC radio. At the outbreak of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, they buried the last cache.

¹¹ "Let the World Read and Know," Yad Vashem.

¹² "Let the World Read and Know," Yad Vashem.

Only three members of the Oyneg Shabes survived. Ringelblum and his family were caught and executed in 1944. Hersh Wasser, one of Ringelblum's secretaries, and his wife Bluma survived. Auerbach is the third survivor. After the war, she emigrated to Israel, where she created the Survivor's Testimony Department at Yad Vashem. She dedicated the rest of her life to collecting witness testimonies and writing about the people she knew during the war. In 1960, she was an influential part of the war crime tribunal, convincing Israel's state prosecutor to include survivor testimony in the trial of Adolf Eichmann. Auerbach gave testimony about Ringelblum and the Oyneg Shabes Archive.

The first cache was discovered in 1946. The effort was led by Wasser, who was the only one who knew where it was buried. Polish construction workers discovered the second cache in 1950. The third has yet to be unearthed. In 1999, the Oyneg Shabes Archive was one of three Polish collections included in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register.¹³ The Oyneg Shabes Archive has been preserved at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, and in 2018, it became a permanent exhibit there. Some records from the Oyneg Shabes are also at Yad Vashem in Israel.¹⁴

Because of the work of Emanuel Ringelblum and his colleagues, we know more about the history of Jews during the Holocaust. We also know them: their values, hopes, and personal experiences. The Oyneg Shabes group documented their identity as a culture; *Who Will Write Our History* uses these very documents to show that to the viewer. This serves as a reminder of the purpose of archives to preserve the voices of the marginalized and the persecuted. The struggle to hear them is the fundamental challenge of the archival profession.

¹³ "Let the World Read and Know," Yad Vashem.

¹⁴ "In a Ceremony Today . . .," Yad Vashem.