Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

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Part One

Historiography
From the moment that its existence became widely known, the Ringelblum Archive (also known as the Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto) was widely regarded as a collection of unusual significance. Under the initiative of historian Emanuel Ringelblum, a group of social activists incarcerated in the Warsaw Ghetto created the archive between 1940 and 1943 with the aim to document the persecution of Jews in occupied Poland. Emulating the working principles of YIVO (Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut, Yiddish Scientific Institute), the Warsaw group gathered and produced a total of 35,000 pages of documents in Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew, and German and stowed them away secretly within the Ghetto. Among the documents were diaries, accounts from approximately 300 Jewish communities from the whole territory of occupied Poland, school essays, research works, and official German documents like posters, identification cards, and food ration cards. There were also some 70 photographs and over 300 drawings and paintings.

The Archive was retrieved in parts from the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto: Part I (concealed on August 3, 1942) was found on September 18, 1946, and Part II (concealed in early February 1943) was found on December 1, 1950. The collection was housed in the Central Jewish Historical Commission (from

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1947 the Jewish Historical Institute, JHI), and the members of the commission, which included the original surviving secretary of the Archive, Hersh Wasser, immediately began cataloguing the collection. The documents gathered in the Archive formed a source base for the first academic research articles on the Holocaust in occupied Poland, published initially in Yiddish in Bleter far Geshikhte: Tsaytshrift fun Yidishn Historishn Institut in Poyln and beginning in 1950 in Polish in Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego (for a short time published also in Yiddish as Yediyes). Given the significance of these documents and the public interest they evoked, it is not surprising that they were quickly used for ideological propaganda. This began with the communist takeover in Poland and continued later under Polish Stalinism. As Ber Mark (the director of the Jewish Historical Institute from 1949) wrote in the first issue of Biuletyn, the key tasks of the Institute were not only to study the history of Jews in Poland but also, immeasurably more importantly, to “show the


true face of fascism and imperialism, focusing on the danger of the war looming over the nations of the world from instigators from across the ocean.\textsuperscript{6} The main weapon of the Institute in this fight was the Ringelblum Archive. In this chapter we will demonstrate how the editorial choices made by the Jewish Historical Institute in using the documents collected in the Warsaw Ghetto constituted de facto self-censorship and this editorial line was assimilated into the official state narrative of World War II.\textsuperscript{7}

Those aims were, considering the political environment of Stalinist Poland, not surprising. In-house censorship carried out by publishing houses, editors, and the authors themselves, even before the book or article reached the Main Office for Control of the Press, Publishing, and Performances (Główny Urząd Kontroli Prasy, Publikacji i Widowisk GUKPPiW), was common in the period and has now been widely discussed.\textsuperscript{8} Most of the time, following official state censorship guidelines was considered a price worth paying for publication, even if this was not stated explicitly. Ber Mark’s own editorial changes and self-censorship in producing the Ringelblum Archive allowed for a narrative of the Holocaust to enter into the restrictive public discourse of Poland and to ensure the existence and continued publishing of the JHI at a time when the state was shutting down other Jewish institutions. This editorial work not only aimed at conforming to communist ideology and the demands of the socialist state apparatus, but also at constructing a positive image of Jews during the Holocaust—an image of Jews for the postwar Jewish community. As the Ringelblum Archive became of vital significance to the construction of Jewish Holocaust memory, so too did the JHI’s self-censorship.

In this article we will focus on three published volumes of literary works preserved in the Ringelblum Archive: a collection of short stories by Peretz Opoczynski entitled Reportazhn fun varshever getto\textsuperscript{9} (Reportage from the

\textsuperscript{6} Bernard Mark, “Rola i zadania Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego” [Role and tasks of the Jewish Historical Institute], \textit{BŻIH} 1 (1950): 3.


\textsuperscript{9} Peretz Opotshinski, \textit{Reportazhn fun varshever geto} [Reportages from the Warsaw Ghetto], ed. D. Sfard (Warsaw: Yidish Bukh, 1954). Opoczynski’s reportages appeared at the time also in \textit{Bleter far Gesvikhte}.
Warsaw ghetto), a collection of stories by Jehuda Feld entitled *In di tsaytn fun Homen dem tsveytn*¹⁰ (In the times of the second Haman) and a novel by Zalmen Skalov, *Der haknkrayts: Di hak on krayts*¹¹ (The Swastika: The axe without a cross). All three were published in 1954.¹² All of these editions were overseen by Ber Mark, both a historian and an outstanding literary critic. They were published by the Jewish Historical Institute in association with the publishing house Yidish Bukh,¹³ (also spelled Idisz Buch), an independent publishing house, and after 1950 the only publisher of Yiddish books in postwar Poland, with up to thirty titles appearing every year between 1950–1955. The end of the thaw curtailed this outburst of publications, including the ambitious plan to publish further literary sources from the ghettos. The publishers’ intention had probably been to carry this out over the following years as a publishing series entitled *Literarishe shafungen in di getos un lagern* (Literary works in the ghettos and camps).

Publications of documents from the Ringelblum Archive came at a price. As Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikov writes, the main aim of Yidish Bukh was to commemorate the Holocaust and to promote the rebuilding of Jewish life in Poland.¹⁴ Yet, they did not only publish Holocaust-related books at that time. Their 1950’s publishing catalogue reflects the spirit of the times, as the publishing house produced numerous works, mainly in translation, which can be considered purely ideological. For instance, in 1954 these included I. Lekhter’s “Demokratye oyfn amerikaner shtayger” (“Democracy”: the American way) and *Unter der tsionistisher hershaft* (Under the Zionist rule).

¹² Yidish Bukh published one more book of literary works assembled from the Ringelblum Archive, a volume of stories by various authors: *Tsvishn lebn un toyt* [Between life and death] (Warsaw: Yidish Bukh, 1955). The volume underwent similar censorship as the works analyzed in this article.