"Before the bow that was drawn": The Vilna Komitet and its documentation of the destruction of Polish Jewry, 1939–1940/41

by Miriam Schulz, translation by Joshua Price and Miriam Schulz

In geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies (May 2018)

For the online version of this article:

https://ingeveb.org/articles/before-the-bow-that-was-drawn
"BEFORE THE BOW THAT WAS DRAWN": THE
VILNA KOMITET AND ITS DOCUMENTATION OF
THE DESTRUCTION OF POLISH JEWRY
1939-1940/41

Miriam Schulz
Translation by Joshua Price and Miriam Schulz

Abstract: Perhaps the most famous collective effort to document the Holocaust while it was still unfolding is the Oyneg Shabes archive of the Warsaw Ghetto, organized by Emanuel Ringelblum. From late 1940 to early 1943, the members of Oyneg Shabes worked to gather material documenting all aspects of life in the ghetto. At first, Ringelblum’s intention was that this material would be of value for the work of rebuilding Polish-Jewish life and Polish-Jewish relations after the war. But by the start of the mass deportations in 1942, the archival work became focused on documenting the destruction of Polish Jewry. The Warsaw ghetto was not the only community to undertake the work of documenting and archiving their experiences, however. As Miriam Schulz writes in the following introduction to her recent book, “Similarly seized by the ‘fever’ to gather and document, Jewish civil resistance groups started community archives all over German-occupied Eastern Europe between 1939 and 1945, including in the ghettos of Białystok, Kovno, Łódź and Vilna.” Schulz’ book focuses on what appears to be the very first of these initiatives, the Vilna Committee, a group of sixty Jewish writers and journalists who began documenting the destruction of Polish Jewry in September of 1939.

The first half of Schulz’s book, Der Beginn des Untergangs: Die Zerstörung der jüdischen Gemeinden in Polen und das Vermächtnis des Wilnaer Komitees ("Before the
bow that was drawn': The Vilna Komitet and its documentation of the destruction of Polish Jewry, 1939–1940/41), offers the historical context of the moment when the committee was created, describes the situation in Vilna, details the committee members and their work, and compares the Vilna Committee with other similar projects. The second half of the book presents six “bulletins” produced by the committee in the original Yiddish and in German translation, with brief introductions to each. We are very pleased to present here the introduction to Schulz’s book in a translation done by the author and Joshua Price, accompanied by Price’s translation from the original Yiddish of one of the committee’s bulletins. This bulletin, no 3, “discusses the campaigns of September 1939—a ‘broad topic, which encompasses a sea of suffering, bloodshed, offenses, and humiliation.’ The Bulletin describes violent mass expulsions and looting of Jews from the cities of Sierpc, Ostrów Mazowiecka and Wysokie-Mazowiecka (both in the Białystok voivodeship), Brontshik (Węgrów district) and Wyszków.”

The author is working on a complete English translation of this book. In the meantime, we hope that these excerpts will help introduce English language audiences to this important new scholarly work and the history of the Vilna Committee. —The Editors

Introduction

Language has unmistakably made plain that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theater. It is the medium of past experience, just as the earth is the medium in which dead cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. [...] For the matter itself is merely a deposit, a stratum, which yields only the most meticulous examination of what constitutes the real treasure hidden within the earth: the images, severed from all earlier associations, that stand—like precious fragments or torsos in a collector’s gallery—in the sober rooms of our later insights. True, for successful excavation a plan is needed. Yet no less indispensable is the cautious probing of the spade in the dark loam, and it is to cheat oneself of the richest prize to preserve as a record merely the inventory of one’s discoveries, and not this dark joy of the place of the finding itself.2

1 Isaiah 21:15.
Like an excavation of a historical site, Walter Benjamin’s archaeological concept of memory as “the medium of past experience” synthesizes a loss experienced in the past and an attempt at recovery. Memories are like landscapes of ruins—sometimes well-preserved, sometimes in decay—and with increasing distance from the experience, they gradually become more fragile and more manipulable. These remnants are, however, the “vehicle of historical knowledge.” Their preservation bears a directive for the future, and the act of their conscious transmission entails a promise and the acceptance of a responsibility: archived memory is power.

Jacques Derrida, in *Archive Fever*, argues that the urge to archive is a kind of disease, a *conditio humana*, originating from the radical finiteness of memory and the threatening possibility of amnesia. People are less eager to enter or use the archive than to merely have it. This instinct can be observed in all the dictatorships of the twentieth century as well as in those people who, according to their rulers, should have had no place in history, but who created archives nevertheless. The age of totalitarian dictatorships exposed the potential of the archive in its most extreme form: both the impotence of archives—particularly their susceptibility to abuse and destruction—and the concrete power of archives to accurately (and often subversively) document historical events and thereby offer a transparent record of the past for future historians. With respect to the impotence of the archive, one cannot help but cautiously agree with Voltaire’s famous claim that “History is the lie commonly agreed upon.” But the threat of the destruction of historical knowledge was met with the opposing drive to gather records counter to the official documents of the given totalitarian regime, to create archives outside of the state apparatus, and to document the experience and struggle of a given persecuted social or ethnic group.

Similarly seized by the “fever” to gather and document, Jewish civil resistance groups started community archives all over German-occupied Eastern Europe between 1939 and 1945, including in the ghettos of Białystok, Kovno, Łódź and Vilna. The largest and most famous of these archives was created by *Oyneg Shabes*, a group of activists led by Emanuel Ringelblum, in the Warsaw ghetto between 1940 and 1943.

---

3 Dietmar Schenk, *Aufheben, was nicht vergessen werden darf. Archive vom alten Europa bis zur digitalen Welt* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2013), 140.


7 This claim is also attributed to Napoleon.

8 On November 22, 1940, Emanuel Ringelblum (1900–1944) initiated the *Oyneg Shabes* project in the recently sealed-up Warsaw ghetto together with an unknown number of assistants (Samuel Kassow estimates between 50 and 60 activists). Their objective was to document, investigate, and archive all sides of their lives in the ghetto without delay. The code name *Oyneg Shabes* (Isaiah 58:13: “delight of the Shabbat”) indicated not only the day on which they met — it also established a continuity to gatherings which Chaim-Nachman Bialik organized under the same name in 1928. cf.: Eleonora Bergman, “Ein Archiv der Opfer? Das Ringelblum-Archiv” in: *Wie mächtig sind Archive? Perspektiven der Archiwissenschaft*, eds. Rainer Hering and Dietmar Schenk (Hamburg: Veröffentlichung des
These underground archives emerged not ex nihilo but from a long-standing Jewish archival impulse—one that was typically part of a traditional Jewish theodicy subsuming (and justifying) the depredations of history within centuries-long narratives of sin, exile, and redemption. At the end of the 19th century, however, this archival impulse took a secular turn. From then on, the Eastern European Jewish intelligentsia responded to outbreaks of anti-Semitic violence with accurate and objective documentation (in addition to self-defense organizations), whether in the name of publicizing such violence to Jewish communities worldwide or in the name of demanding justice and reparation in situ. Philip Friedman, Polish-Jewish historian and co-founder of the Centralna Żydowska Komisja Historyczna (Central Jewish Historical Commission), coined the fitting term Khurbn-forshung (“Destruction Research”) for these documentation efforts. And in contrast to the armed Jewish resistance, this civil form of resistance did not actively confront the Nazi occupation. It rather intended “to heal the injuries and damages inflicted on the society, or, as the case may be, to mitigate its consequences.”

The abundance of documents gathered by Jewish resistance groups like Oyneg Shabes allow future historians “to recreate history from the perspective of those doomed

---


to death—not mediated by documents of the perpetrators.”\(^{13}\) And while Oyneg Shabes’ ghetto archivists preserved “the last chapter [...] of Polish Jewry”\(^{14}\) since November 1940, another so-far unknown Polish-Jewish commission had started an underground project already in November 1939 in still neutral Vilna to record the penultimate one: the *Komitet tsu zamlen materialn vney yidisn khurbn in Poyln 1939* (“Committee to Collect Material of the Destruction of Polish Jewry 1939”), whose archive I retrieved in 2013 from the *Wiener Library for the Study of the Holocaust and Genocide* in London under the heading Document Section no. 532.\(^{15}\)

Two months after the outbreak of the Second World War, a group of sixty Jewish writers and journalists—who had managed to escape from German-occupied Poland eastward to Lithuania’s regained capital Vilna—clandestinely joined forces for the sake of documenting the “total destruction” of Polish Jewry. With its birth in November 1939, this group seems to be the earliest Jewish historical committee in Eastern Europe, having begun to record Nazi crimes against Polish Jewry almost simultaneously with the German invasion of Poland. Its archive comprises approximately 1000 type-written pages of eyewitness accounts, 25 reports about the *Tsunstund fun yidishe yishuwim in Poyln* (*in der milkhome-tsayt* 1939 (“Condition of Jewish settlements in Poland during wartime 1939”) as well as six bulletins. Together, this corpus conveys a plethora of recollections from an “authentic” Jewish perspective from the “incubation phase of the Holocaust”\(^{16}\) and is consequently a unique and invaluable source for the study of the Holocaust and the writing of its historiography. These memories come from a moment when the wheel of history was moving towards the still unknown catastrophe and offer a kind of raw immediacy free of the backshadowing tendencies of much of Holocaust testimony and scholarship.

Astonishingly, the *Komitet tsu zamlen materialn vney yidisn khurbn in Poyln 1939* (henceforth: *Komitet*) and its legacy have been almost entirely untouched by researchers. Historian David Engel offered the first attempt to investigate the provenance of one document which most probably stems from the committee’s archive. Without attention to the broader activities of those 60 journalists and writers in Vilna whose work lay behind the document, however, Engel’s work is necessarily provisional and only coincidentally part of the historiography of the *Komitet* and peripheral to the unraveling of its history.\(^{17}\) While Engel at least touched upon it, neither the most recent multi-volume publication *Jewish Responses to Persecution*\(^{18}\) by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum nor the extensive edition series *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland*,

\(^{13}\) Bergman, “Ein Archiv der Opfer?”, 126.

\(^{14}\) Kassow, *Who will write our history?*, 210; emphasis added by MS.

\(^{15}\) Henceforth: WL 532 MF Doc 54/Reel No. 10–11/c686 frame.


1933–1945 so much as to mention the Vilna committee. Similarly, Laura Jockusch omits
the collective in her study Collect and Record! of 2012. Her work is the very first to
comparatively investigate several Jewish historical commissions and documentation
centers in different European countries focusing on the early postwar years.
Notwithstanding her postwar focus, she thoroughly traces the genealogy of Eastern
European Jewish documentation efforts before and during the Holocaust and her
findings were and will be of utmost importance in exploring the role and legacy of the
Komitet. Moreover, studies of Jewish civil resistance, especially regarding Ringelblum’s
collective Oyneg Shabes, have been constant reference points. Samuel Kassow’s work as
well as Israel Gutman’s anthology need to be highlighted especially, as they not only
discuss the work of Oyneg Shabes itself, but masterfully contextualize it with (Eastern
European) Jewish history writing and self-defense.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the discovery of WL Documents
Section no. 532 is potentially transformative for the field of Holocaust Studies. This
study is the first exploration of the Komitet, which brought to life the earliest
documentary project of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe. In addition, an analysis and
translation of the six bulletins contained in the archive is included. This study seeks to
spare the Komitet from the last step of the “cycle of creating knowledge — preservation —
forgetting” to which archives are susceptible, and to explore its members, activities,
and methodology within the larger complex of Jewish historical commissions
established during and immediately after the Shoah.

The first two chapters explore the historical and political background in which
the Komitet was created, and particularly why it arose in Vilna. The subsequent chapters
— “Sadowa 9: The Founding of the Komitet”; “Context: Khurbn-forshung”; “The Vilna
Committee”; “Key Personnel”; “Biographical Sketches”; “Cooperation with YIVO” —
constitute the main part of the study. Here are described the immediate conditions on
the ground which led to the founding of Komitet and how the Komitet’s origins,
orientation, and method relate to earlier Jewish documentation projects. The specific
agenda and procedures of the Vilna Komitet, as revealed in the Komitet’s own
documents, are presented on the basis of the tradition of Khurbn-forshung. The role of
two key Komitet figures as well as other members are also addressed. The chapter
“Cooperation with YIVO” explores the connection between the project of journalists and
writers from Poland and a simultaneous project of the Yidishn Visnshaftlekhn Institut
(YIVO): Was the Komitet working together with the most important institute of Jewish

und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland, 1933–1945, eds.
Göty Aly, Wolf Gruner, Susanne Heim et al. (Munich: De Gruyter, 2011); Bert Hoppe and Hildrun Glass
(ed.), Sowjetunion mit annektierten Gebieten I. Besetzte sowjetische Gebiete unter deutscher
Militärverwaltung, Baltikum und Transnistrien, Vol. 7 of the series: Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der
europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland, 1933–1945, eds. Göty Aly, Wolf
Gruner, Susanne Heim et al. (Munich: De Gruyter, 2011).
20 Jockusch, Collect and Record!.
21 Samuel D. Kassow, Who will write our history?; Israel Gutman (ed.), Emanuel Ringelblum, The Man
and the Historian.
22 Julia Fertig, Die Archivfälle, in: kunsttexte.de 1 (2011), 1–14, 8,
scholarship in Eastern Europe? The chapter entitled “Legacy” gives an outline of the scope and content of the materials available in the Wiener Library, which, however, presumably represent only a part of the entire collection. Traces of the Komitet’s legacy in other archives are waiting to be discovered. Ultimately, the results of this study are summarized in order to determine the uniqueness of the Komitet within the matrix of “passive” Jewish resistance groups: How does the project of the Komitet, active in initially “free” Vilna, compare to later documentation projects undertaken in the ghettos?

In the second part of this study, the “Bulletins,” that is, the official communiqués about the unfolding events in Poland, are published for the first time in translation from the Yiddish. A short commentary precedes each translation. Out of all the materials of the Komitet’s archive, I chose the “Bulletins” for publication and analysis because, as compilations of interviews with the persecuted, they exemplify the potential importance of this archive for the historiography of the Shoah.

Where possible, the bulletins are compared with contemporaneous German primary sources. Analysis of the Komitet materials was further enriched by Yiddish-language memoirs of people who were in contact with or part of the Komitet, including Herman Kruk, Mendel Balberyszski, Pinkhas Shvarts, and Moses Beckelman. These sources have become increasingly important to the field of Holocaust Studies. While previous research was mainly oriented around perpetrators, more integrative approaches making use of victims’ sources have emerged, and this study necessarily continues that work.

The life of the Jewish population in Eastern Europe from the beginning of World War II until the “Final Solution” is often obscured by a disproportionate focus on the act of killing itself, in which the six million individuals are reduced to a monolith of undifferentiated suffering or martyrdom; this study seeks in part to remedy this imbalance. To write (Jewish) Holocaust history is not only to chronicle destruction but to document and understand the life of Eastern European Jews as they themselves recorded it.

---


25 Mendel Balberyszski, Shtarker fun ayzn, Vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Ha-Menorah Farlag, 1967). I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Prof. David Fishman, who pointed me to this important source.


27 Since 1997, when Saul Friedlander first called for Holocaust research, which factors in both victim and perpetrator sources, this so-called integrative approach has increasingly developed to become the basic principle of international Holocaust studies, see: Saul Friedlander, Das Dritte Reich und die Juden, 2 Vol. (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998/2006); Peter Longerich, Politik der Vernichtung. Eine Gesamtdarstellung der nationalsozialistischen Judenverfolgung (Munich: Piper, 1998); Dieter Pohl, Verfolgung und Massenmord in der NS-Zeit 1933–1945 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2003); Göty Aly, Wolf Gruner, Susanne Heim et al. (eds.), Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland, 1933–1945, 12 Vol. (Munich: De Gruyter, 2011).