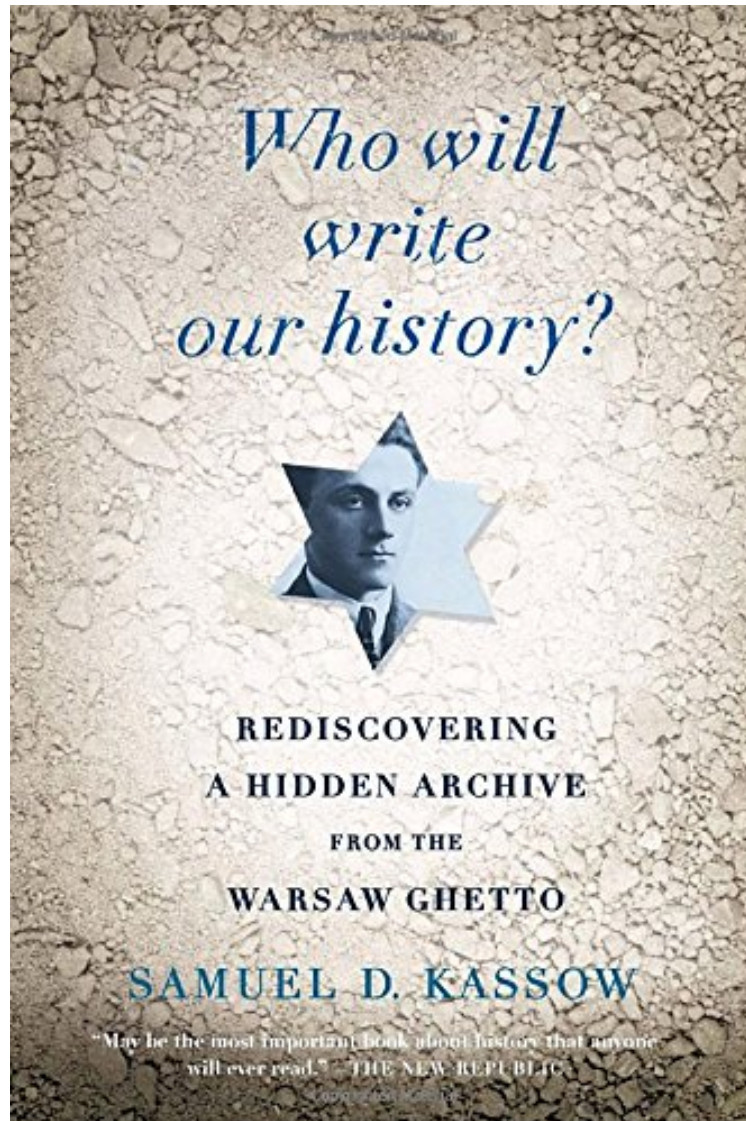


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## Who Will Write Our History?: Rediscovering a Hidden Archive from the Warsaw Ghetto

*Samuel D. Kassow*

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**Samuel D. Kassow : Who Will Write Our History?: Rediscovering a Hidden Archive from the Warsaw Ghetto** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Who Will Write Our History?: Rediscovering a Hidden Archive from the Warsaw Ghetto:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. An important and extensively researched work providing insight into

actual Warsaw Ghetto life. By Frespkr I had the privilege and pleasure of listening to Dr. Kassow, a remarkable scholar and renowned expert on Ashkenazic Jewry a few years ago. Multilingual, with a fascinating personal history, he is not only an excellent and entertaining speaker but a great person as well. The Warsaw Ghetto archives provide a deep understanding of the diversity of Jewish life with myriad political and social variations that would most likely come as a surprise to American Jews who often idealize Jewish life and view it much more monolithically, relatively speaking. Jews were herded together, as in other ghettos merely by virtue of their being identified as members of a single group/ethnicity/religion/race (SIC!) In reality, there were lawyers, doctors, writers, artists, musicians, criminals and prostitutes, religious and secular, socialist, communist and nationalistic. Their diversity in a country where 10% of the population and perhaps, at one time 50% of Warsaw's prewar population was Jewish is striking. I bought this book in paper format and to read on my trusty Kindle Paperwhite where I can carry reference books that I can refer to over and over again. Highly recommended. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Emanuel Ringelblum the optimist wanted the Christian Poles to like the Jews. By David The book is very troubling, it is unnerving, scary and beyond the word heartbreaking. Mr. Kassow writes the book about the Nazi's destruction of Jewish culture in Poland during the creation and the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto. The book is really more than that though. It is a comment on the destruction of the Jewish people and culture with complicity of Europe and America. Emanuel Ringelblum the optimist wanted the Christian Poles to like the Jews; he thought it would work and he reiterated his optimism continuously. But it was not to be. So we see the heartbreaking story of the destruction of Jewish Warsaw. Warsaw was divided into a Jewish portion and an Aryan portion. Life on the Polish side was more normal. I finished it in 2 or 3 days. I will read it again. To read it one time is not enough. This is truly a book to read for any person who wants to understand the Holocaust. Admiration for the author, yes; it goes beyond words. Please buy this book and read it. 11 of 11 people found the following review helpful. Civilization in Warsaw Ghetto. By Hank Bradley A detailed report on the life, education and activities of Emmanuel Ringelblum and the Oyneq Shabes organization he headed, culminating in their detailed gathering of the history of Polish Jews throughout the course of the establishment and ultimate destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto. Despite fearsome hardships, and the transportation and murder of most of the hundreds of thousands of ghetto inhabitants who managed to survive starvation and disease, Ringelblum and his associates collected and preserved every sort of historical information they could obtain, commissioning hundreds of personal articles and testimonies by writers from all stations in life, and buried the records in three locations shortly before their own murder. Through the efforts of a very few survivors, the records were recovered from two of those locations after the war, and shine a painfully clear light on one example of the mechanics of inhumanity, as systematically chronicled by some of the intended victims of the Hitler regime. This volume is encyclopedic in scope, and has lovingly rendered in meticulous detail the history of the history-collection, and of the daily lives within the ghetto of those who accomplished it.

In 1940, in the Jewish ghetto of Nazi-occupied Warsaw, the Polish historian Emanuel Ringelblum established a clandestine scholarly organization called the Oyneq Shabes to record the experiences of the ghetto's inhabitants. For three years, members of the Oyneq Shabes worked in secret to chronicle the lives of hundreds of thousands as they suffered starvation, disease, and deportation by the Nazis. Shortly before the Warsaw ghetto was emptied and razed in 1943, the Oyneq Shabes buried thousands of documents from this massive archive in milk cans and tin boxes, ensuring that the voice and culture of a doomed people would outlast the efforts of their enemies to silence them. Impeccably researched and thoroughly compelling, Samuel D. Kassow's *Who Will Write Our History?* tells the tragic story of Ringelblum and his heroic determination to use historical scholarship to preserve the memory of a threatened people.

This may be the most important book about history that anyone will ever read. The New Republic Brilliant. . . . Illuminating and heartbreaking. . . . A heroic act of synthesis and contextualization. . . . Kassow honors the efforts and restores the names of men and women who wrote though they knew their lives and those of their families and even their culture were doomed. Los Angeles Times A rich and complicated study. . . . Surprising and extraordinarily moving. Newsday Magnificent. . . . A stellar exploration of how history . . . can and should be preserved. Deborah Lipstadt, author of *History on Trial* If there is one book that should be read this year (or any year) about the Holocaust it is *Who Will Write Our History?* Jewish Book World A gripping biography. . . . We should be grateful to Professor Kassow for allowing us to share in Ringelblum's heroic efforts. Jewish Ledger One of the most important books I've ever read. . . . Kassow has created a stunning and brilliant social history. Reform Judaism One of the most important studies on the Holocaust to have appeared in years. Zachary Baker, Curator of Judaica and Hebraica Collections, Stanford University A stunning revelation of the enduring spirit of the decimated residents of the Warsaw Ghetto. NUVO Weekly (Indianapolis) Without the faux romanticism or faux spirituality that often accompanies Holocaust historiography, Kassow is able to bring to life the tragic and moving story of these Jews doomed by Nazi fanaticism. Tikkun About the Author Samuel D. Kassow is the Charles Northam Professor of History at Trinity College. He is author of *Students, Professors, and the State in Tsarist Russia, 1884-1917* and editor (with Edith W. Clowes and James L. West) of *Between Tsar and People: The Search for a Public Identity in Tsarist Russia*. He has lectured on

Russian and Jewish history in many countries, including Israel, Russia, and Poland. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

Chapter 1 From "Bichuch" to Warsaw

GALICIA Was it just a coincidence that more Jewish historians came from Galicia, part of the Habsburg Empire, than anywhere else in Eastern Europe? Lww produced Meyer Balaban, Philip Friedman, and Natan Gelber. Tarnw was the home of Isaac Schiper and Salo Baron. Rafael Mahler, Ringelblum's lifelong friend, and Artur Eisenbach, his future brother-in-law, grew up in the small town of Nowy Sacz. They all came from a region that differed in many important ways from Jewish Lithuania and Congress Poland, just across the Russian border. They were the products of a cultural milieu that combined excellent Polish education with strong Jewish nationalism. Habsburg rule was milder, educational opportunities greater. During Ringelblum's formative years, Galician Jewry was undergoing a fateful process of redefinition and self-examination. Emanuel Ringelblum was born in Buczacz (Bichuch in Yiddish) in eastern Galicia on November 21, 1900. Once a part of Poland, the province passed under Habsburg rule in 1772 before it became part of the new Polish republic in 1918-19. The area of Buczacz was also known as Podolia. The Buczacz of Ringelblum's childhood was a pretty town, surrounded by wooded hills and nestled in a bend of the river Strypa. High up overlooking the town was an old empty castle, "der puster shlos," where, according to tradition, the legendary Polish King Sobieski staged a daring ambush of Tatar invaders. On Saturday afternoons young couples would explore the countless tunnels that lay underneath the castle.<sup>1</sup> The great Hebrew writer Shmuel Yosef Agnon Ringelblum's cousin grew up in Buczacz and left a beautiful description of his birthplace in the story "B'tokh iri" (In my town).<sup>2</sup> Dominating Buczacz was the splendid Ratusz, or town hall, an imposing baroque landmark built by Prince Nikolai (Miko\_aj) Potocki in the eighteenth century. Buczacz had long belonged to the Potockis, one of the greatest of the Polish landowning families. Like other Polish magnates the Potockiseager to further their economic interests went out of their way to attract Jews.<sup>3</sup> From the very beginning Buczacz was a predominantly Jewish town. In 1870, 68 percent of the population had been Jewish (6,077 out of 8,959 inhabitants); in 1900, the year Ringelblum was born, there were 6,730 Jews out of a total of 11,755 inhabitants or 57.3 percent of the population. The surrounding countryside was heavily Ukrainian. Buczacz was a poor town, like most towns in Galicia, with little industry. Jews dominated trade, mainly in grains and other agricultural products, but the low purchasing power of the peasant population severely limited economic possibilities. In time, the growth of both Ukrainian and Polish cooperative movements would deal another heavy blow to the economic position of the Jews. Dim economic prospects served as a powerful stimulus to emigration. Many Jews, including Jacob Freud, Sigmund Freud's father, left for Vienna. Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the future Nobel Prize winner, also left the town at a young age. Emanuel Ringelblum's father, Fayvish, a grain merchant, was respected, if not particularly prominent in the Jewish community and regarded himself as a maskil, a follower of the Jewish Enlightenment. Someone who met him during World War I recalled that "he looked like an ordinary Jew [folksmesh], a 'Jewish Jew' [yidishlekher yid]. He was dressed half-Jewish, half-European, without earlocks but with a short, red beard."<sup>4</sup> Ringelblum's mother Munie, ne Heler, died when he was twelve years old. In later years he would use her name as a nom de plume. Fayvish was determined that his children two sons and two daughters have a solid education in both Jewish and secular subjects.<sup>5</sup> As a child, Ringelblum studied in a modern heder (Jewish elementary school) a so-called heder metukan<sup>6</sup> and attended one year of the local Polish gymnasium before the family fled the Russian invasion in 1914. He also participated in a Zionist youth organization led by the dynamic Zvi Heller, who later emigrated to Israel. Natan Eck, who worked with Ringelblum in the Warsaw Ghetto, recalled that Ringelblum loved to tell stories of his childhood in Buczacz.<sup>7</sup> Although he never returned to live in his hometown, he would often refer to his childhood there. In some ways Buczacz was like other Jewish small towns in Eastern Europe, and the young Emanuel grew up in an atmosphere rich in Jewish folk culture. But in other ways Buczacz was different. While East Galicia and Podolia were Hasidic strongholds the native grounds, after all, of the Ba'al Shem Tov Buczacz stood out as a bastion of the Haskala. Hasidim were a minority,<sup>8</sup> and their relative weakness made it easier for strong Zionist organizations to grow in Buczacz before World War I. A third of the students in the local Polish high school were Jews, and they received a solid grounding in classics and exposure to Polish and European high culture. Many of the high school's most popular teachers were Jews.<sup>9</sup> The town boasted a large Baron de Hirsch primary school, set up to give Jewish students both a general and vocational education. Some of its graduates went on to the gymnasium, others entered trades. By the beginning of the century, several alumni who had remained in Buczacz had already formed a fledgling Jewish labor movement.<sup>10</sup> Although young Jews received a Polish education, they did not become young Poles. The Galician Jewish intelligentsia, however acculturated, was surrounded by a strong and vibrant Yiddish-speaking folk culture nourished in many places by deep-rooted Hasidic traditions. Buczacz Jews like other Galician Jews considered themselves lucky that they did not live across the border in Russia. They did not have to worry about stiff quotas barring them from high schools and universities. The Polish political elite had built up a network of Polish high schools that freely admitted Jewish students, making Polish the preferred language of educated Galician Jews. The Galician "gymnasium" instilled discipline and orderly work habits. Meanwhile, across the Russian border, thousands of desperate Jewish young people either went abroad to study or wasted countless years trying to pass university entrance exams. Many, embittered and alienated, would join the revolutionary movement. In Galicia, only finances not legal quotas stood between Jewish youth and the great universities of the empire. They could choose between a

German education in Vienna or a Polish university in Krakow or Lemberg (Lww). Many attended both. A university degree did not guarantee prosperity; there were too few jobs for university graduates. (Less fortunate Jews on the other side of the Russian border liked to swap barbed jokes about the ubiquitous and often impecunious "doctors" who inundated the tiniest Galician shtetl.) Unquestionably, however, this university-educated Galician- Jewish intelligentsia, with its overlay of European culture, imbued Galician Jewry with a special character. In the early years of the Polish Republic, many Galician Jews, including Emanuel Ringelblum, would stream to Warsaw. There, in the new capital of the new state, they used their excellent Polish and superior educational credentials to good advantage as teachers in state schools for Jewish children, Jewish secondary schools, and administrators in various Jewish institutions. Unlike their brothers from Lithuania, Russia, and Congress Poland, Galician Jewry had also benefited from the more congenial political climate of the Habsburg Empire. By the 1860s, they had won legal emancipation. Long before the first Duma elections in Russia in 1906, Habsburg Jews were participants in the political process. When Ringelblum was growing up in Buczacz, the town had a Jewish mayor, Berish Shtern, and a Jewish police chief.<sup>11</sup> Jews in Galicia felt more secure than Russian Jewry, with a relatively free press and a rich organizational life, with more legal safeguards in place. Pogroms were rarer, the resonance of revolutionary politics much weaker. Indeed Ringelblum would later recall how moved he was when, as a young man in Warsaw in 1920, he first came into contact with young Jews from Congress Poland who had participated in battles against the tsar and who had a revolutionary tradition.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, Galician Jewry saw its share of political struggle and confrontation, especially during the decade preceding World War I. Although the Jews enjoyed the political and educational benefits of Habsburg rule, clouds loomed on the horizon, and the years of Ringelblum's childhood witnessed far reaching changes that transformed Galician Jewry. The same reforms that brought emancipation to the Jews in the 1860s also placed political power in Galicia in the hands of the Polish nobility. Most middle-class Jews shifted their allegiance from German culture to Polish. Many Jewish leaders also preached assimilation: Jews should become "Poles of the Mosaic persuasion." But by the time Ringelblum was born, support for the assimilationists had largely collapsed in Galician Jewish society. Even as they spoke Polish at home and sent their children to Polish schools, many educated Galician Jews keenly resented growing Polish anti-Semitism and the refusal to repay Jewish cultural loyalty with full acceptance. According to some memoirs, by the eve of World War I the social gulf between Jews and Poles, especially in East Galicia, had grown enormously. Polish and Jewish high school students would study together but go their separate ways after school.<sup>13</sup> By the turn of the century much of the non-Hasidic Galician Jewish middle class was turning to Zionism. Zionism in Galicia had less to do with immediate emigration to Palestine than with new definitions of Jewishness. Galician Zionism, which largely conducted its business in refined Polish, symbolized Jewish nationalism, a Jewish self-consciousness that could easily coexist with the adoption of non-Jewish culture. Galicia would anticipate a characteristic development of the interwar Jewish life in Poland: growing acculturation that at the same time rejected assimilation. As tensions escalated between Ukrainians and Poles, especially in Eastern Galicia, Jewish nationalism also became an expedient way of declaring neutrality and avoiding a potentially dangerous crossfire. Aware that they had no hope of attracting Jews to Ukrainian culture, Ukrainians preferred Zionism and Jewish nationalism to overt Jewish identification with Polish culture and aims. In turn, Polish nobles preferred Jewish assimilationists or pliant Hasidic rebbes who denied separate Jewish national status and obeyed the dictates of the Polish leadership. (In Buczacz, they had long enjoyed a cozy relationship with Berish Shtern, the Jewish mayor.) In the decade before World War I, two major events sparked Jewish- Polish confrontation and encouraged an intense process of national redefinition: the new 1907 election law and the 1910 census. The 1907 law, which expanded the suffrage, changed the rules of the political game. Zionists now saw their chance to make major gains, and the Polish elite had more reason to fear losing control over a Jewish vote that often held the balance between Poles and Ukrainians. In Buczacz and elsewhere, the elections of 1907 led to bitter charges of Polish intimidation and vote tampering. The 1910 census saw heavy Polish pressure on Jews to declare Polish as their mother tongue and thus bolster Polish claims to predominance in the area; the census authorities refused to recognize Yiddish as an option. In a test case of modern Jewish politics, many Galician Jews, even those who were actually Polish-speaking, demonstratively defied the census commission and declared Yiddish as their mother tongue. In an ironic twist, certain Yiddish-speaking Hasidic rebbes, who detested modern Jewish nationalism, urged their followers to declare themselves as Polish speakers! All over Galicia, including Buczacz, the census battle became the symbol of Jewish independence from Polish tutelage.<sup>14</sup> By the time Ringelblum entered the Buczacz gymnasium, relations there between Polish and Jewish students had become quite tense.<sup>15</sup> One by-product of the 1910 census fight was a renewed interest in modern Yiddish culture among a small but growing minority of the Jewish intelligentsia. They could count for support on a nascent Jewish labor movement. The Jewish labor movement was not as strong in Galicia as in Russia; Galicia had barely industrialized. But echoes of the revolutionary battles across the border in Russia certainly raised the prestige of the Bund and the Poalei Tsiyon, the party founded by Ber Borochov in 1906. On the eve of World War I both these parties had well-established organizations in the region.<sup>16</sup> For workers and students who wanted to combine radical Marxism, Zionism, and Yiddishism, an ideal vehicle was the emerging Poalei Tsiyon. Several students had already broken away from a larger Zionist youth organization, the Tseirei Tsiyon, and joined

Borochof's party. Among the new leaders of the Galician Poalei Tsiyon were two university students who in later years would have an important influence on Ringelblum's life: Natan Buchsbaum and Isaac Schiper. When Buchsbaum joined the party, he knew no Yiddish at all. He laboriously taught himself the language and began addressing meetings of tailors and store clerks, whom the party was trying to organize. By 1914 the party was conducting its meetings in Yiddish. Schiper became not only one of the most important Polish-Jewish historians but also a key leader of the Galician Poalei Tsiyon before World War I. Born in Tarnw in 1884, Schiper already spoke Yiddish well and had begun to take an active interest in Yiddish culture when he read Ber Borochof's seminal article, "The Tasks of Yiddish Philology," which appeared in 1913. In December of that same year, Schiper wrote an article in the Lemberg party newspaper, *Der Yidisher Arbeter*, that elaborated on and explained Borochof's arguments in favor of Yiddish. On the eve of World War I, therefore, Galician Jewry had undergone a marked process of political self-definition. Assimilation as an ideology had collapsed; political changes in the Habsburg Empire hastened the modernization of Jewish politics. For the first time Jewish labor parties were becoming a factor in Jewish politics. A sizable Jewish intelligentsia had emerged, well educated in Polish and German but identified with Jewish nationalism. If Galician Jewry lacked the revolutionary traditions of Russian Jewry, it did possess a large reservoir of well-educated cadres who would play a major role in Jewish political and cultural activity in the interwar Polish republic. This was the milieu of Ringelblum's formative years. SANZ When the First World War broke out in the summer of 1914, Emanuel Ringelblum had completed one year of the Polish classical gymnasium in Buczacz. A heavy Russian offensive in September 1914 broke the Austrian lines and headed into Podolia. Horrified by stories of maltreatment of Jews by the Russians, thousands of refugees began to flee westward. The Ringelblum family joined the stream of refugees. After a brief stay in nearby Kolomeja, the Ringelblums settled in Nowy Sacz (Nay Sanz or Sanz in Yiddish), a town on the Dunajec River in Western Galicia. Uprooted from his home at the age of fourteen, Ringelblum had to make a painful adjustment to a new life. The family faced desperate poverty. Fayvish, who had remarried, barely eked out a living in the town marketplace. The family of six crowded into a tiny house. One of Ringelblum's new friends, the then fifteen-year-old Mendl Naygroshl, visited Ringelblum many times and remembered a "poor, depressing place: a small kitchen, a small room and every bit of space taken up with beds. . . . You could feel a quiet sadness in the house, the poverty that had taken hold and the loneliness of uprooted people."<sup>17</sup> According to Naygroshl, Ringelblum's new stepmother seemed especially depressed, as did his older sister.<sup>18</sup> Despite the family's poverty, Emanuel continued his high school studies and supported himself by tutoring younger students.