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# Politics and History in Emanuel Ringelblum's War Diaries. Emanuel Ringelblum between the Two World Wars

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## Introduction

Emanuel Ringelblum is mainly remembered for the archive he established in the Warsaw ghetto, *Oynewg Shabes*<sup>1</sup>. However, it was his outstanding activities prior to the war that enabled him to evolve into a prominent and influential historian and prepared him for the huge task of documentation that he had carried out during WWII.

The world in which Ringelblum operated and developed his unique observation skills and analysis capabilities was turbulent, in transition, from the traditional to the modern. Ringelblum, who was himself secular as well as a communist, was also a dedicated Jew devoted to the Jewish culture and language (Yiddish). This apparent contradiction prevented him from becoming a member of the Polish communist party, but he was a member of another form of Marxist group – one that was Zionist as well as communist: Left Poalei Zion, LPZ (the left workers of Zion).

LPZ suited Ringelblum not only because of their Marxist approach to the present, but also as for them, the relationship between politics and history was evident: politics was a human activity on behalf of a certain group, activities that were the result of conclusions derived and inspired by historical research conducted by the parties involved and

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<sup>1</sup> Oynewg Shabes is transliteration for the Yiddish pronunciation. The term entered the Yiddish language from Hebrew and the spelling of the term in Yiddish is phonetic. It means Shabbat (Saturday) delight – the best about Shabbat. In this paper, I will use the Hebrew transliteration: Oneg Shabbat.

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designed to help them.

In Poland of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, history was a necessity as the political system was democratic. This implied that it was no longer acceptable to reject Jews for a religious pretext in this new political arena, whereas Jewish history was indeed a pretext for rejecting the Jewish entity and failing to recognize it as Polish. According to Poles, history “proved” that the Jews have been a threat to Polish society (Kassow 2007: 50, 74).

The above allegations contributed to the accelerating approaches among Jews to research their own history. (Kassow 2007: 51-52) Furthermore, for Ringelblum and others, history and its research were the causes of the development of an alternative Jewish identity that replaced religion as well as strengthening the national identity on a historic basis. Thanks to Ringelblum and his colleagues, Jewish history became a common interest that was practiced everywhere and not necessarily at universities.

This paper is intended to describe Ringelblum’s work in the years that preceded WWII. These years have consolidated Ringelblum’s approach that history was strongly linked to politics. As this was his personal conviction, Ringelblum was very active in both fields: history and politics. Researching what Ringelblum was engaged in prior to the war reveals his preconceived approach to dealing with what has been inflicted on the Jewish population by the Germans. In other words, when Ringelblum begins to create the archive, his point of departure is that history and politics are linked and history, that is, what is happening in the ghetto is influenced by politics.

Ringelblum was an active member of a Zionist-Marxist party (LPZ), a history researcher at the Pioneering Jewish Research Institute (YIVO), a history teacher at Yehudiya (a private secondary school for girls), and in 1932 he began working for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, JDC. These extremely dedicated and meaningful accomplishments had prepared Ringelblum’s for the unprecedented challenges he had to face during WWII and were the perfect background experience needed for the establishment of *Ong Shabbat*, the archive that treasures under its wings everything and anything in writing that was going on in the Warsaw ghetto and sometimes outside the ghetto.

#### A Brief Account of Ringelblum’s Life

Emanuel Ringelblum was a historian, pedagogue and social activist. He was born on November 1900 in Buczacz, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (now Ukraine), where he grew up till the beginning of WWI. As soon as the war broke out, his family fled the city and ended up in Nowy Sącz, Poland.

When Ringelblum was still living in Nowy Sącz, he joined the Poalei Zion movement, but when they split in 1920, he became a member of its left wing. In the same year Ringelblum moved to Warsaw and applied to the medicine faculty which rejected him by the

numerous clausus.<sup>2</sup> Eventually he was accepted to the faculty of history at the Warsaw University and in 1927, Ringelblum was awarded a doctorate in philosophy after completing his dissertation entitled “Jews of Warsaw from its Earliest History until 1527”.<sup>3</sup>

Even before completing his doctoral thesis, in 1925, Ringelblum joined YIVO and became the head of its historical section. (Kassow 2007: 81) In 1928, Ringelblum received a diploma asserting his training as a teacher and for several years, he taught history at the Yehudiya Jewish secondary school for girls. In 1932, Ringelblum started working also at the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). During the 30s he published two books: his doctoral dissertation in 1932 and a monograph, Jews in the Kościuszko Uprising, which was published in Yiddish in 1937 and in Polish in 1938.

In October 1938, the director of the JDC, Yitsĕhak Giterman, sent Ringelblum to Zbąszyn, to assist Jews of Polish origin who were expelled from Germany but were forbidden to enter Poland. They were held on the border in a camp in the town of Zbąszyn in horrible conditions. In addition to assisting the refugees, Ringelblum has applied there the YIVO methodology of research, namely, collecting firsthand accounts of the events and the difficulties encountered by those refugees. (Kassow 2007: 102)

When WWII broke out, Ringelblum, who was incarcerated in the Warsaw ghetto like all other Jews, kept on with his social welfare work along with establishing an archive which was to gather all the information about the occurrences of the war. The archive which was called *Ong Shabbat* is what Ringelblum is mostly remembered for, and it is this archive that has enabled the world to become familiar with the atrocities of life in the Warsaw ghetto as well as with other events of the war recorded in the archive.

Ringelblum was captured and deported to the camp of Travniki in April 1943, but three months later, the Bermans, his longtime friends, managed to smuggle him out and bring him back to Warsaw. He joined his wife and son and about 30 other Jews in a hiding at an orangery belonging to Mieczysław Wolski. During his stay in hiding he continued to write history and it is then that he has written *Writings in Hiding*, a series of monographs about life in the ghetto, among which his essay *Polish-Jewish Relations during the Second World War* has become the most famous. Once a week, Ringelblum would meet with the Bermans<sup>4</sup> and hand over to them his weekly produce.

On March 7<sup>th</sup>, 1944 the hide out was discovered. All its inmates were taken to the Pawiak prison. All inmates, including Ringelblum himself, his son Uri (aged 12) and wife

2 A restriction in the admission of Jews to some university departments.

3 Viewed January 13 2017 from [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Ringelblum\\_Emanuel](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Ringelblum_Emanuel).

4 Adolf Avraham and his wife Batya would gather written accounts from Jews in hiding and they are now part of the Adolf Avraham Berman Collection. Viewed January 13 2017 from <http://www.ah.org.il/snq/?CategoryId=3495&ArticleID=3416&SearchParam=berman-collection>.

Judith (Józia), were executed at the beginning of March (probably on the 10<sup>th</sup>) 1944.<sup>5</sup>

## Politics

### Polish Jewish Politics between the Two World War

Traditionally, ideological disputes of all shades, including within the religious community, were debated, argued etc. through the Jewish press which was published by different interest groups. This meant that the press preceded political formation and it was the arena where political ideas were formed. (Engel 2001: 652) However, the administrative order issued by the occupying forces of Germany and Austria during WWI institutionalized trends that had already existed within the Jewish community in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that is, the growth of a secular intelligentsia which was already very influential in the different Jewish communities and its battle to take over the leadership of the community were well underway when the Austrian-German decree was issued. (Engel 2001: 651-653)

Due to the structure of the Polish political system, Polish parties were mostly reluctant to absorb Jews into their ranks, let alone those who had claims for particularity. (Engel 2001: 655) This situation led to creating a feeling among Jews that their own representative would serve their purposes better.<sup>6</sup> Another factor that increased the feeling of Jewish separatism was Polish attempts to minimize the Jewish political activity. For instance, even though the law granted the Jews with the right for political organization at the national level, in practice, the administration tried to reduce and limit this activity to the community framework. (Engel 2001: 658)

Polish Jewish society between the two world wars was split and divided from within, but it was also separated from the general society (because of the rise of anti-Semitism in Poland). (Mendelsohn 1982: 94) The inability to integrate into Polish society, and more importantly, the lack of hope for things ameliorating in that respect in the foreseeable future, turned the Zionist idea on all of its diversity to appealing. Conversely, Poles also found that the Zionist idea could be useful to them since it contained the seeds of evicting Jews outside of Poland. (Mendelsohn 1982: 94) On the other hand, accomplishing the Zionist aspirations was almost impossible, if only because of British opposition to a massive increase of the number of Jews in Palestine.

Besides, as Jewish society in Poland was split within: the left and right, religious and

5 Viewed January 13 2017 from <http://www.ihl.pl/en/blog/2016-03-07-last-days-of-emanuel-ringelblum>.

6 However, the multiple opinions among the Polish-Jewish population had split their power thus reduced their impact in society at large.

secular, and so on, each of these groups strove to determine their own ideology in an attempt to get achievements on a number of levels while the present, namely, the impact on the situation of the Jews in Poland itself, was the most crucial. Thus, the criterion of Jewish life on a personal level and in everyday life was the most influential on a party's popularity. (Engel 2001: 661) The Left Poalei Zion, Ringelblum's party, was not among those enjoying a vast support like the Bund, which managed to fight for the Jews on a daily basis, also because its ideology focused on Jewish life in exile. (Engel 2001: 661)

### Left Poalei Zion (LPZ)

Left Poalei Zion, Ringelblum's political party, was a movement of Marxist-Zionist Jewish workers founded at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century after the Bund<sup>7</sup> rejected Zionism in 1901. As mentioned before, Ringelblum joined the party when he was still a youth living in Nowy Sącz. However, when the party split in 1920, Ringelblum chose to become a member of its left wing, which looked up to the leadership of communist Moscow.

Ringelblum's conscious choice to join Left Poalei Zion indicates his personal priorities, namely, the fact that the party doctrine set the boundaries of socialism by determining that preserving the Jewish people preceded the aspiration of establishing a socialist society. In this respect Left Palei Zion was perfect for Ringelblum as he was not required to make a distinction between loyalty to the party and its political inclination since an important part of the political perception of this party was tolerating the Jewish masses regardless of their political preferences. (Kassow 2007: 23)

Left Poalei Zion was not the only party that made the connection between history and politics. This correlation characterized most of the political parties and social movements of the European Jewish organizations, starting with Zionism and even orthodox religious movements whose priority commitment was maintaining the historical concept, to be exact, the inseparable link between the ahistorical and the existence of the Jewish people, or the eternal existence of the people of Israel regardless of time and history. Thus, Ringelblum's concept, which formulated years before the war and whose core principles were relying on history as a means for achieving goals of a political nature for the entire Jewish people, irrespective of a Jew's political view, was not unusual. (Engel 2006: 125)<sup>8</sup>

The Left Poalei Zion Party was a socialist and therefore a secular Jewish party that had derived its ideology from sociological theories that relied on historical research which led

7 The Bund was a secular Jewish socialist movement, a trade union as well as a political party. The Bund did not advocate ethnic or religious separatism, but focused on culture, not a state or a place, as the glue of Jewish nationhood which was also the reason why they rejected Zionism. Viewed January 13 2017 from <https://www.wikitand.com/en/Bundism>.

8 Here Engel mentions that the tradition linking history to nationalism created among Jews was influenced by such tendencies among Polish historians.

to political conclusions. This party's central conflict was determining the dose for combining socialism and activism for the sake of Palestine<sup>9</sup> - until 1921 this party emphasized socialism first and foremost. (Mendelsohn 1982: 149) As of 1921, they singularize themselves by their determination to focus on two centers: Poland and Palestine which was the result of their assessment that even if there was a strong Jewish center in Palestine (Kassow 2003: 74), most of the Jews would still be living in exile.

According to the Left Poalei Zion ideology, the Jewish problem was not only political, but also economical and existential. Without a state of their own, Jews would never be able to become part of the global economic system. Therefore, immigration to Palestine was a central and integral part of the ideology of this party. Immigration had to be to Palestine because, according to them, only there could a healthy Jewish entity flourish, and only there the Jewish people would be able to go through the process of modernization. (Kassow 2007: 71)

Largely, the party has failed in its attempt to provide a practical and clear vision to the idea to settle in Palestine, which led to focusing their activity in exile, in our case, Poland. Despite its ideological complexity, the idea to insist on centering activities in Poland, provided Zionism with a good grip in the left and thus brought this idea to audiences which were reluctant to join youth movements or Zionist parties. (Kassow 2003: 74) Therefore, Left Poalei Zion had gained some influence among Jewish labor organizations and they had a network of schools and soup kitchens alongside an active youth movement (Yugnt) and a popular sporting organization. Supporters of Left Poalei Zion came from Jews living in mid-sized cities but they also had supporters in Warsaw and Lodz. (Kassow 2007: 75-76) However, since Left Poalei Zion focused their activity in Poland and were inspired by the Soviet Union, they were also victims of the Polish police. (Kassow 2007: 75-76)

In the mid-1920s, the LPZ party separated its education system from the other Yiddish oriented groups (Bund) and established its own network of schools named after Borochov<sup>10</sup>, which emphasized providing socialist education for children alongside the establishment of a revolutionary society in Palestine. (Mendelsohn 1982: 186) These schools worked hard, not only on imparting cognitive skills, but their aim was also designing a curriculum which was intended to give Jewish children a sense of security in their Jewishness. (Frost 1998: 137)

In 1937 LPZ voted to become part of the World Jewish Zionist organization, which they had left in the 20s claiming that it was a bourgeois organization. This change was due to the difficult situation of the Jews in Germany, the Arab revolt in Palestine and the fear

9 The term Palestine means the geographical and spiritual land of Israel regardless of who controls it. Palestine was part of the Ottoman Empire until 1918 and in 1921 it came under the British Mandate.

10 Borochov was the founder of Poalei Zion.

of the British turning their backs on the Jews. LPZ announced that they were delaying their war against the Zionist bourgeoisie given the danger they think they all face as Jews (Kassow 2003: 74)



### Ringelblum and the LPZ

Ringelblum was appointed a member of the Central Committee of the organization *Yugend*, the LPZ youth organization. It was then that he started to publish in their newspapers, one of which was in Polish and the other in Yiddish. This activity was risky as those associated with the left were subject to persecution on the part of the Polish police. (Kassow 2007: 35)

Ringelblum wrote under the pen name of Munié Hefer, his mother's maiden name, numerous articles that concerned Jewish history. Obviously, his analysis was in accordance with the Marxist prism and therefore his articles focused on showing the subjective aspects of the study of history. According to him, researching and writing history so far was primarily conducted from the viewpoint of the ruling classes. In other words, Ringelblum's analysis thrived to expose the prejudice of the science of history as it ignored much of the other parts of society. It failed to appreciate their contribution as well as disregarded the point of view of those not in power. (Kassow 2007: 38)

In an article he published in *Di fraye yugend* no.3, 1925, "*Di yidische arbetershaft un di geshikhtsvishnshaft*", Ringelblum mentions his colleague Dr. Schiper who praised the work done by three prominent Jewish historians: Jost, Graetz and Dubnov (who was still alive and active at the time), but also criticizes their work. He claimed that indeed it was thanks to them that the Jewish population has become familiar with the history of the spiritual leadership, but according to Ringelblum, what was missing was the accounts of the majority, the Jewish masses. This, according to Ringelblum, prevented Jews from fully understanding their own past.

Additionally, according to Ringelblum, both Jost (1793-1860) and Graetz (1817-1891), who were from a German origin, treated Jews in their studies only as a religion and thrived to prove that Jews were a spiritual entity whose vocation was to spread monotheistic ideas and morality. In contrast to them, Hiliary (Hillel) Nussbaum (1820-1895) and Alexander Kraushar (1842-1931), both of Polish origin and against whom Ringelblum had the severest criticism, studied Judaism from the angle of assimilated Jews. According to Ringelblum, all of these works ignored in their analysis the vast majority of the Jews on the one hand and on the other hand, they turned their back on roots, namely, Yiddish and Yiddish culture. (Kassow 2007: 39)

The cultural organization within the LPZ, the *Ovnt kursn*, was one of the most important in Poland. In 1927, Ringelblum joined a committee running the *Ovnt kursn* whose aim was providing education to the uneducated, adults as well as the young. He substituted Eizenshat who was arrested and exiled to Russia and together with Rafael Mahler, Bela Mandelsberg and Adolf Berman organized a study curriculum that would take place in the evenings in an attempt to eradicate illiteracy. (Kassow 2007: 36)

The topics of those courses were diverse and included natural science, literature and history. Their approach to history is well manifested in the topics chosen for elaboration: impact of housing on the life of its residents, climatic effects on human societies, diet, etc. (Kassow 2007: 36) Likewise, history courses included both Jewish history as well as non-Jewish history, and were taught together as one unit. (Kassow 2007: 36) Ringelblum put a tremendous effort in teaching and supervising those courses, but he never ceased to be deeply touched by his students' devotion. All of them were working people and despite the fatigue, came to the courses and showed their gratitude to this ambitious project.

As of the mid 20s, 1926 to be exact, YIVO, the first institution erected by Jews for the study of Judaism, was established, and Ringelblum offered his services to Max Weinreich and Eliyahu Cherikover immediately. (Kassow 2007: 81) This marks a crucial event for the development of Ringelblum, not so much as a politician but certainly as a historian and a scholar. Therefore, one may say that it is almost impossible to separate Ringelblum's political activities from his career as a historian in the manner in which it developed since he established the Historical Commission at YIVO.

## History

### I. YIVO

While the activities of the institute can be regarded as one of the fruits of emancipation, that is, the very possibility of establishing a Jewish academic institution, its creation also reflects a rift with the concept of the "Wissenschaft des Judentums"<sup>11</sup> and a deep concern for the Jewish people which has undergone a tremendous change as a result of modernity. (Kassow 2007: 78)

The institute of YIVO (Yidisher Visnshaflekher Institut) was established in Vilnius in 1925. It institutionalized Dubnov's call to collect and research the historical "natural resources" of the Jewish people. The aim was to establish a scientific center for the study of Yiddish, as well as Jewish history and culture of Eastern European Jewish communities. The institute was apolitical but its establishment reflected a political concept presented before, namely, that Judaism was a religion as well as a national entity.

Despite operating as a research institute, YIVO had an embedded political agenda which was expressed by initiating groundbreaking activities in the Jewish spiritual world. They have explored areas such as Jewish history, linguistics, psychology, economics, folklore and sociology. (Sandler 2002: xiii) One form of work at YIVO that reflected its political agenda was collect-

<sup>11</sup> The scientific study of Jewish culture and religion whose departing point was the Judaism was a religion and following the emancipation, Jews should adopt their country of origin customs. Viewed January 13 2017 from [https://www.wilwand.com/en/Wissenschaft\\_des\\_Judentums](https://www.wilwand.com/en/Wissenschaft_des_Judentums)

ing and documenting history – Ringelblum, who engaged in that in Warsaw, regarded it as an appropriate political Jewish response to leaving the Jews outside of history. According to him, in order to become part of the more significant forces in the world, or alternatively be an entity whose needs are taken into consideration, not only do Jews have to learn about themselves, but it is their duty because the particularity and uniqueness of the Jews is hidden from the eyes of non-Jews.

YIVO considered itself obligated to create legitimacy for the Eastern Europe Jewry existence alongside with strengthening Jewish life. They believed in the idea of Doikayt, that is, the contemporary or current, and thus they constituted an alternative to Zionism and territorialism. (Sandler 2002: xiii)

For example, Weinreich, a prominent researcher at YIVO, had estimated that Jewish youth have a double problem of insecurity: the youngsters first find out that they are Jewish and therefore belong to an underprivileged group, and later, as teenagers they begin to wonder about their status in the general society and the prospects of integration. Very soon, that youth is confronted with the recognition that discrimination would prevent them from developing and integrating into society. (Sandler 2002: xxii)

One of the ways to try and make those youngsters more interested in their communities was done through competitions among teenagers who had to write an essay describing their personal life story. Such competitions were held in 1932, 1934, 1938-9, and competitors were aged 16-22. (Sandler 2002: xi) The first competition (1932) took place in the Vilnius region and 32 young people accepted the challenge. In 1934, 304 essays were submitted from various countries. In 1938, there were already 289 works submitted and the range of the writers here was much larger.

An analysis of those compositions showed how significantly East Europe changed. In post WWI world, social structure caused a deep intergenerational gap. They revealed that the gaps between generations were not so much in ideologies as much as in the parents' life experience, which was irrelevant because social structure has changed and as a result, relationships at all levels. (Sandler 2002: xiii) For instance, in inter war Europe, it was no longer evident that the younger generation followed their parents' footsteps when it concerned professions. In that respect, parents' advice and guidance that was traditionally provided to their offspring became irrelevant to the young which eventually led to the increasing sensation of isolation. (Sandler 2002: xiii)

Introducing this competition which was based on information from contemporary people and concerned their personal and intimate experiences characterized research methodology adopted at YIVO. Ringelblum, who established the Historical Commission at YIVO, used a similar research approach which would also characterize his methodology in erecting the *Oneg Shabbat Archive*.

## 2. YIVO and Ringelblum

Even before the establishment of YIVO, in 1923, Ringelblum, and the historian Rafael Mahler, also a member of LPZ, established the “Yunger Historiker Krayz” (the Young Historians Circle). At the time, it was the first and only one in Poland. (Kassow 2007: 58) This group was organized at the Warsaw University and met monthly from 1923 till the beginning of the war in 1939.

The group was engaged in the study of Jewish-historical issues whose aim was affecting the understanding of the current economic and cultural situation of the Jews in Poland. (Kassow 2009: xvii) They had about 40 regular attendants and the circle became the basis on which YIVO Historical Commission relied once it was founded. (Kassow 2009: xvii) The circle published two academic journals: *Yunger historiker* (in 1926 and 1929) and later on the paper was named *Bleter far geshikhte* (1934, 1938). (Kassow 2007: 59) When these journals were first published, they were the first to appear entirely in Yiddish, and this reflects the attitude of the group, that is, the Jews must be familiar with their own history, so publishing in Yiddish was intended to make the articles accessible to many more Jews. (Kassow 2007: 60)

Ringelblum attributed importance to the group because he felt it had militant characteristics - while the initial purpose was to study Jewish history, the results of the studies were intended to serve the struggle of Polish Jewry on a double level: the national and social. (Kassow 2007: 60) Ringelblum was one of the editors of the Society's publications, and by 1939, he had written and published in both Yiddish and Polish about 216 scholarly articles of different sorts. (Shatzky 1953)

For example, he researched the history of hygiene living habits of Jews in Poland in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the history of Jewish book printing in Poland in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, or the role of the Jews of Poland during the Kościuszko rebellion in 1794. (Ringelblum 1937) Ringelblum also wrote short monographs about Jewish communities in Poland that were published in the *Judaica Encyclopedia* published in Berlin.

As previously mentioned, Ringelblum became part of YIVO almost from day one. It is important to note that Ringelblum and the “Yunger Historiker Krayz” were very important to the development of the institute as its founders, including Cherikover and Dobnow, were self-taught scholars, whereas Ringelblum and his colleagues were certified doctors. (Kassow 2007: 82) In that respect, Ringelblum and his colleagues were the backbone of the academic expertise that was so vital to the development of YIVO.

As soon as Ringelblum was accepted to YIVO and founded the Historical Commission, he decided upon the guidelines for creating a collection of firsthand accounts and established a connection with people from all over East Europe to start looking

up documents and also have ordinary Jews as well as community leaders write their own accounts. (Kassow 2007: 81) However, many times he found himself quite helpless when encountering problems concerning the destruction of community records or documents that were held by individuals. Yet, he was determined to construct the historical picture by putting together information largely based on testimonies collected from anonymous people whose voice, according to Ringelblum, was never heard until then. (Kassow 2007: 83)<sup>12</sup>

And indeed, Ringelblum was involved in collecting documents and account from around Poland, documenting the present and in many ways educating those he came in contact with about recording and preserving, as well as simply arousing their interest and involvement in Jewish history. Once the routine of collecting was becoming a habit, Ringelblum encouraged the locals to begin writing about histories of institutions like banks etc. (Kassow 2007: 88)

In addition, Ringelblum was frustrated by the lack of attention community leaders lent to architecture and art. In many places and for lack of awareness, old community buildings were renovated with little care or attention to their original artistic value. As a result, Ringelblum got together with other organizations to teach locals about preservation and the Commission also organized an expedition that would take pictures of old synagogues and cemeteries. (Kassow 2007: 4-5)

He also addressed the Jewish Society for Knowledge of the Land in Poland (Yidisher gezeishaft far landkentenish) and with them organized programs of tourism to Jewish sites in Poland. For him Jews needed that to be separate from the Poles as the latter showed no interest in Jewish history or archeology. This was not a flaw unique to Poland, but as Jewish sites were never really researched, Ringelblum thought that the Landkentenish meant to combine pleasure (tourism) and collecting information and sources about the sites. (Kassow 2007: 85) For example, as a result of these efforts, the chair of the Vilnius branch of the Landkentenish Society wrote a book that attempted to preserve Jewish Vilnius known in Jewish circles as “Yerusholayim de Lite” (the Jerusalem of Lithuania). In light of the war that was about to break out, the importance of such a record is invaluable – during WWII, much of Vilnius Jewry was annihilated along with its cultural treasures. Those records that were gathered before the war and managed to survive the horror have made it possible for us to reconstruct the past, as well as assess more accurately the magnitude of the destruction.

One way to make YIVO influential was establishing contact with historians at large. He put tremendous efforts in having YIVO scholars participate at the Seventh Inter-

<sup>12</sup> In that respect, Ringelblum's attitude towards history was communist so to speak. Apparently, this attitude to history was also encouraged in USSR.

national Congress of the Historical Science that met in Warsaw in 1933. Indeed, the participation in that conference was a great achievement, as by allowing their participation, the Congress which was state-based, acknowledged the existence of an external nation, the Jews. (Kassow 2007: 83) Furthermore, on top of this being an outstanding accomplishment for the Jewish entity, it was also a triumph for YIVO that was an independent institute and not connected to any university. Sadly, the shift of moods in Poland made it virtually impossible for Jews to be part of the Polish delegation to the Eighth International Congress. (Kassow 2007: 84)

### Welfare - The JDC or the Joint

At the end of the 1920s, Ringelblum had started an additional career at the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), a major relief agency established in the USA, and which had many branches in Poland. From 1930-1938 Ringelblum was the editor of the *Folkshtif* - the journal of the CEKABE, a roof organization under whose wing were credit societies from all over Poland that received help from the JDC. In addition, Ringelblum was the head of the *landmanshaft*, a department that dealt with raising money from former Polish Jews to helping those still living in Poland.

It was at the JDC that Ringelblum got acquainted with Yitzhak Giterman, one of its directors who had a major role in developing Ringelblum's attitude towards the concept of philanthropy. Here Ringelblum has learned the difference between old school philanthropy that was essentially based on providing help, but without involving responsibility on the part of the help seeker, and Giterman's approach which was to supply self-help aimed at providing the needy with tools to overcome crisis and hopefully prevent a greater one in the future. (Kassow 2007: 90)

By 1937, the CEKABE included 870 towns. These figures show that Jews all over Poland were particularly vulnerable and needed a great deal of help. And indeed the austere situation of the Jews, instead of discouraging Ringelblum, became an incentive.

As of 1936 there was a growing number of pogroms against Jews all over Poland, like in Przytyk, Brest etc. In addition, there were more and more local initiatives of economic boycott, initiatives that were supported by the clergy and the Polish government. Therefore, the JDC stepped up to protect those who were harmed and restore the businesses hurt by lending them money. (Kassow 2007: 98)

In many ways, the work conducted by Ringelblum did not correspond to his Marxist political views as the loans were given to private people, but the work certainly corresponded to Ringelblum's very developed sense of solidarity. The fact that



those loans required responsibility on the part of the borrowers made this venture a means to strengthen the community rather than weakening it while encouraging the Jewish borrowers to get more involved in the general economy. (Kassow 2007: 99)

In 1938, Giterman put Ringelblum in charge of the *landsmanshaftn* which was designed to convince American Jews to support the shtetels.<sup>13</sup> One way to encourage that help was through publishing in the newspaper *Folkshtifl*. Ringelblum published accounts by ordinary Jews connected to the *kases* (free loan societies) which described in the most heart breaking manner the huge difficulties encountered by the Jewish population. (Kassow 2007: 100)

Apart from providing valuable information about the realities in Poland, these reports provided Ringelblum with insight into the amazing quality of accounts that one could get hold of from ordinary people. Furthermore, as accounts were written by all sorts of people, Ringelblum's approach that Jews constituted a class of their own regardless of their background and beliefs was reinforced as he witnessed how despite the division of their beliefs, they all worked together in an attempt to ameliorate the situation regardless of their political or religious convictions. (Kassow 2007: 100) Their valuable and important work stood out in comparison to what the *Kehilles*, the official institution of Jewish communities. These were largely under the influence of internal politics as well as government political preferences and therefore, almost paralyzed. (Kassow 2007: 100)

### Zbaszyn

In November 1938 Giterman sent Ringelblum to the border town of Zbaszyn, where about 7,000-6,000 Jewish refugees from Germany, out of 17,000 deportees, were gathered. These people had been forced out of Germany for being considered Polish but not allowed into Poland.<sup>14</sup> Ringelblum spent five weeks in Zbaszyn as the person in charge of the refugees. In his letter to Mahler he describes what he did once he arrived to the town:

*“In the course of those five weeks we (originally Giterman, Ginzberg and I, and after ten days I and Ginzberg, that is), set up a whole township with departments for supplies, hospitalization, carpentry workshops, tailors, shoemakers, books, a legal section, a migration department and an independent post office (with 53 employees), a welfare office, a court of arbitration, an organizing committee, open and secret control services, a cleaning service, and*

<sup>13</sup> Shtetlach – the Yiddish word for towns with large Jewish populations, which existed in Central and Eastern Europe before the Holocaust. Shtetlach were mainly found in the areas that constituted the 19th-century Pale of Settlement in the Russian Empire, the Congress Kingdom of Poland, Galicia and Romania. Viewed January 13 2017 from <https://www.wildwand.com/en/Shtetl>

<sup>14</sup> Deportation of Germans from Polish to Zbaszyn was a response for Polish legislation from March and October 1938 which dealt with cancellation of passports to Poles living outside of Poland. The law was aimed at the numerous Jews living in Germany and that the Polish state was afraid would return to Poland because of the Nazi regime.

*a complex sanitation service, etc.” (Ringelblum 1938)*

The information that Ringelblum provides Mahler with indicates on the one hand, Ringelblum's organizational capabilities, as well as the chaos in camp prior to his arrival. In addition, Ringelblum's approach to welfare work stands out here as he set up the camp as an independent unit from the town that had actually housed the camp. Obviously, the experience he had gathered in Zbaszyn would become really handy when Ringelblum would have to deal with the constant flow of Jews deported from their hometowns to the Warsaw ghetto.

The event of Zbaszyn exposed Ringelblum to the harsh realities of five years of Nazism in Germany, but it also revealed and exposed the Polish government antisemitism.

In the same letter to Mahler, Ringelblum concludes: *“... Zbaszyn has become a symbol for the defenselessness of the Jews of Poland. Jews were humiliated to the level of lepers, to citizens of the third class, and as a result we are all visited by terrible tragedy. Zbaszyn was a heavy moral blow against the Jewish population of Poland. And it is for this reason that all the threads lead from the Jewish masses to Zbaszyn and to the Jews who suffer there...” (Ringelblum 1938)*. These events helped Ringelblum grasp the depth of the abyss between Jews and Poles. Their refusal to help the Jewish deportees not only struck the unfortunate refugees, but sent a message to the entire Polish Jewry that Poles regarded them as a separate entity from Polish society. (Ringelblum 1994: 306)

The encounter with the Jewish refugees in Zbaszyn was very traumatic for Ringelblum, feelings that he had put in writing in 1939 and on the spot. (Shatzky 1953) However, it is well known that when Ringelblum was in that town, he collected a huge amount of documents from the Jews who had been expelled from their homes (the material was lost) and also accounts from those refugees. Evidence of his intention to deal with gathering materials about the deportation to Zbaszyn can be found in a letter written by Ringelblum to Rafael Mahler dated December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1938, asking him to collect materials from the Jewish press and English newspapers. (Ringelblum 1938)

### Conclusion or the Beginning

The events of Zbaszyn were followed by Kristallnacht or the Night of Broken Glass, on November 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup>, 1938. The alleged reason for that pogrom was an act of revenge carried out by Herschel Grynszpan whose parents were among the deportees to Zbaszyn. Grynszpan assassinated a Nazi German diplomat, Ernst vom Rath, in Paris and immediately afterwards the organized pogrom took place.

On September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1939, WWII broke out. This very brief account of what Emmanuel



Ringelblum was involved in prior to the war shows that he was well equipped in talent, experience and above all, motivation to react according to the events.

Ringelblum could have fled Poland in time. In August 1939 he was in the 25<sup>th</sup> Zionist Congress in Geneva and could have stayed behind. Even on the first days of the war he could have left like many others did, but he remained in Warsaw. Ringelblum took part in the Civil Defense Organization and also continued to work for the Joint relentlessly. On September 28<sup>th</sup>, 1939, Warsaw was occupied by Germany.

Although the brutality of the Nazis was immediately felt, things remained relatively normal in Warsaw until October 1940, when Jews were ordered to move to the ghetto within two weeks. This decree found Ringelblum ready for action in every respect. His organizational skills enabled him to erect a whole system of self-help and he established the *Omeg Shabbat* archive in the ghetto. At first he worked alone, but when things became more and more complicated, he established a network of people to help. Ringelblum's background at YIVO determined how the archive would be organized. In other words, the same methods used in YIVO were implemented at the archive as well. (Kassow 2007: 147; Huberband 1969: 310).

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