
DAVID G. ROSKIES, ed.

Voices from the Warsaw Ghetto:

Writing Our History

Foreword by SAMUEL D. KASSOW

New Haven—London: Yale University Press, 2019

WHILE I was in Warsaw, in October 2021, within the inter-academic exchange program between the Romanian Academy and the Polish Academy of Sciences, I had the opportunity to visit the so-called Ringelblum Archive, listed on the Memory of the World Register by UNESCO, a unique collection of documents and testimonies on the extermination of Polish Jews. It was there that I found this amazing volume, *Voices from the Warsaw Ghetto: Writing Our History*. It contains fragments of diaries, pages of prose, some skillful artwork, many poems, and several sermons that capture the heroism, tragedy, humor, and socio-cultural dynamics of the ghetto's inhabitants. This collection offers an insight into the life of Warsaw Ghetto's unsung heroes and speaks about their legacy and their importance for the recovery of a turbulent history.

These people “had few illusions about their survival, but they believed in their mission. Theirs was a battle for memory, and their weapons were pen and paper,” writes Samuel D. Kassow, professor of History at Trinity College, in his Foreword. But only a few researchers outside Poland, and the Holocaust Studies field, know about these things. “Even today the story of Oyneg Shabes is largely unknown” (p. x). What is Oyneg Shabes?

Oyneg Shabes—Yiddish for “Joy of the Sabbath”—was a clandestine research organization, consisting of a group of scholars and intellectuals who collected and pre-

served during World War II, in the Warsaw Ghetto, materials and documents regarding the life of Polish Jews. Written in Yiddish and Polish, the documents kept now in the Ringelblum Archive in Warsaw, also known as the Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto, amount to about 35,000 pages. These documents were buried in 10 metal boxes and 2 milk cans, and their existence remains one of the most astonishing projects in history. This organization of around 50 to 60 people was secret, and many of its collaborators didn't even know about each other. In many cases, Emanuel Ringelblum, a Polish Jewish historian, and his collaborators reached out to ordinary people, who became “an army of collectors,” their records explaining everyday life. Most of the materials collected by them were written pieces, fragments of diaries, or writings about different aspects of life in the Ghetto. However, an important selection of artifacts—newspapers, personal letters, postcards, leaflets, theater posters, candy wrappers, and food ration tickets, as well as drawings and watercolors—were also preserved, and all of these are glimpses into the real life of the Warsaw Ghetto.

Voices from the Warsaw Ghetto offers powerful and gripping selections of documents, artworks, poems, and biographies of people who made possible the existence of this incredible archive. The name of Emanuel Ringelblum appears often, which is only natural, given the fact that Oyneg Shabes was his idea. He was born in eastern Galicia, in 1900. He moved to Warsaw, in his 20s, to study History at Warsaw University, where he also completed, in 1927, his doctoral thesis on “The Jews of Warsaw Until 1527,” published in 1932. He began to work, in the same year, for the American Jewish Joint Distribution

Committee. When the Second World War broke out, Emanuel Ringelblum “became the leader of the Aleynhilf (Jewish Social Self-Help), the key relief organization in the Warsaw Ghetto, as well as the Yidishe kultur-organizatsye (IKOR), a Yiddish culture organization. Ringelblum used the Aleynhilf to employ and support the Jewish intelligentsia and cultural elite. Ringelblum and his wife and son were murdered by the Nazis in March 1944, along with thirty-four other Jews who had been hiding in an underground bunker” (p. 63).

Shimon Huberband became Ringelblum’s “most valued collaborator chronicling. He died in the Great Deportation in the summer of 1942” (p. 82), but his writings on “Ghetto Folklore” survived and they are valuable tools for researchers.

The story of a house, “House No. 21” (pp. 83–114), written by Peretz Opoczynski, contains the tragedy of war, and also “the real life of the war . . . his own life” (p. 113).

Leyb Goldin contributed the “Chronicle of a Single Day” (pp. 115–135), a terrible account of living under terror, tormented by hunger: “Die? So be it. Anything is better than being hungry. Anything is better than suffering” (p. 120).

The volume contains pages from several journals, like the one kept by Chaim A. Kaplan, who was a Hebrew educator, essayist, and diarist, born in Belorussia in 1880. His “Scroll of Agony” shows the inhuman life of the Ghetto: “Group by group the Jews of the ghetto, shrunken, shriveled, and frozen with frost, shadow Jews whose flesh cries emaciation, and the bones of whose faces jut out like skeletons, deadly ill, worn down, and wretched in their great poverty, the hardships of displacement, wandering, and expulsions . . .” (p. 139).

There are many paragraphs like this one, written by many members of the group, terrible accounts of the Great Deportation, loss, and death. “It is hard to keep going. I have no food, nothing to sleep on,” writes Abraham Lewin (p. 196). Like him there were many, countless, nameless, unknown and forgotten victims of those times.

“What can I possibly say and ask for at this moment?” asks Gela Seksztajn, who studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, but perished in April 1943. “Unearthed in the first part of Oyneg Shabes archive were 311 of her watercolors, drawings, sketches, and portraits, produced in the years 1930–42” (p. 202).

“My name is not great; humanity has no reason to bless it” (p. 207), writes Yehoshue Perle, Yiddish prose writer, famous for his bildungsroman *Everyday Jews* (1937). His detailed accounts of Nazi atrocities are hard to read: “They lie, the slaughtered creatures, naked and shamed, scattered and spread, never purified for burial, without a Kaddish, without a gravestone” (p. 212). Perle himself was “transported to Auschwitz in a sealed train with eighteen hundred other Polish Jews, they were gassed on arrival, on October 1, 1943” (p. 213).

This volume, edited and introduced by David G. Roskies, the Sol and Evelyn Henkind Chair in Yiddish Literature and Culture, and professor of Jewish literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, brings to life terrible and unknown stories about the real life of people who lived in the Warsaw Ghetto. It is a touching volume, full of incredible details of privations and records of atrocities, a must-read collection for those researchers, students and ordinary readers interested in the life of Jews during the Holocaust.

A powerful written testimony of the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto, this volume contains their stories, in their words, and it is an amazing source of inspiration, a book dedicated to their valuable legacy.



MIHAELA GLIGOR

STEFANO BOTTONI

**Moștenirea lui Stalin în România:
Regiunea Autonomă Maghiară
1952–1960**

(Stalin's legacy in Romania: The Hungarian Autonomous Region 1952–1960)

Translated from English by MUGUR BUTUZA
Bucharest: Humanitas, 2021

THE SUBJECT of the Hungarian autonomous region in Romania, which lasted from 1952 until 1968, has been insufficiently addressed within the national and transnational historiography of the past three decades, perhaps because it is a sensitive topic in the history of the Romanians, of the relations between the Romanian and Hungarian communities in Transylvania, or of the relations between Bucharest and Budapest.

Although several studies have been published about the Soviet experiment which granted territorial autonomy to the Hungarians in southeastern Transylvania, comprehensive approaches to this particularly complex issue have not been undertaken until quite recently, when two historians chose to examine the history of the Hungarian Autonomous Region in their book-length studies. They are Claudia Tișe, who has a Ph.D. in history from the University of Oradea, and Stefano Bottoni, an Italian historian and university professor.

In her work entitled *Administrație și politică în Regiunea Autonomă Maghiară (1952–1968)* (Administration and politics in the Hungarian Autonomous Region, 1952–1968), published in 2014, Claudia Tișe engages with this topic mainly from the perspective of interethnic relations in the Hungarian Autonomous Region. The author explores how Romanian-Hungarian diplomatic relations evolved in the context of this autonomous region, which is described by Tișe as a “Soviet-style political experiment.” By contrast, the volume authored by Stefano Bottoni analyzes in greater depth the internal life of the Hungarian Autonomous Region. However, it focuses solely on the timespan from its founding until 1960, without covering the period 1960–1968, coeval with the existence of the Hungarian Autonomous Mureș Region.

The two historians also analyze the concepts of territorial and cultural autonomy, as they were understood and applied by the Romanian communist regime to the Hungarians in Szeklerland. Stefano Bottoni believes that in the 1950s the autonomy of this region was limited, having been designed according to the Bolshevik pattern, with a view to ensuring the political integration of the Hungarians from the Hungarian Autonomous Region. Claudia Tișe concludes that the Hungarians in the Szekler region benefited only from extended cultural autonomy, but remained under the control of the central authorities. Tișe states that their territorial autonomy was not a real one, since it was regarded by the authorities in Bucharest as a solution to the national problem in Romania.

While Claudia Tișe's contribution to the advancement of knowledge on this topic is important and indisputable, Stefano