Holocaust Remembrance

The Shapes of Memory

Edited by Geoffrey H. Hartman



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The Library of Jewish Catastrophe

David G. Roskies

In the Jewish experience of the twentieth century, one cycle of violence rapidly gave way to another: the Kishinev pogrom of 1903 that ushered in the century with more deaths (49) than all the previous pogroms combined; the First World War, where untold numbers of civilians were murdered, robbed and deported along the eastern front; the civil war in the Ukraine which claimed anywhere between 60,000 and 250,000 civilian Jewish lives, and the Holocaust. The immediate problem facing the survivors of these catastrophes was not how to mourn but simply how to preserve a record of the unfolding disaster. For it was now possible for the modern nation state to wipe out entire populations and hide the fact. Something that the rabbis could never have anticipated had been added to the landscape of Jewish catastrophe: that the state would control all lines of communication as well as the lives of all its citizens. Whereas once, in Hadrianic times, the rabbis had coined the phrase bish'at hashemad to designate a time of religious persecution, one could now speak of a new category, bish'at hahashmada, "in times of mass extermination." Whereas bish'at hashemad the rabbis had enjoined the masses to perform Kiddush Hashem, to sanctify God's name in acts of martyrdom, now, in time of mass extermination, the latter-day rabbis enjoined the masses to preserve every scrap of evidence; to consider these documents as if they were sheymes - sacred fragments that bore the shem or name of God.

I wish to illustrate how painstaking and courageous was the making of a new literature of destruction.2 The first chapter was written in the wake of the Kishinev pogrom, when Jews in London and New York staged mass rallies in support of the victims and to denounce the tsar, and when members of the ad hoc Hebrew Writers' Union of Odessa called on their fellow Jews (in Hebrew) to mobilize Jewish self-defense units throughout Russia:

Brothers! The blood of our brethren in Kishinev cries out to us! Shake off the dust and become men! Stop weeping and pleading, stop lifting your hands for salvation to those who hate and exclude you! Look to your own hands for rescue! (p. 158)

This group of Hebrew writers dispatched one of their number, 30-yearold poet Hayyim Nahman Bialik, to collect eyewitness accounts from the survivors. While Bialik returned from Kishinev with several notebooks worth of survivor testimony that remained unexploited, his pogrom poem, "In the City of Slaughter," transformed the way that modern Jews perceived catastrophe. Published under the code name "The Oracle at Nemirov," as if it were recounting the seventeenth-century Cossack revolt, Bialik's epic poem dethroned the Jewish God of History and vilified the survivors for their passivity.3 Forty years later, in the ghettos of Warsaw, Vilna, and Lodz, Bialik's poem would be constantly cited to measure the distance from pogrom to Final Solution.⁴ Thus, on the third day of the Great Deportation, which marked the beginning of the end in the Warsaw ghetto, diarist Abraham Lewin would link Kishinev to Warsaw with this famous line from "In the City of Slaughter": "The sun is shining, the acacia is blooming, and the slaughterer is slaughtering."5

Kishinev became an international *cause célèbre* that gave rise to new forms of political action and poetic response. Then came the first total war in history. The war had barely begun when three leading Jewish intellectuals in Warsaw – I. L. Peretz, Jacob Dinezon and S. Ansky – issued this appeal to their fellow Jews:

Woe to the people whose history is written by strange hands and whose own writers have nothing left but to compose songs of lament, prayers and dirges after the fact.

Therefore, we turn to our people that is now and evermore being dragged into the global maelstrom, to all members of our people, men and women, young and old, who live and suffer and see and hear, with the following appeal:

BECOME HISTORIANS YOURSELVES! DON'T DEPEND ON THE HANDS OF STRANGERS!

Record, take it down, and collect! (p. 210)

All relevant documents and photographs were to be mailed – COD, if necessary – to the Jewish Ethnographic Society in Petrograd.

Though it was early in the war, it was already too late, for in July 1915 the tsarist government closed down the entire Jewish-language

press, imposed strict censorship on all news from the war front and banned the use of the Hebrew alphabet in the mails. It was left to Ansky himself to launch a one-man rescue operation to save the lives, livelihoods, letters and legends of Jews victimized by the war.

Ansky's six-volume chronicle of the war was the second major contribution to the modern Library of Jewish Catastrophe. Titled Khurbm Galitsye (The Destruction of Galicia), its subtitle defined the geographic, temporal and generic scope of this extraordinary document: The Jewish Catastrophe in Poland, Galicia and Bukovina, from a Diary, 1914-1917. In marked contrast to the celebrated European war memoirs and semifictional novels that were to appear, from Henri Barbusse's Lefeu to Erich Maria Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front to Jaroslav Hašek's The Good Soldier Schweik, Ansky used his personal experience to document the fate of an entire collective. Having traveled widely before the war through the backwoods of Volhynia and Podolia on a celebrated ethnographic expedition, he possessed intimate knowledge of Jewish folkways and foibles. As a Russian Socialist-Revolutionary and one-time Narodnik (Populist), he had access to the minds and inner reaches of the Russian military command. As a poet, playwright and journalist, his "diary" would be a literary document in its own right.6

Ansky redefined the Literature of Destruction both vertically and horizontally, viz. both in relation to what had come before in Jewish culture and what European gentile survivors and chroniclers of the Great War were doing in their respective languages. No more would Jewish writers be satisfied with composing "songs of lament, prayers and dirges after the fact." Henceforth the Literature of Destruction would draw on eyewitness accounts, would render the concrete and sensual particulars of modern violence, would spare neither victim nor victimizer and would seek the causality of war, revolution and pogrom not in heaven but on earth. In contrast to the European and Anglo-American literature of war, however, the modern Jewish texts would continue to present the catastrophe in terms of the ancient archetypes of Akedah, Hurban, Kiddush Hashem.7 (New to the repertoire as of 1907 was the crucifixion, now reinterpreted as an icon of Jewish suffering.8) Thus, the modern Library of Jewish Catastrophe both grew out of Jewish collective memory and fed back into it. To the ancient and medieval songs of lament, prayers, and dirges were added panoramic chronicles written in the first person but encompassing the fate of the collective.

Ansky represents the new voice of collective memory to emerge from the First World War and a new generation of secular intellectuals with roots in other cultures as well as their own. In the catastrophe that followed, his mantle was assumed by Russian-Jewish historian Elias Tcherikower. Like Ansky, Tcherikower was an active player in the very events that he would chronicle. Tcherikower, recently returned from America, moved to Kiev at the end of 1918 to assume a central role in the Jewish National Secretariat. But no sooner had the Ukraine proclaimed its independence and no sooner had the Jews been granted national autonomy than civil war erupted, and the Jews were caught between all the warring factions: the Whites, the Reds, the Poles, the Ukrainians. Even as Kiev kept changing hands, Tcherikower organized an archive to collect and research materials on the Ukrainian pogroms. The terse Yiddish circular issued in May 1919 began with an invocation of the Tokheha, the Mosaic Curses: "Jews!" it read, "a terrible pogrom-Tokheha has befallen our cities and towns, and the world does not know; we ourselves know nothing or very little about it. [Knowledge of this must not be suppressed!"9

Tcherikower and his staff left several important legacies: three out of a projected seven-volume series of historical monographs on the pogroms, as well as Rokhl Feigenberg's Chronicle of a Dead Town, a documentary novel of destruction in which the anatomy of a single pogrom was recreated in excruciating detail. Their most lasting legacy of all, however, was the archive itself - as model and metaphor. For the archive was never safe from the hands of those who wished to see all evidence of this crime destroyed. Copies of every important document were therefore made in triplicate and two of them deposited elsewhere for safekeeping. And a good thing too, for when the Soviets succeeded in annexing the Ukraine, they made the destruction of the archive a top priority. Tcherikower managed to smuggle the archive out of the Soviet Union and reassembled it in Berlin as the Ostjüdisches Historisches Archiv. When Hitler came to power, Tcherikower divided the archive into two, shipped the lion's share to the YIVO Institute in Vilna and took the rest with him to Paris. And when the Nazis occupied northern France, Tcherikower fled to the south, abandoning his archive in Paris where, at the end of 1940, it was rescued by historian and former French Foreign Legionnaire Zosa Szajkowski who was dropped behind enemy lines by the US Air Force to aid the French Resistance. As for the bulk of the archive in Vilna, the Nazis destroyed it in 1942.

The legacy of this archive on the pogroms, then, is nothing less than a redefinition of the law of *sheymes*: under extreme conditions every scrap of paper becomes sacred.

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The sheer scope of historical catastrophe had made the old methods of chronicling obsolete. Besides issuing appeals for all primary sources

to be preserved and collected, East European Jewish historians began to generate their own primary sources using the tools of social science. Foremost among them was the analytic questionnaire, first used by I. L. Peretz back in the 1890s when conducting a statistical expedition through the Tomashow region of Poland, then perfected by S. Ansky's ethnographic expedition on the eve of the First World War. But it was Max Weinreich of the YIVO Institute in Vilna who introduced the latest social scientific methods in order to study the long-range effects of trauma, discrimination and poverty on Jewish adolescents. (Weinreich even coined the Yiddish term for "adolescent.") Under YIVO's auspices, Polish Jewish adolescents began submitting their autobiographies - a new genre for the Jews - for Weinreich and others to examine, while an army of amateur zamlers, or collectors, worked the ethnographic and linguistic field on YIVO's behalf.10 While the Polish government was intent upon eliminating the Jews from all walks of life, the zamlers, students and scholars associated with YIVO came to see self-study as the route to emancipation.

Most research projects had barely gotten off the ground by the time the German tanks rolled into Poland, but the ideology and methodology behind a modern Jewish archive were now firmly in place. It should therefore come as no surprise that within a month of the German invasion, an underground archive, nicknamed for clandestine purposes Oneg Shabbes (Enjoyment of the Sabbath), was already being established in Warsaw. By design of its founder and organizational genius, 39-year-old Emanuel Ringelblum, the Oneg Shabbes archive was to be a decidedly modern library that drew upon the cumulative experience of contemporary East European Jewry. Ringelblum, a YIVO-affiliated scholar, began by choosing for his staff young men and women with prior training in the study of Jewish life; with reliable political (read: Labor Zionist) credentials and who were already involved in the life of the collective. Here is how Ringelblum described the hiring process:

Of the several dozen full-time staff, the great majority were self-educated intellectuals, mostly from proletarian parties. We deliberately refrained from drawing professional journalists into our work, because we did not want it to be sensationalized. Our aim was that the sequence of events in each town, the experiences of each Jew – and during the current war each Jew is a world unto himself – should be conveyed as simply and faithfully as possible. Every redundant word, every literary gilding or ornamentation grated upon our ears and provoked our anger. Jewish life in

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wartime is so full of tragedy that it is unnecessary to embellish it with one superfluous line. (p. 389)

Thus Ringelblum also broke with the time-honored practice that favored archetypal embellishment over temporal details, sacred text over historical context. He wanted to let the facts tell their own story. Finally, in contrast to the rabbinic stategy of preserving only one, timeless version of events, Ringelblum went out of his way to gain multiple perspectives - that of young and old, religious and secular - and to cover the entire range of Jewish experience in wartime. "We tried to have the same events described by as many people as possible," he wrote. "By comparing the different accounts, the historian will not find it difficult to reach the kernel of historical truth, the actual course of an event." To this end, the ghetto population was divided up by age, gender, class, religious persuasion and place of origin; detailed questionnaires were drawn up to cover every conceivable aspect of Jewish life and death; autobiography contests were announced, and amateur fieldworkers were co-opted to work alongside the professionals. The YIVO mandate was being carried out against all odds.12

Yet for all its hard-nosed historical positivism, and for all its desire to leave nothing out, Oneg Shabbes' work of recording, compiling and synthesizing the data of Jewish destruction had become, as Chaim Kaplan put it, *melekhet haqodesh*, a sacred task analogous to the building of the Tabernacle. The turning point came with the Great Deportation in the summer of 1942 when 275,000 Jews were shipped off to Treblinka in cattle cars:

The work of O[neg] S[habbes], along with the whole of our social and economic life, was disrupted. Only a very few comrades kept pen in hand during those tragic days and continued to write about what was happening in Warsaw. But the work was too sacred and too deeply cherished in the hearts of the O[neg] S[habbes] co-workers; the social function of O[neg] S[habbes] too important for the project to be discontinued. We began to reconstruct the period of the Deportation and to collect material on the slaughter-house of European Jewry – Treblinka. On the basis of reports made by those who returned from various camps in the province, we tried to form a picture of the experiences of Jews in the provincial cities during the time of the deportation. At the moment of writing, the work is proceeding full force. If we only get some breathing space, we will be able to ensure that no important fact

about Jewish life in wartime shall remain hidden from the world. (p. 389)

A life of extremity – there was to be no breathing space – made absolute demands. What's more, those few who survived the Great Deportation had to become both historians and threnodists, had to supply the facts as well as their meaning. Despite their scientific objectives, the chroniclers of the Warsaw ghetto were thrown back to the age-old models of commemoration – to the liturgy. The most dramatic example was Rokhl Auerbach, a staff member of Oneg Shabbes almost from its inception and the one, along with Hirsh Wasser, who dug up part of the archive in 1946.

Like the best of her generation, Rokhl Auerbach was equally at home in Yiddish, Hebrew and Polish. She had been a close friend of leading Jewish intellectuals and writers, such as Dvora Fogel and Bruno Schulz, and a one-time companion of Yiddish poet Itzik Manger. But both in the ghetto and on the Aryan side of Warsaw she devoted her energies to documenting the catastrophe – in Polish. Hers was the first published account of the Treblinka death camp. While Polish, however, was the language most accessible for historical documentation, Yiddish remained the language of collective memory. And so she composed, while in hiding on the Aryan side, and at great personal risk, a Yiddish prose epic of the ghetto's destruction, titled "Yizkor, 1943."

What unlocked the memory of those weeks of unsurpassed terror and what probably enabled her to write in the first place was the liturgy. From a Jewish woman's perspective, this liturgy began with Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel and ended in the recitation of *Yizkor* four times a year in her grandfather's synagogue back home in Galicia. Here is the penultimate part of her lament:

Not long ago, I saw a woman in the streetcar, her head thrown back, talking to herself. I thought that she was either drunk or out of her mind. It turned out that she was a mother who had just received the news that her son, who had been rounded up in the street, had been shot.

"My child," she stammered, paying no attention to the other people in the streetcar, "my son. My beautiful, beloved son."

I too would like to talk to myself like one mad or drunk, the way that woman did in the Book of Judges who poured out her heart unto the Lord and whom Eli drove from the Temple.¹³

I may neither groan nor weep. I may not draw attention to myself in the street.

And I need to groan; I need to weep. Not four times a year. I feel the need to say Yizkor four times a day. (p. 464)

Here was a secular Jew who had to play all roles at once because she might turn out to be the sole survivor. Warsaw was Jerusalem and she its witness-as-threnodist, composing a new Book of Lamentations. She was the last living member of her family who must name the names of all the dead. She was the witness-as-eyewitness who must conjure up before it is too late the face of a murdered people – young and old, rich and poor, noble and corrupt. The memorial prayer served Auerbach as a measure of how much had changed; of the losses that *had* no possible measure. In lieu of the ancient and medieval dirges recited at fixed times and within a sacred space – hers was a private lament with no fixed addressee. Indeed, she chose not to publish it until twenty years after it was written. Inasmuch as Auerbach perceived the Holocaust to be the culmination of all catastrophes that came before, her memorial had to encompass all the bereaved mothers, daughters, wives and lovers who perished along with their men.

That unbelieving Jews would transmit the traditional response to catastrophe – in however dialectical a way – is consistent with the collective ethos of East European Jewry. That the techniques of Jewish collective memory were still viable, even as the whole culture of East European Jewry was being destroyed, testifies to the power of that fusion of sacred and secular. The eyewitness chroniclers of modern Jewish catastrophe – Bialik, Ansky, Tcherikower, Ringelblum, Auerbach and others – found new and even subversive means to merge the events they witnessed into an ongoing saga. Despite their loss, or lack of faith in a God of History, they revived the archetypal reading of that history.

The efforts of these activist—historians demonstrates that the will to bear witness had to be cultivated. It did not arise in mystical fashion out of the Holocaust and its aftermath. Oneg Shabbes and other archives like it drew on forty years of organized and politicized activity to make the chronicling of events a tool of Jewish self-emancipation. Questionnaires, contests and collectors made the act of memorializing a grassroots phenomenon. There is likewise no mystery about the amount of documentation that survived. The greater the perceived destruction, the greater the effort to preserve every documentary scrap. That is precisely why these *sheymes* written *bish'at hahashmada* deserve special status.

They also help to refute the commonly held belief that an adequate response to the Holocaust could only emerge one generation after the

event. A careful reading of the Oneg Shabbes archive, itself but one part of the vast Library of Jewish Catastrophe written during the Nazi occupation, shows that a new archetype of catastrophe emerged even as the events were unfolding. Whatever area of post-Holocaust consciousness one mines — whether historiography, theology, social psychology, literature, the graphic arts or music — one discovers the core of that new consciousness in the midst of the Nazi terror.

The encylopedic scope, the way this body of writing combines fact and fiction, or modern and traditional forms of Jewish self-expression, makes it comparable to that other great collective document of the diaspora – the Talmud. Ringelblum is to Oneg Shabbes as Rav Ashi was to the Babylonian Talmud. The ghetto and concentration camp archives, moreover, exist like the Talmud in various recensions. Oneg Shabbes is as distinct from the Lodz Chronicle as the diverse holdings of the Zonabend collection from Lodz are distinct from the Sutzkever–Kazcerginski collection from Vilna. And the various ghetto archives compiled over a three- four- and even five-year period of occupation are utterly different from The Scrolls of Auschwitz written by members of the Sonderkommando in between the gassings of whole "transports" in 1943–4.14

Like the Talmud, this literature of the Holocaust requires a mental curriculum of languages, history, theology, fiction, folklore, and then some, to master. Many of the relevant documents are still undeciphered, and unpublished even in their original languages. As opposed to the writing on the Holocaust that will go on being produced for generations to come, these documents composed during the Holocaust are finite and therefore (like the Talmud) constitute a closed canon. Because of their insistence on the knowability of the destruction – that one could, in Ringelblum's words, convey as simply and faithfully as possible, the sequence of events in each town, the experiences of each Jew – they require a separate hermeneutics.

Perhaps they are sacred, too. Sacred in the way that any torah-related text or *seyfer* is hallowed by the faithful – who obey a strict hierarchy of what *seyfer* may be placed on top of another, and if any page is torn out, that *sheyme* is accorded proper burial. But since they arise out of a secular and revolutionary consciousness that taught Jews to make history by knowing their history, their sanction does not come from God. They derive their authority from the dead whose deeds they chronicle; from those who preserved and buried every scrap of evidence so that the Nazis would not vanquish Jewish memory even as they destroyed the Jews of Europe; and from the living who publish, translate and teach these memorial texts.

Chapter 3 The Library of Jewish Catastrophe

A version of this essay appeared as "La Bibliothèque de la catastrophe juive," *Pardès*, 9, 10 (1989), pp. 199–210.

- 1 H. J. Zimmels shows how the European rabbis applied this legal term to the unfolding Nazi terror. See "How far can the Nazi Holocaust be termed 'shaath ha-shemad' (religious persecution)?" in *The Echo of the Holocaust in Rabbinic Literature* (Marla, London, 1976), chapter 7. *Bish'at hahashmada* is my own coinage.
- 2 All subsequent quotations are drawn from *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish responses to catastrophe*, ed. David G. Roskies (Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1989).
- 3 For more on this epoch-making poem, see Alan Mintz, Hurban: responses to catastrophe in Hebrew literature (Columbia University Press, New York, 1984), chapter 4; and David G. Roskies, Against the Apocalypse: responses to catastrophe in modern Jewish culture (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1984), chapter 4.
- 4 Bialik's commanding presence in the Nazi ghettos and concentration camps deserves a separate study. For some preliminary evidence, see Roskies, Against the Apocalypse, chapters 8–9 and two remarkable documents from the Lodz ghetto, Simcha Bunem Shayevitsh's "Spring 1942," and Jozef Zelkowicz's "In these nightmarish days," Lodz Ghetto: inside a community under siege, ed. Alan Adelson and Robert Lapides (Viking, New York, 1989), pp. 250–62, 320. Shayevitsh's poem is both a continuation and parody of Bialik's "In the City of Slaughter." Likewise, the intertext of Zelkowicz's "Son of Man, Go Out into the Streets" is Bialik's poem.
- 5 Abraham Lewin, A Cup of Tears: a diary of the Warsaw ghetto, ed. Antony Polonsky (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1988), entry for July 26, 1942. Jewish literary and biblical references in Lewin's diary, including this one, are not identified in Polonsky's otherwise scrupulous edition.

- 6 For excerpts in English, see *The Literature of Destruction*, sect. 53 and my *The Dybbuk and Other Writings by S. Ansky* (Schocken Books, New York, 1992).
- 7 The Akedah or Binding of Isaac on Mt Moriah became the archetype of individual sacrifice. Hurban signifies the Destructions of the Temple in Jerusalem in 587 BCE and 70 CE and became the archetype of national catastrophe. *Kiddush Hashem*, the Sanctification of God's Name, is the Hebrew term for martyrdom, eventually defined as an act carried out in public during times of religious persecution. For a fuller discussion, see Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse*, chapter 2.
- 8 See Against the Apocalypse, chapter 10.
- Gited by Zosa Szajkowski in his epilogue to Elias Tcherikower, *Di ukrainer pogromen in yor* 1919 (YIVO, New York, 1965), p. 333. Szajkowski is my source on the Ukrainian pogroms.
- 10 See Max Weinreich, Der veg tsu undzer yugnt: yesoydes, metodn, problemen fun yidisher yugnt-forshung (YIVO, Vilna, 1935); Moses Kligsberg, Child and Adolescent Behavior Under Stress: an analytic topical guide to a collection of autobiographies of Jewish young men and women in Poland (1932–1939) in the Possession of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (YIVO, New York, 1965). On the revolutionary import of the autobiography contest in the history of the genre, see Marcus Mosley, "Jewish autobiography in Eastern Europe: the prehistory of a literary genre" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Oxford University, 1990), chapter 7.
- See Ringelblum's history and evaluation of the archive written in December 1943 in *The Literature of Destruction*, ed. David G. Roskies, sect. 71 incorrectly dated January 1943.
- 12 For sample questionnaires, monograph outlines and other research projects of the Oyneg Shabes archive, see To Live With Honor and Die With Honor! . . .: selected documents from the Warsaw ghetto underground archives, ed. Joseph Kermish, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1986.
- 13 Two memory lapses: Hannah's prayer is recorded in 1 Sam. 1, not in Judges. Eli did not drive Hannah from the Temple.
- In 1988, Yad Vashem published To Live with Honor and Die with Honor! . . .: selected documents from the Warsaw ghetto underground archives, ed. Joseph Kermish. The uneven quality of its translations and annotations as well as the idiosyncratic selection of materials render this 790-page volume almost unusable. In 1988, the YIVO Institute in New York published The Documents of the Lodz Ghetto: an inventory of the Nachman Zonabend Collection, compiled by Marek Web. The YIVO has also announced the publication in English of Herman Kruk's Diary of the Vilna Ghetto, tr. Barbara Hashav (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1993). Ber Mark's The Scrolls of Auschwitz, tr. from the Hebrew by Sharon Neemani and adapted from the Yiddish original (Am Oved, Tel Aviv, 1985) may be read in conjunction with Zalmen Gradowski's "The Czech transport," in Roskies, The Literature of Destruction, sect. 93.