How Writers Fought Back: 
Literature from the Nazi Ghettos and Camps 

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READERS TEND TO BE MORE FAMILIAR WITH WRITING ON the subject of the Holocaust created after rather than during the war, and are generally unaware of the remarkable quantity of writing done in the ghettos and camps. As Yechiel Szeintuch observes: “The phenomenon of writing in general and of literary creation in particular among Jews . . . during the Holocaust, on all levels and at all ages, in scores of different places, has no precedent in Jewish history. It seems that in no other period was so much written in a limited number of years by so many authors. Of special interest is the variety of forms comprising poetry, prose, plays, essays, literary journalism . . . translations . . . chronicles and diaries.” David Roskies refers to the existence of “over three hundred writers in Yiddish and Hebrew alone, who spanned the entire arena of Nazi domination with a full range of literary expression.”

Most of these writers died of starvation or disease or perished in the camps; and much of their writing was destroyed in the deportations or lost along with the possessions they left behind. Fortunately, a portion of what was created has survived and is gradually appearing in English translation. Like smuggling food into the ghetto, operating clandestine schools for children, running underground presses, maintaining illegal worship groups (minyanim), ghetto writing was a form of spiritual resistance performed under circumstances that made physical resistance often equivalent to suicide. Simply to write in the valley of death—a diary entry, a lyric, a lullaby, a hymn—was itself an act of resistance, an affirmation of life at the very moment the enemy sought your annihilation. More direct was the resistance of ghetto poets like Shmerke Kaczerginski, Abraham Sutzkever, Wladyslaw Szlengel, and Hirsh Glik who inspired and exhorted ghetto victims to rebellion. My focus, however, is on another aspect of resistance through writing: Writers in the ghettos (and to a lesser degree in the camps) were intent on resisting the Nazis by leaving for future readers a record of Nazi crimes and Jewish suffering in the hope that after the war justice would be done. To be sure, defiance of the Nazis was not the only motive behind ghetto writing, but it was a dominant one. While such defiance of the Nazis has not gone unnoticed by scholars, the subject

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From All Their Habitations takes its title from Ezekiel 37:23 and features reports of Jewish religious, intellectual, and communal life in various parts of the world.
has not received the full discussion it deserves. Yechei Szeintuch observes that a comprehensive study of literature written in ghettos and camps would tell us a great deal about Jewish responses to the Nazi destruction and suggests that “literary creativity ought to be examined as one possible form of resistance.” This essay is a preliminary attempt at such an examination.

Let me speak first about an organized form of resistance by means of writing— the Warsaw Ghetto Secret Archive, which historian Emanuel Ringelblum secretly established to chronicle the murderous deeds of the Nazis for future generations. Readers unfamiliar with ghetto writing are likely to know little about this extraordinary enterprise. What started in November 1940, when the Warsaw ghetto was sealed off, as Ringelblum’s personal diary became through his efforts an organized underground archive with several dozen full-time and numerous part-time participants. The aim of the Archive, as Ringelblum described it in an essay that survived the war, was “to give an all-embracing picture of Jewish life during the war . . . a photographically true and detailed picture of what the Jewish population had to experience, to think, and to suffer.” The writings collected in the Archive were of “great significance,” Ringelblum believed, “for the future tribunal after the War, which will hold the guilty responsible.”

Ringelblum’s leadership in the ghetto’s mutual assistance program gave him access to extensive sources of information which he and his staff collected. The secret archive carried the code name “Oneg Shabbes” (Enjoyment of the Sabbath) because Ringelblum and his colleagues met on Saturdays, but more important because the name served as a cover for their activities. Abraham Lewin, a secondary school teacher and active participant in the Archive, whose Warsaw diary Ringelblum praised for its “conscientious precision . . . and profound content” wrote the following on June 6, 1942: “We gather every Sabbath, a group of activists in the Jewish community, to discuss our diaries and writings. We want our sufferings . . . to be impressed upon the memories of future generations and on the memories of the whole world.”

Writing was not restricted, however, to Ringelblum, Lewin, and other members of the core group. “Oneg Shabbes” enlisted a large number of writers, women as well as men—all carefully selected for purposes of secrecy—to document the events taking place in the Warsaw ghetto as well as in occupied Poland, along with the Jewish response to those events. Documenting the destruction of particular towns and villages was one of the major projects of the secret Archive. Writers working for “Oneg Shabbes” interviewed refugees entering Warsaw from the provinces to learn about the destruction of their towns and villages. Ringelblum tells us that because of the danger of Jewish informers working for the Gestapo, extreme caution was used in the interviewing process. Indeed, few of the refugees knew the true purpose of the interviews. To be a member of “Oneg Shabbes” was, in Ringelblum’s words, to endure “onerous labours and hardships” and to take “risks . . . for the sake of an exalted ideal.”

The “Oneg Shabbes” Archive urged everyone in the ghetto to provide testimony against the Nazis by keeping diaries of their daily lives. “I regard it a sacred duty . . .” wrote Menachem Kon, an official of “Oneg Shabbes, “for everyone, talented or not, to write down whatever he sees with his own eyes, or hears from a witness of the murders committed by the barbarians in each Jewish town. When the time comes—as come it certainly must—the world shall read and
know what the murderers perpetrated.\textsuperscript{11} In addition to diaries and chronicles, the Archive included a collection of underground newspapers, periodicals, and magazines published by the various Jewish political parties and youth organizations. These contained poetry, fiction, and personal essays based on what was actually taking place under Nazi rule. In addition to underground publications, the Archive contained thousands of other original documents.

The deposits of the Archive were sealed in metal containers and milk cans and buried in August 1942 and in March and April 1943 in two hideouts, one at 68 Nowolipki Street and another at 34 Swietojerska Street.\textsuperscript{12} The youths who carried out the job did not survive, but the words of one of them, David Graber, age nineteen, is contained in the Archive:

> With what kind of enthusiasm we... dug the graves for the boxes... We would not divulge [the place of burial] even if they cut pieces off us... What we were unable to cry and shriek out to the world we buried in the ground... May the treasure fall in good hands, may it last into better times, may it alarm and alert the world to what happened and was played out in the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{13}

On September 18, 1946, the first part of the archive was dug out at 68 Nowolipki Street. The second part was unearthed on December 1, 1950 at a nearby location. Unfortunately, the deposit at Swietojerska Street has not been recovered despite many searches. Thus, while much writing was saved, much was lost, including the Hebrew diary of Mordechai Anielewicz, commander of the Jewish Fighters Organization and the writings of the important poets Israel Stern, Yechezkel Lehrer, and Hirsch Danielovitch, who contributed their poems to the underground newspapers and periodicals in the Warsaw ghetto.

A selection of documents from the “Oneg Shabbos” Archive, including Ringelblum’s account of the establishment and aims of the secret organization, is available in English translation in the remarkable volume *Selected Documents from the Warsaw Ghetto Underground Archives “O.S.” (“Oneg Shabbos”),*\textsuperscript{14} from which I have quoted. Since the Warsaw ghetto can be considered representative of the various large ghettos in Eastern Europe under Nazi rule, Kermish’s volume gives us an extraordinary sense of being in the midst of the inferno, in the very place where the greatest destruction of Jewish life took place—three million people in Poland alone. To read this volume is to realize that our previous distance from the events has led us to create images of the Holocaust much less complex and much less painful than they really were.\textsuperscript{15}

In a diary entry of June 26, 1942, two months before the first burial of “Oneg Shabbos” documents, Ringelblum expressed the belief that the project was succeeding, that revealing to the world the process of extermination which the Germans wished to keep secret was an effective means of fighting back: “The group thus fulfilled a great historical mission,” writes Ringelblum, “alerting the world to our fate... our pain and torment. Our suffering and self-sacrifice under constant threat was not in vain. We have dealt a blow to the enemy.”\textsuperscript{16} Ringelblum, to whom we are immensely indebted for our knowledge of daily life in Warsaw and in Poland under the German occupation, was murdered by the Nazis in March 1944.

To offer testimony against the enemy was dangerous. Rabbi Simon Huberband, who joined Ringelblum in May of 1940, originally kept notes of his own, disguised as marginal comments on religious texts.\textsuperscript{17} Writers in the ghettos
feared the frequent and thorough searches, which were aimed at finding gold, diamonds, foreign currency, and valuables of one kind or another. But had written accounts of Nazi brutalities been found, these would have been destroyed, with fatal consequences for the authors. As David Roskies observes, “Writing anything was dangerous enough; writing from right to left [as in Yiddish or Hebrew] was as good as signing one’s life away.” Punishment was likely to be collective: not only the “offender” but his family would be shot, and possibly all those Jews in the house where he lived. While a great number of individuals—journalists, teachers, community activists, young people—wrote diaries recording daily life as they experienced it, only a small number admitted that they kept them.

Ringelblum’s “Oneg Shabbas” served as a model for the Jews in the Bialystok ghetto. The Bialystok archive was organized by Mordecai Tannenbaum who came from Warsaw in November 1942 to coordinate the resistance movement. Under Tannenbaum’s guidance, eyewitness reports and journalistic and historical accounts of the Soviet occupation from 1939 to 1941 and the subsequent German occupation were systematically gathered. The collection included ghetto folklore and poetry, the records of the underground Zionist youth movement, and most of the minutes, proclamations, and other official documents of the Judenrat. All these materials were buried outside the ghetto in three sealed metal boxes in May 1943. These boxes were found after the war.

In Vilna, too, writers and intellectuals created a secret archive which included Judenrat documents as well as diaries. They also rescued manuscripts and rare books from the renowned library of the Yiddish Scientific Institute—YIVO, which came under Nazi control. Old and new materials were hidden from the Germans and, after their retreat, from the Soviet authorities. Remarkably, about seven hundred ghetto documents and some prewar materials were sent through clandestine channels to the YIVO in New York. Two Yiddish poets, Shmerke Kaczerginsky and Abraham Sutzkever, had organized the undertaking.

In the Kovno ghetto, inmates defiantly assembled documentary evidence against the Nazi assault in the form of chronicles, reports, diaries, letters, poems, songs, photographs, paintings, and drawings, all of which they hid from their oppressors. Spearheading the effort to amass such a record were Dr. Elkanhan Elkes, the chairman of the Jewish council, the Altestenrat; linguist and educator Chaim Nachman Shapiro; and Avraham Tory, secretary of the Altestenrat, who also kept an extensive diary of the ordeals. The various materials were hidden in crates under the floors of ghetto buildings. The hidden documents tell the story that Elkanhan Elkes charged the Jews of Kovno to tell: “Remember and never forget it all your days; and pass this memory as a sacred testament to future generations.”

Less daring than the Warsaw, Vilna, and Kovno archives, but nevertheless historically significant, are the official records of the Judenrat of Lodz, which include the Daily Chronicle and the unfinished and fragmentary Encyclopedia of the Ghetto. These records, generally known as the Rumkowski Archives, named after the controversial head of the Lodz Judenrat, were hidden and also survived the war. Fearing punishment from the Germans, officials of the Judenrat cautioned writers whom they employed to tone down accounts of Nazi atrocities and Jewish suffering. It is thus necessary to read between the lines of the Lodz records for a more accurate history of the ghetto.
I have been describing collective efforts by which Jewish writers conspired against their persecutors to let the world know what was taking place. But much writing in defiance of the Nazis and aimed at future audiences was done independently of the archival projects. In more than a few cases, writers, fearing that their lives were about to end, buried their own writings in the hope that their work would one day find an audience and contribute to justice and even to vengeance. Isaiah Spiegel of Lodz buried several of his stories about ghetto life before he was deported to Auschwitz. Surviving the camp, he returned to Lodz to unearth them. Poet Yitzhak Katzenelson of Warsaw, hid his epic work *The Song of the Murdered Jewish People* in three glass bottles in Vittel, the German transit camp for foreigners in France, so that the world might one day know of the agony of Polish Jewry. Fortunately, surviving admirers exhume his work and published it in 1945, a year after he perished in Auschwitz. Diarist Abraham Tovy buried his diary in five crates before he escaped from the Kovno ghetto, recovering about two-thirds of it after the Russian liberation.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the burial of writing in the hope of leaving a first-hand record of German atrocities is the case of Zalman Gradowski, who gave accounts in Yiddish of life in the Sonderkommando in Auschwitz to which he was assigned. (Members of this work unit had to extract gold teeth from the mouths of the dead, cremate the bodies, heat the furnaces, and clean the crematoria.) Gradowski buried his writings in the ash pits of the crematoria where he worked. Fortunately, four of his chronicles were unearthed after the war. Uncertain that any Jew would survive the destruction, he headed each manuscript with a declaration in four languages (Polish, Russian, French, and German): “Take heed of this document, for it contains valuable material for the historian.” In his introduction to one of the chronicles, “The Czech Transport,” Gradowski writes: “Who knows if I will ever again behold a ‘free’ man and be able to speak with him. It may be that these, the lines that I am now writing, will be the sole witness to what was my life. But I shall be happy if only my writings should reach you, citizen of the free world. Perhaps a spark of my inner fire will ignite in you, and even should you sense only part of what we live for, you will be compelled to avenge us—avenge our deaths!” As Gradowski’s writing was a form of resistance, so was his final act: he died leading a revolt of the Sonderkommando on October 7, 1944.

In works individual writers attempted to preserve for future readers, they dared to tell about the full range of Nazi brutality and its effects on the Jewish population. An adequate level of nutrition for a working person is between 3,000 and 5,000 calories. By 1941, the average Jew’s calorie intake in the ghettos of Eastern Europe was under 500. This meant gnawing hunger, radical weight loss, extreme weakness, eventual mental breakdown, susceptibility to disease, and ultimately death. Leyb Goldin, in his autobiographical story “Chronicle of a Single Day,” written in the Warsaw ghetto in 1941 and unearthed with “Oneg Shabbes” materials after the war, told what it was like to go through a single day while waiting for a bowl of soup to be had at a public kitchen: “The war has been going on for a full two years, and you’ve eaten nothing but soup for some four months, and those few months are thousands and thousands of times longer for you than the whole of the previous twenty months—no, longer than your whole life until now. From yesterday’s soup to today’s is an eternity, and I can’t imagine that I’ll be able to
survive another twenty-four hours of this overpowering hunger." Like thousands of others, Goldin died of starvation in the Warsaw ghetto in 1942.

Abraham Lewin's Warsaw diary was also part of the "Oneg Shabbes" Archive. Its detailed record of the harrowing days of July and August 1942 when approximately 300,000 Warsaw Jews—men, women, and children—were sent to Treblinka, is unforgettable. Almost every page of the diary is a direct or indirect indictment of the murderers. I cite here a passage of May 16, 1942 in which Lewin tells future readers what it is like to live day-in, day-out, in a state of terror created by Nazi viciousness and cruelty:

An unremitting insecurity, a never-ending fear, is the most terrible aspect of all our tragic and bitter experiences. If we ever live to see the end of this cruel war, and are able as free people and citizens to look back on the war-years that we have lived through, then we will surely conclude that the most terrible and unholy, the most destructive aspect for our nervous system and our health was to live day and night in an atmosphere of unending fear and terror for our physical survival, in a continual wavering between life and death—a state where every passing minute brought with it the danger that our hearts would literally burst with fear and dread.

In the Lodz ghetto, it was the agony of deportation, especially of women and children, that moved poet Simcha Bunim Shayevitch to create two unforgettable poems—"Lekh-lekho" and "Spring 1942," which were written independently of the Lodz Archive. Of the poetry Shayevitch wrote in the ghetto, only these pieces were recovered after the war. In the following lines from "Spring 1942," powerful in the naked simplicity of their language, a mother and her children stand for thousands of mothers and children who made the terrible journey into the unknown:

. . . like a camel a mother is hunched
With a pack on her back,
Her five children dragging behind her,
One smaller than the next,
Clad in rags
And torn shoes
Tied with string,
With heavy sacks
Like beggars' bags
Hung on them.
They are tired and can walk no further.
The mother spreads her arms like a hen.
The oldest she leaves unattended,
The second she scolds,
The third she pushes ahead,
The fourth she pleads with,
And the fifth she takes in her arms.
But soon she stands still, breathless
Like a dead fish,
with staring eyes
And open mouth,
And the pack on her back and the child in her arms
Rock cumbrously—
On the mother’s scale—
Down and up
back and forth,
Up and down
Back and forth. 29

The short lines seem to mirror the mother’s exhaustion and anxiety. Life seems to be drained from the lines as from the mother herself who is “breathless/Like a dead fish.” Because the Lodz ghetto was more thoroughly sealed off from the rest of Europe than any of the other ghettos, the real destination of the transports was unknown to the victims. Hence the tragic irony of these lines: we know that the transports ended in death. Shayevitsh wrote “Spring 1942” in April, during a month of deportations. He could not know then that during the terrible Aktion of September 4–6, 1942, aimed at the elderly and the very young, his daughter and infant son would be carried off to the waiting trains, their mother accompanying them to their doom. Shayevitsh himself was deported to Auschwitz in 1944 and perished shortly before liberation.

Jozef Zelkowicz, on the staff of the Rumkowski Archive and the Daily Chronicle and contributor to the “Encyclopedia of the Ghetto,” has left us a record of those notorious days of September 4–6 in the Lodz ghetto when 20,000 Jews, mainly the sick, the elderly over sixty-five, and children under ten were rounded up for deportation and death. Zelkowicz’s monograph describing that Aktion is called “Days of Nightmare.” The work was found after the war, along with other private, non-official pieces of ghetto writing, in the remains of the Rumkowski Archive. It is Zelkowicz’s major work written in the Lodz ghetto.

In his entry for Friday, September 4, 1942, he writes:

The deportation of children and old people is a fact. . . .
There is simply no word, no power, no art able to transmit the moods, the laments, and the turmoil prevailing in the ghetto since early this morning.

To say that today the ghetto is swimming in tears would not be mere rhetoric. It would be simply a gross understatement, an inadequate utterance about the things you can see and hear in the ghetto of Litzmannstadt, 30 no matter where you go or look or listen.

There is no house, no home, no family which is not affected by this dreadful edict. One person has a child, another an old father, a third an old mother. . . .

All hearts are icy, all hands are wrung, all eyes filled with despair. All faces are twisted, all heads bowed to the ground, all blood weeps. 31

Zelkowicz perished in Auschwitz less than two years after he wrote these lines. Like most ghetto writers, he wrote while the ordeals were taking place, determined to offer eye-witness evidence of Nazi atrocities.

If the ghetto ordeals of hunger, terror, and deportation challenge our imaginations to identify with a reality so different from our own, that challenge is intensified when we read passages from the unearthed writings of Zalmen Gradowsky. In “The Czech Transport: a Chronicle of the Auschwitz Zonderkommando,” a combination chronicle and lament written in March-April 1944, Gradowsky gives us a highly detailed account of the destruction process in the death camp: the deception of the victims in order to discourage resistance; the psychological shocking of the victims
to induce a state of mental paralysis; the gassing of the victims; the removal of items of value from their naked bodies [hair, gold teeth, jewelry]; the transfer of their bodies to the crematoria; the final burning of the bodies—all as seen and experienced by Gradowski himself, a Jewish prisoner assigned to help carry out this demonic process. It was the hope of future retribution for the victims that impelled Gradowski to record and then hide the gruesome details.\textsuperscript{32}

Like a witness who knows that testimony is strongest when it is not unduly colored by feeling, Gradowski holds back emotion to give us the naked facts. In doing so, he reminds us of the words of Abraham Lewin in the Warsaw ghetto: “just cold facts. The day will come when these facts will shake the world and will be transformed into an impassioned appeal ‘Remember!’ against hatred and shame and against the degenerate murderers.”\textsuperscript{33}

If we are inclined to pass judgment on Gradowski for his “complicity” with the Nazis, it is because we have not been confronted by the “choiceless choices” which the Nazis set before their victims—choices that were not between good and bad but between bad and worse. (It is worth noting that members of the Sonderkommando attempted to blow up the crematorium at Auschwitz.) We need to know the dark truths that Gradowski and other writers in the ghettos and camps risked their lives to tell, so that distorted versions of this tragic period not become the accepted record.

There is nothing in post-war writing on the Holocaust that matches the irresistible drive, despite adverse conditions and danger of detection, to record the terrible truth. Chaim Kaplan described his urgent purpose as “a flame imprisoned in my bones, burning within me, screaming: Record!”\textsuperscript{34} It is true that survivors who wrote after the war also felt a compulsion to bear witness to atrocity and suffering. To testify was also one of their chief motives for writing. But they experienced a range of inhibitions that often blocked and delayed expression. Most survivors wished, at the outset, simply to forget. When they considered writing about what they had seen and experienced, they were inclined to ask themselves whether silence was a more respectful response than words. They asked whether words were adequate for so horrendous an evil and so huge a suffering. They wondered whether they could tolerate the reopening of wounds. And they sometimes asked whether it was morally right to create “literature” (long associated with pleasure) based on the suffering of victims. Given such concerns—understandable ones, to be sure—it is not surprising that the greater part of serious post-war writing on the Holocaust by survivors did not appear until fifteen years or more after the war.\textsuperscript{35}

Ghetto writers were not troubled by questions that tended to silence survivors. Indeed, in the midst of their ordeals and despite dangers, they were impelled by an almost sacred obligation to record what they and their fellow Jews were enduring. Referring to the summer of 1942 when 300,000 Jews were deported from Warsaw and sent to their deaths, and when it was difficult in those calamitous days to keep pencil in hand, Ringelblum wrote: “But the work was too holy for us . . . we could not stop.”\textsuperscript{36} And Chaim Kaplan, writing in his diary on July 31, 1942 during this same deportation of Warsaw Jews wrote: “My utmost concern is for hiding my diary so that it will be preserved for future generations. As long as my pulse beats, I shall continue my sacred task.”\textsuperscript{37} They were driven by the sense that the world had never before seen anything like this. What had befallen the Jews was, in Ringelblum's words, an “unparalleled tragedy.” What was taking place was not simply a replay of the middle
ages with its ghettos, yellow badges, Jewish councils, and mass expulsions. This was new: cattle cars and transports, death camps, gas chambers.

A sense of holy mission did not mean that the task of recording the truth for future generations was an easy one. The psychological problems were no less daunting than the physical conditions that confronted writers. The determination of writers to tell the truth did not free them from the recurring anxiety that their reports of atrocities, almost unbelievable to themselves as witnesses, would not be believed by the free world. Writers feared that their accounts of starvation, of slave labor, of deportation in railroad cars to death camps would be viewed as grossly exaggerated, as hardly possible in our age. In a diary entry for May 20, 1942, Abraham Lewin wrote: “The level of Nazi brutality is beyond our power to comprehend. It is inconceivable to us and will seem quite incredible to future generations, the product of our imagination, over-excited by misery and anger.”

And in his detailed and heartbreaking account of the Warsaw Ghetto deportations of July and August 1942, Lewin expressed this same worry that truth would be perceived as untruth: “The Germans’ lust for Jewish blood knows no bounds, it is a bottomless pit. Future generations will not believe it.” And then, as if appealing to future readers for belief, he adds, “But this is the unembellished truth, plain and simple. A bitter, horrifying truth.” Similarly, Jozef Zelkowicz, writing about atrocity and suffering in the Lodz Ghetto, made this appeal to future readers who might regard the atrocities as mere invention or as a myth comparable to the strange myths of the ancient past: “Listen and believe this, even though it happened here, even though it seems so old, so distant, and so strange.”

In the face of such fears of disbelief, they continued to write and record, as if they had no choice.

Subsequent history has shown that Lewin and Zelkowicz were not wrong to anticipate disbelief. In the Netherlands, members of the Dutch resistance responded to news about the death camps “with such incredulity that they failed to act on the information in any way.” Similarly, U.S. State Department officials in 1942 and 1943 hearing reports of barbarities committed against the Jews of Europe thought them grossly exaggerated. Today, the enormities of the Nazis play into the hands of the deniers of the Holocaust who claim that the reported atrocities are highly exaggerated inventions of the Jews. The SS counted on disbelief. They boasted that after the war, should there be rumors and speculations, people would not believe that evil on such a scale was possible.

Aside from the fear of not being believed, during the Holocaust there were other psychological problems of immense proportions for these writers. How do you collect your thoughts, how do you give a clear, orderly account of the truth when your heart is breaking, when the horrors you are witnessing evoke anguish? Jozef Żelkowicz describes what it felt like during the days of September 4–6, 1942 to observe the round-up of 20,000 children and elderly in the Lodz Ghetto and then to give an account of it: “Son of man, go out in the street. Look at all this, soak in the subconscious terror of the infants about to be slaughtered. And be strong and don’t weep. Be strong and don’t let your heart break, so that later on you can give a thoughtful and orderly description of just the barest essentials of what took place in the ghetto during the first few days of September in the year 1942.”

In addressing “son of man,” Zelkowitz is also addressing himself, trying to bolster his own courage; for to let one’s heart break is to lose one’s ability to give a precise and coherent account of the atrocity. Some individuals who wished to give
written testimony simply could not master grief sufficiently to set down what they saw and felt. An anonymous author, probably one of the workers in the Warsaw “Oneg Shabbes” Archive, explains his silence during the first three years of the occupation: “I’ve often been asked by friends and acquaintances why I don’t write something . . . there is so much to write about, let those who come later read and know what we have suffered from the murderous occupant. And indeed my friends are right. But it is difficult to write, now when the Vale of Tears is overflowing not only with rivers of tears but with seas of blood, shed hour after hour by our brothers and sisters, old and young.”44

How do you write, furthermore, when you fluctuate between hope and despair. On June 3, 1942, Abraham Lewin entered these words into his diary: “The desire is so strong in us to see the day of redemption, the triumph of righteousness, but at the same time there is a worm of doubt and despair gnawing at the heart. . . . Every day a new misfortune, a new pogrom, a new expulsion that heralds a new mass murder.”45

When the worm of doubt and despair gnawed at the heart, words could easily seem a futile weapon against the enemy. Several days earlier, on May 25, Lewin wrote:

But perhaps because the disaster is so great there is nothing to be gained by expressing in words everything we feel. Only if we were capable of tearing out by the force of our pent-up anguish the greatest of all mountains, a Mount Everest, and with all our hatred and strength hurling it down on the heads of the German murderers of our young and old—this would be the only fitting reaction on our part. Words are beyond us now.46

But words—even if they seemed at times inadequate and futile—were the only weapons they had; and mastering doubt, grief, and despair, ghetto writers used words to resist the enemy. They continued to believe there was a moral world outside the ghetto and outside the camp, that people would want to know about the evils that were perpetrated. They continued to believe that justice still mattered. Without such a faith, they could not have found the motivation to tell the truth.47

Their use of words as weapons during the Holocaust is further evidence repudiating the notion that the Jewish response to the Nazi terror was passivity, paralysis, submission. The response of numerous Jewish writers was one of courageous resistance under the most difficult conditions. Writers in ghettos and camps who risked their lives to produce evidence against the Nazis must have had moments when they felt as Ringelblum did when in June 1942 he wrote: “One thing we know—we have fulfilled our duty. We have overcome every obstacle to achieve our end. Nor will our deaths be meaningless, like the deaths of tens of thousands of Jews. We have struck the enemy a hard blow. We have revealed his Satanic plan to annihilate Polish Jewry, a plan he wished to complete in silence.”48

The truth-telling of writers in ghettos and camps did not, it is true, hurt the Germans while genocide was taking place; nor did the efforts of writers lessen the destruction to the Jewish people. But as a result of their eye-witness accounts, the mountain of evidence of German crimes against the Jews during World War II is larger, and the infamy of the Nazis indelibly inscribed in the historical record.
NOTES


7. Szeintuch, “Corpus of Yiddish and Hebrew Literature,” p. 188.

8. Kermish, To Live With Honor, pp. 8, 10.


11. Kermish, To Live With Honor, p. 56.


15. The originals of the “Oneg Shabbes” documents that survived the war can be found in the Yad Vashem archives in Jerusalem and in other institutions in and outside Israel—in Beit Lohamei Haghettaot, in the Yivo Archives in New York, and in the Historical Institute in Warsaw. We can look forward in coming years to the gradual publication in English of additional materials from the O.S. Archive.


20. Artists bearing witness through drawings or paintings were exposed to a similar danger. At the camp at Theresienstadt, artists were tortured and murdered when Germans discovered their hidden drawings, many of which were on the subject of Nazi cruelty (Gerald Green, The Artists of Terzgin [New York: Schocken Books, 1978], pp. 2–3). Jewish photographers in the ghetto who wished to record the tragedy that had befallen their people likewise placed their lives at risk (Adelson and Lapides, Lódz Ghetto, p. xx).


28. Lewin, *Cup of Tears*, p. 73.


30. The Germans renamed Lodz Litzmannstadt in honor of a World War I German general who died while battling to conquer the city.


32. In a passage like the following from the conclusion of “The Czech Transport,” Gradowski intended to give the free world a glimpse of the Auschwitz hell:

   On the upper level, by the pulley, stand four men. The two on one side of the pulley drag corpses to the “storeroom”; the other two pull them directly to the ovens, where they are laid in pairs at each mouth. The slaughtered children are heaped in a big stack, they are added, thrown onto the pairs of adults. Each corpse is laid out on an iron “burial” board; then the door to the inferno is opened and the board shoved in. The hellish fire, extending its tongues like open arms, snatches the body as though it were a prize. The hair is the first to catch fire. The skin, immersed in flames, catches in a few seconds. Now the arms and legs begin to rise—expanding blood vessels cause this movement of the limbs. The entire body is now burning fiercely. (Roskies, *Literature of Destruction*, p. 563).

33. Lewin, *Cup of Tears*, p. 133.


35. Teichman and Leder, *Truth and Lamentation*, pp. 31–36. There is another difference between the testimony of victim and survivor. The desire for justice is not a motivating factor for the survivor-writer but rather, as Terence Des Pres has pointed out, the preservation of a civilized world. The survivor-writer leaves a record in the hope that this tragedy will never happen again (Terence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1976], p. 47). Furthermore, when the survivor offers testimony, that testimony is part of the story of “how I survived”—I as an individual. When victims in the ghettos and camps offered testimony, that testimony was part of a record of “how we were destroyed”—we as a people.


38. Lewin, *Cup of Tears*, p. 81.


44. Kermish, *To Live With Honor*, p. 22.
45. Lewin, *Cup of Tears*, p. 115.

46. Lewin, *Cup of Tears*, p. 97.

47. In citing examples of courageous “witnessing” on the part of writers in ghettos and camps, I would be remiss in omitting representative lines from Yitzhak Katzenelson’s fifteen-canto masterwork on the destruction of Polish Jewry, *The Song of the Murdered Jewish People*. Most of the poem, as I mentioned earlier, was written during a ten-month stay in Vittel, the German concentration camp for foreigners in France, and buried there before Katzenelson was transported to Auschwitz in April 1944. Before his end, Katzenelson knew of the existence of gas chambers and the crematoria; he also knew that total destruction of the Jews of Europe was the Nazi plan; and he knew that God was silent during the catastrophe. His deeply moving poem of truth-telling and lamentation is addressed first to the Muse, then to the heavens, then to his slain wife Hannah, and finally to the unknown reader of the future. Like other ghetto writers, Katzenelson feels compelled to tell the world what happened to the children. I quote here some lines from Canto VI, which deal specifically with the orphans of Warsaw, whose parents were either shot or died of starvation or disease. If the heavens were deaf to the prayers of the victims—a theme of Canto IX of Katzenelson’s poem—then free men and women of the future had to know what was perpetrated. Their conscience had to be stirred.

The first to perish were the children, abandoned orphans,
The world’s best, the bleak earth’s brightest.
These children from the orphanages might have been our comfort.
From these sad, mute, bleak faces our new dawn might have risen.

At the end of the winter of forty-two I was in such a place. [an improvised shelter for orphans in the Warsaw ghetto]
I saw children just brought in from the street. I hid in a corner—
And saw a two-year-old girl in the lap of a teacher—
Thin, deathly pale and with such grave eyes.

I watched the two year-old grandmother,
The tiny, Jewish girl, a hundred years old in her seriousness and grief.
What her grandmother could not dream, she had seen in reality.
I wept and said to myself: Don’t cry, grief disappears, seriousness remains. . . .

. . . I saw a five-year-old girl in that “home.”
She fed her younger, crying brother . . .
She dipped hard bread crumbs in watery marmalade
And got them cleverly into his mouth . . . I was lucky

To see it, to see the five-year-old mother feeding him,
And to hear her words. My mother, though exceptional, was not that inventive.
She wiped his tears with her laughter and talked him into joy. . . .

They, the Jewish children, were the first to perish, all of them,
Almost all without father or mother, eaten by cold, hunger and vermin,
Saintly messiahs, sanctified by pain . . . O why such punishment?
Why were they first to pay so high a price to evil in the days of slaughter?

They were the first taken to die, the first in the wagon.
They were flung into the big wagons like heaps of dung—
And were carried off, killed, exterminated,

Not a trace remained of my precious ones! Woe unto me, woe
