



More Important Than Life: The Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto

June 29, 2023 – January 7, 2024

In a joint exhibition with the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, the Munich Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism presents the underground archive of the Warsaw ghetto, a collection of unique historical significance, yet one that is largely unknown. Preserved at the Jewish Historical Institute, the archive is an outstanding example of Jewish self-assertion during the Shoah. It constitutes an act of civil resistance and one of the first attempts to systematically document the German-initiated mass murder of European Jews directly, as it was happening, and later to archive this documentation.

The invasion of Poland by the German Wehrmacht in September 1939 marked the beginning of World War II. Following the invasion, the anti-Jewish policy of Nazi Germany was extended to the occupied territories, and the Jewish population of Poland was enclosed in ghettos. The largest of these ghettos was established in Warsaw, home to Europe's most significant Jewish community and a center of Jewish cultural life. In 1940, the German occupying forces cordoned off a section of Warsaw and forced the Jewish population of the city and the surrounding villages and towns to move there. Aware of the significance of what was happening and of the urgency of documenting it for the outside world and for posterity, the historian Emanuel Ringelblum initiated an unprecedented project to collect material in the ghetto. Over a period of more than two years, a group of Jewish academics, writers, and activists, who called themselves "Oneg Shabbat" (Joy of the Sabbath), worked secretly

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to assemble tens of thousands of items documenting life and death in the ghetto. This was how the Oneg Shabbat or Ringelblum Archive came into being. The exhibition *More Important Than Life* tells the story of this endeavor and of the persecution and extermination of the ghetto's highly diverse Jewish community.

The original goal of Oneg Shabbat had been simply to document life in the ghetto, where Jews from Warsaw and other Polish regions, Jews deported from Germany and from countries under German occupation, and Jews who had fled to Warsaw from other ghettos were herded together to live in the oppressively overcrowded, inhumane conditions in the sealed-off ghetto in the center of Warsaw, where they tried to survive. Here, as many as 460,000 men, women, and children were packed into a small area; around 100,000 of them died of hunger and disease.

From 1941/42 onward, it became increasingly clear what direction the German occupation policy was taking. In the framework of "Operation Reinhardt," the plan agreed at the Wannsee Conference on January 20, 1942, to systematically murder the Jewish population of the German occupied territories in Poland, the German authorities in July 1942 ordered the "resettlement of Warsaw Jews to the East." Here "resettlement" was simply a euphemism for death. More than 300,000 people were deported to the Nazi extermination camps and murdered.

The members of Oneg Shabbat became aware that they probably would not survive the German occupation. As they learned about the murderous machinery of the Shoah, the group began to change the focus of its collecting activities, which now concentrated exclusively on documenting the mass murder of European Jews in the German extermination camps in the East for future generations. They assembled accounts of deportations, executions, torture, and the annihilation of entire Jewish communities, including Warsaw's.

Of the roughly sixty members of Oneg Shabbat—we still do not know the exact number—only three were still alive after the Shoah. A large part of the archive, however—around 35,000 pages—did survive the war, hidden and buried in metal boxes and milk churns beneath the ruins of the ghetto.

The exhibition *More Important Than Life* focuses on the testimony from the archive. By making the surviving Oneg Shabbat documents and photos the centerpiece of the exhibition and allowing them to speak for themselves, it offers a radical insider view of the ghetto as seen from a Jewish perspective. What emerges is a condensed and multi-faceted picture of life, suffering, and death in the ghetto. Alongside reproductions of archive material and historical film footage, about a dozen originals from the archive will also be on display in the exhibition. All of them reflect the broad spectrum of collected and pro-

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duced items: diaries, reports, statistics, letters, food ration cards, photographs, German newspapers, Jewish underground journals, and even candy wrappers. Each piece of testimony sends a message of varying gravity from an archive that feels like a time capsule. Audio points offer visitors opportunities to hear contemporary texts from the ghetto that have been specially recorded for the exhibition by actors from the Munich Kammerspiele theater. They endow the voices from the ghetto with a powerful presence.

More Important Than Life renders the underground archive of the Warsaw Ghetto tangible as an act of resistance—an infinitely arduous and harrowing, yet ultimately successful attempt to tell the story of the Shoah from a Jewish perspective, despite the obliteration of Polish Jewry.

The exhibition has been realized jointly with the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, where the archive is preserved and administered to this day. Founded in 1947, the Institute is devoted to the history and culture of Jews in Poland. Alongside Yad Vashem and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum it is one of the most important research institutions concerned with the Holocaust. The Ringelblum Archive belongs to the Society of the Jewish Historical Institute in Poland and is one of its most valuable collections. In 1999 it was granted UNESCO World Cultural Heritage status.

Impressum (short version):

More Important Than Life: The Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto is a joint exhibition of the Munich Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism (nsdoku) and the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw (JHI)

Director: Mirjam Zadoff (nsdoku), Monika Krawczyk (JHI)

Project lead: Ulla-Britta Vollhardt (nsdoku)

Curators: Piotr Rypson (JHI), Ulla-Britta Vollhardt (nsdoku), Mirjam Zadoff (nsdoku)

Research consultant: Katarzyna Person (JHI)

Accompanying program (in German)

The exhibition *More Important Than Life* will be accompanied by a diverse program of events, with a focus on life in the Warsaw Ghetto. Public tours will take place every Tuesday at 5.30 pm and every Sunday at 3 pm. Other confirmed events in the program through fall 2023 are:

July 5, 2023, 7 pm, book presentation and discussion

Notes "one step away from death" – Holocaust diaries of Jewish children

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and youth

With Wolf Kaiser and Andrea Löw

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July 25, 2023, 7 pm, film screening and discussion

Warsaw: A City Divided (Poland, 2019)

With Eric Bednarski and others

Sept. 26, 2023, 7 pm, reading

Poetry in the ghetto

In cooperation with the poetry cabinet

With Olga Mannheimer

Oct. 26, 2023, 9.30 am– 4.30 pm, training session for teachers

Resisting oblivion: documentation and remembrance as a form of Jewish self-assertion under the Nazi regime

In cooperation with the Bavarian Museum Academy

For information about the current program please visit:

www.nsdoku.de/programm/aktuell

Publication

The publication accompanying the exhibition contains texts by Georges Didi-Huberman, Amos Goldberg, Monika Krawczyk, Andrea Löw, Katarzyna Person, Piotr Rypson, and Mirjam Zadoff. Edited by Ulla-Britta Vollhardt and Mirjam Zadoff and published in a German and an English edition by Wallstein Verlag.

To pre-order a review copy please contact: Leo Eberhardt, Wallstein Verlag: leberhardt@wallstein-verlag.de

For the deaf the transcripts of the audio points are summarized in the booklet *Voices from the Ghetto* (available in German and English). Please ask at the nsdoku reception desk.

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Announcement on behalf of the German authorities on the "Resettlement to the East" of Warsaw's Jews, July 22, 1942 | © Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw



02
The ghetto wall on Bonifraterska street | © Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw



03
Smugglers throwing sacks of flour over the ghetto wall, after 1940 | © Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw

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Benjamin Rozenfeld, *Funeral Fund*, drawing,
and description of the incident pictured, 1941
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05
Candy wrapper from the Wiktorija Sweets
Factory in Warsaw | © Jewish Historical
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06
Obituaries in the ghetto | © Jewish Historical
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07
Warsaw, September 18, 1946: The
Ringelblum Archives were discovered on
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View of the exhibition *More Important Than Life: The Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto, 2023* | © NS-Dokumentationszentrum München, photo: Connolly Weber Photography



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View of the exhibition *More Important Than Life: The Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto, 2023* | © NS-Dokumentationszentrum München, photo: Connolly Weber Photography



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