

YOM HASHOAH COMMEMORATION

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ADDRESS

NINA BASSAT AM, JCCV PRESIDENT

“What we were unable to cry and scream out to the world, we buried in the ground ...”
These were the words written by Dawid Graber on August 3, 1942 in Warsaw in his last will and testament. He was 19 years old.

The day before, on August 2, while German soldiers searched the streets outside, Graber and his friend Nahum Grzywacz buried 10 metal boxes in the basement of a school on Nowolipki Street in the Warsaw ghetto.

The 10 boxes were dug up more than four years later, long after Graber and Grzywacz had been murdered.

Voices can come to us in many ways; and resistance can manifest itself in many forms. Among the most poignant voices and the strongest example of resistance are those which speak to us from the Ringelblum Archives. These are documents which were contained in the 10 boxes buried by Dawid Graber and in 3 large metal milk containers, 2 of which have been found.

In circumstances which are so horrific that words can barely describe them, the preservation of one's moral courage becomes of paramount importance. About 50 men and women in the ghetto found their moral salvation by forming themselves into a group which they called “Oyneg Shabes”, or "Sabbath Joy," because it usually met on Saturday afternoons, beginning in November 1940.

Led by the historian Emanuel Ringelblum, the group included intellectuals, journalists, teachers, writers, scientists and ordinary people and they set themselves the mammoth task of documenting every aspect of life in the ghetto.

They collected everything that they could get hold of – scraps of testimony scribbled on the way to Treblinka and thrown from train windows decrees, ration cards, surveys on schooling, on smuggling, descriptions of the life of the streets, the bitter jokes, the price of bread, letters, diaries and drawings.

Nothing was too trivial - posters, songs, newspapers, pamphlets and tram tickets. Altogether, 35,000 pieces of paper were collected – described as “documents of horror in Yiddish, German and Polish”.

The prime aim was to thoroughly document the daily life in the ghetto, with all its tragedy – the hunger, the cold, the suffering, the terror, and also the acts of heroism and of resistance, the acts of grace and kindness, and furthermore, to document it in such a way that in years to come, the evidence would be irrefutable.

But this was more than a collection of documents; there was research and analysis, as well as the raw material.

Using historical methodology, the researchers investigated their environment and studied their surroundings. They issued questionnaires and conducted hundreds of interviews with refugees and people on the verge of starvation. From the refugees, they learnt of mass shootings and synagogues burned to the ground.

One refugee told of how the SS had used gas to kill people in railroad cars in Chelmno, west of Warsaw.

Ringleblum believed that the massive compilation of data would save lives, or at the very least, it would help to prevent similar atrocities happening again in the future.

He made sure that papers telling of the full horror were smuggled out, most likely by Vladka Meed. News of the exterminations reached the BBC, which broadcast about them in June 1942. As we know, the world ignored the warnings.

Of the 50 or so members of "Oyneg Shabes", only three survived and it was they who were able to provide the information that led to the recovery of the bulk of the documents.

This preservation of social and cultural life was both an invaluable documentation of life in the ghetto and a powerful form of resistance. You may be able to kill us, said Ringleblum and his group, but you cannot still our voices.

Voices can come to us in many ways; and resistance can manifest itself in many forms. But few are as powerful as the voices which speak from the Ringelblum Archives, and no resistance is as enduring as that which leaves a legacy that bears witness for all generations.

Long after the death of the "Oyneg Shabes" group, long after Dawid Graber and others buried the records, the voices from the ghetto speak out with testimony not to be denied, with testimony never to be forgotten.