

*Chroniclers of Catastrophe:
History Writing as a Jewish Response to
Persecution Before and After the Holocaust*

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It is not obvious that Jews who witnessed and survived the Holocaust would undertake to meticulously document their catastrophe immediately after. From a psychological point of view, traumatized survivors might have been more prone to repress and forget the past as quickly and as much as possible; while from a practical point of view, they might have been more likely to settle their most basic material needs and consolidate their living conditions and physical safety as far as possible before dedicating themselves to historical documentation.

In fact, Holocaust survivors began to chronicle the atrocities in the first hours after their liberation from Nazi rule, when their lives were still in complete disarray. As one contemporary observer remarked, survivors established historical commissions and documentation centers “at the very same moment when they opened the first public soup kitchens to cook thin little soups.”¹ Indeed, even before the war’s end and in its immediate aftermath, Jewish documentation initiatives crystallized in over a dozen European countries for the purpose of establishing, preserving, and transmitting the record of the recent cataclysm.² Those

1 Jacob Pat, *Ashes and Fire. Over the Ruins of Poland*, New York, 1946, p. 77 (Yiddish).

2 These countries included: Austria, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania, Sweden, Switzerland, and the Soviet Union. For an overview, see Philip Friedman, “European Jewish Re-

who gave the impetus to begin documenting were survivors of eastern European, particularly Polish, backgrounds who by and large were untrained in the historical profession but acted out of the conviction that their survival made bearing witness an imperative and that their personal experiences qualified them to document the tragedy.

This phenomenon begs explanation and raises the following questions: What did the survivors who invested their energies in these early postwar documentation initiatives hope to achieve? Why did they dwell upon the recent past instead of trying to put it behind them? Why did they attach such meaning to documentation, giving priority even over material care?

A deeper look into the history of the early postwar historical commissions and documentation projects suggests that the survivors engaged in documentation for a variety of reasons. For one, they perceived testifying as a moral obligation towards the dead and the generations to come. Second, they were deeply convinced that documenting the atrocities would have practical benefits in the present and the future, such as bringing the perpetrators to justice, regaining equal rights, and receiving redress for physical abuse and despoiled property. Third, they believed that they needed to chronicle the events for the sake of Jewish historiography and prepare the grounds for future research through compiling archives. Fourth, they chose to engage in documenting the atrocities because they saw history writing as a way to commemorate the dead and ascertain that their memory be kept by future generations. Yet another reason seems to have been that many commission activists saw themselves as part of a distinct eastern European Jewish tradition of history writing as a response to catastrophe according to which documenting anti-Jewish violence and persecution equaled armed resistance in its significance and honorability — a cultural tradition that the survivors sought to continue with their documentation work.³

search on the Holocaust,” in: idem (ed.), *The Roads to Extinction. Essays on the Holocaust*, New York and Philadelphia 1980, pp. 500–24.

- 3 This is discussed in greater detail in Laura Jockusch, “Collect and Record! Help to Write the History of the Latest Destruction!” Jewish Historical Commissions in Europe, 1943–1953, Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 2007, “*Khurban Forshung* — The Jewish Historical Commissions in Europe 1943–1949,” *Simon Dubnow Institute Year Book*, 6 (2007), pp. 441–473, and “A ‘Folk Monument for Our Destruction and Heroism’: Jewish Historical Commissions in Displaced Persons

This essay explores the latter motivation and focuses on two questions: What were the origins of the concept that documenting atrocities committed against Jews was a form of Jewish self-defense and resistance? Why does it seem to have been especially prominent among Jews in eastern Europe?

When seeking to locate the origins of this concept, it appears that the Holocaust had not been the first case in which Jews reacted to violence through recording the events. Rather, several cases of anti-Jewish mass violence in the twentieth century prior to the Holocaust had elicited Jewish documentation projects aimed at defending the victims through exposing the historical truth. Moreover, these projects had developed a distinct historiographical genre — the genre of *khurbn forshung* (destruction research) — which centered on interdisciplinary, social science-oriented, and proto-professional research methods and geared to achieving moral and material redress.⁴ When placing the postwar historical commissions and documentation projects in the context of these earlier initiatives, considerable similarities in motivations and methods become apparent. While the historiographical genre of *khurbn forshung* had crystallized in earlier cases of persecution, it seems to have gained full propulsion in the shadow of the Holocaust.

This essay traces the development of the genre of *khurbn forshung* through four pre-Holocaust precedents of historical documentation as a Jewish response to persecution and links them to the documentation efforts of the survivors after the war. It suggests that these historiographical continuities and cultural traditions might explain, in part, why survivors attached such great significance to chronicling the traumatic events in the immediate wake of the war.

Camps in Germany, Austria, and Italy,” in: Avinoam J. Patt and Michael Berkowitz (eds.), *“We Are Here”: New Approaches to Jewish Displaced Persons in Postwar Germany*, Detroit (forthcoming, 2008).

- 4 The term *khurbn forshung*, *Churbanforschung* or *études churbaniques* was coined by the Polish Jewish historian Philip Friedman, see, for example, Friedman, “Die grundsätzlichen Probleme unserer Churbanforschung (Kurzer Inhalt eines Vortrags gehalten in Paris auf der europäischen Konferenz der historischen Kommissionen),” [1947] Archives of the *Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine* in Paris. The term *khurbn* is the Yiddish version of the Hebrew *hurban*, “destruction.” Originally referring to the destruction of the first and second temples, the term became a synonym for catastrophe in the Jewish past, specifically for the Holocaust.

*Jewish Responses to Catastrophe Before and During
The Holocaust*

Precedent one: the Kishinev pogrom

The first case of collective violence against Jews that elicited a historiographical response was the infamous pogrom in Kishinev in the Russian Empire in April 1903, which followed a ritual murder accusation in the neighboring town of Dubossary.⁵ When the news of the pogrom reached Odessa, a group of Jewish intellectuals — including historian Simon Dubnow, Zionist essayist and editor Asher Ginsberg (Ahad ha-Am), writers Shalom Ya'akov Abramovitch (Mendele Moykher Sforim) and Mordecai Rabinowicz (Ben-Ammi), publisher Yehoshua Hana Rawnitzki, the young Hebrew poet Hayyim Nahman Bialik, future Tel Aviv mayor Meir Dizengoff, and Talmudic scholar Hayyim Tchernowitz (Rav Za'ir) — issued a call for self-defense.⁶ For the manifesto's authors this concept included not only taking up arms but also the formation of a secret "information bureau," which would gather data at the site of the crime, establish the historical truth about what happened, and disseminate an accurate report to Jewish communities in western Europe. Those communities, the group hoped, would use the report to persuade their governments to take in Jewish refugees and to apply diplomatic pressure on the Russian Empire to stop the anti-Jewish violence.

The group dispatched the thirty year old Bialik to Kishinev to collect eyewitness testimonies. Dubnow equipped him with a battery of questions to raise and issues to cover in his interviews:

1. The address of the witness, the apartment where he lived at the time of the pogrom, followed by name, age, profession, his social status, place of birth; how many years [he had] lived [in Kishinev]

5 For details about the pogrom, see Edward Judge, *Easter in Kishinev. Anatomy of a Pogrom*, New York, 1992, and Shlomo Lambroza, "The Pogroms of 1903–1906," in: idem and John Klier (eds.), *Pogroms. Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History*, Cambridge and New York, 1992, pp. 195–247.

6 Simon Dubnow, *Mein Leben*, Berlin, 1937, p. 137 ff, for the call for self-defense, see David Roskies (ed.), *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*, Philadelphia, 1988, pp. 156–59.

2. The rumors he heard from Christians in the days preceding the pogrom
3. The relations between Christians and Jews in his neighborhood; whether he is still in contact with them [and] whether he knows about the participation of his Christian acquaintances in the pogrom, their names and social status
4. The time and place from which the pogrom began in his street
5. The chronology of the events in detail, what he experienced himself and what he saw of others
6. Whether there was an attempt by an individual or a group to defend themselves
7. The treatment by Christians of the people who ran away during and after the pogrom
8. The damage to the property and body of the witness
9. Whether he asked for relief and with what sums he was supported
10. The impact of the pogrom on his material circumstances
11. His thoughts for the future
12. Photographs of the dead and severely wounded.⁷

In addition, the group instructed Bialik to inquire about the exact course the pogrom, the social backgrounds and ideological orientations of its perpetrators, the behavior of local bystanders, the authorities, and the Jewish community. Bialik was to visit hospitals in order to compile a detailed list of patients and gather information from nurses and doctors on injuries, disabilities, causes of death, and cases of rape. Bialik's task also included to collect photographs of the dead, the wounded, and the disabled, of sites of the atrocities and desecrated ceremonial objects. He was to document the physical and material damage suffered by the Jewish population and give estimates of the sums that Jewish relief organizations would have to invest to rehabilitate the community.⁸

Bialik arrived in Kishinev a month after the pogrom, and stayed there for almost two months. Following Dubnow's instructions, he wrote

- 7 Archives of the Bialik House Tel Aviv (hereafter BHTA), Hayyim N. Bialik's first notebook, section "Stories of the damaged and of witnesses: List of Questions." (Hebrew).
- 8 Ibid., sections "The period prior to the pogrom," "The pogrom," "Hospital," "Photographies." (All in Hebrew).

down several dozens of eyewitness accounts which he instantly translated from Yiddish and Russian into Hebrew. A number of educated Kishinev Jews assisted Bialik, among them the Hebrew teacher and writer Pesach Auerbach. Bialik also used material gathered by the Jewish community to compile detailed information on the extent of the material damage and the expenses that Jewish relief organizations incurred helping the victims.⁹

The Odessa committee planned to publish Bialik's material in a Hebrew-language anthology, *Sefer Kishiniov*, under Dubnow's editorial direction, that would give a synthetic overview on the pogrom and feature eyewitness testimonies and documents.¹⁰ In the end, this anthology never saw publication. Bialik had turned his entire attention to completing a poetic rendition, his second, of the disaster, "In the City of Slaughter" (*Be-Ir ha-harigah*).¹¹ But several other factors appear to have prevented the project's realization. Lack of financial support was one.¹² The czarist censorship was no doubt another.¹³ Also, pogroms

- 9 Ja'akov Goren, *Testimonies of Victims of Kishinev 1903 as Collected by H. N. Bialik and his Friends*, Yad Tabenkin, 1991, p. 48 (Hebrew), and Bialik's letters to Auerbach in Fishel Lachower (ed.), *Letters of Hayim Nachman Bialik*, Tel Aviv, 1937, vol. 1, pp. 174, 178f (Hebrew).
- 10 Simon Dubnow, *The Book of My Life*, Buenos Aires and New York 1963, vol. 1, p. 380 (Yiddish), and Dubnow's letter to Bialik, 24 October, 1903, BHTA, Bialik's correspondence with Dubnow (Hebrew).
- 11 In the immediate wake of the pogrom, Bialik had written his poem "On the Slaughter" (*'Al ha-shehitah*). Prior to his trip to Kishinev he had decided to write another poem based on his impressions at the site, for which he received 25 rubles advance payment from the editor of *Ha-Zeman*. Bialik seems to have agreed to go to Kishinev primarily for his poetic endeavors, while compiling documents for an anthology was a secondary concern. Cf. Dan Miron's introduction to "In the City of Slaughter," idem (ed.), *Poems of H. N. Bialik 1899–1934*, Tel Aviv, 1990, p. 162 (Hebrew).
- 12 Some financial support came from Dr. Mochnik, a public figure in the Kishinev Jewish community and head of the Committee for Relief of Pogrom Victims, who had promised to support Bialik's documentation work with 500 rubles but only paid half. See Bialik to Shlomo Dubinski, 24 October 1903, Lachower, *Letters*, p. 180f. On the financial difficulties in his documentation work see also Bialik to Auerbach, September 1903, October 1903 during the Sukkoth holiday, 17 October 1903, 11 Tevet (January 1904), Lachower, *Letters*, pp. 176, 178, 180, 191.
- 13 When Bialik published his poem, censorship forced him to make several changes rendering the reference to current events less obvious and linking the poem to the

continued over the next three years on a scale that made Kishinev seem a relatively minor incident in comparison.¹⁴ Kishinev thus appeared to be the introduction to an era of violence against the Jews of eastern Europe, and in order to be effective, historical documentation had to be continued on a larger scale and as a long-term project.¹⁵

Kishinev became a symbol for the rise of Jewish self-defense. The concept of self-defense that emerged out of the work of the Odessa committee included not only taking up arms but also gathering and exposing evidence of crimes against Jews. Such evidence — in the form of testimonies by the victims and witnesses, documents, and pictures — was to be used in the international diplomatic arena both for calling the perpetrators to justice and for the fight for Jewish rights.¹⁶

The project to document the Kishinev pogrom also inaugurated a new set of Jewish historiographical practices. The techniques of research used in gathering and producing evidence stood in sharp contrast to the notions of modern Jewish historical research that had been developed by the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Science of Judaism) in the German-speaking states, which had dominated Jewish historical writing

town Nemirov which had been the site of a pogrom two hundred fifty five years earlier. Its first edition, published in *Ha-Zeman* (vol. 3 Kislev 5664/December 1903), the poem appeared as “Vision of Nemirov,” with 20 Sivan 5408 (1648), the date of the memorial day for the Nemirov pogrom, in the subtitle. These experiences, in addition to the problems Dubnow had encountered in May 1903 with the publication of his essay “A Historic Moment” which called for mass emigration and self-defense, seem to have discouraged the group from seeking to publish the eyewitness accounts in the Russian Empire. Cf. Dubnow, *The Book*, vol. 1, p. 381; Goren, *Testimonies*, p. 39; Miron, introduction to “In the City of Slaughter,” pp. 163, 167.

- 14 While 49 Jews died in the Kishinev pogrom about 3,100 Jews were killed in the pogroms of the years 1905–1906. Cf. Lambroza, “The Pogroms of 1903–1906,” p. 231.
- 15 When a pogrom broke out in Homel in September 1903, Bialik suggested to Auerbach that it would be worth collecting new documents for a “second volume.” See Lachower, *Letters*, p. 175f.
- 16 David Engel argued for the development of a “defensive tradition” of history writing in the immediate wake of the Kishinev pogrom: see Engel, “History Writing as a National Mission: Polish Jews and their Historiographical Traditions,” in: Yisrael Gutman (ed.), *Emmanuel Ringelblum. The Man and the Historian*, Jerusalem, 2006 pp. 109–30, 118ff (Hebrew).

throughout the nineteenth century. According to these notions, historical research should focus on the remote Jewish past, especially on Jewish intellectual history and the male urban elites representing it. Moreover, the major practitioners of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* were university-trained Jewish scholars.¹⁷ In contrast, the Kishinev documentation was undertaken by autodidacts who gathered eyewitness accounts of people from all strata of Jewish society. The “voices of the victims” thus collected were complemented by photographic material and printed matter pertaining to the most recent past.

Simon Dubnow had developed the basis for this kind of history writing about a decade before the Kishinev pogrom. In 1891, in the wake of the expulsion of Jews from Moscow and the increasingly violent antisemitic atmosphere in southern Russia, Dubnow published a seminal essay setting out a new agenda for the writing of Jewish history, especially regarding the Jews of eastern Europe.¹⁸ Dubnow’s basic tenet was that the Jews were a nation and not just a religious group, as the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* scholars regarded them in their studies. According to Dubnow, Jewish nationhood based on a collective historical consciousness, which had served as a binding force for thousands of years. This, he held, outweighed the other two binding forces — kinship and religious consciousness — in enabling the Jews to survive as a collective: “It is this historical consciousness,” Dubnow stated, “which has been imbued in us and sealed in our hearts for thousands of years and which renders us the first-born of history, eternal and immortal among the nations.”¹⁹ Knowledge and study of the Jewish past was imperative for strengthening and preserving the Jewish nation in the face of its modern challenges. But, he bemoaned, the Jews of Poland and Russia had not cultivated this historical consciousness adequately. Although they constituted the largest segment of the Jewish nation, they, unlike the Jews in western Europe, had fallen short in developing a historical

17 On the conception and history of *Wissenschaft* scholarship see i.a., Ismar Schorsch, *From Text to Context. The Turn to History in Modern Judaism*, Hanover, NH, 1994 and Michael Brenner, *Propheten des Vergangenen, Jüdische Geschichtsschreibung im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Munich, 2006, chapters 1 and 2.

18 Simon Dubnow, “Let us Search and Research. A Call to the Wise of our People who Volunteer to Collect Material on the Jews in Poland and Russia,” *Pardes*, 1 (1891), pp. 221–42 (Hebrew).

19 *Ibid.*, p. 223.

scholarship. “Only among us, the Jews of Poland and Russia,” Dubnow lamented,

has the passion not arisen to expose the mystery of our past, to know who we were, how we got to our country, and how our ancestors have lived here from the beginning of their settlement in Poland 800 years ago. Sometimes my heart lets me believe that we lack all historical consciousness, like negroes, like the wild people of the desert who have no history at all, like gypsies who live all their lives in the present and have no future and no past.²⁰

Dubnow did not call for adopting the approaches to history writing that had been developed in the west. Instead he sought a new kind of historiography, using a different type of source material. In contrast to Jewish historians in western Europe whose historical narrative focused, as mentioned, on Jewish intellectual elites and the records those elites had left behind, and contrary to the common practice of his contemporaries in the Russian Empire who were primarily concerned with legal documents relating to the Jews, Dubnow conceived of history writing on the basis of Jewish communal records (*pinkasim*) and the memoirs, diaries, and recollections of “ordinary” Jews in addition to non-Jewish documents in state and community archives. In order to assemble this vast range of archival sources Dubnow sought to enlist Jewish communal leaders as well as interested individuals from the “Jewish street”:

I will call all of you, come and join the camp of the builders of history! Not everyone who can read and write can be a brilliant writer or chronicler of events, but every one of you can be a collector of material, an aid to the building of the edifice of Jewish history. The construction of history is a national cause and therefore all those in the nation who can write, all those who understand a book and appreciate history [...] are obliged to participate in this work. Let us work together, let us collect all the remote sources from the scattered places, and let us arrange them and make them known to the public and use them for the building of the edifice of history. Let us search and research!²¹

Thus the distinctively Dubnowian approach to the past had four major

20 Ibid., p. 226.

21 Ibid., p. 242.

characteristics. First, Dubnow endeavored to extend the field of modern Jewish historiography to the study of the Jewish past in Poland and Russia, albeit with a different conceptual and methodological approach than the one that Jewish scholars had developed in western Europe. Second, he viewed Jewish history as national history: raising Jewish historical consciousness through historical research and compiling an archive of primary sources was a national cause that would underwrite a new kind of secular Jewish identity. Third, since he understood Jewish history as the history of the Jewish people, the people itself would be the major object of study, with source material drawn from all segments of the community. Fourth, as a national project, establishing a historiography of the Jews of Poland and Russia required the cooperation of the entire Jewish nation, from the intellectual elites to the simple Jew. Dubnow — a highly educated autodidact — did not address an audience of university-trained scholars. He had no doubt that the study of Jewish history had to be conducted as a scholarly discipline, but in contrast to his German Jewish predecessors, he believed that it should not be confined to an academic setting (which remained barred to most Jews) but be “close to the people.” Therefore, he advocated Jewish historical studies that were both scholarly and popular: they were to be accessible to a broad audience; connected to the social, communal, and political issues of the day; and built on the active support of wide segments of the Jewish community.²²

In response to Dubnow’s call, individuals all over the Russian Empire began gather material on the history of the Jews in eastern Europe. In 1892 a circle of his followers in St. Petersburg established the Jewish Historical-Ethnographic Society in the framework of the Society for the Promotion of Culture Among the Jews of Russia, which was the first of the fruits of Dubnow’s attempt to lay the basis for the systematic study of the Jewish past in eastern Europe. It was also the result of the ever-growing perception among Jewish intellectuals of an imminent

22 Sofia Dubnov-Ehrlich, *The Life and Work of S. M. Dubnov. Diaspora Nationalism and Jewish History*, Bloomington, 1991, p. 103. See also Robert Seltzer, *Simon Dubnow. A Critical Biography of His Early Years*, Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, New York, 1970, and David Weinberg, *Between Tradition and Modernity. Haim Zhitlowski, Simon Dubnow, Ahad Ha-am and the Shaping of Modern Jewish Identity*, New York, 1996.

threat that Jewish folk culture was disappearing under the impact of secularization, urbanization, and modernization which yielded a new interest in studying and preserving this culture through “eleventh-hour ethnography.”²³

Dubnow’s conception of history writing as a vehicle for strengthening Jewish national identity and as a means of self-defense in times of crisis, which had been the driving force to document the Kishinev pogrom, found further application and broader public support among eastern European Jews during and after the First World War.

Precedent two: Historical documentation of Jewish suffering during and after the First World War

When the Central Powers devastated the Pale of Settlement, a group of Jewish intellectuals, some of them associated with the Jewish Historical-Ethnographic Society, called upon the Jewish populations to record the events. The ethnographer and writer Solomon Zainwil Rapoport, alias S. An-ski, assisted by his close friends, the writers Isaac Leib Peretz and Jacob Dineson from Warsaw, played a central role in these attempts. In late December 1914 and early January 1915, these three intellectuals issued a call to the readers of the Warsaw-based Yiddish dailies *Haynt* and *Der Moment*, urging them to keep a record of their wartime experiences. They argued that the war constituted a historical moment of unprecedented significance; it would yield a new order of borders and political systems. To obtain justice following the war’s destruction and to secure equal rights in the new political order, Jews needed to document both their wartime suffering and their contributions to the war efforts of the contending powers. Otherwise they would not have the evidence to make a cogent case for Jewish rights in the postwar world, and would risk their history being falsified by others. Hence they urged

23 The term “eleventh-hour ethnography” was coined by Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett to signify a sudden interest of ethnographers and folklorists in specific aspects of folk culture which they deem to be under the imminent threat of extinction. Cf. Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, “Folklore’s Crisis,” *Journal of American Folklore*, 111 (1999) pp. 281–327, 300. On the development of “eleventh-hour ethnography” in the Jewish context at the end of the nineteenth century see for example: Itzik Nakhmen Gottesman, *Defining the Yiddish Nation: The Jewish Folklorists of Poland*, Detroit, 2003.

their fellow Jews: “We turn to all members of our people, men and women, young and old, who live and suffer and see and hear, with the following appeal: Be your own historians! Don’t depend on others [to tell your story]! Record, make notes, and collect [material]!”²⁴

Although a number of individuals seem to have responded to this appeal, efforts to make a comprehensive documentation failed, largely because wartime censorship banned the Hebrew and Yiddish press and prohibited the use of Hebrew characters in the mail.²⁵ Nevertheless, a number of Jewish institutions, mostly dedicated to relief work among Jewish war victims, collected eyewitness reports and other information on the atrocities. The Historical-Ethnographic Society set up a Bureau for War Relief and the Political Bureau of YEKOPO (Jewish Relief Committee for War Victims) established a “war archive,” both of which gathered documents and eyewitness accounts on the current situation of the Jews in the hope that the evidence would help the Jewish populations of the decaying Russian Empire claim equal civil rights after the war.²⁶

The devastation of the First World War prompted a heightened interest among eastern European Jews in folkways, which, as many believed, had been virtually destroyed. This interest not only added a new level of urgency to the “eleventh-hour ethnography” that had already begun to crystallize two decades earlier, it also yielded yet another form of documentation as a response to catastrophe aimed at preserving the traces of Jewish traditions and ways of life.²⁷ For example, in the sum-

24 *Der Moment*, no. 291, 31 December 1914, p. 3.

25 David Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past*, Bloomington, 1999, p. 18f and idem, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture*, Cambridge, Mass., 1984, pp. 135–39. See also Dubnow, *The Book*, vol. 2, p. 181. An example of a young woman who began a diary of her wartime experiences in direct response of the call issued by An-ski and his friends is Anne Kahan, “The Diary of Anne Kahan, Siedlce Poland,” *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science*, 18 (1983), pp. 141–371. An-ski himself kept a wartime diary, see, S. An-ski, “The Destruction of Galicia” in his *Collected Writings*, vols. 4–6. Vilna, Warsaw, and New York 1921, and in English translation, *The Enemy at His Pleasure. A Journey through the Jewish Pale of Settlement during World War I*, New York, 2002.

26 Dubnov-Ehrlich, *The Life and Work of S. M. Dubnov*, p. 165 and Dubnow, *Dos bukh*, vol. 2, p. 180f.

27 Cecile Kuznitz, *The Origins of Yiddish Scholarship and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research*, Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 2000, p. 28f.

mer of 1917 a group of Jewish intellectuals, writers, and communal activists in Vilna, led by Moshe Shalit and the physician Zemah Shabad, founded a historical commission to collect documents reflecting the destruction that the war had wreaked on Jewish culture.²⁸ The activists shared a strong sense of urgency: “Now, in the time of destruction [*khurban*], when so many rich national cultural treasures were lost, many old books, manuscripts and communal records burnt, and when so many artifacts were stolen, it would be the greatest sin to discontinue [our] work. It is a holy duty to save at least the remainder [*sheyris hapleyte*] with all our strength.”²⁹ Consequently, the group developed a broad concept of what should serve as historical sources. These included not only publications (such as newspapers and books, proclamations, advertisements by communal, educational, and cultural institutions along with voluntary organizations) and private documents (for example, diaries, tax books, and letters), but also artistic works along with folk tales, songs, and idiomatic expressions created during the war. In order to assemble this material, the historical commission employed non-professional *zamlers* (collectors) from among the Jewish population. In February 1919, the historical commission was transformed into the Historical-Ethnographic Society in Vilna. The Society established six departments, among them a folklore section, which compiled different kinds of folk songs and poems, idiomatic expressions, sayings and rhymes; a music section, which collected tunes of Jewish folk songs; and a historical section, headed by Moshe Shalit, which now also collected material from previous centuries in addition to documents on the recent past.³⁰

Thus the experience of the First World War generated a new historical consciousness, which expressed itself in documentation efforts aimed at defending Jewish rights in the international arena on the one hand,

28 “The Historical Commission,” in: Zemah Shabad and Moshe Shalit (eds.), *Vilna Anthology*, Vilna, 1916–1918, vol. 2, p. 254 (Yiddish).

29 Khaykel Lunskey, “The Jewish Historical-Ethnographic Association in Vilna,” in *Unzer Tog — Vilne. Special edition for the US*, Vilna, 1921, p. 47 (Yiddish).

30 Khaykel Lunskey, “The Jewish Historical-Ethnographic Association,” in Zalman Rayzn (ed.), *Collection on the History of Vilna in the Years of War and Occupation. Published by the S. An-Ski, Historical-Ethnographic Association*, Vilna, 1922 pp. 855–64, p. 861f (Yiddish).

and preserving the memory of the Jewish culture and folkways threatened by war, violence, and growing modernization on the other.³¹

Precedent three: Documenting the suffering of Ukrainian Jews

These trends of historical documentation gained further momentum when a new wave of anti-Jewish violence, claiming between sixty thousand and a hundred thousand lives, struck the Jews of the Ukraine in the years 1917–1921.³² While some Jews referred to the Ukrainian pogroms as a “second Kishinev,”³³ it soon became clear that they exceeded by far the scale of Kishinev. In response to this unprecedented violence, several Jewish agencies in the Ukraine began to collect documents on the atrocities. By the end of May 1919, these initiatives led to the formation of the Editorial Committee for the Collection and Research of Material concerning the Pogroms in the Ukraine (*Redaktions-kolegye oyfzameln un oysforshn di materialn vegn di pogromen in Ukraine*) by members of the Jewish National Council, the Central Committee for the Relief of Pogrom Victims, and the publishing house Folksfarlag. The committee members included Elias Tcherikower as secretary and Nahum Shtif as editor-in-chief, and, among others, Abraham Joffe, Jacob Ze’ev Wolf Latzky-Bartoldi, and Israel Eliashev (“Baal-Makhshoves”). Further supporters of the project were Simon Dubnow, Moshe Silberfarb, Jacob Lestschinsky, and Nahum Gergel.³⁴

31 This new history-mindedness also found expression in a range of diaries and autobiographies written during the war and published in the interwar period. See, for example, Jacob Shatzky, “Jewish Memoir Literatur,” *Di Tsukunft*, 30 (1925), pp. 483–86. For a discussion of autobiographical writing after the First World War in Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse*, pp. 132–62.

32 See Henry Abramson, *A Prayer for the Government: Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times, 1917–1920*, Cambridge, Mass., 1999, p. 110 and Peter Kenez, “Pogroms and White Ideology,” in: John Klier and Shlomo Lambroza (eds.), *Pogroms. Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History*, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 293–313, 302. For a general overview on the violence following the First World War see Piotr Wróbel, “The Kaddish Years: Anti-Jewish Violence in East Central Europe, 1918–1921,” *Simon Dubnow Institute Year Book*, 4 (2005), pp. 211–36.

33 Dubnow, *The Book*, vol. 2, p. 16.

34 Cf. Elias Tcherikower, *Antisemitism and Pogroms in the Ukraine. The Period of the Central Rada and Hetman, 1917–1918*, Berlin, 1923, pp. 1–2 (Yiddish); Zosa

According to Tcherikower, the tasks of the Editorial Committee were not limited to information gathering on the pogroms but also included historical analysis which he envisioned as “a fundamentally objective work where the material must be arranged systematically and illuminated historically without political biases and without the intention to evoke pity.”³⁵ To these ends the Editorial Committee planned to create a documentary basis in the form of eyewitness testimonies and official documents pertaining to the situation of the Jews. A second step would be to analyze, edit, and publish the material in historical works in Yiddish, Russian, English, French, and German.

In their quest for objectivity, the members of the Editorial Committee were concerned with the one-sidedness of their sources representing mainly the experiences of the victims. “This material has a great disadvantage,” warned Nahum Shtif in 1923, in that “it represents only one side. We see and hear those who are being beaten but in general not those who are beating. That a Jewish editorial board will be able to obtain a word from the perpetrators about their reasoning and their deeds is almost unconceivable.”³⁶ Indeed, since the Soviet state archives remained inaccessible, the Editorial Committee had no choice but to concentrate on Jewish sources. Ultimately, the group was convinced that testimonies from Jewish witnesses constituted a more truthful source on Jewish suffering than state or army sources — provided, however, that the eyewitness accounts represented a great variety of perspectives.

Therefore, by means of appeals in the local Jewish press, the Editorial Committee invited people from various political, social, and ideological backgrounds, scholars as well as laypeople, to join the documentation project and write their personal accounts of the events:

Brothers! A terrible pogrom disaster is covering Jewish villages and towns, and the world does not know, we ourselves do not know or know only very little about it. This must not be concealed! Everything must be told and written down. It is a duty for every Jew who has come or

Szajkowski, “On the History of the Present Book,” in: Elias Tcherikower (ed.), *The Ukrainian Pogroms in the Year 1919*, New York, 1965, pp. 333, 335 (Yiddish).

35 Tcherikower, *Antisemitism and Pogroms*, p. 2.

36 Nahum Shtif, *Pogroms in the Ukraine: The Time of the Volunteer Army*, Berlin, 1923, p. 12 (Yiddish).

comes from the devastated Jewish towns to report everything that he has seen, for the news must not be lost. We request people to contact the commission for collecting and research under the following address: Mikhaylovski Street 11, apt.1, telephone 88–12, open from 12 noon–3 p.m. except for Saturdays.³⁷

The only demand the Editorial Committee brought to those who were willing join its documentation work was “that the material be of a strictly documentary or purely memoir-like character, not tendentious or publicist writing.”³⁸

The Editorial Committee established an archive containing several thousand eyewitness accounts on the pogroms, memoranda, protocols, and correspondence of Jewish communal organizations, diaries and letters of individual Jews, as well as clippings from the Jewish press. It also gathered several hundred official documents of non-Jewish provenance, including calls issued by pogrom instigators and the texts of government legislations, along with hundreds of photographs depicting the devastation.³⁹ Rivka Tcherikower, Elias’s wife, catalogued the material and arranged a card index of 1,350 pogroms in 750 places. She assembled “pogrom graveyards” (*pogrom-beys-olmin*), a detailed list of 17,000 Jews killed in the pogroms, arranged by location.⁴⁰

The Editorial Committee took great care to protect its material. In the turmoil of the Russian civil war, documents could easily be lost and the pogrom instigators and some political leaders had an interest in seeing the evidence destroyed. As a result, every incoming document was copied three times and kept in different places.⁴¹ Nevertheless, some parts of the collection did indeed get lost and several times the Soviet powers attempted to confiscate the archive. Clearly, publishing the pogrom

37 YIVO Archives New York, Tcherikower Collection RG 80, MK470.55, folder 664, frame 57221, no date.

38 Elias Tcherikower (ed.), *In Times of Revolution. Memoirs, Materials, Documents, Collections*, Berlin, 1924, vol. 1, p. VIII (Yiddish).

39 Tcherikower, *Antisemitism and Pogroms*, p. 3; Szajkowski, “On the History,” p. 347, n 37.

40 Szajkowski, “On the History,” p. 338.

41 *Ibid.* Other Jewish archives also faced the problem of confiscation. For example, the archives of the Jewish Historical-Ethnographic society were confiscated by the Bolshevik Commissariat for Jewish Affairs in April 1918. Dubnow, *The Book*, vol. 2, p. 252f.

documents in the Soviet Union was virtually impossible for political and technical reasons. Therefore the members of the Editorial Committee decided to transfer the archive to Berlin. In April 1921, after eight months of planning and with the help of Lithuanian diplomats based in the Soviet capital, the collection reached Berlin via Moscow and Kovno.⁴²

In Berlin — at that time the temporary home of numerous eastern European Jewish intellectuals and scholars, and a center of Jewish, particularly Hebrew and Yiddish publishing — the Editorial Committee gave itself a new organizational appearance by transforming itself into the *Mizrekh-yidisher historisher arkhiv* or *Ostjüdisches Historisches Archiv* (Eastern Jewish Historical Archive) under the auspices of Tcherikower. In addition to obtaining new documents, the Archive now concentrated on editing and publishing those already in its possession with the financial support of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJJDC) and of Ukrainian Jews in the United States.⁴³ At the beginning of 1923, the Archive announced the publication of a seven-volume opus, *Di geshikhte fun der pogrom bavegung in Ukraine, 1917–1921* (History of the Pogrom Movement in Ukraine, 1917–1921). Each volume was to give a summary description of the events and feature original documents. In the end, only two volumes were published at the time: the first by Tcherikower on the years 1917–1918, which

42 Szajkowski, “On the History,” p. 339; Tcherikower, *Antisemitism and Pogroms*, p. 4f; Kuznitz, *Origins of Yiddish Scholarship*, p. 49. The transfer of the archives found resonance in the Jewish press of Berlin, Warsaw, Kovno, and Łódź. For example, *Der Moment* in Warsaw reported: “The entire Ukrainian tragedy is written down, protocoled and packed up in five boxes...never, never have such loads of Jewish sorrows been collected...all hands have reached out to the material. Every ‘power’ that entered Kiev was keen on getting its hands on the material. Seventeen ‘powers’ have been watching out for it! Some have searched for it — so that the world would not become aware of their deeds — in order to destroy it. Others [have searched for it] in order to blame their opponents...All peoples in the world research, spread, and write about the smallest details of their heroism and victories...we Jews are endowed with a different kind of idealization. Like dogs do we lick our own blood! We collect, collect, and collect: blood, tears, and sorrows. These are our trophies: pounds of written paper. Rejoice — five full boxes have joined our national treasure.” Hersh Dovid Nomborg, “Five Boxes of Jewish Troubles,” in *Der Moment*, 28 April 1921 (Yiddish).

43 Tcherikower, *Antisemitism and Pogroms*, p. 5.

appeared in 1923 in Russian and Yiddish editions;⁴⁴ the second by Joseph Schechtman on the pogroms perpetrated by the Russian army of General Anton Denikin, published in Russian in 1932.⁴⁵ An additional volume of documents, edited by Tcherikower on Jewish suffering in the context of the Russian revolution, appeared in 1924.⁴⁶ The extreme material difficulties of the Archive prevented it from publishing the remaining volumes, even though manuscripts of five of them were completed.⁴⁷

Indeed, despite assistance from the Jewish National Council in Warsaw and the Polish office of the AJDC, Tcherikower's project does not appear to have gathered much initial support from among the broader Jewish public. Tcherikower was disappointed to note that in the wake of the pogroms, few Jews were able to see beyond their material needs, or to realize that historical documentation had the potential of serving the victims in an even greater measure than did material victim relief. In a letter to Baruch Zuckerman, a Russian-born American Labor Zionist and the executive director of the People's Relief Committee in New York, he complained:

Now we see that the Jewish public and the Jewish communal organizations are as interested in the work of collecting documents on the pogroms and in our entire historical work as they are in snow from the year before. We have never overcome the idea that what needs to be thrown at someone hungry and devastated by pogroms is a little money or a pack-

44 Tcherikower, *Antisemitism and Pogroms in the Ukraine. The Period of the Central Rada and Hetman, 1917–1918*.

45 Joseph Schechtman, *The Pogroms of the Volunteer Army in the Ukraine*, Berlin 1932 (Russian).

46 Tcherikower, *In Times of Revolution*.

47 The volumes of the series that never saw publication due to a lack of funds included: a Yiddish translation of Schechtman's monograph (note 45), *Pogroms of Denikin's Army in the Ukraine*; Nokhem Shtif, *The Insurgents' Pogroms. The Year 1920 in Ukraine — Civil War and Pogroms* (Yiddish); Jacob Lestschinsky, *The Pogroms' Consequences. Statistical and Economic Investigation* (Yiddish); Nokhem Gergel, *Short Descriptions of all Registered Pogroms. A List of Pogroms' Locations and a Nominal List of the Killed* (Yiddish); Elias Tcherikower, *Materials on the History of Self-defense* (Yiddish). The only volume published much later by YIVO, is Elias Tcherikower, *The Ukrainian Pogroms in 1919*, New York, 1965 (Yiddish). See Szajkowsky, "On the History," pp. 342–44.

age. We are not yet mature enough for a national historical work, creating an archive and publishing the material of our destruction.⁴⁸

Tcherikower, like his fellow activists in chronicling Jewish tragedies, believed that historical documentation served as a form of Jewish self-defense against the perpetrators and was a weapon in the fight for Jewish rights and thus a more potent and long-lasting form of relief than were material goods.

A few years later, Tcherikower had the opportunity to prove the practical value of his work. On 25 May 1926, the Ukrainian Jewish watchmaker, Shalom Schwarzbard, assassinated Semen Petliura in Paris in revenge for the pogroms perpetrated by the armies under Petliura's command. The trial, which aroused a sudden public interest in the history of the pogroms in general and Petliura's role in particular, took place in 1927. Tcherikower became an advisor to Schwarzbard's lawyer, Henri Torrès, and transferred large sections of the archives from Berlin to Paris.⁴⁹ The trial ended with Schwarzbard's acquittal thanks to the fact that Torrès, with the help of Tcherikower's evidence, managed to focus the proceedings on the atrocities against the Jews of the Ukraine that motivated Schwarzbard instead of on the deed itself.⁵⁰ The Schwarzbard trial turned the Ukrainian pogroms into a *cause célèbre*, spurring the publication of works about them, some of which were based on documents from Tcherikower's archive. Most notable among these was a three hundred page collection of pogrom documents published by the Paris-based international Jewish defense organization, *Comité des Délégations Juives*, headed by Leo Motzkin.⁵¹

Tcherikower and his collaborators made a significant contribution to the evolving tradition of historical documentation as a fitting response to catastrophe, in particular among eastern European Jews. Placing a

48 Tcherikower to Zuckerman, 25 May 1923, quoted after Szajkowski, "On the History," p. 343.

49 Ibid., p. 344. See also Elias Tcherikower, "The Eastern Jewish Historical Archive in Berlin on the role of Petliura in the Jewish pogroms," YIVO RG 80, MK 470, folder 481, frames 39265-39284, (Yiddish).

50 On the trial and its wider implications see David Engel, "Being Lawful in a Lawless World: The Trial of Scholem Schwarzbard and the Defense of East European Jews," *Simon Dubnow Institute Year Book*, 5 (2006), pp. 83-97.

51 Comité des Délégations Juives, (ed.), *Les pogromes en Ukraine sous les gouvernement ukrainiens (1917-1920)*, Paris, 1927.

strong emphasis on “objectivity” and “comprehensiveness,” they collected testimonies of people from various social, ideological, and educational backgrounds and included multiple perspectives on the same events. For the first time, documenting atrocities yielded a usable archive and the publication of collated documentary evidence in synthetic works. Moreover, the trial and the use of the material by the *Comité des Délégations Juives* meant that the witness accounts reached a wider Jewish and non-Jewish audience in both eastern and western Europe.

Some of the research techniques used by Tcherikower’s group were further developed by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, which was founded in 1925 in Berlin and Vilna. Dubnow, Shtif, and Tcherikower played formative roles in the founding of YIVO and its approach to research, the last as head of YIVO’s Historical Section.⁵² In opposition to western European Jewish scholarship associated with *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the supporters of the Institute placed the sociocultural, economic, and political developments of Jewish society in the past and the present at the center of their analysis. Accordingly, they developed an interdisciplinary concept of Jewish scholarship that combined the fields of history, sociology, philology, demography, ethnography, economics and pedagogy, using methods from the social sciences. Research was not confined to academically trained scholars but was carried out with the support of non-professional *zamlers* recruited from the wider Jewish public.⁵³ Thus, in many ways YIVO perpetuated and institutionalized the scholarly traditions that Simon Dubnow had set in motion in 1891.⁵⁴

52 On the role of YIVO’s historical section, see Heidemarie Petersen, “‘We See in Front of us the History of a Historical Mummy’: The Historical Section of the YIVO and the Jewish Historical Writing in Poland in the Interwar Period,” in: idem and Marina Dmitrieva (eds.), *Jüdische Kultur(en) im Neuen Europa. Wilna 1918–1939*, Wiesbaden, 2004, pp. 163–179 (Yiddish).

53 Kuznitz, *Origins of Yiddish Scholarship*, pp. 96–102. See also Brenner, *Propheten des Vergangenen*, chapter 3, especially p. 150f and Lucjan Dobroszycki, “YIVO in Interwar Poland: Work in the Historical Sciences,” Yisrael Gutman et al. (eds.), *The Jews of Poland Between Two World Wars*, Hanover and London, 1989, pp. 494–518.

54 Anke Hilbrenner, “‘Simon Dubnow war eine Art interlektueller Pate’: Das YIVO in Wilna und Dubnows Aufruf zur Arbeit am nationalen Gedächtnis,” in: Dimitrieva and Petersen, *Jüdische Kultur(en)*, pp. 147–162.

Precedent four: Jewish history writing under German occupation

These approaches to studying Jewish society in the past and the present continued in the shadow of Nazi occupation. Many Jews responded to the German persecution and extermination policies by documenting the catastrophe in letters, diaries, or even archives. Arguably, the single most significant of these was the underground archive in the Warsaw ghetto, directed by the Polish Jewish historian Emmanuel Ringelblum, one of the leaders of YIVO's Warsaw branch before the war.⁵⁵ Ringelblum belonged to a new generation of academically trained Jewish historians who were affiliated with socialist or Marxist Zionism and combined historical research with political and social activism in the Jewish community.⁵⁶ In May 1940 Ringelblum, who had been collecting material on the situation of Polish Jews under German occupation since the second month of the war, decided to extend the documentation work to a group of coworkers. The group, codenamed *Oneg Shabatt* ("joy of the Sabbath"), had two kinds of participants — permanent workers and one-time contributors. The latter, whose contributions were limited to a single text describing the happenings in their town or village but otherwise were not connected with the *Oneg Shabatt*, were generally people who had headed communal organizations in their hometowns and had come to Warsaw as part of the wave of one hundred and fifty thousand refugees who descended on the city in spring 1940.⁵⁷

The four dozen permanent members were by and large from the

- 55 See Raya Cohen, "Emmanuel Ringelblum: Between Historiographical Tradition and Unprecedented History," in *Gal Ed*, 15–16 (1997), pp. 105–17; Samuel Kas-sow, "Politics and History: Emmanuel Ringelblum and the Oneg Shabbes Archives," *Michael*, 16 (2004), pp. 51–80 and idem, *Who Will Write Our History? Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabbes Archive*, Bloomington, 2007; Ruta Sakowska, "Two Forms of Resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto — Two Functions of the Ringelblum Archives," *Yad Vashem Studies*, 21 (1991), pp. 189–219 and Joseph Kermisz et al. (eds.), *To Live and to Die with Honor! Selected Documents from the Warsaw Ghetto Underground Archives "O.S."*, Jerusalem, 1986.
- 56 See Philip Friedman, "Polish Jewish Historiography Between the Two Wars (1918–1939)," *Jewish Social Studies*, 11/4 (October 1949), pp. 373–408 and Artur Eisenbach, "Jewish Historiography in Interwar Poland," in: Gutman, *The Jews of Poland Between Two World Wars*, pp. 453–93.
- 57 Emmanuel Ringelblum, "O. Sh.," in idem, *Ghetto Writings*, Warsaw, 1963, vol. 2, p. 82f.

grassroots intelligentsia, affiliated with left-wing political parties, mainly the socialist-Zionist Po'alei Zion. Many of them were workers or craftsmen who discovered a talent for writing and research only through their activities for the underground archives.⁵⁸ In his choice of participants, Ringelblum consciously avoided employing professional journalists because he feared that they might give vent to their own literary aspirations, and hence their descriptions of the situation would be less accurate.⁵⁹

Ringelblum defined the two main principles of *Oneg Shabbat's* work as "objectivity" and "comprehensiveness" in conveying the full, unadorned truth about the Jewish tragedy, no matter how bitter it might be.⁶⁰ Therefore *Oneg Shabbat* collected multiple accounts on the same events to represent various social, political and ideological viewpoints, as well as those of different age groups.⁶¹ This way, Ringelblum held, "by comparing various accounts, the historian is able to arrive at the historical truth, the actual course of the events."⁶² Another precondition for "objectivity," Ringelblum maintained, was that his co-workers conceived of the material as serving future rather than present use which meant that they could utter their views of the Germans, the Poles, and the Jewish leadership without fearing any negative consequences.⁶³

In accordance with the plan to provide a comprehensive picture of the Jewish situation in the ghettos of occupied Poland, *Oneg Shabbat* collected various kinds of documents: the clandestine Jewish press in Yiddish, Polish, and Hebrew; letters; diaries; material produced by underground Jewish political organizations; synthetic reports on various aspects of ghetto life; eyewitness accounts of certain important events in the history of the ghetto; and monographs and reports on towns and villages. *Oneg Shabbat* also used questionnaires to gather information on the socioeconomic and cultural effects of the German occupation.⁶⁴

In early 1942, Ringelblum and his co-workers decided to write a

58 Ibid., p. 84.

59 Ibid., p. 82.

60 Ibid., p. 85.

61 Ibid., p. 84.

62 Ibid., p. 86.

63 Ibid.

64 See the sample questionnaire in Kermish, *To Live with Honor*, pp. 25–31.

summary work, "Two and a Half Years," depicting Jewish life in occupied Poland since the beginning of the war. The work was planned to cover the social, political, and economic developments of the Polish Jewish community under German occupation and describe its cultural, educational, political, and religious institutions on the basis of the material that the group had collected so far. However, due to the great deportations, which began in July 1942, the project remained unfinished.

Ringelblum's work was not only about preserving an accurate account of the events depicting both the acts of the Germans and the Jewish responses, but also about resistance and justice. As he stated in his December 1942 report reflecting on the activities of the group, "The O[neg] S[habbat] material is of great significance for the future tribunal of the war, which will call those guilty to responsibility, be they among the Jews, the Poles or the Germans."⁶⁵ When the material compiled by the group would be analyzed after the war, he claimed, this collection work would be valued every bit as much as that of those who fought the Germans with weapons in hand: "Every co-worker of O[neg] Sh[abbat] knew that [...] all this is for the sake of a high ideal and that in the days of freedom, society will acknowledge it significantly and reward it with the highest honors that there will be in a free Europe. O[neg] Sh[abbat] was a brotherhood, an order of brothers that inscribed on its banners: self-sacrifice, mutual loyalty, and service to the public."⁶⁶ While it became increasingly clear to the members of the group that they would not be part of this free Europe, the only option left to them in the face of death was to leave a trace of the historical truth for future generations. Between August 1942 and April 1943 members of *Oneg Shabbat* buried the underground archive in several portions in and outside the ghetto.

This concept of history writing as resistance was by no means limited to the Warsaw ghetto but widespread among eastern European Jews under the Nazi regime. Other secret documentation projects existed in the ghettos of Bialystok, Vilna, Kovno, and Łódź.⁶⁷ On an individual level,

65 Ringelblum, "O. Sh.," p. 86.

66 Ibid., p. 102. On the concept of history writing as resistance in Ringelblum's thinking, see Engel, "History Writing," p. 110ff.

67 See, for example, Bronia Klibanski, "The Underground Archives of the Bialystok Ghetto founded by Mersik and Tennenbaum," *Yad Vashem Studies*, 2 (1958), pp.

thousands of Jews confided their experiences to diaries, most of which, along with their authors, did not survive the war.⁶⁸ However, for many the very act of writing — testifying to a fictive interlocutor through the paper — and the idea that the truth about the crimes will thus be made known to the outside world played a central role in keeping what the victims perceived as the remnant of their human dignity.⁶⁹

*The Postwar Jewish Documentation Projects in the Context
of their Precedents*

In September 1946, the Warsaw branch of the Central Jewish Historical Commission in Łódź unearthed portions of the *Oneg Shabbat* archives under the rubble of the Warsaw ghetto. This was achieved with the help of two of its co-workers who were the only survivors of Ringelblum's staff — the writer Rachel Auerbach and the former secretary of the underground archive, Hersz Wasser. A second portion of the archive was recovered in December 1950.

Ringelblum's initiative soon gained popularity among the activists of the historical commissions and documentation centers also outside Poland. Many saw themselves as continuing documentation projects that had originated during the war, mainly, but not only that of Emmanuel Ringelblum.⁷⁰ In Italy, Yitskhok Kvintman, secretary of the

295–329 and Sarah Bender, "The Bialystok Archive," Michal Unger, "Jewish Documentation from the Łódź Ghetto" and Yitzhak Arad, "The Vilna Ghetto Underground Archive," all published in: Yisrael Gutman (ed.), *From Hidden Treasures to Historical Landmarks: Jewish Archives from the Holocaust Period*, Jerusalem, 1997, pp. 121–31, 141–50, 151–60 (Hebrew).

68 For an analysis of Jewish wartime memoirs see: Alexandra Garbarini, *Numbered Days. Diaries and the Holocaust*, New Haven and London, 2006; Robert Moses Shapiro (ed.), *Holocaust Chronicles: Individualizing the Holocaust Through Diaries and Other Contemporaneous Personal Accounts*, Hoboken 1999.

69 See, for example, Nathan Cohen, "The Diaries of the Sonderkommando in Auschwitz: Coping with Fate and Reality," *Yad Vashem Studies*, 20 (1990), pp. 273–312 and Zoë Vania Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust. Identity, Testimony, Representation*, New York, 2006, pp. 7–49 and 81–87.

70 On the self-perception of some commission activists that their work was a continuation of Ringelblum's efforts, see Stadtarchiv Göttingen, Records of the Cultural

Central Historical Commission of *Pakhakh* (the association of former Jewish partisans) in Rome, asserted that documenting the recent past meant fulfilling “the last will of the famous Jewish historian, Professor Dubnow, who shouted on his last journey ‘Jews, write, record, and tell this to the future generations’.”⁷¹

At times the commission leaders expressed their own sense of superiority over western European Jews who did not share this Jewish cultural heritage in which historical documentation equaled resistance. For example, Moshe Yosef Feygenbaum, one of the heads of the Central Historical Commission in Munich, rebuked German Jewish survivors for neither founding historical commissions of their own nor supporting those commissions initiated by Jewish Displaced Persons of eastern European backgrounds in occupied Germany.⁷² He explained the apparent disinterest of the German Jews in the historical work and the absence of secret Jewish archives of the kind of *Oneg Shabbat* in Germany, arguing that German Jews lacked the “dynamics of the Jewish communities

Office of the Municipality of Göttingen, file no. 475, report by Cwi Horowic on the activities of the Historical Commission in Göttingen [1947], German; Moshe Yosef Feygenbaum’s report on the activities of the Central Historical Commission in Munich in Archives of the *Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine*, protocol of the fifth day of the first conference of Jewish historical commissions and documentation centers in Paris, 7 December 1947, morning session, and Michal Borwicz’s comment, protocol of the third day of the conference, Paris, 3 December 1947 morning session. In France, the *Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine* in Paris emphasized that its work was part of the *Résistance* and gradually made its founder, Isaac Schneersohn, the “Ringelblum of France,” cf. Marcel Livian “Le Centre de Documentation Contemporaine a Quatre Ans,” *Le Monde Juif*, 9–10 (May-June 1947), p. 20, “Message André Spire,” *ibid.*, March-April 1953, p. 25 and Michel Mazor, “Historique du CDJC,” *ibid.*, pp. 34–35, 1963, p. 43f. See also Renée Poznanski, “La création du *Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine* en France (Avril 1943),” *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire*, 63 (July-September 1999), pp. 51–64, 52ff.

71 Yitskhok Kvintman, “A Memorial to the Unknown Jewish Partisan and Ghetto Fighter,” *Farn Folk* 27 (12 October 1948), p. 10 (Yiddish). Simon Dubnow is said to have exclaimed before he was murdered in the Riga ghetto in December 1941: “Good people — do not forget, good people — tell, good people write.” Cf. Dubnov-Ehrlich, *The Life and Work of S. M. Dubnov*, p. 247.

72 “Activities Report,” in *Fun Letstn Khurbn*, 10 (December 1948), p. 169 (Yiddish).

in eastern Europe,” were “brought up in discipline” and therefore “far from revolutionary and conspiring deeds.”⁷³

Other commission activists deplored that this tradition of *khurbn forshung* had always been confined to a small number of eastern European Jews rather than turning into a massive phenomenon. For example, in October 1945, Joseph Kermish, director of the archives of the Central Jewish Historical Commission in Łódź, reflected on the purpose of documenting the recent catastrophe by reiterating “the opinion of professor Dubnow, that Jewish history is the chain uniting the generations, and someone who does not know the past is not a Jew.” Yet as Kermish criticized, especially when it came to the many tragedies in the Jewish past, the Jews did not know their past well enough:

In the Jewish past a number of important sources are missing. For example, we do not know how many Jews were murdered during the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, in the pogroms of the years 1917 through 1921 and so forth. The Jews referred to their own tragedy with contempt and therefore we know only very little. In the last decades, Motzkin,⁷⁴ An-ski, Tcherikower and others have taken upon themselves to research the destruction of the Jews. But even the results of their research have not been entirely published.⁷⁵

Thus, for Kermish, the previous attempts at documenting the more recent catastrophes in the Jewish past were only a beginning. Since they had been limited to a number of individuals whose work had not received adequate attention, Kermish hoped the Central Jewish Historical Commission would make a difference and change this trend: “The latest catastrophe has an international character. It affected 9,000,000 Jews in 21 countries. Polish Jews suffered most. The creation of a historical

73 Ibid, p. 163.

74 In the framework of the World Zionist Organization, Leo Motzkin, under the pseudonym A. Linden, had published two volumes of documents: *Die Judenpogrome in Rußland*, Cologne and Leipzig, 1909–1910. As head of the Comité des Délégations Juives he was the driving force in publishing the documents on the Ukrainian pogroms, cf. note 51.

75 Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, protocol of the inaugural meeting of the Society of the Friends of the Central Jewish Historical Commission in Łódź, 10 September 1945, CŻKH/303/XX, folder 405, p. 6, (Yiddish).

commission is a proof that Polish Jewry has understood its historical task.”⁷⁶ Yet much remained to be done to fulfill this task:

Although we have a very rich archive, we lack a lot of material for a complete history of our *khurbn*. We must be able to answer the question which history will pose us: What happened to Polish Jewry? The Central Jewish Historical Commission endeavors to answer this question through its difficult collection work, establishing, among other things, card catalogues of the criminals. When the world will become familiar with our materials and will take the necessary consequences, maybe then the hatred between human beings will cease. To a great extent this will be the achievement of the *She'erit Hapletah* of Polish Jewry, which in the heat of the moment understood [the need] to snatch documents and materials.⁷⁷

These examples show that the awareness of the earlier cases of *khurbn forschung* among Holocaust survivors — be it in the form of pride in a cultural heritage of documenting as resistance, or in the form of an incentive to undertake more prolific documentation work than had earlier initiatives — was clearly one motivation for the commissions’ efforts. Until the late 1950s these commissions and documentation centers in Europe had collected some eighteen thousand survivor testimonies in addition to several thousand questionnaires, and their comprehensive archival collections laid the groundwork for the main Holocaust museums, memorials, and research institutions in Europe and Israel.⁷⁸

Conclusion

In sum, the cases of documenting persecution preceding the postwar historical commissions and documentation centers show that, beginning with the Kishinev pogrom, Jews in eastern Europe had developed a concept of documentation as a fitting and valuable way to respond to

76 *Ibid.*, p. 6f.

77 *Ibid.*

78 According to Philip Friedman, a total of 18,000 testimonies were collected until the end of the 1950s. Cf. Raul Hilberg, “I Was Not There,” in: Berel Lang (ed.), *Writing and the Holocaust*, New York, 1988, pp. 7–25, especially p. 18.

persecution. The protagonists of this concept believed that documentation could serve as evidence in bringing the perpetrators to justice, claiming compensation for physical and material damage, fighting for Jewish rights, establishing historical truth, and preserving the memory of the culture and people that had been destroyed. The documentation programs, even though initiated by small circles of intellectuals, were meant to be communal projects carried out by large segments of Jewish society — not necessarily by people trained in the historical profession but by each woman and man who had witnessed the atrocities. The distinct historiographical genre of *khurbn forshung* developed: thematically, this genre centered on events of collective suffering and destruction and focused exclusively on the most recent past; its historical record — mainly in the form of eyewitness testimonies and questionnaires — was generated during or immediately after the traumatic events by broad segments of Jewish society who had witnessed the tragedy; the texts produced were non-fictional, chronicle-like, and mostly autobiographical or based on an eclectic array of sources, among them official documents of the perpetrators, photographs, folklore, and artifacts; the documentation work itself was motivated by the belief of the activists that documenting would serve the material, social, psychological, political and moral needs of the survivors in the present and the future.

When comparing the work of the postwar Jewish documentation initiatives to earlier cases of *khurbn* documentation, there appear to be conspicuous similarities. Holocaust survivors, as the protagonists of earlier cases of *khurbn* documentation, aimed at ensuring the legal defense of the victims and the prosecution of the perpetrators, supporting claims for compensation for material and physical damage, and recording the recent past for Jewish history. There was also continuity in the idea that Jews must be the “administrators of their own past” and therefore must create an archival basis for future historical research because non-Jews might have an interest in distorting the truth and barring Jews from accessing the historical evidence. Likewise, there were direct similarities in their interdisciplinary social science-oriented methods of research and documentation, which centered on the victims’ experiences through testimonies and questionnaires and used an eclectic array of sources, including folklore, photographs, and artifacts to provide a comprehensive picture of the atrocities.

The postwar commissions and documentation projects did, however, make these methods of research and documentation more refined, purposeful, and professional than their predecessors, and thereby helped establish *khurbn forschung* as a separate field of research. In the previous cases, the documentation work was confined to a relatively small circle of intellectuals and communal activists who sought to win the attention of the “common people” through appeals to their moral duty to testify. In the wake of the Holocaust, which had directly affected Jews in twenty-one countries, *khurbn* documentation ceased to be confined to small groups of Jewish intellectuals but reached a broader Jewish audience and turned into a European-wide phenomenon. Those active in the documentation work established international contacts and tried to collaborate across national borders. While earlier *khurbn* documentation projects had barely managed to implement their collection and publication programs, be it for financial reasons or government censorship, the postwar commissions engaged in the comprehensive publishing of documents, local studies, memoirs, and works of early synthesis.

On a different note, perhaps beyond the scope of this essay, is the question of whether this kind of documentation as a response to catastrophe was in fact a specifically Jewish phenomenon. Since the First World War, documenting atrocities against civilian populations was common among governments and specifically armies. However, this documentation concentrated on data pertaining to citizens of the respective states and was primarily motivated by strategic, less so humanitarian, interests. In the case of the Turkish genocide of the Armenians in 1915–1916, comprehensive data in the form of eyewitness testimonies were collected and published in the immediate wake of the events by the British Foreign Office.⁷⁹ The impulse to do so did not come from the Armenian victims and witnesses themselves but from Viscount Sir James Bryce, a senior British diplomat familiar with the region and with Armenian culture. Clearly, had it not been for British political interests in the region, anticipating the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the drawing of a new geopolitical map, the British government might not

79 Arnold J. Toynbee (ed.), *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire 1915–1916*, London, 1916.

have sponsored the publication. Another reason why the British were at all attentive to the fate of the Armenians was their sympathy towards a Christian minority in a Muslim empire. Most of the testimonies in the seven hundred page study are not of the Armenian victims but of what Bryce deemed “objective observers” such as western Christian missionaries, travelers, merchants, and Red Cross workers who found themselves in the region at the time of the massacres whose reports were brought to the attention of western diplomats, which prompted Bryce to undertake his study with the help of the young historian, Arnold Toynbee.⁸⁰

Following the Second World War, it became even more common for governments to document atrocities perpetrated by foreign military forces — mainly but not only, by the Germans — against their respective populations on their territory. The focus was on violence against the citizens of the respective states, not against foreign nationals and refugees who also made up a considerable part of their prewar population. One reason for the widespread interest of governments in documentation after the war was that the new juridical framework of the prosecution of war crimes, crimes against peace, and crimes against humanity that had begun to become institutionalized with the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg, necessitated documentary evidence. Another reason was that the new governments seizing power after the war were built on respective founding myths — mainly centering on resistance — and had a vested interest in buttressing these myths and patriotic memories with documentation. In both cases, it was governments that initiated, financed, and carried out the collecting of evidence.⁸¹

What is specific to Jewish efforts at documenting atrocities perpetrated against them during the Holocaust as well as prior to it was that

80 On the methodological considerations underlying the study and the question whether victim testimony was a legitimate historical source, see James Bryce’s preface to *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire*, pp. XXI-XXXIII.

81 Examples of government-sponsored documentation institutions include the Netherlands Institute of War Documentation, the High Commission for Research on German Crimes against the Polish Nation in Poland, the Committee for the History of the Second World War in Paris. See, for example, Nobert Frei (ed.), *Transnationale Vergangenheitspolitik. Der Umgang mit deutschen Kriegsverbrechern in Europa nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Göttingen, 2006.

these initiatives were not government-sponsored. Rather, the examples of Jewish documentation as a response to persecution in eastern Europe were purely civilian, grassroots initiatives, without the backing of a government. On the contrary, they were undertaken in the fear that the respective government under whose jurisdiction Jews lived had an interest in destroying the evidence collected because of its responsibilities for the crimes. These Jewish documentation efforts were a response to an environment with a high level of ethnic violence and the lack of government protection of minorities — conditions that were an integral part of the eastern European Jewish experience. The form in which they manifested, as proto-professional social science-oriented grassroots initiatives, was the result of the eastern European Jewish conception of Jewish history developed most notably by Simon Dubnow and the collaborators of the YIVO Institute. In western Europe, where from the late nineteenth century until the Holocaust Jews could generally rely on protection by the state and its laws, such responses of *khurban* documentation were virtually absent as was the periodic anti-Jewish mass violence. In addition, the relative weakness of the Jewish national conception of history writing and the predominance of an academic rather than popular and autodidactic setting of Jewish history writing in western Europe might explain why such grassroots documentation initiatives were not as prominent among western European Jews.⁸² Evidently therefore, the concept of documentation as a response to catastrophe

82 In the German Jewish context, history writing also functioned as a “defense mechanism” yet in a conceptually different manner than in the east. With few exceptions, German Jewish history writing lacked a Jewish national focus but aimed to serve as a vehicle to integrate the Jews into their non-Jewish environment. It tended to focus on the remote past in order to establish the long-standing presence of the Jews. This was the case, for example, in the work of the historical commission founded by the Jewish historian Harry Bresslau in 1885 as a response to the antisemitic climate of the day. Historical documentation undertaken by Holocaust survivors of western and central European backgrounds— most notably Alfred Wiener, H. G. Adler, Bernhard Brillinger and the circle of German-Jewish scholars who formed the Leo Baeck Institute — was very much oriented to scholarly research and did not apply popular traditions of involving non-professional *zamlers* (collectors of data) to represent the experiences of large segments of the Jewish community. Also, the Leo Baeck Institute did not primarily focus on documenting the Holocaust *per se* but on the history and culture of German-speaking Jewry against the background of its destruction.

was not just a Jewish phenomenon but a specifically eastern European Jewish cultural tradition which, even though it had developed before the Holocaust, came to full momentum in the work of the early postwar Jewish documentation initiatives in Europe.

Before the Holocaust: Historical Anti-Semitism & Hitler's Rise to Power. Anti-Semitism in Europe did not begin with Adolf Hitler. Though use of the term itself dates only to the 1870s, there is evidence of hostility toward Jews long before the Holocaust—even as far back as the ancient world, when Roman authorities destroyed the Jewish temple in Jerusalem and forced Jews to leave Palestine. Under the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, anyone with three or four Jewish grandparents was considered a Jew, while those with two Jewish grandparents were designated Mischlinge (half-breeds). Under the Nuremberg Laws, Jews became routine targets for stigmatization and persecution. The Holocaust was a period in history at the time of World War Two when millions of Jews were killed because of who they were. Find out more with our guide. Many of them died as a result of their treatment. The Holocaust was an example of genocide. Genocide is deliberately killing a large group of people, usually because they are a certain nationality, race or religion. To enjoy the CBBC Newsround website at its best you will need to have JavaScript turned on. It was a process that became increasingly brutal over time. Nazi persecution. From the moment they came to power in 1933, the Nazis persecuted people who they didn't think were worthy members of society - most notably Jewish people. They introduced laws that discriminated against them and took away their rights. Jockusch, L. (2008) "Chronicles of Catastrophe: History Writing as a Jewish Response to Persecution Before and After the Holocaust", in Bankier D. & Michman, D. (eds) Holocaust Historiography in Context, Yad Vashem Publications, Jerusalem. Johnston, I. (2001) On Spiegelman's Maus I and II, <http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/introser/maus.htm> Accessed 05/11/12. Jewish responses to Emancipation and continuing discrimination predated Zionism by decades. Two very different such efforts, are represented by Moses Mendelssohn, descended from a line of orthodox rabbis, and Karl Marx, son of a Lutheran convert, also the son of an orthodox rabbinical family. Marx wrote On the Jewish Question in 1843. Originally intended as a response to an opponent of Jewish emancipation, its tone and focus shifted during its composition. Rather than a defense of the Jews its real significance to the world was as his first effort to develop the theory of dialectical materialism. Through Marx antisemitism became a political ploy for both left and right, before and after the Holocaust. Artistic responses to persecution during the Holocaust took many forms. From theatrical performances to poems and drawings, the wide range of sources collected here reflects the diversity of Jewish experiences and reveals how some people reacted to the trauma and loss they experienced during the Holocaust. This collection's materials range from published pieces to compositions in private notebooks and diaries. These sources include poems, songs, visual art, and theatrical performances composed and staged inside the camps. Their authors range from children and youth without formal training to p