

The Secret Archive of Oneg Shabbat.

Dawid Gruber was 19 years old, in 1942, when he left his final message to the world. His testimony was placed in one of ten tin boxes and buried in the cellar of the Borochow School in the Polish city of Warsaw. He had no idea whether anyone would ever read it, but he hoped they would. Dawid was imprisoned behind the walls of the Warsaw ghetto, unable to communicate with the outside world and he knew that his days were numbered.



The lid of one of the two milk cans in which portions of the **Oneg Shabbat** archives were hidden and buried in the Warsaw ghetto. © Jewish Historical Institute

The Warsaw ghetto, where the Nazis forced up to 500,000 Jewish people to live, was established in 1940. By November 1941 it had been completely surrounded by walls and fences and cut off from the rest of society. Emmanuel Ringelblum, a Jewish Polish historian organised a large group of people to record the details of life and conditions behind ghetto walls. The group represented a wide spectrum of the imprisoned society and included academics, artists, teachers, journalists, religious believers, secretaries and young people like Dawid.

Members of the group began to meet each Saturday, the Jewish Shabbat or Sabbath. They worked together under a code name “Oneg Shabbat”, which means “Sabbath Delight”. The group aimed to record and preserve history so that when the war was over they would be able to use the archive they were creating to help them tell their collective and individual stories. It soon became evident, at the receiving end of their policies of hatred, that the Nazis were aiming to totally annihilate the Jews. As an historian, Ringelblum, witnessing this attempt to destroy his people, decided it was vital for a Jewish version of events behind the ghetto walls to be recorded for posterity.

Walled into an area of less than four square kilometres, about 83,000 people had died from starvation in the Warsaw Ghetto by the early months of 1942. In the summer another

300,000 were deported to death camps. Whilst all this was happening the Oneg Shabbat writers and diarists continued to record both the pre-war history of their people and details of everyday life in the ghetto. They wrote of soup kitchens, simple faith, poverty, death from starvation and fear but they also provided evidence of the struggle to continue with normality such as educating children, holding political debates and efforts to retain some sort of cultural life. They also described in detail the actions taken against them by the Nazi authorities and told of Nazi film makers coming to the ghetto to make propaganda films in order to deceive the world, forcing Jews to take part and stepping over the bodies of starving children.

Once mass deportations from the ghetto to Treblinka began, Ringelblum and the secretary of the group, Hersh Wasser, instructed the Director of the ghetto school to bury the archive in a safe place. The Director, Israel Lichtenstein, asked two of the younger members of the group to help him with the physical task of burying all the documents in tin boxes and milk churns. One of them was Dawid Gruber and the other eighteen year old Nahum Grzwacz.

It was important that the evidence was hidden away from Nazi eyes. Whatever the fate of the writers the truth within their testimonies should be preserved for the rest of the world to read once the Nazis were defeated. It was important too for those whom the Nazis destroyed to be remembered and amongst the detailed histories were small details about the ordinary people the Nazis were about to murder.

Israel Lichtenstein asked future readers to remember those he loved, including his wife Gele Sekstein, an artist who had worked as a teacher with the ghetto children. Gele herself believed that she was one of the last Jewish painters left alive and wished for the chance to live in order to “keep Jewish art alive.”

As well as hiding the archive Ringelblum strove to find other ways to tell the world about Nazi treatment of Jewish people. He managed to arrange information about the murder of Jews in Chemno to be smuggled to the Polish Government in exile in London and this enabled the BBC to make a public announcement in June 1942 about the horrific Nazi plan for the Jews, known as the “Final Solution”.

During the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which took place in April and May 1943, Ringelblum was captured and sent to a labour camp. He was able to escape and lived for a while in Warsaw using false documentation but he was eventually tracked down by the Nazis and executed, with his family.

The Nazis liquidated the Warsaw Ghetto after the uprising and very few members of Oneg Shabbat survived the war. Much of the hidden archive was uncovered in 1946, with the help of three survivors Hersh Wasser, his wife Bluma and the journalist Rachel Auerbach. As the three people responsible for burying the archive were dead, finding the exact locations of the milk churns and tins was difficult. More discoveries were made in 1950; including some of Rachel's own writings but a third section is still missing.

The Nazis may have succeeded in exterminating millions of Polish Jews but, due to the determined efforts of the Oneg Shabbat, they failed to destroy their history.

So Dawid Gruber speaks to us posthumously:

“What we were unable to cry and shriek out to the world we buried in the ground...I would love to see the moment in which the great treasure will be dug up and scream the truth to the world. So the world may know all. So the ones who did not live through it may be glad and we may feel like veterans with medals on our chests. We would be the fathers, the teachers and educators of the future...May the treasure fall into good hands, may it last into better times, may it alarm and alert the world to what happened.....May history attest for us.”

So his Legacy of Hope passes to us, along with Israel Lichtenstein's poignant comment about his child “I wish my little daughter to be remembered. Margalit is twenty months old today.” As does eighteen year old Nahum Grzwacz's wish for remembrance “I don't know what's going to happen to me. Remember my name is Nahum Grzwacz.”

Their requests to us are simple. We are asked to remember the prisoners of the ghetto, to re-tell their story and to challenge injustice, prejudice, discrimination and exclusion in whatever form we find it.