



# The Rhetoric of Buried Testimony: Memory and Absence from the Warsaw Ghetto

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What do we do with an archive of Holocaust testimony that we know exists, but don't have access to? I argue that the still-buried portions of the Ringelblum (also known as the Oyneg Shabbas) archive can still be educational and meaningful though observing the conditions of its absence.

In October 1940, the Nazis established a locked ghetto in the Muranow district of Warsaw, and it became the largest of 1,500 ghettos. The ghettos were calculated extensions of the Nazi's final solution to suppress, exploit, and murder every Jew in Europe. Of the 400,000 Jews imprisoned there over four years, 52,000 perished, by starvation or disease, and 300,000 were deported to the extermination camp Treblinka. Nearly all the rest perished by mass shootings and Nazi terror within the ghetto.

Emmanuel Ringelblum was a prominent Jewish historian before the war, who led a sea-change of scholars in using historical documents to conduct evidentiary research into the history of European Jewish communities. Ringelblum, realizing the fate of his own community, covertly led a mission to document the atrocities occurring around him. The "Oyneg Shabbas" collective gathered diaries, letters, essays, photographs, drawings, underground Yiddish newspapers, song lyrics -- over 35,000 pages that were bundled into three large milk jugs and a number of small metal boxes, and buried underneath the earth as mass deportations signaled the end of all hope in 1943.

After the war, part of the archive was recovered by surviving collective members Herb Wasser and Rachel Auerbach. Today, the materials from those boxes and two of the milk jugs substantiate one of the most famous Holocaust archives in existence. The third milk jug, containing the rest of the archive, is still buried in Warsaw, underneath what is now the Chinese Embassy.

## Study Around the Absence

I argue that there is value in studying around the absence of the third part of the Ringelblum archive -- that is, exploring the conditions contributing to its inaccessibility today. Israel, Germany, Poland, and even China become players on the post-war stage. As Sonia Combe writes, "the repressed archive is power...of the state over the historian."

In "Politics of Commemoration," Ronald Zweig writes about the post-war attention (and lack thereof) paid to Holocaust refugee testimonies. After 1948, the task of collecting and chronicling Jewish testimony was undertaken with the aid of German financial reparations. The Claims Conference coordinated the negotiations between world Jewry and the German government over reparations in a 1952 agreement, which allocated \$125 million dollars from 1954 to 1964 to almost every aspect of Jewish life. The conference earmarked hundreds of thousands of dollars for Holocaust memorialization. Zweig traces the impact of reparations on the three projects that the Conference allocated funds to -- the Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine (CJDC) in Paris, Yad Vashem -- in Jerusalem, and YIVO in New York.

The post-war conversations surrounding these three institutions tell us much about attitudes towards memory preservation. In Paris, Baron Guy du Rothschild openly opposed the funding for the CJDC, saying it would be "of sentimental value, but without social contribution" and instead suggested building a community center. Furthermore, by Spring 1955, nineteen Jewish organizations across France had openly opposed the proposed allocations as well. In a highly unusual move, the Claims Conference ignored these oppositions, and allocated \$300,000 -- nearly 10% of their cultural budget -- to the CJDC. The Conference saw archival research and preservation as a key priority for the country. YIVO transferred its activities to New York in 1940, and recovered from the Nazis almost one million documents -- half of their prewar archives. Over 11 years of post-war allocations, the Claims Conference gave \$225,000 to YIVO in conjunction with Yad Vashem, for the shared collation and research of the documents.

Most of the reparations went to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial, museum, and research center established in Jerusalem in 1953 just five years after the state was founded. Yad Vashem adopted a number of institutional goals, including commemoration, research, and interestingly, honoring the Jews who perished with Israeli citizenship.

As it was, Holocaust survivor testimonies were gathered immediately after the war by historians sent to refugee ("Displaced Persons") camps. Testimonies were gathered not for cultural memory preservation per se, but to collect evidence in prosecuting Nazi War Crimes. Immediately following WWII, the Cold War gripped the political and social interests of the globe, and decades of public disinterest in Holocaust victims' narratives ensued -- amazingly illustrated by the fact that the second part of the Ringelblum archive was uncovered accidentally by a Polish construction worker building Communist housing on the site of the former Ghetto. Some scholars argue that interest in Jewish testimony didn't emerge until the 1980s and 1990s, following the rise of popular movies about the Holocaust.

The most recent attempt to uncover the third milk jug of the Ringelblum archive was in 2003. The excavation was spearheaded by Israeli researchers Uri Mintzer and the geologist Ya'akov Karch, a survivor from Warsaw. The project was financed by another reparations-based grant from the Claims Commission of \$146,000, as well as the University of Haifa. The location was determined by from survivor testimony and computer modeling, which pointed to a spot directly underneath the Chinese Embassy in Poland. The team dug for three months, and found nothing but the burnt scraps of a single diary, after which time the Embassy asked they leave.

As for the Oyneg Shabbas archive, the documents were known about, but not truly accessible for decades after their discovery. The archive was known to exist in the decades after the war, but because Poland was then under Communist control, access was nearly impossible. According to USHMM senior curator Jack Nowakowski, very few historians from the West had access to the documents. Even after Poland transitioned to a Democratic Republic in 1989 historians were still not necessarily able to study the Ringelblum archive. American historian Samuel Kassow was among the first to have a comprehensive view of the archive. Kassow is now considered the primary expert on the Oyneg Shabbas archive. His definitive book on the archive, "Who Will Write Our History," was published in 2007, and a documentary film of the same title was released in 2018.

Only in the recent past have non-Jewish Polish historians begun conducting Polish-language scholarship on the Holocaust, which some consider to be an element of "the internal discussion relating to the country's coming to terms with the past of anti-Semitism within Polish society before, during, and after the Second World War." Meanwhile, "alt-right" political movements are rising with speed and power in Poland today, hand-in-hand with anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial. In 2018, the Polish legislature passed a bill signed into law by their president, which made speaking the words "Polish Concentration Camp" a crime punishable by jail time. After great international controversy, the law was amended.



## ABSTRACT

My research suggests specific ways to interact with and learn from the still-buried segments of a sprawling Holocaust archive created in the Warsaw Ghetto, known as the "Oyneg Shabbas" or Ringelblum archive. I argue that the distance between us and the still-buried portions of the Ringelblum archive can be meaningful though the ways in which we engage with its absence. The paper analyzes two approaches: studying around the absence -- to learn about the international politics and reactions after the war which left the archive underground -- and studying within the absence -- a more rhetorical consideration of Jewish collective memory and sublime historical experience. It concludes by contextualizing how museums display and preserve discovered Holocaust testimonies, and how technology may or may not alter the museum goer's interactions with testimony.

### Displaying Absence in Museums

Walter Benjamin's essay "On the Motoric Faculty" (1935) considered the sensation of understanding something by interacting with an empty vessel. Museum curators "to get hold of something by means of history, which implies a copying or imitation, and is palpable, conscious, connection between the very body of the present and the perceived." Allison Linsinger, in "Absence, the Holocaust and a Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Emptiness" (1997), considers the curatorial experience of interacting with Holocaust artifacts at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. These artifacts would be recognizable to anyone who has read a Holocaust memoir -- piles of magazines, bath towels, dental records, trousers, shoes. "The museum one experiences with these 'object survivors' is not an experience of presence, but rather an experience of profound absence. It is through this semantic or iconography of the pile, 'that the mute surviving objects speak.' The iconography of absence creates a material experience of solidarity, felt not just as the physical remains of absence, such as shoes or stove pipes, but as the tangible absence of buried stories.

Landberg considered the museum's material museum experience to derive from the dual recognition of absence of bodies who owned the objects and their awareness of our own bodies. "By engaging an individual's sensorial faculty, the museum makes empathy possible. We are going one body over to these dead objects." For Landberg, every artifact may narrate a silent testimony.

In November 2017 a permanent exhibit was installed at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw displaying the Ringelblum archive, commemorating the 70th anniversary of the ghetto's destruction. The exhibit, titled "What We Were Unable to Show to the World," citing Daniel Charney's award-winning 2004 book, "The Ringelblum Archives," a project of physical, intellectual and spiritual -- as written by Emanuel Ringelblum -- "buried voices." A special publication by the JHI Publishing House accompanies the exhibit with "Letters to Oyneg Shabbas," a compilation of essays and letters by contemporary writers in response to the present and absent voices of the archive. And one of the two milk cans is displayed at the end of a long narrow passage, constructed and reinforced to perfectly straighten the route but effects an emphasis of nearly invisible. The container is the same color and irregular texture as the walls and floor, and would be barely noticeable, if not for a light illuminating from above. The milk can is no longer an institution or archive -- it is as if it was one day destined to be empty.

## Study Within the Absence

Taking a leap beyond the notion of transferrable trauma, where a literary testimony creates an emotional relationship between author and reader, perhaps the absence of testimony can do so as well. What Freud called the uncanny, others have identified as a certain sort of absence. Cathy Caruth calls it the "inaccessible," and Friedlander the "projections." It is the inability of testimony, however accessible it is to the reader or listener, to convey the reality of the historical moment. I argue that observing the absence of Holocaust testimony from an internal, emotional perspective may be valuable as well. Toni Morrison, writing about the unspoken voice of Afro-Americans in the Western Canon of 19th century literature, similarly suggests that silence may be inherently meaningful, educational, and traumatic. She articulates this in a 1988 Tanner Lecture at University of Michigan: "We can agree, I think, that invisible things are not necessarily 'not-there'; that a void may be empty but not a vacuum. In addition, certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose, like neighborhoods that are defined by the population held away from them." For Morrison, the unspoken Black voice is not just instructive of the racist, suppressive conditions of the time -- the silence carries a commanding weight. The very lack of a traumatic narrative reveals one and of itself. The unspoken voice rings in our ears when we think of the institutional powers that enforced its silence.

In his influential 1982 book of published lectures, "Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory," Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi argued that Jewish historiography was up until the nineteenth century framed around the redemptive paradigm of the Messiah, rather than through documentation and archivalization. Jewish collective consciousness evolved from cultural memory rather than historical knowledge. Yerushalmi writes of a rupture, a duality caused by the split from collective memory towards pure historical research, which by its scientific nature rejects the uniqueness of Jewish memory: "Memory and modern historiography stand, by their very nature, in radically different relations to the past. The latter represents, not an attempt at a restoration of memory, but a truly new kind of recollection. In its quest for understanding it brings to the fore texts, events, processes, that never really became a part of Jewish group memory even when it was at its most vigorous." Under Yerushalmi's thesis, only the absent testimonies from the Oyneg Shabbas archive may be shelved within the memory of Jewish collective history. To us, they carry non-actual meaning -- they do not currently believe as documents for us, because we cannot read them. We can only think about the conditions under which they are buried. Yerushalmi cites Kafka's 1924 short story, "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk": "Is it her singing that enchants us, or is it not rather the solemn stillness enclosing her frail little voice?" If Jewish consciousness is indeed the memory of memory itself, then collective thought assumes less of the documentation of history than the reasons why that history was penned.

In a metonymic sense, the absence of the buried Oyneg Shabbas testimonies may also represent and invoke greater notions of loss. As each document within the mass archive was solicited, written, and compiled by countless individuals, so great is the loss represented in its burial. One way we feel the physical erasure of Polish Jewry is in the knowledge that its testimonies have been destroyed or made remote. The absence -- the sublime, grotesque silence -- instructs us with ever-present power. It indicates a historical censorship whose implications can never truly be expressed or understood. We are stirred by the powerful, instructive absence of the Ringelblum archive's third jug. Is silence, and our emotional response to it, sublime? In Antiquity, a writer under the pseudonym of Longinus attempted to define, in a manifesto on sublimity, that intangible emotional reaction. Longinus argued that sublimity was produced as an effect of a cosmic distance, an echo. Sublimity to him was an elevation and figuration of absence, displayed by example through Homeric metaphor and the drama of Ajax's silence in Hades. Sublimity, or bypos -- literally "height" -- elevated material to an impossible, emotional level based upon evocative context alone. In "Interpreting Literary Testimony" (1987) James Young concludes, "diaries such as Ringelblum's, which was stuffed into milk cans in Warsaw, or those buried in food tins at Auschwitz by the Sonderkommando, retain their links to time, place, and events. It might thus be to the diary's actuality -- not its factuality -- that we turn to satisfy our need for evidence in literary testimony." By actuality, he is referring to the sheer fact of the object's existence -- rather than its factuality, the contents within the diary. Terminologies aside, I am convinced that the knowledge of the third part of the archive, coupled with the inaccessibility to read the testimony therein, invokes notions of a sublime absence.

In "Oral History at the Extremes of Human Experience" (2001), Tony Kushner reviewed the Imperial War Museum's Holocaust exhibit, which pioneered the display of audiovisual Holocaust testimony in a museum setting. He argues that the overwhelming volume of testimony spoken out of mounted video screens made learning difficult, and the experience hard to process. The peak of his criticism comes with the statement that the most impactful element of the exhibition was not the plethora of spoken testimony, but an enlarged photograph set on the wall, of a British soldier bulldozing the corpses of Belsen into a pit. On his emotional reaction to the photograph, he writes, "the psychologist Faith of the testimony to reach the imagination of the visitor is revealed." Kushner cites physicist Henry Greenspan, who studied Holocaust survivors: "we follow recounting best, when we are able to enter into the survivor's struggle for words rather than receiving their words as finished texts."



The archive as uncovered 1946

