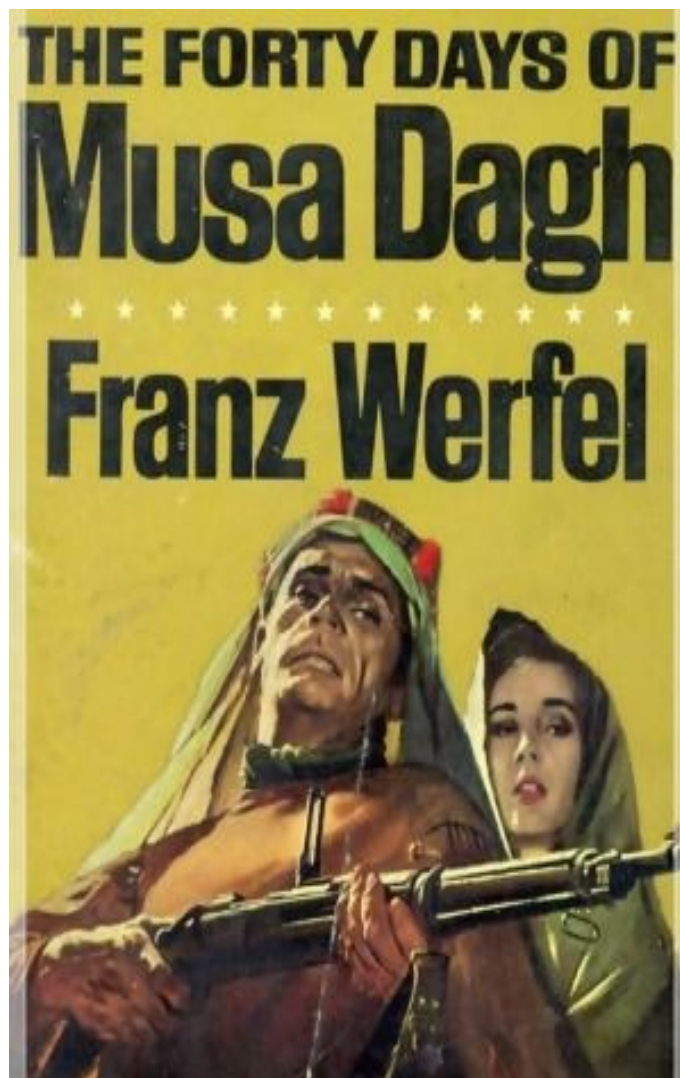




What were Jews Reading and Writing in the Ghettos? Spiritual Resistance During the Holocaust

Dr. Edna Friedberg



Dr. Edna Friedberg is a JTS Fellow and Historian at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. A graduate of the University of Illinois, she received her Ph.D. in Modern Jewish Studies from the Jewish Theological Seminary where she wrote her dissertation on the origins of American Jewish services for the elderly. Dr. Friedberg joined the staff of the Holocaust Museum in 1999 and has served as the historian for the Museum's highly-visited online *Holocaust Encyclopedia* and as Director of its Wexner Learning Center. She also curated a special exhibit on the legacy of the Nuremberg trials and postwar justice. Dr. Friedberg regularly speaks to audiences across the country and her essays connecting Holocaust history with social, cultural, and political issues today have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Slate*, *Newsday*, and *The Forward*. An alumna of Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, she serves as president of the Board of Trustees of the Milton Gottesman Jewish Day School of the Nation's Capital and is a member of Adas Israel Congregation.

LODZ GHETTO

#1

“Listen and believe this, even though it happened here, even though it seems so old, so distant and so strange.” --Jozef Zelkowicz, September 1942

#2

“Any moment now, the search will begin. If they find our hiding place, I will leave these notebooks in the dungeon. They might be our last trace.”

--Jakub Poznanski, engineer

#3

“Son of man, go out into the streets. Soak in the unconscious terror of the newborn babies about to be slaughtered. Be strong. Keep your heart from breaking so you’ll be able to describe, carefully and clearly, what happened in the ghetto during the first days of September in the year one thousand, nine hundred and forty two.” --Jozef Zelkowicz, journalist

#4

“I want to be able to record for posterity what I have seen....I deem it my duty to report...[if not as] a finished, systematically researched work of history, then at least as source material for the objective historians who will come later.”

--Jakub Szulman, physician

From the Notebooks of Oskar Rosenfeld

#5

“Gangs of scruffy children, their yellow, wrinkled faces looking aged, walk tiredly through the streets. Sometimes one sees a fleeting smile on their faces, hears singing from their bloodless lips. Sometimes they throw a snowball like children elsewhere.

No one can say what will happen tomorrow. What will happen to all of us. What all this is for. Why the ghetto? Will there be a tomorrow? Is it worth thinking about?

We are lepers, outcasts, common thieves, people without music, without earth, without beds, without a world. There is no other city like this in the world. Come here, people from the outside, from over there...where there are normal days and holidays, where there are dreams and desire and resistance. Come quickly. For when it is all over, we will be so thinned out and so miserable that we will no longer be able to enjoy the pleasure of seeing you again.”

#6

“The First Hunger

Worn out by idleness, tired, the thin lukewarm coffee in their empty stomachs, 1000 people crept onto the hard wooden planks. First they had to put their things somewhere--clothes, suitcases, rags, cooking things--to make room for sleeping. Squeezing together as much as they could, free movement was impossible. Children babbled, cried, whined; the sick people made the noises of their diseases: coughed, wheezed, scratched, moaned, sobbed. The creaking of the boards and animal-like sounds filled the night. The breathing of so many hundreds of people created so much warmth that one did not freeze, even on the coldest winter nights, but one had to go into the courtyard for fresh air.

A little unpleasantness comes over the body. One’s belly becomes loose, gradually sinks in. Hesitantly, almost fearfully, one runs one’s hand over the restless body, bumps into bones, ribs, runs over one’s legs and finds oneself, feels suddenly that one was quite recently fatter, fleshier--and is amazed at how quickly the body deteriorates....With such considerations, the word ‘ghetto’ spread itself above us and laid itself on the brain, forcing one to despair of finding a cure. One had to be careful, parsimonious with oneself. Necessity and the force of the situation gave strength to the weak, thoughtfulness to the rash, a sense of parsimony to the dim-witted. The nights ran, the days walked.”

Dawid Sierakowiak's Teenage Diary

#7

"Sunday, May 25, 1941

It's May-like, finally. Those who are emaciated and starved (as I am) can't do without warm clothing yet, but overcoats are gone. It's dry everywhere. Marysin smells like spring, and the heart breaks at the memory of pre-war days, when we'd be getting ready for our long-awaited vacation. It would've been an excursion for the graduating class, then camp or the country. Damn it! One could cry at the memory. The hell with it!"

#8

"Monday, May 26, 1941

All is okay in school. We're working on Cicero; next week it will be metrics. In math we're doing square roots and soon solid geometry. In other subjects, except for German, we're behind.

I'm organizing a school paper, for which I've submitted a caricature. Maybe one of my Yiddish articles will be accepted this time, though so far none have passed the censor. Even the ghetto has its own bourgeois ideology, distinctly formulated.

Not all is well at home. Mother works from 7 am till 9 pm and father from 8 am to 8 pm. The household chores are done by Nadzia [his sister]. She gets only one soup a day and has 30 dkg. of bread, because she and Mother both give Father 10 dkg. which he doesn't even appreciate. His attitude toward them is bad and shows great egotism."

WARSAW GHETTO

#9

Summer 1942, Emanuel Ringelblum: "[A] new disaster descended upon [the heads of] the Warsaw Jews, a disaster that cost us three hundred thousand victims--the Deportation....Only a very few comrades kept pen in hand during those tragic days....But the work was too sacred and too deeply cherished...the social function of *Oyneg Shabbes* too important for the work to be discontinued.

We began to reconstruct the period of the Deportation and to collect material on the slaughterhouse of European Jewry--Treblinka. On the basis of reports made by those who returned from various camps in the province, we tried to form a picture of the experiences of Jews in the provincial cities....If we only get some breathing space, we will be able to ensure that no important fact about Jewish life in wartime shall remain hidden from the world....

We deliberately refrained from drawing professional journalists into our work, because we did not want it to be sensationalized. Our aim was that the the sequence of events in each town, the experiences of each Jews--and during the current war each Jew is a world unto himself--should be conveyed as simply and faithfully as possible. Every redundant word, every literary gilding or ornamentation grated upon our ears and provoked our anger. Jewish life in wartime is so full of tragedy that it is unnecessary to embellish it with one superfluous line. Second, there was the matter of keeping a secret; and as is well known, one of the chief failings of journalists is that they reveal secrets.”

#10

Chronicle of a Single Day, Leyb Goldin

“[Y]esterday Friedman died. Of starvation. Of starvation? When you saw him naked, thrown into the large--the gigantic--mass grave (everyone covered his nose with a handkerchief, except me and his mother), his throat was cut. Maybe he didn't die of hunger--maybe he took his own life? Yes...no. People don't take their own lives nowadays. Suicide is something from the good old days. At one time, if you loved a girl and she didn't reciprocate, you put a bullet through your head....At one time, if you were sick with consumption, gallstones or syphilis, you threw yourself from a fourth-floor window in a back street, leaving behind a stylized note with 'It's nobody's fault' and 'I'm doing the world a big favor.' Why don't we kill ourselves now? The pangs of hunger are far more terrible, more murderous, more choking than any sickness. Well, you see, all sicknesses are human, and some even make a human being of the patient. Make him nobler. While hunger is bestial, a wild, a rawly primitive...thing. If you're hungry, you cease to be human, you become a beast. And beasts know nothing of suicide....

Food, food. It isn't my stomach talking now--it's my palate and temples. Just half a quarter load, just a little piece of crust, even if it's burnt, black, like coal. I jump off the bed--a drink of water helps, it provides an interruption. On your way back to bed you fall--your feet are clumsy, swollen. They hurt. But you don't groan. For the last few months you've got used to not groaning, even when you're in pain....You're like a robot now. Or maybe, again, like a beast? Perhaps....Die? So be it. Anything is better than being hungry."

#11

Song of Hope, by Yitzhak Katznelson, May 28, 1941

Come out, my dear, on to the street,
Come and die on the street,
On the hard sidewalk.
Bring our pale children.

Bring the eldest,
Bring the middle one.
Our third is very young yet
But like a grown Jew
Is able to die of hunger on the street.

Come on to the street
Come on to Karmelicka
Here we fit in well
Some fall, some stay sitting.
There is a hubbub on the Karmelicka.

Come out, oh leave the house
The empty house.
I'd be ashamed

To lie there in a living grave.
A starving man
Should not die lonely in his home.

No cause for shame on the street.
People go out, lie down
Swollen, tight-belted.
A whole legion dies together.
They are dying wholesale, wholesale.

We too, we'll lie down on the sidewalk.
No, not lie down--we'll fall.
No, no, not fall down--lie down,
Heart to heart
And die,
Die with the rest.

#12

Dawid Graber, age 19, August 2, 1942

“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 at the world. So the world may know ...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...in the twentieth century....May history attest for us.”

Warsaw Ghetto Humor and Folklore collected by Shimon Huberband

#13

A teacher asks his pupil, "Tell me, Moyshe, what would you like to be if you were Hitler's son?" "An orphan," the pupil answers.

#14

Rubinshteyn says, "I had a *groschen*, but lost it; I had a *tsveyer*, but lost it; I had a *drayer*, but lost it. Only the *firer* I can't seem to lose."

#15

Jews are now very pious. They observe all the ritual laws: they are stabbed and punched with holes like *matzahs* and have as much bread as on Passover; they are beaten like *hoshanahs*; rattled like Haman; they are as green as *esrogim*; they fast as if it were Yom Kippur; they are burnt as if it were Hanukkah; and their moods are as if it were the Ninth of Av.

#16

No garbage was permitted to be taken out of the ghetto. A Jewish ghetto administrator appeared before his German commissar to request permission to remove garbage accumulating in his home. When the Jew came into the commissar's office and did not raise his arm in the Hitler salute, the commissar became furious and threw him out of the room.

A few days later the Jewish administrator appeared a second time in the commissar's office. The commissar was certain that this time the Jew would salute him by raising his arm. And indeed, the Jew entered his room, raising his arm. So the commissar addressed the Jew, "This time, *Jude*, you acted correctly by raising your arm in the Hitler salute." "No, Mr. Commissar," the Jew answered. "I just wanted to show you how high the garbage has gotten."

#17

A child who steals from others is said to be manic. An adult who steals from others is said to be kleptomaniac. A nation that steals from others is called Germanic.

#18

Signs of the Messiah

A commentary on the weekly *parsha* “speaks of a nation, Magog, that will arise on the eve of the redemption. It will be extremely well armed, organized and disciplined. This nation will conquer many other nations and will subjugate them. This nation will reach the land of Israel and wage war on it. At that time, all the soldiers of this nation will perish, the dead will be revived and the Messiah will appear.”

Scroll of Agony, Chaim Kaplan

#19

“November 13, 1941

The journal is my life, my companion and my confidant. Without it I would be lost. In it I pour out all my heart’s feelings, until I feel somewhat relieved. When I am angry and irritable and my blood boils; when I am full of reproach and bitterness because I have so little strength and capacity to fight the vicious waves that threaten to engulf me; when my hands tremble with inner feeling--I take refuge in the journal and am immediately enwrapped in the inspiration of the *Shekhinah* of creativity, though I doubt whether the task of documentation with which I am occupied is worthy of being called ‘creativity.’ In the future let them evaluate it as they may: the main point is that I find repose for my soul in it, and that is enough for me.

Why am I angry? Typhus has attacked my home too: my wife has contracted that dread disease. Her life is in great danger, and I must save her. Our material means are limited, infinitesimal. Only with great difficulty did I manage to earn a day’s sustenance in normal times. In times of danger, when physicians, medics and all sorts of healers frequent your house, and you must spend more

than a hundred zlotys a day on them, my strength is insufficient. And there is no help on the side. The Joint [Distribution Committee] community fund and other social welfare institutions are open but to a few, to those close to them, to bootlickers, to the Director's lackeys who submit to his ways. And what am I? I have no foothold there."

#20

"January 7, 1942

'Whatever is on land is also in the sea.'...Everything found in the wide world of nature is found on a small scale in the narrow, confined ghetto. There is penury and poverty and, in contrast, wealth and plenty. The Nazi overlord acts according to this rule: whoever makes the great equal the small misses the mark. The means of destruction do not have a uniform effect throughout all the ranks of the ghetto. There is a certain percentage of ghetto residents who become wealthy and have secured a life of sustenance, perhaps even a life of ease, and that is because they trade on their brothers' distress. There is one great principle of life: no one has a misfortune that does not benefit someone else....Two leeches suck our marrow: the Nazi leech, the elite of elites and the primum mobile, the first 'father' in setting up the machinery to make us perish and suck our blood; and its spawn--the Jewish leech, born of contraband and price gouging. Despite draconian measures, smuggling does not cease. Even the danger of death does not restrain it. Rather, as those means become more severe and harsh, they drive up prices."

#21

"March 7, 1942

When the wagons enter the gates of death, they begin to remove the bodies, and anyone who has not seen that with his own eyes has never seen ugliness in his life....Mostly naked corpses are removed from the wagons, without even a paper loincloth to cover their private parts. I was stunned...simple human dignity had been insulted, the dignity of man. I was so disgusted that physically I had to vomit. Full of anger, I addressed one of the [cemetery] workers: How can

this be? But he actually got furious at me and nearly reviled me: 'Have you fallen to earth from the sky? Is there cloth for shrouds for two hundred corpses a day? And if there is? Who can afford to buy it? A meter of cloth is worth its weight in gold; the wealthy give white sheets instead of cloth, but not always, because they hide them for sale when bad times come. 'Paper,' you might say. There hardly is any to be found. It went up in price and the average person can't afford enough to bury even one of the dead members of his family. It's wartime, a hard, bitter time. We are in an emergency! The dead will forgive us! Isn't it the same to them? Just as the dead man's flesh can't feel the scalpel, it can't feel its nakedness.' I was left speechless...."

VILNA GHETTO

#22

Silence, and a Starry Night, by Hirsh Glik, Summer 1942

Silence, and a starry night
Frost crackling, fine as sand.
Remember how I taught you
To hold a gun in your hand?

In fur jacket and beret,
Clutching a hand grenade,
A girl whose skin is velvet
Ambushes a cavalcade.

Aim, fire, shoot--and hit!
She, with her pistol small,
Halts an autoful,
Arms and all!

Morning, emerging from the wood,
In her hair a snow carnation.
Proud of her small victory
For the new, free generation!

#23

Sermon, Friday April 30, 1943--Zelig Kalmanovitsh

“...To be a Jew means in every instance to be on a high plane. The temporary suffering and blows that descend upon the Jews have a meaning, are not merely oppressions, and do not degrade the Jew. For a Jew is part of the sacred triad: Israel, the Torah, and the Holy One, blessed be he. That means the Jewish people, the moral law, and the Creator of the universe. This sacred triad courses through history. It is a reality that has been tested countless times. Our grandfathers clung to the triad, lived by its strength. And now too: the Jew who does not cling to this triad is to be pitied. He wanders in a world of chaos, he suffers and finds no explanation for his suffering....

But the Jew who clings to the sacred triad needs no pity. He is in a secure association. To be sure, history rages now, a war is waged against the Jews, but the war is not only against one member of the triad but against the entire one: against the Torah and God, against the moral law and the Creator. Can anyone still doubt which side is the stronger? In a war it happens that one regiment is defeated, taken into captivity. Let the ghetto Jews consider themselves as such prisoners of war. But let them also remember that the army as a whole is not defeated and cannot be defeated. The Passover of Egypt is a symbol of ancient victory....My wish is that together we shall live to see the Passover of the future.”