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

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

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Abstract

This paper 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 Ringelblum archive. It will argue that the distance between us and the still-buried portions of the Ringelblum archive can be meaningful through the ways in which we engage with its absence. The paper analyzes two approaches: studying *around* the absence—to learn about the international policies 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.

“I only wish to be remembered. I wish my wife to be remembered, Gele Seksztajn. I wish my little daughter to be remembered. Margalit is 20 months old today.”

— Israel Lichtenstein, in a letter for the Oyneg Shabbas archive¹

“The work of memory collapses time.”

— Walter Benjamin²

“Stories come up about ‘treasures’ that were hidden, but very seldom does anything come of it.”

— Jacek Nowakowski, Senior Curator at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2018³

¹ Monica Whitlock. “Warsaw Ghetto: the Story of its Secret Archive,” *BBC*, 27 January 2013.
<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-21178079>

² Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1969).

³ Jacek Nowakowski (Senior Curator for Collections at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum) interviewed by Sarah Goldwasser, January 2018.

What is the Ringelblum Archive?

“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 writes Dawid Graber, a nineteen year old, on August 2, 1942. His testimony is destined for the Ringelblum archive, and will be buried somewhere under the Warsaw Ghetto soil as the war rages on.

During the Holocaust, it was uncommon but not unheard of for Jews to document and archive their own testimonies. Anthologies such as the *Scrolls of Auschwitz*, and an encyclopedia of the Lodz ghetto were created by Jewish victims in real-time during the war.⁴ This paper will focus on the archive of the Warsaw Ghetto—a compilation known as the *Oyneg Shabbas* or Ringelblum archive.

Warsaw, Poland’s capital city, had been a teeming intellectual and social hub for Jews and non-Jews alike from the 1920s leading up to the war. In October 1940, the Nazis established the ghetto in the Muranow district of Warsaw, and it came to be the largest of 1,500 ghettos established under Nazi Germany. Over 400,000 Jews were imprisoned there over four years, and nearly all perished by bullet, starvation, disease, or deportation to labor and extermination camps.⁵ Inside the locked ghetto walls, Jews were stuffed into apartments with no water, heat, light, or plumbing. Mass shootings were commonplace and starved bodies lay frozen in streets. Education and religious expression were forced underground, and children risked their lives smuggling flour and basic necessities into the ghetto. When deportations began in 1942, trains came and went daily, transporting people at random to the death camp at Treblinka.

In November 1940, a Polish Jewish historian named Emmanuel Ringelblum organized a secret collective to archive testimonies and other documents from within the ghetto. Before the war, Ringelblum was a significant contributor to YIVO, a center for Jewish historical research, data collection, and archival preservation since 1925.⁶ YIVO scholars, based initially in Vilna and then all over the world, had often complained of the lack of documentation from specific geographical and social groups from previous centuries, and sought to create their own research centers and legacies of Eastern European Jews and their cultures. In his recreation of the past through scant primary sources and his use of a non-religious historical lens, Ringelblum was at the forefront of Jewish ‘secular’ historiography. He once wrote an entire book speculating about the implications of an arcane legal document from the 18th century; he understood the prerogative of documentation and memory preservation.

With a group of 60 other Jews inside the ghetto, who formerly led lives as historians, journalists, businessmen, and community leaders, Ringelblum covertly solicited and compiled over 6,000 documents from the ghetto inhabitants. These documents consisted of underground Yiddish newspaper clippings, diaries, commissioned essays, letters, photographs, song lyrics, receipts, and sketches. The code name for the archive was “Oyneg Shabbas,” meaning “Pleasures of the Sabbath.”

As the hope of a future disintegrated, the Oyneg Shabbas collective buried troves of documents under the ghetto soil. First, they buried documents in small metal boxes, and in February 1943 they bundled thousands more into three large aluminum milk jugs. The final days of the Warsaw ghetto in April and May of 1943 saw a famous uprising, organized by young Jewish partisans, that lasted for three weeks. The uprising ended when the Nazis, led by Commander Jurgen Stroop, firebombed the ghetto to the ground. All semblance of life—shoddy apartments, streets, sidewalks—turned to rubble. The largest ghetto in Europe was diminished to a pile of ash, and all survivors found

⁴ David Roskies. “The Holocaust According to its Anthologists,” *Prooftexts* 17, no. 1 (1997): 97.

⁵ “Warsaw.” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005069>

⁶ The following background information on Ringelblum and the Warsaw ghetto comes from Samuel Kassow’s *Who Will Write our History? Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabbas Archive* (Indianapolis: Indiana University, 2007).

by the SS were sent to labor camps or gas chambers. Ringelblum escaped the ghetto with his family shortly before the uprising, but sometimes snuck back in to work on the archives. In 1944, he and his family were discovered, and executed along with those who hid them.

After the war, in September 1946, some of the archive's boxes were excavated with the help of the three Oyneg Shabbas survivors. Hersh Wasser and his wife Bluma, and Rachel Auerbach, helped locate the boxes buried at 68 Nowopliki Street. And in 1950, Polish construction workers building communist housing developments accidentally dug up two of the milk jugs. These discoveries are the source of almost everything we now know about the Warsaw Ghetto from the Jewish perspective. The 35,000 pages of the discovered archive are housed at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, which was founded three years after Ringelblum's death. In addition to their preservation and display, these documents have been digitized and uploaded to a free online database,⁷ copied and housed in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and translated into many languages. It is a truly remarkable archive, noted for its depth by archivists and curators around the globe. "You can count on one hand the number of comprehensive and poignant collections of documents like the Ringelblum archive," notes Jacek Nowakowski, the Senior Curator for Collections at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in D.C., and one of the first people in America to work with the Ringelblum archive. According to Nowakowski, in 1999 it became one of the first 100 objects inscribed into the UNESCO Memory of the World Register, constituting "a big recognition."⁸

However, the rest of the archive – the third milk jug -- is still underground in Warsaw, according to survivors Hersh Wasser and Rachel Auerbach. This was stressed particularly by survivors Wasser, who was instrumental in the 1946 discovery and was "the right hand of Ringelblum, the chief archivist."⁹ According to Wasser and Auerbach's testimonies, there should be a third milk jug, located at what is now the Chinese Embassy of Poland. Some historians, including Samuel Kassow, believe the buried documents are about the resistance groups and their preparations for the uprising, although this is debated by others.¹⁰ However, after an unfruitful three-month excavation in 2003, the Chinese Embassy requested that the archeologists leave, and to pursue no further work on-site.¹¹

The Rhetoric of Archived Testimony

How do we understand a buried archive of testimonies? And how can we use this absence to learn about the suffering caused by the war, and the post-war international policies that resulted in the archive's inaccessibility? I argue that the distance between us today and the still-buried portions of the Oyneg Shabbas archive can be rendered meaningful through the ways in which we engage with its absence. Just as people today find themselves in conversation with surviving documents, it is possible to be in conversation with the absence of testimony.

In "Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening" (1992), Dori Laub argues that the reader's act of witnessing trauma through reading testimony not only pulls the historical event into the present, but in effect brings the testimony into existence.¹² This relationship between testimony-giver and testimony-receiver is a performative relationship, which requires specific textual interaction.

⁷ <http://www.jhi.pl/en/blog/2016-06-07-complete-edition-of-the-ringelblum-archive-in-cj>

⁸ The recovered documents of the Ringelblum archive are designated in the Memory of the World Register for UNESCO alongside the manuscript of an African [slave song](#) from Barbados, and a 4th century [geographical codex](#) of Islamic territories. These documents are recognized, on an international, cross-cultural forum, as pieces of significant historical memory.

⁹ Nowakowski, interview with author, 2018.

¹⁰ Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History?*, 5.

¹¹ Yair Sheleg, "Digging for the Ghetto's Terrible History," *Haaretz*, 4 April 2003. <https://www.haaretz.com/1.4746536>

¹² Dori Laub, "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening," in S. Felman and D. Laub (eds), *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York and London: Routledge. 1992.

Of course, not every interaction with memory, particularly traumatic memory, is aided by written testimony. This is particularly true of Jewish religious practice. As Pierre Nora writes in “Between Memory and History” (1989), Judaism can be seen as practicing “the memory of memory itself.”¹³ Indeed, Saul Friedlander’s “Trauma, Transference and Working Through in Writing the History of the Shoah” (1989) places importance on the evasive elements of Holocaust testimony—the silences and gaps. In this sense, an absence of testimony can be a place of concentrated meaning.¹⁴ The Shoah’s nature, he writes, creates for historians “a field of projections...of an authentic transferential situation.”¹⁵

This “transference,” as Friedlander writes, may also be expressed in Derridean terms. In “Archive Fever” (1995), Derrida argues that a document communicates not just through its text but in the repetition and engagement with readers throughout history, and that it both carries and obliterates the meaning of its point of origin through the very nature of its “archive” status.¹⁶ The context of an interaction between reader and text—be it access, medium, or historical environment—contributes to the witnessing of the document. “Archives could do without neither substrate nor residence,” he writes, “it is thus in this domiciliation, in this house arrest, that the archives take place.”¹⁷ The milk jugs and iron boxes no longer literally house the archives, and are displayed in museums as separate objects. Their status as residences are no longer immediately meaningful—except for the third milk jug, the function of which, as an enclosure or house arrest, provides an image not unlike a time capsule.¹⁸

Furthermore, Derrida states that archival technology does not determine the moment of recording but is “the very institution of the archiveable event.”¹⁹ The Oyneg Shabbas collective not only documented the murder of their families and neighbors: by the very nature of the buried archive, they preserved the context under which it occurred. The institution of the Oyneg Shabbas’ archive—the “house arrest”—is profound. The archive was initially shelved not in a personal library, but under the dirt of an open-air prison. In the house arrest, the telltale heart still beats.

The Rhetoric of Absence

What Freud called the uncanny, others have identified as a certain sort of absence. Cathy Caruth calls it the “inaccessible,” and Friedlander the “projections.”²⁰ It is the inability of testimony, however accessible it is to the reader or listener, to convey the reality of the historical moment. In “The Rhetoric of Disaster Testimony” (2001), Michael Bernard-Donals uses Holocaust testimonies, including a diary found in the Oyneg Shabbas archive, to observe the limits of knowledge they can impart to their readers.²¹ Looking at the diary of ghetto inhabitant Abraham Lewin, Bernard-Donals

¹³ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire,” *Representations* 26 (1989): 16.

¹⁴ Saul Friedlander, “Trauma, Transference and ‘Working through’ in Writing the History of the Shoah,” *History and Memory* 4, no. 1 (1992): 40.

¹⁵ Friedlander, “Trauma, Transference and ‘Working Through,’” 44.

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,” *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995).

¹⁷ Derrida, “Archive Fever,” 10.

¹⁸ For more literature on Holocaust testimony and mediums that preserve and display them, see: Rabinowicz, Paula. “Wreckage upon Wreckage: History, Documentary and the Ruins of Memory.” *History and Theory* 32, no. 2 (1993): 119-137; Pinchevski, Amit. “The Audiovisual Unconscious: Media and Trauma in the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies.” *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 1 (2012): 142-166; Eppert, Claudia. “Testimony Against the Wall: Reading Relations, Loss and Responsible/Responsive Learning.” *Counterpoints* 165 (2002): 45-67; Stark, Jared. “The Task of Testimony: On ‘No Common Place: The Holocaust Testimony of Alina Bacall-Zwirn.’” *History and Memory* 11, no. 2 (1999): 37-61.

¹⁹ Derrida, “Archive Fever,” 18.

²⁰ Friedlander, “Trauma, Transference and ‘Working Through,’” 44.

²¹ Michael Bernard-Donals, “The Rhetoric of Disaster and the Imperative of Writing,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 31, no. 1, (2001).

points to the textual silence of testimony as an example of inaccessible memory. The day Lewin's wife was deported, he simply wrote: "Eclipse of the sun, universal blackness. My Luba was taken away today during a blockade on 30 Gesia Street..."²² The terror he felt from her deportation is invoked through a metaphor of negative space; the emotions of such events "are omitted from the language and writing, but are made present in the absence of the writing."²³ Like the sublime negative space of poetry, Bernard-Donals argues, testimonies fail to capture their moments in language but express them nonetheless in their silence.

I agree with Bernard-Donals' stance that testimony—particularly writing produced around a "disaster"—can bring us closer to, but never fully realize, the facts of history. This is the elusive originary point, in Derrida's words. To realize this past would be a perfect empathetic return, to the exact sensations and experiences of a moment in history. An exact re-creation of this sort is never possible, not even through the most accurate or illuminating of testimonies. Bernard-Donals cites ancient philosophers like Socrates, who believed that writing reminds a reader of an object of knowledge but doesn't represent the object, and Gorgias, who in Bernard-Donals' words believed that "the figural effects of speech... indicate what lies beyond the contingencies of the world."²⁴ Bernard-Donals writes only of the gaps within textual and audible testimony. But he recognizes the literal gaps in Holocaust testimony as well, including the subject I am grappling with, the buried Oyneg Shabbas documents. "Holocaust testimony is often both extrinsically incredible and intrinsically incoherent—exhibiting gaps, silences, and disjunctions," he writes.²⁵

Toni Morrison, writing about the unspoken presence of Afro-Americans in the Western Canon of 19th century literature, similarly suggests that absences 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.²⁶

In Morrison's case, the absence is in itself an agent of racism within the framework of the Western canon. And she argues that modern readers may poke and prod at the absence as an academic or pedagogical experiment, until it transforms itself into a revelation about historical layering. Morrison is less concerned with the "why" of the absence—she is confident in its racist implications—as she is the "how," the specific methods in which authors and critics erased and evaded the presence of Afro-Americans in their literature.²⁷

Morrison concludes that some authors, like Herman Melville, transformed blackness into an accessible mode of discourse—silence. She says that this absence or silence "is instructive," and that the absences "may be the insistent fruit of the scholarship rather than the text. Perhaps some of these writers, although under current house arrest, have much more to say than has been realized."²⁸ Revisiting Freud's term, Morrison believes that the absence, the negative spaces, the unspokenness—whatever you call it—reveals a voice at its kernel. The very lack of a traumatic narrative reveals one in

²² Ibid., 82-83.

²³ Ibid., 83.

²⁴ Ibid., 76.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature" (presentation for the Tanner Lectures on Human Values, Ann-Arbor, Michigan, October 7, 1988), 136.

²⁷ Ibid., 137.

²⁸ Ibid., 139.

and of itself. The unspoken black voice rings in our ears when we think of the institutional powers that enforced their silence.

I include Morrison's argument because the absence of Afro-Americans in literature during slavery and the antebellum period is a fascinating analogy to the buried and/or destroyed Holocaust testimonies. By filling in gaps through the collective memories formed and carried by traumatized communities, we engage the absence in a meaningful way. By studying the absence, we recognize the silence as a factor of oppression. And by considering the circumstances which contributed to the modern absence, we can take the absence as evidence within a greater narrative about history and policy.

Studying *Around* and *Within* the Absence of Shoah Testimony

I propose two approaches to studying "absent" Holocaust testimony, especially the still-buried Oyneg Shabbas documents. By "absent" I am referring to testimonies and artifacts that are known about in memory but are missing, destroyed, or inaccessible. One approach is to study *around* the buried archive's absence: to observe the international policies and efforts to uncover, preserve, and memorialize Holocaust memory. Why do we have access to some artifacts and testimonies, and not others? What can the memory of absent testimony reveal? The second approach is to study *within* the absence. Here I'm interested in exploring the nature of Jewish collective memory, and how the lack of access to testimony might, if surrounded by enough factual context, create a sublime emotional absence which speaks from the buried archive's distance.

Around the Absence: Post-War Policy and Reaction on the International Stage

In a practical sense, the presence and absence of the Ringelblum documents inform quite a lot about the immediate and longer-term international policies and responses to the Holocaust. Specifically, with the Ringelblum archive, it is a fascinating educational exercise to follow the financing of its recovery and preservation, where 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."²⁹

In "Politics of Commemoration," Ronald Zweig writes about the post-war attention (and lack thereof) paid to Holocaust refugee testimonies, within the purely practical frame of gathering evidence for Nazi prosecutions.³⁰ After the Allies liberated the camps and the war ended, 250,000 Jewish refugees were sent to Displaced Persons, or "DP," camps. Historical commissions almost immediately sent historians to interview refugees in these camps in order to gather testimonial evidence for the war crimes trials. Such historical commissions were supplemented by the work of Jewish historical centers in France, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Bohemia, Italy, Austria, Germany, Sweden, and Switzerland. Though mass concern swept among DP camps about the prospect of being forgotten by the world, enormous financial efforts went towards documenting and archiving survivor testimony. 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.³¹ The conference earmarked hundreds of thousands of dollars for Holocaust memorialization. Zweig traces the impact of reparations on the three projects

²⁹ Sonia Combe, *Forbidden Archives*, p. 231, cited by Derrida in "Archive Fever," p. 10.

³⁰ All information in the following passages about testimony collection, finances, and reparations comes from Ronald Zweig's "Politics of Commemoration," *Jewish Social Studies* 49, no. 2 (1987).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

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 CDJC, saying it would be “of sentimental value, but without social contribution” and instead suggested building a community center.³² 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 CDJC. The Conference saw archival research and preservation as a key priority for the country.

YIVO, having survived the Nazis, transferred its activities to New York in 1940. The US recovered almost one million documents—half of YIVO’s prewar archives—and 41,000 books, a quarter of its original holdings. These holdings included material from ghettos, Jewish councils, eye-witness accounts, Nazi documents, and refugee testimonies. 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.³³

Most of the conference money went to Yad Vashem, which is the Holocaust memorial, museum, and research center established in Jerusalem in 1953, just five years after the state of Israel was founded. Yad Vashem adopted a number of institutional goals, including commemoration, research, and interestingly, honoring the Jews who perished with Israeli citizenship. Saul Friedlander, referencing Pierre Nora and Yosef Yerushalmi, later argued that the Holocaust played a large part in forming Israeli national identity.³⁴ Families of victims could eventually request honorary Israeli citizenship for the deceased, although at the time of the proposal, it was not founded in any existing international law.³⁵

Sixty years later, the ever-present and tumultuous relationship between the state of Israel, international politics, and the Holocaust manifested in headlines about an archeological project in Warsaw to uncover the buried Ringelblum documents. The 2003 excavation was spearheaded by Israeli researchers Uri Mintzker, who was 27 years old, and the geologist Ya'akov Karch, who had survived the Warsaw Ghetto.³⁶ Leads from documentation and Oyneg Shabbas survivors suggested that the papers were buried on 34 Swietojska Street, where the Chinese Embassy of Poland now stood.³⁷ *Ha'aretz* reported on the excavation.

To locate the exact conjectured site of the treasure, Mintzker and Karch met with Marek Edelman, who was the commander of one of the three sectors of the ghetto revolt; Swietojska Street was in his sector. Edelman, who was then a member of the anti-Zionist Bund, still lives in Poland. The details of his testimony were fed into a computer model in order to try to find the precise location. The final conclusion was that the documents were buried on the grounds of what is now the Chinese embassy in Warsaw.

At this stage, it became necessary to bring Polish officials into the picture. Lena Bergman, the deputy director of the Jewish Historical Institute told *Haaretz* this week that the efforts to

³² Ibid., 158.

³³ Ibid., 160. Adjusting for inflation, this equals over \$1 billion today.

³⁴ Saul Friedlander. *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe*. (Indianapolis, Indiana University, 1993).

³⁵ Zweig, “Politics of Commemoration,” 161.

³⁶ Yair Sheleg, “Digging for the Ghetto’s Terrible History,” *Haaretz*, 4 April 2003.

³⁷ Ibid.

persuade the Chinese to allow the dig extended as far as the president of Poland, Aleksander Kwasniewski.³⁸

The project was financed by another reparations-based grant from the Claims Commission of \$146,000, as well as the University of Haifa.³⁹ Unfortunately, the team—which included one of the survivor fighters of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, Simha Rotem—found nothing but the burnt scraps of a single diary.⁴⁰

While the recent excavation activity points to international interest in studying Holocaust history and memory, Nowakowski believes that public interest in the victims' narratives did not grow until the 1990s, with the popularity of Holocaust films and novels.⁴¹ As it was, the international public in the decades after the war was not interested in learning about the Holocaust, or even confronting it.⁴² World War II ended in 1945 but the Cold War almost immediately afterwards gripped the political and social interests of the globe.

Tony Kushner argues that public disinterest in immediate post-war Jewish testimony reflects the lack of desire to listen to Jews during the war. He writes, “The reality is that many survivors did want to talk about their lives during the war but they faced a world that was at best indifferent and at worst openly hostile to them exposing their experiences.”⁴³ He argues that the “recent transformation” of the Holocaust as “moral touchstone of 20th century” through film and literature indicates a pervasive guilt about post-war indifference.⁴⁴ 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.”⁴⁵ As we will see, this relationship continues to evolve.

As for the Oyneg Shabbas archive, the documents were known about, but not truly accessible for decades after their discovery. According to Nowakowski, the archive was known to exist in the decades after the war, but because Poland was then under Communist control, access was nearly impossible. “Very few historians from the West were using the documents,” he said. According to Nowakowski, 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, according to Nowakowski. 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 is expected for 2018 release.⁴⁶

From a pedagogical perspective, these varied responses to the absence of testimony—to preserve memory, to ignore it, the reactions personal and political—are all worthy of exploration.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Nowakowski, 2018.

⁴² Tony Kushner, “Oral History at the Extremes of Human Experience: Holocaust Testimony in a Museum Setting,” *Oral Histories* 29, no. 2 (2001): 84.

⁴³ Kushner, “Oral History,” 85.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Tomasz Majewski, “Review: Holocaust Memory in Polish Scholarship,” *Association for Jewish Studies* 35, no. 1 (2011).

⁴⁶ <http://whowillwriteourhistory.com/faq.html>

Within the Absence: Collective Memory and Sublimity

As previously explored, Toni Morrison proposed filling in the unspoken Afro-American presence in literature through collective memory. If it is true that we fill the gaps of our knowledge with a knowingness gained from collective memory, then what is the source of that collective memory? Must collective memory be borne from non-textual origins? While the Afro-American tradition and collective memory is largely oral, Jews are known as “the People of the Book.” For a community dedicated to gaining meaning from text, how might they reconcile with a textual absence?

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 archivization.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸

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-textual meaning—they do not currently behave as documents for us, because we cannot read them. We can only think about the conditions under which they are buried. Yerushalmi is gripped by a line from 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?”⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰

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.

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.⁵¹ Sublimity, or *hypsos*—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

⁴⁷ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (University of Washington, 1982).

⁴⁸ Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 94.

⁴⁹ Franz Kafka. *The Complete Stories*. Ed. and Trans. Nahum N. Galtzer. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1971.

⁵⁰ For a more in-depth dissemination of *Zakhor*, I recommend Amos Funkstein’s “Memory and Historical Consciousness,” *History and Memory* 1 no. 1 (1989).

⁵¹ Longinus, *On the Sublime*, trans. H. L. Havell (London: Macmillan and Co., 1890), IX.2.

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.”⁵² By actuality, he is referring to the sheer fact of the object's existence—rather than its factuality, the contents within the diary. Simply by existing, the testimony-bearing artifact is satisfactory. In the way that Americans see a block of stone at the National African American History and Culture museum in Washington, D.C., and feel the presence of slaves sold upon it at a trading post, so might we understand the absence of Holocaust testimony.

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.⁵³ On his emotional reaction to the photograph, he writes, “the absence of faith of the testimony to reach the imagination of the visitor is revealed.”⁵⁴ Kushner cites psychologist 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.”⁵⁵

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. While Nowakowski spoke of an in-articulatable feeling he had when holding in his hands Holocaust artifacts, including the papers of the Ringelblum archive, perhaps one may also be stirred by an emotion caused by absence. We may call this tugging from a distance a sublime historical experience.⁵⁶

Holocaust Memory in Museums and Digital Spaces

Walter Benjamin's essay “On the Mimetic Faculty” (1933) considered the sensation of understanding something by interacting with its mere likeness. Mimesis means “to get hold of something by means of likeness, which implies a copying or imitation and a palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived.”⁵⁷ Allison Landsberg, in “America, the Holocaust and a Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy” (1997), considers the mimetic 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 visited a Holocaust museum—piles of eyeglasses, hairbrushes, utensils, razors, scissors, shoes. “The mimesis one experiences with these ‘object survivors’ is not an experience of presence, but rather an experience of profound absence...it is through this semiotic or iconography of the pile, ‘that the mute surviving objects speak.’”⁵⁸ The iconography of absence creates a mimetic experience of sublimity, of experiential historical sublimity. This sublimity is felt not just in the physical reminders of absence, such as shoes or shorn plaits, but in the intangible absence of buried stories that are addressed to us.

⁵² Young, “Interpreting Literary Testimony,” 420-421.

⁵³ Kushner, “Oral History,” 83.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 92-93.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁵⁶ For more on the background of this term, see Frank Ankersmit's *Sublime Historical Experience* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2005).

⁵⁷ Allison Landsberg, “America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy,” *New German Critique* no. 71 (1997), 81.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 79-81.

According to Nowakowski, the USHMM prefers to display the original objects over facsimiles, even though doing so subjects them to risk. He also said that, as “amazing” as technology is in creating access, digital copies cannot evoke the same emotional reaction as the original pieces. But a similar evocative mimetic experience from interacting with an original Holocaust artifact can be felt, in particular cases, with an artifact’s absence. As museums center themselves around storytelling, around the emphasis of memory over history, perhaps absence has a place at the table or behind the glass. While the research and presence of artifacts is vital for the preservation of memory, a collective emotional consciousness may be preserved without accessible documentation.

Landsberg’s “experience of profound absence” at the USHMM in the late nineties was likely new and unique to her decade of Holocaust museum visitors. Nowakowski explained that in the past two decades, there has been a shift from a collection-based mindset to a storytelling mindset. “The USHMM was one of the first storytelling museums of its kind, and now the story is the most important thing,” Nowakowski said. “Until the 1990s these Holocaust museums celebrated objects, and the story would be built around the object. Now, we decide to tell a story, and have to curate a collection around that story. This was a revolution in museums,” Nowakowski said.

According to Nowakowski, before the 1990s, Holocaust museums were interested in acquiring artifacts as individual pieces, to be displayed as such—stand-alone fragments from an isolated point in history. However, museums recently changed their approach to be narrative-based. Nowakowski said that museums now collect and curate exhibits around stories they wish to tell the viewers, and that single artifacts are considered objects within sprawling contexts of a family’s narrative. In fact, the USHMM’s architect is quoted as saying, “I felt intuitively that this was an emotional building, not an intellectual building.”⁵⁹

Landsberg considered the immersive, emotional museum experience to derive from the dual recognition of absence of bodies who owned the objects and hyper awareness of our own bodies. “By engaging an individuals’ mimetic faculty, the museum makes empathy possible...we are giving our bodies over to these mute objects.”⁶⁰ For Landsberg, every silent artifact is an object of testimony.

In 2014, the Jewish Historical Institute held a temporary exhibit in honor of the anniversary of Ringelblum’s death. It showcased just a fragment of the archive, and displayed the documents in a way which, according to an online post by historian and curator Teresa Smiechowska, “synthetically show[ed] what the Ringelblum archive is.”⁶¹ According to photographs from their website, documents were displayed in a slightly clinical manner, either mounted on neutral boards or in floating glass display cases, with little to comfortably linger upon throughout the rooms. However, the exhibit was deliberately displayed in a place where the Oyneg Shabbas collective regularly met, 3/5 Tłomackie Street in Warsaw.⁶²

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 Institute. The exhibit, titled “What We Were Unable to Shout to the World,” citing Dawid Grawber’s arresting testimony, is a key component of their “Oneg Szabat” program creating scholarship and experience around the archive. The current President of the Republic of Poland Andrzej Duda, as well as the deputy ambassador of Israel in Poland, and a UNESCO representative were present for the opening ceremony. The President of Poland gave the following remarks regarding history and memory: “The exhibition... is another important step in recovering memory about the world which Hitler’s criminals

⁵⁹ Ibid., 81.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 82-83.

⁶¹ Smiechowska, Teresa. “Hidden in Milk Cans.” *Jewish Historical Institute*. 9 May 2014. <http://www.jhi.pl/en/blog/2014-05-09-hidden-in-milk-cans>

⁶² Ibid.

intended to destroy forever. But it has survived—for the memory of Poland. Even more so: it has survived, above all, for the memory of the world.”⁶³ A bold statement of solidarity, considering that the President openly supported a bill, which was passed by the Polish senate in Warsaw this February, which criminalizes speech suggesting Polish complicity in the Holocaust with up to three years in prison. The President promised to engage in dialogue with Israeli leaders after their outcry to the bill, but he has yet to do so.⁶⁴

In this new permanent exhibit at JHL, the experience invoked by space and absence was at the forefront of the curator’s mind. Before entering the exhibition rooms displaying the documents, the biographies of the Oyneg Shabbas members are presented at an inviting wooden table, “symboliz[ing] a space of physical, intellectual and spiritual—as written by Emanuel Ringelblum—‘kindred union.’”⁶⁵ A special publication by the JHL Publishing House accompanies the exhibit with “Letters to Oneg Szabat,” a compilation of essays and letters by contemporary writers in response to the present and absent pieces of the archive.⁶⁶ And one of the two milk cans is displayed at the end of a long narrow passage, constructed and enveloped in perfectly straight corridor that effects an explosion of earthy ceramic rubble. 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 it was one day destined to be, empty.

Digital media is also profoundly transforming the ways in which we interact, pedagogically and emotionally, with accessible Holocaust testimony. PDF databases, language translation systems, and virtual reality tours of labor and death camps are revolutionizing modes of experience. Some forensic anthropological teams are digitally re-creating contemporary and past disaster zones through 3-D modeling and uploading the results online.⁶⁷ A Holocaust museum in Illinois filmed Holocaust survivors and developed the subjects into hologram systems, which will respond to museum-goer’s verbal questions and cues for decades in the future.⁶⁸

Criticism of Theoretical Absence

On the flip side of the empathic possibilities to be gained by a sublime historical experience, an essay in the *American Literary History* journal recently criticized the mimetic faculties encouraged by commentators regarding the Holocaust memoir, *Fragments*. The essay’s author espoused the dangers of a post-memory world where encouraged imagination might freewheel into ultimately invalidating the past. The essay criticizes commentator Bernard-Donals, who wrote of bearing witness to the memoirists’ trauma through the emotions the book caused—a feeling that Caruth calls transmissible trauma. The critic Eric Sundquist writes,

Whatever trauma theory has contributed to psychiatric or psychological conjecture about victims...would seem mainly to have raised the stakes of mystification. Now, what is unrecoverable, unspeakable, unknowable—the authentic “kernel”—belongs not just to survivors but also to everyday scholars, readers, and filmgoers. In this respect, *Fragments* is a

⁶³ “Permanent Exhibition: What We Were Unable To Shout To the World,” *Jewish Historical Institute*, 22 November 2017. <http://www.jhi.pl/en/blog/2017-11-22-permanent-exhibition-what-we-were-unable-to-shout-out-to-the-world>

⁶⁴ James Masters, “Polish President Signs Controversial Holocaust Bill into Law,” *CNN*, 7 February 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/07/europe/poland-holocaust-bill-signed-intl/index.html>

⁶⁵ “Permanent Exhibition: What We Were Unable to Shout to the World,” *Jewish Historical Institute*.

⁶⁶ “Letters to Oneg Shabbat,” *Jewish Historical Institute*, 29 January 2018. <http://www.jhi.pl/en/blog/2018-01-29-letters-to-oneg-shabbat>

⁶⁷ “Forensic Architecture.” Accessed January 2018. <http://www.forensic-architecture.org/>

⁶⁸ Sam Gringlas, “Illinois Holocaust Museum Preserves Survivor’s Stories – As Holograms,” *NPR*, 19 December 2017. <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/19/572068474/illinois-holocaust-museum-preserves-survivors-stories-as-holograms>

proof text of the voracious, but un-fulfillable, post-Holocaust demand for new evidence of that which lies hidden in the abyss of history, the black hole of memory.⁶⁹

Critics of the notion of transferrable trauma worry that the treatment of Holocaust history can dangerously veer into territory that feeds skeptics and deniers. The more that everyday people claim the trauma of historical memory, the more easily that history can be dismissed and invalidated. While Holocaust denial is far more complex—for instance, with its steadfast belief that every image and paper was doctored after the war—every absence of testimony and speculative gap is an opening for deniers to take and accuse academics.

What's remarkable about the discovered Ringelblum archive is that it is so vast, diverse, and now easy to access. Multi-media, multi-vocal evidence about life in the Warsaw Ghetto is accessible and irrefutable. It is only because of the accessible documents that the still-buried portions are understandable to us.

Conclusion

The prior research and suggestions regarding interactions with Holocaust memory are centered around the the Ringelblum archive, while the methods of studying around and within the absence of testimony may be useful on a larger scale. I believe that the implications of studying “around” an absence of testimony—that is, observing the context under which it is inaccessible—can be highly informative for any historical or anthropological investigation. What agents caused the absence? Who has worked towards making it accessible, and what might their motives be? Furthermore, observing “within” an absence of testimony has the potential to reach thoughtful points about collective memory. Listening to such an absence, guided by well-informed historical knowledge and consciousness, can be a valuable, emotional experience.

I'd like to conclude with a handful of observations regarding the future of the Ringelblum archive. According to a BBC article on the Ringelblum excavations, the buried documents may be potentially located with ground-penetrating radar technologies.⁷⁰ Investigations at Treblinka have used GPR and other non-invasive tools since 2003. Nowakowski seconded the possibilities of discovery through sonar technologies, saying that while the unearthing of the documents around the embassy is unlikely to occur in the future, a new wave of archeological discovery may be on the horizon.⁷¹

As for their contents, the buried documents may contain important information about the Jewish resistance inside the ghetto, the ŻZW. While some scholars believe the lack of documentation about the rebellion in the Ringelblum archive represents Ringelblum's own ideological position about the resistance, it is possible that papers simply remain undiscovered.⁷² Just as efforts to preserve Yiddish songs and poetry became ways to “salvage ethnography,” preserving documentation on the ŻZW would enlighten future generations about the fighting spirit and military actions of Jewish youth in Warsaw.⁷³ Meanwhile, the tens of thousands of documents that are currently known have been digitized through Warsaw's Jewish Historical Institute and the Central Jewish Library.⁷⁴ Publications

⁶⁹ Eric Sundquist. “Witness Without End?” *American Literary History*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Spring, 2007), 70.

⁷⁰ Whitlock, “Warsaw Ghetto: The Story of its Secret Archive,” BBC, 27 January 2013.

⁷¹ Nowakowski, 2018.

⁷² Dariusz Libionka, “Deconstructing Memory and History: The Jewish Military Union (ŻZW) and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising,” *Jewish Political Studies Review* 18, no. 1 (2006): 92.

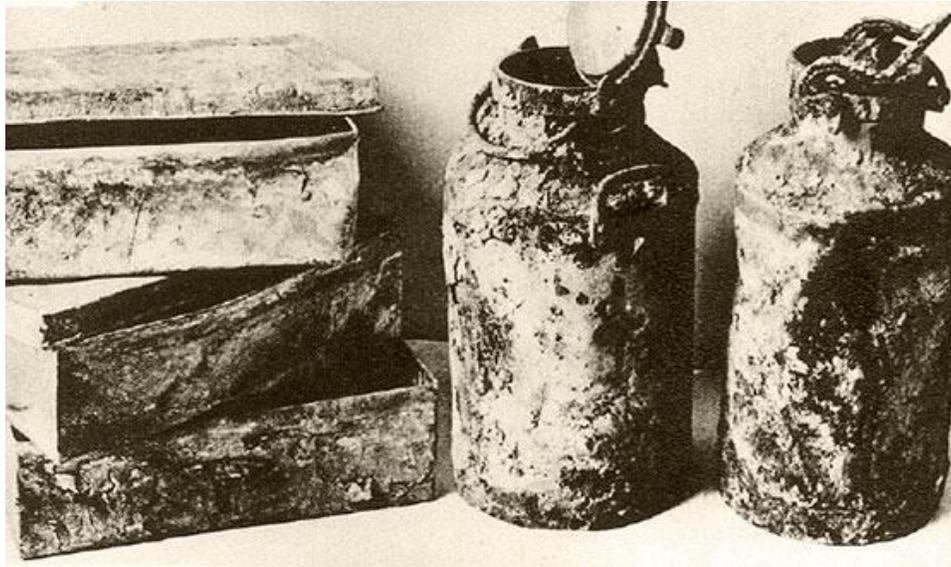
⁷³ Shirli Gilbert, “Buried Monuments: Yiddish Songs and Holocaust Memory,” *History Workshop Journal* no. 66 (2008): 117.

⁷⁴ <http://www.jhi.pl/en/blog/2016-06-07-complete-edition-of-the-ringelblum-archive-in-cjil>

of the archive—15 volumes in total—are available in English, Hebrew, German, and Polish, and current efforts are underway to translate the entirety into Spanish.⁷⁵

This concludes my paper on the approaches to studying around and within absent testimony. I encourage those who interact with the still-buried, or absent, documents of the Ringelblum archive to consider it a sublime historical experience.

⁷⁵ Nowakowski, 2018.



The two discovered milk jugs, and some of the boxes, which contained portions of the Ringelblum Archive. (YIVO)



The Ringelblum archive is unearthed for the first time in 1946 (Jewish Historical Institute)

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