

The Diaries from the Warsaw ghetto

Summary

Abraham Lewin was born in 1893 in Warsaw, in a religious Jewish family. From 1916 until 1939, he was working as a teacher of Hebrew and Jewish studies in Yehudia – a progressive Jewish high school for girls. It was in Yehudia that he met his wife Luba, née Hotner, a fellow teacher of Hebrew. In 1928, their daughter Ora was born. Throughout the interwar period Lewin, a supporter of General Zionists, remained involved in Jewish communal life and the Warsaw branch of YIVO. He also studied and wrote about the history of Jews in Eastern Europe. In 1934, his book *Kantonisten* [the Cantonists] was published, in which he discussed conscription of Jewish boys to the Tsarist army in the Russian Empire. After the war broke out, Lewin, his wife and their daughter were forced to move to the Warsaw ghetto. There, having had met Emmanuel Ringelblum through his work in both Yehudia and YIVO, he became one of the key collaborators and a member of the executive board of the *Oneg Shabbat* – the Underground Archive of the Warsaw ghetto. He also worked for the Jewish Social Self-Help as a secretary of its youth division. Employed alongside other members of the underground in the Ostdeutsche Bautischlerei-Werkstätte workshop, Lewin survived the deportations in the summer of 1942. In August 1942, his wife was murdered in Treblinka, leaving him as the sole guardian of their teenage daughter. The last entry of his diary, which he deposited in the Ringelblum Archive, is dated 17 January 1943, a day before the beginning of the January *Aktion*, when he is assumed to have perished.

The diary of Abraham Lewin, which is presented in this volume and covers the period from April 1942 to January 1943, is one of the most important documents dealing with history of the Warsaw ghetto, and in particular the great deportation of July–September 1942. Despite the extremely difficult situation in which he found himself, Lewin was one of the few who kept a daily diary of the events unfolding in the ghetto in the summer of 1942. The diary, a document of very high literary quality, is a very personal description of the deportations in Warsaw, with references to the news of the annihilation of Jews in smaller localities that reached Warsaw at a time. The diary is also unique in the way in which it portrays the inner workings of the *Oneg Shabbat*.

Abraham Lewin provides us with descriptions of the group's meetings, including those held during the deportations. He was also one of the members of a group tasked with interviewing escapees from Treblinka who reached the Warsaw ghetto with news regarding the functioning of the camp and the true nature of deportations.

This publication is the first complete edition of the Diary of Abraham Lewin. It is based on the documents preserved in the first and second part of the Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto, kept in the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw (ARG I 431, ARG II 251, ARG II 252) and the Hersch Wasser Collection in YIVO in New York (HWC 31.11, HWC 32.2, HWC 32.4, HWC 32.6, HWC 32.7). The diary is divided into two parts. The first part covering the period up to the beginning of the *Aktion* was retranslated into Polish from the Yiddish manuscript. The second part is based on the existing translation published in *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego*¹, with omissions filled based on the Hebrew original and, in parts, the English edition of the diary.²

The second part of the volume is composed of diaries and testimonies from the Warsaw ghetto. Of the twenty one documents presented here, eight have never been published before, and only three of the remaining thirteen have been previously published in their entirety. Most of the texts were written in 1941 and 1942, two mention the events of 1939, and two contain brief references dated at the beginning of 1943.

The vast majority of documents comprising the present study come from the archive of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, while two texts – fragments of the diaries of Jechiel Górný and Elíasz Gutkowski – come from the collection of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archives.

Documents in this volume have been arranged in chronological order. Exceptions are: Document 2 (notes by Mordechaj Szwarcbard), Document 13 (notes by Jechiel Górný) and Document 18 (diary of Elíasz Gutkowski), which, given the fact that they are a thematic whole, have not been separated. In their case, the order of placement in the volume has been determined based on the date of first entry.

Texts published here relate primarily to the situation in the Warsaw ghetto. The authors devote much attention to the issue of terrible hunger, as well as the resulting social inequalities. They describe the phenomena such as smuggling and widespread bribery, as well as selection carried out in work details and street roundups. They comment on rumours circulating in the ghetto and attempt to represent the mood prevailing among the Jews. An important theme, recurring in several testimonies, is the great liquidation operation in the summer of 1942.

Also described are the most important institutions of the Warsaw ghetto: the Jewish Community, the Office to Combat Usury and Speculation, the Jewish Social Self-Help, or the Jewish Order Service, which was regarded with particular disdain. Most likely,

¹ Abraham Lewin, *Dziennik z getta warszawskiego*, part 1: *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego* 1956, No. 3–4 (19–20), p. 169–206; part 2: 1957, No. 2 (22), p. 85–107; part 3: 1957, No. 3 (23), p. 71–79; part 4: 1957, No. 4 (24), p. 42–55.

² See: Abraham Lewin, *A Cup of Tears. A Diary of the Warsaw Ghetto*, ed. Antony Polonsky, Oxford 1988. Parts of the diary discovered in the Hersch Wasser Collection in YIVO were published in: *Twilight days: missing pages from Avraham Lewin's Warsaw Ghetto diary, May–July 1942*, ed. Havi Ben-Sasson and Lea Preiss, "Yad Vashem Studies" XXXIII, 1995: 7–60.

it was mainly due to the role played by Jewish policemen during the great deportation action in the summer of 1942, though their earlier zeal in carrying out their tasks was another factor.

In several cases, texts published herein address the Holocaust of other Jewish communities, such as Białystok or Pabianice. Numerous testimonies make references to concentration and extermination camps, mainly Treblinka, but also Majdanek or Chełmno on the Ner.

While some authors are anonymous, others are well-known associates of Emanuel Ringelblum and the *Oneg Shabbat*, including Jechiel Górný, Eliaasz Gutkowski, Menachem Mendel Kohn, Mordechaj Szwarcbard, and Nechemiasz Tytelman. Their texts supplement documents by these authors published in previous volumes. These records contain mostly their personal testimonies, although in some case they cite testimonies by other people. Authors of diaries often quote conversations they heard in the street or excerpts from letters from labour camps, etc. Some tried to make their texts as objective as possible, describing only specific events (although, of course, the very choice was dictated by their emotions). Others could not or did not want to hide their emotions and feelings, as reflected in their texts. These are testimonies of that time, often recorded on the spot, as such, they are undoubtedly of great value, and by publishing them in print we carry out the will of their authors.