“ONEG SHABBAT,” THE JEWISH UNDERGROUND ARCHIVES IN THE WARSAW GHETTO

The ghetto archives were established by the group that called itself “Oneg Shabbat” ("Sabbath gathering") in the course of the three and a half years of war. The strange name derived from the fact that the discussions of this group were held on the Sabbath—for the sake of secrecy the entire institution was called “Oneg Shabbat.” I laid the foundations of the archives in October 1939....

I began to collect material on current events in October 1939. As head of the Jewish Self-Help welfare organization (which was known then as the Coordinating Committee of the welfare organizations), I had daily personal contact with the life around me. Information reached me on everything that happened to Jews in Warsaw or the suburbs. The Coordinating Committee was at that time a branch of the Joint, and delegations from the smaller towns arrived almost daily to describe the difficulties experienced by the Jewish population. Whatever I heard in the course of the day I wrote down in the evening, and added my observations. In time these daily records made up a good-sized book of some hundreds of closely written pages, a mirror of that time. The daily records were replaced first by weekly summaries, and later monthly summaries. I did this at a time when the number of colleagues working for the “Oneg Shabbat” had already become larger...

In May 1940 I decided that it would be proper to find wider support for this important work. I made a careful choice of people for the job and as a result the work progressed in the right direction and could be carried out in sufficient measure. The secretary of “Oneg Shabbat,” Hirsch W [Wasser] was appointed by the Committee of “Oneg Shabbat” at that time, and he has continued with the work to the present day....
The creation of the ghetto, and the shutting away of the Jews within the walls, brought about even greater opportunities for work on the archives. We reached the conclusion that the Germans took very little interest in what the Jews were doing amongst themselves. There were meetings on subjects and in a manner that would not have been possible before the war. One said everything that came to mind at every meeting of a house committee, in every soup-kitchen, and on the premises of every public institution, without interference. The Jewish Gestapo agents were busy looking for the rich Jews with hoarded goods, smugglers, etc. Politics interested them little. It went so far that illegal publications of all political directions appeared almost openly. In the cafés they were read practically in public; money was collected for the newspaper fund, there were arguments with opponents—in a word, people behaved almost like before the war. In conditions of such "freedom" among the slaves of the ghetto it was not surprising that the work of "Oneg Shabbat" could develop successfully....

"Oneg Shabbat" grew and grew, and so much valuable material was collected that we came to the conclusion that even if the time had not yet come to consolidate the material we could in any case make summaries of various problems and important events in Jewish life. If this plan had been carried out it would have made a very important contribution to the history of the Jews in Hitler's time. It is very regrettable that only a part of the work planned was carried out. There was missing the quiet atmosphere that is needed for a task of such size and dimensions. The compilers of "Oneg Shabbat" who undertook to work on one chapter or another did not find it possible to complete their work up to the end....

Ringelblum, II, pp. 76-80.