

**ERD 2017**  
**Education, Reflection, Development, Fifth Edition**

**THE ROLE AND VALUE OF DIARIES IN TEACHING HISTORY -  
CASE STUDY**

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***Abstract***

This article discusses how diaries can broaden the scope of understanding of what history is and what invaluable insight they are for the future historian. The focus will be on what those testimonies say about the concept of history and how this information would be useful for raising awareness about the nature of the subject matter of history. The future historian must be aware that for both the diary writer as well as the historian, the message engulfed in the story is the main concern; it's an interest in itself. While striving to provide accurate information, both are equally preoccupied by the message that is transmitted through what is recorded which eventually forms what is remembered. By using diaries one is able to portray the significance as well as the limitation of the discipline of history. After all, the essence of history is the relationship between the facts or the events so to speak, and grasping that information. Diarists tend to voice their concern about transferring the information into the realm of recording and the significance of the action of recording. The historical awareness of the diary writer should be a concern for the historian as this perpetually questions the value of the information that is gathered to reconstruct an accurate and reliable image of the past. This idea will be discussed using two diaries that were written during the Holocaust: Emanuel Ringelblum's diary – a historical document and Ruben Feldschu (Ben Shem)'s diary - a personal intimate diary.

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**Keywords:** Diaries, Holocaust, history, teaching, objectivity.



## 1. Introduction

This article seeks to discuss the importance of personal testimonies, more specifically, diaries, to the subject matter of history in general. The major argument here is that diaries are an essential source in order to create a reliable and complete image of the past. Now more than ever, historians are well conscious that historiography is an interpretation conducted in the present and as such, the recreation of the past is influenced by the present (Drayton, 2011, p 672).

As the relative nature of historical narratives is something that cannot be overlooked, the arguments and reasoning against the use of diaries to recreate the image of the past loses its grounds. Diaries, renowned for their subjectivity, may do just the opposite to the historical narrative – they can effectively contribute to history by adding to the non-biased character of the historical account of the present because they bring us the authentic voice of the era discussed (Garbarini, 2014, p.92). This study suggests that the individual's point of view and the local contents of a diary constitute the strength of the historical narrative in mainly two areas: understanding the conceptual-cultural values of the time and the meaning behind phenomena and events discussed (Goldberg, 2009, p. 227).

In this article, the case studies have to do with two WWII diaries which were both written in the Warsaw ghetto. One such diary was intentionally designed to be a historical account under the form of a diary. It was written by the historian Emanuel Ringelblum (1900-1944). The other diary is private, written by Ruben Feldschu (Ben Shem) (1900-1980), a psychologist. Despite their differences, both diaries exemplify how we can learn about history in general and in particular using the unique and personal perspectives of both writers. By examining for example, issues of violence or hunger, we may get a better understanding of what lies behind such abstract notions. By looking at the case of the Jewish deportees from Danzig, it may be possible to penetrate their conceptual world and as a result understand their mental difficulties. By focusing on language peculiarities, an additional hidden message about concepts may be revealed.

## 2. A glimpse into the diaries

Emanuel Ringelblum was a historian who in 1926 joined YIVO and became head of the Historical Commission where he formulated the distinct methodology for historical research which was to be used also in the Oneg Shabbat Archive. One unique feature of Ringelblum's methodology was using personal accounts written by individuals of different capabilities and qualifications. As mentioned before, in Warsaw he took it upon himself to write a diary which was to record life in the ghetto (Nizan, 2016, p.30). The diary was originally written in Yiddish. The series of monographs which were written in hiding were also in Yiddish except one part, the relationships between Jews and Poles, which was written in Polish. On March 7th, 1944 Ringelblum's hideout was discovered. All its inmates including Ringelblum, his son Uri (aged 12) and wife Judith (Józia), were executed at the beginning of March (probably on the 10th) 1944 (Haska, 2014).

Ruben Feldschu (Ben Shem) was one of the leaders of the Zionist Right in interwar Poland. One of the unique features of his diary is the fact that it was originally written in Hebrew. Feldschu succeeded in rescuing more than 800 pages of his diary which was never published (Yad-Vashem Archive, Record Group 0.33). The contents of the diary are a remarkable example of an acute power of observation, compassion

and poetic capacities. Feldschu's diary (the deciphered part) ends in April 1943, about two weeks before the tragic death of his daughter Josima on 21 April 1943 and death of his grieving wife shortly after her daughter's death (Weinbaum, 2010, p.24).

One last biographical particularity has to do with the biography of both writers. Both were born in the same year, 1900, the same shtetl, Buczacz, east Galicia, and both have kept a diary in the Warsaw ghetto. Rachel Auerbach, Feldschu's cousin was a prominent figure among Ringelblum's Oneg Shabbat co-workers and she too had documented her experiences in the ghetto. During the war, she lived with the Feldschu's family. Ringelblum and Feldschu paths crossed each other many times but their relationship remained estranged (p. 14, 16).

### 3. Problems of Writing Holocaust Histories

One very important feature of the Holocaust historical accounts is the fact that they were all written from the point of view of the aftermath. Therefore, for historians, students and the public in general, the shadow of the death dominates the discussion and whether we like it or not, it is also a judgmental reference. Thus, research of "during the Holocaust" or what lies behind the term of Holocaust is overshadowed because the end is known. In his book, David Engel (2009) discusses the separation of the field of Holocaust research from that of Jewish history to which he opposes. According to Engel, historians of our era should adopt the same attitude that was adopted by earlier Jewish historians when discussing other disasters. For example, the expulsion from Spain in 1492, was indeed place in a central position but it didn't become an obstacle in researching Jewish history in contrast to the manner the holocaust has become. In other words, after the expulsion, historians relating to previous events refrained from weighing them in light of the expulsion. Engel believes that historians of our era should do the same with the holocaust and it mustn't cast its shadow backwards. (p.46, p.258). Furthermore, the aftermath of the Holocaust left no "room for recovery", no possibility for rehabilitation and therefore the void and its implications makes it very difficult to recreate an accurate image of the past.

In fact, part of the problem in researching the Holocaust is being able to understand the reasoning of perpetrators as well as victims at the time it happened. In the case of the Jewish Holocaust victims, it is crucial because part of the "success" in torturing and annihilating the Jews has to do with the manner they conceived what was happening to them. The conceptual world and reasoning which was based on the past which didn't include such experiences, made it almost impossible to grasp the present. In an entry from June 30, 1942, which Ringelblum (1989) writes after the broadcast on London Radio about the annihilation of Jews, he keeps asking why the world is silent. At times he answers: they didn't know but then he contradicts himself as he understands they knew about other events that were less conspicuous. Yet, further on he chooses to stick to the belief that the information transmitted to London was new to them and that was the reason nothing was done. (p.297). Ringelblum, a secular scholar and a Communist, begins his interpretation of events at the ghetto according to patterns he is familiar with, that is that to every effect there is a cause. Only later on he realizes that what he was witnessing was radically different and did not match familiar patterns of thinking (Simon, 2015, p.137).

Feldschu who is a religious man and whose diary is not a historical diary also demonstrates the growing sense of awe and confusion at the events and rumors that keep flowing into the ghetto. He too

demonstrates the incapacity to grasp the events but unlike Ringelblum, he is less cautious with his words. Already on December 1940 Feldschu says about himself that he considers himself to be almost proficient in the history of all peoples and the "... the ways of history are clear to me just as the paths of the ghetto... and I found in no nation such brutality ... It isn't for nothing that the Huns have settled in the land of Germany and from their guts they gave birth to these jewels." (Yad-Vashem Archive, Record Group 0.33, pic 29) In other words, Feldschu refers to his acquired knowledge of history in order to try and make sense of what is happening around him but in vain. The explanation that he finds is biological, according to him, the Germans behave in this way as they are descendants of the Huns.

Almost from the beginning, it was becoming more and more evident that it was difficult to find words not only to describe what Jews were experiencing, but neither could they decipher a meaning or logic in the occurrences (Kassow, 2007, p. 93-94). Furthermore, the unprecedented events are characterized by being sensed as inconceivable and unpredictable. In any case, the speed of calamities barely allowed reasoning of any sort (p. 352).

In other words, in order to truly grasp a glimpse of what it was like, one needs the point of view of the men who experienced it. We now know that this destruction is possible, but the tortured were unaware of the outcome. That is why what they say represents a crystalized insight into their capacity of interpretation at the time of writing (Garbarini, 2014, p.92). Their point of view is what can help historians produce a more accurate account not only of what it was really like, but also of how events were understood, and what influenced them when making choices.

## **4. Historical Awareness**

### **4.1. Events and Their Meaning - Violence**

Both Ringelblum and Feldschu report about incidents of deliberate, sporadic and unpredictable violence. On 27 December 1940, about a month after the ghetto was surrounded by a wall and categorially no one was allowed out, Ringelblum reports the following: "... at about 3:30 in the afternoon, a taxicab stopped at the small shop of a merchant selling tailor supplies .... A soldier emerged with Jewish companions. They emptied the shop completely. Having finished this piece of work, they left. Suddenly, with a rare calm, the Gestapo man pulled out his revolver and shot point blank into a crowd of Jews that happened to be standing around. They were all merchants who worked on the other side of the street. The result was that an 11 year old child fell dead; a woman from Dzielna Street lay badly wounded." (Ringelblum, 1989, p. 114)

This passage should draw attention first of all because of the date. This incident occurs after a little more than a year of ghettoization and only about a month after it was sealed. Apparently, by then Jews had already become "accustomed" to such occurrences and were no longer surprised to be robbed or beaten up. Equally, a logical reason for such behaviour is not sought, it is clear to everyone that it is abuse for fun. The Germans appear to think that it is acceptable and Jews know there is nothing that can be done against it, not even against the sporadic shooting. Furthermore, it seems that in Warsaw, soldiers were expected, at least by their comrades to be brutal to Jews. In his diary, Ringelblum (1999, p.87) writes about the fear to treat Jews decently. A German soldier was talking politely to a Jew but when he saw another German

approaching, he raised his voice and shouted at him to go away quickly adding a curse. This report is preceded by Ringelblum's characterization of Germans being afraid to be civil to Jews.

Four other incidents of a similar nature are described on the same date, but in a fifth Ringelblum writes that at the corner of Chlodna and Zelazna, there was a discussion between a Jewish policeman and a German soldier about Jews. In an answer to the German who said that if he were a Jew he would commit suicide, the Jewish guard who "could contain himself no longer" (Ringelblum, 1989, p.115) replied that the Jews were an antique people that have already "endured a great deal" (p.115) after which Ringelblum says "that did not prevent him from stopping Jews afterward and making them do calisthenics holding a brick in either hand." (p.115) Ringelblum whose report was intended to show the composure of a historian infiltrates his attitude by choosing to interpret the policemen's reaction and say that he could no longer remain quiet and by judging the German through adding "that did not prevent him from stopping Jews..."(p.115)

Between December 1940 – January 1941, Feldschu also writes about sporadic and arbitrary violence. Yet after describing a typological case a paragraph later (Yad-Vashem Archive, Record Group 0.33, pic. 30), Feldschu writes about a case that can be traced to a person. A certain gendarme who was considered to be a good man (as he allowed smuggling) was asked why he shot into the people's houses and he answered that "he really liked the scream of the man before his death." (0.33, pic. 30) This is followed by a very angry, cynical, and frustrated passage that goes from calling the shootings "a private sports that each German ... a son of the nation of scholars and poets, who read a lot but who aspires to create that scream of the dying and has found here the opportunity to complete his education..." (0.33, pic. 30) to an infuriated series of frustrated cries of astonishment "is it possible, can you imagine this, that a healthy man, who dominates everything, who is master of his senses, who has but one sparkle of humanity in him, would pick up his rifle and shoot for the sake of sport and kill people?!" (0.33, pic. 30). Apparently, capricious cruelty was a norm in the ghetto and the German high commanders as well as the Gestapo were not in the least concerned with the conduct of their soldiers.

Furthermore, it is visible that Jews were not surprised when it happened but those incidents remained unpredictable and extremely terrorizing. Both Ringelblum's descriptions that at least at that stage, so meticulously try to avoid that which may not sound objective, betrays his own feelings by choosing words like "that did not prevent him from..." (Ringelblum, 1989, p.115) as well as Feldschu's much less "objective" observations reveal how helpless Jews felt and how incomprehensible and for that matter, despite it all, surprising and deeply traumatizing these events were.

#### **4.2. Events and Their Meaning - Hunger**

Hunger and associated troubles such as disease, beggary, smuggling, degradation, crime, but also decadent lavish parties and depravity, have struck the ghetto right from the beginning. Feldschu recounts about an extraordinary event he had witnessed just before the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah, December 1940. He writes about two children that made it a habit of theirs to show up at the committee soup kitchen and "gazed [at the food] with lustful eyes and hunger" (0.33, pic. 25). Despite their evident desire to eat, they run away each time someone approached them and offered them food. Later when Feldschu is able to discover who the mother is, he writes: "In an extremely clean room and dreadfully cold, at the corner there

was a woman sitting and it seemed she was probably once really beautiful as even today her eyes were still shining with splendour. Her face features were carved like a statue and in all her bony and scrawny body there were traces of beauty and aristocracy." (0.33, pic. 26). The woman told them that her husband, who was a lawyer, had died six months earlier and that they were chased out of their home. Feldschu and his companion told her that her children refused to taste the soup they were offered and when they finally accepted, they begged Feldschu not to tell their mother about it. "“They tasted?’ She screamed in such a strange voice that we became alarmed. Maybe she lost her mind. She called the children who were by now really trembling. Probably afraid of being hit. ... we began, calming her down and asking what was wrong with them tasting a few drops of soup? We couldn't understand her anger. 'You gentlemen from the committee may be soulful but you can't understand the sorrow of a woman-mother whose whole possession is the children and she aspires only one thing, the death of these children without agonizing for too long. We are close to achieving the goal. Today is the fifth day that we tasted nothing not even water and my greatest hope is that in two days or maybe three we shall be dead. We will die together and you, you are in the way. Giving the children soup to make their suffering longer. you can't give them enough to eat so why would you torment them and lengthen their sufferings, now that we are close to achieving our goal.'" (0.33, pic. 27)

The Lawyer's wife insight that by eating insufficiently she was extending their torment is shared by Ringelblum only about two and a half years later. On May 26, 1942, Ringelblum writes the following about the inefficient if not futile efforts of the social help in the ghetto to sustain people: "The social help doesn't solve the problem; it sustains people for a short while. People are anyway doomed so it only extends their agony but doesn't bring salvation .... The fact remains that those who eat in kitchens die anyway as the little soup and dry bread cannot sustain them. It should be asked whether it wouldn't be better to assign the money to help a selected group, the socially active, spiritual elite etc. ...second, the question remains why should we condemn to death those who are artisans, workers and ... the tragic question remains, what to do? Should one small teaspoon be given to each and then no one remains alive or should we give some people abundantly to resuscitate them?" (Ringelblum, 1989, p.371)

The two passages obviously demonstrate not only the severe degree of hunger but also the despair that was part of it. The lawyer's wife was obviously among the very poor and that is why she and her family were among the early victims of hunger. Sadly, her story shows how the humiliation and degradation had broken her spirit before her body. Without being judgmental, rather than reacting, she chose to remain passively quiet and inflicted that reasoning on her children too. This may indicate as for her degree of composure but it also shines on the helplessness of the children who were struggling with their healthy instincts of staying alive and getting something to eat instead of starving.

The despair of that woman catches up with Ringelblum, at least in writing, only two and a half years later, on the verge of the massive deportations that was about to begin and of which no one had clear knowledge but everyone sensed approaching. Of the two texts, Ringelblum's whose passage is impersonal and doesn't relate to a particular human being, demonstrates clearly how impossible the situation in the ghetto was and what dreadful daily choices people had to make. At this stage, he too finds it difficult to keep his emotions to himself and rather than keeping the composure of the detached historian, the inner debates that have probably been overwhelming him for some time, surfaces onto the page.

## 5. Understanding the Conceptual – Cultural Framework

The degree of gravity of the war against the Jews and how it is conceived can be detected by the choice of vocabulary. One very interesting example has to do with the difference between the English versions to the original (Yiddish) as well as the Hebrew, in the word Ringelblum chooses to describe Germans (Ringelblum, 1985, p. 203). He refers to them as "Yevanim" which means Greeks. Sloan, the English translator, chose to write "soldiers" and in that the feelings behind Ringelblum's chosen term is lost. But Ringelblum's choice is meaningful and reflects the fact that it was not unusual for Jews to refer to enemies of the Jewish people by the name of "Greeks" who have traditionally been considered as one of the nations that have tried to annihilate Jews and Judaism. For a Jew reading the text in the original language, the term "Yevanim" bears a lot of significance.

If Ringelblum's choice at this stage (December 1940) was prophetic and he expressed what he hadn't yet conceived, what both Ringelblum and Feldschu write about the German Jews is insightful and shows that they were unable to grasp the events and decipher much of what was going on. (Ringelblum, 1999, p.363) Feldschu dedicates quite a lot of pages to the Jews of Danzig who arrived to the Warsaw ghetto on March 1941. Feldschu learns that a relative of his is among the deportees. He goes to meet him and once he arrives, he sees more than 500 people standing quietly in the yard not knowing what to do with themselves. However, he writes that he is immediately able to distinguish between the Jews of Polish origin that lived in Danzig to those who were Jews of German origin. The former were already engaged in organizing their "new lives" while the Germans appeared lost, gazing around them with stupefaction. (Yad-Vashem Archive, Record Group 0.33, pics 68-69)

Feldschu continues writing that his relative was nearly out of his mind when for some obscure reason; the Germans had started shooting into the crowd. Given the fact that the relative tells Feldschu afterwards about the deportation and its horrors, one might have expected the relative not to be so surprised at the shooting.

The relative begins by saying that when it all started, they were absolutely certain no one would touch them and the decree was meant against the Jews of the East. But they were wrong and in a few hours they were all chased out of their houses into the ghetto. The local Germans apologized for this but said that the orders came from Berlin. The Jews tried to get out of there, even to Palestine of which they didn't want to hear about previously. Unfortunately, only one ship was able to leave. At first, life became better thanks to the Eastern Jews who were much more resourceful than the German Jews. But all of a sudden they were ordered to pack. They were put on trains which stopped in Tczew where they were robbed again of the little possessions they had been left with, and then out into barracks.

The brutality of the Germans provoked 11 ex-officers of the German army to wear their old uniforms and go and speak to the manager. Even though the others tried to hold them back they went. As soon as the "sadist" (0.33, pic. 72) saw them he asked them to approach and as they did he slapped the first with enormous force. Then, they started hitting them all while shouting, "Bloody Jews, don't you know that a Jew isn't allowed to wear the uniform of a German officer!" (0.33, pic. 72) They were astonished but did not run away until the young officer started hitting them with the butt of his revolver. "March home, get dressed and come back!" (0.33, pic. 72) He shouted. The two weeks they remained in that camp were hell on earth especially for those 11 whose life was made especially difficult. People found out that they were

planning to commit suicide but their relatives and everyone else convinced them to renounce the plan. Only the old man who was slapped first became very ill and died on the way to Warsaw.

## 6. Conclusion

The examples given show how complex the recreation of the past is. Those who train the future historians must draw their attention to the fact that without the authentic point of view of the epoch discussed, one might misjudge the past. For it is the contents of diaries that provide the historian with the décor that the abstract term can't convey.

To begin with, Ringelblum's accounts were meant to be historical. For him, history was what related to the majority and not only to the ruling classes (Kassow, 2007, p.38). Ringelblum's accounts try to be as objective and precise as possible but it is the anecdotes themselves that are revealing. Ruben Feldschu (Ben Shem) was not a historian but he was a psychologist and his diary certainly proves that he had a very penetrating eye to the individual's soul. Ringelblum's monologue about the problem of hunger is heart breaking just as Feldschu's story of the lawyer's wife and her children is. The dilemmas, decisions, human agonies that are engulfed in both entries can't be conveyed otherwise.

The same goes for what is expressed through the few examples of the conceptual-cultural problems. These are visible also through the language which too mirrors the past. When Feldschu calls the Germans "Huns", (the example doesn't appear in this article), he relates to the history and the origin of the German people. He uses his own knowledge about them to try and understand them in his present. And Ringelblum calling the Germans "Greeks" shows what a historical meaning the word "Greeks" bears for the Jews. These attempts, of using past experiences to understand the present can't be conveyed without using diaries.

For years Jews have been portrayed as the passive part in this war. How could anyone think otherwise if it hadn't been for the diaries? If one doesn't encounter a passage such as that which describes the Jews of Danzig, how can he understand that they were unable to break with concepts, ideas and a whole world of the mind? But it's not only the German Jews that demonstrate such a level of understanding and deciphering the occurrences. Were the Jews of Poland, France or any other country better at understanding? If one is not exposed to the state of mind of the actors on the scene, how can anyone attempt to write about them?]

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