

## Revealing 'The Dead Sea Scrolls' of the Warsaw Ghetto

Roberta Grossman's upcoming documentary sheds light on a secret society's nonviolent resistance to the Nazis, via diaries and archival materials that its members wrote, collected and later buried underground in the ghetto.

By Judy Maltz

Another Holocaust film?

Award-winning director Roberta Grossman gets that question a lot, and she has a few ready-made responses. "The flippant answer is there are six million stories out there, so it's going to take us awhile," she says. "But mostly, I tell those who roll their eyes that I think this is the most important untold story of the Holocaust."

Her latest film, still under production and titled "Who Will Write Our History," tells the story of the secret society of archivists in the Warsaw Ghetto who were determined that even if they did not survive, the world would hear about them and about what went on there during the war years. Spearheaded by local historian Emanuel Ringelblum, their project was given the Yiddish code name Oyneg Shabes ("the joy of Shabbat"), presumably because its members would convene on the Sabbath.

Its 60 or so members were handpicked by Ringelblum and represented a broad cross-section of Polish-Jewish society, including doctors and rabbis, Zionists and Bundists. Only three of the archivists survived the war, but before the ghetto was razed in April 1943 by the Nazis, they managed to bury underground – stuffed in milk cans and suitcases – a treasure trove of documents and artifacts. Their job was to keep personal diaries, to document atrocities, to gather testimonies about the fate of other Jewish communities (some of whose members ended up in Warsaw), and to collect ghetto jokes, songs, folklore, theater posters, tram tickets, Judenrat announcements, and any other artifacts of everyday life. Three caches of archival material were hidden underground, two of which were dug up several years after the war.

"I think of them as the Dead Sea scrolls coming out of the rubble of the ghetto," said Grossman in a Skype conversation from her home in Los Angeles. "That's how I see this story."

The armed Jewish uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto is a piece of well-known World War II history. Yet, most of the world is largely unaware of this other uprising that was happening at the same time, notes Grossman. "What Ringelblum and these people were doing was resisting in the most profoundly human way possible. Through their act of unarmed resistance, which entailed gathering information, they were also able to help those involved in the armed resistance."

A veteran television and film producer, Grossman has most recently focused her documentary work on the Jewish experience. Previously, her 2008 film "Blessed is the Match: The Life and Death of Hannah Senesh" was short-listed for an Academy Award and broadcast on PBS. Her 2012 "Hava Nagila (The Movie)" was a huge hit at Jewish film festivals around the world, and her recently released "Above and Beyond" – a collaborative effort with Nancy Spielberg (the sister of one of Hollywood's best-known names) – tells the story of the Jewish-American World War II veterans who volunteered to fight for Israel during the War of Independence.

'Bring the past alive'

"Who Will Write Our History" is Grossman's second collaboration with Spielberg, who recently assumed the role of executive producer of the new project. Grossman came up with the idea for the film when she read a book by that same name, written by Samuel Kassow, a professor of history at Trinity College in Connecticut, and published by Indiana University Press in 2007. At the time, she had just started working on another documentary about Janusz Korczak, the legendary director of the orphanage in the Warsaw Ghetto, who insisted on accompanying his charges to the gas chambers of Treblinka.



Warsaw Ghetto survivors Rachel Auerbach and Hersh Wasser on the day the first cache of the archive was discovered.

Photo by Courtesy

"I read this book and I said, 'I'm really sorry about Korczak, but I've got to tell this story instead,'" recounts Grossman. "So I dumped Korczak, even though he appears in Ringelblum's diaries, so he will have a cameo appearance in the new film. I just felt this was a more important project – maybe not more important, but people know about Korczak, and they don't know about the Oyneg Shabes project."

Grossman subsequently optioned the right to make the documentary based on Kassow's book. It is "brilliantly written, though its density might put off the average reader," she explains, acknowledging that it's not the type of story that lends itself naturally to the medium of film.

"There will be some form of visual recreation using archival material," she says. "That's what you have to do when you have a place that doesn't exist anymore, with people who are no longer alive. You have to figure out a way to visually bring the past alive. In terms of the narrative, it'll be a weave of the voices and the writings that were in the archive."

Grossman plans to focus on three characters besides Ringelblum, all members of the Oyneg Shabes: Rabbi Shimon Huberman, Abraham Lewin and Rachel Auerbach, one of the three survivors. A writer and journalist, Auerbach ran a soup kitchen in the Warsaw Ghetto, and after the war was the driving force behind digging up the archives.

Auerbach, whose writings are the basis for the main narrative in the film, eventually ended up in Israel, where she died in 1977. The founder of the department of survivor testimonies at Yad Vashem, she assisted Gideon Hauser, the former Israeli chief prosecutor, in choosing witnesses for the Eichmann trial, among other things.

"Auerbach's writing is very cinematic because she pays attention to very small details," notes Grossman. "For instance, after the great deportation in the ghetto [summer 1942], she describes the scene of all the debris lying around, and in the middle of it all, a photo of a woman in a bathing suit."

Much of the world was kept in the dark about the Oyneg Shabes archives, Grossman continues, because they were kept in the Jewish Institute in Poland, and the country was, for an extended period after the war, under communist rule. To this day, most of the documents have not been translated from Polish or Yiddish.

Depending upon how well the next stage of her fundraising campaign goes, Grossman plans to release the film in 2017.

"I will not rest until I finish it," she vows. "This is a terrible thing to say, but I don't care if anyone sees it – though I know they will. My main goal is to make this into a time capsule, just like the time capsule of the archives. For me, it's about creating a permanent historical record."



Professor Samuel Kassow on the set of *Who Will Write Our History*.

Photo courtesy: Katakadin Productions