

EMMANUEL RINGELBLUM'S LAST REQUEST, MARCH 1, 1944

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A collection of letters written by Emmanuel Ringelblum and his wife Yehudit (née Hermann), in 1943 and 1944, from their hiding place on the “Aryan side” in Warsaw to their friends Avraham and Batya Berman was recently discovered in the archive at the Ghetto Fighters’ House.¹ The letters related the dangers and difficult conditions in the hiding place; reported on Ringelblum’s progress in his writing; told of his condition and that of his wife and their thirteen-year-old son Uri; discussed the aid that should be given to a number of people whom Ringelblum named; and the relations among the small circle of underground people in hiding, the last Jews, and the Poles who were helping them.

These newly discovered letters, obviously, could not have been included in the publication of Ringelblum’s wartime and ghetto writings published in Hebrew by Yad Vashem and the Ghetto Fighters’ House a decade ago.² This despite the fact that, during the preparatory work for this publication, no effort was spared to trace every remnant of the written work of the founder and driving spirit behind the “Oneg Shabbat” underground archive.

1 Ghetto Fighters’ House Archive, Collections, 3162.

2 Emmanuel Ringelblum, *Diary and Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: September 1939 – December 1942* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem and the Ghetto Fighters’ House, 1992); idem, *Last Writings: Polish-Jewish Relations, January 1943–April 1944* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem and the Ghetto Fighters’ House, 1994).

This archive is the major and most comprehensive source of documentation on Polish Jewry during the Holocaust in general and in Warsaw in particular. In addition to his diary, written as a chronicle, Ringelblum's series of essays from the last period of the deportations and murder and his biographies of people who had been active in the ghetto and had perished, as well as his basic scholarly work on Polish-Jewish relations — which Ringelblum wrote while in hiding, although he did not have access to the relevant documents and published material — were also included in the original volumes.

In addition, there are letters and random notes of his, although they are not always easily decipherable. Sections of the diary that were excised from earlier publications by the Polish Communist censors were reinstated in this publication. The editorial board — Joseph Kermish, the late Israel Shaham, and myself — toiled over a precise rendering of the original handwritten material and added annotation. We turned to memorial institutions and to people who were close to Ringelblum in an effort to get to every scrap of his material for inclusion in the two volumes of his writings.

Below is an excerpt from one of the newly discovered letters. Ringelblum wrote it six days before he, his family, and approximately thirty other Jews hiding with them were discovered by the Germans and subsequently executed. In this letter Ringelblum establishes who should be the heir to the archive and to his own writings. This, therefore, was the last will and testament of Emmanuel Ringelblum.

1/III/44

My Dears,

...Has the matter of the preservation been arranged definitively?³ I would notify Rafael [Mahler]⁴ of the address of our collections [i.e., the archive's hiding place]. In case none of us survives the war, we must now designate Rafael and Aunt Yivo⁵ as heirs. At least then this will remain of us, and of course I am including the collection under 68.⁶ I hope that you will think about this in advance and will inform Rafael in time, so that, in the worst case, he will be our heir. Has the letter been sent to Rafael? Perhaps what I am writing is sad and it is unpleasant to raise such depressing thoughts. But what can you do; it is better to anticipate [the future] than for everything to be lost without a trace...

I send you warm regards

Letter translated from the Polish by Israel Gutman, with the assistance of David Silberklang

- 3 The reference is to the secret interment of the archive known by the code name "Oneg Shabbat" and today referred to as the Ringelblum Archive.
- 4 Rafael Mahler was a Jewish historian in Poland, who was part of the group of young pre-war historians that also included Ringelblum. He and Ringelblum were close friends. Mahler was then living in the United States. He moved to Israel after the war and became a professor at Tel Aviv University, where he published his most important works.
- 5 YIVO, the Yiddisher Wissenschaftlecher Institut (Institute for Jewish Research), was moved from Poland to New York early in the war. Ringelblum worked in its historical department before the war.
- 6 The reference is to Ringelblum's written work when he was hiding and to the first part of the archive, which was discovered on September 18, 1946, under the ruins of the building that had stood at 68 Nowolipki Street.

