

**THE  
RINGELBLUM  
ARCHIVE:  
A READING**

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One day someone, a friend, asks you to write something about the Ringelblum Archive. An essay, an article, anything. There's supposed to be an exhibition about it and they want the catalogue to include texts that aren't simply run-of-the-mill scholarly essays. Texts that aren't completely obvious. This person suggests that you don't work on it right away but that you think about it first.

You answer that of course you know what archive it is. And of course you'll think about it. You'll think about it, not in the sense that you don't know if you want to get involved – because you do – but if you'll be able to deal with the subject at all. It seems to you the proper thing to say in such circumstances: I don't know if I'll manage to deal with the subject.

You don't know if you'll manage to deal with it, but you begin to read. You start reading documents from the archive, because to find them all you have to do is go online. Yes, you know what archive it is. You've read something about it. That it was buried somewhere and then unearthed. In some kind of milk cans. Somewhere in the Chinese embassy grounds. That's where it could have been. Maybe.

You first realize that till now you were convinced it was the Ringelblum Archive. But it's Ringelblum, not Ringenblum. So yes, you've read something, but too hastily, as it turns out. If not outright inattentively. But no matter. It's just one letter. It could happen to anyone. Nobody's perfect. We're only human. The Chinese embassy, too, was a different story. But that's not the point.

What's worse is that it only takes a couple of hours of reading to understand that the elegant (as it seemed to you) formula, "I don't know if I'll manage to deal with the subject," is highly unfortunate. Because what would have happened if Emanuel Ringelblum had begun to wonder whether he was capable of dealing with the subject? If all the people who helped him had begun to wonder about it? If Rachela Auerbach had started thinking if she'd manage? It's clear what would have happened. They would have concluded that it was too much for them. And there would be no archive.

So now you know there are no excuses. That you have to write. Even though you don't know what to write yet. Still, you know you have to.

So I write. That is, not yet. For now I read – you can't really write off the top of your head, and the first couple of hours of reading are not enough. So a few more hours. For the moment, I'm not being very systematic – I'm simply trying to get an idea.

I first come upon letters sent to the Warsaw Ghetto from the countryside. They are in volume Volume 1. Of the 400 pages in this volume, I read almost half. I promise myself to get back to it later. Then comes Rachela Auerbach's journal from Volume 7 – that's why I was only capable of citing her initially. It would be hard to say it encouraged me to search for other journals. The word "encouraged" sounds somewhat awkward here, but it's the first one that comes to mind. Besides, I didn't have to search for them. All I had to do was open the volume entitled *Journals from the Warsaw Ghetto*. I started with Abraham Lewin's journal, of which Ringelblum wrote: "Due to its purity and conciseness of style, its accuracy and faithfulness in depicting the facts, this profound journal should be considered a valuable literary document and will have to be published as soon as possible after the war." "Purity and conciseness of style" – one more good reason to read it. I dropped off after Abraham Lewin. "I'm just having a look around for now," I said to myself.

What made me read Volume 13, *The Last Stage of Deportation is Death*? Some kind of unhealthy dialectic of repulsion and attraction? The title was a clear warning to stay away. Inside, I found testimonies from the Pomiechówek camp. I had never heard of it before. I now know a lot about it, though I have to admit I didn't read the testimonies word by word. Sometimes I'd skip a page or half a page. For instance, the long list of victims with information on how they died. Their names told me nothing. Also, there are a lot of testimonies from Pomiechówek. You only need to read the first three to know all there

is to know. It's tempting to say you don't need to read on because the whole sequence of events is simply repeated each time. Only the details change. I read more than three, but I only leafed through the final ones.

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Actually, I shouldn't be doing this right now. Telling the story of my readings. After all, I was only trying to get an idea. I was going to write later, after I had read everything. Nearly everything. The problem is, it has now dawned on me that it won't be possible to read everything. Even if you could imagine some form of discipline that would make it doable, you have to confront yet another doubt. You have to admit that even when making the very first attempts to get an idea of what the archive contains, you begin to suspect that it simply makes no sense to read everything.

Not only because certain pieces of information are repeated, just as in the Pomiechówek accounts. Sometimes the same events are described by Auerbach and Lewin; and I am guessing they were also recorded in other texts which I haven't yet gotten around to reading.

This was better left unsaid, but this is a serious subject and one that calls for honesty. The trouble is that different accounts not only cite the same events but also events that *are the same*. And this isn't true only of accounts by different authors. Usually, the same facts are restated in any account that runs for more than a couple of pages. I haven't counted how many people who died of hunger are mentioned by Rachela Auerbach. How many shot in the street fill the journal of Abraham Lewin. How many beaten with clubs are described by Perce Opczyński. You could also put it differently. I have two months of such irregular readings behind me. How many people who lost their children and had to go on living – usually not for a long time, but still – have I read about during this time? I don't remember. But how can you not remember such a thing?

This is no great discovery. Anyone who's read any books about the Holocaust knows this. After a while you become indifferent, and

only a particularly cruel detail still has the power to elicit a more emotional response. But emotions aren't the key thing. What's more important is that bit of attention and focus that those of whose deaths we are reading deserve. Although on the other hand indifference is the only thing that allows you to go on reading.

I promised I would be honest, so there is no way I can afford not to write this. It was when I was reading Abraham Lewin's journal. I tried to read unhurriedly, without skipping pages. Lewin did indeed present the facts with "accuracy and faithfulness." Starting on May 12, 1942, he wrote every day, sometimes several pages. He touched on various topics, however always scrupulously noting down information that reached him about people killed in the ghetto.

On May 9 (in the text: April 9, yet, as the publisher notes, the date is incorrect in the original), he cites a story he heard from his sister about a house-painter who was killed when going to work in the morning, largely by mistake – having been forced by one gendarme to fill in a hole in the ghetto wall, he was killed by another, who thought that he was trying to escape to the "Aryan" side. Lewin notes that the man was 38 years old. On May 12, he writes: "Yesterday a woman involved in smuggling was shot dead on Krochmalna Street."<sup>1</sup> He then mentions the head of the community kitchen, Sklar, killed at 54 Nowolipki Street. "[L]ast night his body was found." And further: "The Nazi murderers shot a second Jew at 19 Zamenhof Street at the Jewish post office." He provides additional information the following day: "According to additional information that I have received today, not two, but four bodies of executed Jews were found yesterday. As follows: at 19 Zamenhof Street, at the post office, at 54 and 68a Nowolipki Street, and at 64 Pawia Street."<sup>2</sup> On May 15: "Yesterday at eight p.m. at the ghetto entrance on Gęsia, corner of Okopowa (near the cemetery), a Jew was shot, a father of six." May 18: "Also a Jewish woman, a street-vendor from 36 Leszno Street,

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Lewin, *A Cup of Tears: A Diary of the Warsaw Ghetto*, ed. Antony Polonsky, transl. Christopher Hutton, Blackwell: Oxford, 1988, p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> Lewin, op. cit., p. 71.

was among the victims.”<sup>3</sup> May 19: “Yesterday two more Jews were grabbed on Smocza Street and dragged off to the Pawiak. One of them was released in the evening. The second was brought out dead early this morning.”<sup>4</sup> May 20: “Yesterday afternoon, at half past two in the afternoon, two officers drove a 17-year-old Jewish girl out from the Pawiak Prison. They took her as far as 11 Pawia Street, led her into the entrance-way, let her walk a few steps in front and shot her several times from behind with a revolver.”<sup>5</sup>

On May 21, Lewin allows himself a confession: “I have such an uncanny and terrible feeling when I hear bad news, and there is sadly no good news, that my heart begins to hurt, the pain nearly drives me insane.”<sup>6</sup> Still he continues his chronicle: May 22, 23, 24, 25... Then June begins and it’s harder and harder to read. Not because each day is even worse and there is more and more news of victims. The story simply becomes tediously monotonous.

It was near mid-June. I looked at the next date and a thought flashed through my mind, not quite articulate yet: “OK, another month. Then the Great Deportation will start and the pace will pick up.” Today I could formulate that thought in a different, more subtle and tactful way, but that was the simplest way I could put it.

And barely a moment later, when I had regained control of my thoughts, I told myself it made no sense to read everything. That you couldn’t do such things to the victims. That you couldn’t do such things to yourself either.

### 3.

But I also said, much earlier, that there were no excuses. That you have to write, pure and simple. And since you have to write, you also have to read. Just to do it differently. Somehow. In another mode.

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<sup>3</sup> Lewin, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

<sup>4</sup> Lewin, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

<sup>5</sup> Lewin, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>6</sup> Lewin, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

For example I could decide that the Ringelblum Archive was not a book to be read. And I would be right. The archive is just that, an archive, something like a closet full of documents that historians and other scholars in search not of emotions but of facts should look into. After all, you don't read an encyclopedia. You look things up in it. That's what you do. Yet I felt that in this case it would be an alibi. It's natural to want to make the task easier for yourself. But not too easy.

I am recounting all these failures and doubts but it doesn't mean I stopped reading. I got familiar with new documents – Hersz Wasser's journal and the account of Shlama Ber Winer, known as Shlamek, who ran away from Chełmno and told others what he'd seen and experienced there. I return to some of these texts when I'm not sure if I remember everything correctly.

I returned to Lewin's journal twice. Because of this I was able to come upon a sentence at the very end of the rather lengthy entry for May 16, which I initially found astonishing and then quite meaningful: "The Jew from 17 Dzielna Street, a house-painter, who was murdered at five o'clock on his way to work – I gave the story a few days ago – had the surname Dziedzic."<sup>7</sup>

I recalled the house-painter, killed, as I wrote, "by mistake." I was surprised that Lewin was returning to the event. Exactly one week later. Many others had been killed during that time, while May 16 itself had been "heavy with gloom and depression." In spite of this, Mr. Abraham (I find it increasingly hard to keep writing Lewin) found it necessary to supplement the previous information. I found it odd, and then I understood. As often happens.

His name was Dziedzic. The Jew from 17 Dzielna Street. At five in the morning. 38 years old. The head of the community kitchen, Sklar. A Jewish woman, a street-vendor from 36 Leszno Street. At 19 Zamenhof Street, at the post office, at 54 and 68a Nowolipki Street and at 64 Pawia Street. Yesterday at half past two in the afternoon. They took her as far as 11 Pawia Street. A 17-year-old Jewish girl.

Every detail was important. The most important was the name. Not only because a family member might come across it one day. As

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<sup>7</sup> Lewin, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

time went by it became less and less likely that any living relatives would survive. But if there was a chance that the name of the victim might one day be read by someone, then it had to be written down. No matter if it had to stay buried underground in a milk can for God knows how long. Even if it meant nothing to future historians.

When I begin to understand this, I am reminded of the nearly three-page-long list of dead people appended to one of the Pomiechówek testimonies. A list I had skipped over when reading because the last names of the people on it “told me nothing.” So I go back to the volume.

I wrote that it was sufficient to read three accounts from Pomiechówek to know all there was to know. The first, and probably the longest, is by Abram Błaszka vel Błaszka, born in Nowy Dwór but living in Warsaw before the war. The second is anonymous, all we know is that it was given by a man from Zakroczym. The third constitutes “an abbreviated version of the story” of Miriam Fasa from Sierpc. This is the one with the list.

The fourth account, which I initially thought wasn’t mandatory reading, was given by an anonymous resident of Płońsk. I had already skimmed it before, along with another account, otherwise I wouldn’t have thought so. But I did say so, even though I had the chance to write something wiser. It would have sufficed to think about it a bit harder.

During those initial readings, I hardly took any notes. “I’ll do it later,” I said to myself. As a result, all of the notes I made on first approach could have filled less than a page. Only one of my notes was concerned with Pomiechówek. It was an excerpt from the fourth account: “It was Mrs. Karaś from Nowy Dwór.”

With these words ends the story of a woman who begged not to be buried alive in a pit. She kept explaining she had children and asking why they were doing it to her. Still, she was buried.

There was something alarming about that sentence. It was too matter-of-fact. Too short. The story itself wasn’t very long – only eight lines in print, but it demanded a different, more meaningful ending. In fact, the sentence was unnecessary and added nothing to the impression the story made without it. It seemed to carry no

additional content, and yet – I don't know how – it made the whole story seem even more terrible. That's why I copied it down. I didn't understand the effect it had.

And since already during my first reading it had caught my attention, I shouldn't say it was enough to read only the three accounts from Pomiechówek. Upon giving it some thought, you cannot stop at that. You have to read the fourth account to find out that a Mrs. Karaś from Nowy Dwór was also killed in a horrific way in Pomiechówek. I only checked now – her name isn't on the list drawn up by Miriam Fasa. Nor are the three names cited by the anonymous resident of Płońsk in two other cryptically short sentences. "Mrs. Markiewicz from Warsaw was burned. Mosze Szoel Krzyński and Mendel Szwajger from Nowy Dwór were shot."

#### 4.

One has to be careful not to use figures of speech that are too spectacular, too neat or too polished when dealing with such matters. On the other hand, you have to take risks. Without risk-taking, you can only be silent about such things.

So let me write the following straight away: the Ringelblum Archive is not a prayer for the dead whose meaning can be reduced to pronouncing their names and, where these are missing, reporting their death.

But neither is it a body of evidence for a future prosecution case. It seems odd at times that the witnesses devote so little attention to the perpetrators. They don't describe their faces, nor do they take down their military ranks, they don't try to determine their surnames and if they do, it's oddly rare. It probably wasn't easy or safe to do this, but one can suspect there is another reason. The names of the perpetrators were simply less important. They didn't merit being mentioned. There wasn't even enough time and strength to talk about all the victims.

Abraham Lewin was not a religious man. I initially thought otherwise. I read somewhere that he came from a very religious family.

I then stumbled upon a sentence in his journal that was supposed to express the philosophy of the Oneg Shabbat: “We want our sufferings, these ‘birth-pangs of the Messiah,’ to be impressed upon the memories of future generations and on the memory of the whole world.”<sup>8</sup>

Of course, I thought. The Jews have their religion, the book that tells that weird story of a God who rewards his chosen people only to abandon them and subject them to the cruelest of trials. They must have decided that it was time to add another chapter to the story, and that’s how they were going to try to interpret what was happening to them. But no. The Messiah thing was only a rhetorical figure – spectacular, polished, even if full of despair. Because Abraham Lewin was not a religious man. When on July 2, 1942, the news reached him that German forces in Northern Africa were approaching the Land of Israel, he wrote with desperation: “If I were a religious man I would pray: ‘God, at least spare Eretz Israel!’” So he didn’t pray. He did not write prayers for the dead.

Indeed it is hard to say – the subject is beyond the scope of this essay – whether the idea of recording the names of the dead is closer to the hearts of those who believe in God or those who do not. It seems the latter, because if God exists he must surely know the names and remember the faces, which guarantees that they will never be lost. Although one could hold a different view of these things.

## 5.

I wonder what would have happened if Emanuel Ringelblum and the other Oneg Shabbat people had started to wonder whether they could successfully deal with the subject. And straight away I know that it’s clear what would have happened: there would have been no archive because they would have concluded that they were not up to the task. But this, unfortunately, is another of these over-neat rhetorical figures that should be avoided when writing of these things.

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<sup>8</sup> Lewin, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

The problem is that the Oneg Shabbat people didn't know what sort of task they were undertaking. In October 1940, when they met in Emanuel Ringelblum's apartment and decided to create the archive, all they knew was that bad times – by no means unprecedented – had come for the Jews. Very bad times. But no one could humanly have expected that it would be the end of time. Jews were dying, suffering, being bullied, disappearing in an unknown direction, but it still wasn't clear what it all meant. The idea of creating the archive as a resource for future historians was completely natural. In fact it would have been almost strange if no one had thought of it. Although even then it was a risky, thankless, and depressing business.

In 1940, even in 1941, life in the ghetto went on as if the nightmare was about to end. There was nothing surprising about this. After all, it was hard to imagine the nightmare continuing. And even harder to conceive that things could get much worse.

The Oneg Shabbat team, who received news from other towns and cities, were the best informed. Therefore, they had to be the first to guess that yes, things would get much worse. Shloma Ber Winer, better known under his false name Jakub Grojnowski, told them what had happened in Chełmno in February 1942. At that point they probably started to realize that they would be fated to describe and document something like the end of the world.

I think I understand them much better today than I did three months ago. I am still surprised, however, that back in 1942, particularly after that summer, they still had shreds of hope – not that they themselves would survive, but that the world would one day be the same again.

Today we know that the world has gone back to being the same. It's even improved in certain respects. But they had the right to judge that the world – if a world would continue to exist at all – would never be the same again. That no one would care about their lives and their death. That killing would become a norm, a claim to fame, a subject taught in schools and at universities, especially the technical ones. And that's how it would be. And should anyone find the metal boxes and milk cans one day, they would simply shrug their

shoulders or laugh out loud. And throw them back into the pit and fill it. Or burn what was inside. Or perhaps recycle them, because in the new age caring about the purity of the world would become a supreme imperative.

Therefore, they had the right to think that that was precisely what was going to happen. But they didn't give up. Even after the Great Deportation they kept writing their journals, collecting evidence of crimes, letters of victims, spending lists, ration cards, passes, photographs, postcards. Everything. And at the end, when they knew they could do no more, they took another great risk to pack it all up and bury it. As if they knew intuitively that someone would find it one day, organize it, read it, make footnotes, publish it and translate it into other languages. More, in fact – it's as if they knew one day somebody would ask me to write something about the Ringelblum Archive.

If I were them, I probably wouldn't have had the strength to delude myself that such things were possible.

## 6.

It was not until June 1942 that Abraham Lewin wrote about the birth-pangs of the Messiah. At this point he knew it wasn't simply a bad spell, but something unprecedented. Back then people didn't use the words we have today, like Holocaust and Shoah. That's probably why he resorted to a religious metaphor. But perhaps it was also because it was the only formula that let him accept the thought that there would be no "tomorrow." To accept – it's easy to write, even if it sounds decent, but it's pure nonsense. It wasn't something you could just accept.

Moshe Asch from Izbica, who along with Jakub Grojnowski had buried the dead in mass graves, also thought the Messianic age was upon them. Coming from him, it was not a metaphor. He believed it. We don't know if his faith allowed him to accept what he was seeing and what eventually caught up with him. From our viewpoint, all that is certain is that we would never know of Moshe Asch from

Izbica and of the prayers he said in the cellars of Chełmno if not for his cellmate who managed to escape and find people willing to hear his confession and then guard with their lives the 14 pages on which it was recorded.

Thus, the Ringelblum Archive is not a prayer for the dead. But neither should this interpretation be rejected out of hand or belittled. Not because it makes it easier to read the documents – it does not. On the contrary, it makes it more difficult. It shouldn't be rejected because it guards us against the overhasty though natural thought that "it makes no sense to read everything."

So by now we know this is wrong, and yet we continue to have doubts. Because what is one supposed to make of documents like the "Urine analysis of Elias Gutkowski," dated April 26, 1940, issued by the Higiena Medical Analysis Laboratory, which we find in Volume 7, *Legacies*? Or of an attestation issued on October 24, 1940 by the Municipal Health Office in Łódź, which tells us that Mr. Gutkowski Gabriel, son of Elias, "was deloused here on this day"? Is it even proper to read such things? Is it proper to read that in April 1940 the urine of a man killed three years later as he attempted to leave the ghetto through the sewers was "golden" and had a "normal" odor? Is it fitting to assist when a young man is humiliated by being subjected to a perverse, since clearly not a hygienic, procedure? Surely not.

And yet, without yet being able to explain it, one begins to suspect that even this kind of information had some kind of meaning since it has wound up here. And that it should not be skipped.

## 7.

It's been three months since I began my irregular readings. Three months of writing, too. I haven't been consistent here either, but for some weeks I've been writing every day. Only slowly – three, four, five sentences, sometimes more. And there are already over ten pages. What a surprise. But for the last couple of days, when I wake up in the morning and remember my task, I panic. Because it becomes

clear I've achieved nothing; I've understood, achieved, and touched nothing. And moreover, there are so many phrases, so many words I am not certain of. Some seem stupid or completely out of place, even though I know – because I've tried – that there is no way to put it otherwise. At least I can't. I then think it's time to phone my friend and tell him there won't be an essay. That I didn't manage to deal with the subject. After all, I warned him it could end that way. Then the feeling passes. I print what I typed, sit down somewhere with all of the pages and add a few sentences here and there or edit what I've written. And I don't really have to force myself. In fact, there are moments – I must confess – when it seems to me the text is pretty good. "A good text" is what one would say, even if the adjective is somewhat misplaced. But that's irrelevant. Because whatever the quality – I tell myself – if I can finish, then a few more people will find out that a Mrs. Karas lived in Nowy Dwór before the war and that she died a terrible death in Pomiechówek. No more is needed.

## 8.

It's unfair. It seems that no chronicler was present at the death of Abraham Lewin, who had done so much – whether before God or before an empty sky – by recording the stories of victims of the Holocaust. Or, if there was, his account did not come down to us.

For me it's better that way. As long as I don't know if Lewin saw the death of his daughter, Ora, with whom he had tried to leave the ghetto, or whether it was the other way around – that she witnessed her father's death – I can go on living as if neither had happened. And as long as that's the case I can remember Lewin first of all as the author of two pages that, in the context of the whole archive, throw one off one's guard just as much as Elias Gutkowski's urine analysis.

Mr. Abraham began his entry of June 30, 1942 in his typical fashion, by stating how many corpses had been found that morning in the ghetto. On Lubeckiego Street. Eight killed. He punctuates his short, matter-of-fact note with the sentence "One of the shot was called

Miler and had a tea-room at 41 Zamenhofs Street.” And then, without any segue or warning, he changes his tone and writes:

Every man carries inside of him a reflection of the sky. He looks at it all day and half the night, but we only remember what it looks like in certain moments. [...] It's not that I have a peculiar fondness for some particular kind of sky. I carry in me images of the sky seen at different periods in my life and in different countries. Thus, there is alive in me to this day the image of a sky I saw once as a child from a cheder (in Muranów in Warsaw) on a rainy day, I think it happened to be Lag ba-Omer. The sky was a gray blue, hung with heavy black clouds flowing across it with great speed. The swiftness of the clouds made a huge impression on me, as though I had only noticed that clouds could move so *hendum-pendum* for the first time. [...] I was a boy of some 7–8 years.

I also remember the sky I saw from the balcony of a street in the east part of Berlin one evening. The sky was covered with a magnificent spider web of light clouds which formed a mysterious, beautiful mosaic of geometrical shapes. I sat for a long time and looked up at the sky, thinking: how beautiful and full of rapture the sky can be in Berlin too! It was in the summer of 1923. I also carry that Berlin sky inside me to this day.

I also remember the sky of Eretz Israel on an afternoon in February 1924. [...] It was raining a little. As it happens in Eretz Israel, it soon cleared, and a rainbow, a long, long rainbow, appeared. The wide sky of Eretz Israel with its many-colored rainbow impressed itself on my memory. It seemed to me that such a luminous rainbow could not be seen in any other part of the world. And that sky with the rainbow also continues to live inside my soul to this day.

I also remember a sky in Italy, in Rome. I arrived in Rome from Genoa in the middle of the night, in summertime. The first thing in the morning, I jumped out of my hotel bed and ran up to the window to peer outside and see the sky. I stood there dazed and charmed: it seemed that such an azure, a dark shimmering azure could not be seen in any other part of the world. I have also kept the sky of Rome in my memory.

Until now I've not cited longer fragments from the documents. Although some time ago I realized that in fact every fragment in the archive is worth citing. A few pages back I was already tempted to cite the full three-page list of victims from Pomiechówek – a list of people whose last names “told me nothing.” And which won't tell anyone anything. I also wondered, a little bit later, whether it would not be worthwhile, as a metaphysical experiment, to cite a few excerpts from Eliasz Gutkowski's urine analysis. But I refrained.

This time I simply couldn't. I had to copy this down. I had to, because writing it I felt as though we were looking at those four skies together with Mr. Abraham. In the present.

And besides, I find delight in those two amusing words that came to the mind of a seven-year-old boy from a cheder in Muranów – *hendum-pendum*. Or, as the editors of Volume 23 of the archive explain: “*szybcikiem-pędzikiem*” (nippy-zippy).

## 9.

The Ringelblum Archive is a world unto itself. Because it contains almost everything. You can only wonder whether as a world it is completely separate from ours, or whether there is a connection between the two.

TRANSLATED BY DOMINIKA GAJEWSKA