

HERMAN KRUK

*The Last Days of Jerusalem of Lithuania: Chronicles from the Vilna Ghetto and the
Camps, 1939–1944*

Edited and introduced by Benjamin Harshav; translated by Barbara Harshav
(YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, Yale University Press, 2002); pp. 732

It is still amazing to reflect on the sheer volume and variety of Jewish writing that was recorded during the Nazi Occupation. From underneath the ruins of Warsaw, searchers found Emanuel Ringelblum's *Oneg Shabes* archive containing thousands of documents packed into ten tin boxes and two milk cans (and a large part of the archive was never recovered). Buried under the rubble of a Birkenau crematorium were writings of Rabbi Zalman Gradowksi, a member of the Sonderkommando. Discovered in an old well in Łódź were large sections of that city's ghetto archive. There were secret archives in Białystok and Kovno. In a death cell in Kraków, Justynia Draenger wrote on sheets of toilet paper. At the camp in Vitel, France, the poet Yitshak Katznelson wrote his diary—and his 'Poem to the Murdered Jewish People'.

And Vilna too had its chronicler: Herman Kruk. A refugee from Warsaw, Kruk decided, on the very first day of the Soviet–German war, that to 'keep the chronicle of a city...my chronicle must see, must hear and must become the mirror and the conscience of the great catastrophe and of the hard times'. Before the war, Kruk had been a prominent Bundist, the director of the party's Grosser library in Warsaw. Thoroughgoing and methodical, he had turned out many articles on libraries and on the problems of working-class culture. The serious librarian turned into a serious diarist. Had Kruk been a well-known author or a prominent intellectual, his diary might have had less value. Kruk was not a great writer. But he was a careful observer. He had his political biases and made no effort to hide them. But his diary would provide more information about the Vilna ghetto than any other single source.

Using the ghetto library he directed as cover and as a base, Kruk methodically collected documents and noted what he saw. He could move outside the ghetto because he was part of a group of Jews (also including Avrom Sutzkever, Shmerke Kaczerginski, and Zelig Kalmanovich) that the Germans ordered to cull the great collections of the YIVO and of Vilna's famed Strashun library for valuable books that would be shipped to Germany to show the remains of an extinct culture. Of course Kruk approached this job with deep ambivalence. In his diary entry of 19 February 1942, he wrote that 'Kalmanovich and I don't know if we are gravediggers or saviors' (life under the Germans was full of insoluble dilemmas, great and small, and this job was no exception. Kruk believed that the best way to save rare books was to hide them in Vilna. Kalmanovich had a hunch that it would be better to hand them over to the Germans. And he was right. After the war it was the books shipped to Germany that formed the core of YIVO's library in New York). Able to move around the city, Kruk's vantage point was not limited to the ghetto. He provided valuable insights about Polish and Lithuanian attitudes toward Jews. He also admitted that the great ally of the Bund, the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) showed little interest in helping the Jews of Vilna.

The 20,000 Jews in the Vilna ghetto continued the cultural traditions that had made their city famous in the Jewish world. Crammed into a tiny space, residents

attended concerts and song recitals, heard poetry readings and watched theater productions, and avidly read the books of the ghetto library. This all happened after the stabilization which began in January 1942. By that time, the vast majority of Vilna Jews had been shot in the pits of Ponar and most of the Jewish leadership of the city had already been exterminated. In those circumstances, many political activists reacted with anger and disbelief when Jacob Gens ordered the formation of a ghetto theater. Herman Kruk complained, on 17 January 1942, that ‘you don’t make theater in a graveyard.’ But the theater was an unexpected success. In his diary entry of 8 March of that year, Kruk admitted that ‘life is stronger than anything. In the Vilna ghetto life begins to pulse again. Under the overcoat of Ponar a life creeps out that strives for a better morning. The boycotted concerts prevail. The halls are full. The literary evenings burst their seams and cannot hold the large number that comes here.’

Each ghetto in Eastern Europe had its own specific identity and its own particular problems and potential controversies—and the Vilna ghetto was no exception. The ghetto harbored a well-organized and relatively well-armed fighting organization—which failed, at a critical point—to secure the support of the ghetto inhabitants. The commandant of the Vilna ghetto, Jacob Gens, was a complex individual whom survivors of the ghetto, on the whole, remember with a certain grudging respect. No one will deny that compared to many other ghettos, the Vilna ghetto developed an extraordinary cultural life. After the war, ghetto survivor and physician Mark Dvorzhetsky hailed the theater and cabarets as a sign of psychological resistance. They helped fight depression and encouraged a will to live. From the cabaret came one of the most popular songs in the ghetto, sung to a ragtime beat: ‘Moyshe halt zikh, nisht farlir zikh, un gedenk men darf aroys’ (Moyshe hold on, don’t lose it, remember, we have to get out of here). But that did not keep Shloyme Belis, a native Vilna Jew and literary critic, from charging that the ghetto’s rich culture was a ‘narcotic’ that made Jews forget the urgent need for armed resistance. And in a diary entry of 19 July 1942, Kalmanovich, a leader of the YIVO and the person whom Avrom Sutzkever called ‘the prophet of the ghetto’ used the example of Vilna to call into question the entire value and future of the Yiddish secular culture that had so marked the city:

When God decided to destroy Jewish Vilna, perhaps he had a purpose—to hasten the redemption, warn those who can still be warned, tell them that there is no hope in the Diaspora. Jewish Vilna was a model, an example for a Jewish community with its own unique culture in the Diaspora. But many, too many did not see the dangers that lurked in this culture. And now the temple of *Goles Yidishkayt* (Diaspora Jewishness) is ruined, her temple is forever destroyed. . . . One didn’t need the present *khurbn* to predict the destruction of Vilna Jewry. (Zelig Kalmanovich, ‘Togbukh fun Vilner Geto’, entry of July 19, 1942; *YIVO Bleter*, New Series, Volume III.

Kruk’s diary will not lay these controversies to rest. But it will serve as a powerful reminder that glib post-war ruminations about choices and decisions taken by Jews under Nazi occupation are of limited value at best. It is diaries like these, with their daily notations and their lack of foreknowledge, that best convey how it actually felt to live under the Germans, where moments of sheer terror would give way to ‘normalcy’ and even a little hope. In July 1941, after Kruk first heard the first accounts of survivors

from the shooting pits of Ponar, he wrote: ‘I don’t know if I will ever live to see these lines but if anyone anywhere comes upon them, I want him to know that this is my last wish: Let the words someday reach the living world and let people know about it from eyewitness accounts. Can the world not scream? . . .’ By contrast, on 7 September he writes that ‘the heart stops with grief. But everything around here runs like a magic wheel, a kaleidoscope where you can’t catch everything all at once. There you must not grieve too long. To ponder for long means to be late. (In the meantime a representative of the Judenrat suggests that I take care of the Mefitsei Haskole library and get permission to occupy one of the library rooms).’

While Yehoshua Sobol in his play *Ghetto* has crafted an image of Kruk as a stern moralist who held those around him to high standards, the Kruk that emerges in the diary is a much more complicated figure who reflected the dilemmas faced by the Jews of Vilna. Over time, Kruk dropped his opposition to the theater. And if he never actually became a supporter of Gens, the diary does record an occasional glimmer of admiration for a man who was trying to play an impossible game. Unfortunately we will never know what Kruk thought about the dramatic events of 16 July 1943 when the ghetto inhabitants supported Gens in his demand that Itzik Vittenberg, the communist commander of the United Partisan Organization (FPO), give himself in to avoid an immediate liquidation of the ghetto. Reluctantly the FPO told its commander to surrender. Those pages were either lost or destroyed by those who found the diary after the war. In 1944, fearful of an NKVD investigation of the entire matter, Avrom Sutzkever took these sensitive sections and filed them away. They then disappeared.

Like many others in the ghettos, Kruk clung to his pre-war ideals and politics as a moral compass in the midst of despair, confusion, and fear. Thus Kruk opposed armed resistance in the Vilna ghetto except as a last resort—because it might endanger ‘the last metropolis of the Bund in Poland’ (this was in 1943!). Several months before its final liquidation, Kruk railed against the Hebraization of the ghetto schools. Had Kruk survived the war and written his memoirs, it is highly unlikely that he would have recorded these particular concerns. And this is another reason why diaries are so important. As Ringelblum implied, it was precisely in wartime that Jews had to write down what they were experiencing—immediately and without delay. In a time of upheaval when a war-time week would see more change than a peacetime year, what seemed important on one day could quickly pale before the horrors to come. Whole aspects of Jewish life and experience could be permanently forgotten, unless diarists carefully recorded them.

In September 1943, Kruk was sent to concentration camps in Estonia, but he kept writing until the very end. In Klooga and in Lagedi, Kruk noted that Vilna had finally been liberated. He even allowed himself to hope that he might survive. But it was not to be. On 18 September 1944—one day before the Red Army entered Lagedi—the Germans piled him and all the other Jews on rows of logs, shot them in the neck, and set the pyres on fire. The day before, Kruk made his last entry, and buried his journal in front of six witnesses. One of them survived and retrieved the diary.

Barbara Harshav’s translation of this material is excellent. Benjamin Harshav merits the highest praise for his introduction and for the painstaking editing of this collection. The 1961 Yiddish edition of Kruk’s diary, edited by Kruk’s brother Pinhas Schwartz, contains a great deal of important material but omits many other writings that

Kruk compiled between 1939 and 1944: poems, accounts of the 1939–1941 period, and fictionalized reportages and short stories. Much of this material was written in an almost decipherable script. Professor Harshav deserves the gratitude of all serious students of East European Jewry for his decision to include this additional material and for tracking down missing pages of the Vilna diary. One can quibble with some of the explanatory footnotes—for example the assertion that Orthodox Jews in Vilna were assimilationists. But this should not detract from the enormous value of this long-awaited book.

SAMUEL D. KASSOW
Trinity College, Hartford, CT