

Writing Holocaust history

Samuel Kassow's book on the Warsaw Ghetto is being made into a movie

by Lynn Woike
Editor

Going for a master's degree at Princeton University, Dr. Samuel Kassow was deciding between becoming a lawyer and being a historian.

"I decided to be a historian," he said.

Born in a displaced persons camp in Germany to Polish parents who were Holocaust survivors, Kassow went on to become an American historian of the history of Ashkenazi Jewry.

Samuel Kassow's book about the Warsaw Ghetto is being made into a movie by Roberta Grossman and Nancy Spielberg.

He is the Charles Northam Professor at Trinity College and a consultant to the Museum of History of the Polish Jews in Warsaw, Poland.

Now, a book he wrote about a historian in the Warsaw Ghetto is being made into a movie that will preserve the truth about three years of history that have largely gone unnoticed.

First published by Indiana University Press in 2007, "Who Will Write Our History? Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive," was runner-up in the 2007 National Jewish Book Award

in Holocaust and winner of the 2008 AAASS/Orbis Book Prize for Polish Studies. In 2009, Random House published it again with a different subtitle: "Rediscovering a Hidden Archive from the Warsaw Ghetto."

The book tells the story of Emanuel Ringelblum, a Jewish historian, social worker and activist who organized a secret operation known as Oyneg Shabes – Yiddish for "Sabbath delight" – to document life in the Warsaw Ghetto where Jews were resettled during World War II.

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A group of about 60 journalists, activists, teachers and scientists, as well as ordinary people, began to write about all aspects of life as 30 percent of the city's population was forced into less than 3 percent of its space. Shut off and subsisting on starvation rations, with no one to help them, the Jewish people ran their own soup kitchens, orphanages and cultural organizations.

German decrees, posters, official and underground newspapers, labels from ghetto goods, artifacts, menus, diaries, photographs and theater tickets, along with jokes and words to the songs of beggars, were secretly collected.

Just before the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in April 1943, 30,000 pages of eyewitness documents were buried in time capsules "so future generations would be able to write the history of the Ghetto from Jewish sources" and not just from the German perspective, Kassow said.

There came a time when the Jews knew that the Germans would kill them and their "[w]riting was a confirmation of life in the face of death," states a video about the movie that was part of a fundraising campaign on Indiegogo this past summer.

"A Jewish historian who died in Majdanek and a teacher of

Left: Emanuel Ringelblum, who organized a secret operation to document life in the Warsaw Ghetto, is the focus of a book by Dr. Samuel Kassow that is being turned into a movie. Above: Emanuel Ringelblum (standing, second from left) gathers with members of a secret operation he organized to document life in the Warsaw Ghetto. Right: The Ringelblum living room was recreated for the movie set.

Ringelblum's said, 'What we know about murdered peoples is what their killers choose to write about them.' Ringelblum knew that the Germans not only wanted to kill the Jews, but then also write their history. He collected documents so future generations would write Jewish history on the basis of Jewish, not German, sources. And that's why I chose that title for my book," Kassow said.

Their hope was that the truth would survive, even if they did not. After the war, only three from that group were alive; Ringelblum was not one of them.

"It wasn't my book, but the person I was writing about, that deserves the attention. He really did an amazing thing. He understood how important history is and how important it is to write things down, to collect material."

-Dr. Samuel Kassow

In 1946, 10 metal boxes were found among the ruins, and two milk cans containing documents were found in 1950.

"They didn't find everything," Kassow said, adding that "a lot was ruined by moisture."

The book that took Kassow about eight years to write has been translated into about eight languages. Within its 568 pages are 38 black-and-white photographs and a map.

"It really underscores that you can resist evil – not just with guns and bullets, but with pen and paper – and it's a tribute to somebody who

understands that historians can make a difference, that history can make a difference. It also means that all the Jews that were killed ... [were] not just faceless victims; they have names and identities. They turn into people that you can write about and you can remember."

Roberta Grossman, an award-winning filmmaker, read about the book in the Jewish press.

Her 2008 film "Blessed Is the March: The Life and Death of Hannah Senesh," was shortlisted for an Academy Award, aired on PBS, was nominated for a Primetime Emmy and won the audience award

at 13 film festivals. Most recently, she directed "Above and Beyond," about Jewish-American pilots who flew for Israel in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.

"I got the book, and as soon as I started reading it, I knew that this was a story that I would love to tell as a documentary film because it's such an important story and has not been widely known. It is, in my mind, the most important story of the Holocaust that has not yet been broadly told," Grossman said.

She called Kassow's book "a master work of history."



"He recreated an entire civilization, and piece by piece he told ... a story that would have been largely lost if he hadn't researched and wrote the book. He made sure Emanuel Ringelblum and the Oyneg Shabes wouldn't be forgotten."

Nancy Spielberg, sister to Steven Spielberg, is again working with Grossman at Katahdin Productions, a 501(c)(3) organization, as the film's executive producer.

The movie will tell the story in another medium; the music and the imagery will "bring the story to life." Not everything will be able to be shown, Grossman said, noting, "Sam's book is the Bible and the film will be a haiku."

The project began about a year ago with interviews and recreations shot on-set and on-location in Poland and Israel. There's also been some fundraising. So far, two-thirds of the total needed has been donated.

Judy and Henry Zachs "got the ball rolling," Grossman said.

Then, Harriet Dobin, director of the Hartford Jewish Film Festival, got involved. About a year ago, while planning the March 2015 Mandell JCC Hartford Jewish Film Festival, she said she found out that Kassow's book had been optioned by Grossman and Spielberg, "two dynamic filmmaker/producers who were behind our 2015 closing night film about the Israeli Air Force."

The Mandell JCC frequently gets pitches to support various endeavors, and as a nonprofit itself, it's difficult to add such a project to the mix of what donors are asked to support, Dobin explained.

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Among those attending the fundraising event in March for the documentary "Who Will Write Our History?" are, from left, Roberta Grossman, Nancy Spielberg, Dr. Samuel Kassow, Judy Zachs, Henry Zachs, Sandy Chase and Arnold Chase.

"Lisa Kassow, currently director of Trinity College Hillel, was the founding director 20 years ago of our Jewish film festival, and her husband, Sam Kassow, is a community treasure. I felt strongly that their work deserved to be supported and championed at the highest levels in our community."

Dobin has been director of the Hartford Jewish Film Festival for six years, and part of the festival marketing team for five years prior.

"I screen hundreds of Jewish films, and understand that fundraising to make these incredible masterpieces on screen is a hungry engine that constantly needs fueling."

Yet this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity – to have a West Hartford resident present such an important story to the world – so Dobin said she wanted to see if "maybe there are some people who really want to know this is going on. There was no question that we had to do it."

The response was great. With the generous support of the Zachs, Mandell JCC Executive Director David Jacobs and event hosts Sandy and Arnold Chase, a dinner reception was held the day after the close of the 2015 festival "so leadership donors could meet Nancy, Roberta and Sam, the team at the core of this exciting project," Dobin said.

The group of generous supporters of Jewish community causes both locally and on the national scene had the opportunity to do a real "mitzvah," or good deed, and donated more than \$100,000 "to support this incredible film project about a story that demanded to be told," she said.

"People were incredibly generous," Grossman said, adding that it was a successful fundraiser as well.

A campaign on Indiegogo this past summer raised \$107,569 as 752 backers gave between \$5 and \$4,000. It helped raise awareness around the globe, she said, creating another network of friends who are invested in the project and who will help get out the word when the film is ready to be shown at festivals and limited theatrical releases; it will also be available on DVD and on-line.

"That is a legacy that we will all be thrilled to share in when the film is completed some time next year," Dobin said. "Of course, we will host a grand premiere in town."

In the meantime, Kassow will present another sneak peek of the film's progress April 10, 2016, the closing night of the film festival.

Grossman will be interviewing scholars in November as she continues to write the script for the 90-minute documentary, likening it to wrestling with a 1,000-pound bear.

Come May or June, the majority of the production will be done in Warsaw. That will be followed by about a year of editing, she said.

She said Kassow is "the expert," involved with every stage of the film from conception to completion.

"He's the world's expert on the subject. The film is based on his work, so he's the one I turn to for historical accuracy," along with a panel of other scholars.

Grossman said the biggest challenge is telling the story with the same depth as the book.

"It wasn't my book, but the

person I was writing about, that deserves the attention," Kassow said. "He really did an amazing thing. He understood how important history is and how important it is to write things down, to collect material. ... He didn't survive, but he was a hero, so I'm glad that the movie will bring him some recognition."

Kassow has published a number of other books. The most recent is "In Those Nightmarish Days: The Ghetto Reportage of Peretz Opoczynski and Josef Zelkowitz," which he edited. Just released in October, it's the translations of two lesser-known ghetto journalists who died in World War II.

"They wrote as if they were writing for the morning newspaper, even though they didn't know if anyone would ever read it," Kassow said.

He is currently translating the writings of Rachel Auerbach, one of the three from Oyneq Shabes who survived.

"She wrote her memoirs in Yiddish and I'm translating them into English," said Kassow, who can read eight languages.

A prolific writer, Auerbach spent the rest of her life shouting, mostly in vain, for the world to pay attention to the treasure of the archives and to honor the legacy of the extraordinary man who created it. It is Auerbach's writing and point of view that will provide the narration and narrative structure of the film.

Joan Allen, a three-time Academy Award nominee and the winner of a Tony Award for Best Actress in a Play for her Broadway debut in "Burn This," will be the voice of Auerbach. **WHL**

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