

The “Kryisia” Bunker

7 March marks the 76th anniversary of the unmasking of the “Kryisia” bunker located under the greenhouse on the property of Mieczysław Wolski at 81 Grójecka Street, where several dozen Jews were hiding in 1942-1944. The family of Emanuel Ringelblum was among the hiding people.

“Is dying difficult?” writer Jechida Hirschant was asked that evening [Kassow, 351]. Not to discourse with him on the meaning and price of life in times of peace. Because when the question was asked, there was a different era: the era of murder. Such a thread – when among all the otherness, one thing was certain: the inevitable death – was permanently inscribed in conversations. Especially between the prisoners of Pawiak. There was enough hope and time – only and still – to remain in uncertainty. The information that such a famous and exceptional figure was kept there spread among the Jews in a flash. At the same time, they started to look for a solution that would give the inmate a chance to avoid death. Even by going to public works outside the prison walls for a while. With other convicts – workers, but without loved ones: his wife Judith and son Uri. Then he made the final decision. Did he surrender or did he turn out to be unbroken and overcome his fear or did he, on the contrary, surrender to it? Nonetheless, he didn’t take advantage of the help proposed. He stayed and become one of the forty victims of the murder committed by the Germans the next day – in the morning of 10 March 1944, in the area of the ghetto ruins. It was Emanuel Ringelblum...

Too active in the ghetto public life; he was recognisable in the welfare, aid, social and partly also political sphere. Thus, since February 1943, “sentenced” to live – literally – “under the surface”: in the “Kryisia” bunker [Engelking, Lebionka, 2009, 24] That shelter – built thanks to the funds coming from Jewish families and institutions – was regarded as an exceptional safety zone in the era of lawlessness. The area of approximately 35 m² was occupied by around forty people at a time. Makeshift beds were set up along the walls. A long table cut through the space. A small part of the space served as a kitchen (used only at night), and another part – behind the screen – was a toilet. People from “Kryisia” had double protection – their underground “house” was

additionally masked by a huge greenhouse. During the day, they had to remain silent and motionless in an enclosed space, while at night, as far as possible and as far as security required, they could leave the bunker for a short time, talk and eat. The direct rescue for the Jews was provided by Mieczysław Wolski, the owner of a gardening farm at 84 Grójecka Street (the “Kryisia” bunker was located in this area) and his teenage nephew, Janusz Wysocki (they delivered food, took out the wastes, ensured safety). Wolski’s mother and sisters provided spiritual support. The men additionally acted as mediators in contacts between the Jews hidden in the bunker and people functioning “on the surface”.

Despite the advantages, with the most important one which was the chance to survive for the residents of the bunker, there were still many mental and health problems in “Kryisia”. Especially mental problems had to be present among people who were staying in one place continually for many months. There were disputes, quarrels, malice. Orna Jagur, staying “underground” until the first days of March 1944, saw and felt directly the burden of the dramas happening there: people doomed to exist in a world so different from the one they knew before the war that it was unreal. She talked about awful conditions: dirt, mustiness and vermin, insane looks, fears, anxiety, annoyance and excitement. In a letter to Adolf Berman, Judith Ringelblum wrote straight: “This is a terrible dejection – an indefinite prison. A terrible hopelessness” [Paulsson, 180]

Emanuel Ringelblum, even though he stayed in “Kryisia”, still lived the life of the residual ghetto. On the eve of the outbreak of the uprising, he left the shelter to be an eyewitness of the events. He went to the ghetto. He has been missing for several months. It was not until the summer of that year that the news reached Warsaw that he is alive and is a prisoner of the SS training camp in Trawniki. Thanks to the efforts and actions of “Żegota” and the Home Army (Emilia Rozenchwajg “Marylka” and Teodor Pajewski), he returned to the shelter in August [Engelking, Libionka, 2009, 72]. And from then on, he stayed with the others until the very end.

The end of the “Kryisia” bunker was a result of a denunciation probably by a Pole. On 7 March 1944, the property of Wolski was surrounded by Gestapo and Blue Police units. They knew perfectly where the “enemy” was hiding. They directed their first steps there: “*The bunker trapdoor was lifted and the figures of the unfortunate convicts started to appear in the hole,*

one after another. It is said that the first to come out were mothers with children. Poor children squinted their eyes, blinded by daylight and the sun, which they had not seen for so long, some of them cried out of fear. Mothers helplessly hugged them. Then the adults went out one by one, in deadly silence, which was sometimes interrupted by a woman's cry drowned out by a German scream". [Kassow, 350] They were taken to the Pawiak prison and tortured for two days. They wanted to force the testimony and hear accusations that would lead them to other "guilty" people. In vain. So finally, in the early morning of 10 March 1944, the prisoners were driven to the area of ghetto ruins. And killed. Emanuel Ringelblum, his wife and son were among those prisoners...

Emanuel Ringelblum may have predicted that the end of the Jewish community in Warsaw was coming. That's why he worked without a break. Throughout the whole period, from November 1940 to March 1944, when the breakthrough events for the Jewish population were happening (the so-called Grossaktion Warsaw, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising), he was devoted to the idea of recreating a comprehensive picture of the life of Jews under Nazi occupation. He was the father of Oneg Shabbat – a team of several dozen people conducting various archival and research activities [Ringelblum, 473 – 490]. The main principle of Oneg Shabbat was versatility, while objectivity was to be the second. The research work and the historical process overlapped, the reality that was not yet past but ongoing, alive, engaging the researcher, his family, his environment and the whole vanishing Jewish community, was analysed [Sakowska, 164 – 165]. All activities were divided into four areas: general, economic, social security, as well as cultural, scientific, literary and artistic. And official documents were constantly collected (announcements, copies of correspondence, postal forms, ration cards), personal materials (ID cards, certificates, registration cards, diplomas), scientific papers, correspondence, photographs. Diaries were most valuable. Although the creator and leader of Oneg Shabbat fell victim to the Nazi crime, a great work survived: the Ringelblum Archive... In 1999 it became part of the UNESCO Memory of the World.

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Photo: The area where the "Kryisia" bunker was located in the years 1942-1944, taken in the late 1940s (private collections)

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