

The Hersch Wasser Collection

Summary

The Hersch Wasser Collection is a collection of documents handed over after the Second World War to YIVO (Institute for Jewish Research) in New York, by Hersch Wasser secretary of the “Oneg Shabbat”. It is the largest collection of documents from the Ringelblum Archive housed outside the Jewish Historical Institute Archive.¹

Hersch Wasser was born on 13 June 1910 in Suwałki. After graduating with a degree in economics, he settled in Lodz, where in December 1939 he married a teacher, Bluma Kirszenfeld. Soon after, the couple moved to Warsaw. After the closure of the Warsaw Ghetto, both became deeply involved in its communal life. Bluma became a teacher and later principal of a Tarbut school at Nowolipki, while Hersch was involved in providing aid to refugees. In January 1941 he became the secretary of the Central Refugee Commission [Centralna Komisja Uchodźców]. However, the most important field of Wasser’s activity was undoubtedly the Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto.

From the first weeks of its activities, Hersch Wasser was the key member of the “Oneg Shabat” team. As the secretary of the Archive he was the one who coordinated its activities and recorded both its collaborators and the wealth of incoming documents. Together with Elias Gutkowski he organized the crucial press department of the Oneg Shabat, which provided information on the Holocaust to the Polish and Jewish underground press. Just as importantly, the Underground Archive also contains 55 documents, mainly notes, documenting the fate of Jewish communities outside Warsaw, which were collected by Wasser during his work in the

¹ A few „Oneg Shabat” documents which were handed over to the „aryan side” were preserved in the Delegatura Rządu RP na Kraj collection in The Central Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw. A small collection of documents was also handed over by the Jewish Historical Institute to the Yad Vashem Archive in Jerusalem. See T. Epsztein, *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy. Inwentarz Archiwum Ringelbluma*, Warszawa 2011, s. 47–51.

Central Refugee Commission and which are now crucial in reconstructing the history of the Holocaust in smaller localities. During his work for the Archive Wasser was accompanied by his wife, Bluma, who became one of the most prolific copyists of Yiddish documents for its collection.

After the end of the war, it was Wasser, as the only surviving member of the Archival team who knew the location of the concealed archives, who played the key part in unearthing the first part of the Underground Archive in September 1946. In the following months he was the only one who was able to identify the documents and prepare their first catalogue. Simultaneously, in circumstances which are still unclear, Wasser began to take out some documents from the collection and send them to YIVO in New York, most likely seeing it as a way of safekeeping them in face of a difficult situation in post-war Poland. The YIVO Archive now holds 49 envelopes in which, under assumed false names and return addresses, 244 documents sent by Wasser reached New York between April and September 1947. Among them was a copy of Wasser's wartime diary but also key documents of the Holocaust in occupied Polish, including a testimony of Jakub Grojnowski (Szlama Winer) from the Chełmno death camp (HWC 4.1). Despite his attempts to emigrate to America, Wasser himself never followed his documents to YIVO. He emigrated from Poland to Israel in 1950 and died there in 1980.

The volume contains all previously unpublished documents from the Hersch Wasser Collection which originated in the Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto (excluding those copies which can be found in the Jewish Historical Institute's Archive). It also includes other previously unpublished documents from the Collection which were created during the war and deal with the Holocaust. Documents contained in this volume were divided thematically into ten chapters. The first contains the diary of Hersch Wasser. Chapters 2 to 7 deal with various aspects of life in the Warsaw Ghetto. Chapter 8 is dedicated to Jewish communities outside Warsaw. Chapter 9 contains information on forced labor camps. Chapter 10 consists of personal documents of Hersch Wasser from the second part of the Ringelblum Archive which were not included in volume 7 of this series: *Spuścizny*.²

Translated by Katarzyna Person

² *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy, t. 7: Spuścizny*, ed. K. Person, [trans. S. Arm et al.], Warszawa 2012.