

Maria Ferenc Piotrowska

## The use of radio in the Warsaw ghetto as a source for the progress of the war (and what can we learn about it from comparison with BBC Monitoring Collection)

This article presents the results of research conducted on radio monitoring in the Warsaw ghetto. The main focus here, however, is what can we learn about the monitoring of bulletins preserved in the Warsaw Ghetto Underground Archive (Ringelblum Archive)<sup>1</sup> in the light of examining contemporaneous materials preserved in the BBC Monitoring Collection (BBCMC). The goal is therefore to explore one of several possible ways in which BBCMC can be used by researchers.

### Ringelblum Archive

In November 1940, historian and political and social activist Emanuel Ringelblum - at the time detained in the Warsaw ghetto - decided to create an underground archive which would assemble materials and testimonies documenting the life of Jews in Poland under German occupation. For this purpose, Ringelblum established Oyneg Shabas (Joy of Saturday), the clandestine group that created the Warsaw Underground Ghetto Archive (now commonly referred to as the Ringelblum Archive). The team started working and collecting documents in November 1940<sup>2</sup>. Documents gathered by Oyneg Shabas were subsequently buried in mid-1942 and early 1943 in the cellar of Nowolipki 68 Street, in the

---

<sup>1</sup> I conducted the research together with Franciszek Zakrzewski for the purpose of the Ringelblum Archive full edition project in Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. All bulletins from radio monitoring published in Warsaw ghetto that were preserved in Ringelblum Archive are published in this volume: *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Warszawy* [Ringelblum Archive. Underground Archive of Warsaw ghetto], volume 22: *Nasłuchy radiowe w getcie warszawskim* [Radio monitoring in Warsaw ghetto], edited by Maria Ferenc Piotrowska, Franciszek Zakrzewski, Warsaw: Jewish Historical Institute, 2016

<sup>2</sup> Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History? Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press

central part of Warsaw ghetto<sup>3</sup>. Two parts were discovered after the war, in 1946 and 1950 respectively, and today the collection constitutes one of the most important collections of documents for the research into the Holocaust in Poland.

The archive contains both documents created independently of Oyneg Shabas activities and those prepared by or for the group. It consists of a huge variety of documents: newspapers published by the underground ghetto press, orders issued by the German authorities, ration cards, letters, poems, reports and much more. Members of the group described in detail the conditions in the Warsaw ghetto, and gathered testimonies from its inhabitants<sup>4</sup>.

### Jewish responses to German policy regarding information

One of the most crucial aspects of the isolation of Jews incarcerated in Warsaw ghetto was the extremely limited access to information on what was going on in the outside world. This included the actual progress of the war – something which would have a tremendous impact on the fate of Jews across Europe, including those living in the occupied Polish territory.

The Germans deliberately cut Jews and Poles off from such information: from as early as October 1939 it was forbidden to own a radio and all such devices were confiscated. All newspapers were banned unless they were German, and the publishing industry and postal service were all strictly supervised and censored. According to Barbara Engelking, there were three basic kinds of information that were available in the ghetto: official (that coming from the Germans and from the *Judenrat* or Jewish Council), the unofficial underground press,

---

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Engelking, Jacek Leociak, *Getto warszawskie. Przewodnik po nieistniejącym mieście*, Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów: Warszawa 2013, p. 17 (English edition: *Warsaw Ghetto. The Guide through the Perished City*, Yale University Press, 2009)

<sup>4</sup> On more about history of Oyneg Shabas see: *The Warsaw ghetto. Oyneg Shabas–Ringelblum Archive: catalog and guide*, ed. by Robert Moses Shapiro and Tadeusz Epsztein ; translated by R. M. Shapiro; introduction by Samuel D. Kassow. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2009

and rumours<sup>5</sup>. Word of mouth was the most frequent source of information – and of course was prone to rumour and supposition.<sup>6</sup>

Official information was only provided by the Germans. The Nazis controlled all news dissemination through posters with propaganda and German orders, German movie chronicles screened in cinemas, news broadcast through “szczekaczki” (special megaphones) and German-controlled press printed in Polish and addressed to Polish readers (so called “reptile-press”). The only legal newspaper in the ghettos of the Generalgouvernement (the term used to denote the central zone of German occupation in Poland) was “Gazeta Żydowska” (The Jewish Newspaper), published in Kraków<sup>7</sup>. It cited German propaganda news about developments in the different theatres of war<sup>8</sup>. Most people had an ambivalent attitude to “Gazeta Żydowska” – it could not be trusted when it came to international politics and some other issues but, on the other hand, “Gazeta” also published socially-engaged articles, that dealt with the painful challenges of life in the Warsaw ghetto<sup>9</sup>.

When it comes to information spread unofficially, it is of course very difficult to assess its scope and impact. The precise range of the underground press is not known, but its importance for the dissemination of information cannot be underestimated. Almost all

---

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Engelking, *Zagłada i pamięć. Doświadczenie Holocaustu i jego konsekwencje opisane na podstawie relacji autobiograficznych*, Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, Warszawa 1994, p. 131-136 (English edition: „Holocaust and memory”, Leicester University Press, London, New York, 2001)

<sup>6</sup> Katrin Stoll, „Pogłoski w białostockim getcie. Przyczynek do historiografii Zagłady z perspektywy żydowskiej” [Rumors in Białystok ghetto. Holocaust historiography from the Jewish Perspective], [in:] *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i materiały*, vol. 8/2012

<sup>7</sup> Justyna Gregorowicz, „Komunikacja telefoniczna w życiu społeczności getta warszawskiego” [Telephone communication in the life of Warsaw ghetto’s inhabitants], [in:] *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i materiały*, vol. 10/2014; Tomasz Szarota, *Okupowanej Warszawy dzień powszedni. Studium historyczne*, Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1988, s. 25–51, 291–313.

<sup>8</sup> Marta Janczewska, „Gazeta Żydowska” (1940–1942), [in:] *Studia z dziejów trójjęzycznej prasy żydowskiej na ziemiach polskich (XIX-XX w.)*, ed. J. Nalewajko-Kulikow; G. P. Bąbiak, A. J. Cieślíkowa, Neriton, Warszawa 2012

<sup>9</sup> For example articles of Abraham Mordechaj Rogowy, a religious journalist. Many of his articles from “Gazeta Żydowska” were also preserved in Ringelblum Archive. Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute, sign. ARG I 579, ARG II 320, ARG II 321

the political movements published newspapers or bulletins at some point. Of course, the gathering information went far beyond what was included in the underground press. A special role in this regard was played by Ringelblum's Oyneg Shabas: the group gathered information about the killings in the province, and what was happening in the death camps. The compilers of the archive were in contact with the Polish underground movement and Home Army and issued their own informational bulletin<sup>10</sup>.

### History of radio monitoring station in Warsaw ghetto

Interestingly, it was two of the Warsaw ghetto's best known inhabitants who took a particular interest in monitoring radio stations. Leaders of HaShomer Hatzair (Hebrew for Young Guard) Mordechaj Anielewicz and Szmuel Bresław were very active – as can be seen by many pages of documents preserved in the Archive that bear handwriting of both of them.

The use of radio was illegal, but people on both sides of the ghetto wall took the risk in order to know what was happening in the wider world. Listening to communiques broadcast from various countries allowed those under occupation to counterbalance the news spread by German propaganda. There were many illegal radios in Warsaw ghetto, most of them were listened to by people for their private use, but there were also radios belonging to various political organizations that used their own channels of communication to circulate the news. One of them was Hashomer Hatzair, the leftist and Zionist youth movement. The transcripts of the bulletins from radio monitoring that Hashomer Hatzair published under the title of 'News and Communiques' in fact represent the largest collection of radio monitoring transcripts preserved in the Ringelblum Archive and we happen to know a lot about their history. Most probably, this particular set of documents was saved because of Bresław's involvement with Oyneg Shabas and because of the increasing affinities and political alliance between Hashomer Hatzair and Poale Zion Left – the political party that Emanuel Ringelblum and many of his friends belonged to.

---

<sup>10</sup> „Oyneg Shabas “Buletins [in:] *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy. Vol. 11 Ludzie i prace „Oneg Szabat”*, ed. A. Bańkowska i T. Epsztein, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego i Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, Warszawa 2013, pp. 206-300

According to Bresław's testimony about the outputs of radio monitoring preserved in ARG alongside bulletins, the listeners started operating in the summer of 1941. The ARG collection is therefore incomplete – for the first documents known to be a product of its activity date from November 1941<sup>11</sup>. Hashomer Hatzair rented an apartment specifically to listen and transcribe radio broadcasts - thanks to the financial support of donors (unfortunately, we do not know anything about their identity). Documents preserved from the first period of station's functioning were typewritten and most probably copied on a hexographer, a simple kind of copying machine. Until April 1942 bulletins functioned like many other underground publications – copied in limited numbers, then spread among supporters of the movement, sometimes reaching other ghetto inhabitants. What marked the difference between 'News and Communiques' and other newspapers was the subject itself and the regularity of publication: bulletins from radio monitoring were obviously devoted solely to information from the fighting fronts and appeared daily, or at least few times a week. The fate of Jews in occupied Europe was hardly ever mentioned – reflecting the paucity of information on that subject on the airwaves more broadly – and news from occupied Poland appeared only sporadically. But it was news from the theatres of war that the Warsaw ghetto inhabitants craved the most. Most other underground newspapers focused on ideological discussions and political deliberations and were too hermetic for external readers – or that was the case until news about the Holocaust started reaching Warsaw. News from the outside world interested and excited most people. There are many references to news from radio monitoring in the diaries from that time.

### [What did the Warsaw monitors listen to? How do they compare with the BBCM Collection?](#)

The staff of the Warsaw radio monitoring station listened to two sources in particular – the BBC's Polish service in London and Radio Moscow - we know this from the headlines of the transcripts which record the origin of each communique. Occasionally, we find transcripts of broadcasts from New York and Berne in Switzerland.

---

<sup>11</sup> All documents regarding radio monitoring in Warsaw ghetto can be found in *Nasłuchy radiowe w getcie warszawskim* [Radio monitoring in Warsaw ghetto], *op. cit.*

Thanks to comparison with BBCM materials we were able to establish that monitoring teams in Warsaw and England were listening to the same Polish speaking Soviet radio stations based in Kujbyszew. Hours of broadcast of news and programs consistently overlapped in both sets of archival materials. Moreover, in a few cases, we find the same information quoted both in BBCM and the Ringelblum Archive (although, as I mention later, the focus of both monitoring stations was very different). The best example is the information about the Polish-Soviet pact concluded in early December of 1941, which was broadcast on December 5, 1941.

Comparison with BBCM material suggests that the operators of the Warsaw ghetto monitoring might not have listened to New York-based broadcasters, but rather to parts of broadcasts from New York-originating news which were subsequently aired on Soviet radio. This hypothesis is supported by the different broadcasting hours of New York radio stations (confirmed thanks to records found in BBCMC) and the completely different structure of news than those indicated in Hashomer bulletins.

BBCMC material also brought a likely answer to another important question that had to be posed regarding the Warsaw ghetto materials: what was the reason for the long break – of several months duration - in radio news originating from Moscow in late 1941 and early 1942? Since we knew that Hashomer Hatzair and BBCM were actually listening to the same Soviet radio stations, we could compare materials from both archives. It turned out, that monitoring notes from a similar time-span are available in BBCM. In many other cases we can find proof that the BBC's monitors faced similar reception problems to those of the Warsaw station, but it seems that this case is different. BBCM was almost constantly listening to Moscow stations, while the Warsaw ghetto team seem to have faced some kind of technical problems that made it impossible for them to listen to Soviet stations in the winter of 1941/1942.

It is interesting to note that the 'News and Communiques' based on news broadcast from Moscow bear no resemblance to the English-language news broadcast from Moscow that was monitored and transcribed by BBC Monitoring Service. Comparison with the BBCM Collection also attests to different purposes of radio monitoring during the Second World War: in relation to information from USSR broadcasts, the BBC focused on issues that were of little interest for people conducting radio monitoring in the Warsaw ghetto and *vice versa*.

The BBC monitored Russian stations 'for important items only', as did Anielewicz and Bresław in Warsaw – but they defined 'important' in a completely different ways. The Warsaw monitoring team was looking for communiques of Army Headquarters and front news only. BBC staff, on the other hand, was carefully listening to comments and reportages from the Soviet Union that were in turn of no interest for very news-centered HaShomer HaTzair activists. A good example of these differences is radio broadcasts from Russian Kuibyshev to a Polish audience: Bresław and Anielewicz were only interested in their news part, while the BBCM Service focused on ideological, propaganda-loaded communiques for Poles.

## Conclusions

Discrepancies between the BBC Monitoring and the activities of the radio monitoring station in the Warsaw ghetto reflect various motivations for conducting such activities. Both parties might have listened to the same Russian broadcasting stations, but the conclusions they drew and even their transcripts significantly differed. Obviously, both approaches mirrored the situation in which monitoring was conducted and the state of knowledge of both parts.

The BBC Monitoring Service was listening to Soviet propaganda and was intent on singling out mentions of events that the British War Office might not know about. The operation overseen by Hashomer Hatzair in the Warsaw ghetto was very different – indeed almost its opposite. The inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto knew next to nothing of what was happening in the different theatres of war. Their priority was to acquire and process news so as to predict what might happen next. Bresław and Anielewicz were looking for the kinds of news of which the BBC monitors had no need – for it was reported on in communiques, newspapers and newsreels. For the Warsaw Ghetto chroniclers' – and their readers – it was their main source of information, news they craved beyond all measure. News broadcast from Moscow and London reported in bulletins gave people hope that the war would actually end – and that they might live to see the end of it. Readers of clandestine bulletins could not had known that, only few days after the final issue of "News and Communiques" was circulated (16<sup>th</sup> July, 1942), the deportation from Warsaw ghetto to Treblinka death camp would start.