

Trauma in first person : diary writing during the Holocaust
(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017),

PART III

THE JEWISH SELF UNDER NAZI DOMINATION

Chaim Kaplan's Warsaw Diary

7

CHAIM KAPLAN AND HIS DIARY

PART III focuses on the wartime diary of the Warsaw Jew Chaim Aron Kaplan. Kaplan's diary, written in Hebrew, covers the period from the Nazi invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939, when Kaplan was age fifty-nine, until 4 August 1942, a few days before he was deported to Treblinka. The following chapters discuss the complex relations that the diary reveals between the writer, a Jewish victim; Nazism; and the Nazis, his persecutors (in other words, between the Jewish "I" and the Nazi "Other").¹

Kaplan's war diary was a continuation of the diary that he had begun keeping in 1933. Prior to the war the diary had, from Kaplan's point of view, fulfilled a dual function. First and foremost, the diary provided him with a means of free expression, as someone who had always felt himself to be a loner and even hostile to the world around him. In 1936, for example, Kaplan writes that "The diary has become my daily bread. I have virtually no true friends and comrades."² Elsewhere he confides that "After all, I have in my world no comrade closer and more intimate than it."³ Yet already at this early stage Kaplan stresses an important secondary element of his diary, its documentary nature: "The diary indeed reflects only my personal life, yet I am, however, part of the surroundings and contend with the conditions of life, and my personal life conveys something of life in general."⁴

Kaplan's prewar diary covers a diverse range of aspects of the author's life, including his extramarital affair, his yearning for his children in Palestine, his countless personal feuds (many of which ended up in court) and daily educational matters in the school that he founded, in addition to the dramatic political events unfolding in Poland, Germany, and Palestine. Yet

as we saw in Klemperer's diary and as is evident in many other Jewish diaries of the period, with the outbreak of war the diary's focus and character are transformed. From a journal focusing mainly on the writer's intimate and personal spheres, it becomes an overtly historical-documentary document. From this point on, Kaplan's gaze is directed almost exclusively outward. Abraham Katsh, who wrote the preface to the printed edition of Kaplan's diary, noted: "Until the outbreak of the world war the diary serves primarily the personal sphere . . . but from the tense months of the summer of 1939, with the impending storm of war, the nature of the diary underwent a blatant change. Chaim Aharon Kaplan abandons the individual sphere."⁵ Indeed, Kaplan regarded documentation to be a sacred mission. On 16 January 1940 he writes as follows:

I don't know if there is anyone else who keeps a daily record? The conditions of life that surround us do not facilitate such literary work. I am one of the fortunate people whose pen never ceases to flow even during these deranged times. Anyone who does this takes his life into his hands, but this does not frighten me. I feel within me that these are momentous times and that I have a responsibility, I have an inner awareness that I am engaged in a national duty, an historical duty, and that I am not at liberty to discard it. I do not edit what I write. The momentary reflex shapes my writing. Perhaps this gives it value. I am somehow convinced that Providence has sent me on this mission. My records will serve as historiographical material for the future historian.⁶

Nevertheless, as is true of all first-person narratives, the war diary too is not only a historical document but also reveals the writer's life story. Events are always observed from a subjective perspective, and the diary includes a good number of descriptions of his personal experiences, as well as his feelings and emotional and intellectual responses to events. Although he did not seek to focus his writing on these elements, they are all inherently integrated into his narrative. Thus Kaplan reveals through his descriptions his inner world and his point of view, which find expression in virtually every line. Despite the diary's clearly stated tendency toward documentation, the Polish scholar Jacek Leociak rightly calls it an "intimate diary," and in this respect Kaplan's journal is indeed a life story.⁷ Yet in fact, like most other Holocaust diaries the diary presents not only a "life story" but also an account of the disruption and sometimes even the disintegration of life. It portrays how the life of an Eastern European, Zionist Jewish intellectual, thoroughly immersed in both ancient and modern Hebrew and European culture, was disrupted by the Nazi occupation, and paints a picture of his

lifelong struggles to establish and confirm this identity, even during this period. In this respect it is a “life story,” underscoring the act of narration that facilitates life. As such, the diary was of tremendous existential value to Kaplan: “The diary is my life, my comrade, my ally. Without it I would be lost. I pour into it my discourse and all my heart’s feelings until I gain some relief. When I am angry and my blood boils, when I am filled with resentment and inner agitation I drag myself toward the diary and am immediately inspired by the God of creativity, although I doubt whether the work of recording I do deserves to be called ‘creation’ . . . the main thing is that I find emotional rest therein and that’s good enough for me.”⁸

WHO WAS KAPLAN?

Kaplan was born in 1880 in Horodysze (also Gorodishche) near Baranowicze in Poland (at that time part of the Russian empire today in Belarus). His family members possessed a strong Jewish consciousness and spoke Hebrew well. He received his initial education in a *heder* (the traditional Jewish educational institution), and went on to study at the Mir yeshiva and the Vilnius pedagogical seminary. In adulthood Kaplan abandoned his religious belief but remained loyal to Jewish tradition, in which he was extremely well versed, as a vibrant national culture. Although he was not a religious man he observed some of the precepts (yet did not refrain from writing in his diary on the Jewish New Year), frequently attended synagogue, made an effort to study the Jewish religious texts regularly, and frequented religious circles.⁹

Kaplan was a zealot of the Hebrew language. Upon arriving in Warsaw in 1900 he founded and ran a private school in which he introduced the method of “Hebrew in Hebrew,” namely, the teaching of the Hebrew language using this tongue itself, rather than teaching it as a foreign language. Hebrew was taught with a modern Sephardic pronunciation.¹⁰ The diaries he kept during the 1930s testify to his interminable educational, ideological, financial, and legal struggles to maintain the school. These educational innovations sparked fierce debate, but this did not deter Kaplan from pursuing them, believing that they would play an essential role in the rebirth of Hebrew spirit and culture. He was involved in contemporary Jewish Warsaw cultural discourse, and published a large number of articles, critiques, and feuilletons in the Jewish press and periodicals of the period. A collection of his articles was published in 1937 in Poland under the title *Pezurai* (in Hebrew).¹¹ During the twenties and thirties several more of his works appeared, including a number of Hebrew grammar books, works presenting the Bible

in the light of modern scholarship, a Passover *Hagada* with modern interpretation, and a book of games for teachers and counselors.¹² Almost all his writing addresses topics of Jewish culture and education.

Kaplan was an ardent Zionist, leaning to the right, although he was not affiliated with any particular party. Among the Zionist leaders, he particularly admired Nahum Sokolow. During the interwar years Kaplan participated in the activities of the Zionist Organization in Warsaw and encouraged his two children, Leon and Zipora, to emigrate to Palestine. For many years he considered taking this step himself. As a profoundly nationalist Jew he yearned to live in the Land of Israel, yet feared that he might not endure the hardships of life there. He visited Palestine in June 1935 as a tourist, and was favorably impressed by the enterprise of national regeneration, in particular its cultural aspects. However, he remained apprehensive about uprooting himself and about the challenges of making a new start in the country, in which despite all his intentions he felt a stranger.¹³ He eventually returned to Warsaw and remained there, devoting himself to the struggle for Jewish education based on the Hebrew language and inculcating Jewish cultural values within modern and progressive educational frameworks.

As mentioned, Kaplan began writing his diary in 1933 and continued it during the war years. His diaries were smuggled across to Warsaw's "Aryan" section in 1942: sensing that his end was near, Kaplan entrusted the diary to one of his students, who passed it into the hands of a Pole named Wytzek (who assisted Jews during the Holocaust) for safekeeping. After the war a number of the diary copybooks were handed over to the Jewish Institute in Warsaw and to Abraham Katsh, head of the Jewish Studies Institute at New York University.¹⁴

Incomplete versions of the wartime diary in several languages appeared many years later. It was first published in English in 1965 (edited and translated by Abraham Katsh), followed by several further editions, the latest of which was published by Indiana University Press in 1999.¹⁵ The English editions were highly bowdlerized by the editor and translator Katsh.¹⁶ The diary appeared for the first time in Hebrew in 1966, titled *Scroll of Agony: A Warsaw Ghetto Diary*. This edition includes almost all the diary entries (only a few highly personal ones were omitted) from 1 September 1939 to 4 August 1942, apart from those dated March 1941 to February 1942. Some of these entries were published previously in the periodicals *Yalqut Moreshet* and *Betsaron*.¹⁷ The diary has also been published in German, French, Danish, and Japanese translations.

Kaplan wrote his diary entirely in Hebrew and resolutely composed a new entry almost every day. As such, it provides extensive coverage of processes and events that occurred in Warsaw, alongside attempts to interpret these occurrences and reports of his and other Jews' feelings and responses to them. It covers the entire period of occupation up to Kaplan's deportation to Treblinka in August 1942. The diary is at once an exceedingly important historical document concerning the lives of the Jews under Nazi occupation in Warsaw and an autobiographical testimony that can improve our understanding of the world of the writer-individual in the face of these events.

Despite his somewhat disparaging attitude toward Kaplan as a person, the historian Emanuel Ringelblum, who led the clandestine documentation project in the Warsaw ghetto known as *Oyneg Shabes*, already during the war years accorded the diary recognition as a historical document of major importance. Reviewing the documentation activity conducted in the Warsaw ghetto, Ringelblum notes:

The Hebrew diary of the author and Hebrew teacher Kaplan contained thousands of pages in which were to be found a wealth of reports on all that occurred in Warsaw on a daily basis. Kaplan was not a person of wide horizons, yet all that befell an average Warsaw Jew, his suffering and experiences, the desire for revenge that pulsed in his heart, all these were faithfully reflected in the diary. The diary's importance lies precisely in the fact that its writer was an ordinary man. On more than one occasion I asked Kaplan to hand the diary over to us for safekeeping and I guaranteed that we would return it once the war had ended. He grudgingly agreed that we should copy the diary, but the task of copying was plagued by many hardships. A part of the diary remained in the *Oyneg Shabes* archive, while the complete manuscript was lost along with its author, who was taken to the Umschlagplatz.¹⁸

It appears that Ringelblum was mistaken in his assessment of Kaplan's talent as a writer: neither was he mediocre nor were his horizons limited. Indeed, historian Saul Friedländer characterizes him as "usually more farsighted than any other diarist."¹⁹ As will be discussed further below, the mutual lack of appreciation between Ringelblum and Kaplan most likely resulted from their differing political stances. As luck would have it, Ringelblum's surmise with regard to the diary's fate was also proved wrong, and the work survived. Since the war, the diary has come to be one of the major historical sources regarding the life of the Jews in Warsaw during the Nazi occupation,

and is mentioned by virtually every study of Polish Jewry focusing on this period.²⁰ Likewise, scholars of literature frequently refer to the diary, presenting it as an example of elegiac and poetic yet profound and analytical prose writing during the Holocaust, a text that is at once self-conscious and aware of its surroundings.²¹

While Kaplan's writing is rich and multifaceted, in the following chapters I seek to examine his work from the perspective of the text's stance and that of the subject encompassed therein toward the Nazi as their (big) "Other." By (big) Other I mean the ones who controlled the life and death of the Jews, who sealed their fate, passed the laws, determined policy, and controlled language—the ones who determined reality and the rules by which it was organized. The Jews were complete subjects to their rule, which thus shaped their inner self. It follows that the Nazis at once played a major role in shaping the Jews' self and at the same time were their oppressors and murderers. What, then, was the extent of the Nazis' influence on the Jews' language, their self-perception, their identity, and their effect on the inner world of the Jews? To what extent did they influence their story? Where should this influence be located? Although not couched in these exact terms, Chaim Kaplan was pre-occupied with these questions when writing his diary, and they are among the diary's focal points, as will be demonstrated in the next two chapters.

NOTES

1. Following Lacan's notion of the "Other," which indicates the authoritative place in which the symbolic order is produced. According to Lacanian theory the subject's attitude toward the Other is extremely complex. On the one hand, the Other is the ultimate extraneousness, but on the other hand the subject bares a structural dependence to the Other and unavoidably identifies with him. See, for example, Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1998), 203–216; Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

2. Diary entry dated 11 April 1936 (Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, ZIH 302/218) (henceforth Kaplan Diary). Kaplan expresses his sense of loneliness on numerous occasions throughout the diary, and indulges in a good deal of self-pity. On 13 March 1937, for example, he writes: "It seems to me that no-one is as lonely as I in life." His hostility to his fellow humans is unmistakable and his diary is studded with expressions such as "villain," "garbage," "wicked Galician," and "stupid Galician." It appears that he did not enjoy a warm relationship with his children either. He respects few of the people whom he mentions in his diary. In an entry dated 20 March 1937 he discerns that his attitude toward others is influenced by two opposite poles of self perception, fluctuating between an attitude based on a feeling of "I am the best," and a sense that he himself is worthless and insignificant.

3. Kaplan Diary, 14 December 1938 (ZIH 302/218).

4. *Ibid.*, 11 April 1936 (ZIH 302/218).

5. Abraham I. Katsh, introduction to Chaim Aron Kaplan, *Megilat Yisurin: Yoman Geto Varshah* [Scroll of agony: Warsaw ghetto diary] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved and Yad Vashem, 1966), 11. The following review is based on these sources, on Katsh's introduction to the English edition of the diary (Chaim Aron Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony: The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan*, trans. and ed. Abraham I. Katsh [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999], 9–17), and primarily on his diaries from the years 1936 to 1939, which have not been published and are kept in the archive of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. See also a concise and excellent review in Jacek Leociak, *Text in the Face of Destruction: Accounts from the Warsaw Ghetto Reconsidered*, trans. Emma Harris (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2004), 72–73; and Abraham I. Katsh, "Kaplan, Chaim Aron," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, vol. 11, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2007), 774–775.

6. All of the references to Kaplans's wartime diary are based on the original Hebrew text. Where available, I have used Abraham I. Katsh's English translation (Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony*), adapting it, as necessary, to render it more faithful to the original Hebrew. On Kaplan's perception of his historical mission, see Alexandra Garbarini, *Numbered Days: Diaries and the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 22–57. See also Alvin Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 40–44.

7. Leociak, *Text in the Face of Destruction*, 15. For the definition of "Life Story," see chapter 1.

8. Entry dated 14 November 1941 ("Hayim Ahron Kaplan" file, Moreshet Archive D.2.470).

9. Kaplan Diary, see the entries dated 20 September 1936 (ZIH 302/218) and 20 August 1936 (ZIH 302/218). This kind of hybrid and "fluid" identity was very common in interwar Poland, despite the sharp ideological rifts. This is very well reflected, for example, in the autobiographies written by Jewish youth in Poland. See Shandler, *Awakening Lives: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Poland before the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

10. He lived in Nowolipki st. 20 in Warsaw (see his Yad Vashem "page of testimony," which was filled by his son-in-law Benjamin Gesundheit), <http://db.yadvashem.org/names/nameDetails.html?itemId=6687639&language=iw>. There were obviously other Hebrew schools in Poland but they were, for the most part, branches of the Tarbut network. Kaplan's school was completely private and did not belong to any network. See Miriam Eisenstein, *Jewish Schools in Poland 1919–1939* (New York: King's Crown, 1950), esp. chap. 4. See also Kamil Kijek, "Was It Possible to Avoid 'Hebrew Assimilation'? Hebraism, Polonization and Tarbut Schools in the Last Decade of Interwar Poland," *Jewish Social Studies* 21, no. 2 (2016): 105–141.

11. Chaim Aron Kaplan, *Pezurai: Mehkarim, Reshimot Ufelyetonim: Kol Kitvei Hamehaber Bitkufat Hashanim 1900–1936* [My scatterings: Studies, articles, and feuilletons: The author's complete writings during the years 1900–1936] (Warsaw: Va'ad Hayovel, 1937).

12. Chaim Aron Kaplan, *Sefer Hamis'hakim Hasha'ashuim Vehahit'amlut: Sefer Ezer Lehorim, Lemorim Uletalmidim* [The book of games, quizzes and exercises: A reference book for parents, teachers, and students] (Warsaw: Limud, 1922); Kaplan, *Haggadah shel Pesah: Hotza'ah Omanutit Umada'it, im Be'ur Ivri Hadash* [Passover Haggadah: An artistic and scientific edition with new Hebrew explanations] (Warsaw: Limud, 1924); Kaplan, *Dikduk Halashon Veshimushah* [The grammar of the language and its usage] (New York: Hebrew Publishing, 1926); Kaplan, *Amei HaTanakh: Tziurim Histori'im Mihayei Amei Hamizrah* [The peoples of the Bible: Historical portraits from the lives of the peoples of the East] (Warsaw: Limud, 1926).

13. He arrived at Haifa on 30 June 1935 together with his wife Toibe. Both were registered as emigrants (Central Zionist Archive 5104\578\2). His arrival was reported on 5 July by the

Doar Hayom newspaper. A month later, the newspaper reported that “The pedagogical writer C. A. Kaplan has started working as a pedagogical director at the Safra school” (*Davar*, 7 August 1935). Eventually he quit his job and returned to Poland later that year.

14. Several of the copybooks were lost. One is kept at the Moreshet archive, the Polish family retains some of them, and others are kept at the archive of the Jewish Historical Institute (ZIH) in Warsaw. A copy is also kept at the Washington Holocaust Museum.

15. The English version (Chaim Aron Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony* [New York: Macmillan, 1965]) does not include the entries from March 1941 to February 1942. In addition, extensive sections of the published years have been omitted. The subsequent English editions, the first of which was published in 1973 (New York: Collier Books), include the entries dated March to October 1941. The entries dated October to April 1942 are missing from these editions as well. The Indiana University Press 1999 edition is similar to the 1973 edition.

16. On the very common phenomenon of bowdlerization in Holocaust diaries, see Engel, “On the Bowdlerization of a Holocaust Testimony: The Wartime Journal of Calek Perechodnik,” *Polin* 12 (1999): 316–329; Amos Goldberg, “Yomanei HaSho’ah—Samkhut She’ainah Medaberet Kahalakhah” [Holocaust diaries: An authority that doesn’t speak appropriately], in *Kanoni Upopulari: Mifgashim Sifrutiyim* [Popular and canonical: Literary dialogues], ed. Tamar Hess, Omri Herzog, and Yael Shapira (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2007), 131–140.

17. The entries written between April 1941 and May 1942 were not included in the printed edition, but are kept in the Moreshet archive (D.2.470). Several of that year’s entries appeared in Hebrew in the following periodicals: *Yalqut Moreshet* 3 (December 1964): 7–22 (prior to the publication of the printed edition); *Bitzaron* 53, no. 1 (254) (October–November 1965): 7–18; *Bitzaron* 69, no. 5 (28) (April–May 1969): 15–17, 39. The choice of material in each of these publications appears to be tendentious in the sense that few entries expressing Kaplan’s dependency or aggression toward institutions or people in the ghetto are included. I have yet to find an answer to the question of why the entries for this year were included in neither the printed edition of 1966 nor the English-language editions.

18. Emanuel Ringelblum, *Ktavim Ahronim: Yahasei Yehudim-Polanim* [Last writings: Jewish–Polish relations], vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1994), 19.

19. Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Extermination 1939–1945* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007), 41.

20. See, for example, Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945*; Yisrael Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw 1939–1943: Ghetto, Underground, Revolt*, trans. Ina Friedman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); Dalia Ofer, “Everyday Life of Jews under Nazi Occupation: Methodological Issues,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 9, no. 1 (1995): 42–69; Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to a Perished City*, trans. Emma Harris (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); Alon Confino, *Foundational Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

21. Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying*, 40–44; Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 102–103.