

Discovery Theater



TIME CAPSULE IN A MILKCAN: A Holocaust Remembrance

*Recommended for Ages 10+
Grades 5+*

A Reproducible Learning Guide for Educators

This guide is designed to help educators prepare for, enjoy, and discuss *Time Capsule in a Milkcan*. It contains background, discussion questions and activities appropriate for ages 10 and up.

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HISTORY AND BACKGROUND OF THE PRODUCTION

In 2004, to commemorate its 10th anniversary, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) commissioned the Smithsonian's Discovery Theater to create an interactive history program for ages 10 and above, based on the true story of Emanuel Ringelblum and the secret archives of the Warsaw Ghetto.

Time Capsule in a Milk Can, a cross generational participatory multi-media performance, demonstrated how the story behind such a simple everyday object such as a milk can could become an important tool for families and those who work with the young to communicate about painful, difficult topics such as the Holocaust.

It originally ran for over two years at USHMM and has subsequently toured the U.S. and performed in Alaska and Montreal, Canada. The play was the featured performance at the International Jewish Genealogical Society's 2014 conference, and in 2016 was used in Central California to teach young people about the courage and strength of the war time communities.

Discovery Theater is excited about its return to the Smithsonian seventeen years after its first performance, and are honored to commemorate Yom Hashoah, International Holocaust Remembrance Day, April 12, 2018.

WHO WAS EMANUEL RINGELBLUM?

"...a quiet middle-aged man sat at a table next to a pressure lamp. He always sat in the same spot and wrote. He wrote continuously, day and night for hours on end, without rising from the table which was covered with papers and books. He was the historian...Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum."

-Orna Jagur, one of 37 people in hiding with Ringelblum near the end of his life. Quoted in *Scream the Truth at the World: Emanuel Ringelblum and the Hidden Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto* (Museum of Jewish Heritage, 2001).

In pictures, Emanuel Ringelblum doesn't look like a remarkable man or a courageous resistance activist. He looks like what he was: an organized, hard-working person—the father of a small son, a historian, a high school teacher, a volunteer for good causes, a community leader.



(YIVO Institute, courtesy USHMM Photo Archive)

These pursuits may sound tame. Yet, because he did all these things—and especially because he was a historian—Emanuel Ringelblum became the leader of one of the most remarkable, heroic information-gathering efforts ever undertaken. Under the direst possible circumstances, Ringelblum organized suffering people **to document the destruction of the Polish Jews by Nazi Germany during World War II**. This massive archive of writings, journals, and other documents, found buried in metal boxes and milk cans after the war, is one of the most complete records anywhere of the struggle of the Jewish people to survive under Nazi oppression.

Born in 1900, Ringelblum grew up in Poland, a center of Jewish culture in the early twentieth century. As an adult he lived and worked in Warsaw, the capital of Poland, where more than 350,000 Jews made up about a third of the city's population. Jewish thinkers, writers, musicians, and artists were a vibrant part of Polish life.

Among these Jewish writers were people like Emanuel Ringelblum who were beginning to rethink the study of history. Convinced that the past was more than just biographies of kings and generals, Ringelblum became known as one of the greatest cultural historians of his day. He poured over records left by ordinary people to write important works about the life of Jews in Warsaw from ancient times to the present. He did his best to connect twentieth-century Jews with their past—for instance, by writing about the history of Warsaw street names. Beginning in 1925, he also worked with people who wanted to capture the story of modern-day Jews through scientific use of interviews and questionnaires.



Emanuel Ringelblum with his wife Yehudit and their son Uri

THE WARSAW GHETTO

After conquering Poland, the Germans began to force Jews out of their homes and villages all over the country and into special areas in cities and larger towns. These areas came to be called ghettos. In Warsaw, all Jewish residents were ordered into a ghetto area that was sealed off from the rest of the city in November 1940. A wall more than 10 feet high was built and topped with barbed wire. Guards kept close watch to make sure that the only Jews who left were laborers who had special passes to work in factories.

For Ringelblum, his small family, and others in the Warsaw ghetto, life was incredibly hard. Jews who moved in lost almost everything they owned, since they were permitted to bring only a few personal possessions. With a third of the city's population—some 350,000 people—suddenly packed into less than 3 percent of its area, the ghetto streets were crowded with homeless families. Food ration books issued by the Germans allowed ghetto residents less than 10 percent of the calories needed each day for survival. Hunger was constant. Every day people starved to death or succumbed to disease.

But the residents helped each other. Ringelblum and others worked together to organize soup kitchens, find lodgings for those on the street, and set up orphanages. Food smugglers, many of them children, found routes into and out of the ghetto through underground tunnels, sewers, or houses near the walls.

The Germans closed Jewish schools, libraries, and houses of worship, but the ghetto community found ways to operate these institutions secretly. Underground presses printed newspapers and illegal political books. Musicians even gave concerts. Each of these activities was important to keeping the human spirit alive. The people of the Warsaw ghetto were determined to outlast the German starvation tactics and make it through until the end of the war.

ONEG SHABBAT

Before long, Ringelblum realized that one man, working alone, would never be able to record fully the momentous events happening around him. He gathered a few colleagues to plan and coordinate a massive record-keeping effort. This group called themselves “Oneg Shabbat” (or Oyneg Shabbes)—meaning “Joy of Sabbath”—because they met on Saturdays, the Jewish Sabbath.

In Ringelblum's words, Oneg Shabbat's goal was to give an objective and “comprehensive picture of Jewish life in wartime—a photographic view of what the masses of the Jewish people had experienced, thought, and suffered...the

whole truth, however painful it might be.” Using the methods Ringelblum had learned before the war, Oneg Shabbat members planned a scientific, systematic effort based on interviews, questionnaires, and eyewitness accounts.

Working on the archive was dangerous. Anyone collecting detailed records of German activities risked being shot. Ringelblum kept his own notes in the form of letters to relatives. Rabbi Huberband hid the record he was keeping by writing in the margins of religious books.

For safety, many of the people who helped Oneg Shabbat weren’t told they were contributing to an enormous body of evidence. Refugees from small towns unwittingly helped write the story of Jews outside Warsaw by answering the questions of social workers. Children were assigned Oneg Shabbat essay topics as part of their school work. A writing contest was held, with cash prizes. Everyone was encouraged to keep journals.

HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT OF CREATING A TIME CAPSULE?

In effect, that is what Oneg Shabbat did when they decided to bury their milk can archive. The decision brought challenges with it. The documents had to be hidden well enough that the Germans wouldn’t find them, but not so well that they’d be lost to the world forever. The precious papers had to be protected from water and fire. Suitable containers had to be found within the ghetto itself, among everyday objects.

Oneg Shabbat succeeded in preserving most of their records for the future. Paper, however, is a very fragile material. Water and fire aren’t the only hazards: some insects eat paper, and mice like to shred it for nests. If you’ve ever seen an old, yellowed newspaper clipping, you know that acids in newsprint and many other kinds of paper will cause the pages to discolor, turn brittle, and finally disintegrate over time. Photographs, glues, metals, and plastics may also disintegrate or react chemically to destroy nearby objects.



Oneg Shabbat didn’t have the luxury of using modern materials and methods to preserve their records. They didn’t have access to special, acid-free papers or nonreactive plastic folders. They may not have understood which materials are best to store and which mean trouble. But today’s archives and museums do.

CREATE YOUR OWN, STATE-OF-THE-ART CLASS TIME CAPSULE

Go to the International Time Capsule Society home page (<http://crypt.oglethorpe.edu/international-time-capsule-society/>) to learn about the history of time capsules, how to pick an archivist to organize your capsule, what to collect, how to choose a container and register your capsule with the society, and much more! What items might you place in your own time capsule? How would you decide what is worth preserving?



PRESERVING THE MOMENT

Sixty years from now, what would you want to remember about your life today? What would you want other people to know about you and about this time in world history?

1. Write about a typical day. Write about your wishes and dreams, your worries and fears, or preserve these facts and feelings in a different way—in a poem or drawing.
2. Put these pages in a large envelope and address it to yourself. On it, write today's date—and the same date, next year.
3. A year from now, open the envelope and read what you've written. Then repeat the three steps. Add your latest pages to the envelope and close it up for another year. How long can you keep up your yearly "life snapshot"?



VOCABULARY

- **Activist**—One who takes direct action to support a belief.
- **Antisemitism**—Opposition to and hatred of Jews. Term first coined in the 1870's.
- **Archive or archives**—A collection of historic records, assembled together so they can be preserved.
- **Cache**—A hidden collection of something (food, supplies, etc.).
- **Chronicle**—A detailed historical account, arranged in order of time
- **Deport**—To move someone from or to a place by legal order.
- **Ghetto**—An area set apart where members of a minority group are forced to live. First used in Venice, Italy in 1516 when Jews were ordered to live in a specific area locked at night, partly for their own safety, partly as an anti-Jewish measure in order to segregate them from the rest of the population.
- **Holocaust**—From the Greek, meaning a sacrifice totally burned by fire.
- **The Holocaust**—The Holocaust was the state-sponsored, systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Jews were the primary victims—six million were murdered; Gypsies, the handicapped, and Poles were also targeted for destruction or decimation for racial, ethnic, or national reasons. Millions more, including homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi tyranny.



Archivists at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw sort through the contents of the Ringelblum archive, retrieved from two milk cans discovered in 1946 and 1950 in the ruins of buildings in the former ghetto.
— Yad Vashem, courtesy of the USHMM Photo Archives

EACH VOICE IS IMPORTANT

Emanuel Ringelblum's early research taught him that to understand the past, we need to understand "what the common man experienced, thought, and suffered." Often these feelings and experiences are what he and his fellow Oneg Shabbat members tried to capture for the future. Like every person on earth, you, too, are a witness to history. You, too, have a story to tell and a contribution to make. You may feel your life is "just ordinary"—but sometimes it is the everyday detail that speaks loudest. As Emanuel Ringelblum knew, even the most ordinary voice becomes extraordinary when given as a gift to the future.

OUR MISSION: "THE INCREASE AND DIFFUSION OF KNOWLEDGE"

Smithsonian Associates advances the Institution's mission through life-enriching educational and cultural experiences inspired by the Smithsonian's research and collections for DC-region students, families, and adults, and for learning communities nationwide.

Discovery Theater has been presenting DC-area children with live educational performances for almost 40 years. With programs that enrich the Smithsonian experience for nearly 50,000 children annually, Discovery Theater is a gateway to the exhibits, collections, and themes contained in the museums and galleries on the National Mall and beyond. We explore American history and cultures, folk tales from around the world, and exciting, accessible science and math programs in the company of puppeteers, storytellers, dancers, actors, and musicians. Discovery Theater performances unite ideologies, enact themes that reflect the diversity of its audiences, open avenues of self-reflection, and offer an enjoyable means for parents and teachers to demonstrate life's lessons. There's so much to do and explore at the Smithsonian—and Discovery Theater is the ideal place to begin!



Our Location

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