BEST KNOWN FOR his Warsaw ghetto diary, Chaim A. Kaplan was born 1880 in Horodyszcze, in the Minsk gubernia, to a Jewish family of limited means. He attended heder as a boy and received a traditional Jewish secondary education, studying at yeshivas in Mir, Minsk, and Lida. In the late 1890s, Kaplan enrolled in the government-run pedagogical institute for Jewish teachers in Vilna. In 1900, Kaplan became involved in the secular Jewish school movement and moved to Warsaw, where, in 1905, he founded a pioneering secular Hebrew elementary school, which he ran for thirty-four years as he devoted himself to Jewish education. His advocacy of the study of Hebrew as a spoken language using the Sephardi pronunciation culminated in the publication of several scholarly books and modern Hebrew textbooks for children.

In 1921, Kaplan traveled to the United States, where he made contact with Jewish educators. In 1926, the Hebrew Publishing Company in New York published Kaplan’s Hebrew Grammar and, two years later, his richly illustrated Haggadah with commentary (New York, 1927). The latter work included a lengthy introduction on Pesach (Passover) customs among Jewish communities around the world and was published also in Warsaw in Hebrew, Yiddish, and Polish and reprinted after the war in a Hebrew edition (New York, 1960). Kaplan also traveled to Palestine in 1936, intending to settle there to be with his two children, who had emigrated earlier. But he was unable to obtain a position and returned to Warsaw. The following year an anthology of Kaplan’s articles on Jewish education and pedagogy was published as Pezurai (Warsaw, 1937). Kaplan also actively contributed to the scholarly and popular press in interwar Poland, including Fraynd, Unzer lebn, Moment, and Haynt.

Diary

When World War II broke out on 1 September, 1939, Kaplan began to record the extraordinary events in a secret Hebrew-language diary. Within days of the German invasion of Poland, Kaplan commented on the historical importance of documenting the day-to-day events, as in his entry of 14 September, 1939: “It is difficult to write, but I consider it an obligation and am determined to fulfill it with my last ounce of energy.” Just a few months later, after Nazi Jewish policy began to make itself felt, Kaplan’s commitment to the diary dramatically intensified, as revealed in the entry of 16 January 1940: “I sense within me the magnitude of this hour, and my responsibility towards it, and I have an inner awareness that I am fulfilling a national obligation, a historic obligation that I am not free to relinquish. . . . I am sure that Providence sent me to fulfill this mission.”

While we now have several important Warsaw ghetto diaries, including those by Emmanuel Ringelblum, Adam Czerniakow, and Abraham Lewin, Kaplan’s is distinguished by its penetrating insight into the nature of Nazi antisemitism; its frank and astute observations about the Warsaw Jewish community, the Judenrat and Jewish police; and the precise recording of Nazi policies, as well as observations about Polish-Jewish relations and Jewish attitudes to Soviet Russia. From the very beginning of the Nazi occupation, Kaplan did not analyze the succession of Nazi edicts in terms of the specific consequences of each law. Rather, he sought to deduce a larger overall aim out of the haze of capricious decrees.

Kaplan sensed the disastrous implication of initial Nazi edicts even before Warsaw Jewry was subjected to the humiliation of external markings and the walled ghetto. When the Judenrat was ordered to conduct a full census of the Jewish population less than a month after the Nazi occupation of Warsaw, Kaplan commented, “For what purpose? . . . Our hearts tell us that a catastrophe for the Jewry of Poland is hidden in this demand” (16 October 1939). Five days later, following an edict barring Jews from certain sectors of the econ-
omy, Kaplan wrote of the beginning of Polish Jewry’s “legal destruction” (21 October 1939). By the end of October 1939, Kaplan suspected the worst, writing, “Blatant signs prove that some terrible catastrophe, unequalled in Jewish history, is in store for Polish Jewry” (25 October 1939). The tragedy, Kaplan further commented, “is not in the humane or cruel actions of individuals, but in the plan in general . . .” (28 October 1939). Grasping immediately the nature of Nazi antisemitism, Kaplan maintained that “In the eyes of the conquerors we are outside the category of human beings” (28 October 1939). By the third month of occupation, Kaplan surmised that the larger Nazi aim with regard to Jews was “complete extermination and destruc-

tion” (1 December 1939).

A keen observer of international affairs, Kaplan sensed the ominous link between Nazi war aims and Nazi Jewish policy as Hitler’s armies stormed across western Europe in the spring and summer of 1940. Fearing the fall of England, Kaplan wrote, “The destruction of England will mean the ultimate end for the house of Israel” (4 May 1940). As long as the Nazis remained drunk with real or imagined victories, Kaplan maintained, the Jews would enjoy some respite, while prolonged warfare and defeat would intensify Nazi aggression against Jews. As the conflict between England and Germany intensified after the fall of France, Kaplan noted in his diary “a new line of attack” by which Jewish civilians in Nazi-occupied Europe would be regarded as “combatants” who had to be “dealt with as enemy prisoners.” The Nazi concept that Jews caused the war in order to bring about the destructing of the Third Reich provided, Kaplan reasoned, a kind of legal rationalization for the total destruction of European Jewry (6 July 1940).

Meanwhile, Kaplan chronicled how the Jews were being “strangled by decrees” (21 Aug. 1940) as he records a succession of edicts barring Jews from public worship, from entering public parks, from riding in the same trolleys as Aryans, from owning horses, from (as doctors) treating Aryans patients, and from purchasing German-language books, as well as the stunning decree for the creation of a walled ghetto in Warsaw, “a barbaric edict which by its weight and results is greater than all the other edicts made against us up to now” (12 October 1940).

As rumors of war between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia appeared in spring 1941, Kaplan maintained that such a conflict would spell disaster for the Jews. “In the event of war with Russia . . . we are lost. . . . [T]he Jews will immediately become the target of revenge” (13 March 1941). As war erupted and the German army headed toward Moscow, Kaplan observed with chilling insight that a Nazi victory against Russia “means complete annihilation, morally and materially, for all the Jews of Europe” (18 October 1941). With the American entry into the war, an ecstatic Kaplan tempered his enthusiasm with the observation that henceforth, “the stupid Nazis will insist that Germany is at war with world Jewry” (12 December 1941).

Following the creation of the Warsaw ghetto, Kaplan’s diary focused more on the inner life of Warsaw Jewry and in particular on the Judenrat and its Jewish police. As disease, malnutrition, and starvation gripped the ghetto community, Kaplan praised the fearless smugglers “without whom we certainly would have starved to death” (5 November 1941). By fall 1941 and the winter of 1941–1942, Kaplan chronicled the devastating impact of Nazi Jewish policy, chillingly noting that the monthly death rate had risen to 10,000, and that “our bodies have shriveled to half their normal size” (13 October 1941) He also comments on the decline in moral standards resulting from the instinct of self-preservation (4 January 1942).

Kaplan’s diary is important as a record of how and when news about the Nazi Final Solution reached the ghetto. In February 1942, Kaplan recorded rumors that Hitler had decided to rid Europe of its Jews through shooting, including the mass killing of some 40,000 Jews from Vilna (2 February 1942), and that thousands of Jews had already been killed by the experimental use of poison gas (23 February 1942). When news reached Warsaw that 30,000 Jews were missing after a mass liquidation of the Lublin ghetto, and that no trace of them had been found, the question of their fate plagued Kaplan. By June 1942, Kaplan understood that they had all been transported in tightly sealed freight cars to “some secret place, unknown even to the hawk” (3 June 1942) where mass murder took place and which he would later refer to as the “kingdom of death” (22 July 1942).

The final part of Kaplan’s diary chronicled the mass deportation of the Warsaw ghetto in July and August of 1942. Here, Kaplan described the terror inflicted on the Warsaw Jewish population and reserves his most scathing critique for the Judenrat and, particularly, the Jewish police who daily delivered 8,000 deportees to the Nazis as demanded. The “cruelty” of the Jewish police “is no less than that of the Nazis,” Kaplan wrote on 26 July 1942, adding that “the extermination of the Jews” is being carried out not only by the Nazis but “by the Jewish slaughterers” as well. Despite imminent doom, Kaplan recorded with great detail the terror of the daily roundups and actions, proclaiming, “As long as my heart pulses, I continue my sacred task” (31 July 1942). At the height of the deportations, amid the horror of physical expulsions and brutality, Kaplan
lamented the destruction of Europe’s largest Jewish community:

Jewish Warsaw is in its death throes. A whole community is going to its death! The appalling events follow one another so abundantly that it is beyond the power of a writer of impressions to collect, arrange, and classify them; particularly when he himself is caught in their vise. . . . And let it be known: From the very beginning of the world, since the time when man first had dominion over another man to do him harm, there has never been so cruel and barbaric an expulsion as this one. From hour to hour, even from minute to minute, Jewish Warsaw is being demolished and destroyed, reduced and decreased. Since the day exile was decreed [22 July 1942], ruin and destruction, exile and wandering, bereavement and widowhood have befallen us in all their fury (2 Aug. 1942).

Kaplan’s last words in his diary, written on 4 August 1942, asked, “If my life ends—what will become of my diary?”

Publication

Kaplan’s diary was known in the ghetto. Emmanuel Ringelblum, in his writings from late January 1943, wrote: “The Hebrew diary of the writer and teacher, Kaplan . . . numbered a thousand pages and comprised a multitude of information about daily events in Warsaw.” The diary “is a faithful reflection” of the tragic experience of the average Warsaw Jew, both “his sufferings and desires for revenge.” On several occasions, Ringelblum personally asked Kaplan to temporarily hand over his diary notebooks to the Oneg Shabbat archives for sake keeping until after the war. But Kaplan would only agree to his diary being copied, which Ringelblum was unable to do under the conditions of the ghetto. (Ringelblum, pp. 490–491). Fearing imminent deportation, Kaplan gave the diary notebooks to a Jewish friend who was working daily outside the ghetto in forced labor detachments. Chaim Kaplan perished in Treblinka sometime between late 1942 and early 1943. The precious notebooks were entrusted to Władysław Wojciek, a Pole from a village outside of Warsaw, who preserved them throughout the war and subsequently made them available to researchers. The diary first appeared in English in 1965 under the title The Scroll of Agony, and one year later was published in Israel in the original Hebrew. Kaplan’s Warszaw diary has since been translated into German, French, Danish, and Japanese and is considered one of the most important records of the Warsaw ghetto in particular and of the Holocaust in general.

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