

Diaries, Holocaust

Personal journals written by victims of the Holocaust. These diaries are very useful to historians as reliable primary sources. Unlike Holocaust literature written after the fact, they provide a direct window into the lives of those who endured the day-to-day horrors of the Holocaust. They describe the genuine feelings of those who experienced the Holocaust, without the drawbacks of 20-20 hindsight.

Holocaust diaries were kept for several reasons. Some Jews, including many teenagers and children, felt the need to record their feelings of pain and humiliation as an outlet of expression. Others wrote diaries so that there would be some historical evidence of what was happening, which could help ensure that what they were going through would never happen again. Some even wrote as an act of resistance—their way of showing that they could not be defeated.

Jews kept diaries in all countries, in every situation—in Ghettos, camps, and in hiding. Many of the diaries have been lost, so it is impossible to estimate how much was written during the Holocaust and by whom. However, the many writings that were found and preserved have served as important reminders of the legacy of those who perished.

Several different kinds of diaries were written during the Holocaust. These include daily records of events, public diaries, private diaries, and children's diaries. Those journals that recorded day-to-day happenings did not usually include personal thoughts or observations about the events described, but rather presented a drier type of record. One example of this was the chronicles of the Lodz Ghetto *Judenrat*. *Judenrat* members charged some of the council's employees with recording the current events that took place in their ghetto from January 1940 to July 1944.

Public diaries were similar to daily chronicles in that they did not record private feelings, but rather concentrated on public events that affected many. However, unlike daily chronicles, public diaries emphasized those specific details that the author associated with historical trends. One such diary is that of the historian Emanuel Ringelblum of the Warsaw Ghetto, who kept both his

own public chronicles and organized the writings and testimonies of others in the Oneg Shabbat Archives. Other public diaries were written by Adam Czerniakow, the head of the Warsaw Ghetto *Judenrat*; Raymond-Raoul (Heshel) Lambert, a leader of the Union of French Jews; and Tova Draenger, a leader of the *Akiva* movement and the Fighting *Halutz* resistance movement in Cracow.

In private diaries, the authors concentrated on their own feelings, observations, and experiences, or on their relatives' experiences. They did not generally describe current events; rather they wrote about those happenings in which they themselves were involved. Some such diaries were found in concentration camps—several, whose authors were members of the *Sonderkommando* units, were discovered in the ruins of the Auschwitz-Birkenau crematorium. These men wrote about the horrors of being in daily contact with murder, and begged the world to understand how they had been forced by the Nazis to participate in the extermination process. They also disclose many details about the *Sonderkommando* uprising in Birkenau, for which there is very little other primary source material.

Children's diaries are a special type of private diary. They help us see the horrors of the Holocaust through the observant eyes of children who quietly protested what was happening, and struggled to find the good in the world in even those darkest of times. The most famous of these diaries is that of Anne Frank, the young Dutch teenager who kept a diary while hiding from the Nazis in Amsterdam. Her father published her diary after the war, and it has served as an important testament and reminder to millions of readers around the world.