

BOOK CLUB KIT



Dear Reader,

We Must Not Think of Ourselves is a novel I never expected to write. I had no ambition to tell a story about the Holocaust; people like Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi had already done the brutal job as perfectly as it could be done. I could not imagine attempting to put myself in their company.

But in July 2019, I discovered the stories of the people of the Warsaw Ghetto.

Or, more specifically, during a family trip to Warsaw, a tour guide brought us to the Jewish Historical Institute, a prosaic name for an extraordinary place. The institute houses the Emanuel Ringelblum Archive, the work of thirty-two secret diarists who, under the direction of historian Emanuel Ringelblum, secretly recorded everything about their imprisonment in the ghetto from 1940–1943. In comprehensive detail, their reports describe the ghetto’s schools, synagogues, and prisons; its marriages and births; its struggles to feed its population; and its terror at the oncoming deportations to Treblinka. Their work constitutes the most significant written testimony of what was once Europe’s largest Jewish community.

Of the thirty-two diarists, three survived; they were the ones who showed authorities where to dig up the buried archive after the war. Without this record, we would know nothing of the Warsaw Ghetto, save what the Nazis saw fit to record.

My family and I spent a transfixed afternoon reading translated diary entries and studying the ephemera the diarists collected. When we left, I said to my sister, “There are a thousand novels in that building.”

She said, “So you should write one of them.”

“Hah!” I said out loud. Then, for emphasis, I said it again.

“Why not?”

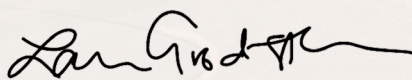
“Every reason,” I said. “But first and foremost, who am I to even try?”

Yet the people of the archive kept tugging at me: Daniel Fligelman, who believed in the humane treatment of animals; Gela Sekstain, who drew beautiful portraits of her daughter. I spent almost a year trying to ignore them—and then the pandemic started. Suddenly I was trapped in my house, and I needed a project. I decided to write a page of the novel. We’d see how it went.

Much to my surprise, the first page begat another one, and then another, and during those long days when there was nothing to do but stay inside and worry, I found I could bury myself in the research and imagination I needed to write this book. I envisioned my characters trying to live their lives, finding food, finding meaning—even finding small moments of joy. Days outside were filled with fear of Covid; days inside were filled with the memory and testimony of the Warsaw Ghetto archivists and the characters I imagined who lived alongside them.

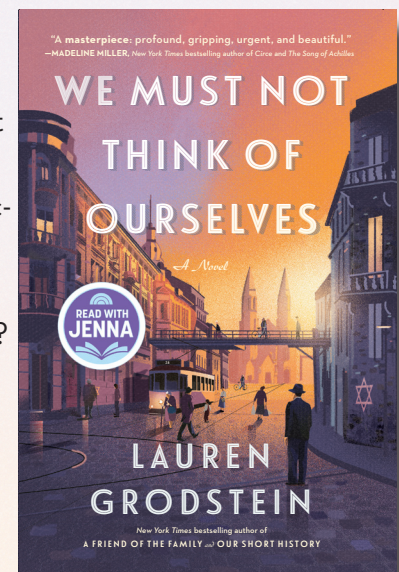
Now that I’ve spent years with the residents of the Warsaw Ghetto—both real and fictional—I’ve learned that the story of the archive is there for us whether or not we feel we’re up to the challenge. Perhaps now more than ever, we must listen to what the Jews of Warsaw wanted us to know.

Sincerely,



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why did Emanuel Ringelblum create the Oneg Shabbat project? How did the project's goals change as the novel progressed?
2. Why do you think more people didn't try to escape from the ghetto?
3. Everything in the ghetto is a trade. What are some of the various economic systems that keep the Jews alive?
4. In what ways are the children at the heart of ghetto life?
5. What is Szifra's attitude toward her brothers? Why doesn't she abandon them?
6. Although Adam never had children of his own, he takes on various paternal roles throughout the novel. What kind of father figure is he to Szifra? To her brothers? To Sala's boys? What is he attempting to teach them through poetry?
7. What kind of man do you think Nowak, the guard who helped Adam, really is?
8. Midway through the novel, Adam encounters a fellow Oneg Shabbat archivist who tells him the ghetto has exposed the rot of Warsaw's Jewish citizens. What do you make of his speech, and of Adam's reaction to it?
9. If Kasia were alive, do you think she would have accompanied Adam to the ghetto? Would they have been able to escape before the war?
10. What role does Yiddish play in *We Must Not Think of Ourselves*? What does it symbolize? What is its power?
11. How did you feel about Henryk Duda, Kasia's father? Did he love Adam, or did he just want to use him for his own ends?
12. Is Sala and Adam's affair—in the same apartment as her husband and children—immoral, or do you think morality can take different shapes in certain circumstances?
13. What do you make of Adam switching out the photos in the kennkartes? Were you disturbed by his choice to do so, or do you think you might have done the same?
14. Do you think Sala's husband knew what was going on between her and Adam?
15. Have you ever been in a situation where every one of your options is a compromise, that there is no way to do right by everyone? How did that make you feel? Nearly every character in the novel finds themselves in this situation. In what ways did this story broaden your understanding of life during the Holocaust?



LAUREN'S GUIDE TO WARSAW

WHAT TO SEE

The **Okopowa Street Cemetery** is one of the largest Jewish cemeteries in the world. It contains the graves of over 250,000 Polish Jews, including the mass graves of those killed in the Warsaw Ghetto. It is impossible to walk around here and not feel moved—and awed—by the numbers of Jews who lived and died in Warsaw and their incredible accomplishments: there are so many writers here, so many scientists, famous artists, famous musicians, even the inventor of Esperanto. You can also find the graves of Adam Czerniakow, who led the Judenrat (the Jewish Council) in the Warsaw Ghetto, and Marek Edelman, the last surviving leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, who died in 2009.

The **Warsaw Zoo** is a pretty good zoo—hopping lemurs, slithering otters—but the real attraction here is the Zabinski Villa, a small modernist house that hid, in its basement, over three hundred Jews during the course of World War II. You must arrange a guided tour in advance, but it is well worth it to learn the incredible story of the Zabinski family, zookeepers who used the family piano to signal danger to the Jews downstairs, and who, after the war, were honored by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations.



The **Polin Museum** is one of the finest museums I've ever visited. It tells the one-thousand-year story of Polish Jewry, from the first settlers to the medieval shtetls to the bustling social and intellectual life of the interwar cities. Here you will find a stunning re-creation of a wooden synagogue from the seventeenth century, registries and archives of Jews from the Middle Ages, and interactive exhibits dedicated to Jewish newspapers and theater. The museum's audio guide is comprehensive and there are lots of areas specially designed for young children to explore and play. And, if you're into this kind of thing (I am), the museum's restaurant and shop are superb.

The **Jewish Historical Institute**, located at 3/5 Tlomaskie Street, houses the Emanuel Ringelblum Archive, an astonishing and precious record of ghetto life during World War II. Emanuel Ringelblum was a historian who spearheaded the Oneg Shabbat group, a secret collective of diarists and journalists who created a three-dimensional history of everything that happened during the three years of the ghetto's existence. The Institute tells the story of the ghetto from its founding through its destruction, gives background on the members of the Oneg Shabbat archive, and keeps alive the memory of the open-air prison where Jewish Warsaw lived its final days.



LAUREN'S GUIDE TO WARSAW

WHERE TO STAY

Every time I go to Warsaw I stay at the **Sofitel Warsaw Victoria**, which has everything I like in a hotel: it's quiet as a mausoleum, boasts a gorgeous swimming pool, stocks top-notch toiletries (Hermès shower gel, anyone?) and offers up a hilariously vast breakfast buffet. It's centrally located, and the lobby bartender makes a very nice gin martini. Plus, due to the friendly exchange rate, a hotel that would be a financial stretch on this side of the Atlantic is relatively affordable in Poland. There are probably other hotels in Warsaw—even nice ones!—but the Sofitel Warsaw Victoria is my go-to whenever I'm lucky enough to be in this city.

WHERE TO EAT

I happen to love Polish food. It's a wintry cuisine, and perhaps not for everyone, but as far as I'm concerned, there's nothing more vivifying than a bowl of rye bread soup and a plate of pierogies (washed down, or not, with a shot of vodka). My favorite places to eat in Poland are its many milk bars, or **bar mleczny**, which were established during the Communist era to provide cheap, nourishing meals to the masses. They operate like cafeterias, and you can get a big old plate of mushroom pierogies, a bowl of soup, and a pile of cheese crepes for maybe five dollars. Milk bars are reliably delicious, un-touristy, and welcoming, a uniquely Polish experience that makes me feel like a local.



My favorite milk bars in Warsaw are:

- Bar Prasowy—The interior is sleek and maybe even a bit chic, but don't be fooled: this is an old-school milk bar with delicious pierogies and top-notch potato pancakes. Plus, the woman who took my order spoke enough English to talk me into an extra serving of apple crepes, which was an excellent idea.
- Bar Bambino—I was told that this was a super-popular milk bar, but when I arrived at around six p.m. it was almost empty, and the few people there were staring sullenly into paperbacks like iPhones hadn't even been invented. I loved it! The tomato soup was slightly sweet and filled with tiny noodles, the coffee was strong, and they let me stay and read my own paperback till closing.
- Milk Bar Elektrownia—This milk bar has the advantage of being close to the Sofitel (see above) and has some nice outdoor tables where you can sit while the sun shines. The desserts here are especially wonderful: they have a cheesecake that puts Brooklyn's to shame, and there was this kind of milk cake that tasted like a cloud married a marshmallow and honeymooned in a bowl of crème brûlée. Outstanding.

WHERE TO SHOP

The main shopping street in Warsaw is **Nowy Swiat**, which is full of Zaras and H&Ms and stores aimed at tourists, but my favorite place to shop in Warsaw is the Mokotów district. Here, just north of the Plac Zbawiciela (there are excellent pastries at the bistro Charlotte on the square), you'll find streets lined with beautiful boutiques like Grail Point, Le Collet, and Wasalaa. These stores feature Polish and European designers that are hard to find in the US, and shopping there is a wonderful way to bring a small bit of Warsaw home.



LAUREN'S PHOTO JOURNAL

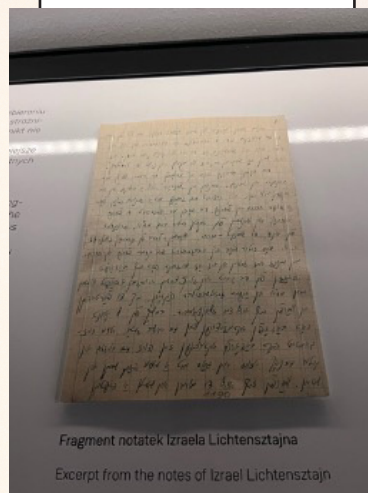
The complete Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto, the so-called "Ringelblum Archive," transcribed in Polish and English.



One of the milk cans buried by the Oneg Shabbat group in July 1943, before the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. There were three milk cans buried but only two unearthed and identified by the three surviving members of Oneg Shabbat. The third is rumored to still be buried under the Chinese Embassy of Warsaw.



Gila Sekstein's portrait of her daughter, Margot, who was entrapped in the ghetto and subsequently killed.



Fragment notatek Izraela Lichtensztajna

Excerpt from the notes of Israel Lichtensztajn

A page from an archivist's diary.