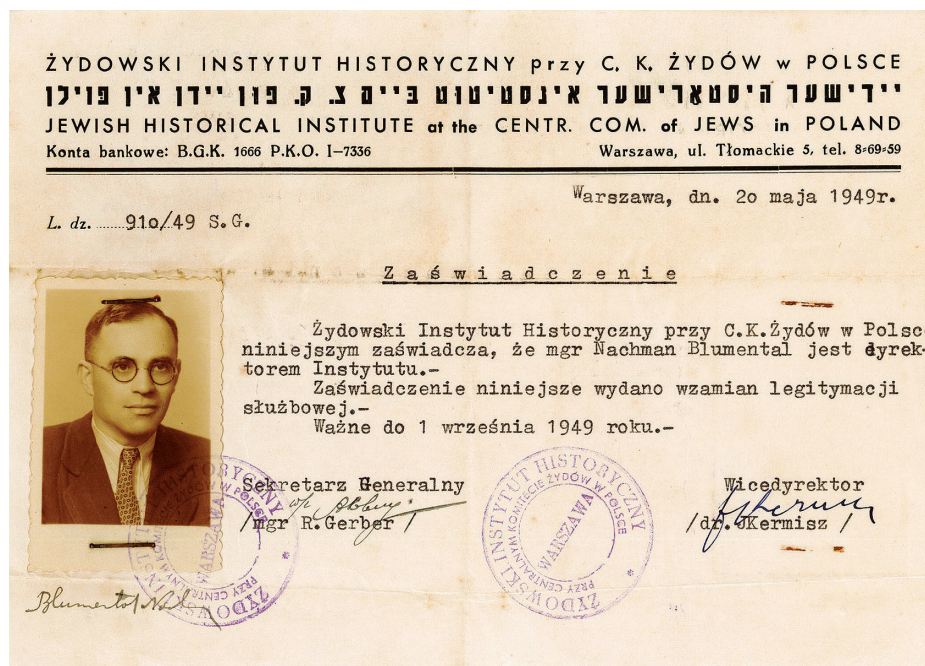


THE YIDDISHISTS

OUR SERIES DELVES INTO THE TREASURES OF THE WORLD'S BIGGEST YIDDISH ARCHIVE AT THE YIVO INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH RESEARCH



Blumental's Jewish Historical Institute membership card; Dictionary cards

from the public but also from oneself, and thereby enables the horrors of mass murder, gas chambers, extermination camps, and robbery to become normalised in the discourse of everyday life. Nazi language, Orwell observed, brutalised and degraded German language and thought.

Blumental understood this. The thousands of Nazi euphemisms and neologisms he examined are not simply examples of perverted language. They are a key to understanding the mentality of totalitarianism, whereby Nazi ideology became instrumentalised in the genocide of the Jews. The unthinkable becomes thinkable; the unspeakable becomes a matter of daily, 'innocent' speech.

After the war, Blumental returned to Borszczów to find the Polish man who had murdered his wife and their three-year-old son. He interviewed him as well as the townspeople who had witnessed the murder of his family.

Blumental's notes from these interviews complement his study of the Nazis' 'innocent' speech. The so-called bystanders observed the mother and son being led to the killing place and watched in fascinated horror as the mother undressed her son. But they did not protest or demand that this latter-day Passion play be stopped. Were they innocent? Or were they by their inaction also enablers without whose passive – and sometimes not so passive – participation the terrible work of genocide could not proceed?

Blumental's archive raises these questions and takes us into the heart of the unspeakable. His work anticipated the current critical reassessment of Polish collaboration in the Holocaust that has produced so much consternation in Poland and which has given rise to new generations of 'innocent' words that are not innocent at all. The role of the 'bystander' both in those horrific times and in the present day may be the most troubling of the moral issues raised in any reflection on the evil of the Holocaust and genocide more generally. ■

Visit yivo.org for more. Jonathan Brent is YIVO's Executive Director and CEO.

THE HOLOCAUST DICTIONARY

Nachman Blumental's investigations into the Nazi perversion of language are key to understanding how totalitarianism operates.

Jonathan Brent explores his remarkable work

The archive of Nachman Blumental, recently donated to YIVO by his son, Miron, constitutes one of the most important bodies of Holocaust evidence to come to light in recent years. It adds around 200,000 documents to the seven million in YIVO's Holocaust archive.

Blumental was born in 1905, in Borszczów, Poland. He was a history teacher and member of YIVO before World War II. During the war, he fled to the Soviet zone but his wife Maria and son Ariel remained in Poland and were murdered in 1943. In 1944, he was among the founders of the Jewish Historical Commission, which collected survivor eyewitness testimony to the Holocaust. In 1947 he became the first director of the Jewish Historical Institute (ZIH) in Warsaw. He also served as an expert witness in the trials of Rudolf Höss and Arthur Liebehenschel, both commandants of Auschwitz, and in other post-war trials of Nazi perpetrators.

The archive contains Blumental's life's work: an examination of Nazi language, as well as photographs and personal materials; Nazi documents; songs, ghetto

diaries and poetry; survivor accounts and much more. His investigation into the perversion of the German language by the Nazi regime occupied his entire life. The first volume of his study, *Słowa Niewinne* [Innocent Words], was published in 1947. It included the following examples of how some words acquired another, sinister, meaning under the Nazi regime:

AUSSIEDLUNG (eviction): the destruction and robbery of Jewish property

ENTLASSEN (to dismiss): murder

ERHOLUNG (recreation): prison

BAUERNHÄUSER (farmhouses): gas chambers

GROßEINSATZ (major operation): liquidation of the Jews

THE PHRASE 'DEPORTATION TO THE EAST' murder in extermination camps

In his 1946 essay, *Politics and the English Language*, George Orwell noted that language shapes thought – not merely how but what you see. As a result, perverted language – language whose true aim is to conceal – hides one's actual intentions not only