

War in Context: Let the Artifacts Speak

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Why would the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) be interested in participating in a conference on whether war should be displayed in military museums and armories? The USHMM is not an armory. We have just a handful of guns in our permanent exhibition on the Holocaust, and those were used in the resistance and are in less than ideal condition. We are also not a war museum. We are a museum on the history of the Holocaust and a memorial to the victims. The USHMM, however, must deal with many of the same issues as war museums and armories.

Since its founding, the Museum has grappled with how to depict extreme examples of horror and destruction without feeding people's propensity to glorify war, stoking their macabre or voyeuristic fascination with terror, trivializing the event, and, above all, sacrificing the victim's dignity – essentially making them victims for a second time.¹ The USHMM's founders were anxious that the Museum – with its pictures of atrocities – not become a museum of horrors. They extensively debated the types and manner in which images would be displayed. To prevent visitors and especially younger people from being bombarded with shocking and disturbing photos, concrete privacy walls were placed in front of the monitors displaying the more graphic images, allowing visitors to decide whether or not they wished to see the displays. In hindsight, privacy walls were not the answer; their presence sometimes serving as an attraction to – as one barely teenage boy once put it to one of the authors – the good stuff. Although one can never deter a determined viewer, the Museum is considering more subtle ways of screening such imagery in future exhibits.

The founders of the Museum also grappled with how much the permanent exhibition should show about the war and especially about the perpetrators. The concern was that exhibits about Hitler could become a place of homage for neo-Nazis, where – it was feared – flowers and votive offerings would be left. The original plan for the permanent exhibition thus contained little about Hitler, the Nazis, and the war itself.

1 | Edward Tabor Linenthal (2001): *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Although an interesting idea, the perpetrator-less exhibit gave the impression that an unseen force had committed the Holocaust, almost as if a meteorite had hurtled down and destroyed the Jewish communities of Europe. In the end, a portrait of Hitler and a large Nuremberg flag were reinstated in the exhibit plan, but they were placed behind a large, black, iron grill, thus separating the objects from the viewers and making it seem as if they were behind bars.

Such issues are minor, however, compared with the problem of conveying that the six million Jews murdered during the Holocaust were real people with real lives and families. How can an exhibition return the humanity to all the people murdered in the chaos of war when the numbers discussed are literally incomprehensible? Most institutions resort to exhibiting old photographs of long lines of people trudging with their few belongings in small suitcases and sacks. These exhibits lack power, however, in a day and age when people equate grainy, black-and-white photos with ancient history.

One way to return the humanity to the victims is to put the visitors in the victim's frame of mind, making the viewers think about what they would take if they were never to return home again. If asked, most people would probably assume that the refugees and victims were carrying clothing and some food, whatever transportable valuables they had left, official documents such as passports and family records, and work records, including job histories and recommendations. After all, why would someone sacrifice valuable space and weight to take something that is of no use? Is this true, however? Do people only take with them what is essential, valuable, or useful? Visitors would be surprised by the number of seemingly superfluous personal items that victims and refugees carried with them. Visitors would probably be equally astonished to learn that the people in the long lines were also creating or discovering new items along the way that they then proceeded to carry with them. These items were obviously important to the victims or they would have been abandoned. Perhaps they were mementos of the people's lost lives, symbols of their desire to start a new life somewhere else, or simply validations of their humanity – their ability to still appreciate beauty in the midst of ugliness?

The objective of this article is to show how displaying personal items in context can turn the huge numbers of victims back into individuals and return their humanity. Three case-studies will be discussed: personal items discovered near shooting pits in Ukraine; damaged photographs from Poland; and a piece of mica from the Theresienstadt Glimmerwerke (mica factory).

PERSONAL ITEMS FROM UKRAINE

A tenet of the Nazi Party from its founding in the 1920s was the elimination of what it termed the Judeo-Bolshevik threat supposedly posed by the USSR and its Jewish community. After conquering Western Europe, Nazi Germany turned its sights on

the Soviet Union, invading it on 22 June 1941 in an ideological war of annihilation codenamed *Operation Barbarossa*. To ensure the total subjugation of the region and make the rich farmland safe for eventual German expansion and settlement, four mobile killing-units, known as Einsatzgruppen, followed the German army into Soviet territory, killing anyone deemed a threat to German occupation, including Jews, Roma, and Soviet political officials. By late July 1941, the Einsatzgruppen – aided by locally recruited police auxiliaries and German police units – were murdering Jewish communities in their entirety: men, women, and children. Over a million Jews and tens of thousands of Soviet political officials, Roma, and disabled people were eventually murdered by the Einsatzgruppen and their collaborators by the spring of 1943.

The USHMM has extensive documentary evidence in its archives of the thousands of actions conducted by the Einsatzgruppen, including SS reports of the number of people shot at different locations and even photographs of the actions sent home by soldiers in the German army who witnessed the shootings.² We also have documentary and photographic evidence that a special unit known as Sonderkommando 1005 was established during Germany's retreat in 1943 to destroy the mass graves resulting from the massacres.³ Commanded by SS-Standartenführer Paul Blobel, Jewish slave laborers were forced to exhume mass graves; cremate what remained of the bodies on huge, outdoor pyres; and then pulverize any extant bone-fragments in large crushing machines. Moreover, we have documentation recording the periodic shooting and replacement of the Sonderkommandos with new Jewish prisoners brought in to obliterate their predecessors' presence as well as continue their work.

Some of the most emotional evidence, however, comes from the on-the-ground work of Father Patrick Desbois, with the USHMM's assistance.⁴ Spurred as a youth

2 | For example, see Wendy Lower (2007): *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; Joshua Rubenstein/Ilya Altman (2007) (eds.): *The Unknown Black Book: The Holocaust in the German-Occupied Soviet Territories*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; and Timothy Snyder (2010): *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, New York: Basic Books.

3 | »International Conference on Operation 1005: Nazi Attempts to Erase the Evidence of Mass Murder in Eastern and Central Europe, 1942–1944«, 15-16 June 2009 at the Collège des Bernardins in Paris and co-organized by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum' Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, Yahad-In Unum, Collège des Bernardins, and the Université Paris IV-Sorbonne.

4 | Father Patrick Desbois (2009): *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews*, with a foreword by Paul A. Shapiro, New York: Palgrave Macmillan with support from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

by his grandfather's brief description of the fate of the Ukrainian Jewish population, Father Desbois helped found *Yahad-In Unum* in 2004 to determine what had actually occurred. He and his team have located hundreds of mass graves in Ukraine and Belarus since then and hundreds of bullet casing at these sites. They have also collected nearly 2,000 testimonies from eye-witnesses.

Displaying such compelling evidence may demonstrate the results of the murderous policy and the ruthlessness of the perpetrators, but it does not return the victims' humanity. These individuals, who were once part of an old and vibrant Jewish community, are reduced to pits of bones seemingly to be remembered only as victims for evermore. Changing them back into real people in the eyes of museum visitors requires displaying artifacts of their lives as well as their deaths.



Figure 1: Rings recovered approximately 10 meters from a mass grave in Busk, Ukraine (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Acc. 2008.76.1–2008.76.5, gift of Father Patrick Desbois and Yahad-In Unum)

© Photo by Jane Klinger

In addition to bullet casings, Father Desbois' team found a number of wedding rings and other jewelry (Figure 1) roughly 10 meters from the shooting pits in Busk, Ukraine. These objects must have been purposely thrown away by the Jewish population when they were forced to undress and hand their personal belongings to their murderers. Knowing full well that they were about to die, these individuals discarded their most cherished objects in a last act of defiance rather than letting their murderers get their hands on them. Displaying these significant yet overly familiar objects in a manner reminiscent of how they were found (e.g., haphazardly in a stabilized but tarnished condition) would force museum visitors to connect with the victims in ways not possible otherwise. Most people appreciate that simply losing a wedding ring is a heart-rending experience; and the idea that these people deliberately threw theirs away makes the viewer appreciate the strength and fortitude of the victims even more. Thus, displaying these seemingly insignificant objects in the proper manner would force the visitor to appreciate that these victims were

individuals – making whatever final decisions were still possible up until the very end – and not just fodder for a murderous policy.

DAMAGED PHOTOGRAPHS FROM POLAND

The second case-study concerns a set of photographs that was donated to the USHMM by Lidia Kleinman Siciarz. Mrs. Siciarz was born in Łacko, Poland, in 1930 to Dr. Mendel Kleinman, a radiologist, and Aniuta (nee Szwarcman) Kleinman. Dr. Kleinman was mobilized by the Polish army during the German and Soviet invasions of Poland in 1939 but was soon captured by the Soviets. With Dr. Kleinman in prison, Mrs. Kleinman took her daughter to Pinsk and moved in with her parents. Dr. Kleinman escaped from a prisoner transport in 1940 and made his way to Pinsk. He then fled with his family to Turka nad Stryem, where he worked in a local hospital until the German army invaded in 1941. Dr. Kleinman was once again arrested, this time being forced to live in the local hospital as a prisoner and treat German soldiers.

Mrs. Kleinman and her daughter remained in Turka nad Stryem until 1942, when Mrs. Kleinman heard rumors of an action to take place the following day in which all non-essential members of the Jewish population were to be deported. Thinking quickly, Mrs. Kleinman sent her daughter in the middle of the night to Dr. Kleinman at the hospital, where the head nurse, Sister Jadwiga, hid her. Before leaving, Mrs. Kleinman gave her daughter a locked cosmetics case, making her promise to keep it safe. The young Lidia spent the next three years in hiding in Catholic orphanages in Lvov, Lomna, and finally Warsaw, where she remained until 5 May, 1945, when she was reunited with her father. Sadly, Mrs. Kleinman did not survive the Holocaust.

Although Lidia had lost the key over the intervening years, she had fulfilled her promise to her mother to keep the case safe. She and her father forced the case open and found it crammed with important documents and photographs from before the war. It is incredible to think that these photographs had survived six years of running, from 1939 in Łacko – when Mrs. Kleinman must have packed them – to her husband's and daughter's reuniting in 1945 in Warsaw. The value that these photographs held for Mrs. Kleinman – and then for her husband and daughter – must have been tremendous.

The photos were subsequently placed by an aunt of Mrs. Siciarz into another photo album using double-sided tape. Since the album also contained many materials from well after the war, Mrs. Siciarz removed the photographs by pulling them off the new pages. Pieces of double-sided tape as well as residues of the modern album paper remained on the backs of the photographs, causing a conservation dilemma. These newer materials had to be distinguished from the traces of the original glue and album pages adhered to the back of the photos, which were not harming the

photos and testified to the panic during which Mrs. Kleinman tore the photos out for safe keeping in the cosmetics case. Returning the photos to pristine condition would have meant destroying all vestiges of their Holocaust history. Thus, it was critical to remove the modern double-sided tape and album pages residues without removing the original materials.



*Figure 2: Photo of Dr. Mendel Kleinman, Lidia Kleinman Siciarz (seated), and an unidentified cousin, circa 1937 (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Acc. 1999.113.97)
© Courtesy of Lidia Kleinman Siciarz*



*Figure 3: Verso of Photo 2 before conservation (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Acc. 1999.113.97-BT, courtesy of Lidia Kleinman Siciarz)
© Photo by Conservation Branch, USHMM*



*Figure 4: Verso of Photo 2 after conservation (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Acc. 1999.113.97-AT, courtesy of Lidia Kleinman Siciarz)
© Photo by Conservation Branch, USHMM*

As can be seen in the Figures 2-4, the conservators at the USHMM – including one of the authors – were able to do just that. The newer materials were stripped off completely while the original, Holocaust-era material remained intact, preserving the historical damage done to the photos and the overall integrity, power, and history of the objects. An exhibit consisting of a contextualizing narrative and the photographs mounted over a mirror, which would allow visitors to view both the front and damaged back of the photos, would make a simple yet powerful exhibit of the trauma faced and decisions made by Mrs. Kleinman as a person during one of the most tragic periods in history.

MICA FROM THE THERESIENSTADT GLIMMERWERKE

Emma (nee Pariser) Jonas was born on 14 December 1889 in Inowraclaw (now Inowroclaw, Poland), which was part of German Prussia at the time. Mrs. Jonas was married to Martin Israel Jonas, who was born on 5 June 1885 in Lobsens (now Łobżenica, Poland), which was less than 100 km from Inowraclaw. They lived with their one daughter, Helga (nee Jonas) Carden, in Berlin, where Mr. Jonas was a business man.

Mr. and Mrs. Jonas successfully got their daughter on a Kindertransport to England in March of 1939, but they were unable to flee themselves. Mr. and Mrs. Jonas were arrested in early 1943 and taken to Hapsburgerstrasse collection center. They were then shuttled from center to center until mid-May, when Mr. Jonas suffered congestive heart failure. As a decorated World War I veteran, Mr. Jonas was taken to a series of nursing homes until he finally ended up in Berlin's Jewish Hospital. Mrs. Jonas was allowed to accompany him throughout these moves, eventually becoming an ironer in the hospital. Mr. Jonas died on 2 October 1944 at 6 AM, leaving his wife unprotected. The recently widowed Mrs. Jonas was deported to Theresienstadt on 24 November 1944, where she worked in the mica factory (Glimmerwerke).

A number of German industries had opened plants near Theresienstadt in order to take advantage of the ghetto's "free labor". The Glimmerwerke, or mica factory, opened in June, 1942 and existed semi-continuously until 1945. The female laborers who were forced to work there each day had to use extremely fine blades to split large mica cores into individual sheets of particular dimensions for use as electrical insulation. The work was extremely difficult yet monotonous. The women were constantly slicing their fingers in their haste to meet the ever-increasing production quotas. If quotas were not met, the workers had to continue working until the full amount was produced. In a world where life constantly hung in the balance, working past one's allotted shift had serious ramifications. Not only did it further exhaust an already seriously weakened and half-starved slave-labor force, it also meant missing the meager food rations back at the ghetto, making surviving the next day even more challenging.

Like so many people during the Holocaust, Mrs. Jonas found life in Theresienstadt and the mica factory horrific. She wrote many poems about her time there, including “In the Glimmer Splitting Factory”:

The young and the old
Bent over figures
Sit and work
under forced obligation

Split the glimmer
The silver glitter
Until leaf and plate
are according to size

The left one has to hold
the right one has to split
at a pace that they will fit
and if the accord is lost it
will indicate sabotage, and
that threatens transport.⁵

The sound of the crackle and
fearful whisper
The ice cold hands
“I will not make it today”

A difficult plague
a rushing chase
Until ‘glimmer’ and knife cut the fingers

And if the controls want to weigh again
We stand in front of a heavy fearing question in every face

what are the weights?
So our life hangs on the tongue of the scale.

Not surprisingly, Mrs. Jonas suffered from bouts of depression so deep that she considered committing suicide. She did survive Theresienstadt, however, and was liberated by Soviet troops on 8 May 1945. She then spent the next sixteen years moving: from Theresienstadt to Deggendorf DP camp in 1946; to the UK in 1947, where she

5 | Transport to Auschwitz.

was reunited with her daughter; to Canada in 1957; and then finally to the United States in 1961.

Throughout these successive moves and sixteen years, Mrs. Jonas always kept a piece of mica from the Glimmerwerke with her (Figure 5). Why would she have done this, when her life in Theresienstadt was so harsh and painful? Did she consider the mica to be a talisman that had protected her from death? Did she want to keep it as a symbol of her strength and ability to survive even the most dire of circumstances? Did it simply appeal to her aesthetic sense? It would have been easy to have lost or discarded it over that time, not to mention that mica is a highly friable material that easily breaks apart. Mrs. Jonas must have deliberately taken care of the piece for it to have survived those sixteen years in transit. A display containing Mrs. Jonas' story, her poetry, and the mica would thus form a very powerful exhibit that would make the viewer think about Mrs. Jonas as a person – the choices she made, the actions she took, and how she was able to survive the Holocaust.



Figure 5: Mica carried by Emma Jonas after liberation from Theresienstadt (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Acc. 2004.230.1)

© Courtesy of Helga Carden; Photo by Jane Klinger

CONCLUSION

This article aims to show that properly conserving and displaying personal items with contextualizing narrative can help visitors see events from the victim's perspective and provide a glimpse of the struggle that these people were forced – as individuals – to endure in order to maintain their humanity in the face of adversity. Such artifacts and stories allow visitors to appreciate the large number of victims or refugees as individuals as opposed to faceless numbers, as well as to contemplate how they would have reacted to such events. These displays would demonstrate the true horrors of war and counter-balance more technical displays of the machines of war or deeds of particular soldiers, which tend to glorify battle. Obtaining such a result, however, requires approaching the topic from a completely different perspective and can only be accomplished by the proper conservation and exhibition of the victims' artifacts with associated, contextualizing narratives.