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## The Presentation and Preservation of Historical Objects Made of Paper in Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oświęcim

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### ABSTRACT

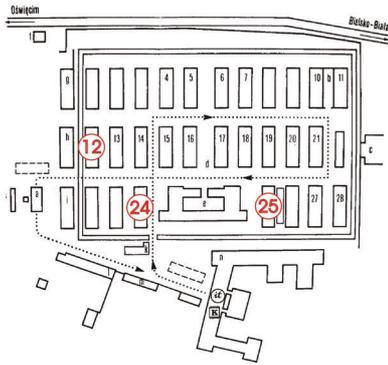
*The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oświęcim established on the site of the former Nazi concentration and annihilation camp commenced its work in 1947. The historical objects made of paper and leather are stored in the Archive and Collection Departments. Among the exhibits are works of art produced in secrecy such as the children's books. The unique story of each of these books left behind traces, historical testimonies. The line between traces and damages is fluent. Guiding principle of the curatorial intervention should be to preserve the highest level of historical authenticity. The decision has to be made whether the traces transmitted or the damages occurred are to be interpreted and to be restored and displayed as relevant historical testimonies.*

*Auschwitz was the largest Nazi concentration and extermination camp. Established on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July 1947, the State Museum of Auschwitz Birkenau was erected on the site of the former KL Auschwitz Birkenau. It was placed by UNESCO on its international list of the world cultural heritage in 1979. The archival collection was put on the UNESCO list in 2000.<sup>1</sup>*

### THE MUSEUM

Former prisoners of Auschwitz and other camps established the museum. They did pioneering work. They had no models or reference points. They felt compelled to preserve the traces of the horrific crimes perpetrated, to keep the memory of Auschwitz alive and to pass the memory on to following generations.<sup>2</sup>

The museum collection includes documents produced by the camp administration, photographs of prisoners taken upon arrival; and records produced by prisoners such as letters or notes documenting the Nazis crimes, smuggled to and from the camp. They are housed in the Archive Department located in Block 24. The collection also comprises personal belongings left behind by prisoners as well as examples of camp facilities, including parts of the gas chambers and crematoriums. The collection includes works of art created either in the camp or after liberation and are kept in the Collection Department located in Block 25. Some objects are displayed in a permanent exhibition. Others are kept in storerooms of the Archive. Temporary exhibitions are shown in Block 12.



Layout of the former Auschwitz concentration camp, showing the Archives Department (Block 24), Collection Department (Block 25) and the space for temporary exhibitions (Block 12).

#### ARCHIVE DEPARTMENT

The Archive commenced its work in 1957. Very quickly documents were separated from artefacts. Since then they have been gathered and kept in the Archive Department. All other material is stored in the Collection Department. The main task of both departments is to collect, catalogue and preserve the material as well as produce scholarly studies within the framework of the Museum's extensive publication program. The Archive houses only 3-5% of the documentation produced by the German camp administration. To erase the evidence of their crimes the Nazis destroyed a vast array of records just before they abandoned the camp. Documents were also sent to Germany where they were lost. After the liberation of

Auschwitz on 27th January 1945, the Russians confiscated remaining camp files and kept them under lock and key in Secret Archives.<sup>3</sup>

What makes up the main part of the archival collection has been more or less saved by coincidence. Some files remained untouched during the turbulent events of evacuation and liberation. Others were found in heaps of rubble or in the mud. A few of the most valuable records, were discovered in various locations where they had been hidden by prisoners.<sup>4</sup>

The paper objects in the archive of the museum are divided into different groups. Like in all concentration camps, the administration in Auschwitz consisted of five divisions (= Abteilungen).<sup>5</sup> The camp structure was based on the model of the first German concentration camp, Dachau, set up in 1933, on the outskirts of Munich. In other words: The archival storage of the records was determined by the camp structure.

#### *Division I: Camp Command*

Division 1 was in charge of dealing with all matters of SS personnel deployed in Auschwitz. The collection contains:

- personal files of SS-men
- SS questionnaires,
- often with hand-written CVs
- and the special oath compelling the camp guards to keep strictest secrecy on the tasks performed.
- Files of criminal proceedings.
- Relevant group of records comprises telegrams reporting the escape of camp inmates

#### *Division II: Political Division*

Division 2 was in charge of keeping the card indices and dossiers of prisoners. The record group contains personal files of inmates

- lists of the newly arrived prisoners to be transferred to other camps
- 'Penal Registry'– books recording penalties imposed on inmates
- 'Death Registry'- books recording

the death of inmates

#### *Division III: Camp Control*

The record group contains

- the books with the daily reports about the number of prisoners incarcerated in the camp
- the books of the penal company
- the 'bunker-book' of block 11

#### *Division III a: Prisoners Employment*

The record groups contains

- telegrams and letters concerning with employment of the camp prisoners,
- daily reports on the quantity of working prisoners
- and lists of the worked commandos

#### *Division IV: Administration*

The record collection contains:

- files on food supply and clothing (camp garb)
- permits for car trips. Trucks were very often sent to various places. They delivered the poison gas Zyklon B or fuel (coal and coke) to the gassing installations and crematoriums

#### *Division V: SS Medical Service*

The record group contains:

- Volumes of the SS-Hygiene Institute
- books of prisoners admitted to camp hospital (block 20, 21, 28)
- reports on golden teeth extracted from the bodies of gassed victims

In addition, the Archive is the custodian of following materials:

- Records from the "Central Construction Office" of the Armed SS and Police in Auschwitz, (Waffen-SS). Among them are architectural designs, technical drawings and cost calculations to build or to extend camp facilities. The collection of plans, called Centralbauleitung contained plans on tracing paper, blueprint plans and technical drawings.
- Letters sent by prisoners to their families. Jewish and Russian

prisoners were not permitted to communicate with their relatives. Other inmates, however, could send one letter per month. The letters were written on a specially designed small form and censored by camp officials.

- Personal, secretly made notes of the inmates, which describe what went on in the camp as well as poems. These were hidden on the premises of the camp or smuggled out secretly. In the years 1945, 1952, 1962 and 1980 notes taken by members of the Sonderkommando about the genocide of the Jews were found on the premises of KL Auschwitz-II-Birkenau. Among other evidence discovered after the war are for example, two registers from the Gypsy camp with approximately 21000 names and dates of death.

Finally, two record groups contain post-war materials. Among them are testimonies of survivors as well as files of war crimes trials conducted against Rudolf Hoess, the first commander of Auschwitz, and other camp officials.

#### COLLECTION DEPARTMENT

Objects kept in the Collection are divided into two groups. One group consists of objects originating from camp facilities and from belongings robbed from the victims upon arrival (at the "Ramp", the place of selection at the railway end station in Auschwitz-Birkenau) or robbed from bodies. The vast majority of these artifacts – 90% - has been found on the site of the camp.

#### OBJECTS ROBBED FROM INMATES INCLUDE:

Several thousand shoes – suitcases - baskets – clothing – coat hangers – buttons – umbrellas - glasses - mirrors - artificial limbs – dentures – tooth brushes – shaving things- heaps of hairs (collected after the humiliating process inmates had to undergo of having their head and body shaved), Religious items such as talliths (praying shawls) and tefillins ('phylacteries' worn by Orthodox Jews during morning prayer on the head and on the arm).

KZ-related objects include: textiles including prisoners garb, footwear, badges of inmates with different colours, inscriptions and numbers, - chairs, beds, wardrobes, tables etc. Objects originating from killings facilities such as tins of Zyklon-B

Another part of the collection is made up of objects falling under the category of fine arts. Altogether, there are more than six thousand works of art – paintings (in oil or water colours), sculptures and graphics produced by inmates either during the period of incarceration or after liberation. There are also collections of stamps, medals and posters.

Since art works were forbidden in Auschwitz Birkenau, artists worked in secrecy - and under horrific conditions, just in so-called Lager Museum, the artist acting with the permission of camp authorities.

The catalogue of works ranges from portraits, caricatures via scenes from camp life and landscape paintings to drawings in sketchbooks or on letters. It goes without saying, that some these works are of immense value. They have been created by artists who were both victims of Nazi terror and eye-witness to the events they depict.

#### CHILDREN'S BOOKS IN AUSCHWITZ

It is difficult to imagine that there is a link between children's books and Auschwitz. We are inclined to separate these terms - the more so since they give rise to different associations. Children's books exemplify a safe world. Auschwitz is the symbol of terror, of mass destruction, of genocide, and yet, both worlds meet each other.

#### *Production*

Seven children's books are in the collection: Four books with the title "The Fairy Tale of the Rabbit, the Fox and the Rooster" and three titled 'The Fairy Tale of the Black Chicks'.



The Fairy Tale of the Rabbit, the Fox and the Rooster

As it results from the memories of the prisoners who worked in the construction office produced these fairy tale books secretly.<sup>10</sup> The exact point in time in which these books were produced cannot be determined, the sources document the years 1942 and 1944.<sup>11</sup> A Czech children's book, which was brought into the construction office was used as a model.<sup>12</sup> The genesis of the books is described by the former inmate Stanisław Bęć:

We thought of our children that stayed there in the open 'freedom'... the thought occurred to send the people closest to us a memento to remember the fathers and husbands when they are no longer there.

...I was a wheel in the apparatus of those who worked on it. I wrote poems which reflected our wants and needs and corresponded in context to the drawings that other comrades drew or copied. Other workers of the 'Construction Office' detachment copied the drawings put them together and bound the books. Yet others brought them to the construction site where they had contact to civilian workers who brought the books 'into freedom' and sent them to the addressees. For each of these activities the punishment was the Bunker—But what was not punished.<sup>13</sup>

### *Individual design*

Due to the use of different techniques, such as ink, water colours, tempera colours and copying techniques, each book received its own individual character.<sup>14</sup> Different materials and paper types were used in the production. A self-developed colouring technique and personal entries are a further peculiarity.<sup>15</sup>

### *Bernard Swierczyna's book*

That sort of memories and tragedies are connected with these books is exemplified by a book which was donated to the museum by Felicjan Swierczyna. It is a personal souvenir from his father. His father, Bernard Swierczyna was brought to Auschwitz on 18 July 1940, when his son was not yet born. The father was able to send the fairy tale, 'The Fairy Tale of the Rabbit, the Fox and the Rooster' to the son. A poem with a personal dedication of the father to the son he would never meet, makes this book a tragic document. After a failed attempt to escape on 30 December 1944, Bernard Swierczyna was hanged in the last public execution at the camp.<sup>16</sup>

### *Concept for the children's books*

The unique history of each of these children's books commenced with its production followed by the secret distribution, the "illegal export" through barbed wire and the "outside" mailing to relatives. Each of the trails leave behind traces that transmit historical evidence. The line between traces of history and the damage is, however, blurred.

### *Preserving or Deleting the traces*

In order to preserve the greatest amount of authenticity through restoration measures, it is necessary to weigh two considerations: shall priority be on preserving the traces or deleting them.<sup>17</sup> In other words, are the traces historical evidence or damage.

As soon as one looks at the children's books many questions arise. For example, two different types of traces/damage can be mentioned which occurred in different books: in one, fingerprints and in another, children's scribbling.

### *Fingerprints*

It is impossible to say today if the fingerprints were left intentionally as a type of individual identification or occurred later when in use. Because this question cannot be answered with certainty it is better not to remove these traces. The viewer of historical objects is constantly on the lookout for personal touches, and these can be found in fingerprints.

### *Children's scribbles*

The children's scribbling is seen at first glance to obscure the picture in an intact children's book. However, as soon as we realize that the books were used by others, the scribbling takes on a new meaning. It tells a tale of how the following generations<sup>18</sup> used the book and therefore belongs to the object. In this case, the aesthetic consideration moves into the background. In order to preserve the history of the children's books these traces should be preserved as historic evidence not treated as damage and removed.<sup>19</sup>



illus.3 children's scribbling

## CONSERVATION OF SHOES

Shoes and glasses, artificial limbs and suitcases have a deep, emotional impact on visitors of the permanent exhibition in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Initially, photographs shot during the liberation of the camp showing heaps of shoes, glasses, artificial limbs and suitcases provided the basis for the design and layout of the showcases. As artefacts displayed - they quickly became symbols of Auschwitz.<sup>20</sup>



shoes before the conservation  
photo: R. Pióro & N. Jastrzebiowska



shoes after the conservation  
photo: R. Pióro & N. Jastrzebiowska

No relevant historical event is conceivable without its picture. It is the picture that finds its way through the flood of information into the mind of people in a much stronger and striking way than the thousand words which assorting it.<sup>21</sup>

The curatorial documentation<sup>22</sup> illustrates the strategy of preservation and conservation adopted. Based on the experiences gained and after consultation with scientists a new concept<sup>23</sup> was developed for the preservation and display of the 29 471 pairs of shoes. A strategy was designed to combine collective and

individual aspects. The visitors were to be confronted with piles of shoes symbolising relics of mass-murder. But they were also to be enabled to link a pair of shoes to the fate of an individual victim. Or to put it differently. The curatorial intervention had to preserve the symbolic nature of the artefact, the shoes, and also to stabilise to increase their historical authenticity.

## OLD / FIRST / INITIAL CONSERVATION

Looking back it becomes clear that the initial / first conservation techniques as well as the then poor air-conditioning of the showcases changed the conditions of the shoes, causing considerable damage. In the 1970s a special cylinder was constructed for the mass conservation for the mechanical cleaning of the shoes, especially to remove the layer of dust. A disadvantage of the technique was that with the passage of time a dark layer covered the shoes.



Above: shoe before conservation  
Below: shoe after conservation  
photo: R. Pióro & N. Jastrzebiowska



## Damage

Other damages occurred as a result of the massive variation in temperature and humidity. In winter the temperature amounted to 11 degrees, humidity to 38

percent. In spring time the temperature rose to 21 degrees, the humidity to 40 percent. Consequently, the leather became very friable and broken. Metallic elements at shoes corroded.

#### *New Conservation treatment*

To stabilise the shoes, they were first cleaned using paint brushes and vacuum equipment, then treated with damp cloth and Marseiller soap, and finally with distillate water. After the cleaning a treatment with a mixture of neat's-foot oil (6 percent) in test gasoline and ethanol (30:1) followed. The damages caused by corrosion were mechanically repaired.

#### VIEWPOINTS

The conservation techniques were successful. They removed the black layer and made the original colours of the shoes visible again.<sup>24</sup> The contrast to shoes untreated is quite striking. On one side piles of grey shoes - on the other, piles of shoes clearly distinguished by different colours. A feeling arises that these shoes belonged to people. From testimonies of survivors we do know that shoes were for inmates of utmost significance, very special items, carefully looked after and often used as exchange for other, often life-saving valuables. The restoration work has not only preserved but also increased the symbolic character of these memorabilia.

#### CONCLUSION

It is important that prior to any restoration work the question has to be asked: How does the intervention affect the historical authenticity of the object? With a wide range of methods and materials available to the restorer it is possible that they may be used over-enthusiastically. Techniques which reduce the authenticity also reduce, or even wipe out the significance of the historical testimony transmitted.

- There are memorabilia which only in its original form reveal the power of the historical testimony transmitted. In this case a damaged object can be restored to its original form.
- This is possible, if the restorer has standards or better models of comparison at his or her disposal.

- However, it becomes problematic when the original form is shaped by memory, that is, by eye-witness accounts. There is a danger that the original form and thus the past have wrongly been interpreted and misrepresented. The object could be reconstructed differently and possibly not in accordance with the original state.

- Returning to the books, they are an excellent example of objects representing not only the value of the object itself- its original, intact condition- but also the values concerning its further history, elements bearing witness to its later fate.<sup>25</sup>

- The shoes could never have been restored to its original form – due to wear and tear and the natural process of decay and disintegration. Restoration techniques, however, made it possible to bring the shoes closer to its original form and to increase the significance, the power of its historical authenticity.

- By uncovering, by unearthing the original colours of the shoes, the personal, individual nature of the memorabilia became visible – enabling viewers to identify the shoes as objects which belonged once to people who – half a century ago - were murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

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<sup>6</sup> Kupiec, J. 1995, 'Motis on Letters from Prisoners of Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp taken from the Collection at the Auschwitz State Museum', [in:] *Representations of Auschwitz*, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, pp.113-119

<sup>7</sup> Szymańska, I. 1989, [in:] *Suffering and hope. Artistic creations of the Oświęcim prisoners*, KAW Katowice i PMO, pp.7-46.

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<sup>9</sup> Kozub, B. 2000, 'Książeczki dla dzieci w obozie Auschwitz', [in:] *Promemoria*, Nr. 13, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, pp.99-100.

<sup>10</sup> APMO. Kor. IV-8520-61/761/67, fragment relacji byłego więźnia Artura Krzetuskiego

<sup>11</sup> One day between 1942 -1944, one of the prisoners employed in the *Zentralbauleitung* found some colorful children`s books, probably near the *Kanada* storehouses. The prisoner brought them to the *Baubüro* to show them to his fellow prisoners. The realization that they had belonged to children who died in a gas chamber was quite a shock for them. These books evoked memories of their own children, left behind at home [in:] *Kulasza, J. 2002 :Illustrated Fairy Tales of Auschwitz, The Last Expression: Art & Auschwitz, Northwestern University Press, Illinois, pp.79-83*

<sup>12</sup> APMO. Kor. IV-8520-61/761/67, fragment relacji byłego więźnia Artura Krzetuskiego; APMO. Zespół Oświadczenia, t. 109 k. 107, relacja byłego więźnia Stanisława Bęć; APMO. Zespół Oświadczenia, t. 34 k. 54 relacja byłego więźnia Józefa Drożdża

<sup>13</sup> APMO. Zespół Oświadczenia, t. 109 k. 107, relacja byłego więźnia Stanisława Bęć

<sup>14</sup> APMO. Zespół Oświadczenia, t. 34 k. 54 relacja byłego więźnia Józefa Drożdża

<sup>15</sup> APMO. Zespół Oświadczenia, t. 109 k. 109, relacja byłego więźnia Stanisława Bęć

<sup>16</sup> APMO. Zespół Oświadczenia, t. 80 k. 193-209, relacja Adelajdy Swierczynowej

<sup>17</sup> „Ziel der Konservierung und Restaurierung von Denkmälern ist ebenso die Erhaltung des Kunstwerks wie die Bewahrung des geschichtlichen Zeugnisses“, *Internationale Charta über Konservierung und Restaurierung von Denkmälern und Ensembles (Denkmalbereiche)*, Artikel 3, Venedig 25-31. 5. 1964, (in der Fassung von 1989), [in:] *Denkmalschutz, Texte zum Denkmalschutz und zur Denkmalpflege*, Deutsches Nationalkomitee für Denkmalschutz, Band 52, Bonn 1996

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<sup>20</sup> Peter, S. 1995, 'Symbole Instandhalten' [in:] *Representations of Auschwitz*, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, pp.65-70

<sup>21</sup> Reiche, J. 2003, 'Bilder die lügen - Bonner Ausstellung in Berlin' [in:] *Museumsmagazin, Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, No 4, pp.17

<sup>22</sup> the first conservation documentation is from the year 1948

<sup>23</sup> The conservation work was carried out under the management of R. Pióro and N. Jastrzębiowska in the conservation studio of the museum which opened 2003

<sup>24</sup> Parts from the conservation report of R. Pióro und N. Jastrzębiowska

<sup>25</sup> B. Kozub, 'The preservation of historical objects...' op. cit.

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