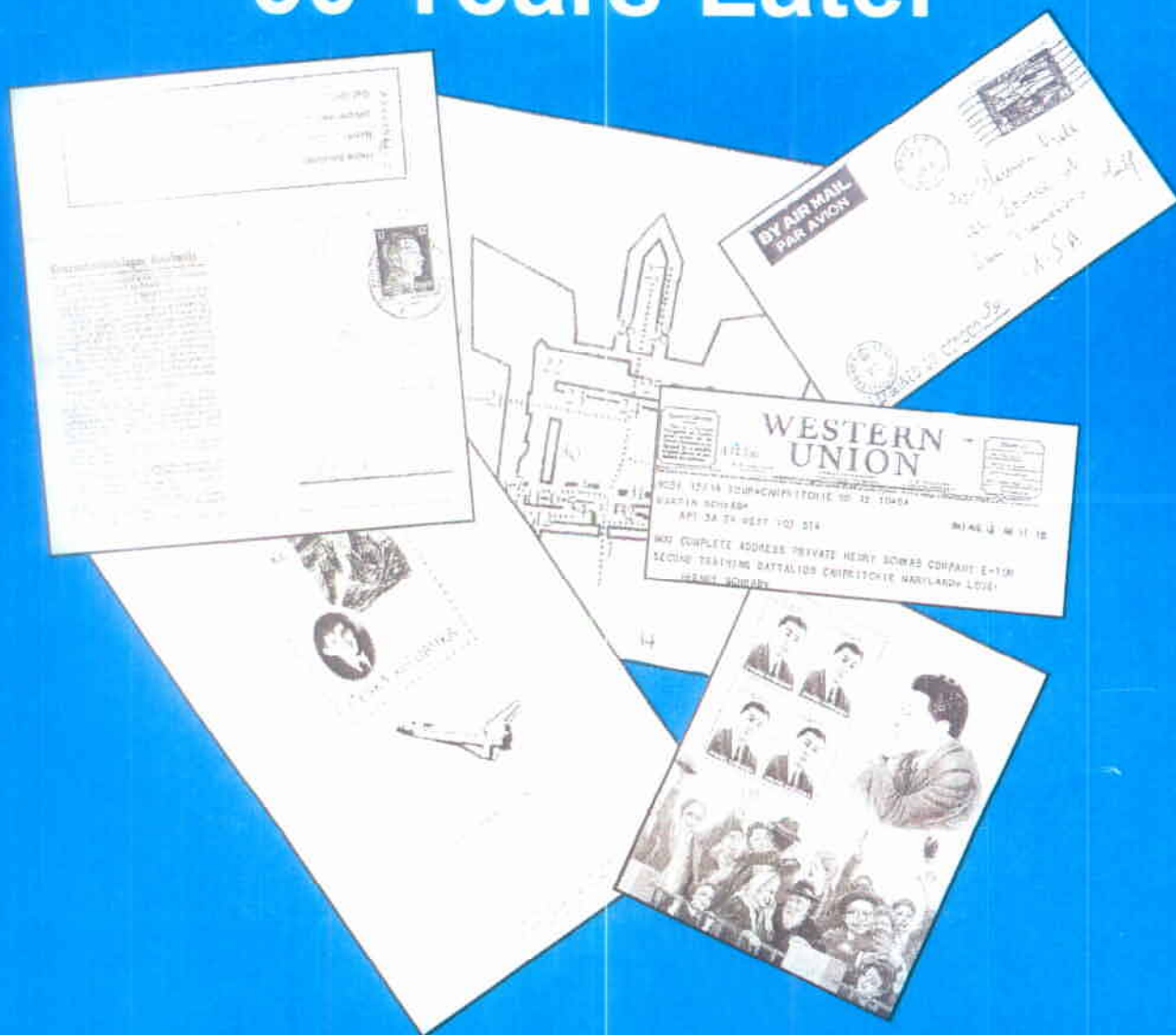


Yom Ha'shoah Remembrance Day 60 Years Later



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COLLECTING AND EXHIBITING MAIL OF THE HOLOCAUST

Ken Lawrence, Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, apsken@aol.com

I began collecting mail of the Holocaust in 1978. It wasn't a considered choice, and I didn't know much about it. But suddenly it had become important.



I have been involved in the civil rights movement since the 1950s in Chicago, where I grew up. Eventually I spent more than two decades as an activist in Mississippi. Although there were plenty of scary moments, by the mid-1970s we seemed to have overcome the major problems.

But without much warning, things suddenly got worse. The Ku Klux Klan began recruiting again and launched violent attacks on African Americans across the South. A crescendo of escalating bloodshed culminated in the murders of five anti-Klan demonstrators in Greensboro, North Carolina, while television cameras recorded the deed. Their killers were members of the United Racist Front, a grand coalition of Klansmen and Nazis.

Alongside the violence and ostensibly unconnected to it, a previously unknown pseudo-scholarly organization based in California, the Institute for Historical Review, began a campaign to deny that the Holocaust had occurred, that mass murder of European Jews by the Nazi regime in Germany was a myth.

In the South the connection between these two events was evident to anyone who paid close attention, because KKK spokesmen such as David Duke of Louisiana were also the ones who distributed Holocaust-denial literature and promoted the cause.

In response to these events, our movements organized a grand coalition called the National Anti-Klan Network. I was the principal NAKN organizer and researcher in Mississippi. I worked closely with The Southern Poverty Law Center's Klanwatch program to get their material into the schools.

I felt that our literature, audio-visual material, and speaking programs were effective in educating the public about white-supremacist violence, and in refuting our opponents' racist propaganda. But I thought we did not do a sufficient job of countering

their success among social groups that tended to regard KKK and Nazi violence as heroic.

I decided that the strongest way to counter their growth among people susceptible to that message was to document the kind of society that would result if they were to prevail. And being a stamp collector, I was most familiar with mail. I did not have much money to spend on this, but I did have several friends in Eastern Europe who agreed to help.

My first acquisition was an October 3, 1943, Auschwitz prisoner's letter shown here. The writer was a 21-year-old Polish man named Eduard Pys, prisoner number 379. That meant he had been arrested as a teen-ager in May of 1940, and had been one of the slave laborers forced to build the camp. Almost three and a half years later he was still locked up in that corner of hell, writing to his parents in broken German because his own language wasn't allowed, asking them to send food and tobacco. "I also, thank God, am in good health and feel fine, without changes," he wrote, the message that the Nazis required prisoners to include in their letters to relatives.

If Eduard Pys had been a Jew, he would have been dead or slowly wasting from hunger in a wretched, overcrowded ghetto. If he had been a soldier, he would have been dead or imprisoned in a relatively humane German Oflag or Stalag prisoner-of-war camp. If he had been a criminal, he would have been tried in a court of law before facing long-term consignment. He was none of those. He was a young Polish gentile who probably had more in common culturally with his Nazi tormentors than with his Jewish neighbors. Having somehow fallen afoul of the Gestapo, Pys was imprisoned at dreadfully hard labor without any right to know who had accused him of what offense, without a right to counsel or access to a court, without any right to review or appeal, without a right to visits from his family, without a right to know whether he might ever see them again.

The most awful thing about this Auschwitz lettersheet is how typical it is, how relatively common, and therefore how perfectly it suited my need as I talked to children in Mississippi schools and showed them

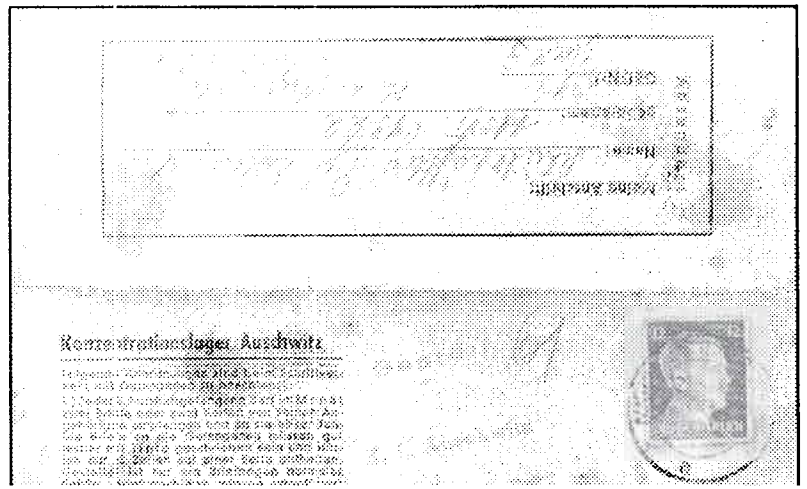
The most awful thing about this Auschwitz lettersheet is how typical it is, how relatively common, and therefore how perfectly it suited my need as I talked to children in Mississippi schools and showed them my collection of letters, cards, and documents.

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I built this collection one item at a time, not for philatelic exhibition but to take into schools, community centers, churches, libraries, and college campuses. I gave talks and presented a slide program that I made at Buchenwald, but always the cards and letters were my most effective display.

To skeptics I could always reply, "See for yourself. I did not make this up." Eventually I toured the United States, Canada, and Europe with my exhibit and slide program.

Anywhere the KKK and Nazis showed their faces, I offered this program to their opponents if securi-



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dropped back down to vermeil.

At George Kramer's insistent urging, I entered it in international competition at Philakorea 2002 in Seoul. As a first-time exhibit an entry is limited to five frames, but The Nazi Scourge was awarded a large vermeil medal nonetheless. Evidently international judges are more impressed by my material than are many U.S. national judges.

Perhaps the explanation is my collecting and exhibiting approach, which is admittedly unconventional. I have never been interested in collecting mail from every concentration camp and ghetto, or every type of camp envelope, lettercard, letter sheet, post card, cachet, and censor mark. Those are the collecting strategies presented by Sam Simon and Erik Lørdahl in their wonderful reference books on concentration camp postal history.

I'm trying to document the Nazi scourge in broad strokes, to bring a lump to your throat and tears to your eyes, not to numb you with minutia.

In keeping with my collecting habits, I have tried to illustrate each stage of that story with the most visually arresting material available. When I had a choice, I preferred the rarest or most unusual cover. So my collection includes items that have the highest rarity ratings in Simon's and Lørdahl's lists, plus unlisted material that's even rarer. Today, the Eduard Pys lettersheet is not included.

Here are some examples

Early mail is much more difficult than late. My first Dachau prisoner cover from 1933 is from a time when the camp had about 4,000 prisoners. My latest, when Dachau had 100,000 prisoners. For the late one, I show a correspondence in both directions between the prisoner and his wife.

Incoming mail is much scarcer than outgoing mail, and often more poignant. Mail from prisoners at the Dora underground factory who built V-2 rockets is rare, but my exhibit's post card to a Dora slave laborer from his mother is the only one I've ever seen, and is gut-wrenching to see.

Camp-to-camp mail is excruciatingly rare. I have several examples, including letters from a father imprisoned at Dachau to each of his two daughters imprisoned at Ravensbrück. Another example is from a Polish prisoner of war held captive in a German Oflag to his sweetheart who was a prisoner at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

Mail to and from Jewish prisoners in camps is scarce. Again, I exhibit several examples. A November 18, 1938, formular postcard from "protective custody Jew Gottfr. Schwab" at Dachau to his wife is her first notice of his fate, having been swept away by the Kristallnacht pogrom. A sender's certificate of mailing for a prayer book mailed to a Jew held captive in a French camp is a pertinent, unusual item.

... and a Tanakh scroll piece pillaged from a Jewish synagogue in Russia that was used as a field post parcel wrapper by a German soldier.

Other Jewish-related items are the unique surviving post card sent by Rabbi Leo Baeck, leader of German Jewry, while he was an inmate of the Theresienstadt ghetto; a cover bearing a JUDENPOST stamp of the Litzmannstadt (Lodz) ghetto; and a parcel waybill that accompanied an urn of human remains from the Buchenwald crematorium to a Jewish cemetery in Vienna.

Unlike every other exhibit of Holocaust mail I've seen, I include mail that represents every important element of anti-Nazi resistance.

Now consider a different aspect. When I show this collection to audiences outside the philatelic community, such as my display at Pennsylvania State University in 2002 during the Anne Frank memorial seminar, I choose material that is more striking visually to unfamiliar members of the public, such as a more dramatic title page.

I also include material that is not postal or philatelic, such as a Warsaw Nazi poster that announces the impending executions of 100 alleged members of the underground in reprisal for a partisan attack on a German unit, a Jewish registration document, and a slave laborer's identification paper.

Today my exhibit fills ten frames and is frequently invited as a Court of Honor display. But it remains a work in progress. I have not yet exhibited exactly the same material twice. Recent acquisitions include a cover from Gypsy camp Lackenbach in Austria and a Tanakh scroll piece pillaged from a Jewish synagogue in Russia that was used as a field post parcel wrapper by a German soldier.

My exhibit closes with several pages about Nazi war criminals and their fate. A postal card addressed to Professor Doctor Eugen van Haagen, who injected Natzweiler-Struhof inmates with typhus and recorded their agony, has the only recorded example of the International Military Tribunal censor mark from Nuremberg. My closing page contains a death warrant for a Nazi war criminal signed by General Lucius Clay, commander in chief of U.S. occupation forces, at Dachau in 1948.

Today I'm eager to share my knowledge of the subject, and to assist others who take up this collecting challenge. ■

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