



SPUNGEN FAMILY FOUNDATION

A fragment of a pillaged Hebrew scroll, used by a German soldier to wrap a parcel for mailing.

Stamp Collector's Holocaust Memorial

By MATTHEW HEALEY

When Ku Klux Klan violence spiked across the South in the 1970s, and a hitherto unknown group in California began publicly denying that the Holocaust had ever occurred, Ken Lawrence decided to fight back — using his skills as stamp collector.

Painstakingly, over 30 years, he researched and assembled a collection of postal memorabilia documenting the range and depth of horrors of what he termed "the Nazi scourge." He gathered items that showed not just the persecution of Jews and Communists but also other groups deemed undesirable by the Nazis, like gypsies and the disabled, not just in Germany but across Europe.

The award-winning collection, containing some 250 letters, postcards, postal documents, leaflets and other materials, has now been sold to the Spungen Family Foundation in Illinois. That foundation, in turn, has sought to expand the collection and continue to use it for the educational purposes that inspired Mr. Lawrence, of Spring Mills, Pa.

Daniel Spungen, a board member and spokesman for the foundation, said recently that his acquisition of the collection represented a "life-changing" experience for him. He is retiring from his job with the family business, a manufacturer of ball bearings, and devoting himself to further development of the collection, which includes rare letters from concentration camp inmates, postal documents illustrating Nazi activities and a Hebrew scripture re-used by a German soldier as a parcel wrapper.

In addition to being displayed online, the collection will be shown to the public beginning next year in Skokie, Ill., at the new headquarters of the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center, which was set up in part as a reaction to neo-Nazi activities in that suburb of Chicago in the 1970s. The center advocated successfully for an Illinois state law requiring education about the Holocaust in schools.

The collection will also travel around the country, including stops in Santa Barbara, Calif.,

and Billings, Mont.

Mr. Lawrence, a longtime civil rights activist and writer, began gathering the materials in 1978 "in response to the sudden appearance of Holocaust deniers." He recalled in an interview recently that he used to show his first acquisition, a 1943 letter from 21-year-old Eduard Pys, who had arrived at the Auschwitz concentration camp on the very first transport in May 1940, to children in Mississippi and tell them, "David Duke says this never happened."

Having little money to spend on his collection, Mr. Lawrence used his contacts with writers and activists in Eastern Europe to solicit additional material. One item is a telegram from a member of a wartime Communist resistance group that was given to

Nazi propaganda newspaper; the only known letter from Rabbi Leo Baeck, leader of German Jewry, when he was held in the Theresienstadt ghetto; cards from two previously unlisted camps in Romania; and mail sent to a Nazi doctor on trial for war crimes at Nuremberg in 1945.

Mr. Lawrence described the biblical scroll used as a parcel wrapper, which recounts part of the tale of David and Goliath, as "the most viscerally disturbing item" in the collection. "Some scholars have told me it is among the most important surviving evidence of Nazi desecration," he said.

The Philatelic Foundation, a nonprofit organization, has produced a DVD documentary about the collection, and Mr. Lawrence, who is being retained by Mr. Spungen to advise him on further development of the collection, is planning a book.

Last year, after a chance encounter with Mr. Spungen at a collectors' event, Mr. Lawrence agreed to sell him his collection. "I felt like I had taken the collection as far as I could. And I'm 65," Mr. Lawrence said.

A well-known stamp auctioneer had advised Mr. Lawrence to keep the collection intact rather than breaking it up to sell.

Mr. Spungen said he had originally planned to use part of his fortune to buy an "Inverted Jenny," one of the rarest of American stamps, which has an airplane misprinted upside down. But he said he changed his mind when he saw Mr. Lawrence's collection.

"I admit I knew next to nothing about the Holocaust, and now I'm playing catch-up," he said in a recent telephone interview. Among the items he finds most compelling are a piece of mail documenting sex slavery at the Buchenwald concentration camp and fake British banknotes made by Jewish slave laborers during the Nazis' program to undermine the British economy.

Mr. Spungen said that while the collection as a whole was insured for a million dollars, and the scroll used as a parcel wrapper could be worth as much as half a million dollars on its own, "the educational value to future generations is incalculable."

After acquisition, a collection of postal memorabilia will get broader exposure.

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"I wanted to show all the victims and all the resisters, through their mail," Mr. Lawrence said. "I tried to include every sort of anti-Nazi activity, and treat them all heroically, whether they liked each other or not."

He continued to trail the Klan and neo-Nazis around the United States, offering his collection at community centers, schools and churches as evidence of what could happen if white supremacists prevailed.

Eventually, in 1992, Mr. Lawrence started exhibiting his collection to fellow stamp collectors as well, garnering awards at philatelic gatherings from Ohio to Washington to South Korea. His collection includes rarities like an envelope from a letter sent from Dachau in 1933, shortly after the concentration camp opened; a certified-mail receipt for a prayer book sent to a Jew in a French camp; a postal checking account receipt with a crude anti-Semitic cartoon indicating payment for a

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