

Old Papers, Currency Put New Focus on Holocaust

May 5, 2010

By Janelle Walker for Sun-Times Media

The letters, envelopes, stamps and currency that Danny Spungen bought at a stamp show in 2007 tell a unique story.

He has pages of the Torah that were torn from their scrolls and used as little more than wrapping paper. He has letters from inside German concentration camps that show the censor's evaluation marks. He has fake British notes and U.S. dollar bills used as Nazi propaganda.



Danny Spungen, a representative of the Spungen Family Foundation, shows pages off Torah scrolls that were used by Nazis as wrapping paper during World War II, at a Dundee Township Rotary Club luncheon Tuesday in Elgin.

Spungen spoke about survivors and a collection of materials from the Holocaust.

(Michael Smart/Staff Photographer)

Instead of leaving these papers in a museum, where people must go to them, he has been traveling the country and sharing this wealth of paper with children and adults to educate them about the Holocaust.

On Tuesday, he shared just a fraction of his collection with the Dundee Township Rotary Club.

Spungen, 48, of Buffalo Grove, was a last-minute fill-in speaker. The club originally planned to have Sam Harris speak at their luncheon. Harris, a Northbrook Rotary Club member, is a Holocaust survivor himself and is one of the founders of the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center in Skokie. Spungen stepped in for him after Harris became ill.

Spungen is a docent for the Holocaust Museum. But before he came across the papers on sale at a Pennsylvania stamp collecting show, he was more interested in getting rare U.S. stamps than he was in letters.

He was taken, however, by the sheet from the Torah. A German had used it to wrap a parcel, and the stamp on the back had an image of Adolph Hitler.

The seller had hundreds of similar items, collected while he worked for the Southern Poverty Law Center. "His job was to go around finding American Nazis and the KKK," Spungen said.

Not locked away

Spungen convinced the seller to let him buy the items so they wouldn't be locked away in a museum.

He said some curators don't like the fact that, even though Spungen's letters and envelopes are covered in plastic sleeves or in plexiglass frames, they are not archived as most museums would do. There also are some Jews who would prefer that the Torah pages be buried, because they have been desecrated by being written on and torn from their scrolls.

However, he believes that by showing the papers to school children and adults, they may learn more about the Holocaust and the people who were murdered.

Spungen began bringing his collection to Illinois schools -- the first state in the country, he said, to require the Holocaust be taught to students. He's done similar presentations now in Montana and Iowa, neither of which have large Jewish populations.

When he spoke in Montana, he said, some people drove 100 miles to see and hear his presentation.

Students connect to the drawings and the letters in the collection, but mostly to the money, he said. There are slips of currency printed inside the concentration camps to buy things from the camp -- a privilege that not every Jew received. He has real British notes and some of the counterfeits that Germans flooded the country with. He's also become good at finding the differences between the two.

"His presentation was so unusual, it was a whole different take on (the Holocaust)," said Pat Szpekowski, one of the Rotarians.

She also found it shocking to see that genocide did not end with World War II and the Holocaust, and that millions have been killed around the world in other countries since then.

"We don't want it to happen again," she said. "Look at the other countries. It is one country after another. Do they not learn from their mistakes?"

Spungen focuses on inclusion, acceptance and diversity as he talks to students around the country. Because the world is getting bigger, he said, there are more people to hate.

But his job isn't to convince anyone or share his opinions, Spungen said, but to just share the information. "I want to ignite the kids and get them talking with each other."