

# Collecting and Exhibiting Mail of the Holocaust

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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 Ku Klux Klan 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. 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. They provided some of the rarest items in the collection.

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 confinement. 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 my collection of letters, cards, and documents.

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 security was adequate. (I presented a smaller exhibit of duplicates in more dangerous venues.) There's no way to know which activities mattered most, but we did succeed in defeating the Ku Klux insurgency and in discrediting the Holocaust deniers, though tag ends of both groups are still around causing trouble.

In the early 1980s after thirty years as a stamp collector, I finally became active in organized philately, and not a moment too soon. I began writing for *Stamp Collector* in 1983. At Ameripex 1986 in Chicago, Michael Laurence recruited me to write for *Linn's*. My writing covered a broad swath of philately, from worldwide topicals to United States plate number coils, but *not* Holocaust letters.

At Capex 87 in Toronto I took a break with Michael Laurence and Leonard Kapiloff at the Beaver Club. We discussed our collecting interests. Leonard asked me to write about my Holocaust mail collection for a paper he owned, *Washington Jewish Week*, and Michael asked me to write about it for *Linn's*. I refused both requests, because that would have ended my ability to build my collection. My success as a *Linn's* writer had been such that nearly every subject I wrote about became expensive to collect.

Eventually in 1992, I started to show my collection at philatelic exhibitions, and I wrote three articles about individual covers for the *American Philatelist*. My collection was an invited Court of Honor exhibit at the German-American salon hosted by the Germany Philatelic Society at Colopex 92 in Columbus, and in four frames won a vermeil medal at Ropex 93 in Rochester.

By 1993 I had been collecting Holocaust mail for 15 years, but I had only four frames (64 pages) of material. No other collecting challenge has taken me so long, but none of the others have provided the visceral satisfaction of this one either. I did not put it in philatelic competition again until 2001, when I had doubled the size of the exhibit, improved the overall quality by an even greater margin, and provided a much more comprehensive narrative. Now titled *The Nazi Scourge: Postal Evidence of the Holocaust and the Devastation of Europe*, as an eight-frame exhibit at APS Stampshow 2001 at Chicago I again received a vermeil medal.

Finally the exhibit got a gold medal at Garfield-Perry March Party 2002, where one of the judges opined that it is the best exhibit of such material ever shown. That success did not last. At Chicagopex 2002 it 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 were more impressed by my material than are many U.S. national judges. In eight frames it received another large vermeil medal at Washington 2006.

My collecting and exhibiting approach is admittedly unconventional. I have never been interested in collecting mail from every concentration camp and ghetto, or every type of camp envelope, lettercard, lettersheet, post card, cachet, and censor mark. Those are the collecting strategies presented by Sam Simon and Erik Lordahl in their wonderful English-language reference publications 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 Lordahl'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. A photo of the camp on a Nazi guard's postcard from 1933 is probably unique. For my latest item from Dachau, when 100,000 prisoners were confined there, 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 in the exhibit, including letters from a father imprisoned at Dachau to each of his two daughters imprisoned at women's concentration camp 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.

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. Most poignant of all, and most viscerally revolting to me, is a sacred Tanakh (Jewish sacred scripture in Hebrew calligraphy) parchment scroll piece pillaged from a Jewish synagogue in Russia that was used as a field post parcel wrapper by a German soldier.

Unlike every other exhibit of Holocaust mail I've seen, I include a cover from Gypsy camp Lackenbach in Austria, and mail that represents every important element of anti-Nazi resistance.

When I have shown 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 selected 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.

The exhibit closes with several pages about Nazi war criminals and their fate. A postal card addressed to Professor Doctor Eugen von Haagen, who injected Natzweiler-Struthof 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.