

Joy of News

“At last after a long wait I have received news from you. I can’t describe my feelings when I read your card, especially when I see your handwriting.”

Mariaa Steiman, Warsaw ghetto, to Yanka Sapir, Kobe, Japan. Undated.



Lodz ghetto postman. Courtesy Yad Vashem

Every situation posed its own difficulties. In the ghettos of eastern Europe, Jews were held under duress, sealed off from the rest of the population by wooden fences, barbed wire and, sometimes, brick walls. Ghettos were administered by Nazi-imposed *Judenrat* (Jewish Council). Members of these councils were forced to convey the orders of the Nazis. Ghetto inmates were exposed to terror and slave labour; appalling housing and hygienic conditions; starvation and disease. The *Judenrat* played an integral role in attempting to maintain order and normalcy for inmates. They tried to ameliorate the harsh nature of these orders whenever possible. One responsibility the Councils held was the management of the postal system. They were under strict regulations and instructions about mail receipt, distribution, and dispatch. In many ghettos there was intermittent access to post.

In the largest ghetto, Warsaw, that housed over 400,000 Jews there were only three post offices and eight mailboxes to service the entire ghetto. The *Judenrat* were responsible for the cost of the running of the postal service, which meant that for each letter or parcel there was an additional administrative fee associated with its sending. This placed a further strain on an already impoverished people.

In Lodz, among other ghettos, we see the creation of special stamps and its own stationery.

The Lublin ghetto had a postal department from the inception of the *Judenrat* in January 1940. From January to August 1940 more than 130,000 items of mail were received in the ghetto. Most of this was incoming mail, but 15,000 items were outgoing. One in every

three inmates in the ghetto wrote one letter over the course of 8 months. So what seems like a lot of communication was, in fact, very limited. As the persecution intensified there was a more desperate need for financial support and contact with family members abroad. Thus mail increased over 1941 and 1942 in the Lublin ghetto. While we cannot know how much was written, based on the number of letters that have survived, we know that there was a great deal of activity.

Recognizing the importance of letters, the Germans unrolled the "Letter Program of the Reich Security Main Office". Their aim was to use the inmates' mail to disguise the murderous campaign of the 'Final Solution'. From time to time, the SS in Auschwitz forced inmates to write cards "home" to soothe the anxiety of those left behind and counter rumours of mass murder. According to SS Captain Dieter Wislenceny's testimony in the Nuremberg Trials in 1946, this was one of Adolf Eichmann's inventions:

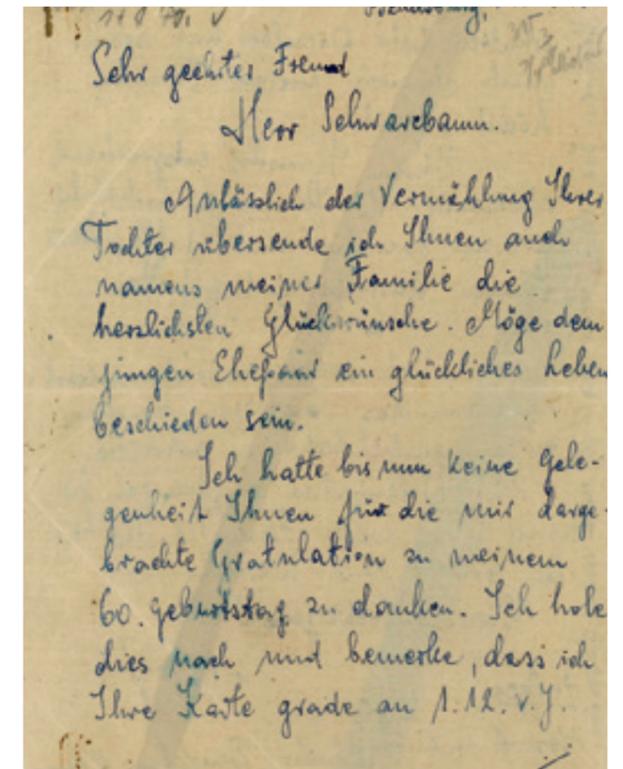
"He had thought out a special system of postcards and letters, whereby he believed he could mislead the public. The Jews brought to Auschwitz or to other extermination camps were forced, prior to being murdered, to write postcards. These postcards – there were always several for each person – were then mailed at long intervals, in order to make it appear as though these persons were still alive."

Concentration camp inmates in the 1930s and early 1940s were permitted to send highly regulated postcards. The address side displayed a printed extract from the camp rules governing correspondence. The prisoner number and birth date, and stamps by the barrack leader and camp censor appeared on

every card. Ten lines of text were permitted on the official stationery that was provided to inmates.

Military, police, and state authorities censored mail, removing text that conveyed information they did not want transmitted. Numerous specific regulations applied, including permitted languages and word count. Many letter writers resorted to code; many more simply fell silent. Paper and envelopes grew scarcer. Access to the post office decreased and ever-poorer Jews could not afford postage. Mail connections grew tenuous and all ordinary mail service stopped in late 1942.

Still, families persevered. The energy loved ones expended attempting to hold on, their commitment to keeping contact notwithstanding all the obstacles they faced, is one expression of Jews' agency. If the Germans saw Jews as less than human, Jews resisted their ideology and efforts. The love and loyalty expressed in their letters denied the Germans' attempts to dehumanize them.



TOP The letter from Maurice and Miriam Tintpulwer, Bendsburg, Poland to Alfred Schwarzbaum, Switzerland, 24 March 1943 shows the chemical smear marks used to detect secret messages.

BOTTOM A postcard sent by Nelly Holzger, Hungary, to her sister, Irene Roth, Palestine, 13 May 1941. Stamps were often removed by censors to check for hidden messages underneath.

Case Study / Terezín

Terezín, or Theresienstadt, was a Nazi ghetto-concentration camp in Czechoslovakia that existed for three and a half years between November 1941 and May 1945. In this “settlement”, the Nazi deception was acute. Terezín served the purpose of not only being a transit centre. It became infamous because it was the site utilised by the Nazis to deceive the International Red Cross about the extermination of Jews. The ghetto was enhanced with social events; gardens planted and barracks renovated. This placated the Red Cross, and once the inspection was complete, deportations and slave labour resumed. Approximately 118,000 people perished as a result of the conditions in the ghetto-camp, or having been deported to the East.

Access to post was a privilege that had to be earned and retained. Henry Schwab has done extensive research into this relatively unexamined topic and concluded that:

“Texts with political contents, or offensive to the Reich and its representatives, or containing untrue or misleading information about life in the ghetto were banned. In practical terms, this meant uniform contents from which it followed that the sender was well. Censors of the Jewish self-administration as well as those of the German commander’s office were checking the contents carefully. If the German censor detected an objectable text; the sender as well as the Jewish censors were punished. This way, the commander made sure that the censorship in the first stage was conducted very carefully.”



TOP Women prisoners lie on thin mattresses on the floor of a barracks in the women’s camp in the Terezín ghetto. Czechoslovakia, between 1941 and 1945. Courtesy YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York
BOTTOM Parcel admission stamp from Terezín (or Theresienstadt) ghetto. This particular type of postage stamp was created by the Germans (but designed by the Czechs) in July 1943. It is estimated that 75,000 copies of the stamp were used. SJM Collection

Letter 1 / Helene Levy



Helene Levy, Terezín ghetto-concentration camp, to her daughter Selma, Germany, 1943.

From: Helene Levy
 To: Selma Vollmann
 Dated: 16 July 1943

My dearest children

I am very much with you in my thoughts. How happy we are with your postcards and how joyful we were when we received your packages, my dear good Selma. Out of this as always speaks your touching sympathy to show me love, and always succeeding doing the right thing.

My joy is therefore indescribable whenever we hear from you. I am doing reasonably well and with God's help I am in good care. I as well, am longing for the sun. Just remain well, very good children. We all send our regards.

*With love, embrace and kiss you
 Your... [Illegible]*



- 1/ How does the exhibition title "Joy of News" affect your understanding of this postcard?
- 2/ Comment on how the receiver's knowledge of the composer being limited regarding content, time and space, affects their reading and interpretation of the letter.
- 3/ Discuss how effectively the concept of **Signs of Life** is represented in this letter.
- 4/ How has the sender demonstrated their interpretation of the situation they are in? What evidence has been provided in the letter to indicate this type of interpretation?
- 5/ How has the writer's perspective helped you to process and understand the individual human experience during the Holocaust?
- 6/ According to official documentation Helene died in Terezín three weeks after this letter was posted. We have no photographs or testimony to accompany this letter. The written words are the only words that we have from Helene. Discuss the significance of conserving artefacts like Helene's postcard. What are the potential ramifications of losing documents like this one? What do we gain by conserving it and/or displaying it? Does a postcard like this one belong in a Museum?