

Object One – Handbag made from the parchment of a Torah (bible) scroll



With the onset of the Nazi occupation, humiliation and abuse of the Jews and their holy artifacts commenced. As the Nazis occupied each new territory, they began by destroying synagogues and desecrating holy books. Before long the degradation and destruction included locally instigated acts of destruction and looting.

The local population realised that Torah scrolls provided raw material for making purses, wallets, musical instruments and other leather products. But these were not only local manifestations of spontaneous theft. The Nazis efficiently organised the “industrialisation” of this practice, which included the transformation of Torah scrolls into other items. In the Yad Vashem Collection, there is a letter from the owner of a paper goods factory who offered Torah scroll parchments as raw material. He sent a small Torah scroll sample, and wrote the following to the manager of a purse and leather goods plant:

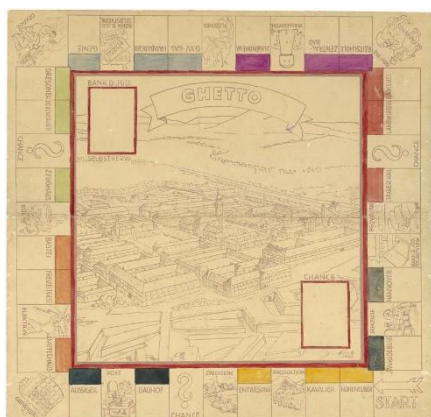
“A Nazi party office has given me a large quantity of parchment, instructing me to store it . . . This merchandise is genuine... Although it has writing on one side, we have experimented and determined that the writing can be washed off... If you are interested in purchasing this parchment, please let me know. I currently have about 600-700 kg in stock.”

Augsburg, Germany, August 13, 1940

Yad Vashem Artifacts Collection, Gift of Margaret Rosenthal, Elmhurst, N.Y., USA

The Yad Vashem Collection contains many artifacts that testify to the use made of desecrated Torah scrolls, including shoe soles, musical instruments, purses, wallets and paintings.

Object Two – Monopoly-style Board Game



The Monopoly game was made in the graphics workshop in Theresienstadt as part of the ghetto's underground activity. It was drawn by Oswald Poeck, an artist who was expelled from Prague to Terezin in November 1941 and was later deported to his death in Auschwitz in September 1944.

The game served to entertain children. It shows how prisoners devised ways to keep morale high. As such, it is an example of spiritual resistance. It also shows how older prisoners made efforts to ensure that children experienced some 'normality' amidst the unusual conditions of the ghetto.

In addition to entertaining the children, the game was intended to provide them with information about ghetto life. The board displays a drawing of the ghetto. Significant ghetto sites are stations in the game: the prison, the barracks, the fort, the warehouse, the kitchen, the deportees' absorption site and others. Those who were deported would often leave belongings with friends who remained in the ghetto, and thus, the Monopoly game was passed on to Pavel and Tomáš Glass in Theresienstadt.

<https://www.yadvashem.org/artifacts/museum/monopol.html>

A replica of this item is displayed at the Sydney Jewish Museum.

Object Three - Wood Based Clogs with leather hide uppers nailed to the wood



The Nazis developed an immense system of concentration and extermination camps throughout Europe to imprison and murder those groups of people they deemed to be enemies of the regime. From four original camps in Germany, the system grew to include thousands of different camps and sub-camps organised into 23 major complexes, holding about 2 million prisoners. These included Jews, gypsies, political prisoners and prisoners of war. In addition to these concentration camps some 4,500,000 Soviet POWs were held in makeshift camps, which were often nothing more than open-air enclosures where prisoners were left to starve or freeze to death.

At most camps, prisoners who were not selected for immediate death were subjected to hard labour with long hours, starvation rations and harsh punishments. The death rate was very high. German firms could buy the labour of these slaves from the SS. More than 2 million men, women and children toiled in this vast system of camps. Nearly half were murdered, or died as a result under the appalling conditions in which they were forced to work and live.

On arrival at a concentration camp prisoners were deprived of their possessions, classified, photographed, numbered, shaved and deloused. They were then issued with ill-fitting clogs, such as these, and striped uniforms. The idea was that providing prisoners with clogs would help to prevent escapes. Prisoners wearing them quickly developed painful sores. However, not to have them was even worse. Primo Levi wrote: "Anyone who does not have them no longer perceives himself as a human being, but rather as a worm: naked, slow, ignoble, prone to the ground. He knows that he can be crushed at any moment." -

Adapted from <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30099859>.

Object Four – Chess set made from paper in Buchenwald camp



On 9 November 1939, an announcement came over the loudspeakers: "The prisoners are required to form lines in front of the barracks". It was the day after the attempt on Hitler's life by Johann Elser and a "Revenge Aktion" was carried out in the camp. On that morning, the prisoners were not sent to work, but were returned to their barracks after roll call. Shortly afterwards, 21 men, among them Rautenberg, were selected and sent to stand by the gate of the camp. As they waited, the camp doctor was instructed to fill out 21 death certificates. The cause of death noted on the certificates was "killed while escaping". The prisoners were then marched to the nearby quarry and shot.

Among the personal effects sent to Rautenberg's mother after his murder was the chess set that he made and a newspaper cutting with chess moves. These items allow us a glimpse of Rautenberg's resourcefulness in creating a chess set out of paper in his final months as a prisoner. The game enabled him to divert his attention from the loneliness and the harsh reality of his existence. As such, it is an example of spiritual resistance.

Yad Vashem Artifacts Collection

Donated by Ruth Rappaport, Switzerland

Object Five – Electric Fence Insulator



This ceramic high voltage insulator was used as part of an electric fence that imprisoned people in the death-camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Its primary function was to support and isolate the high-voltage wires that surrounded the camp, preventing escape and reinforcing the constant threat of death. These insulators, often ceramic and mounted on concrete posts, were part of a broader system of surveillance and control that turned the camp into a machine of terror. Their presence reminds us that the Holocaust was not only a human tragedy but also a technological and bureaucratic one, where ordinary materials were repurposed for extraordinary cruelty.

As a historical object, the insulator speaks about the calculated efficiency of Nazi operations. It is a small, utilitarian item, yet it played a role in a vast infrastructure designed to dehumanize and destroy. It encourages reflection on how everyday engineering was co-opted into a regime of mass murder.

Prisoners in the camp were aware that it would be fatal to touch the electric fence. It reminded them of danger, but it also offered them a method of suicide, ever present as a temptation to end the horrors of their existence. It challenged prisoners to fight to maintain their morale every day, and to resist the urge to end their suffering.

Object Six – Wooden Duck used by the French Underground for Smuggling Documents



In the course of her activities in the French underground, Judith Geller (or as she was known by her pseudonym - Jacqueline Gauthier) received a hollow toy duck containing hidden documents. The duck was added to a collection of toys used by Judith under her assumed identity as a children's social worker.

Born in Metz, Judith Geller was 17 years old when the war broke out. In 1941, her older brother Joel was arrested and sent to the Pithiviers camp, and later deported to Auschwitz, where he was killed. Judith's parents and younger brother hid in occupied Paris while Judith walked around "openly" with false papers under the assumed name of Jacqueline Gautier. She worked for the underground, smuggling documents and false papers. Once, she was arrested with a package of documents belonging to the underground. Miraculously the documents were not discovered by the Germans. After that incident, Judith received the duck, to provide a safer way to hide documents.

The duck was made by "Cor" who brought people from Holland to France, and was connected to both the French and Dutch undergrounds.

Judith organised false papers for her mother, and a hiding place for her parents and brother. During the war, Judith continued to see her beloved, Alfred Marcus (a good friend of her elder brother Joel) who was imprisoned in a detention camp for British subjects. After the war, Judith married Alfred and together they immigrated to Israel.

Adapted from the Yad Vashem Artifacts Collection

Loaned by Judith (Geller) Marcus, Petach Tikva, Israel