What They Carried

Objects of Survival

Each of these objects once belonged to someone targeted by Nazi violence during the Holocaust.

They were carried in hands and pockets, hidden in walls, or stored for safekeeping in the hope that they might one day be retrieved. They also carry an emotional weight: a link to family members never seen again, to friends and communities dispersed and destroyed, or to experiences beyond comprehension.

Survival was never guaranteed. It was shaped by ever-changing circumstances, arbitrary violence, and uncertainty. Life could be lost in an instant through exhaustion, hunger, illness, or chance encounters with authority.

Survival was largely a matter of luck. Yet, when pushed to their limits, people found extraordinary ways to adapt. Through resourcefulness, determination and care for others, they created opportunities where few seemed to exist.

Nazism was designed to eradicate people, faith, families, and identities. However, these objects stand as testament to the strength and resilience of human beings.

Body

Suffering within the Holocaust was bodily. Nazis and their collaborators physically humiliated their victims, inflicted trauma, and sought to weaken, control and ultimately destroy them.

Yet the body is remarkably resilient. It adapts, recovers, and endures. Survival meant protecting the body from hunger, illness, and exhaustion, often through the care and support of others.

Forced into impossible circumstances, people found new ways of inhabiting their bodies and the world around them. Though the body was on the front line of relentless violence, it remained a way to navigate the world, sustain others, claim space and keep going.

Military-issued blanket used by Frederick Smal

Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, Germany, c. 1943–1945

MHM 1947-1 / Cornelis Vanos Collection

This thick blanket was a remarkable shield for malnourished bodies against the harsh elements of northern Germany. It was used by Frederick Smal who was imprisoned in Bergen-Belsen and was present at its liberation. It is unclear if Frederick obtained the blanket during his imprisonment or from Allied forces at liberation, but it would have been a highly-sought-after item to protect from the horrendous conditions in the camp. The stitched star in the corner indicates that someone intentionally marked it as their own, staking claim to its warmth and security.

When British forces entered the camp in April they encountered 60,000 prisoners suffering from typhus, dysentery and starvation. Around 13,000 unburied bodies lay among the survivors. Even after liberation, more than 500 people died each day from disease and the devastating effects of starvation and poor sanitation. Frederick, wrapped in this heavy wool blanket, was not one of them.

Spoon engraved with prisoner number from concentration camp, owners unknown

Location unknown, c. 1939–1945

MHM 619

For prisoners in Nazi concentration camps, a spoon and bowl were essential to survival. Without them, they could not eat their ration of soup, often their only meal for the day. Issued only the most basic uniform items, prisoners had to find and acquire additional necessities within the camp's black market. A spoon could cost a daily ration or more.

The number 57021, engraved on this spoon, suggests its personal importance in an environment where scarcity redefined value, personhood and possession. We are unable to identify the exact owner as the Nazi camps operated multiple overlapping prisoner numbering systems.

This spoon may not have stayed with its owner for long. Objects were lost and obtained through theft, barter, confiscation and redistribution, passing through many hands as people were moved across the vast network of Nazi camps.

Among those assigned the number 57021 are the following people:

Hendrik Jansen in Meppen-Versen labour camp, Germany

Katja Zimbal in Flossenbürg concentration camp, Germany

Angelo Casalini in Mauthausen concentration camp, Austria

Anton Pobregar in Dachau concentration camp, Germany

Photographs of Bernard Nestler taken by an acquaintance

Sambor, Poland, June 1943

MHM 654-2 / Sara Lipman Collection,
Copies of MHM 654-5 and 654-2A / Sara Lipman Collection

Following the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, Bernard was deported from his hometown of Sambor to Janowska labour and transit camp in Lwów, Poland. After escaping he rejoined his parents and five siblings, who were confined in the Sambor ghetto.

Bernard soon escaped the ghetto and hid in a cellar outside it, emerging only at night in search of food. This series of photographs were taken without his knowledge during one of those dangerous journeys.

Bernard repeatedly evaded death. On one occasion, an SS guard recognised him, and he was shot in the arms and back while fleeing. Surviving by pretending to be dead, he returned to hiding before being captured and imprisoned in Sambor jail. He was later sent to Borysław labour camp, Poland and then to Sachsenhausen concentration camp, Germany. Selected for the gas chamber, he survived by declaring himself a watchmaker, a skill considered valuable by the SS.

After the war, the photographer sought out Bernard and presented him with these photographs, preserving his furtive moments.

We don't know who took these photos. Who might have taken them and why did they choose to capture Bernard in this moment?

Prisoners' cap worn by Leon Kluger

Various camps, c. 1942–1945

MHM 982-3 / William and Roman Kluger Collection

Captured as a member of the Polish Army and held as a prisoner of war, Leon was sent to Gross-Rosen and Klettendorf concentration camps in occupied Poland, before being transferred to Auschwitz. Hats formed part of the standard prisoner uniform for men and had to be worn at all times outdoors. Failure to do so could result in punishment.

For camp authorities, the cap functioned as a tool of regulation and visual uniformity. For prisoners, it offered their shaved heads a small but significant amount of protection against exposure to the cold, rain and sun.

As Allied forces approached Nazi camps in 1944 and 1945, the SS evacuated inmates to continue exploiting them as slave labour and to prevent survivors from revealing Nazi crimes to the world. These evacuations were referred to as "death marches" by those who endured them, because they were an instrument of murder. Nearly 750,000 people were sent on marches across occupied Europe; between 200,000 and 400,000 were murdered by starvation, exhaustion, exposure, or execution.

In January 1945 Leon was one of nearly 60,000 prisoners evacuated from Auschwitz on a death march. Temperatures at the time were recorded as low at -20°C. This hat would have provided limited but vital protection against the freezing conditions, which the SS weaponised against the already exhausted prisoners.

Contraceptive device belonging to unknown person

Watenbüttel, Germany, c. 1915–1940s

MHM 676-1 / Brant Collection

Under the Nazi regime, racial ideology shaped access to contraception and abortion. This access was limited for Aryan women, whose reproduction was seen as beneficial to the German state, while births among Jews were increasingly prohibited.

This particular contraceptive device was acquired after the war by a Terri Brant, the wife of a British soldier stationed in Germany. Faint engravings on the cup indicate that this device, known as the "Obstavit", was manufactured by the German company Rauh's from as early as 1915. This device is marked with the number 2, denoting its size.

While there is no evidence that Nazi authorities implemented intrauterine contraceptives such as this one in concentration or labour camps, the regime imposed other forms of reproductive control, including forced sterilisation, forced abortions and infanticide. By 1942, births in many ghettos had been banned under penalty of death for both mother and child.

In response to these conditions, records from the Vilna Ghetto show that Jewish doctors actively sought to give people agency in preventing pregnancies. They organised lectures on reproductive health, distributed contraceptive devices, and carried out abortions to save lives. In this context, the use of this device would have been an informed and intentional instrument of survival.

Comb used by Blanka Polak

Various locations, c. 1941–1945

MHM 2480-1 / Blanka Wise Collection

Photographs of Blanka Polak's parents, Rosa and Lazar Polak

Location and date unknown

Courtesy Dia Goldenfein, Zorita Sormann and Romy Moshinsky

When Blanka was 14, her home town of Veľký Bočkov, Czechoslovakia, was annexed by Hungary. Two years later, she and her parents were deported to German-occupied Poland, where they wandered between towns, searching for safety. Her father, Lazar, recognised that their forced removal marked the beginning of an uncertain and dangerous future. Believing possessions would become burdens rather than comforts, the family carried only a few essentials: some household items, clothing and something with which to wash themselves.

Blanka understood that appearing healthy and respectable could work to her advantage in a world shaped by antisemitic stereotypes. She wore a smart tweed coat whose black and white chequered weave concealed dirt and repairs. To maintain both hygiene and her appearance she washed in rivers and used this comb to brush her hair:

> "It saved my life.
> I never had lice.
> I was lucky that I didn't look like somebody poor."

She said goodbye to her parents for the final time in the Kołomyja Ghetto, hid these photos of them in her shoe, and survived by working in Budapest using false Christian identity papers. Before they parted her mother told her:

> "Somebody has to survive.
> Somebody has to tell the story."

Application for vegetable patch by Abram Goldberg

Łódź Ghetto, Poland, 1943

MHM 33 / Bono Wiener Collection

Certificate of Concentration Camp Inmate Status issued to Abram Goldberg

Hannover, Germany, 1945

MHM 1809-36 / Abram Goldberg Collection

By the end of 1943 over 40,000 people had been killed by starvation, disease and cold within the Łódź Ghetto, one of the largest in occupied Europe. Nazi authorities delegated the daily administration of the ghetto, including food distribution, to the *Judenrat* (Jewish Council), headed by Chaim Rumkowski, who sought to make the ghetto indispensable to the Nazis by meeting their demands for forced labour.

The Goldberg family, forcibly relocated into the Łódź Ghetto, were lucky enough to be assigned a weatherboard flat with a fenced garden shared by only a few other families, including the Wieners. Abram Goldberg and his friend Bono Wiener quickly learnt how to garden, using human waste as fertiliser. They grew vegetables such as lettuce, radishes, beetroot, cabbage and carrots, favouring fast-growing crops that could be eaten sooner.

The garden also contained a cherry tree, an apple tree and a pear tree – sought after rarities in the ghetto. When the *Judenrat* learned of the fruit, they ordered it to be collected. Rather than hand it over, Bono and Abram shared the unripe fruit with their families, gaining nutrients that helped protect them from the diseases rampant in the ghetto.

Postcard written by Julian (Julek) Ordynans to his parents in Łódź Ghetto

Pinnow über Reppen labour camp, Germany, 2 December 1941

MHM 104-3 / Michael and Eugenia Rovi Collection

At the end of 1940, Julek was one of 1,300 Jews from Łódź Ghetto forced to work for the Reichsautobahn-Behörde (Reich Highway Authority) on the Frankfurt (Oder)-Posen highway. Jewish forced labourers were required to pay for their food, accommodation, and camp maintenance, leaving few resources to obtain adequate clothing for the freezing winter.

Conditions inside the ghetto were similarly severe, and acquiring extra clothing was extremely difficult. The Łódź Ghetto was officially sealed 1 May 1940, making it nearly impossible to maintain contact with the outside world. Most people relied on the possessions they had brought with them or repurposed the limited materials available. Although those trapped inside the ghetto were subject to extreme scarcity, the ghetto became a centre of forced production, where labour was exchanged for the chance of survival.

As families were separated, they often knew little about the conditions their loved ones were enduring. Letters such as Julek's, requesting warm clothing from his family in Łódź, reveal the hope that, despite everything, relatives might be alive and held in slightly better circumstances than their own.
Julek and his sister Eugenia survived the Holocaust. However, their father David died in Łódź Ghetto and their mother Leah was transported to Ravensbrück concentration camp, Germany, where she was murdered.

Relationships

Relationships are central to Jewish life, shaping families, communities and networks of care. During the Holocaust, these bonds came under relentless attack. Families were torn apart, often believing their separation would be temporary. Some knew they were saying a final goodbye to a parent, sibling, spouse or friend; many never had the chance. By isolating individuals and dismantling communities, the Nazis sought to destroy the relationships that sustained Jewish existence.

Yet these bonds remained essential to survival. People drew strength from loved ones. They endured in the hope of protecting or reuniting with family and friends. They relied on strangers who became companions or surrogate families through shared experiences.

In a regime designed to isolate and fracture, preserving these connections was a quiet but powerful act of resistance.

Tablecloth embroidered by sisters Rachela, Anna (Andzja), Estera (Edzia), and Bella Gersztynowicz

Łódź, Poland, c. 1932

Courtesy Margaret Taft

Copy of photograph of sisters (left to right) Edzia, Bella and Andzja Gersztynowicz

Location unknown, c. mid-1930s

Courtesy Margaret Taft and Elias Kreuzer

Copy of photograph of Rachela Gersztynowicz on her wedding day to Avram Lesman

Łódź, Poland, 1934

Courtesy Margaret Taft and Elias Kreuzer

In their family's apartment in Łódź, Andzja and her sisters spent countless hours on this detailed embroidery. Each worked on their own section, from Bella, probably all of ten years old, to Rachela, a pharmacist in her 20s.

When Germany invaded Poland in 1939, Rachela and Bella chose to stay in Łódź, while Andzja and Edzia fled to Warsaw, where Edzia died of tuberculosis in 1941. Smuggled out of the ghetto by the Polish resistance, Andzja survived the rest of the war in a cellar, going without sunlight for 18 months.

She emerged to learn that she was the only one of the four sisters left. Yet somehow, throughout it all, she held tight to their handiwork – the last surviving trace of the life that they had shared.

Medical kit used by Helen (Hela) Kasman in Auschwitz infirmary, containing glass ampoules with pharmaceuticals, ampoule opener, syringes, needles, finger cots, scalpels and curettes

Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, Poland, c. 1943

MHM 2182 / Helen Kasman Collection

Photograph of Hela Kasman

Vienna, Austria, 11 July 1947

Courtesy Kaufman Family

This medical kit kept Hela alive in Auschwitz from 1943 until 1945.

Hela was arrested in Radom, Poland and then deported for attempting to smuggle her young daughter Giza to safety in 1943. She was separated from Giza, who was murdered in Radom Ghetto.

When Hela arrived in Auschwitz she was recognised by a non-Jewish acquaintance who was the wife of a doctor working in the camp's infirmary. This woman picked her out from the crowd and organised for Hela to work in the infirmary.

Although Hela had no medical experience, this acquaintance's quick-thinking and kindness kept Hela alive for the next two years. Her role in the infirmary protected her from harsher forced labour and selection for the gas chambers.

Diary and notebook kept by Imre Gaspar

Various locations, 1945

Photograph of Imre Gaspar with wife Jenny and son Peter

Melbourne, Australia, 1950

Courtesy Peter Gaspar

On 10 January 1945, after years in hiding, Imre and his wife Jenny handed themselves in to the police to save the life of their 7-year-old son Peter, who was dangerously ill.

This diary, kept by Imre, documents what happened next. The family was imprisoned in the town of Trnava, Slovakia and then deported to Sered concentration camp, where, on 13 January, they were separated. Jenny and Peter were interned in Theresienstadt ghetto-camp. Imre was sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp, and from there to various other camps across northern Germany. He survived beatings, forced labour, and death marches; all of it chronicled in this diary.

In another notebook, Imre recorded the names and addresses of his fellow prisoners, along with their family members – a promise to stay in touch if they were to survive, or to let their families know of their fates. Alongside the addresses are recipes in Slovakian, Hungarian and German, the diverse languages reflecting the varied homelands of the men imprisoned with Imre. In the face of malnutrition and even starvation, these men shared reminders of home.

Why would recording recipes have felt as important to Imre as recording names?

Autograph book belonging to Susanne Friedlander, with a note from her father Peter

Vienna, Austria, c. 1940–1942

MHM 1631-14 / Dr Susanne Maria Wright née Friedlander Collection

Copy of photograph of Susanne Friedlander, age 7, with her father

Vienna, Austria, 1938

MHM 1631-3 / Dr Susanne Maria Wright née Friedlander Collection

Living in Vienna in 1940, 9-year-old Susanne was only able to see her father once a week. The Friedlander family had been kicked out of their apartment due to antisemitic laws, and most of their belongings – including Peter's beloved grand piano – had been confiscated. While Susanne and her Catholic mother Trude crowded into Trude's parents' two-bedroom apartment, Peter lived elsewhere, hoping to protect his family from any further danger caused by having a Jewish father and husband.

Peter's decision may have saved his family's life. He was arrested in May 1942, and murdered in either Izbica Ghetto or Bełżec extermination camp. Susanne survived, as did this book, holding Peter's message. Over the page, he wrote the notes of the song she loved to hear him play: a lullaby by Johannes Brahms.

Lock of Gilah Vanderhoek's hair, kept by her foster sister Joop Zwanikken

Laren, Netherlands, c. 1943–1945

Courtesy Gilah Leder

Photograph of Gilah Vanderhoek at 2 years and 8 months

Laren, Netherlands, c. August 1944

Courtesy Gilah Leder

In 1943, as Nazi deportations of Jewish people in the Netherlands intensified, Gilah's parents made the difficult decision to give their 16-month-old daughter to the Zwanikkens, a Catholic family they had never met. Gilah's aunt, who had been arrested and was already in a transit camp, had smuggled a letter out to the family warning of what was to come:

> "Do whatever you can, but make sure your daughter isn't sent here. She won't last more than a couple of weeks."

Hidden among the Zwanikken family's seven children, Gilah became a beloved part of the household over the next two years. Knowing Gilah would not remain with the family forever, her teenage foster sister quietly cut off a lock of Gilah's hair while she slept. She believed that if she kept the hair safe, Gilah herself would remain safe. Years later, she returned the lock of hair to Gilah, its purpose fulfilled.

Letter written by Lily Seiden to her penpal Emma Mae Dierks in the USA, with envelope

Vienna, Austria, 5 April 1938

MHM 2365-15 / Lily Skall Collection

Photograph of Lily Seiden and her brother Kurt

Vienna, Austria, 1934

MHM 2365-3 / Lily Skall Collection

In April 1938, 19-year-old Lily begged her pen-pal Emma Mae's family to sponsor her immigration to the USA. A month earlier, Germany had annexed Austria, subjecting Austrian Jews like Lily to antisemitic laws and public humiliation, and limiting their participation in civic life. Escape was difficult. The USA, Australia and many other nations had imposed strict limits on immigration and required prospective émigrés to have a financial sponsor.

The Seiden family's hopes rested on their teenager daughter and a friend who she had never met. If Lily was able to emigrate, she may in turn have been able to sponsor her mother, father, and younger brother. Their desperate search for a way out took its toll – a few months after this letter was sent, Lily's father Jakob attempted suicide.

Jakob survived, and although Emma Mae's family agreed to support Lily, the Seidens were unable to arrange immigration to the USA, and instead found refuge in Shanghai.

Artwork by František Herman

Prague, Czechoslovakia, 1940

MHM 1469-216 / Trude Sturm Collection

Sheet music for *Die Grüne Lasterhütte* (The Green House of Disrepute) written by Adolf Strauss, with lyrics by Erka (surname unknown)

Prague, Czechoslovakia, July 1941

MHM 1469-178 / Trude Sturm Collection

Copy of photograph of Elly Schiff

Location and date unknown

MHM 1469-20 / Trude Sturm Collection

In German-occupied Prague, Jewish performances were banned. In spite of these laws, František, Adolf, Erka, and their tight-knit group of friends continued to create music, literature, and art.

Of the six friends depicted in this artwork, only Elly is known to have survived the Holocaust. It is likely she who would have sung this music, a cabaret waltz dedicated to her by its composer, Adolf. Although any performance would have happened in secret, a motto at the top of the page hints that this music provided a measure of normalcy and even joy under Nazi occupation.

> Funny brothers don't go down.
> Despite a hard time, we are jolly and awake
> We are not blessed with good luck right now
> but a little wine and music helps.

This song celebrates friendship, romance, companionship and gossip. Its cheeky and flirtatious lyrics, with their exaggerated refrain about "decency and morality", satirise public respectability in an environment where conventional social norms have been upended.

Ingenuity

During the Holocaust, ingenuity became a powerful expression of resilience and human agency. The Nazis sought to strip Jews of autonomy and force them into systems of persecution and murder. Yet even within these structures, people found ways to reclaim small measures of control.

Survival often depended on recognising opportunity where none appeared to exist. Objects and systems intended to oppress were repurposed, rules were bent and new networks of exchange, cooperation and support emerged. Jewish agency disrupted a regime that sought to make victims complicit in their own destruction.

Drawing on their knowledge, skills, and resourcefulness, people solved impossible problems and found ways to endure, preserve dignity and make something out of almost nothing.

Concentration camp uniform trousers worn by Andre (Avram) Zelig

Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, Poland, May 1944

MHM 271-2 / Andre Zelig Collection

Photograph of Andre Zelig (centre) awaiting medical examination

Écouis, France, June 1945

MHM 271-3 / Andre Zelig Collection

> "We had to line up again to get our clothes because we had to march naked, because we didn't wear the clothes we walked in with. They gave us new prison clothes. And it didn't matter whether it fitted you or not. You just take your parcel and go and hope for the best."
>
> **– Andre Zelig, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation, Interview 4459**

Uniforms were issued hastily and were often mismatched and ill-fitting. Arriving at Auschwitz in May 1944, Andre received a summer uniform consisting of a shirt, jacket, cap, some old shoes, and these trousers. Although he was not liberated until April the following year, he was never provided with a heavier winter uniform.

Prisoners often exchanged parts of their uniform and adapted them to survive camp conditions. Other examples of trousers show that extensive modifications were made. Prisoners added pockets and patches, and newspaper was used to create an insulative layer in winter. These pants were issued with a belt and buttons to hold the pants in place, however as bodies became more emaciated further adjustments had to be made.
At liberation Andre weighed just 32 kilograms, and he recalled using additional string to stop the trousers from slipping off his thin frame.

Birthday invitation addressed to Fritz Schiff

Theresienstadt ghetto-camp, Czechoslovakia, c. 1942-44

MHM 1469-121 / Trude Sturm Collection

Drawing of Fritz Schiff by a friend

Theresienstadt ghetto-camp, Czechoslovakia, 20 May 1942

MHM 1469-68 / Trude Sturm Collection

Fritz Schiff, along with his wife Elly, was deported from Prague to Theresienstadt ghetto-camp on 30 January 1942. They were among the 19,245 Jews deported from Czechoslovakia that year.

A ghetto and transit camp, Theresienstadt was also used by the Nazis as a propaganda site, where they projected false images of ghettoised Jews enjoying a vibrant artistic and culture life. In reality, the prisoners faced food shortages, disease and forced labour and transports regularly left for killing centres such as Auschwitz.

Addressed to Transport V, 286, Fritz's actual transport and prisoner numbers, this fake birthday invitation imitates the appearance and language of a deportation notice. Inviting Fritz to report to the birthday child at the "Dance Floor Department", the card finds humour not just in the threat of deportation, but in the camp's *Freizeitgestaltung* (Leisure Time Administration), the Jewish-run organisation responsible for lectures, theatre, readings and musical performances.

Fritz and Elly actively participated in Theresienstadt's cultural life, both within and outside of sanctioned performances, with Fritz writing poetry, music and theatrical parodies in the ghetto. In October 1944 they were deported to Auschwitz. Fritz was killed in Dachau concentration camp on 19 March 1945, while Elly survived and eventually emigrated to Melbourne.

Poem *Nowy Dzień* (New Day) written by Lajzar (Lolek) Silski

Gusen II (subcamp of Mauthausen concentration camp), Austria, 30 April 1945

MHM 435-1 / Lolek Silski Collection

> "Difficult moments
> Memorable moments
> While waiting for a result
> From the mortality record"

On one side of this sheet of paper is a poem, carefully written as though for posterity. It reads as both a message to Lolek Silski's fellow prisoners and a reassurance to himself.

On the reverse is a sketch of Mauthausen from his perspective as an inmate, showing the electric fencing, illuminated by a bell-shaped light, and guarded by the watchtower. Lolek signs his name, enclosed by the prisoner numbers issued to him at Auschwitz (B-8180) and Mauthausen (119274), preserving the numbers as a record of his identity and experience.

Having endured the Łódź Ghetto, Auschwitz and a death march to Mauthausen, Lolek spent the last four months of the war working as a machine fitter. Written six days before the camp's liberation, this poem captures the psychological and physical state of prisoners in the final weeks of war. Even as Allied forces closed in, survival remained uncertain. Lolek Silski urges endurance in the face of starvation, exhaustion and death. He imagines a future in which the dead and living outlast their captors, ensuring that neither they, nor their experiences, are forgotten.

Spoon from “Kanada”

Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, Poland, c. 1945

MHM 610-4 / Jim Sherlock Collection

This spoon was recovered from the site of one of the warehouses at Auschwitz. Known by the SS as the *Effektenlager* (effects storage), these held the belongings confiscated from people arriving at Auschwitz, many of whom were murdered on arrival without being registered. Their possessions were sorted and sold or repurposed for the German war effort. In January 1945 the warehouses were burned by the Nazis in an attempt to destroy evidence of their system of theft, death and profit.

Prisoners called the sites “Kanada”, associating the country of Canada with prosperity and abundance. For the privileged inmates assigned to work in the *Kanada Kommando*, the warehouses offered access to food, clothing and utensils that could be smuggled back to their barracks and traded or used to stay alive. Here a spoon could hold greater value than gold.

Why would a simple spoon be such a valuable object?

How would this spoon’s value change dependent on its location?

False identity card of Ernestyna (Irene) Zyskind

Warsaw, Poland, 1943

MHM 2194-5 / Irene and Stefan Borton Collection

When the Warsaw Ghetto was sealed in November 1940, Irene Zyskind's family found ways to survive within its confines. Initially, they rented a shop and sold chocolate to German soldiers. When this was no longer possible, Irene worked in a brush factory while her father and brother worked in a kitchen feeding the German Army, giving the family access to food scraps.

As conditions in the ghetto deteriorated, Irene's mother Dorothea arranged an escape for Irene and her sister Sabina. Through a prewar skiing acquaintance, Dorothea connected with smugglers who guided the girls through the sewers to a safe house outside the ghetto. For Irene she obtained the birth certificate of a former employee who lived in Germany.

Using this birth certificate, Irene was able to obtain a mandatory *Kennkarte* (identity card). Her fair hair and blue eyes enabled her to pass as non-Jewish and move freely through Warsaw, while Sabina remained hidden.

Outside the ghetto, Irene joined the underground resistance helping Jews in hiding obtain money and false documents. Through a contact at the town hall, she had unlimited access to birth certificates and blank *Kennkarten*, repurposing the tools of Nazi surveillance to help others survive.

Metal comb made by Frederika Matzner

Freiberg labour camp, Germany,
1 January 1945

MHM 1948-9 / Frederika Matzner Collection

Copy of photograph of Frederika Matzner (left) with her friend Lily Reich, Prague, 1941

MHM 1948-1 / Frederika Matzner Collection

Frederika and her husband Arthur were only newlyweds when they were interned in Theresienstadt ghetto-camp in 1941. They were separated in 1943 when Frederika was transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. She would not see Arthur again until after liberation. Without prior knowledge of the camp and its gas chambers, Frederika described her experience upon arrival as a nightmare. Realising she was about to lose everything, she hid her wedding ring in her mouth. The rest of her jewellery was confiscated.

After a week in Auschwitz, Frederika was transferred to Freiberg, a subcamp of Flossenbürg concentration camp, Germany, where she was forced to work in an aircraft factory. There she made this comb from scrap aluminium. By enabling her to maintain a neat appearance, the comb became a way to preserve her dignity and autonomy. Engraved with the camp, the date, and her initials, this comb became one of Lisa's most important possessions.

Knife made by Lisa Scheuer

Freiberg labour camp, Germany,
c. 1943–1945

MHM 2203-6 / Lisa Scheuer Collection

Photograph of Lisa Scheuer

Česká Lípa, Czechoslovakia, February 1934

Courtesy Arnott Family

> "Here is the recipe for a knife: one takes a thin saw-blade, carves it into the length of a knife, files the tip sharper and drills a small hole into the lower, wider end. The points of the saw-blade still have to be filed off and the knife is thus finished. Then a somewhat wider piece of tin is beaten in half so that a blade forms a sheath. This blade actually serves as a case for the knife because a little hole is also drilled on one end – to screw together the knife edge and case with a small screw and small nut."
>
> **– Lisa Scheuer, *Vom Tode, der nicht stattfand* (The death that didn't happen)**

Gathering scraps of materials, Lisa made several objects while incarcerated in Freiberg labour camp, where she was forced to manufacture aircraft parts for the German Air Force. With bread rationed in slices, the knife she created had little practical purpose. However, Lisa recalled that making it gave her a sense of purpose, helping to occupy her time and sustain her spirit.

Letter written by Magda Hellinger to Zelma and Philip Reich in Michalovce, Slovakia

Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, Poland, 8 April 1943

MHM 2461-7 / Magda and Vojtech (Bela) Blau Collection

Copy of photograph of Madga Hellinger (right) with unknown friends at the Fourth World Convention of Jewish youth group *Hashomer Hatzair* (The Young Guard)

Poprad, Slovakia, 1935

Courtesy Maya Lee

In March 1942, Magda and a thousand other girls were deported on one of the early transports from Slovakia to Auschwitz. As one of the first prisoners at the newly-established Auschwitz II camp, she was assigned the role of *Stubendienst* (room helper). During her four years at the camp, Magda would be promoted to *Blockälteste* (block leader) and then to *Lagerälteste* (camp leader) for Section BIIc, overseeing thousands of Hungarian women who arrived at Auschwitz in 1944.

Magda's positions offered her limited privileges, including the ability to send and receive letters. This letter is addressed to the owners of the brewery in her hometown, which Madga rightly guessed would still be open to support the German war effort. By listing her fellow prisoners who sent their regards, Magda was able to reassure their families that the girls were still alive.

Buttons from a Nazi uniform, acquired by Edvige (Hedy) Balcone

Fossoli concentration camp, Italy, 1944

MHM 2439-4 / Vivian Weldon (née Krauss) Collection

Letter from *Scharführer* (Squad Leader) Hans Hagen to Hedy Balcone's husband Angelo

Bolzano, Italy, 11 August 1944

MHM 2439-3 / Vivian Weldon (née Krauss) Collection

Copy of photograph of Hedy Balcone with son Gabriel

Italy, 18 September 1939

Courtesy Vivian Weldon

Originally from a Viennese Jewish family, Hedy moved to Milan where she found work as an au pair. In her first week there she met Angelo, a Roman Catholic, who proposed three months later. Hedy willingly converted to Catholicism, and in 1939 they welcomed their son, Gabriel.

After the family were discovered attempting to flee to Switzerland, they were sent to San Vittore prison in Varese. Understanding deportation was imminent, Hedy secured Gabriel's escape by arranging a false appendicitis diagnosis and subsequent surgery. Though the procedure was unnecessary, it gave cover for a resistance group to smuggle Gabriel out of the hospital.

Hedy was deported to Fossoli concentration camp in February 1944, where her sewing skills came to the attention of the SS after she repaired an officer's torn glove using a piece cut from her own. She was subsequently assigned to mend Nazi uniforms, a role that gave her limited privileges. During her transport to Auschwitz, she begged SS officer Hans Hagen to send a note to Angelo in Milan. As a favour to her, he obliged, writing:

> "Men and women arrived happy and healthy at Auschwitz"

Self

Dehumanisation is central to genocide, reducing people to categories, numbers and targets. It aimed to strip people of their rights, identities and connections to one another.

Survival required navigating constant threats to one's sense of self. Fragments of ritual, language and memory became vital to quiet endurance. Some chose to conceal their identity to survive; others chose to live in full defiance.

Every object in this exhibition is inextricable from a person's identity. Collectively they trace lives before the Holocaust, the choices made under persecution and the ways survivors redefined themselves afterwards. They reveal that survival was not only about preserving life but also about maintaining continuity while adapting to a world forever changed.

Jacket worn by Wilhelm (Will) Korn

Breslau-Güntherbrücke concentration camp, Germany, 1942

MHM 96 / Wilhelm and Lilly Korn Collection

Photograph of Wilhelm Korn

Italy, 1946

MHM 1883-43 / Wilhelm and Lilly Korn Collection

Wilhelm Korn was first deported from his hometown of Vienna in October 1939, and survived imprisonment in over a dozen prisons, camps, and ghettos. For Will, this jacket was a symbol of what he had endured during the Holocaust.

This jacket was one of the few items he owned when he was liberated from Reichenbach concentration camp, Germany in May 1945. He was still wearing it in June, when he encountered a German woman who dismissed photographs of the concentration camps as propaganda – his first experience of Holocaust denial.

This jacket served not only as an item of clothing, but as a tangible piece of evidence of what had been done to Will, his family, and his community.

Poem *Telefon* (Telephone) by Władysław Szlengel, carried by Helen (Chawa) Berkowicz

Warsaw, Poland, 1941

MHM 18 / Helen Irlicht Collection

False ID card belonging to Chawa Berkowicz

Warsaw, Poland, 1943

MHM 88 / Helen Irlicht Collection

From 1942 until 1945, Chawa Berkowicz survived by taking on the Christian identity of Helena Zurkowska. She straightened her curly hair, went to church, and carried a false identity card. Yet throughout this time, she kept this notebook with her, containing poetry by Władysław Szlengel, a Jewish writer imprisoned in the Warsaw Ghetto. He was murdered in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in April 1943.

A poem about loss, memory and the impossibility of returning to the world that existed before, Telefon resonated with many Jewish people during the Holocaust. With no one left to call, except the telephone service providing the time, the poem recalls ordinary moments of a world that had disappeared.

Within the ghetto, Szlengel's poems were read aloud in factories and homes, or copied out and shared in secret, giving a voice to the experiences of Jewish people. Outside it, this notebook was a dangerous liability that would immediately expose Chawa as Jewish if it was discovered. Despite the risk to her own life, Chawa continued to carry his words.

Why would someone risk their life to preserve a poem?

Comb shared by Genia Wald and her daughters Celina and Ruth

Warsaw, Poland, 1939–1945

MHM 1385 / Celina Wald-Widawski Collection

Photograph of Genia (left), Celina (front) and Ruth Wald (right)

Solec-Zdrój, Poland, 1947

Courtesy Wald family

During the Holocaust, Genia shared this comb with her daughters, Celina and Ruth, each using it to care for hair that was intimately linked to their experiences of survival.

All three survived the Holocaust by living as Christians, moving around regularly to keep their Jewish identity a secret. They were forced to alter or hide parts of their appearance that were considered stereotypically Jewish.

For Genia, this meant bleaching her dark hair blonde. Celina also had dark hair, but fearing that bleaching a child's hair would attract attention, Genia often kept her hidden, at times even separated from herself and Ruth. Not yet ten, Ruth learnt Catholic prayers and used her natural blonde hair to deflect suspicion from the family.

Photograph of *Chanukiah* (Chanukah candelabra) made for Ida Knobler

Gogolin labour camp, Poland, December 1941

MHM 1607-1 / Ida Frydman Collection

Drawing of Ida Knobler by fellow prisoner Walter Spitzer

Blechhammer labour camp, Poland, 24 August 1943

MHM 1607-4 / Ida Frydman Collection

Hidden in the space between their barracks and the camp fence, Jewish prisoners in Gogolin celebrated Chanukah in secret. The holiday, known as the Festival of Light, is marked with the lighting of eight candles in the *chanukiah*, commemorating the triumph of Jewish resistance against the Seleucid empire in the 2nd century BCE.

In Gogolin, the traditional Chanukah candles were combined with items representing the harsh reality of camp life: the barracks where Jewish people lived, and the tools they were forced to use to build German roads. A white sheet draped over the camp fence created a backdrop for this photograph.

An older couple in the camp organised this Chanukah celebration for young inmates, like 16-year-old Ida, reminding them of the rhythms of Jewish life and the tradition of tenacity in the face of efforts to destroy it.

Siddur (prayer book) with bullet belonging to Andre Schwartz

MHM 1684-3A / Liesel Schwartz Collection

Siddur cover stained with blood

Published London, England, 1941

MHM 1684-3B / Liesel Schwartz Collection

This *siddur* saved Andre Schwartz's life. Two items sit between its blood-stained pages: a lucky British penny, and a bullet.

A Jewish refugee from Czechoslovakia, Andre arrived in England in February 1939 and found work making aircraft parts for the Allied war effort. He would have received this *siddur* from the Congregation of Jews from Czechoslovakia, who helped refugees establish new lives in Britain.

In 1943, Andre was drafted into the Czechoslovakian Army, then operating in exile from the United Kingdom. No record of his wartime service survives, but he lived through the war in Europe and arrived in Australia in 1948. His brother Janek was less fortunate. After being liberated from an Italian concentration camp, he was killed while serving with the Czechoslovakian forces near Dunkirk in 1945.

Little information accompanied this *siddur* when it was donated to the Melbourne Holocaust Museum after Andre's death. Although we do not know who shot at him or where, we do know for certain that this prayer book stopped a bullet. Andre believed this *siddur* saved him, and he preserved it as a symbol of life and luck.

Inlaid woodwork crafted by Dr Benjamin (Ben) Gomperts

Amsterdam, Netherlands, c. 1940–1945

MHM 1599-134 / Bep Gomperts Collection

Donated by Frits von Stein in memory of his wife,
Carla Von Stein-Gomperts.

Benjamin Gomperts created this detailed artwork while in hiding in Amsterdam, describing it as a form of occupational therapy.

Before the war, Ben worked as a doctor in Amsterdam. In May 1940, Germany invaded the Netherlands. A year later Jewish doctors like Ben were forbidden from seeing non-Jewish patients.

Ben's years of caring for others were not forgotten. He and his wife Alice were taken in by Mary (Molly) Ruting-Reid, a former patient. She hid them while over 100,000 Jews were deported from the Netherlands. Most would never come home, but thanks to Molly's bravery, Ben and Alice survived.

Torah fragments hidden by Julian Lewin

Siedlce, Poland, c.1920s

MHM 1748-12 / William and Irene Dunwill Collection

Copy of photograph of Anna and Julian Lewin

Siedlce, Poland, c. 1930

MHM 1748-14 / William and Irene Dunwill Collection

When German soldiers took possession of the mill where Julian Lewin's family lived and worked, he took with him what little he could carry. Among those few possessions was a Torah scroll.

The Lewins were not a particularly religious family, but they had built a *shtibl* (prayer house) at their mill and commissioned a Torah scroll for use there to show gratitude to their community and to God for the success of their business. Julian brought the scroll with him when he and his family were forced to move into the Siedlce Ghetto. Knowing that Germans were destroying Jewish religious objects, he unrolled the scroll and glued it around the walls of his ghetto apartment, covering it with plaster and then wallpaper to ensure it would remain hidden. Only Anna knew what he had done.

Neither Julian nor Anna survived the Holocaust. Their Torah was not discovered until their former apartment was renovated in 2002. It was donated to the Siedlce Regional Museum and, with the museum's permission, these two fragments were sent to Julian and Anna's daughter Irene Dunwill, the only member of the family to survive the Holocaust.

Yahrzeit (memorial) card for Judith De Haan-Posener, written by her son Jozeph (Joe) De Haan on the back of a ration card

Amsterdam, Netherlands, 1941

MHM 2180-30 / Joseph and Cecilia De Haan Collection

Photograph of Judith De Haan-Posener

Amsterdam, Netherlands, c. 1940-1941

MHM 2180-22 / Joseph and Cecilia De Haan Collection

Photograph of Joe De Haan

Amsterdam, Netherlands, 7 January 1948

MHM 2180-10 / Joseph and Cecilia De Haan Collection

Judith De Haan-Posener died on 16 June 1941, just over a year after the German invasion of the Netherlands. Her family attributed her death to the stress caused by increasing antisemitism and the German occupation.

Living under the constant threat of arrest, deportation, and forced labour, Judith's teenage son Joe found work distributing ration cards to Amsterdam's Jewish community. On the back of one of these cards, he wrote out the *yahrzeit* dates for his mother, meticulously calculating the day each year that Judith's death would be commemorated according to Jewish lunar calendar.

Despite his precarious circumstances, Joe mapped out the dates until 1991, determined to maintain his mother's memory. He lived long enough to do so, surviving to age 100.

What They Carried

Objects of Survival

EXHIBITION PRODUCED BY

MELBOURNE HOLOCAUST MUSEUM

Judy & Leon Goldman Learning Centre

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Pearce Family Foundation

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The Melbourne Holocaust Museum thanks all survivors, families and supporters whose generosity ensures these stories continue to educate future generations.

The Melbourne Holocaust Museum holds approximately 1,300 testimonies from Holocaust survivors who made Melbourne their home. This exhibition features excerpts from a selection of those testimonies.

Scan the QR code to watch the full interviews and hear survivors reflect on their experiences during the Holocaust.

This testimony installation has been made possible through the generosity of the Pearce Family Foundation.

Survivor's featured:

Helen (Elka) Ekstein

Wilhelm (Willy) Lermer OAM

Phillip Maisel OAM

Wilhelm (Will) Korn

John Lamovie

Helen Granek OAM

Joe Szwarcberg

Charles German

Ruth Crane

Maria Teresa Censor

Helen Lepere

Paul Grinwald

Ester Braitberg

Henry Wynne

Rosa Cirol

Adele Jarzebski

Helen Schon

Abraham Biderman

Felix Flicker

Erika Hacker

Irmgard (Irma) Hanner OAM

Ben Kamieniecki

Peter Windholz OAM

Saba Feniger

Running time: 27 minutes

Parental supervision advised