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# Conservational challenges in dealing with Holocaust objects

**Abstract** The article will highlight different aspects of working with Holocaust objects in today's memorials or museums. It will focus on objects which were artistically created from everyday objects in an active camp time and how the intersection between an object as a historic evidence and an object as a work of art or craft might change the way a conservator should approach it. Is it possible to combine functionality, highest authenticity and readability and measure up to the standards of historical and artistic representation? Can art be displayed on the site of a former concentration camp and how will it be comprehended by a visitor? With focus on the storage and exhibition strategies of smaller and larger memorials or museums, the decisions on which objects should be on display and which should not, the different approaches for a conservator in the field of Holocaust objects will be dealt with by using examples from the State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Ravensbrueck Memorial.

**Keywords** Holocaust objects, memorials, art, concentration camps, conservation

The presentation that was given during the 2017 Helsingborg Conference *Difficult Issues* focused on different aspects of working with Holocaust objects in today's memorials or museums. Having collected different experiences over the past few years, it seems necessary to review why some objects in today's memorials are on display and why others are not, and which difficulties arise with these specific objects. The presentation of this topic and the experiences shared come from a solemnly personal point of view during the work at different museums and memorials.

These memorials and/or museums have different structures and may follow different educational guidelines on how to inform people about the Holocaust. The memorial as a place of remembrance may focus on certain local historical events, a person or a certain group of persecuted individuals. In some cases, memorials will not focus as much on pedagogical transference of historical facts and will only serve as a place, where people come together to find solace and emotional support. A museum usually aims for a more scientific approach into the topic to educate people about a certain historic event or a certain period. There might be a combination of both institutions where a more intertwined approach to the poignant subjectivity of an historical occurrence and the technical transfer of knowledge to the visitor takes place. When it comes to collections and conservation departments, not every memorial has to have one. This usually depends on the size of the memorial, the absence or presence of a collection, the size of the collection, and aids or sponsorships the memorial may or may not benefit from. Larger museums instead are able to afford their own conservation department or may work with outside contractors, especially when there are private funds involved and the size and character of the collections demands a constant conservational care.

Furthermore, it is necessary to highlight the different types of collections and their origins. Dealing with the extremely difficult task of presenting the history of the Holocaust, these museums and/or memorials differ in their pedagogical lectureship and their exhibition strategies. With the representation of the Holocaust, it is possible to have a combination of historic grounds, buildings, artefacts and modern buildings. With this basis, different aspects might contribute to the character of the collections. When referring to a place or location of the Holocaust, which now houses a memorial or museum, the former use of the site might have a great impact on the types of object the institution displays. The Memorial Ravensbrueck was mainly a concentration camp which incarcerated women and deals with the forced labour situation that took place on-site. Many objects belonged to women and have an obvious feminine character or can be linked to specific production processes (use of cable or wire, for example), made under forced labour. In memorials, everyday objects such as former belongings of concentration camp inmates or artefacts which document the daily routine of the incarcerated women and men and their perpetrators, can often be seen on the historic grounds, sometimes even in historic buildings and surroundings. For visitors these objects are usually easy to identify and understand given the context of the historic place. Museums without the connection to a historic location have to create a proper exhibition environment and context, in which Holocaust artefacts can be presented appropriately and the nature of the objects can be perceived by the viewer, as for example it is the case at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington DC. There, the same 'category' of objects that can be found as presented in memorials of former concentration camps, though the surrounding had to be designed specifically to fit in these objects. The USHMM had a controversial start in the eye of the public since it started out at a memorial for the six million murdered Jews during the Holocaust. Survivor Elli Wiesel put emphasis on this fact since the elimination of the Jewish people was the original plan of the Nazis but other persecuted groups felt left out. The founding commission was mostly Jewish and today the main part of the exhibition deals with the *Shoa*. In addition to objects from former concentration camps the museum acquired a vast number of archival objects such as papers, letters, posters, photography, all describing the living conditions of Jewish people under repression or the Jewish resistance during World War II. The museum sometimes takes on complete collections or house/apartment clearances after the death of a Holocaust survivor. Usually within these donations there are what someone would refer to as irrelevant objects for a museum but seeing the mission of the museum as to remember and preserve the memento of a Holocaust survivor, Jewish life and culture, the museum might be the last place able to take care of these objects.

In the case of the USHMM we also have a strong focus on genocide prevention – not only the depiction of the past with artefacts and reconstructions but also written, visual and audio-visual exhibition concepts about past and current genocidal threats around the world. Similar approaches may also be seen in smaller memorials, where oral history interviews and reports play a large part of the exhibition concept since the objects collection might be smaller and maybe deteriorated to the point that exhibition would be a risk for the object itself.

For some memorials or museums, the use of the historic grounds after the liberation had also an influence on current structures. The approach of the State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau, which was established by survivors of the camp who decided to stay there after the liberation, solemnly focuses on the side of the victims and does not display artefacts which can be associated with the Nazis (uniforms, for example). Additionally, the former grounds and barracks of the State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau had been occupied by the Soviet Army after the liberation of the camp. Material had been reused, used up or transported to other areas which led to traces around the camp sites that imply a varied, multi-cultural and multi-ethnical history of the place, but which was also not included into the museum and memorial structures.

Memorials of former concentration camps do not only care for a vast number of objects, they also take care of the original buildings and the surrounding landscape. Their priority is highest accuracy in displaying all the aspects of the Holocaust. Due to the shortage of exhibition space in what is often an original building, memorials can only display a certain number of objects of their large collection – leaving the rest in storage. And depending on how the memorial wants to transfer the place's history, sometimes only objects of a certain character, with connection to a certain people or place, are on display.

The presence of a conservation department at memorials and museums is a political and financial aspect, as funding can be in the hands of federal state politics. Many resources are used for the exhibition and historical programmes and how to transfer the sensitive information to the visitor to raise awareness and as part of the memorials task to contribute to genocide prevention. Furthermore, the storage facilities, limited in space and structure especially when they are part of the cultural heritage, are not always ideal for the many different materials and the often fragile states in which they are in. This is especially difficult when it comes to monitoring. Even larger museums with own conservation departments, like the United State Holocaust Memorial Museum, struggle to tend to the objects in a way they would need it. During the move from the museum's building in Washington DC to a new built storage facility in Bowie, Maryland, this became obvious: objects had to be revisited, new condition reports were written, and the objects had to be rehoused for the move. During the revisitation of the plastics collection it became obvious that especially the early plastics from the 1930s and 40s are in an extremely difficult condition with their plasticizers gassing out and thus being also a risk to the surrounding objects. If transferred to smaller memorials with one storage facility for different materials and sometimes without an air outlet and exchange of air, this situation is a great risk for the collection. It is an extremely difficult task to carry out all these conservational tasks without the proper funding, without the space, the staff and the time.

The conservational approach to research and, in the end, to forming a treatment proposal, as taught at the Cologne Institute of Conservation Sciences, involves an object history and research as detailed as possible. It does not only give all the information needed to attend to the material but in some cases, it might even shed some light on historical and ethical components. When it comes to Holocaust objects, the research includes not only the history of the object and the material, but a broader view on the political and sociological systems from which the Holocaust arose and, if known, personal biographies of the people the object belonged to. It is therefore necessary to have an eye for underlying structures and contextualization. It will make the research process also more emotionally demanding, since it is inevitable to be confronted with graphically written and visualized information.

Art in the context of concentration camps is a difficult topic for memorials. These institutions do not want visitors, especially those who might not be as familiar with the history of the Holocaust, to get the impression that there was – to put it drastically – enough leisure time to follow a hobby like art or crafts and thus trivialize the Holocaust. We can also see objects that once were everyday objects and that have been transformed artistically. Little sculptures that were carved out of toothbrushes, rosaries which were made from chewed bread – materials that could have had an enormous value to an inmate in their original state but were used to create something other instead – highly personal objects, some with religious character, others more playful and intended for children for example, as can be seen at the Ravensbrueck Memorial. Objects with this specific background, objects which were transformed during the active camp time, may be hard to grasp even when displayed at the original site.

A belt, braided out of cable insulation by an inmate of the concentration camp Ravensbrueck points to a woman in need of a belt, maybe to rope up the inmate clothing which was getting too large due to starvation and could have been impractical while working in of the forced labour facilities. It also shows that after stripping down this woman to an animal-like state, with a number instead of a name, without proper nutrition and the constant fear of death, there is still a woman with a sense of femininity and self-consciousness who decided to create something beautiful even at the risk of being punished for misusing material. Researching this object made it very clear that the task of a conservator does not stop at the material itself, but it also leads to an intersection: how do we comprehend these objects? Are they primarily historical evidence or can we see the art in its transformation? If so: is it possible to combine functionality, authenticity and readability and measure up to the standards of historical and artistic representation? The ethical approach to conservational treatments of Holocaust objects is usually predetermined by the museum's or the memorial's directory or board of directory. With the fragile, sometimes inferior, reused material, the limits of possible treatments are already given although they might not coincide with the personal wish of treatment that forms during the examination – especially with objects that demand the certain kind of respect due to the circumstances of their creation. A disentanglement from the commonly used categories of 'art', 'craft' or 'historic evidence' seems as a way to open up to the possibility that there are objects and object categories which just do not seem to fit in these restrictions and are in need and deserving of a more specific and personal conservational approach.