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ART & DESIGN

Auschwitz Artifacts to Go on Tour, Very Carefully

By JOANNA BERENDT JULY 26, 2017



A pair of eyeglasses that belonged to an Auschwitz victim. Credit Pawel Sawicki/Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, via Musealia

WARSAW — More than 72 years after the liberation of Auschwitz, the first traveling exhibition about the Nazi death camp will begin a journey later this year to 14 cities across Europe and North America, taking heartbreaking artifacts to multitudes who have never seen such horror up close.

The endeavor is one of the most high-profile attempts to educate and immerse young people for whom the Holocaust is a fading and ill-understood slice of history. The Anne Frank House, the Jewish Museum Berlin, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and others all find themselves [grappling with ways to engage an attention-challenged world](#) with a dark part of its past.

Yet anything that smacks of putting Auschwitz on tour instantly raises sensitivities. Organizers of the exhibition, which include the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum itself, took pains to explain that, yes, visitors would probably be charged to enter in at least some locations. But officials at that museum and the company behind the exhibition say that their intent is not to create a moneymaker out of the suffering of millions of Nazi victims.

Several prominent Jewish leaders expressed support for taking pieces of Auschwitz to people who might not otherwise see this history. They said that they were not overly concerned about an entrance fee; organizers said that they would ask for it to be small, if any, and for admission to be free for students.



A child's shoe and sock. CreditPawel Sawicki/Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, via Musealia

“If you’re telling me, ‘Gee, they’re coming out and they’re going to be millionaires over this,’ I would object,” said Rabbi Marvin Hier, who founded the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a Jewish human-rights organization. “But if they’re making what is normally considered to be a fair amount of profit since the final end is that hundreds of thousands of people maybe in different places all over the world will see the exhibit — I think that’s quite legitimate.”

The exhibition — announced on Wednesday by the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum and the organizer, the Spanish company Musealia — will include pieces from the museum such as a barracks; a freight car of the same type used to transport prisoners; letters and testimonials; and a gas mask, a tin that contained Zyklon B gas pellets and other grim remainders from the complex’s gas chambers. Seven years in the making, the exhibition is a response to growing anti-Semitism in Europe and elsewhere, those involved with it said.

“We have never done anything like this before and it’s the first project of this magnitude ever,” said Piotr Cywinski, director of the state museum, which is on the site of the former camp, in southern Poland. “We had been thinking about this for a long time, but we lacked the know-how.”

Even though the Holocaust remains a major focus of study by historians and is a staple of school curriculum in many countries, knowledge about the camps is fading for younger generations, he said.

The exhibition will make its first stop in Madrid, aiming for an opening around December, and then tour for seven years. Precise dates and locations will be announced in about a month.

It is no longer enough to “sit inside four walls, stare at the door and wait for visitors to come in,” Mr. Cywinski said, so museum officials decided to reach out to a more global audience.

The exhibition was broached in 2010 when Musealia, a family-owned company whose shows include artifacts from the Titanic, approached the museum.

Luis Ferreiro, the company’s director, said the idea came while he was grieving the death of his 25-year-old brother. He had found consolation in “Man’s Search for Meaning,” a book by a Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist, [Viktor E. Frankl](#), about his experiences in four extermination camps after his pregnant wife, his parents and brother all perished.

Inspired by the book's lessons for spiritual survival, Mr. Ferreiro said he decided to try to make the subject of the Holocaust closer to those who might never have a chance to visit the museum.



A wooden box made in Auschwitz by Bronislaw Czech, a Polish prisoner. Czech became involved in the anti-German resistance movement in 1939, presumably as a mountain courier. CreditPawel Sawicki/Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, via Musealia

It took time for Mr. Ferreiro to gain the trust of the board of the Auschwitz museum, which was surprised to receive such a request from an exhibition company outside the museum world.

The museum demanded that the artifacts be kept secured at all times and that the exhibition comply with the museum's strict conservation requirements, including finding proper transportation and storage, as well as choosing exhibition spaces with sufficient lighting and climate control.



A belt buckle from a German SS uniform. CreditPawel Sawicki/Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, via Musealia

The museum also insisted that the artifacts be presented in historical context, especially because many aspects of [World War II](#) are only vaguely understood by younger generations. For instance, in Spain, asking about the history and place of Jews in Europe “would probably get some strange answers.” The exhibition will show that Spain — which during the war was led by Francisco Franco, a dictator and ally of Adolf Hitler — was not home to large Jewish communities and did not have extensive connections with the Holocaust; yet there were notable exceptions, like Ángel Sanz Briz, a Spanish diplomat who saved more than 5,000 Jews in Hungary from deportation to Auschwitz.

“In other words, we want to show that the Franco regime was certainly very sympathetic to the Nazis,” said Robert Jan van Pelt, a history professor at the University of Waterloo in Canada and a Holocaust scholar who has been working on the exhibition. “But individual Spaniards could make, and made, a difference.”

As for the morality of charging money to see artifacts from a death camp, and potentially turning a profit, Mr. Ferreiro said that traveling exhibitions like this one usually generated huge expenses. Putting the display together has already cost more than \$1.5 million, and there are no guarantees “the exhibit will even be sustainable,” Mr. Ferreiro said.

Musealia will offer museums that want to host the exhibition a flat fee for transportation, installation, design and all the content.

“We need to earn an income to sustain ourselves and keep the enterprise going,” Mr. Ferreiro said, “but our goal is to focus on larger social goals such as enlightenment and education.”

The Auschwitz museum will get a fixed amount that will be given to it yearly to cover any expenses arising from the project, though neither museum officials nor Musealia specified how much. If the exhibition is profitable, the amount the museum receives will be increased, Mr. Ferreiro said.

The story of Auschwitz, as told through the artifacts, will cover the physical location of the camps and their status as symbols of structuralized hatred and barbarity. The exhibition will begin with the history of Oswiecim, the Polish site of the German camps, whose population was about 60 percent Jewish before the war. That history will be followed by the origins of Nazism after World War I.

Of the 1,150 original pieces to be displayed, 835 will come from the state museum. The rest have been lent by other institutions, like Yad Vashem in Israel, or directly by survivors and their families, much of which has not been displayed before.

Each artifact, however, was chosen to help lay out the history of the Holocaust. Mr. van Pelt mentioned a brown blanket that belonged to Siegfried Fedrid, a Jew born in Vienna who was a prisoner at Nazi camps in Lodz, a city in central Poland, and Auschwitz. The blanket is on loan to the exhibition from the Holocaust Center for Humanity in Seattle, which got it from the family of Mr. Fedrid, who died in 1963.



Siegfried Fedrid, who survived Nazi camps in Lodz, Poland, and Auschwitz, with his family before the war in 1927 Vienna. CreditCollection of the Holocaust Center for Humanity, Seattle; courtesy Eleanor Fedrid.

Mr. Fedrid shared the blanket with five other prisoners, probably saving their lives during a grisly winter march.



The Photo at the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center
is loaned from the family of Virginia Federic-Rose by Eleanor Fedrid.

CreditCollection of the Holocaust Center for Humanity, Seattle; courtesy Eleanor Fedrid.

When, in January 1945, the Auschwitz SS ordered the evacuation of the camp, Mr. Fedrid took a blanket, which he shared with other prisoners on their march to Dachau.

Rabbi Hier said that the Holocaust artifacts must travel the world to make sure memories of the era do not fade away.

“We’re in the period of the last remnants, last decades, where personal survivors or witnesses, who can describe the events, are living on this planet,” he said. “We will soon have no survivors.”

Mr. Cywinski, of the Auschwitz museum, said he expected the exhibition to be provocative, with some patrons drawing connections between the rise of Nazism and events around the world today. He mentioned populism, propaganda, institutionalized hatred and an international community that he regarded as sometimes seemingly blind to these social forces.

“Memory that is intelligent, reflexive, is not limited to the past, but allows you to define the reality and project the future,” he said. “Otherwise, why would we even need memory?”

Correction: July 26, 2017

An earlier version of this article referred incorrectly to admissions at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. Visitors are charged a fee if they tour the memorial with a guide, not simply for entering the grounds.

Sopan Deb contributed reporting from New York.

A version of this article appears in print on July 27, 2017, on Page A9 of the New York edition with the headline: Auschwitz’s Legacy, Seen Through Pieces Of a Somber Past.

vacciniumovatum

11 hours ago

Seattle now has a Holocaust Museum; I hope this exhibition comes here. People from both Vancouvers (and their surrounding areas) could...

Madeleine

11 hours ago

I am moaning about those whose main criticism is that they should have included all holocausts in with this exhibit. My god, isn't it enough...

M. Henry

11 hours ago

Who wants to see all of these leftovers from a terrible war than brought suffering and death on all of us on way or another. This sure does...

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