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STYLE

Villages Edition



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Echoes of Death

WRITTEN BY SHEMIR WILES // PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY ANTHONY CASTO

Echoes of Death

The crowd of stamp collectors milled about seeking treasures they might one day trade for profit. But not this young man; he stood spellbound by what the fellow standing in front of him gripped tightly in his hand. Although he was in search of a rare stamp to add to his collection, what he was looking at was much more intriguing... and it now had his full attention.

The well-worn piece of paper once swathed a package more than six decades ago during one of the most turbulent times in world history. This tattered, seemingly nondescript scrap of paper that touched the young man's soul was, to him, a piece of the most sacred literature ever written. It was a piece of the Torah a Nazi soldier had senselessly ripped from the Jewish holy book, desecrated with postmarks, and used to wrap and mail a common parcel.

Seeing the sacred laws of God defiled in such an atrocious manner immediately galvanized Danny Spungen into action. The man holding the priceless relic was philatelic researcher and author Ken Lawrence. Spungen quickly asked Lawrence what he was going to do with the piece.

"He told me he built this exhibit of letters and other historical documents and toured the southern United States with it, chasing around the Klu Klux Klan and the Neo-Nazis who would say the Holocaust never happened," Spungen says. "He then told me he was going give it to the holocaust museum in Michigan, and I said to him, 'No, give it to me.'"

LONGING FOR DEATH

Today, it is hard to imagine a time, so recent in world history, when men, women, and children were slaughtered in cold blood by the millions. It is hard to fathom families being torn apart, young children sent to work camps where they fell dead from starvation while laboring to build armaments for an army seeking world domination. It is virtually impossible for us to comprehend how millions of human beings could wake each morning and hope that death would take them before the setting of the day's sun. How could such insanity, fueled by tyrannical extremists, be accepted and embraced by a sane society?

It may be difficult to grasp that such a level of prejudice and savagery could have existed in the world until you read the heart-rending letter from a young Polish man imprisoned in a concentration camp begging his parents for food or you touch that fragment of handwritten holy Jewish scripture that is now in Spungen's collection of Holocaust memorabilia, which he carries city to city, state to state, country to country, reminding the world of what can happen when seemingly rational people allow insanity to prevail.

Admittedly, at the time Spungen acquired the collection, he knew little about the Holocaust. It was a topic neither his family nor friends never openly discussed. When he first brought the 250-piece collection home in his minivan, using his German Shepard for protection against would-be thieves, he couldn't quite grasp the magnitude of what was before him.

"I was a little scared," he says. "I called my rabbi and told him I wanted him to see it. When he got to my home and saw what I had, he was shaking. I knew I was in trouble because I was out of my league. I learned I had something powerful."

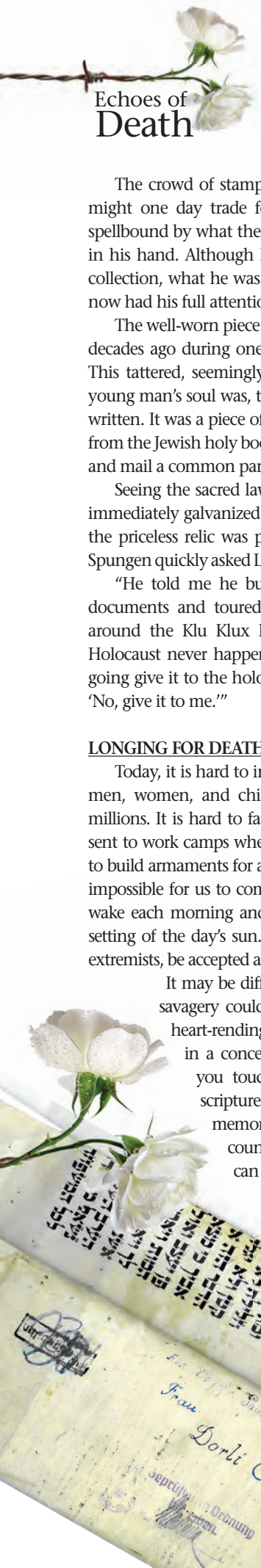
FINDING HIS ROOTS

Since 2007, Spungen has been a self-appointed student of the Holocaust, absorbing any information he can so he can teach others its significance and share his possessions that paint the stark picture of what life was like for those suffering such brutality at the hands of the Nazis. Adding to it over the years, the now-10,000-piece collection, aptly called The Nazi Scourge: Postal & Monetary Evidence of the Holocaust — A Breakdown in Humanity, is filled with remarkable stories — rare pieces of mail exchanged between inmates incarcerated at concentration camps, evidence of sexual slavery in Nazi Germany, and forged British bank notes that were designed to destabilize Britain's economy.

Traveling the world sharing bits of his exclusive collection, Spungen possesses the unique opportunity to educate future generations about a time that, for them, may be too hard to even imagine. "I target high school and college students because I want them to understand it's not just about the six million Jews who were killed. That's just a piece of it," he says. "The Holocaust was a complete breakdown in humanity. That's what makes World War II so interesting. It was a breakdown across the board... Jehovah's Witnesses, gypsies, political prisoners. When I lecture my goal is to plant a seed."

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Auschwitz

WRITTEN BY SHEMIR WILES

The foul stench of human waste and death overpowered the cattle cars as they chugged along the rickety track leading the latest transport of Hungarian Jews to their new home. Alone, frightened, and wedged in the overcrowded compartment, Gene Klein knew not what to expect.

The last time the 16-year-old saw his family was three days ago. They stood outside an old abandoned brick factory after being forced from their homes by Hungarian soldiers. They stayed captive behind barbed wire waiting for the unknown. "We were all scared but had no idea what was going on," Klein says. "There were rumors the families would be kept together, and we would work on farms. It was sort of hopeful thinking, but it was naïve."

The only food was bread passed through the caging from good-hearted Christians who had permission to offer sustenance. After a few days, Klein heard the low hum of a train approaching the factory. The rust-colored cars moved gently to a complete stop. Soldiers commanded everyone to surrender food and clothing because where

they were heading, they wouldn't need it. "But I think some of us didn't," Klein says. "Some kept food in their pockets."

Three days and three nights passed with hardly any sleep and very little comfort. Mothers tried tirelessly to soothe the cries of their young. Many of the sick and elderly perished.

Reaching the end of the line, the cars slowed to a halt. Klein and the others strained to see and hear their surroundings. Abruptly, the doors flew open. German soldiers, their faces twisted in rage, screamed for the weary passengers to get out. German Shepherds barked and nipped as the crowds of famished, tired Jews poured onto the grounds of what would be a hellish existence for some and the final resting place for others: Auschwitz.

"I hooked up with my family for only a few minutes. That's when I learned my grandparents died on the way," Klein says. There was barely any time to talk before Klein found himself being separated from his mother and sisters. But he still stood with his father, a good-looking man in his early 50s

with a muscular build. However, his graying beard made him look much older.

An SS soldier pointed to Klein and sternly instructed him to move to the right. His dad — to the left. It would be the last Klein would see him. "Those who went to the left were gassed," Klein says. "There was no time for conversation. I didn't tell my father goodbye because I didn't know it was goodbye."

Standing in a big open field, Klein and other men who survived the selection process stripped, showered, and were sprayed with harsh disinfectant. Their hair — cut and collected. Klein picked up his blue and white striped



Above, Gene Klein poses for a portrait in 1950, five years after being liberated from a Nazi concentration camp. Though many survivors lost all their personal photos during the Holocaust, a family friend saved Klein's and returned them to him and his family. The above left center top photo shows Klein as a baby; the above left center bottom photo shows him at 3-years-old. His father, Herman, is at the top right and mother, Berta is at the bottom right. On the far right is Klein today. Following liberation he reunited with his mother, but his father died in the Nazi gas chambers at Auschwitz.





prisoner uniform and wooden shoes before reporting for check-in. "The soldier asked for my name. I told him my name, and he found it on the list. Then he looked at my chest, which had a number on it, and he wrote it down. From then on they only called you by your number, not your name," Klein says.

Each morning at Auschwitz, the inmates filed out of the barracks to be counted. Those who looked sick were pulled out of ranks and gassed. Luckily, Klein only stayed at Auschwitz for a few weeks before being transferred to Wolfsberg, a slave labor camp in the Austrian mountains. "My first job was carrying iron rail. It was long and heavy. We carried a couple football-field lengths every day. It was very difficult, hard work."

Every day, Klein witnessed people dying from hunger and sickness, a sight that was hard to process. Six months into his imprisonment, an SS soldier asked during roll call if anyone knew how to speak German. Klein tentatively raised his hand. "They took me to work with a German civil engineer. He basically saved my life because he would leave me food in the barracks. That extra food built me up physically. It also helped mentally

because he was German, and he could have gotten in a lot of trouble for feeding me."

Work was tough, but Klein clung to the hope he would one day be free and be able to see his family again. However, near his year anniversary of detention, he and other slave camp survivors were suddenly relocated to a much larger camp. There, the Nazis only had one expectation: for everyone to die from either starvation or disease.

During his time there, Klein befriended two Polish children. They one day decided to explore the grounds. Eyeing the guards who stood watchful with their hefty machine guns, Klein and the boys gingerly walked up to the gate that surrounded the compound. In the distance, they saw a figure on horseback moving closer to the camp.

"The Russian horseman dismounted and said he was there to liberate us," Klein says, his voice breaking slightly. "So many people perished, but when we saw him we knew we had survived. People were opening the doors to the barracks and yelling, 'We're free, we're free!' It's one of those things you never forget." ■

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Next year, the exhibit will take him to China, where its display will coincide with the Chinese government minting its first coin commemorating a Jewish event — the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the Shanghai Ghetto, a city that housed tens of thousands of Jews who left their homes in Europe for safety during the Holocaust. But before traveling thousands of miles across the globe, some 500 samples from his collection will be on display in both Lake and Marion counties — the first time any of the collection will be shown in the state of Florida.

Local philanthropist Sandy Lichterman is spearheading the project. With a penchant for giving, Lichterman first asked Spungen to bring the collection to Lake County back in June as a way to honor the memory of his friend, Simon Waksburg, who was a Holocaust survivor and once traveled the country sharing his stories.

"I'm doing this for Simon, but I also feel it's my duty not just as a Jew but as a human being to tell this story so it doesn't happen again," Lichterman says. "My hope and prayer is the next generation will pick this up and keep the knowledge and the history of the Holocaust alive."

Spungen will bring some of his most notable memorabilia including a portion of his counterfeit money collection, specifically money that was made at the Auschwitz concentration camp, infamously known for being the location of the single largest mass killing of human beings in the history of mankind.

People who visit the exhibit will also be able to see letters and handmade cards adorned with colorful Easter designs. One prisoner sent a beautiful decorated letter to his wife and family from the confines of Dachau. It proves that even while barely surviving such barbaric and inhumane conditions, prisoners did what they could to cheer up their loved ones and remain hopeful. "People love the Easter letter because it shows that even when you are being tortured

and destroyed, you still have hope, and I think that is pretty powerful," Spungen says.

But most telling of humanity's ability to still hold on to faith in the face of extreme adversity will be the stories told during the exhibit's presentation from local Holocaust survivors who will share their personal accounts of unbelievable anguish, courage, and survival. Villages resident Gene Klein has spoken numerous times all over Florida about his Holocaust experience and will travel with the exhibit to speak while it is in Florida.

"I realize how important it is to share my story," Klein says. "I get so much positive feedback, and I imagine I have reached hundreds of people, so I will keep doing it until I can't anymore."

EXHIBIT SCHEDULE

Friday, February 8,

at Trinity Catholic High School, 2600 S.W. 42nd Street, Ocala; 10:30a.m.–3p.m. (students only); 6–9p.m. (open to the public).

Sunday, February 10,

at Temple B'nai Darom, 49 Banyan Course, Ocala; Noon–4:30p.m.

Monday, February 11,

at Leesburg High School, 1401 Yellow Jacket Way, Leesburg; 10:30a.m.–3p.m. (students only); 6–9p.m. (open to the public).

Tuesday, February 12,

at On Top of the World, 8445 S.W. 80th Street, Ocala; 11a.m.–4:30p.m.

Wednesday, February 13,

at the Savannah Center, 1575 Buena Vista Blvd., The Villages; 11a.m.–8p.m.

