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Powerful collection

Holocaust letters exhibit at University of Memphis

By LINDSAY MELVIN

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Agonizing over whether to purchase a rare stamp that sells for close to a million dollars, Danny Spungen wandered deep in thought through a Pennsylvania stamp show two years ago.

But the collector was yanked from his trance when he caught sight of a sacred Jewish text with postage marks on display.

The hand-inscribed Torah scroll had been used by a Nazi soldier as protective wrapping for a parcel sent from Russia to Vienna.

Most likely pilfered from a synagogue during the Holocaust, the Hebrew text, converted into an envelope, told the story of David and Goliath.

"That was powerful," recalled Spungen, who would later learn that Hebrew scrolls, printed on animal skin, were also desecrated through use as lampshades and for mending shoes.

Spungen, who is Jewish, decided on the spot to buy the exhibitor's entire paper collection, illustrating the tragedy and persecution of the Holocaust.



Doug Blankenship gets a closer look Sunday at documents in an exhibit called "The Nazi Scourge," which contains postal evidence of the Holocaust, at the Belz Museum of Asian and Judaic Art in Downtown Memphis. The documents will be at the University of Memphis today.

Now known as the Spungen Holocaust Postal Collection, it has grown to more than 250 pieces, including stamps, postcards, letters and medical records from concentration camps and Jewish ghettos.

The 47-year-old Chicago native has been traveling the world with these documents and will have them on display today at the University of Memphis.

"The Holocaust was not just about Jewish people," Spungen said Sunday, during a Downtown exhibition of his collection at the Belz Museum of Asian & Judaic Art. "This story is about the breakdown of humanity."

Letters from concentration camp prisoners include some written by Jehovah's Witnesses, among whom 1,200 of 10,000 in the camps died.

Other items in the collection include mail documenting sex slavery at the Buchenwald concentration camp and fake British bank notes made by Jewish slave laborers under Nazi order to undermine the British economy.

"I'm just amazed. These are real people's lives," said Jerry Benya of Cordova, who visited the exhibit with his teenage daughter, Tiffany.

Showing the public proof of atrocities also dispels accusations that

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the Holocaust is a myth, Benya said.

"Dictators around the world are trying to deny this ever existed," he said.

The collection technically belongs to the Florence and Laurence Spungen Family Foundation, named after the collector's parents.

Although Spungen usually charges a

SPUNGEN HOLOCAUST POSTAL COLLECTION ON DISPLAY TODAY

Time: 1:30-3 p.m.

Where: Ned R. McWherter Library at University of Memphis

Cost: Free

Contact: (901) 523-ARTS

fee to exhibit his collection, he said it was Memphis' dense community of Holocaust survivors that convinced him

to pay a complimentary visit to the Bluff City.

Simon Waksberg, an East Memphis resident who is a survivor of Auschwitz concentration camp, found looking through the old letters too emotional, but he was pleased to support Spungen's mission to educate people.

"You've got to know the past," said Waksberg, in a thick Polish accent. "We're not alone. We're not making up the story."

— *Lindsay Melvin: 529-2445*