

Operation Bernhard Notes in Collection

By Donn Pearlman

Operation Bernhard £10 Bank of England note, issue-dated July 18, 1936

A ONE-OF-A-KIND, AWARD-WINNING EXHIBIT OF HUNDREDS of pieces of World War II era mail, documents, and counterfeit money related to the Nazis' attempted extermination of Jews and others has been acquired from a private collector by an Illinois charitable foundation. The foundation will preserve and offer the extraordinary items for public use at Holocaust and genocide educational venues around the world, and has set up a web site for the historic artifacts (www.SpungenFoundation.org).

Numismatically most important to readers of *Paper Money* are the "Operation Bernhard" Nazi fakes of British pound notes in the collection.

"The insured value of the collection is \$1 million, but the educational value to future generations is incalculable," said Daniel Spungen, a member of the board of the Northbrook, Illinois-based Florence and Laurence Spungen Family Foundation.

Including recent additions contributed by Spungen, the collection now contains a dozen examples of the 5-, 10-, 20- and 50- pound counterfeit Bank of England notes created by slave laborers during "Operation Bernhard," the Nazis' failed plot to undermine England's economy and the subject of the recent motion picture, *The Counterfeiters* (see related story on page 259). These notes have been certified by Paper Money Guaranty (PMG).

Between 1942 and 1945, inmates at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in Germany produced nearly nine million fake bank notes. Many of the notes made during "Operation Bernhard" subsequently were used by the Nazis to pay unsuspecting merchants, foreign agents and spies.



Operation Bernhard £50 Bank of England note, issue-dated June 15, 1933



Operation Bernhard £5 Bank of England note, issue-dated Oct. 29, 1935

“One of the most heartbreaking artifacts and historical evidence of Nazi desecration is a torn fragment of a hand-written Hebrew parchment from a Bible scroll (*Tanakh*),” Spungen said. “A German soldier used the holy scripture to wrap a parcel he mailed from Russia to Austria in 1942.”

“The sacred parchment was pillaged from a Russian synagogue. Ironically, the portion that was used as wrapping paper has passages from the first book of Samuel about the story of David and Goliath,” explained Spungen.

The postal artifacts are evidence of the torments, ravages and terror of war and genocide in Europe from 1933 to 1945. They also show that many prisoners never lost hope, and the human spirit survived.

“We will be giving educational institutions and museums around the world the opportunity to use the exhibit materials for displays, lectures and research,” said Florence Spungen, Founder of the Foundation. “This is a permanent educational tool for all generations to document this important period of time that cannot be forgotten.”

The Holocaust exhibit was acquired intact from noted researcher, writer and collector, Ken Lawrence, of Bellefonte, PA a native Chicagoan and a former Vice President of the American Philatelic Society. Lawrence began assembling this material in 1978. The Spungen Foundation now will be the guardian of the more than 250 envelopes, post cards, letters, specially-designated postage stamps used exclusively by concentration camp inmates, Jewish ghetto residents and prisoners of war, and, of course, the counterfeit money.

Operation Bernhard £10 Bank of
England note, issue-dated April 16,
1935



Frequently exhibited by Lawrence, the philatelic items won awards at stamp shows including a 2006 international exhibition in Washington, DC.

“The scroll page that was used for mailing a parcel is the most viscerally disturbing item. Some scholars have told me it is among the most important surviving evidence of Nazi desecration,” said Lawrence.

“Chronic, flagrant desecration exemplified by violating that sacred scripture imbued the cultured German nation and historically honor-bound German army with an inhuman attitude toward Jews that made the Holocaust both possible, and given the opportunity, inevitable,” he said.

Some of the ghetto and concentration camp letters have coded or hidden messages about the plight of the senders. Research about the postal materials has led to discovery of a previously unreported undercover address in Lisbon, Portugal, used by Jewish resistance fighters, and the location of two camps in Romania for slave laborers and political detainees.

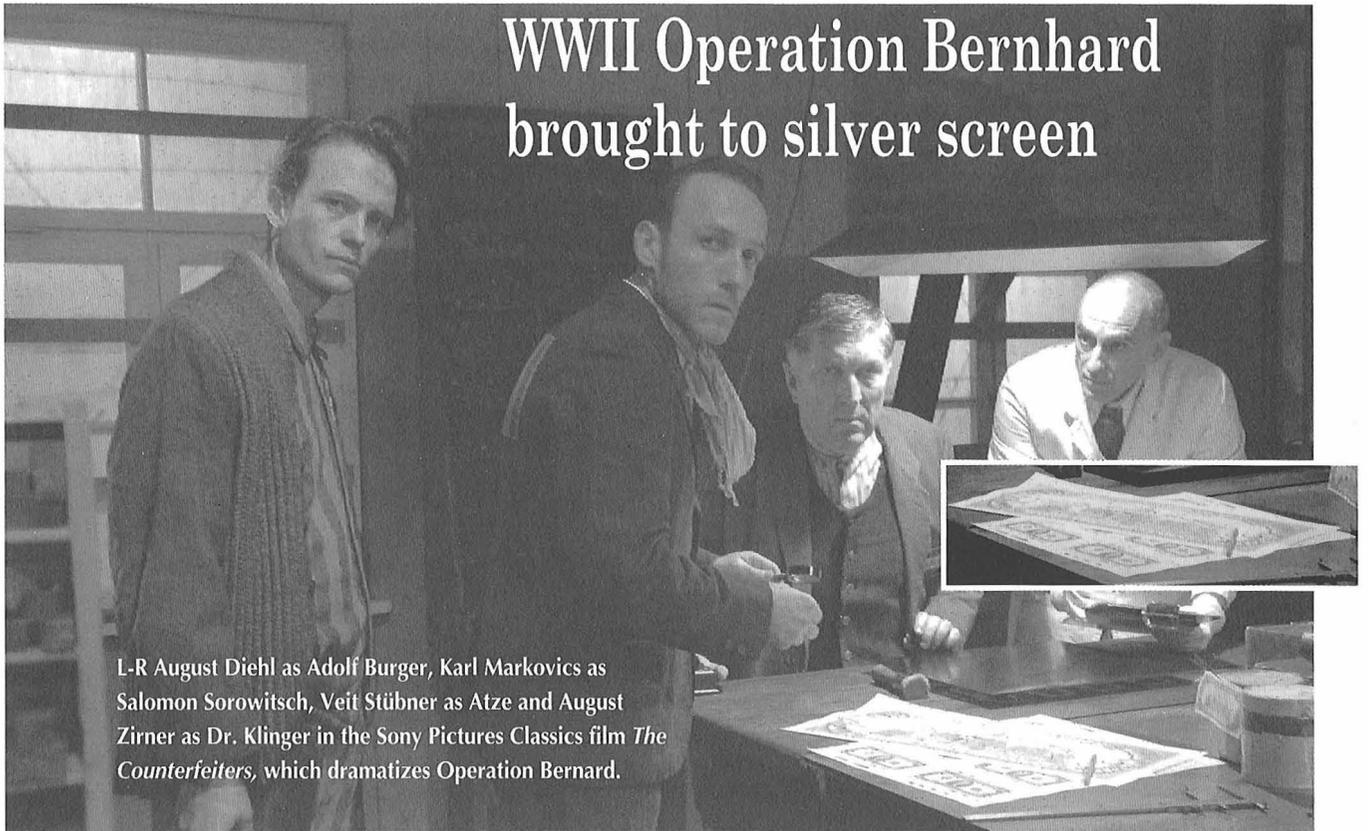
In addition to the Bible scroll fragment used for wrapping a package, the collection includes such significant philatelic material as:

- Rare examples of mail sent to prisoners and mail sent between inmates at different camps;
- A card sent by an inmate at Dachau soon after it opened in 1933, which is the earliest known prisoner mail from any Nazi concentration camp;
- An October 3, 1943, letter to his parents in Rzeszów, Poland, from Eduard Pys, a 21-year-old who arrived on the first transport at the Auschwitz concentration camp in May, 1940;
- The only known surviving piece of mail sent by Rabbi Leo Baeck, the leader of German Jewry (Reichsvertretung der Deutschen Juden), while he was confined to the Theresienstadt ghetto;
- A postal checking account receipt imprinted with a crude anti-Semitic caricature denoting payment for a subscription to a Nazi propaganda newspaper, *Der Stürmer*;
- Mail secretly carried by children through the sewers of Warsaw during the 1944 uprising;
- Mail clandestinely carried from Nazi-occupied Poland to the exhibit Polish Navy headquarters in London and to a Jewish resistance leader in Switzerland;

The Florence and Laurence Spungen Family Foundation was established in 2006 to support charitable and educational causes. The organization’s website is www.SpungenFoundation.org [.]



WWII Operation Bernhard brought to silver screen



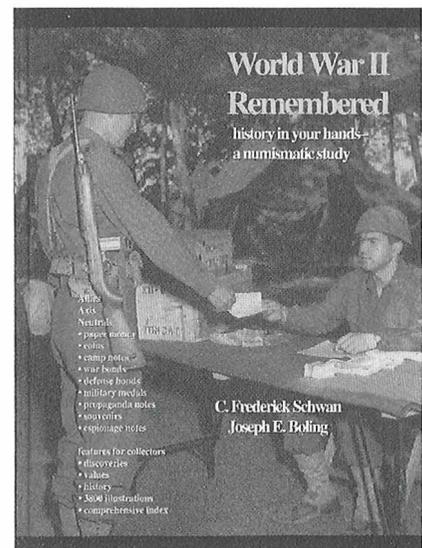
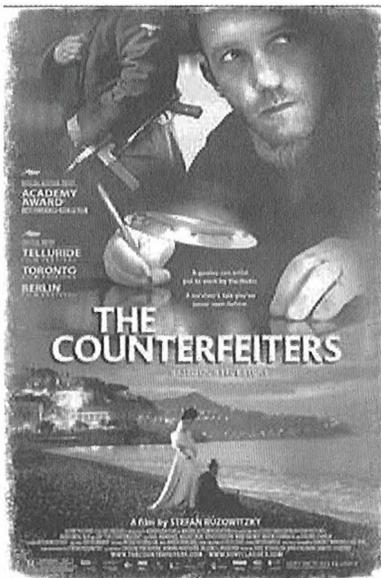
L-R August Diehl as Adolf Burger, Karl Markovics as Salomon Sorowitsch, Veit Stübner as Atze and August Zirner as Dr. Klinger in the Sony Pictures Classics film *The Counterfeiters*, which dramatizes Operation Bernhard.

MAD MONEY IS NOT THE ONLY RECENT FILM TO BRING PAPER MONEY to center stage on the silver screen. The acclaimed, Oscar-winning foreign language movie *Die Fälscher* (*The Counterfeiters*) dramatizes the Nazi Operation Bernhard to fake British pounds during World War II. (See related story following on page 260.)

Paper Money enjoyed the film a good deal, but was confused by the purported proof sheets of U.S. C-note faces (shown being examined above with an overly large C-note back design), on which the note impressions were widely distributed across the sheet, so we called upon World War II numismatic expert, SPMC member Joe Boling to critique the film. Joe is co-author (with Fred Schwan) of the massive, 860-page *World War II Remembered: history in your hands, a numismatic study* (BNR Press, 1995) which is currently under revision.

"It is not really about the counterfeiting operation," Boling noted, "but about the relationships between the prisoners and their jailers, and among the prisoners themselves. The side story about the prisoners wanting to delay the completion of the \$100 notes in order to prevent the Germans from obtaining the foreign exchange that they would represent is not drawn from life, as far as I know. As for the technical

side, I saw two obvious errors (and will no doubt find more when I can view the film on DVD). The spacing of the \$100 notes on each sheet was way too wide. Banknote paper would have been precious, and the very wide gutters shown on the proof sheets was completely incorrect. In addition, the Federal Reserve district seals on the notes shown were incorrect -- they had teeth, and teeth were not introduced on those seals until the Series of 1950. Until then the seals were round without teeth, and larger than were shown on the sheets in the movie. Whoever the technical advisor was on currency, he did not do the film any favors," he added. ♦



PAPER MONEY

OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE SOCIETY OF PAPER MONEY COLLECTORS

VOL. XLVII, No. 4, WHOLE No. 256

WWW.SPMC.ORG

JULY/AUGUST 2008



We're happy too, Katie!



Katie Holmes in Mad Money

First time's a charm