

*Panel 1: Art and Resistance: Material Objects*

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**Resistance as examined through material possessions in Auschwitz-Birkenau**

Resistance by Holocaust Survivors is often a marginalized topic within Holocaust Studies, however, the discussion and remembrance of resistance and the memorialization of this heroism is essential to Holocaust memory and representation. In ghettos, forests and concentration camps, men, women and children resisted Nazi oppression in the face of tremendous odds and horrific death. My research explores the nature of resistance through material possessions specifically within Auschwitz-Birkenau. The capacity of prisoners to resist in the face of absolute oppression and death is in itself a marvel; their ability to create things of beauty while surviving under these extreme conditions is nothing short of miraculous. This exploration of physical manifestations of resistance seeks to address the misconception of passive imprisonment which is often portrayed in the discussion of Holocaust concentration camp victims.

In order to explore the dynamic between material goods and resistance within Auschwitz-Birkenau I will examine three stages of material possession. Within concentration camps there existed three exchanges of material goods; goods that were taken, goods that were given and goods that were ‘organized.’<sup>1</sup> As stated by Holocaust survivor Primo Levi in his novel *Survival in Auschwitz*:

“We know that we will have difficulty in begin understood, and that is as it should be. But consider what value, what meaning is enclosed even in the smallest of our daily habits, in the 100 possessions which even the poorest beggar owns: a handkerchief, an old letter, the photo of a cherished person. These things are part of us, almost like limbs of our body; nor is it conceivable that we can be deprived of them in our work, for we immediately find others to substitute the old ones,

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Epstein & Philip Rosen, “ Dictionary of the Holocaust: Biography, Geography and Terminology” (Westport, Greenwood Press: 1997) 220

other objects which are ours in their personification and evocation of our memories.”<sup>2</sup>

The relationship between the loss, acquisition and creation of goods is explored through the testimony of Survivors and the material evidence of what was both taken and created. The actions of acquisition and creation demonstrate resistance by camp inmates to their incarceration and dehumanization by the Nazi regime.

The agency, humanity and resistance of camp prisoners can be explored in their acquisition and creation of material possession. One example is a dress created by Marianna Malikowski for her daughter while both were imprisoned in Auschwitz in 1944. The dress is made from a blanket; therefore, one can infer that Marianna had to trade something in order to obtain an extra blanket, possibly food or another good or favor. Blankets were not possessions of prisoners as they were left within the barrack during the day and due to a lack of personal bedding and assigned sleeping arrangements, blankets effectively belonged to no one. Thus, this blanket and the needle and thread necessary to sew it were organized. Marianna most likely had to trade a food ration in order to obtain these goods. To put this into perspective “a ration of bread was roughly equal to one day of life.”<sup>3</sup> Marianna created this dress not only to cloth her daughter but to give her a sense of femininity in a world where both humanity and gender were constantly assaulted. The dress would have kept her daughter slightly protected from the elements and would have given her a small sense of self in that her dress did not look like other women’s uniforms.

A second example object is a comb created by Yona Wygocka Dickman, also a prisoner of Auschwitz. While on work detail in an airplane factory, Yona organized metal parts and fashioned them into a comb. It is a demonstration of self-identity that Yona wanted to groom herself; a display of humanity and self-worth through maintaining her

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<sup>2</sup> Primo Levi, “Survival in Auschwitz” (New York, Touchstone: 1993) 27

<sup>3</sup> Eric Epstein & Philip Rosen, “Dictionary of the Holocaust: Biography, Geography and Terminology” (Westport, Greenwood Press: 1997) 220

appearance. These objects serve as two poignant examples of prisoners creating material goods to better their living conditions within camps, both mentally and physically.

Other created material goods found in the camps consisted of artwork. According to the Memorial and Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau, over 2,000 pieces of artwork were found within the camp at liberation.<sup>4</sup> This artwork ranges from drawings of the horrors within the camps to the creation of civilian materials for pure aesthetic enjoyment. These works of art are more than just artistic expression. Made under the threat of execution upon discovery, these pieces were extremely difficult to create. All materials had to be organized through theft, bartering with food or other materials. With the extremities faced by prisoners, even one days ration could be the difference between life and death, thus, it is evident how much prisoners risked creating artwork.

This exploration of material culture within Auschwitz-Birkenau adds a dimension to camp resistance which has been minimally explored. The exploration of this additional layer contributes to the larger conversation at hand which is the nature and memory of resistance. The memorialization of resistance is vital to Holocaust education as it re-humanizes victims who are too often relegated to statistics. By exposing the strength and ingenuity of camp prisoners their agency can be restored and with it a layer of their humanity.

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<sup>4</sup> Museum and Memorial of Auschwitz-Birkenau, accessed November, 21<sup>st</sup>, 2013. <http://en.auschwitz.org>