

## Saving the Legacy of Orphaned Judaica Looted by the Nazis

By Dr. Chana Kotzin

In the last few years, blockbuster movie stories of the work of art historians and curators-turned-soldiers who saved priceless works of European heritage, or the individual struggles of a survivor-descendant to recover his or her family's art collections looted by the Nazis, have filled the silver screen in the form of *Monuments Men* and *The Woman in Gold*. Given the high profile of their creators, these pieces of art and sculptures and their cultural meaning for Western heritage as well as the individual stories of the men and woman who struggled for their safety and return, it is easy to forget that these are the minority outcomes of such efforts. While much art (and by extension – culture) was salvaged after the War, and a number of families have recovered their property, many more remain unresolved.

An allied story that is less often told is that the Nazi's extinguishing of lives during the Holocaust included despoliation of not just priceless art, but a whole range of items, including household objects, as well as Hebraica (books) and Judaica (religious items) for both economic gain and cultural genocide. Millions of possessions were collected and stockpiled, even when they had little apparent direct value to the Reich. In the case of Judaica, while some were made by artisans and highly revered, the majority represented a modest everyday expression of Judaism in the home and in synagogue communities across Germany and Eastern Europe. Although we think of Nazi record keeping as meticulous, it was utilized carefully in certain areas, and not others, and not always in expected ways.

In the case of everyday ritual objects which were less valued, their provenance (who they belonged to, which community they came from) was rarely recorded and their connection to family and community, and the practice of Jewish life was divorced from hundreds of thousands of individual items. Once their owners were gone, this was another act of erasure, as Judaica—intimately an expression of Jewish life—was severed from those who used it or created it.

So what happened to these Jewish religious objects, which, after the conclusion of the War, lacked identifiable owners, yet represented individuals, families and communities, perhaps whole ones, extinguished by the Nazis and their



Top: Spice Box, undated.

Bottom: Wimpel of Jurgen Meibergen, 1920

accomplices? Classified as “heirless” by the Allied Forces that discovered them, these caches of Torah adornments (like *rimonim*—torah finials and home based Judaica like chanukiot—among other items) were transferred to an American organization called Jewish Cultural Reconstruction (JCR), and this is how Buffalo enters the story.

In 1950, a small number of Judaica items were sent to the Bureau of Jewish Education here in Buffalo with the charge to provide Judaica for the use of new communities in the safety of the United States. For many years, the Judaica provided teachers with tools for the education of generations of Jews in the specific function and meaning of these ritual objects. Their connection to the Nazi atrocities remained, signified by special tags, indicating their secondary provenance, but few knew of their connection to this specific part of Jewish history. Recently, a survey of Judaica disbursed under Jewish Cultural Reconstruction revived local institutional

interest in their connection to the JCR program. As they are increasingly fragile, a plan has been put in place with the Cofeld Judaic Museum at Temple Beth Zion, where they will reside on permanent loan, but be given an opportunity for display on an annual basis, beginning with Yom HaShoah this year on May 1st.

In addition, as part of a multi-year project, The Buffalo Jewish Archives Project is researching three of the items – the wimple cloths (circumcision records), which we may be able to trace back to individuals as early research has indicated, and in that way, bring back the names and communities of some of these items. Please come and view this temporary exhibition in May and learn more about Jewish Cultural Reconstruction in Buffalo through the Bureau of Jewish Education. For more information you can email Chana Revell Kotzin, Ph.D. at [archivesproject@jcbuffalo.org](mailto:archivesproject@jcbuffalo.org) or call 716-204-5388.

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