

A Discussion of the Conservation of “SS-Hygiene Institute” Documents in the Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum

The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, founded on July 2, 1947, has been included in the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites since 1979.¹ There are currently 878 cultural and natural heritage sites in 145 countries on the UNESCO list. Only twenty of these sites relate to the twentieth century and two of them are monuments to the deaths of people. One of the two monuments is Auschwitz-Birkenau German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp (1940–1945) and the other is Hiroshima Peace Memorial (Genbaku Dome). As places of horror and modern barbarism, both are on the list as “representatives” for other burying sites of crimes against humanity. The documents in the archive of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum are also included in the UNESCO list as they are the material legacy of the commemorated period.

There has been another UNESCO program since 1992 termed Memory of the World (MOW).² The MOW register contains documents from all over the world. Among these, seven are from Poland and include the Warsaw Ghetto Archives and *Solidarność’s Twenty-One Demands*.³ The aim of the MOW program is to ensure accessibility to culturally and historically significant documents and prevent evidence of outstanding value from disappearing into a collective oblivion or falling victim to destruction.

The Polish National Committee has also included the archive collections of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum on its national list. The documents from the archives are currently housed in the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum’s archives. The museum is on the site of the former extermination and concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. Camp documents, documents filed by concentration camp prisoners, letters sent from the camp, notes, papers documenting crimes of the Nazi staff within Auschwitz, and other documents such as the files of the Institute of Hygiene of the Waffen-SS are stored in this archive. In order to cover the tracks of the crimes, starting



Fig. 1. Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum

in the third quarter of 1944 the camp authorities ordered the destruction and deportation of most of the documents issued by the SS administration.

The systematic concealment of documents was initially carried out in a rather slow and secret way though it accelerated in the final days of the camp with the open burning

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of documents. The chaotic nature of such public burnings allowed some prisoners to get hold of a few documents and hide them from the eyes of their camp guards. Although many written materials could have been saved from the fire, approximately 95% of all documents filed and papers written during the existence of the camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau fell victim to the systematic elimination of documentary evidence within the concentration and extermination camp.⁴

A few weeks after the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau by troops of the Red Army on January 27, 1945, members of a Soviet special committee began collecting the camp's remaining documents.⁵ Some of them were found in abandoned buildings while others, having been blown by the wind across the compound during the burnings, needed to be rescued from the surrounding marsh. After the termination of the committee's work, the saved documents were brought to Moscow. Two Polish committees were set up to further ensure the safety of the documents and other tangible assets. In February 1957 the museum's archive started to function as an independent department. It was not until 1961 that the Main Committee for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland handed over the documents of the Institute of Hygiene of the Waffen-SS to be archived in the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.

The Institute of Hygiene had been headquartered in the concentration camp Auschwitz I until spring 1943 when it was relocated to a place called Rajsko, five kilometers away from Auschwitz. The activities of the Institute of Hygiene centered around medical analysis for the SS, the Wehrmacht, the police force, and the concentration camp (including Joseph Mengele, the doctor notorious for his experiments on humans). Laboratory examinations from the Institute of Hygiene included samples of urine, blood, stool, sputum, and throat swabs. The documents from the Institute in the collection of the archive contain approximately 40,000 files from the period between April 10, 1943 and January 12, 1945, of which nine volumes are general ledgers, eight volumes are subsidiary ledgers, and the rest of the papers are arranged in sixty-two folders.

The documents allow for insights into the inner workings of the Institute of Hygiene. They include notes about treated prisoners of Auschwitz and its satellite camps as well as members of the SS troops stationed at Auschwitz. Frequently, these documents have turned out to be the only written record remaining about prisoners. Beyond that, there is also information about members of the administrative ranks of the Institute of Hygiene of the Waffen-SS and prisoners employed there as aides. Furthermore, the documents contain detailed lists of materials and devices ordered by the Institute of Hygiene of the Waffen-SS.

Currently, there are 40,000 documents from the Institute in the restoration workshop. The three-year conservation

project started in January 2008. The German state of North Rhine-Westphalia provides funding (€ 630,000) and support for the project. Several conservators from the restoration workshop in the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum are there to work on the conservation of the documents. Besides Polish conservators, who are permanently engaged in the restoration workshop, some members of the project team are from Germany.

In order to develop a conservation protocol for the 40,000 documents, conservators of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum tested the proposed treatments on 245 documents contained in one folder. All papers were heavily yellowed and brittle, and they contained wood pulp. The pH value of the sheets was between 4.4 and 5.2. The major problem in applying the aqueous immersion treatments or alkalization of the sheets was the water-soluble aniline inks found on almost all documents in the form of identification markings and stamps, all in various colors. In one folder the conservators examined there were the usual printing inks, a number of colored stamps, and colored pencils. No less than forty items had multiple colors. Some of the documents are typescript while others are carbon copies. As shown by the preliminary tests, the majority of the written material needed to be saved for aqueous immersion treatments. The adhesive strength of writing or stamping inks, which were fundamentally vulnerable to aqueous immersion treatments, depended on the condition of the color and its ionic charge (either anionic or cationic), the consistency of the paper, the thickness of the ink, and how the aqueous immersion treatment was applied.

It proved to be particularly difficult to find a means of fixation that ensured the fastness of all inks. The tests made by conservators, as well as the exact procedures of the conservation process, have been published in the *Polish Biuletyn Informacyjny Konserwatorów Dzieł Sztuki*.⁶ The fixative Standard Suspension (Neschen), sometimes used with cyclododecane, showed the best results. Mesitol NBS and Rewin EL were also tested.

The documents also showed signs of mechanical damage most likely from being rolled. The wear was indicated by torn strips of paper on the back of the documents. Today we cannot really reconstruct whether the rolling of sheets was due to space restrictions on transportation or storage. The sheets showed material losses and cracks, especially around the punch holes. The documents were stained and partly covered with pressure-sensitive tapes and adhesive residues. Some areas even displayed rust spots caused by paper fasteners. The printing ink, writing inks, and several other means of writing are in relatively sound condition with only a few visible spots of minor blurring.

The treatment designed by the conservators at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum utilized their testing results, suggesting that individually applied aqueous immersion treatments and alkalization were adequate techniques to

save all of the 40,000 documents. The fixation of the different types of writing inks was followed by a washing process. The sheets then were immersed into water enriched with magnesium carbonate. If the sheets were still moist, losses were repaired and supported by lining Japanese paper on the back of the document. Once cyclododecane sublimated, resizing the paper with methyl cellulose MH-300 in water enriched with magnesium carbonate was carried out via airbrushing. The slightly damp sheets were pressed between blotters for a final drying. The documents were stored in acid-free folders.

It is a novelty that such a conservation effort has been made possible at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. A profound knowledge of the historical facts surrounding the objects is as important as the elaboration of item-level treatment. The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum rejects mass conservation techniques typically applied to archival collections. The State Museum considers their documents too important to be exposed to the flaws associated with mass conservation efforts. To avoid these pitfalls, every single document requires an individually applied conservation treatment. Beginning in the 1990s the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum entrusted private restoration workshops with the conservation of their archive collections as there was no on-site restoration workshop at this time. This changed in 2003 when highly qualified conservators were hired to found a restoration workshop on the museum's compound with the help of the U.S.-based Roland S. Lauder Foundation, which donated \$2.7 million for the cause. Besides its primary focus on the conservation of objects, the workshop also serves didactic ends. Visitors to the museum such as groups of school kids, soldiers, and others have a chance to take a guided tour of the workshop where they are introduced to the conservation process. This visualization of conservation work makes visitors realize the acuteness and the enormous effort necessary for the restoration of the documents. The material legacy of Auschwitz-Birkenau in the State Museum must be treated individually and with utmost care.

CONCLUSION

The conservation of documents at Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum is about more than simply fixing sheets paper. It is, above all, about the safeguarding of original documents that provide us with evidence of crimes against humanity.

NOTES

1. World Heritage List, Auschwitz-Birkenau German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp (1940–1945): <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/31>.
2. Memory of the World: http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=1538&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.
3. Memory of Poland—Memory of the World: <http://www.archiwa.gov.pl/memory/>.
4. Świebocki, H., Domumentacja nazistowskich zbrodni ukrytych przez więźniów w KL Auschwitz. *Representations of Auschwitz*. (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 1995), 51.
5. Strzelecki, A., Evakuierung, Auflösung und Befreiung des KL Auschwitz, *Auschwitz Nationalsozialistisches Vernichtungslager*. (Oświęcim: Staatliches Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2002), 412.
6. Bisaga, E., Jastrzębiowska, N., Kościelniak, M., Maciaszczyk, M., Archiwalia zawierające barwniki anilinowe na przykładzie zespołu dokumentów SS-Hygiene, *Biuletyn Informacyjny Konserwatorów Dzieł Sztuki*, vol. 18, 1–4. (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Konserwatorów Dzieł Sztuki, 2007), 68–71.

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