Recovered Objects as Agents of Memory in a Holocaust-site Museum: Intrinsic Intimacy and Memory Practice in the 2020 Sobibór Exhibition

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Drawing on scholarship on Holocaust archaeology, object theory and museum studies, this article demonstrates the potency of historical objects as active agents of memory bestowed with a capacity to co-constitute the museum narrative and generate meaning. Using the 2020 exhibit at the museum of the Sobibór death camp as a case study, the article discusses objects on display that once belonged to the Jews deported there in 1942 and 1943. Specifically, the objects in the exhibit are not intended to tell any general story nor to represent the victims symbolically; instead, they communicate individual interests, needs and identities of the deportees. Moreover, these objects, atypical for the setting of a death camp, summon social relations of intimacy with the museum audience.

Keywords: Holocaust museums, Poland, Sobibór, memory, exhibition, personal objects

Introduction

At the small museum located on the site of the former Nazi death camp known as Sobibór, in Poland's Lublin Region, the visitor's gaze may catch sight of a child's pin exhibited in a small cabinet situated on the wall. This particular object stands out among the hundreds of other personal items and everyday objects displayed in a glass case that extends across the entire museum. These objects make up a portion of what Jewish deportees from Poland and other European countries in 1942 and 1943 brought with them to Sobibór. Made of brass, the pin is only 1.5 inches high and half an inch wide. Although the surface of the pin is burned, one can easily identify the famous cartoon mouse figure known to many around the world: Mickey Mouse. This image, created by Walt Disney together with his brother Roy O. Disney and his fellow animator, Ub Iwerks, in 1928, was popular throughout Europe in film and comics but also reproduced as figures to collect and carry.[1] The round ears, the form of the nose, the line of the tail and the shape of shoes that seem too big for the feet: are all present and identifiable. A careful observer may also discern the outline of a hand clad in a glove. The sight of the famous character, beloved by both children and adults, in an exhibition at a Nazi death camp is

[1] APGAR, Garry. Introduction. In: APGAR, Garry (ed). *A Mickey Mouse Reader*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014.

initially jarring and then troubling, as the visitor may realise that a person chose this item from among their personal belongings to bring with them on a deportation in the 1940s.

Mickey Mouse was found in a section of the former camp known as Lager II, where deportees were admitted and their property plundered. This is where the undressing and sorting rooms were located as well as warehouses of plundered property and adjacent dump pits into which items that were considered worthless were thrown and burned.[2] The pin spent several decades in the ground. After it was retrieved by archaeologists, it was included among hundreds of other objects in the exhibition launched in October 2020 presenting the history of the camp with sensitivity to the experiences of the victims.

This article presents the argument that the objects curated in the Sobibór exhibit, Mickey Mouse among them, function in an "agentic" sense to deliver memory through an intimacy with the viewer that is both constructed curatorially and evoked by the nature of the objects themselves, that is, intrinsic to them. These objects are more than artefacts from the past, or evidence that this deportation occurred. As will be shown below, they indicate the life prior to deportation, the act of choosing before a journey, the holding close during the train, and the chaos of disembarking and being forced to undress. In regard to Mickey Mouse, the pattern by which it has been degraded reveals that it was burned together with other items considered worthless by the perpetrators. The Nazi decision to cover the site after the uprising that broke out in October 1943 effectively buried many objects and hid them from view. Postwar years of neglect and restrictions on historical research compounded this until the 2008 decision to transform the landscape and surviving structures of the former camp into a memorial site.[3] In a sense, Mickey Mouse is a storyteller, carrying a narrative from the past that is otherwise not available and initiating a relationship of closeness and familiarity in the present.

To develop this argument, this article engages with three distinct literatures, each of which has made contributions to the study of memory and museology in recent years. The first is Holocaust archaeology, in which Caroline Sturdy Colls poses questions about the material artefacts of displacement and genocide. The second is object theory, which conceptualises material objects (including museum objects) as bestowed with agency, i.e. as influencing the social world. The third literature is museum studies theory and focuses on curation processes as crucial for creating meanings and interacting with an audience as well as on how the curators interpret difficult, sensitive historical issues in their exhibitions.

The research included several study visits and participant observation at Sobibór Museum in 2021 and 2022, resulting in photographic documentation and analysis of published statements of individuals who collected, processed and curated the materials for the Sobibór exhibition. Building on these source materials, this article will make a case that certain Holocaust objects should be considered agents of memory, taking into account how they are framed and positioned within the museum display but also in regard to specific concepts of agency and intimacy. These particular objects were curated to highlight their singularity, which allows them to express an affective resonance that explains a specific persecution journey – that is, an individual Holocaust history – and to bring the viewer into emotional proximity to this history without reducing it to a mass or one-dimensional victim experience. The exhibit at Sobibór

[2] KRANZ, Tomasz. Planowana ekspozycja historyczna na terenie byłego niemieckiego obozu zagłady w Sobiborze. Koncepcja i struktura [A planned historical exhibition on the site of the former German extermination camp in Sobibór. Concept and structure]. In: LEHNSTAED, Stephan & TRABA, Robert (eds). Akcja "Reinhardt". Historia i upamiętnianie [Operation Reinhardt. History and Memorial], Warszawa: Neriton, 2019, p. 394.

[3] Ibidem, p. 399.

generates a narrative for the visitor to partake in, one not dominated by the owner's death but instead originating in a particular social context in which a person from the past made choices, had preferences and was part of a rich prewar culture of Jews living in different European countries.

Sobibór's exhibition is a revealing case study because the Nazi attempt to obscure it completely meant that postwar reconstruction was very challenging and demanded creative technical solutions in the absence of material markers of a human presence at the site.

The Nazi regime established the Sobibór death camp in May 1942 as one of three killing centres (along with Bełżec and Treblinka) operating as the camps of *Einsatz Reinhardt*, or Operation Reinhardt – a project to exterminate all the Jews in the General Government (an occupation zone established by Germans in the territories of invaded Poland). The purpose of these three sites was to carry out the murder of the Jews throughout Poland and Nazi-occupied Europe, as well as appropriate their belongings.[4] In his most recent work, Polish historian Dariusz Libionka estimates that from May 1942 to October 1943, Nazi authorities and their collaborators killed approximately 170,000 – 180,000 people in Sobibór.[5] About half of the victims were Polish Jews; the other half were Jews from other European countries such as Slovakia, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Germany, Austria, France, the Netherlands and the area that is today's Belarus.

Almost all the Jews arriving at Sobibór were immediately murdered. The exception was about 600 Jewish prisoners who were kept in the camp as forced labourers supporting the SS staff on site. Some of them were assigned to organise plundered property, while others performed clean-up work or worked in the adjacent forest. There was also a separate group, isolated from the other labourers, who were forced to handle those killed in the gas chambers.[6] It was a group of forced labourers who organised the uprising in October 1943. The rebels killed nine SS officers and two guards and approximately 300 prisoners escaped through the fences under heavy fire. Nazi authorities responded by killing all the Jews who had not escaped and hunting down the fugitives in the nearby forests for the next few days. As a result of the uprising, the Nazi authorities decided to destroy the camp's infrastructure to obscure evidence of the killing process. They dismantled the gas chambers and planted trees over the entire area, such that any recovery would be very difficult, and even evidence of camp borders would be extremely hard to identify.

Thus, one of the most murderous Holocaust sites became one of the most obscured. Moreover, the Nazis demolished most of the documents regarding *Einsatz Reinhardt* in general and Sobibór camp in particular. Historians and curators dealing with issues related to the Sobibór camp have had to rely mostly on what might be called "memory sources", that is, accounts of Jewish survivors and Polish bystanders, as well testimonies given in postwar trials by SS officers and guards.

The process of musealisation of the space of the former Sobibór camp began in the early 1960s, when an understanding of the spatial layout was developed to secure the area and commemorate the victims. The project did not include archaeological research, and the

[4] ARAD, Yitzhak B. *Belzec, Sobibór, Treblinka. The Operation Reinhard Death Camps*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press Indianapolis, 2018, p. 16.

[5] LIBIONKA, Dariusz. Sobibór camp as an Extermination Site of European Jews. In: KRANZ, Tomasz (ed). *Recovered from the Ashes. Personal Belongings of the German Death Camp in Sobibór*. Lublin: Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku, 2018, p. 19.

[6] SCHLEVIS, Jules. *Sobibór: A history of a Nazi Death Camp*. Oxford-New York: Berg, 2021, pp. 111–117.

commemoration itself did not clearly indicate the ethnic identity of the victims and did not reveal the actual nature of the Sobibór camp. The next stage of the musealisation began in 1993, when a small museum was established on site as a branch of a museum in nearby Włodawa. In May 2012 this arrangement was replaced by the establishment of the Museum and Memorial Site in Sobibór, operating as a branch of the State Museum at Majdanek in Lublin.[7] In 2013, a competition for the commemoration design was held; construction began in 2016. Although some archaeological work had occurred in Sobibór in 2000, in 2011 this work expanded, ultimately providing extensive information on the camp's spatial structure and revealing thousands of material objects that belonged to the victims.[8]

Fig. 1: *Sobibór Memorial Museum, the main building.* Photo by Marta Kubiszyn (2022).

Techniques of reconstruction and the new Holocaust archaeology

Working with very little evidence, most scholars who studied Sobibór, as well as other *Einsatz Reinhardt* camps, took a descriptive, documentary approach. Recent archaeological approaches have made it possible to recover material traces of camp infrastructure preserved below the surface, as well as other physical evidence of Nazi crimes. Non-invasive tools, such as ground-penetrating radar and laser scanning, allowed for the identification of mass graves as well as a multitude of objects without destroying the camp's original features or violating

[7] KRANZ, Planowana ekspozycja…, p. 399.

[8] BEM Marek, MAZUREK Wojciech, *Sobibór. Badania archeologiczne prowadzone na terenie po byłym niemieckim ośrodku zagłady w Sobiborze w latach 2000 – 2011* [Sobibor. Archaeological research in the area of the former German extermination center in Sobibór in 2000 – 2011], Warszawa–Włodawa: Fundacja Polsko-Niemieckie Pojednanie 2012; ZALEWSKA Anna I., Pamięć miejsca naznaczonego akcją Reinhardt. Materialne pozostałości po SS-Sonderkommano Sobibór z perspektywy archeologa [The memory of the Operation Reinhardt site. Material remains of the SS-Sonderkommano Sobibór from the perspective of an archaeologist]. In: LEHNSTAED, Stephan & TRABA, Robert (eds). *Akcja "Reinhardt"*…, pp. 339–368.

Jewish religious practices on sites of the dead. These techniques mean new evidence is available for historical research.

Archaeology has also become a theoretical contributor to historical and memory studies, as well as to museological practices. Sturdy Colls in particular has shown how archaeology has the potential to challenge several assumptions in these fields. Regarding Holocaust sites, she argues:

> Although the above-ground traces of buildings and monuments were damaged and removed, below the ground an abundance of archaeological examples highlight that remnants will likely remain. It is precisely because cultural genocide had a complex and permanent effect on the landscape that it will be detectable; such large-scale destruction cannot help but leave an equally complex and permanent trace.[9]

In this quotation, Sturdy Colls offers a conceptualisation of genocide that differs from the common emphasis on human life. Instead, she focuses on the non-human material remnants of genocide, formations that cannot be easily erased because of their physical permanence and location in a specific space. Furthermore, she notes that the treatment of objects as well as people has affected the landscape and influence it in different ways.[10]

While Sturdy Colls (who conducted surveys at the former Nazi death camp in Treblinka) is firm in viewing objects as material evidence of historical events, she also links her concept of genocidal traces to memory. Discussing Nazi crimes as a part of the collective memory of the twentieth century which continues to have powerful political and social impacts, she views the Holocaust not just as history but as an important element of cultural narratives very much present for living generations.[11] Together with her emphasis on the permanence of remnants, she shows how archaeological work has the potential to co-constitute the narratives of the past and present memory by foregrounding objects. Thus, rather than viewing objects as symbols – that is, representations of "something else" – the archaeological approach to Holocaust positions objects as active participants affected by genocidal perpetration. They are survivors.

In this way the archaeological approach is in productive conversation with object theory, a longstanding cultural studies approach that has recently been reinvigorated by new attention to materiality and representation. Many scholars approach Holocaust objects as having the capacity to "represent" – in a way – their owners. For instance, Alison Landsberg recognises objects as standing in for the absent victims, that is, acting as their metonymic representations. She believes that objects can mediate knowledge and support the work of memory by engaging viewers on an emotional level.[12] Bożena Shallcross, in her book on literary accounts that reference Jewish belongings, also assumes that objects can stand in for their owners as metonymic representations because of their physical proximity to people who have carried them.[13] Numerous researchers, however, take issue with this approach. Sharon B. Oster for instance, who examined Holocaust shoes as objects displayed in museums, expresses her doubts regarding the value of objects as vehicles of memory evoking events and people from

[9] STURDY COLLS, Caroline. The archaeology of cultural genocide: a forensic turn in Holocaust studies? In: DZIUBAN, Zuzanna (ed). *Mapping the 'Forensic Turn': The Engagements with Materialities of Mass Death in Holocaust Studies and Beyond*. Vienna: New Academic Press, 2017, p. 127.

[10] Ibidem.

[11] STURDY COLLS, Caroline. *Holocaust Archeologies: Approaches and Future Directions*. New York-London: Springer, 2015, p. 6–7, 228.

[12] LANDSBERG, Alison. America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy. In: *New German Critique*, vol. 71, 1997, pp. 80–81.

[13] SHALLCROSS, Barbara. *The Holocaust Objects in Polish and Polish-Jewish Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011, pp. 2–3.

the past.[14] Oster claims that to fulfil memory functions, objects need to be accompanied by narratives that endow them with meanings beyond their materiality.

Moving beyond these works, Leora Auslander conceptualises Holocaust objects as potentially active agents in history, stating that "In their communicative, performative, emotive and expressive capacities [objects] act, have effects in the world."[15]

Auslander uses several specific terms to consider objects as having inherent potentialities to affect an audience. She goes further, noting that the communicative capacity of objects is very different from that of texts, as artefacts can communicate things that cannot be expressed in written texts; they are "beyond words".[16] The perspective presented by Auslander fits into a lively scholarship on objects and agency. Museum specialists such as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett have shown that placing an object in a museum setting or curating it in an exhibition changes the object itself.[17] Theorists of object agency, however, argue that these moves change more than the object. They influence the social world by causing reactions, creating meaning, or changing the behaviour of individuals or groups.

The scholarship on curating includes the specific challenges that museum curators encounter when developing exhibitions regarding "difficult" history, i.e., history that is contentious, sensitive, controversial or taboo, and that potentially might be uncomfortable, offensive or upsetting for audiences.

Jennifer Bonnel and Roger I. Simon have documented an increased interest in "difficult history" among museum curators globally.[18] These issues have been developed further by Julia Rose in her monograph on United States history (2016) in which she address the practical and ethical issues of taking up, displaying and commemorating "difficult" topics.[19] Examining the characteristics of the museal environment that would enable visitors to confront "the history of oppression, violence and trauma, pain and shame",[20] Rose stresses that a curatorial interpretation of a difficult past should include and respect the experiences of the different participants in those historical events. Investigating strategies applied by different museums across the US, she explains how the curators can help the visitors to navigate through painful and disturbing topics – including topics that might be "too much to bear" – through the techniques that allow for intimate interaction and connection to personal stories.[21]

Sobibór objects as agents of memory

Assessing the exhibit as an outside researcher, it appears that the creators of the Sobibór 2020 exhibition identified particular objects that possessed capacities that make them active agents in history and memory, rather than ones that play a role of symbols or function as material representations of the historical past. Aleksandra Szymula – an employee of the State

[14] OSTER, Sharon B. Holocaust Shoes: Metonymy, Matter, Memory. In: AARONS Victoria & LASSNER Phyllis (eds). *The Palgrave Handbook of Holocaust Literature and Culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 764.
[15] AUSLANDER, Leora (2005). Beyond Words. In: *The American Historical Review*, vol. 110, 2005, No. 4, p. 1017.
[16] Ibidem, p. 1015.
[17] KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, Barbara. *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, p. 3.
[18] BONNEL, Jennifer & SIMON, Roger (2007). Difficult Exhibitions' and Intimate Encounters. In: *Museum and Society* vol. 5, 2007, No 2, p. 65.
[19] ROSE, Julia. *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites*. Lanham – Boulder – New York – London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.
[20] Ibidem, p. 7.
[21] Ibidem, p. 1 and ff, 105, 125.

Museum at Majdanek, which processed the Sobibór objects – notes that while most of the items remain anonymous, there are several with markings that allowed historians to identify the place of origin or even the names of their owners.[22] The latter is true of several children's identification badges, given to them by family members in case of separation during what they believed would be resettlements.

One of these badges, retrieved in October 2016, especially captured the attention of historians and its story was reported in the press and social media. The pendant was found in 2016 in the area of the Lager II. Although it is not marked with a name, it does have a date of birth embossed along with the name of the city. Researchers from Yad Vashem, together with the Israeli archaeologist Yoram Haimi, managed to identify its owner as Karoline Cohn. Her personal data can be found on the list of Jews deported from Frankfurt am Main to the ghetto in Minsk (today's Belarus) on 11 November 1941.[23]

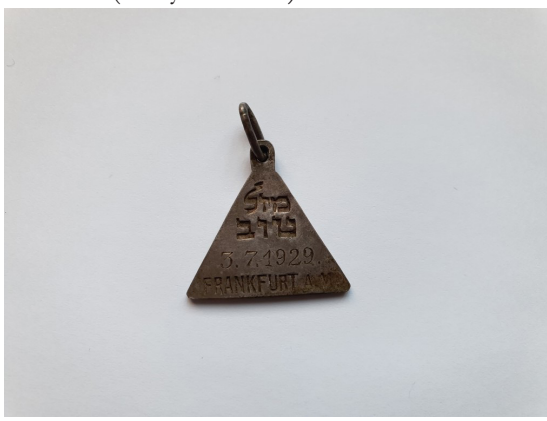

Fig. 2: *Pendant belonging to Karoline Cohn, collection of the State Museum at Majdanek (2016).* Photo by Justyna Bajuk (2023).

The discovery that Anne Frank, who was also born in Frankfurt, owned a similar pendant sparked interest in Karoline's story around the world. Further research revealed that these pendants were offered to Jewish girls born in Frankfurt in 1928 and 1929, probably by a local rabbi. Nevertheless, it was not possible for historians to establish that Karoline was sent to Sobibór along with her family from Minsk in September 1943.[24] Aiming at reconstructing the Cohns' story, researchers noted that her parents, while in Minsk, could have sold the pendant and that it could have been taken to Sobibór by another ghetto inhabitant. Alternatively, if Karolina died in the Minsk ghetto, her relatives might have kept it to remember her. In this way, a single material object revealed a number of aspects of the persecution journey of a Frankfurt Jewish family.

Like the Mickey Mouse pin described earlier, another object in the exhibition resists symbolising "the many" because of its singularity and cultural embeddedness – namely, a pair of gold-coloured brass theatre binoculars. The materials and their obvious function, associated with attending an artistic event, evoke a sophistication specific to a European urban middle- or upper-class setting. Among the other items presented at the exhibition, the binoculars are a relatively large object, eye-catching due to their shining golden colour and shape. Not an object for everyday use, the binoculars raise questions about why such an item was chosen to be packed by someone who had limited possibilities when it came to the amount of luggage that could be taken.

[22] SZYMULA, Aleksandra. Muzealia Sobiborskie. Przedmioty znalezione w miejscu zbrodni. In: *Varia*, October [special issue], 2020, p. 40.
[23] SZYMULA, Aleksandra. Der Anhänger von Karoline Cohn, accessed 11 November 2022, https://www.bpb.de/themen/zeit-kulturgeschichte/geteilte-geschichte/342942/der-anhaenger-von-karoline-cohn/.
[24] Ibidem.

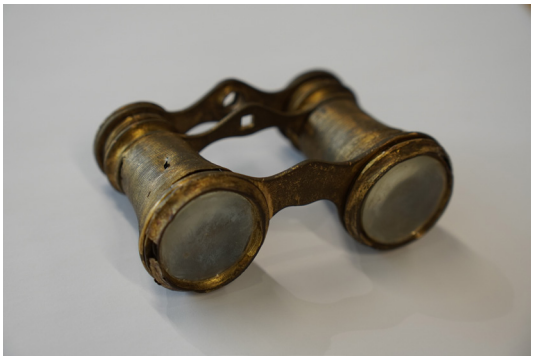

Fig. 3: *Binoculars, collection of the State Museum at Majdanek (2016).* Photo by Justyna Bajuk (2023).

In their study of the death camp in Chełmno, scholars Łucja Pawlicka-Nowak and Jolanta Adamska note that German authorities had told Jewish families they were going to a new settlement in Eastern Europe and suggest that the adult women in the family selected and packed the items the family would take.[25] This was probably also the case with the families deported to Sobibór, who packed for a journey unaware that they were going to a death camp. The packed items included food, medicine, items for hygiene, items related to religious worship and work tools. Since binoculars do not fall into any of the above categories, it seems that they might have been packed as a memento of a loved one, or a family heirloom that was of emotional value to its owner. It is difficult to imagine anything other than sentimental reasons for taking this type of item on such a trip. It can be assumed, however, that the person who possessed the binoculars had a special attachment to them. They were, perhaps, an indicator of prewar life or an object that offered hope of an imminent end to the war and the possibility of returning to old habits. Their presence at Sobibór communicates hope of once again having the opportunity to pursue cultural interests, either in the new location or upon return home.

Hope is also communicated by the keys and doorplates that were excavated in Sobibór. These doorplates are rectangular, slightly elongated metal plates, from 1 to 1.5 inches wide and 2.5 to 5 inches long. Their surfaces are covered with white enamel on which initials of names and surnames are written in various fonts. Most of the doorplates shown in the exhibit were partially burned, probably in the pits of Lager II.

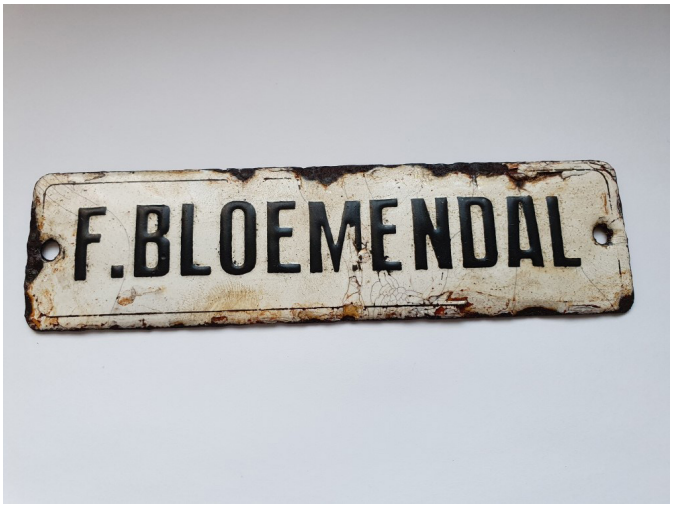

Fig. 4: *A doorplate from Holland, collection of the State Museum at Majdanek (2016).* Photo by Justyna Bajuk (2023).

Doorplates (as well as keys) are neither personal items nor necessary for day-to-day utility. They are associated with individual residences, or perhaps small stores or workshops. Doorplates with specific names are objects that make sense only if hope exists for a new life in the new place of residence where they can be attached to new doors. Since they are painted with specific names, they are of no value to anyone else. These plates communicate a specific perspective held by individuals, made legible to the viewer in the present

[25] PAWLICKA-NOWAK, Łucja & ADAMSKA, Jolanta (eds). *Świadectwa Zagłady. Obóz w Chełmnie nad Nerem. Getto wiejskie Czachulec [Holocaust testimonies. Camp in Chełmno on the Ner. Rural ghetto Czachulec]*. Gdańsk: Museum of the Second World War, 2014, pp. 335–340.

day via the object. When analysed alongside other information, such as transport lists, the doorplates can be identified as belonging to Jewish residences in Amsterdam. These plates allowed historians in some cases to trace them first to individuals and then to other documents revealing details of personal histories.[26]

In contrast to doorplates, the keys are a part of an intention to return to the original place of residence; they may also preserve memories associated with home. Keys from the prewar era were heavy and inelegant, and the keys uncovered at Sobibór are quite large – 2, 3 or 4 inches long, made of steel – and inconvenient to carry; they would likely not have been packed unless considered necessary. Some keys are single, others are connected together in bunches on small wheels. Damaged by corrosion after spending several dozen years in the ground, the keys are blackened, with partly obliterated shapes, and no longer capable of opening any doors. When displayed at Sobibór, these objects direct the viewer's attention to personal experience but also express the shared understanding of a community that believed wartime dislocation was temporary and reversible.

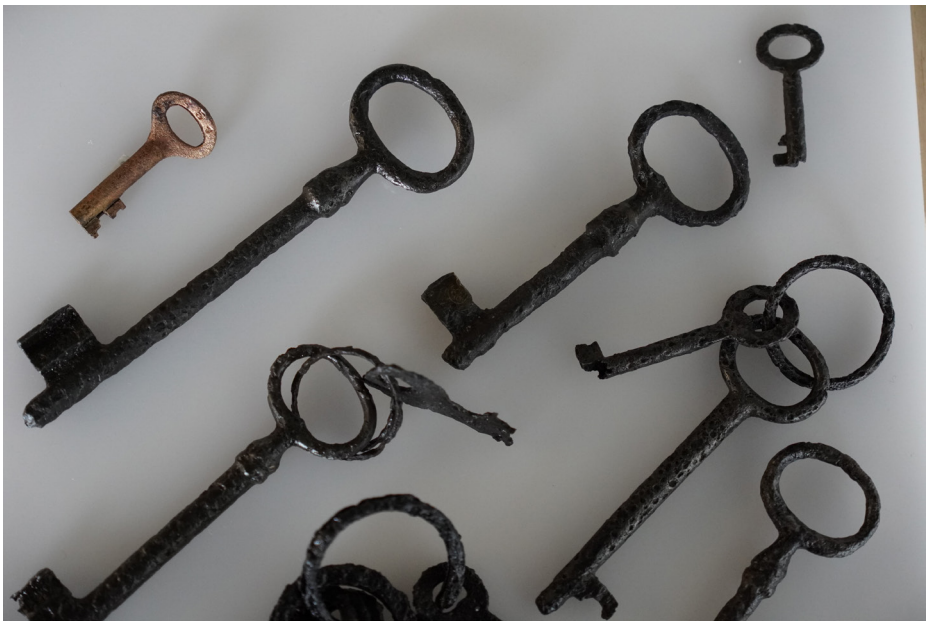

Fig. 5: *The keys, collection of the State Museum at Majdanek (2016)*. Photo by Justyna Bajuk (2023).

Like other items found in the area of the former Sobibór camp, the Mickey Mouse pin was partly distorted by fire. Nevertheless, it is quite well preserved and can be easily identified, unlike other objects that were significantly deformed and even welded together by the burning process. The pin is less than an inch and a half in diameter, made of brass enamel. Due to the shape of the Mickey figure, it can be estimated that it was manufactured in the 1930s. But its most compelling feature is that it may be presumed that the original owner was a child or had cherished it from childhood.

As in the case of Karolina Cohn's pendant, it is difficult to say whether the Mickey Mouse pin was brought to Sobibór by its owner or whether it was saved and carried by a family member

[26] SKRABEK, Aleksandra. O nowej wystawie w Muzeum i Miejscu Pamięci w Sobiborze oraz działalności Państwowego Muzeum na Majdanku: an Interview with Tomasz Kranz. In: *Varia*, February, p. 2021, p. 11.

as a memento of a deceased child. While there are no identifying marks to associate it with a specific individual, the cartoon character itself has strong associations with joy in childhood and thus challenges visitors' expectations of a Holocaust site. The figure itself evokes a positive attitude toward the world: small but smart and brave Mickey successfully confronts opponents and overcomes any difficulties. The transnational popularity of Mickey Mouse means that present-day visitors to the museum recognise the character as a popular culture icon as well as an "emblem of the American Spirit", as Garry Apgar captures it in the title of his book regarding the cartoon character.[27]

Multiple authors confirm the transnational popularity of Mickey Mouse in the early 1930s.[28] Scholars offer varying reasons for the character's popularity in Europe and beyond. For example, Bruce D. Forbes argues that Mickey Mouse's influence can be derived from the fact that this character not only reflects the needs and desires of the audience but also the values that guide them.[29] Even Walter Benjamin reflected on Mickey Mouse's significance in his notebooks, anthologised in Apgar's edited volume, pointing to the fact that in the character's adventures the audience can recognise the difficulties of their own existence.[30]

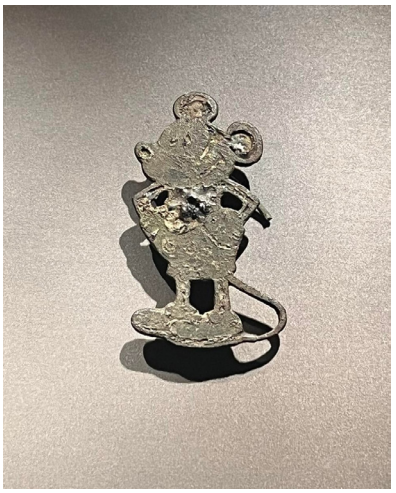

Fig. 6: *The Mickey Mouse pin, collection of the State Museum at Majdanek (2016).* Photo by Paulina Pętal (2023).

In the context of Sobibór, the Mickey Mouse pin creates a powerful connection with a multidimensional, individual story, since it is an interruption of the expectation of grief and horror that is present when visiting a Holocaust site. The character on the pin is childish, ornamental and expressive of a lived context in which humour and fantasy function. The pin does not disrupt the solemnity of the killing site but rather illuminates the stakes of living as a European Jew in the 1940s. In doing so, it breaks through the abstracted "mass" nature of the genocide; it acts a rebellion against a narrative that neglected individual victims for many decades. Due to the nature of its damage and the place where it was excavated, the Mickey Mouse pin has value as both a record of a crime and an extension of the personal narrative. Found in the area of Lager II, it can be assumed that it was either lost or abandoned by its owner or was taken from someone and then rejected as worthless when plundered property was segregated, perhaps discarded to be burned in a pit with other objects designated as worthless, such as private documents, letters, school certificates and family pictures.

Crucial to honouring the capacity of the Sobibór objects as agents of memory was the decision to make them central to the exhibition and to display them in a specific way that makes the past more individual in the moment of encounter by the visitor and which allows emotional and physical proximity. Most of the Sobibór objects are exhibited in a 35 m long glass display case that forms an axis inside the hall, which itself constitutes the entire exhibition space. Inside the display case, against a milky-white background, about 700 items are laid out, one

[27] APGAR, Garry. *Mickey Mouse: Emblem of the American Spirit*. San Francisco: Weldon Owen, 2014.

[28] FORBES, Bruce D. Mickey Mouse as Icon: Taking Popular Culture Seriously. In: *Word & World*, vol. 23, 2003, No 3; APGAR, Garry, Introduction…; APGAR, Garry. *Mickey Mouse*….

[29] FORBES, Mickey Mouse…

[30] APGAR, Garry, Introduction…

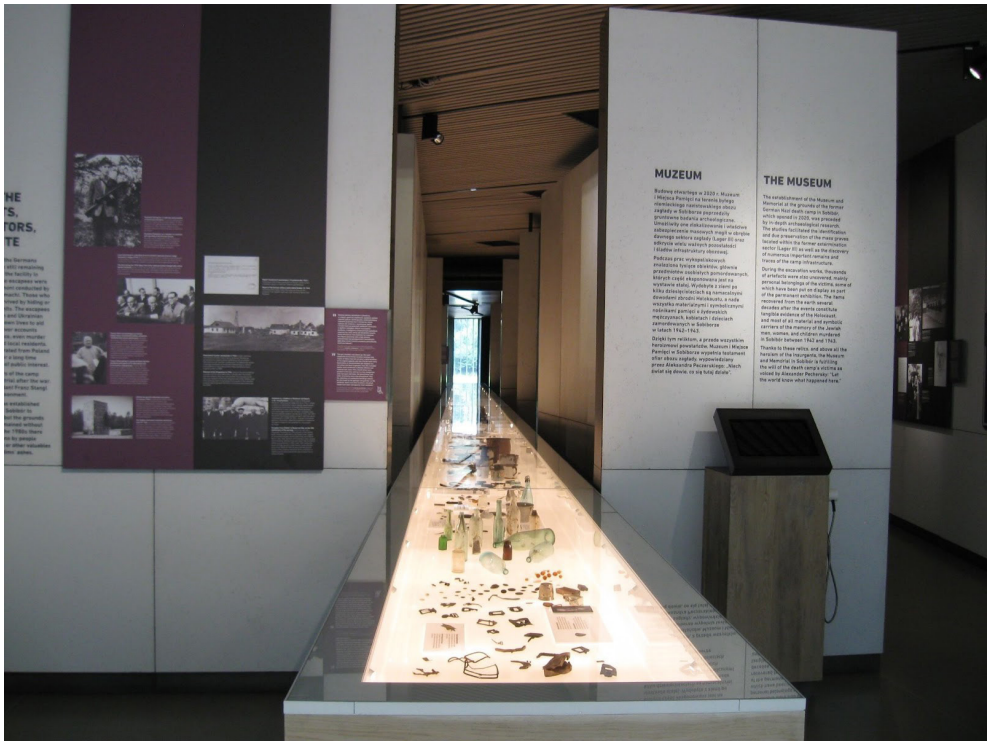

Fig. 7: *The Sobibór display case, photo by Marta Kubiszyn (2021) To clarify, viewers may approach the case from various points between the panels.*

next to the other. The display includes both everyday items, such as dishes, cutlery and pots, and personal objects such as jewellery, watches, eyeglasses and toiletries. According to the curator, Tomasz Kranz, the glass display was designed to evoke associations with a laboratory table on which crime evidence is examined, while referring at the same time to the form of a corridor through which the victims were led to the gas chambers and where they lost or abandoned their valuables.[31] Except for the objects in the main display case, a few of the objects, including the Mickey Mouse pin, were placed in individual small cabinets hung on the museum's walls. The backgrounds on which the objects are displayed and the way they are lit emphasises their singularity, as if the curators wanted them to be perceived as precious jewels.

The issue of "mass" objects in Holocaust exhibitions

While the experts curating the Sobibór exhibition likely had multiple priorities, in terms of museology, Holocaust objects are frequently considered evidentiary in their value. Incorporated into specific collections and displayed to reflect both the policy of a particular museum and the objectives of the curators, objects might lose their agency as the focus is shifted from presenting them to using them to legitimise the Holocaust narrative and co-constitute a memorial practice.[32] At the same time, objects have often been positioned as symbols going beyond the specific instance in which they were discarded, lost or hidden. This "symbol"

[31] KRANZ, Tomasz. Wystawa stała Muzeum i Miejsca Pamięci w Sobiborze [Permanent exhibition in the Museum and Memorial Site in Sobibór]. In: *Varia*., 2020, October [special issue], p. 47.

[32] STILES, Emily-Jane. *Holocaust Memory and National Museums in Britain*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp. 103–105 and ff.

approach – or the "metonymic" approach, as Shallcross describes it – can be seen in numerous exhibitions where curators position items as masses to communicate mass death.[33]

The idea to present objects taken from Jewish victims in the form of mass piles was implemented by curators in Poland as a strategy in the very first museums created after World War II. These initial museum sites were in the areas of the former Nazi camps in Oświęcim (Auschwitz-Birkenau) and in Lublin (Majdanek). In these two sites, material remnants were not curated to refer to murdered individuals, but rather to invoke something more intangible: to represent historical authenticity and to reveal the perpetrators' methods. For this reason, exhibitions centred large piles of objects, such as shoes, to exert an emotional imprint of horror and to communicate the scale of both genocide and the plunder of property. Ziębińska-Witek, in her study of Holocaust representation in Polish museums, explains that curators avoided any interpretive commentary in order to keep viewers' attention on the perpetrators.[34] Jonathan Huener, in his book on Auschwitz, sees in this early period a "martyrological paradigm".[35] Explaining this paradigm Ziębińska-Witek underlines that in these years officials categorised victims as collective nations.[36] She quotes an excerpt from a speech given by the then Prime Minister of communist Poland, Józef Cyrankiewicz, during the ceremonial inauguration of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum in June 1947: "The tragedy of Oświęcim, a monstrous death factory for innocent people, should not dissolve into personal, individual memories".[37] This approach manifested itself in the form of items curated in the form of mass piles.

Thus, into the present day, mounds of plundered objects in numerous museums, often displayed in a chaotic manner in some kind of enclosed space or container, have evolved into an essential aspect of Holocaust exhibitions, or what scholar Alison Landsberg calls the "emerging iconography of the Holocaust".[38] She points out that "[t]he pile has become the "aesthetic" of the Holocaust, precisely because it now evokes a deathworld".[39] In other words, mass objects stand in for the inevitability of genocide. Thus, in the convention developed by many curators of Holocaust exhibitions, material objects positioned to represent the mass nature of death function to prevent – in a sense – their capacity as singular objects to communicate a specific history.

Numerous scholars have expressed their doubts regarding piles of objects as unproblematic visual representations of the Holocaust. James Young, for instance, in his influential text, *Texture of Memory*, argues that the "pile strategy" does not invoke the specific heritage and values of the destroyed Jewish communities, but rather presents the way the Nazis perceived their victims.[40] Criticism of the "pile strategy" as imposing on visitors the depersonalising perspective of the perpetrators and obscuring clear references to victims as individuals has also been developed by several other authors. Sharon B. Oster, in particular, shares Young's

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[33] ZIĘBIŃSKA-WITEK, Anna. Muzea [Museums]. In: BURYŁA, Sławomir, KRAWCZYŃSKA, Dorota & LEOCIAK, Jacek (eds). *Reprezentacje Zagłady w Kulturze Polskiej (1939-2019). Problematyka Zagłady w sztukach wizualnych i popkulturze [The Holocaust in visual arts and pop culture]*, Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich, vol. 2, 2021, pp. 32–33.
[34] Ibidem, p. 34.
[35] HUENER Jonathan. *Auschwitz, Poland and the Politics of Commemoration 1945–1979*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003.
[36] ZIĘBIŃSKA-WITEK, Muzea…, p. 32.
[37] Ibidem.
[38] LANDSBERG, Alison. America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy. In: *New German Critique*, vol. 71, 1997, p. 71.
39 Ibidem, p. 79.
[40] YOUNG, James E. *The Texture of Memory*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, pp. 132–133.

scepticism about the ability of Holocaust objects to go beyond the evocation of the power of the Nazis and their dehumanising perspective, arguing that objects require humanisation and narrativisation to work as genuine forms of remembrance.[41]

Thus, objects can actually detract from understanding the narratives of those most affected by genocide if presented in particular ways. Helpful to addressing this issue are contemporary theories on the process of creating meanings through museum curation. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the author of the influential work *Destination Culture*, brings together theories on tourism, audience, museology and culture to address how space, place and framing shape memory work. Analysing the status of ethnographic objects in museums she argues that "ethnographic objects are made, not found, despite claims to the contrary. They did not begin their lives as ethnographic objects. They *became* ethnographic through the process of detachment and contextualization."[42]

Here Kirshenblatt-Gimblett expresses one of her main interests: the process of creating the museum experience through the process of the curation of objects, which includes transferring objects from their original location to the museum context and thereby endowing them with particular meanings. She finds that the process of choosing and transforming everyday items into a representation of something significant by curators often requires a distancing and disruption from an original context. This process is a form of creation which results in transforming the items of everyday use into artefacts or ethnographic objects that are similar to art objects and valued for reasons that allow them to perform the needed representative functions.[43] Thus, following Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, choices made in the curation process are crucial to allowing objects to communicate with audiences, an issue addressed by scholar Emily-Jane Stiles in regard to Holocaust representation in the Imperial War Museum in London.[44] Stiles stresses that selecting specific historical objects, attaching a narrative created around particular issues and constructing a certain spatial arrangement might open up the possibility of instrumentalising the items and forcing them to serve particular purposes.

Intimacy and agency in the Sobibór Exhibit

As noted earlier, the curators of the Sobibór display stayed away from piles altogether. Instead, discrete objects were placed to keep them distinct from one another and highlight their specificity. In practice, as viewers approach the exhibit, this positioning functions to allow the generation of a particular relationship of viewer to object, one that can be conceptualised as "intimacy", defined as a relational physical and emotional closeness in which individual beings are separate as they exist in their social and physical world but maintain a specific attachment that carries a sense of interiority, privacy and personal meaning.[45] Typically, intimacy assumes sentient beings – humans or animals. Yet in a powerful sense the Sobibór objects allow for a meaningful intimacy that is intertwined with memory and that functions on a number of levels.

A theoretical contribution to these issues is offered by Laura Levitt in her book *The Objects that Remain* (2020). Although Levitt does not address Sobibór, her writing regarding the treatment of

[41] OSTER, Holocaust Shoes…, pp. 762–763, 772.
[42] KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, *Destination Culture*…, p. 3.
[43] KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, Barbara. From Ethnology to Heritage: The Role of the Museum. SIEF Keynote, Marseilles (28 April 2005), accessed 8 August 2022, https://aesthetischepraxis.de/Seminar/BKG_RoleoftheMuseum.pdf.
[44] STILES, *Holocaust Memory*…, p. 106 and ff.
[45] Cf. ROSE, *Interpreting Difficult*…, p. 6–7, 61, 88, 90 and ff.

intimate objects and memory emerges from her engagement with clothing and other intimate objects preserved in Auschwitz museum. As will be developed below, Levitt's haptic conception of the intimacy of objects clarifies how the Sobibór objects can be approached as agentic. Two levels of intimacy are at work here: a primary relationship between the objects and their original owners and a second relationship between the objects and the current day exhibit viewer, the latter inclusive of the former. Using these two understandings of intimacy, the capacity of these particular objects to summon new forms of memory, influence understandings of past and present, and refuse abstraction and identification with the perpetrator, becomes clear.

Levitt emphasises the importance of close, emotionally charged contact between the object and its owner, noting that "[t]here is a tenderness between handled objects and those who use them".[46] In her formulation, "tenderness" is "between" human and object, such that the object is touching the handler as much as the handler is touching it. Her carefully rendered observation of how objects are touched highlights the emotional, personal and tactile connection that individuals develop toward personal and everyday items, but also an intrinsic quality that an object can carry through time.

Levitt also discusses the other aspect of the intimacy of objects, noting that their haptic qualities give them the ability to connect the past with the present on a very physical level. Arguing that "[o]bjects, both worn and pristine, offer tactile access to [an] otherwise often inaccessible past",[47] Levitt expresses the belief – one of the fundamental theses of her book – that due to their materiality, objects can provide a sense of the reality of a certain historical event and continuity over time, including narrative cohesiveness. Developing this concept further, she states that material objects "keep the event tangible, suspended and within our reach",[48] thereby indicating that such items can encourage the audience to perceive past events as specific, allowing them to co-create the imagined connection between historical events and their personal, interior, present reality.

In light of this tactile understanding of intimacy, viewers of the Sobibór exhibit have access to, firstly, the direct haptic connection between the exhibited artefacts and the victims. Someone specifically chose a Mickey Mouse pin, acquired it, or gave it to someone else, and that person held it, carried it, chose it to take from among all other possible pins, and that person recognised Mickey Mouse similarly to the way the museum visitor likely recognises Mickey Mouse. The spacing of each object and the use of lighting to further allow for a sense of specificity align with the choice of objects as deeply personal items – almost idiosyncratic, as the binoculars attest. In contrast to several Holocaust-site museums in which objects are presented in large numbers and behind a glass wall, in the Sobibór exhibition the entire space is configured to facilitate close contact (although not physical touch) with the objects arranged in both a central display case, which is set at waist level, and in cabinets on the walls, allowing their viewing at a very close range. This positioning directs the viewers' attention to their own possessions, the items they use and hold close in their everyday lives.[49]

[46] LEVITT, Leora. *The objects that remain*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020, p. 46.
[47] Ibidem, p. 39.
[48] Ibidem, p. 6.
[49] Cf. ROSE, *Interpreting Difficult*…, p. 7 and ff.

Conclusions

Drawing on scholarship on Holocaust archaeology, object theory and museum studies, this article has demonstrated the potency of historical objects as active agents with capacities to co-constitute the museum narrative and generate meaning in the Holocaust memory field. Several material objects have made significant contributions to the exhibition, launched in 2020 in a museum erected in the area of the former Sobibór death camp. Intended neither to tell the general story of the Holocaust nor to represent symbolically experiences or events, their capacity as agents relies on their ability to summon social relations of intimacy with viewers on more than one level, in part because those particular objects displayed had been touched and carried.

Drawing on work in Holocaust archaeology, object theory and museum theory – especially the importance of curatorial practices in de-contextualising artefacts and in this way changing their meanings and capacities – this paper also brought the concept of intimacy with objects into the study of the museology of the Holocaust. Analysing how the Sobibór curators respected the singularity and the agency of each object to make sure it did not get lost in the process of creating the narrative of the exhibition and of visitor expectations, this article showed how the exhibition's creators were able to achieve the possibility of intimacy, past and present. Objects were curated to challenge the perpetrators perspective, instead foregrounding a victim-centred narrative and personhood. Throughout this article, the example of the Mickey Mouse pin was referred to frequently to centre the unexpected and very personal nature of the exhibit's objects. A child grasping a piece of metal that would not help in her survival but would possibly keep her identity, her emotional core, her memory of herself as a joyful person, her sense of a future, intact – these are the aspects of the Holocaust that these objects insist we remember. The article thus contributes to the debate on the role of material objects and the processes of the curation of the museal arrangements in the context of memory work.

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