

INTERNATIONAL ARTS

Preserving the Ghastly Inventory of Auschwitz

By **RACHEL DONADIO** APRIL 15, 2015



SLIDE SHOW | 14 Photos

Preserving Auschwitz-Birkenau

James Hill for The New York Times

OSWIECIM, Poland — To visit Auschwitz is to find an unfathomable but strangely familiar place. After so many photographs and movies, books and personal testimonies, it is tempting to think of it as a movie-set death camp, the product of a gruesome cinematic imagination, and not the real thing.

Alas, it is the real thing.

That is why, since its creation in 2009, [the foundation](#) that raises money to maintain the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau has had a guiding philosophy: “To preserve authenticity.” The idea is to keep the place intact, exactly as it was when the Nazis retreated before the Soviet Army arrived in January 1945 to liberate the camp, an event that resonates on Holocaust Remembrance Day, on Thursday.

It is a moral stance with specific curatorial challenges. It means restoring the [crumbling brick barracks](#) where Jews and some others were interned without rebuilding those barracks, lest they take on the appearance of a historical replica. It means reinforcing the moss-covered pile of rubble that is the gas chamber at Birkenau, the extermination camp a few miles away, a structure that the Nazis blew up in their retreat. It means protecting that rubble from water seeping in from the adjacent ponds where the ashes of the dead were dumped.



A display of childrens' shoes belonging to some of the victims of the camps.

James Hill for The New York

Times

And it means deploying conservators to preserve an inventory that includes more than a ton of human hair; 110,000 shoes; 3,800 suitcases; 470 prostheses and orthopedic braces; more than 88 pounds of eyeglasses; hundreds of empty canisters of Zyklon B poison pellets; [patented metal piping](#) and showerheads for the gas chambers; hundreds of hairbrushes and toothbrushes; 379 striped uniforms; 246 prayer shawls; more than 12,000 pots and pans carried by Jews who believed that they were simply bound for resettlement; and some 750 feet of SS documents — hygiene records, telegrams, architectural blueprints and other evidence of the bureaucracy of genocide — as well as thousands of memoirs by survivors.

The job can be harrowing and heartbreaking, but it is often performed out of a sense of responsibility.

“We are doing something against the initial idea of the Nazis who built this camp,” said Anna Lopuska, 31, who is overseeing a long-term master plan for the site’s conservation. “They didn’t want it to last. We’re making it last.”

The strategy, she said, is “minimum intervention.” The point is to preserve the objects and buildings, not beautify them. Every year, as more survivors die, the work becomes more important. “Within 20 years, there will be only these objects speaking for this place,” she said.

The conservators are walking a less-trodden path in restoration. “We have more experience preserving a cathedral than the remains of an extermination camp,” said Piotr Cywinski, who turns 43 on Thursday and is the director of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, which runs the site. Auschwitz, he said, “is the last place where you can still effectively take the measure of the spatial organization of the progression of the Shoah.”

Last year, a record 1.5 million people visited to take that measure, more than three times the number in 2001, putting even more strain on the aging buildings.

Between 1940 and 1945, 1.3 million people were deported to Auschwitz, the largest of the death camps, 90 percent of them Jews. The camp encompasses 500 acres, 155 buildings and 300 ruins.

Over the years, there have been dissenting views about the preservationist approach. “I’m not convinced about the current plans for Auschwitz,” said [Jonathan Webber](#), a former member of the [International Auschwitz Council](#) of advisers, who teaches in the European Studies program at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. “If you have a very good memorial, you could achieve that without having to have all this effort on conservation and restoration,” he added.

The preservation lab, with high-end technology, opened in 2003. One afternoon last week, Nel Jastrzebiowska, 37, a paper conservator, was using a rubber eraser to clean a row of papers in files. They were letters on Auschwitz stationery, written in German in rosy prose intended to slip past the censors. “I’m in good health,” one read, adding, “Send me money.”

On a nearby table sat the second horn part to Tchaikovsky’s [Capriccio Italien](#) (Op. 45), which had been played by the death camp’s orchestra. Ms. Jastrzebiowska would preserve the page as it was, she said, and keep the smudges showing that the pages had been turned. “The objects must show their own history,” said Jolanta Banas-Maciaszczyk, 36, the leader of the preservation department.

“We can’t stop time,” Ms. Jastrzebiowska said. “But we can slow it down.”



Visitors to the site crossing the railway line by the ramp where those arriving at the camp disembarked. Times
James Hill for The New York

Ms. Jastrzebiowska's husband, Andrzej Jastrzebiowski, 38, is a metal conservator. He spent three months cleaning all the eyeglasses in a vitrine, preserving their distressed state but trying to prevent them from corroding further. "When I saw the eyeglasses in the exhibition, I saw it as one big pile," he said. But in the lab, he began to examine them one by one. One had a screw replaced by a bent needle; another had a repaired temple. "And then this enormous mass of glasses started becoming people," Mr. Jastrzebiowski said. This "search for the individual," he said, helps ensure that the work does not become too routine.

In 2009, the infamous metal sign reading "Arbeit Macht Frei," or "Work Makes You Free," which hangs over the entrance gate, [was stolen](#). It was found several days later elsewhere in Poland, cut into three parts. (A Swede with neo-Nazi ties and two Poles were [later charged](#) with the crime.) Mr. Jastrzebiowski helped weld the sign back into one piece. But the scars from the welding told the story of the sign's theft more than of its long history, and so the museum decided it would be more authentic to replace the damaged sign with a substitute.

The conservators have an easy camaraderie, but sometimes their task can become too much to bear. "Working with shoes probably is one of the most difficult parts of working here," Ms. Banas-Maciaszczyk said. Everyone here has emotional moments. For her, it was a day when she was cleaning a little girl's wooden sandal. She could see the small footprint inside. "This is something hard to describe," she said. From 1940 to 1945, between 150,000 and 200,000 children died here.

Ms. Banas-Maciaszczyk said her mother thought she was crazy to come work at Auschwitz. "There are moments when I think, What am I doing here?" she acknowledged. But then she thinks of the bigger picture. "Everyone who works here must feel this importance," she said. "If we didn't feel that, no force would make us stay here."

Kamil Bedkowski, 33, worked as an art conservator in Britain for eight years, even restoring ceiling frescoes at Windsor Castle. Now he is on the team shoring up the crumbling brick barracks of Birkenau where thousands slept at a time, crammed into decaying three-level wooden bunks. "This is the most challenging project I've ever worked on," he said.

Almost all the conservators here are Polish and studied conservation at

Polish universities — this is, after all, a Polish state museum, which employs some 287 people, plus 264 guides who operate in some 18 languages.

Most conservators are under 40, young enough not to have known the Second World War — “It’s not our fault that the camp was built here,” Mr. Jastrzebiowski said — but old enough to have heard stories from their parents and grandparents. Few have any regular contact with Jews who aren’t survivors or visitors.

Despite the spirit of freezing the site in time, some exhibits have been redesigned in recent years — the Russian Federation’s tells the story of Russian political prisoners here; those of the Netherlands and France and Belgium talk about the fate of their Jews; the exhibit dedicated to the Sinti and Roma present the often-neglected story of those peoples murdered here. The Polish exhibit is colored by the country’s Communist past.

The new Jewish pavilion opened in 2013. It was designed by Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem. It shows black-and-white films of Jewish life in Europe before the war, then of Hitler’s rallies. In one room, the Israeli artist Michal Rovner has copied children’s drawings from the camp onto the wall. In another, names of some of the six million Holocaust dead are printed on a long row of pages, their edges yellowing from human touch.

The permanent exhibitions here will be updated over the next decade to include more evidence focusing on the perpetrators, not just their victims. In the collection’s storage is a box with neat rows of red-handled rubber SS stamps conserved in acid-free boxes. These will eventually go on view. This is part of the long-term plan by the museum, aided by the foundation, which has raised nearly 120 million euros, or about \$130 million, about half of it donated by Germany, to ensure conservation in perpetuity.

The museum has decided not to conserve one thing: the mass of human hair that fills a vast vitrine. Over the years, the hair has lost its individual colors and has begun to gray. Out of respect for the dead, it cannot be photographed. Several years ago, the [International Auschwitz Council](#) of advisers had an agonizing debate about the hair. Some suggested burying it. Others wanted to conserve it. But one adviser raised a point: How can we know if its original owners are dead or alive? Who are we to determine its fate?

It was decided to let the hair decay, on its own, in the vitrine, until it turns to dust.

Correction: April 21, 2015

An article on Thursday about the challenges of preserving the authenticity of the Auschwitz concentration camp, using information from a press representative of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, misstated the age of Piotr Cywinski, the museum's director. He turned 43 on Thursday, not 44.

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