

Inside the Glass Case: Samuel Pruchno - Script

At the Holocaust Memorial Center, we have hundreds of artifacts and other items on display for our visitors to learn from. Unlike reading panels on a wall or paragraphs in a textbook, these objects tell stories and provide an opportunity to directly connect with the past. We want to know what it is, where it came from, who it belongs to. They provide clues to guide our study and help us find lessons for today.

When Samuel Pruchno retired from his career, he devoted his time and attention to becoming an artist. Doing so had been a longtime dream. He studied with master artists and created seven paintings that are on display in our museum. His works are both his own expression that capture his feelings and perspective and a gift for us to learn from.

Sam was born in Lithuania in 1927. He has sweet memories of growing up as the youngest of four children. His life was turned upside down when the Nazis invaded his hometown. Sam, his brother, and brother in law remained together throughout the war. The rest of his family members did not survive.

In the concentration camps at Stutthof and Dachau, Sam stood for hours each day as the guards and officers counted each prisoner. Every morning, no matter the weather, the prisoners were counted before leaving for work and when they returned.

There are more than 1,200 men in this painting. Sam painted each one with a face and an identification number. He made sure that each number was actually assigned to someone at Dachau. He painted himself and his brother. They are identified by their numbers: 84782 and 86018. As an artistic representation of his camp experience, he painted a small kitchen, an infirmary, a crematorium, and several barracks.

As the Allies advanced into Europe, the Nazis began to evacuate camps and force prisoners on marches into Germany. Prisoners walked for days with little food or time to rest. Many died along the way.

In April 1945, Sam, his brother, and brother in law were sent on a death march from Dachau. They walked for days and would stop to rest at night. One night, Sam stole the Nazi guard's backpack. Inside was bread and condensed milk. Sam shared it with his brother and brother in law. When they started marching again, Sam felt sick. He needed to lean on his brother for support but didn't want to be a burden. When the group stopped, Sam escaped.

In this painting, tired and weak prisoners are walking through a German town. The guards are on both sides of the prisoners to make sure that they stay in line. Several have fallen along the way. Sam, again, made sure to give every prisoner in this painting a face and a number. He also painted himself leaning on his brother for support.

After Sam escaped from the death march, a kind woman took him in. She gave him food, a place to rest, and fresh clothes to wear. When her husband came home, he threatened to call the German police. Sam quickly left to spend the night hidden in the woods. The woman ran after him with news she'd just heard on the radio. The Americans would probably be there in the morning. She was right. The next morning, the American army had liberated the prisoners and Sam found his brother and brother in law. Just as Sam remembered, this painting shows U.S. soldiers tossing chocolate bars from their tank. Since Sam was given civilian clothes, he is painted here in a trench coat.

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As a survivor, Sam felt an obligation to speak about his story. He knew that one day we would not have the privilege to meet face to face with living witnesses. His paintings tell his story and are full of details for us to notice, think about, and learn from.

- What is the purpose of each detail that you notice?
- What do you think it meant to Sam?
- What does it mean to you?

