

Inside the Glass Case: Steve Lewkowicz Uniform - 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.

This blue and white striped uniform was worn by Steve Lewkowicz during the Holocaust. When Steve was 14 years old the Nazis invaded his hometown in Poland. After a few months, Steve was taken away from his family and never saw them again.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, they established the first concentration camps to imprison enemies of the state. Many of the prisoners were targeted because of their political views and ethnic backgrounds, or because they were considered social deviants. Communists, socialists, Roma, Jehovah's Witnesses and gay men were all imprisoned.

On November 9th and 10th, 1938, a wave of anti-Jewish attacks or pogroms took place in Nazi occupied Germany, Austria, and the Sudetenland. On this horrifying night called, Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass, hundreds of synagogues were burned, 7,500 Jewish owned businesses were vandalized and 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and sent to Dachau, Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen and other concentration camps.

By the end of World War II, tens of thousands of camps had been established all over Europe.

Between 1941 and 1943, six killing centers were created to carry out the final solution. The final solution was a euphemism used by Nazi leaders to refer to the mass murder of millions of Jewish people in Europe. Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau were designed for efficient mass murder of Jewish people.

Jews who had been living in ghettos or other camps were transported by train to these killing centers. Upon their arrival, most were sent directly into the gas chambers. Some were selected for slave labor.

When Steve was taken away from his family, he was sent to work as a slave laborer in several different camps. At every camp the conditions were horrible. Prisoners were given very little food, a cup of watery soup and a piece of bread, each day. On such empty stomachs, they were forced to perform very difficult work, such as working in factories, digging in coal mines, building railroads and cutting down trees. Often, prisoners were given striped uniforms to wear. On a bitter cold winter day or in the sticky summer heat they wore the same uniform. Prisoners were not called by their names. Instead they were issued an identification number. At Auschwitz, the number was tattooed on their arm. At other camps, it was sewn onto their uniforms.

Despite the terrible conditions, brutality and dehumanization, prisoners found ways to maintain their humanity and dignity. They whispered prayers to secretly celebrate holidays, encouraged one another to keep going and hid forbidden objects in their clothing and barracks.

Towards the end of the war, the allied troops had advanced toward Germany from the East and West. Germany was surrounded. The German troops began to retreat. To cover up their crimes, Nazi camp leaders forced the inmates to walk to concentration camps in Germany. These forced marches have come to be

Inside the Glass Case: Samuel Pruchno - Script

known as death marches.

Steve was sent on a death march from an Auschwitz sub camp in Poland to Buchenwald located near Weimar, Germany. When he arrived there, he was given this uniform and identification number 128923. The US Army liberated Steve from Buchenwald on April 11th, 1945. He was sent to a nearby hospital to recover from his injuries and regain his strength. Eventually, he connected with relatives in Michigan and came to live with them.

Steve kept his uniform for many years until he chose to donate it to our museum. We keep it on display here to help visitors see what an actual camp uniform looks like and to learn about life in the camps. We keep it on display to share Steve's story.

Steve passed away several years ago, but his memory and experience live on through this artifact.

- Why do you think Steve kept the uniform for so many years?
- Why do you think he donated it to the museum?
- What do you learn about the Holocaust from this artifact?