

The Value of the Original and the Use of the Surrogate

ABSTRACT

The collections of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) focus on a very narrow slice of twentieth-century history, 1933–1946. These were the years of the reign of the Nazi Party in Germany and occupied Europe and of the subsequent liberation of the concentration camps. The discovery of a state-sponsored system for the oppression and extermination of distinct populations resulted in the Holocaust becoming known as a defining moment in modern history and the most terrible crime of the twentieth century. The documents, manuscripts, and photographs in the USHMM collections form a body of evidence documenting events of the Holocaust.

When the Museum opened in 1993, great emphasis was placed on exhibiting only original materials. It quickly became apparent that many of the originals, with their light-sensitive materials and media, could not permanently remain on exhibition. Initially, the curators were insistent that the strict chronology of the exhibition and its effective design be maintained. The early mandate was to replace a document with one exactly like it or very close, but this was not possible in the majority of cases. This paper discusses the use of artist-made facsimiles in the era before digital reproductions and the ethical questions posed by their production and use. Photographic, reprographic, and digital reproductions are also discussed and the underlying significance of choosing one type of surrogate over another.

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INTRODUCTION

At the end of the Permanent Exhibition at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) is a small theater where visitors may pause and listen to survivors speak about their experiences. One of the survivors is Cecilie Klein-Pollak. She was born in Yasina, in an area now part of the Ukraine. The family went into hiding in Budapest in the early 1940s. They then fled to other cities before being caught in a round-up of the ghetto in Chust back in the Ukraine. Cecilie was sent to Birkenau and later to Flossenburg concentration camp in Germany. In the testimonial film, she speaks directly about the significance of the materials on display in the Museum's Permanent Exhibition:

If anybody comes to the Museum and will see the mementos that we left behind, whether it's a little shoe, whether it's a letter, whether it's a torn prayer book, remember these are our precious, precious valuables. Remember that from these books, these children studied; from these prayer books our families chanted their prayers. And remember them when we are gone.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE USE OF SURROGATES

The burden of memory has been a part of the Museum since the planning stages. Creating the Museum and maintaining the Permanent Exhibition as its core has been understood as an essential component to fulfilling the debt of remembrance. In order to be faithful to that idea, the artifacts on exhibit had to be authentic. So the "mementos" as Cecilie called them, whether a family photo, a ration card, or remnants of the Torah, would carry the message that the victims and survivors were real and the events, as hard as they are to face, did happen.

Early on, however, this approach was challenged. Many of the items chosen for exhibition were made of light-sen-



Fig. 1. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Why Auschwitz Wasn't Bombed*, Permanent Exhibit, section 3.40.

sitive materials and media and would deteriorate if placed on view long-term. On the third floor of the Permanent Exhibit is a photomural of a U.S. Air Force Intelligence photograph of Auschwitz-Birkenau taken on May 31, 1944 (fig. 1). Clearly visible are the trains on the tracks, smokestacks, and barracks. Superimposed on the photomural is a case displaying a letter from the World Jewish Congress to the Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy requesting the U. S. Air Force bomb the concentration camp in order to halt or significantly slow its operations. To the right is the response—a clear and succinct refusal (fig. 2).

These two letters are considered important historical evidence that the indifference of the Western Allies contributed to the huge numbers of victims of the Holocaust. It is a compelling point to make that the American government had acted as a complicit bystander. While there was, and continues to be, some debate about this point, the Museum planners felt that the lessons of complicity had to be

addressed so future generations would not stand by while a whole people suffered.

It was here that the ideal of exhibiting only originals and the difficulties of putting that ideal into practice first met head-to-head. The original documents belong to the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). According to the NARA requirements for loan, the originals could only be on display for several months. At the time the Permanent Exhibition was being developed (ca. 1990 to 1993), the USHMM curators were insistent on replacing any item that had to be rotated off exhibit with one exactly like it or very close in size and format, as well as content. The exhibition, having been designed around a tight historical chronology with different areas addressing important events of Holocaust history, only reinforced this approach. However, the two letters, one addressed to the Assistant Secretary of War and the other his response, were unique and the most telling of any others they had found which addressed the question of bombing Auschwitz. In the early 1990s using a surrogate typically meant a photocopy or photograph. The curators wanted replacements that had more of the look and feel of the originals, so it was decided to replace them with artist-made facsimiles. Ellen Kahn, a New York artist, had branched out into the world of reproductions. She combed flea markets and art and antique stores for materials that would be appropriate to the period. To ensure the copies could be easily distinguished from the originals, she embossed the name of her company, Faksimile, into the sheets (note the embossing in the lower right corner of each sheet in figure 2).

The approach to the children's drawings was very similar. The drawings were created by the children of the

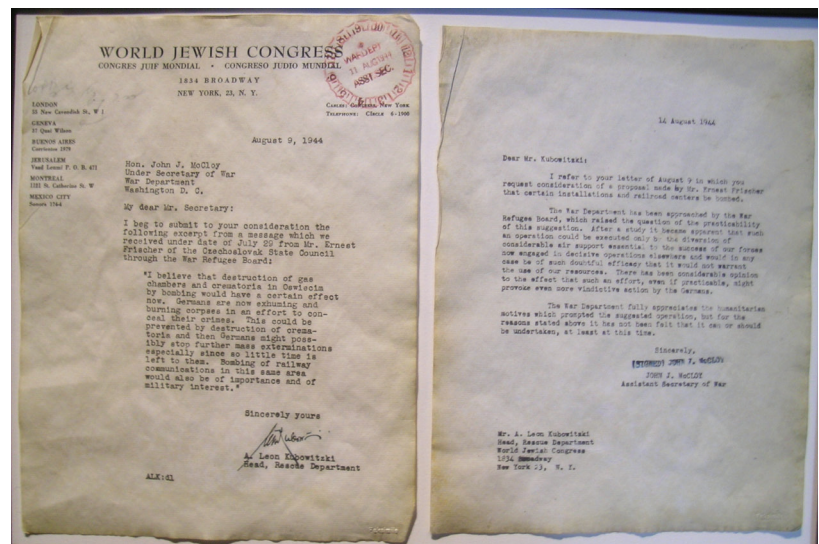


Fig. 2. Ellen Kahn, facsimile of letter from the World Jewish Congress, 1991. 30 x 21.8 cm, and facsimile of letter from Hon John J. McCloy, 1991, 28 x 21.8 cm, USHMM. Note the embossed name Faksimile in the lower right corner of each sheet.



Fig. 3. Baha? Rostikenis(?), *Boat and Candle*, n.d., 21.3 x 29.2 cm, The Jewish Museum, Prague, Czech Republic.

orphanage at Terezin, a showcase ghetto in the Czech Republic. It was used by the Nazis to convince visiting dignitaries and the Red Cross that their treatment of the Jewish population was humane and in accordance with international law—all the while hiding the existence of the more brutal ghettos and labor and concentration camps. The drawings now belong to the Jewish Museum of Prague. According to an early draft of the loan agreement, the drawings could be on exhibit for six months and there would be a six-month gap before another set of drawings would be lent. Because of the difficulty in conveying the direct hand of a child via a photograph, artist-made facsimiles were chosen for use as surrogates. The facsimiles, also produced by Ellen Kahn, have a feeling and texture very close to the originals (figs. 3–4). The results were so successful that the Jewish Museum of Prague requested a second set of facsimiles be produced for them.

The surrogates were not embossed with the Faksimile identification mark. The artist and the curators were concerned the relief would interfere with the overall effect and some of the media would not take well to the embossing. Initially the drawings were produced with an embossed tab attached, but there was some concern the tab could be removed and the copies then mistaken for originals. The artist was, therefore, asked instead to sign the backs with an archival blue pen.

Once the use of artist-made facsimiles using historically accurate materials was accepted, it was not difficult for the curators to accept the use of a reproduction made with modern materials. There is a large poster on display in the Nuremberg Laws section of the Permanent Exhibit which illustrates the edict against interracial relationships and the consequent defilement or shaming of the Aryan race—*Rassenschande* (fig. 5). Visually the poster is extremely compelling, presenting societal stereotypes to illustrate the dangers. In spite of its susceptibility to light damage, it was



Fig. 4. Ellen Kahn, facsimile of *Boat and Candle*, 1991. 21 x 29 cm, USHMM.

on exhibit for more than seven years, because the curators felt it to be essential in illustrating the effectiveness of the Nazi propaganda machine, especially in negatively depicting the Jewish populace. Resources had been committed to obtaining another copy, but no other example of this poster



Fig. 5. *Rassenschande*, ca. 1935, 119 x 82.6 cm, USHMM 1990.41.13.

was to be found, either on the market or in collections willing to lend. After much discussion, the in-house production staff was tasked with making a silk-screen copy of the original. In this way, the look and feel of the original poster is preserved.

Discussion about the need for rotations, the absence of one-to-one substitutions, and the use of surrogates at times took on a slightly different emphasis. An original affidavit signed by Rudolf Hoess was on display for several years (fig. 6). The affidavit is written in light-sensitive ink on lined woodpulp paper. The German text reads, "I declare herewith under oath that in the years 1941 to 1943 during my tenure in office as commandant of Auschwitz Concentration Camp two million Jews were put to death by gassing and a half million by other means." It is countersigned by Josef Maier of the U.S. Chief Counsels' Office and was used as evidence during the Nuremberg trials.

The Museum is fully aware of Holocaust deniers and their supporters. Publications by revisionists questioning the veracity of the events of the Holocaust are readily available and a simple Web search reveals dozens of groups imposing their own spin on history. The 1998 libel suit of David Irving against Deborah Lipstadt and Penguin Books brought the ideas of the revisionists to the attention of the general public. In her book, *Denying the Holocaust*, Deborah Lipstadt described David Irving as a Holocaust denier. In England, where the suit was filed, such a statement could be considered libelous if, as Irving contended, there was no Holocaust to deny.¹ The November 1999 edition of *The Revisionist* published by the Committee for Open Debate on the Holocaust has as its lead article, "A Challenge from the USHMM: A Revisionist Response." The article consists of two sections entitled "Hitler Extermination Orders—Imaginary and Forged" and "Auschwitz Arithmetic." The first questions whether Adolf Hitler was directly involved in developing the "Final Solution." The second, "Auschwitz Arithmetic," points directly to the Hoess affidavit on display in the Museum as having been made under duress in captivity and, therefore, not historically valid.

The question remains, however: where does the importance of the Hoess affidavit really lie? That it was written while Hoess was a prisoner of war? Or that it is an admission of the purpose of the camp and how the majority of its victims died?

Due to the presence of Holocaust deniers on the one hand, and the recognition of the importance of the document as evidence on the other, there was great reluctance to take it off exhibit and replace it with any sort of surrogate that mimicked the look and feel of the original. Above all, the Museum did not want the appearance of falsifying or manufacturing evidence. There was great risk, however, in keeping the affidavit on exhibit due to the fugitive nature of the media and the paper. As a compromise, and to empha-

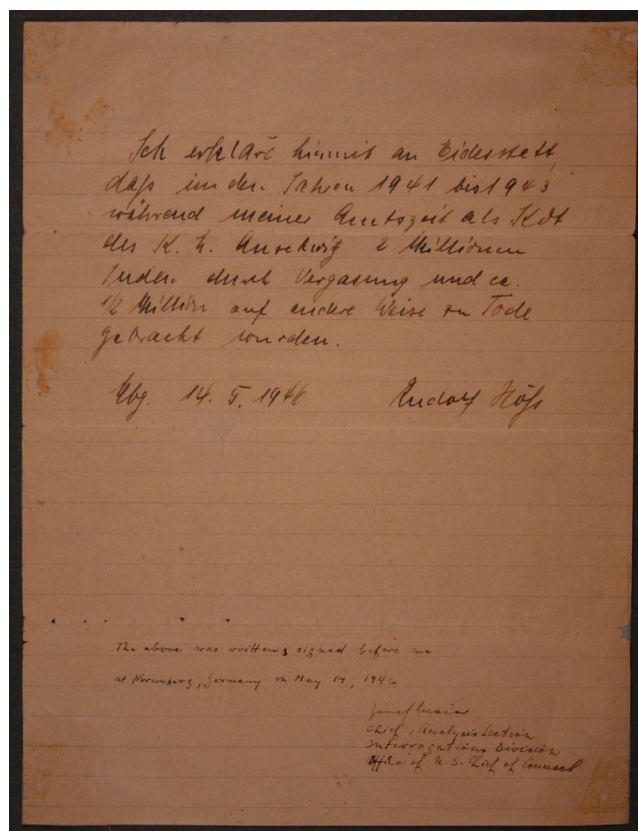


Fig. 6. Rudolf Hoess, affidavit, May 14, 1946 26.7 x 20.2 cm., USHMM 1992.18.1.

size the nature of the surrogate as a photograph rather than a reproduction, a photograph printed on paper with a slight gloss and sized a bit larger than the original was produced to replace the original on exhibit.

A slightly different approach was later used to produce a surrogate for false identity papers. Vladka Meed lived as Staislawa Wachalska on the Aryan side of Warsaw. With her false identity papers she was able to move about Warsaw freely. She obtained guns for the resistance inside the ghetto and helped smuggle people out of the ghetto and into hiding. One of her forged identity cards was lent to the Museum by Kibbutz Lohami ha-Ghettatot in Israel. Before its return to the lender, the question of how to replace this document was discussed. Vladka and her husband Ben were large contributors to the Museum and among the core group of people responsible for getting it built. Museum management was adamant in maintaining their presence in the Permanent Exhibition and the curators were firm in their resolve to emphasize the resistance movement in Warsaw. But with this being a forgery, how could an artist-made facsimile be made without seeming to be in the business of manufacturing false identity papers? Therefore, the approach was to do it photographically, though in contrast to the photograph of the Hoess affidavit, it was important to convey all the minutiae—the stamps, the fin-

gerprints, the signatures in the different media—all the characteristics found in the original false identification paper in such a way that would help the viewer understand the level of detail the forger applied to the work. After all, lives depended on this document fooling the authorities. The original was photographed and the positive transparency was then digitized and printed on photographic paper (fig. 7). On exhibit, under low exhibition lighting, the necessary high level of detail is conveyed; it is only through close examination or by reading the exhibit label that one can see it is a photograph of the original.

The use of digital reproductions slowly began to be accepted at the Museum. The poster of the Hamburg-Americka line, the company that owned the ill-fated St. Louis, is very rare. The St. Louis sailed from Germany to Cuba with nine hundred Jewish passengers on board, but on arrival, only twenty-nine passengers were allowed entry into the country. The ship then cruised off the coast of the United States but was denied permission to dock. It was forced to return to Europe where the governments of England, France, Holland, and Belgium finally agreed to divide the passengers between them. The Hamburg-Americka line poster was on exhibit from the Museum's opening in 1993 until it was replaced with an ink-jet reproduction in 2001 (fig. 8). A positive transparency was made of the original using a film camera, and the transparency was then digitized. The ship's plan in the background of the same exhibit case was not replaced until last year. The reproduction was entirely digital. Both these reproductions look rather flat when compared to the originals. However, the originals are not considered artifacts critical to the documentation of the story of the St. Louis and its passengers, and, in the exhibit design are used more as set pieces than primary sources. For this reason, the use of digitally produced surrogates for these two posters was easily accepted.

CONCLUSION

As the Museum has explored the meaning of authenticity and of being faithful to the memory of the Holocaust, the curators have become more flexible in their approach. While each exhibit segment still follows a strict chronology, artifactual content may change, and a thoughtful and sensitive use of surrogates has become the norm. However, the choice of what type of surrogate to use is neither simple nor straightforward. Criteria such as faithfulness to key characteristics of the original, the desired visual impact, and how the artifact is used in the exhibit are examined. Also important is how the viewer will read the surrogate as they make their way through the Permanent Exhibition. Yet, the evidentiary value of the document remains the most significant quality for the curators at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The key



Fig. 7. Photo reproduction of false identity card for Vladka Meed. 14 x 28.6 cm., USHMM.



Fig. 8. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, St. Louis Case, Permanent Exhibit segment 4.28.

question then becomes whether evidentiary value can be transmitted through facsimiles and reproductions and, if not, how to preserve and protect the original against damage through overuse. By considering all of these aspects and exploring the different methodologies for their production, the use of surrogates for exhibition has become more precise and customized to the requirements of the curators and an accepted preservation tool.

NOTE

1. There are many interesting accounts of the suit, the parties involved, and the trial itself. A Web search will bring up hundreds of articles, commentaries, and even blogs. One of the most interesting and complete sources is the book *Lying about Hitler: History, Holocaust, and the David Irving Trial*, by Richard J. Evans (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

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