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## Treasures Emerge From Field of the Dead at Maidanek

By SAM ROBERTS

LUBLIN, [Poland](#), Oct. 31 - Adam Frydman shut his heavy-lidded eyes and vividly recalled his first glimpse of this unplowed field 62 years ago. He was 20 and had just arrived from the Warsaw ghetto with his father and brother. He imagined hundreds of Polish Jews huddled behind barbed wire fences. He heard barking dogs. He inhaled the unmistakable smell of death. When he got his bearings, he pointed unambiguously.

"There," he said.

So there is where they dug. Barely beating the season's first frost and oblivious to a punishing wind, a team of archaeologists transformed the former Maidanek death camp into a crime scene, complete with victims, witnesses and evidence.

After carving only a fraction of the 1,100-by-164-foot field into checkerboard plots that resembled shallow graves, they found about 20 women's rings, a heavy gold bracelet, 2 watches, gold-framed eyeglasses, a miniature Roman Catholic religious medallion and 15 valuable American Eagle gold coins. Even after the very first find, a tiny cut stone - maybe glass or a garnet - they declared their mission a success.

Once, it was written that there could be no news after the fact from a former death camp. But this week there was news from Maidanek. The dead bared their buried prayers.

"To me this was an act of defiance," Mr. Frydman said. "People who expected to die said why give it to the Germans, why help their war effort?"

David Prince, a pharmacist and Holocaust survivor who accompanied his wife, Ella, a former Maidanek inmate, said, "It was priceless to whoever put it there," and he added, "They said let it rot in the ground - the bastards won't get it."

"It was meant to be found by people exactly like us," he concluded.

Four Maidanek survivors who live in [Australia](#) came here with Israeli archaeologists, Israeli and European amateur investigators and British and American documentarians. They found exactly what they were looking for: evidence validating indelible memories that for whatever motivation, desperate people facing imminent death had scratched burrows into the earth and secreted objects largely of sentimental value.

The participants also learned a great deal about one another and even something about themselves.

Tessie Jacob was 19 when she arrived at Maidanek with her doting parents. When she emerged naked from the disinfecting showers, they were gone. Last Saturday, for the first time, she stepped inside a small room, its concrete walls still splotted with the cobalt blue stains of Zyklon-B gas. A dead rosebud was tucked behind a pipe. This was the gas chamber where her parents died.

"Forgive me," she wept. "I was the baby. You had to pay the price. I came to apologize for being alive."

Grzegorz Plewik, 35, a historian at the Maidanek State Museum, gently grasped her arm. "I try to understand what you went through," he said. "You're not guilty."

The expedition was conceived by Yaron Svoray, an Israeli journalist and former police investigator best known for infiltrating neo-Nazi groups. In a casting director's dream, he recruited the survivors - who speak English with a Polish accent and an Australian inflection - and teamed up with an American entertainment executive, Matt Mazer, to form Historical Media Associates.

Their goal was to research Mr. Frydman's recollection, return to Maidanek with him and other survivors, memorialize their visit in a documentary film and transform the camp into an enduring archaeological dig, perhaps conducted jointly by Israeli, German and Polish students.

"Holocaust stories are about misery, but this is a story of redemption," Mr. Svoray said. "This story is not only about what we find. It's about a bunch of people working together to find something."

The first ring was discovered by Shlomi Avni, a captain in an elite Israeli Navy reserve unit, and Andreas Vokti, a German bricklayer whose grandfather was in the Wehrmacht.

Maidanek is not as infamous as Auschwitz, but according to the Holocaust Encyclopedia, 170,000 inmates died here. John Demjanjuk and Hermine Braunsteiner Ryan were guards (they later emigrated to America, where they were prosecuted). Art Spiegelman recounted his father's ordeal here in "Maus."

Built in plain sight in suburban Lublin to accommodate about 20,000 Soviet P.O.W.'s, Polish dissidents and Jews, the camp suddenly was flooded with as many as 18,000 Polish Jews deported from Warsaw in April and May of 1943 after the ghetto uprising was quashed.

Hundreds of the unchosen - not yet selected for work or for death - waited on a grassy purgatory, the sloping middle field between Barracks 4 and 5 for hours or even days within sight of a smoky pyre. The camp's original crematory was either not working or could not handle the capacity. Unlike most other deportees to the camps, they had yet to be stripped of all their belongings.

"These people realized help was not coming, that they were the last Jews in the world," said Mr. Svoray, who was joined here by his wife, Mikhal, and their two teenage children.

He and Mr. Mazer explained that they were not treasure hunters, not in the conventional sense.

"We've spent a million dollars so far to find rings worth maybe \$100 retail," said Mr. Mazer, who organized the expedition and won the museum's cooperation. "But the objects tell a powerful story. There is no way that a modern person can understand the experience, but looking at an object, understanding the circumstances of how it got here and being involved in its rescue gives us all an opportunity to connect with the people here and their sacrifice."

The camp, now about half of its original 670 acres, is largely barren except for the brown wooden horse barns that served as barracks. It is drab - even the raucous, swooping birds are black - but punctuated occasionally by blue-and-white Israeli flags waved by school groups from [Israel](#). The students rarely explore, much less bridge, the guilt and suspicion that still divide many Poles and Jews. Earnest but frustrated government historians who have worked here for years had barely interviewed any Jewish survivors until now.

"Seeing the place is very important," said Tomasz Kranz, who runs the museum's scientific department and is completing an analysis that will reduce the official toll at Maidanek, but also will challenge the Communist and nationalist orthodoxy by concluding that the vast majority of victims were Jews. "Also important is that we try to confront the past together."

Every morning, Mr. Plewik, the museum historian, said, he drives his children by the camp on their way to kindergarten. They know he works there, but not what he does or why. "I don't know what to tell them," he said. "Maybe later."

Maidanek abuts a Catholic cemetery, which was festooned with flowers and candles and crowded with Poles visiting before All Saints' Day. Two striped smokestacks from nearby power plants now dwarf the 65-foot-tall square brick chimney of the crematory. Signs advertising new homes nearby promise a park vista - the park, in this case, being the former death camp.

After three days of digging with guidance from Mr. Frydman and an assist from a metal detector, Mr. Mazer presented Mr. Kranz with the unearthed objects, which perhaps will go to Israel and elsewhere as part of a traveling exhibit. The team arranged to secure the site and hopes to return next spring.

By Wednesday, Mr. Plewik, after good-natured prodding from Mr. Mazer, was routinely referring to the inmates of Maidanek as Polish Jews rather than distinguishing between Poles and Jews.

Tessie Jacob was feeling unburdened. "I owed it to my parents," she said. "I found the truth. I know what they went through, and I know there's nothing left of them."

Adam Frydman was vindicated. "One day I'll be gone and then there'll be no one to tell the story," he said. "The people who died here can't tell the story, except in what they left."

Majdanek: An Overview  
Dateline: 09/20/99

The Majdanek concentration camp, located approximately three miles (five kilometers) from the center of the Polish city of Lublin, was the second largest Nazi concentration camp. Though it is often called "Majdanek," the official name of the camp was Prisoner of War Camp of the Waffen-SS Lublin (Kriegsgefangenenlager der Waffen-SS Lublin), until February 16, 1943 when the name changed to Concentration Camp of the Waffen-SS Lublin (Konzentrationslager der Waffen-SS Lublin).

The name "Majdanek" is derived from the name of the nearby district of Majdan Tatarski and was first used as a moniker for the camp by residents of Lublin in 1941.\*

#### Established

The decision to build a camp near Lublin came from Heinrich Himmler during his visit to Lublin in July 1941. By October, an official order for the establishment of the camp had already been given and the construction had already begun. The Nazis brought in Polish Jews from the labor camp on Lipowa Street to start building the camp. Though these prisoners worked on the construction of Majdanek, they were taken back to the Lipowa Street labor camp each night.

The Nazis soon brought in approximately 2,000 Soviet prisoners of war to build the camp. These prisoners both lived and worked at the construction site. With no barracks, these prisoners were forced to sleep and work in the cold outdoors with no water and no toilets. There was an extremely high mortality rate among these prisoners.

#### Layout

The camp itself is located in a completely open, nearly flat field. Unlike most of the other camps, the Nazis did not try to hide this one from view. Instead, it bordered on the city of Lublin and could easily be seen from the highway. Originally, the camp was expected to hold between 25,000 and 50,000 prisoners. By the beginning of December 1941, a new plan was being considered to expand Majdanek in order to hold 150,000 prisoners (this plan was approved by the camp commandant Karl Koch on March 23, 1942).

And then again, designs for the camp were discussed so that Majdanek could hold 250,000 prisoners.

Though the Nazis had increased their expectations for the capacity of Majdanek, construction came to a near halt in the spring of 1942. Construction materials could not be sent to Majdanek because supplies and railways were being used for the urgent transports needed to help the Germans on the Eastern front. Thus, though the camp did have a few additions after the spring of 1942, the camp did not grow much after it reached the capacity of approximately 50,000 prisoners.

### Camp Commandments

•Karl Otto Koch (September 1941 to July 1942) •Max Koegel (August 1942 to October 1942) •Herman Florsted (October 1942 to September 1943) •Martin Weiss (September 1943 to May 1944) •Arthur Liebehenschel (May 1944 to July 22, 1944)

\* Jozef Marszalek, *Majdanek: The Concentration Camp in Lublin* (Warsaw: Interpress, 1986) 7.

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