

DR DANIEL HAUMSCHILD & DR SIMON HOLLOWAY

The evolution of objects

When a deportation notice was printed in the Łódź ghetto in August 1944, it was meant to dictate instructions to those imprisoned. It conveyed the order that 5,000 people would be deported from the city every day, to an undisclosed location elsewhere. It stipulated that workers were desired, that families would be kept together and that a certain allotment of luggage would be allowed. Few knew that this was all a lie, and that the destination was the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp, where those unable to work would be murdered.

For those who read the poster, like teenagers Bono Wiener and Abram Goldberg, the authoritative voice would have been easily understood: obey these words as the law. Yet one's relationship to any object is not fixed. Bono and Abram removed the poster from the wall, choosing to employ it for their own aims rather than capitulate to its demands. In the controlled and highly surveilled circumstances of the Łódź ghetto, the relocation of this poster saw its meaning transformed and repurposed.

This article follows the lifecycle of the poster as both a specific and emblematic example through which to explore the mutable relationship between a person and an object. It is the very pliability of material history and culture that sits at the core of our work at the Melbourne Holocaust Museum. Initially, the poster served as an instructional document, dictating what people should do. The moment Abram and Bono took it, its function changed and it became a piece of evidence, testifying to the crimes committed in the Łódź ghetto. The intended audience was no longer the Jews of Łódź, but 'the world', and the information conveyed relates more broadly to the Holocaust as a whole.

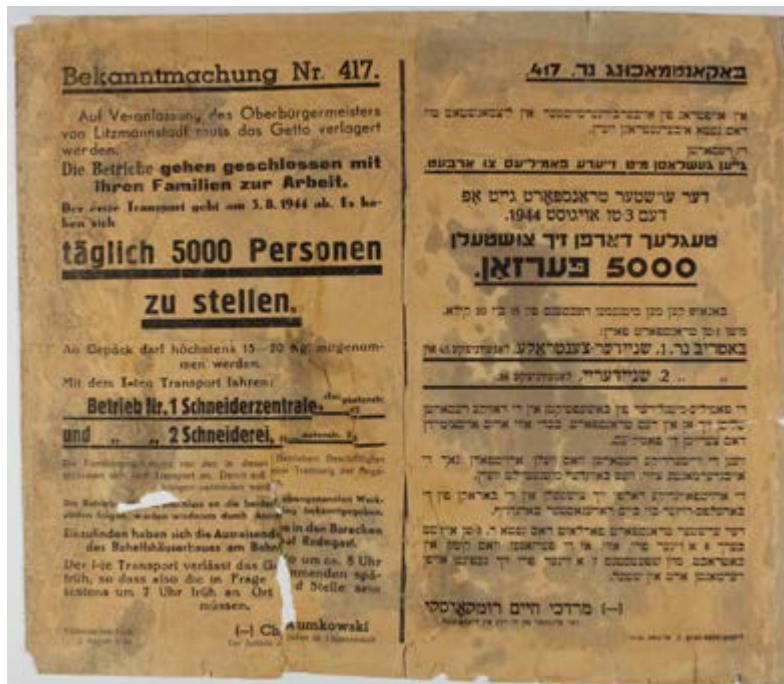


Figure 1: MHM 431. Notice number 417 called for the daily transfer of 5,000 workers from the Łódź ghetto under the pretence that they were needed for labour elsewhere. This deportation notice was printed as a poster within the ghetto and was signed by the head of the Jewish Council, Chaim Rumkowski. Melbourne Holocaust Museum; copyright Melbourne Holocaust Museum.

Reunited after the war, Abram and Bono both migrated to Australia and ultimately to Melbourne. In 1980, almost 40 years after they took the poster and preserved it with other mementoes of their Holocaust experience, some of these objects were incorporated into an exhibition developed by B'nei Brith, with involvement from Aron Sokolowicz (later co-president at the Jewish Holocaust Centre, or JHC) and Saba Feniger (curator at the JHC from 1985 to 2001). This was the first event at which documents preserved by Abram and Bono were showcased. Here, the poster was able to realise its intended function as a tool of communication.

The Jewish Holocaust Centre was established in 1984. Bono served as co-president with Aron Sokolowicz. Some of the objects that Bono and Abram had salvaged were sent to the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York, where they were accessioned as the Bono Wiener Papers in 1996, while other objects were put on display in the new museum's very first exhibit.

Unlike the B'nei Brith exhibition in 1980, the first exhibition at the Jewish Holocaust Centre in 1984 seemed to lack any overt organisational principles and was merely a room in which a variety of photographs, documents and artefacts were arranged. Even when, after several months, a general chronological framework was introduced, very little information accompanied the actual items themselves. Objects in the exhibition were mute witnesses to history, and there was an expectation that survivors (who guided the space) would bring them to life.

As such, while the intention that the exhibition communicate information was being realised, the role of collection items in that process was as a kind of prop: something to which the survivor guide might make reference, with the intention of illustrating a point germane to their specific experiences. This remained the case even as the Jewish Holocaust Centre expanded and a new permanent exhibition was established in 1990 — an exhibition that provided greater detail regarding each object and allowed for additional research in a larger adjoining library.

The curator's intentions in positioning objects, and the subsequent juxtaposition of those objects with others, influences the range of meanings that those objects might have. This is expressed by Steven Cooke and Donna-Lee Frieze in their history of the Jewish Holocaust Centre, *The interior of our memories*:

*The choice and placement of objects in a museum and the narratives of people, place and events through which they are understood and given meaning, provide a tangible location through which to recover the motivations of those involved in their production. They reflect the world view of those involved with their conception, design and installation.*¹

The next stage in the poster's evolution occurred in 2010, when the Jewish Holocaust Centre underwent another redevelopment. This was motivated by the diminishing number of Holocaust survivors, and the need to collect more information about the survivors themselves, as well as information about their objects. While the exhibition was still structured chronologically, it allowed for an exploration of the Holocaust by theme.

One of those themes was 'ghettos', and it was here that the deportation notice was again displayed, this time against a wall. The positioning was designed to be reminiscent of its original function within the ghetto, and thus to convey information not only through its content but through its positioning as well. In this instance, the poster was placed adjacent to two other documents, both of which communicated upcoming deportations. To the left were three posters of a different nature: a notice concerning a speech that would be given regarding 'the current situation', a reminder for people to salute Germans in uniform, and an announcement to the effect that the potato ration for November and December of 1942 would be 26 kilograms per person (a quantity roughly equal to 500 grams per day).

In 2020, the Jewish Holocaust Centre was shut down pending a major redevelopment and expansion of the premises, and its archives went into storage. During the few years that it was inoperative, it was rebranded as the Melbourne Holocaust Museum (MHM) and a large, state-of-the-art facility was erected, into which a new permanent exhibition would be installed. In the temporary absence of a museum, the education team began work on a program that could be delivered without recourse to guided tours or original artefacts. Called *In Touch with Memory*, this program made use of carefully facsimiled versions of a number of items in our collection — including the Łódź ghetto poster. The program continues to this day and maintains its focuses on the educational benefit of a tactile experience of material history.

In Touch with Memory encourages students to investigate and analyse objects with the intention of working out what they are as well as determining what they mean. To this end, students are encouraged to think about objects thematically and engage with their content on a human level. As an illustrative point, because this poster evidences deception, it facilitates an understanding of why many did not know precisely the danger they were in and helps us appreciate why violent resistance was not more common. The intention here is not only to teach students the history of the

¹ Cooke, S., & Frieze, D.-L. (2015). *The interior of our memories: A history of Melbourne's Jewish Holocaust centre*. Hybrid Publishers, pp. 96–97.

Holocaust, but also to facilitate a deeper understanding of the ways in which it became possible. As such, the value of this poster has evolved from a didactic tool that is meant to be received to a locus of engagement for curiosity and guided investigation. Rather than simply representing history as a set of facts, the poster now encourages audiences to take a historiographical stance as well.

This hands-on education program generated consequences for the current exhibition approach. When the enlarged museum reopened in 2023, curators were afforded greater flexibility in both the number and arrangement of museum collection items for display. Today, the Łódź ghetto deportation notice shares a room with other documents, photographs and artefacts that document and recall ghetto life — as well as film and audio from survivors and from the period.

Throughout the museum, labels stipulate the nature of items in such a way that visitors can derive information without necessarily being guided, while mounted interactive displays allow visitors to find additional information. In a few places there are drawers that visitors can open, the contents of which pose provocative questions that allow for a certain degree of ethical or philosophical reflection. This approach is more similar methodologically to the educational programs generated during the redevelopment than to the exhibition strategy that had been previously deployed in earlier iterations of the museum. The poster serves as both factual evidence of the history of violence during the Holocaust and as a call for investigation, inquiry and curiosity.

Considered in this way, the current presentation of the poster recalls the evolution of its use. By providing information about its original purpose within the ghetto, we highlight the distinct informational function of the poster. By linking it to the experiences of the two men who took, concealed and then salvaged it, we highlight its testimonial function in supporting an understanding of Abram's and Bono's experiences. By placing it within a museum, in which it is juxtaposed with other items that pertain to the ghetto experience, it can serve a didactic function, providing historiographical information relating to the Holocaust as a whole. And finally, by embedding it within an educational program it is able to realise a pedagogical function, by which it sheds light on themes and facilitates specific learning goals.

When considering the evolution of this item, we can highlight what must be considerations for all objects put on display within this museum. We must ask ourselves: what is the purpose of displaying this item? Is it to facilitate an understanding of the history? Is it to support a deeper understanding of individual survivors? Or is it to say something about the nature of the survivor community, or the nature of the Jewish community today? Curiously, this very item has been positioned with each of the above-mentioned intentions at different stages in the history of its deployment.

A successful museum will enable meaning-making on a number of levels simultaneously. If we do our jobs well, these objects and their positioning within the space will not only facilitate a greater understanding of the degree to which the Holocaust was a *human* history, but will also serve as a call to arms in the creation of more just and more tolerant societies today.