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CORRESPONDENCE FROM GERMAN CONCENTRATION CAMPS AND PRISONS



Collection consists of items originating from prisoners held in German concentration camps, internment and transit camps, Gestapo prisons, and POW camps, during and just prior to World War II. Most of the collection consists of letters written or received by prisoners, but also includes receipts for parcels, money orders and personal effects; paper currency; and realia, including Star of David badges that Jews were forced to wear.

Date Range: 1936-1945

Content: 5,747 images

Source Library: McMaster University

Detailed Description:

Hitler established the first concentration camp soon after he came to power in 1933. The system grew to include about 100 camps divided into two types: concentration camps for slave labor in nearby factories and death camps for the systematic extermination of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, the mentally retarded and others.

As the allied armies raced towards final victory, advancing troops liberated the camps one-by-one, revealing the horrors of the Nazi concept of establishing a pure society.

Prisoners at Nazi concentration camps in German territory were allowed to send and receive mail on a very limited basis. Letters written to and by Nazi concentration camp prisoners were subject to the scrutiny of regulations: generally, letters had to be written in German and were censored by S.S. personnel; were sent on special preprinted stationery; sending money was permitted but packages were not; requests to speak to or visit prisoners were prohibited; and newspapers were permitted but only if ordered through the concentration camp post office. Though inmates could, in theory, send or receive two letters or cards each month, the regulations governing correspondence could be suspended arbitrarily and without notice.

Simple but personal, these letters make tangible the ordeal of the persecuted. The anguish in the cursive writing of these letters and cards provide visceral and visual documentation of the depravity of the Nazi regime.

This collection comprises several subsets, including:

Concentration Camps Correspondence, 1936-1945

The Concentration Camps Correspondence was arranged by the collector, Michel Brisebois, into three subseries:

- Letters sent to camps: Auschwitz; Buchenwald; Dachau; Flossenburg; Lublin/Majdanek; Mauthausen; Mittelbau; Neuengamme; Ravensbruck; and Sachsenhausen.
- Letters sent by prisoners from: Auschwitz; Bergen Belsen; Buchenwald; Dachau; Esterwegen; Flossenburg; Fort VII; Gross-Rosen; Herzogenbush; Lublin-Majdanek; Mauthausen-Gusen; Mittelbau-Dora; Natzweiler; Neuengamme; Ravensbruck; Sachsenhausen and Stutthof.
- The third series consists of cases where there were three or more letters sent or received by the same prisoner. The correspondence is arranged by name of prisoner.

The Internment and Transit Camps Correspondence, 1940-1944, is arranged alphabetically by name of camp; unless otherwise noted, the camps were located in France. The camps include Beaune-La-Rolande; Chateaubriant-Choisel; Drancy; Gurs; Le Vernet D'arièges; Miranda (Spain); Modane; Noë; Pithiviers; Saint-Sulpice; and Westerbork (Netherlands).

The Gestapo Prisons Correspondence, 1942-1943, is arranged alphabetically by name of prison. The prisons include Radom, Straubing, Waldheim, Welzheim and one or two unidentified prisons.

Prisoner of War (POW) Correspondence, 1940-1945

Generally speaking individual POW letters are not rare but since most correspondences were broken up by dealers who sold letters individually, a long correspondence from the same prisoner is rare. It must be mentioned that correspondences are rarely complete since letters were lost after the war and also, because of the uncertainty of the postal system especially between enemy countries, many were never received. Series consists of the following Prisoner of War correspondence: correspondence of Auguste Bernu with his wife; letters written by M. Megoeuil to Madame M.H. Megoeuil; and letters written by Pierre Prunis to Madame Mme Marcelle Prunis.

Receipts for Parcels, Money Orders and Personal Effects, 1940-[ca. 1945]

Prisoners in most camps were allowed to receive parcels since food was lacking especially from 1942 onwards. A receipt was usually mailed to the person who sent the parcel. Prisoners were also allowed to receive money orders which were kept for them and from which they could retrieve small amounts for the canteen and to buy stamps. These receipts contain the amount and the name of the prisoner and are quite common.

Paper Currency, 1940-1945

It is surprising to some that currency was used in concentration and transit camps. Notes and tokens were given to productive prisoners as rewards. Money received by prisoners

from family through money orders was also converted into camp notes. These notes were redeemable in the camp canteen and also served to purchase stamps for correspondence. Some notes are very rare while others, discovered in hoards after the war, are always found in mint condition and are very common. Briefly the following notes are found in the collection: from two Dutch transit camps, a 25-cent note from Amersfoort (rare), a 25-cent and a 50-cent note from Westerbork are featured; a rare Buchenwald 0.50 RM note guaranteed genuine (there are forgeries); a 0.50 RM note from Mittelbau (Dora) which may be a forgery; a small 4 pfennig note from Holleischen (Holysow), a sub-camp of Flossenburg situated near Prague where prisoners worked in a metal factory. The collection also contains 3 notes (1 pfennig, 10 pfennig and 1 mark) which were used by all POWs in German camps (Kriegsgefangenen Lagerfeld).

Realia, [ca. 1939-1945]

Stars of David

- French Stars of David—"Juif". One is worn and one is unused and in rectangular format; used in France.
- German Star of David—"Jude". These were worn in Germany and parts of occupied Poland.
- Counterfeit Star of David Jewish attached to a fictitious armband and fake Waffemamt.

It is included here for comparison purposes.

Other Prisoner Badges

- Czech badge—a red cloth triangle folded on card with a large "T". These were worn by Czech prisoners.
- Prisoner number badge—a white rectangular piece of cloth on card with the number "18846". These were worn by prisoners.

Content descriptions are from the finding aids to the collection entitled "World War, 1939-1945, German Concentration Camps and Prisons" at the McMaster University Library.