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2006

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Fenyvesi, Lizou, "Reading Prisoner Uniforms: The Concentration Camp Prisoner Uniform as a Primary Source for Historical Research" (2006). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 341.
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Reading Prisoner Uniforms: The Concentration Camp Prisoner Uniform as a Primary Source for Historical Research

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A uniform of any kind, whether worn by a fireman, a nurse or a soldier, is designed to inform us about the person who wears it; and the same thing holds true for a prisoner uniform. In this presentation I am examining textiles from recent history: the prisoner uniforms from Nazi concentration camps; I attempt to “read” the information they contain.

Most, but not all, of the prisoner uniforms were striped. Iconography, in this case the stripes, is the most readily interpreted aspect of a textile. But other aspects of the uniforms are also well worth exploring. Manufacturing details, such as the materials used and the tailoring, tell us about the practical application of Nazi ideology and about the quality of textile materials in wartime. Alterations made by prisoners testify about living conditions as well as the prisoner’s adaptation to these conditions. Even the damage on the uniforms is telling; wear patterns and different stains suggest the prisoner’s work assignment.

As the textile conservator at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, I have worked on approximately 250 prisoner uniforms from Nazi concentration camps. What may seem like a monotonous task became fascinating when close observation of the uniforms revealed details of history that support the findings of scholars based on archival sources such as documents, photographs and films.

It is usually assumed that prisoners are dressed in striped uniforms because stripes stand out in the natural environment and that makes it harder for them to escape. However, this may or may not be the reason why stripes were chosen as the pattern for prisoners. In European visual cultures, stripes have a long association with loss of freedom and their pejorative meaning goes back hundreds of years. Stripes were considered an unnatural pattern in medieval Europe.

The strange aversion to stripes is probably due to a faulty translation of a passage in the Old Testament. The passage is in Leviticus, chapter 19, verse 19, and it deals with forbidden mixtures. For example, it states that it is forbidden to mix linen and wool in the same fabric. The earliest translations of the Old Testament were not always literal. Occasionally, a word was added to clarify the meaning. That is how this passage was translated from Greek to Latin as “duobus coloribus”, meaning two colors instead of two kinds of things. The Church interpreted this as forbidding the juxtaposition of two different colors. This is the likely origin of the low status of striped fabric in medieval Europe. In the 13th century Pope Boniface VIII instituted a general ban against the wearing of stripes by the clergy. At about the same time, the laws of Saxony, in today’s Germany, imposed the wearing of stripes on prostitutes, serfs, and those condemned as criminals. With this law, for the first time striped clothing was associated with criminals.

On arrival at the camps, all the prisoners went through a selection process. The prisoners who were strong and young enough for physical labor were given uniforms. Only about one third of all working prisoners were women because many women chose to stay with their children who were too young to work. This ratio of male to female prisoners is reflected in the uniforms found at the camps after liberation. Mug shots were taken of many newly arrived prisoners in

their uniforms at the camp in Auschwitz (fig.1). Men were given striped caps; women received bonnets or kerchiefs for the head to complete the uniforms. A kerchief can be tied different ways and according to survivors' testimony, the different styles had subtle meanings. Tying the kerchief under the chin is indicative of a more traditional or older woman, typically of peasant background. In the images from a camp workshop the women often tie their kerchiefs in the back of the neck. This is another traditional ethnic style, often seen on religious Jewish women and Gypsy women. When the kerchief is tied on top of the head in a style similar to "Rosie the riveter", which was not an ethnic style in Europe, it indicated a person trying to project an energetic ready-to-work attitude.



Figure 1.

Prisoners received the following uniforms: for men, pants, jacket, and a cap. Most women received a dress or a skirt and jacket. There were also coats for the winter but in archival photographs, the coats are mostly seen on men. Different tailoring was used for male and female jackets. Women's jackets had standing collars, and darts for shaping, and most of the men's jackets were simpler, tailored like work shirts. Occasionally, when the camps ran out of uniforms, civilian clothes with special markings were used. Clothing was marked with yellow or orange oil paint in order to make it substitute prisoner uniform.

Although all prisoner uniforms are similar, they are not identical. Most uniforms were made in the sewing workshops of some of the larger concentration camps such as Dachau, Sachsenhausen, and Ravensbruck. We only have images of some of the workshops because it was generally forbidden to take pictures in the camps. Some photographs were taken only by German officials for propaganda purposes and they were often staged like this from the tailoring workshop in Ravensbruck (fig. 2).



Figure 2.

The rare clandestine photographs available are not always of good enough quality to be really informative. Different workshops used similar but not identical patterns and fabrics. The material of the uniforms was most often cotton, sometimes mixed with a small percentage of wool. Some camps had summer uniforms as well, and they were made of linen. The blue color of the uniform stripes varies from purple to navy blue; and the background gray also comes in many shades. What they have in common is that they are all very well made, and the stripes are always printed on both sides of the fabric.

Uniform jackets are tailored like plain work shirts without pockets. But some look more like a suit jackets with pockets, and lining in the back and shoulder pads. Some of the plain jackets have pockets added, sometimes properly machine sewn on the face of the jacket, sometimes even set-in pockets with piping added. We know from survivors' testimonies that having pockets was very important. It made possible to hide a piece of bread, a spoon, and a piece of twine or anything small and useful.

Pockets were not only added to the face of the jacket, but some pockets were hidden on the inside. The secret pockets on the reverse side of the jackets were often hand-stitched, most likely by prisoners who obtained the thread, the needle, and a piece of fabric from their fellow inmates in the sewing workshop (fig. 3). On the other hand, the machine-stitched pockets on the face of the jacket were probably added in the sewing workshop as a favor to the "high ranking" prisoners. It is known that there was a hierarchy among the prisoners. The Italian writer Primo Levi in his autobiographical book "Survival at Auschwitz" talks about this hierarchy. He mentions a class of prisoners he calls "prominents". The prominents were usually selected by the SS guards from the ranks of the criminal inmates. The guards entrusted these prisoners with minor supervisory functions, such as supervising food distribution and order in the barracks. This select group of prisoners also had to wear uniforms but they were allowed small improvements, such as a layer of warm clothing under the uniform in the winter. It is likely that some of the pockets were added for them in the camp sewing workshop. The prisoners in the sewing workshop were eager to accommodate such requests from those who supervised them because this could mean better treatment or more food in return.



Figure 3.

It is interesting that the hierarchy among prisoners is reflected on their uniforms in ways not unlike in the military. In the military, officers' uniforms are also dressier than enlisted men's uniforms. This may help explain some embellishments on prisoner jackets such as piping around the pockets and the occasional tailored style of the jacket, as opposed to the work shirt style of most other uniforms.

Although the uniforms were made in different sizes, the sizes were not marked, and the prisoners were not assigned uniforms according to size. The prisoners had to make alterations to make them fit better. New hems were sewn mostly to shorten or lengthen the sleeves and pants' legs. A common way of dealing with uniforms that had become too loose as the prisoner lost weight was to move the buttons in the front. Another way was to take in the sides with additional stitching. This dress has two hand-stitched pleats in the front that not only make the dress smaller, but the pleats also hide pockets set in the seam, one on each side (fig. 4).



Figure 4(left).

Figure 5 (right).

For size adjustment the pants relied on the buckles and straps on the sides of the waistband. But over time, as the prisoners lost more and more weight, their uniforms became very loose and more tightening was needed. Some pants had belt loops on the waistband but they were not used because the prisoners were not allowed to have belts. Eventually the loops became important and additional loops were hand stitched to the waistband so a string could be threaded through to secure the pants at the waist as the prisoners continued to loose weight.

This uniform (fig. 5) was made of hand-woven linen. The tailoring is different; there is no waistband, and the pocket is not set in the side seam but sewn to the right front. We tend to think of hand-woven linen as high-end merchandise because in recent years linen has become fashionable. But in the 1940's in Europe, linen was not especially expensive because it grew in the cool, wet climate of Northern Europe and did not have to be imported like cotton. This hand-woven linen uniform may have been made in Ravensbruck, an all-women's camp built in 1940. The camp had a modern textile factory equipped with mechanical spinners and mechanical looms. But it also had 20 handlooms, and on those looms, striped yardage was produced by hand. This seems like an inefficient method for mass-producing uniforms. But in this case, efficiency was not important because labor was free and plentiful. According to the propaganda album published in 1940 about the Ravensbruck camp, the handlooms served as extra hardship. Hand-weaving was considered hard labor and as described in the text "strong Russian women" were assigned to these looms.

The condition of the uniform can also indicate the type of work assigned to the inmate. Judging from the stains of industrial oil on a prisoner jacket, the prisoner who wore it probably worked in a machine shop. It is possible that not all the oil stains on the uniform are work

related; lice infestation was one of the many ills that tormented the prisoners. Some prisoners who had access to industrial oil, deliberately sprinkled oil on their uniform as a form of pest control.

This jacket was left behind in a concentration camp (fig. 6). It is tailored in suit jacket style. It has pockets, a lining in the upper back, and shoulder pads, and it also has darts for shaping. It was already much worn before liberation, but it carries signs of postwar neglect as well. The sleeves and the shoulders have extensive rodent damage. This probably means that after liberation it was left in a barrack and mice made a home in it. It is quite typical of the damage caused by postwar indifference. There is a marked difference between the prisoner uniforms of the survivors and those left behind in the camps by the inmates who died there. The survivors' uniforms are usually in stable condition, while the ones left in the former camps are in poor-to-fragmentary condition. There seems to be a correlation between the fate of the prisoner and the condition of his or her uniform.



Figure 6.

The history of artifacts is influenced by the value attached to them. After the war, public interest in Holocaust history took almost 30 years to develop although historians did write books on the subject earlier. The first official care of uniforms left behind in the former camps date to the 1960's. At that time, the uniforms were not treated as artifacts. They were cleaned and disinfected in mass. Large holes were patched, using fragments of uniforms that were deemed beyond repair. Most repairs were done fast and without much attention, and they are easily distinguishable from earlier repairs by prisoners. From the 1980's on, as interest in Holocaust history increased the quality of care of objects left from the Holocaust era improved. The present condition of uniforms not only reflects their wartime history but also reflects postwar attitudes toward Holocaust history.

As in the case of military uniforms, prisoner uniforms also had insignia. At the time of use, all prisoner uniforms had badges sewn to the left side of the chest or on the left sleeve and the right side of the pants.

The badges consisted of a rectangular piece of white cotton with the prisoner number and a combination of triangles with letters. The triangles referred to the type of prisoner as explained on a German chart. The badges were color coded: yellow triangle for Jewish prisoner; red for politicals, green for common criminals, black for asocials or Gypsies, pink for homosexuals, and purple for Jehovah's Witnesses. The letters in the triangles referred to nationality.

Interestingly, after the war, most of the badges were removed from the uniforms. The few badges still on the uniforms are almost always red triangles, designating a political prisoner. When were the badges removed and by whom? There are several possible answers; one is that some of the camps in post-war communist East Germany and Poland were used for different prisoners after liberation. For a short time after the war, German prisoners of war were interned in Majdanek, in eastern Poland. They wore the striped uniforms from Nazi concentration camps - but without the badges. In East Germany at the camp of Sachsenhausen, political prisoners were housed between 1945 and 1955. They also wore uniforms from the Holocaust era with the badges removed.

When we consider the fact that pink triangle badges – the badge for homosexual prisoners -- are extremely rare, we should take into account that the laws against homosexuality were still in force in Germany until 1962, so there was ample incentive to remove pink triangles from the uniforms individual survivors kept in their homes. The same reasoning helps explain why survivors may have taken off green triangles for common criminals and black triangles for asocial prisoners.

Another possible explanation is proposed by the German historian Barbel Schmidt. She suspects that the communists removed all the badges except for red triangles indicating political prisoners. Communist regimes interpreted the Second World War as the epic struggle of the communist party against Nazism. They did not mention other victim groups of the Holocaust such as Jews, Gypsies, Jehovah's Witnesses, and homosexuals. If there were only red badges left on the uniforms, it would support the communist assertion that most prisoners were members of the communist opposition to Nazism. Other historians I talked to did not share this view.

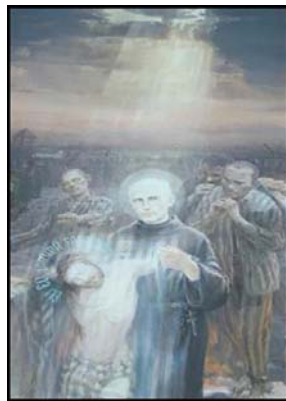


Figure 7.

In the last 30 years, prisoner uniforms occasionally appear in works of art. This painting by Irena Palka, hangs in the Father Kolbe Church built at the site of the camp in Auschwitz (fig. 7)

Father Kolbe is a Catholic martyr of the Holocaust. He died from a lethal injection after he offered to take the place of another prisoner who was originally selected to die. In this painting Father Kolbe wears a striped robe; Christ wears a striped loincloth, the same as the prisoners behind them wear. With this representation, the history of stripes and the Catholic Church has come full circle. Stripes forbidden by a pope in the 13th century become elevated in the 20th century through the portrayal of a martyr of the Church wearing them. With this painting, the prisoner uniforms gain added meaning; they are no longer simply about loss of freedom. Here the striped uniform signifies martyrdom, not only of Father Kolbe but of all the victims of the Holocaust.

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