



Questioned Documents Section – 2008

J14 Out of the Ashes: A Holocaust Diary Revealed

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Upon completion of this lecture, participants will understand how the field of paper conservation relates to that of forensic sciences, particularly in the study of questioned documents. They will be shown how and what conservators do to analyze and treat documents using a specific case study. This case study of a burned diary includes discussion on how different lighting techniques and computer manipulation were used to make a burned document legible.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by introducing the field of paper conservation and the resources that conservators use to preserve and restore paper materials. Paper conservators and forensic scientists have many common goals in the investigation of paper, paper materials, and paper manufacture and can benefit from the sharing of information.

Twenty small, charred and brittle fragments of a diary were donated to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) collection in 2002 by the family of Lusia Hornstein. Lusia, a Holocaust survivor, requested that her family donate it to the USHMM, while she was ill and dying in the hospital. For unknown reasons, and despite the fact that Lusia Hornstein frequently spoke and wrote about her experiences during the Holocaust, she kept the existence of this diary a secret for over fifty years.

The twenty diary fragments were wrapped in a piece of a Polish newspaper and placed in an envelope, on which Lusia wrote a notation outlining the diary's history. This notation contains the only available information about the diary's author, Debora, who was killed by a bomb in Warsaw during the Polish uprising of 1944. In early 1945, Lusia retrieved Debora's diary from behind a radiator in the bombed-out remains of the house where Debora had lived.

The diary is written in black ink on both sides of a blue-lined, wove paper. Each fragment is approximately 3 ¼" x 3" inches. Initial examination of the diary showed it to be in varying degrees of deterioration. Some pages were in fair condition and legible, while other pages were charred, brittle, broken and mainly illegible. Numerous pages were fused together and had also become physically distorted from the heat. The purpose of the conservation treatment of these pages was to physically stabilize them, but not bring them back to their original condition since their burned and charred nature is an intrinsic part of their story.

The diary pages were so brittle and fragile that the originals could not be handled in order to be translated. Initially, the translator used good quality photocopies that were made from digital images; however the charred areas remained too dark to be legible. Different lighting arrangements during photography, coupled with manipulation of the images using the computer, allowed the contents of almost all of the fragments to be read. This also led to the discovery that the fragments could be matched together, allowing for an even fuller translation. This is a wonderful example of how easily available computer technology can be used to recover information from an artifact, without endangering the artifact itself.

Burned, Paper, Conservation