With some 11,200 works of art, as witness to the Holocaust. “Gela was a major, respected artist,” said Yitzhak Ben-Yehuda, Managing Director of Yad Vashem. “In addition to survivor testimonies, documents and photographs, these personal belongings will continue to bear witness to the lives of victims of the Holocaust. The center will ensure that these legacies remain intact.”

In addition to storage facilities for art, artifacts and archival materials, the new half-center will comprise an entrance gallery, a heritage gallery, conservation laboratories, an intake and registration suite, a study room and a conference room. The space will also include additional areas for the growth of Yad Vashem’s collections over at least the next two decades. The facility will incorporate climate control, air filtration, fire suppression, advanced security and safety control systems, necessary to preserve and protect the collection according to international museum standards and regulations.

The preservation of our important collections is vital, since older items tend to deteriorate simply due to the passage of time and exposure to natural elements,” said Uria. “Most of the works in Yad Vashem’s art collection, for example, were created by Jewish artists during the crucible of the Shoah. The works give expression to the events they studied, and demand from us that we do our utmost to preserve them for generations to come.”

In addition to artworks, Yad Vashem houses a range of other Holocaust-era items, such as afghan prayer shawls, documents, and even recipe books. What makes the artifacts and objects collection exceptional is that nearly every item, there is a story behind it. “At Yad Vashem, we endeavor to investigate and document the personal stories of every victim or survivor told through these items – stories of love, despair, strength, hope and compassion,” said Uria. One such heartbreaking story is told through the shoe of the infant Hinda Cohen. Hinda was incarcerated in the Kovno ghetto in Lithuania along with her parents, who were forced to serve in a local forced labor camp. Every morning, they would leave their daughter in the care of an elderly relative in order to go out to work.

One day, while they were at work, the Nazis rounded up the ghetto children, took them away and murdered them. When the Cohens returned home they ran to Hinda’s room to find she had been taken. Only one of her tiny shoes remained, alone on the child’s bed. Her father wrote the date on the sole of Hinda’s shoe and carried it with him through the remainder of the war and then to Israel, where he and his wife began their lives anew, ultimately having more children.

“When the Cohens died, their granddaughter asked Yad Vashem to come get Hinda’s shoe,” Uria recalled. “The shoe was kept by her grandparents and then her parents all these years – they could not relinquish it. Now it serves as a witness to what happened to Hinda Cohen.”

“The story of the Holocaust is a huge puzzle with many black holes, awaiting pieces of memory,” said Yad Vashem Chairman Avner Shalev. “We must fill in the remaining black holes and collect all the pieces of the puzzle in one place, at Yad Vashem.”

Uria continued, “So many people were murdered anonymously. Through these items, their stories and identities are restored and come back to life for all to witness and remember. Their preservation is crucial to our mission.”

The new Shoah Heritage Collections Center will not only adequately house Yad Vashem’s vast Collections, but also allow the display of more items across the Museum of Remembrance. Ultimately, Yad Vashem is working to upload all of them online so anyone in the world can access these items and their stories.

“Yad Vashem’s role as the guardians of the historical truth of the Holocaust at this critical juncture is evident,” said Ben-Yehuda. “The original documents, artifacts, photographs and art in our collections, from across Europe and North Africa, serve as the proof to the history of the Shoah.”

“The Nazis tried to erase the memory of the Jews,” said Gertner. “It is our mission to keep telling their story through the items in our Collections. This is the proof.”

The Shoah Heritage Collections Center will be the heart of the Shoah Heritage Campus, which will include the Joseph Werbel Children’s Exhibition Center, a newly renovated state-of-the-art multiformat, and the new Family and Children’s Exhibition all to be located on the Yad Vashem’s Mount of Remembrance.