

# EVERLASTING WITNESSES

Yad Vashem Embarks on Groundbreaking Campaign to Build New Shoah Heritage Collections Center



STILL LIFE with Self-Portrait Oil on wood by Gela Seksztajn (1907-1942)  
(Courtesy of the Collection of the Yad Vashem Art Museum on loan from the Lahav-Lichtenstein family in memory of Naomi and Shlomo Lahav-Lichtenstein)

• MAAYAN HOFFMAN

**G**ela Seksztajn was a student in one of Warsaw's prewar Jewish high schools. After she graduated Seksztajn enrolled in an art school in Krakow, and in the early 1930s, she went to Paris to paint. Subsequently, Seksztajn returned to Warsaw, married and had a daughter. In 1942, they were arrested by the Nazis, deported to Treblinka and murdered.

In Seksztajn's last will and testament, composed on August 1, 1942, she wrote, "As I stand on the border between life and death, certain that I will not remain alive, I wish to take leave from my friends and my works. My works I bequeath to the Jewish museum to be built after the war. Farewell my friends. Farewell my Jewish people. Never again allow such a catastrophe."

Today, Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, houses 300 of Seksztajn's creations in its Art Collection, alongside her testament, in which she asks that her art serve as a witness to the rich Jewish culture that existed before the war, and the story of how this culture was wiped out by the Nazi regime.

"Gela was a major, respected artist," said Vivian Uria, director of Yad Vashem's Museums Division. However, her last wish was to talk not only about her personal situation, but also what happened to the collective Jewish people. From her works, you understand the spirit of such a person, enduring such a hard time. Her art serves as witness to the Holocaust."

Seksztajn's art and story are just one example of the unrivalled number of artworks, artifacts and archival documentation housed at Yad Vashem. With some 11,200 works of art,

31,600 artifacts, 204 million pages of documentation, 490,000 photographs, 130,000 testimonies, as well as diaries, postcards, letters and memoirs, film footage and personal items, the Yad Vashem Collections are the largest and most comprehensive of their kind in the world.

Yad Vashem has been collecting Holocaust-related items since it began its efforts immediately following the war in 1946.

Dr. Haim Gertner, director of the Yad Vashem Archives Division and Fred Hillman Chair for Holocaust Documentation, explains that "Yad Vashem considers this task a moral mission." In addition to collecting documentation from official sources, eight years ago, Yad Vashem launched a dedicated program entitled 'Gathering the Fragments' in which they actively started collect items from individuals. Gertner continued, "we turned to Holocaust survivors, family members and the general public with an appeal to take part in a real rescue campaign – to search their houses for every document, photograph or object from the years before the war, during the Holocaust, from life in the Displaced Persons Camps and the immediate postwar period, and donate them to Yad Vashem for posterity. Items submitted together with the stories behind them have an important role in the commemoration of the Jews murdered in the Holocaust and in preserving their memory for future generations."

With the number of items expanding rapidly, Yad Vashem has recently embarked on building a Shoah Heritage Collections Center, a new facility that will sit on the Mount of Remembrance in Jerusalem and allow for proper storage and preservation of these materials. According to Shaya Ben-Yehuda, Managing Director of Yad



ARCHITECTURAL RENDERING of the Shoah Heritage Campus  
(Courtesy of Skorka Architects)



THE BABY shoe of Hinda Cohen, and Birth Certificate issued in the Kovno ghetto of Hinda Cohen. Her shoe has the date of her deportation to the death camps carved into the sole by her father, 27 March 1944.  
(Courtesy of Yad Vashem Artifacts Collection)

Vashem's International Relations Division, the state-of-the-art center is slated to open in May 2022.

"Within a few years, survivors will no longer be with us to tell their story," said Ben-Yehuda. "In addition to survivor testimonies, documents and photographs, these personal belongings will continue to bear witness to the lives of the victims of the Holocaust. The center will ensure that their legacies remain secure."

In addition to storage facilities for art, artifacts and archival materials, the acre-and-a-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 area 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 endured, 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 *talitot* (prayer shawls), purses and even recipe books. What makes the artifacts collection exceptional is that for nearly every item, there is a story behind it.

"At Yad Vashem, we endeavor to investigate and record 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. Each 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 and 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, representing 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 Mount 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 Wilf Curatorial Center, a newly renovated state-of-the-art auditorium, and the new Family and Children's Exhibition all to be located on the Yad Vashem's Mount of Remembrance.***

*This article was written in cooperation with Yad Vashem*