

Archives Unbound: German Concentration Camp and Prison Camp Correspondence



Date Range: 1936-1945

Content: 5,747 images

Source Library: McMaster University

This 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.

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 labour in nearby factories and death camps for the systematic extermination of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, the mentally retarded and others.

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. 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 of these letters and cards provide visceral and visual documentation 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; Flossenbug; Lublin/Majdanek; Mauthausen; Mittelbau; Neuengamme; Ravensbruck; and Sachsenhausen.
- Letters sent by prisoners from: Auschwitz; Bergen Belsen; Buchenwald; Dachau; Esterwegen; Flossenbug; 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).



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The Gestapo Prisons Correspondence, 1942-1943, include the prisons Radom, Straubing, Waldheim, Welzheim and one or two unidentified prisons.

Prisoner of War (POW) Correspondence, 1940-1945

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.

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

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.

Realia, [ca. 1939-1945]

- Stars of David
- 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.

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