

Upstanding: The Holocaust Memorial and Tolerance Center of Nassau County

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HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL & TOLERANCE CENTER
OF NASSAU COUNTY

External view of the Holocaust Memorial and Tolerance Center, a Georgian-style mansion on Welwyn Preserve.

For over twenty-one years, the Holocaust Memorial and Tolerance Center has stood within the dense woodlands of Welwyn Preserve, in Glen Cove, New York. Far from the main roads and sharing its northern border with Long Island Sound, the 200-acre preserve provides a space of quiet contemplation away from the everyday world. And while Long Island is not a place that comes to mind when one thinks about the horrors of the Holocaust, visitors will welcome the peace, to hear and reflect on the stories told within the center's walls.

The Holocaust Memorial and Tolerance Center of Nassau County teaches the events of the Holocaust in the hope of encouraging visitors to confront such examples of bigotry, bullying, intolerance, and prejudice today; to be not a bystander of intolerance, but an "Upstander." The museum sections lead visitors through various periods and moments of the Holocaust, using enlarged photographs and recorded interviews with local survivors.

The center reaches out to the community at large through school visits and tolerance training for law-enforcement professionals. Additional resources include guided tours, traveling exhibits, a library of Holocaust-related books, and the archives. Located in a room off the center's library, the archives contains over 500 Holocaust-related documents and artifacts. While anything related to the Holocaust is accepted, donations from survivors living on Long Island are particularly valued.

As a nonprofit organization juggling multiple priorities, one of the center's largest challenges has been securing funding and other resources to care for and manage the relics that have been collected. Many donations were accepted and stored, to be processed at a later date. Last year, the center learned that this was not a good practice, when a mold infestation damaged several artifacts. So when the center began renovating for its new education center, it took the important step of installing a temperature- and humidity-controlled room for the archives and began to pay more attention to the archives' care.

I learned about the center through one of its traveling exhibits, and I decided it would be a good place to intern for my Advanced Certificate in Archives and Records Management from Long Island University's Palmer School of Library and Information Science. I took on the task of conducting a full inventory and reviewing and describing artifacts and their related acquisition records. A side room in the library allowed easy access to the collection, a computer to compile the inventory, and plenty of table space to examine larger artifacts.

As I progressed through the collections, several key tasks comprised my workload. Historical research helped provide context, connecting events with personal accounts. The most time-consuming work involved rudimentary translation of documents in German, Italian, Polish, and, in the case of a wine license from a Jewish ghetto in Shanghai, Chinese. Some of the staff members were helpful with basic Hebrew.



Left: Entryway to the museum's permanent exhibit. The display case contains a portable Torah from Vienna and a wedding ring from Spain, both samples of everyday life before Nazism.

Below: Jim Van Raalte, a frequent speaker at the center, served in the U.S. Signal Corps during the liberation of Buchenwald concentration camp. His dog tag was rediscovered in the course of our inventory.

All photographs courtesy of the Holocaust Memorial and Tolerance Center.

Their involvement had the benefit in turn of making them more familiar with their archives.

Most of the artifacts are paper documents, such as personal letters, photographs, and travel records, like passports. These remnants highlight the experiences of survivors and liberating soldiers alike. Other artifacts include medals, weapons, and Nazi flags; a town flag, seized and signed by an American battalion, was donated by one of the battalion members. The archives also holds recordings, on VHS tapes and DVDs, of interviews with Holocaust survivors visiting the center.

What surprised me most about the collection was that some of the acquisitions were not strictly about the Holocaust. Rather, in keeping with the center's mission of educating others about intolerance, several items portrayed the long history of bigotry and anti-Semitism. I found a beer stein, dating from the late 1800s, covered in caricatures of Jewish stereotypes. The piece reaches out to remind us that we must confront the bigotry and intolerance that still exist today.

With the inventory complete, the center can now take further steps to integrate the archives into the center's mission and operation. The center now understands what its archives contains and what it needs to do as more acquisitions arrive. Future objectives include providing finding aids for researchers on the center's website, prioritizing select artifacts for more intensive preservation and restoration, and incorporating artifacts into the center's educational and outreach programming. Researchers, visitors, and students will benefit greatly from easier access to these items. In all, the Holocaust Memorial and Tolerance Center has much to teach the modern world, in maintaining what is left of this dark time, and showing what continues. ♦

