

Ivar Schute

## *Unearthing the Holocaust*

### *An Archaeologist's Search for Buried traces*

#### Introduction

In September 2014, a team of archaeologists discovered and excavated the foundations of the gas chambers at the Sobibor Nazi death camp. I represented the Netherlands on that team. Sobibor was the final destination for many Jews, and was where over 34,000 Dutch citizens met their deaths.<sup>1</sup> During the ten years prior, I had carried out archaeological research on several camps in the Netherlands, Germany and Poland. Among other projects, I ran digs at the rubbish pits and the commandant's villa at the Netherlands' most famous camp, Westerbork; I conducted research on mass graves in Bergen-Belsen and Treblinka I; and I investigated the gas chambers at Treblinka II and Sobibor. During these investigations, I was party to the absurd dichotomy of government conflicts and the contempt of Holocaust-deniers on the one hand, and the positive attentions of strangers, survivors and journalists on the other.<sup>2</sup> Along the way I gave reports of my experiences via lectures, interviews and articles, and yet I still felt there was something missing. That 'something' has become this book.

To me, the Jewish Museum in Berlin is a very special place. It is made up of two parts: an old, U-shaped building in baroque style, and a new zig-zag-shaped structure connected to it, most of which is buried underground. The modern section was designed by American Daniel Libeskind, and is an example of how form can imitate function: the building is a museum in itself. The long corridors and sharp corners evoke a sense of disorientation, fostering an atmosphere of contemplation. The museum includes empty spaces – voids – which are

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<sup>1</sup> In this book, wherever I talk about 'Jews' I of course also mean the Roma, Sinti, homosexuals and other victims of the Third Reich.

<sup>2</sup> Although the word 'Shoah' is actually more accurate than 'holocaust,' I have opted for the latter as it is more well-known among a broader public.

symbolic of the emptiness left behind by the Holocaust. One such space, the Memory Void, can be entered directly, and is where ten thousand dimly-lit steel faces gaze up at visitors from the floor. The installation is called *Schalechet* – Fallen Leaves – and was designed by Menashe Kadishman. One walks across the faces, creating eerie sound effects that amplify the sense of alienation and homelessness.

Behind the baroque building lies a garden, with a sunken central area. Here one can lie on the grassy slopes, or if there is a concert on, recline in a deck chair and stare at the clouds. This sunken garden was where I once attended a concert of Ladino jazz music, sung in the old language of the Sephardic Jews. These were the sounds that made me realise that as an archaeologist, my connection to the traces of the Holocaust is an almost tangible one, and one that differs from the usual historical perspective. Not necessarily ‘better’ or more meaningful, but distinct nonetheless. This book helps to explain why.

We archaeologists dig up remains with our hands. We put death-camp artefacts on display. These objects are of a shockingly quotidian nature: a pair of glasses, a thimble, a spoon, a razor. Items that we can personally relate to. As the living witnesses gradually fall away one by one, it is these ‘silent witnesses’ that force us to reassess our perspective on the Holocaust. Younger generations ask different questions, and come from a different place. Material culture has proven to be powerfully useful in this regard, and excavations are extremely valuable as ‘manifestations’.

The excavation of a concentration camp attracts many more spectators than other digs. People are fascinated by the activity in itself, and this fascination can be ‘harnessed’ for educational purposes. The artefacts also tell very personal stories about people who have long since vanished. In this context, material culture can have a powerful impact, and the question of how archaeologists should treat these materials – without overstepping moral boundaries or doing injury to individuals – is an important one, and one that occupies my mind, my work, and much of this book.

This is a book of surprise. Surprise at the sheer number of camps that existed, at what happened to them after the war, and at what remains of them but is still hidden from so many. Archaeologists are observers of the space around them, and it is this space that contains the physical remains of history. In woods and brush I have stumbled across small buildings overrun with weeds, I have exposed walls, descended into cellars, picked up shoes and pieces

of barbed wire. I was astonished that the traces of what we call the Holocaust were simply lying around like this, in the Netherlands and elsewhere.

Archaeologists investigate artefacts and remains that are hidden below the ground. Until ten years ago, this type of research was extremely rare in concentration camps. Once I realised that large swathes of Europe still harboured the tangible echoes of these ‘camp landscapes’, I began to document my journey through them, and along with that journey, my astonishment.

One might ask oneself what drives archaeologists to go digging around in almost sacred sites like Westerbork or Sobibor, and who grants them permission to do so. The answers to these questions are not unequivocal. Regarding the former: there are many reasons why archaeologists conduct research in such places. It may be scientifically motivated, such as our research in Treblinka. It may also be forensic in nature, such as my investigation of a mass grave in Bergen-Belsen. To me, however, the Holocaust is already a proven historical fact, so my research does not revolve around the gathering of evidence. Scientific questions are relevant, of course, but I do hope that this book clarifies that I view the role of archaeological research differently in this context, namely as a contribution to the processes of commemoration and heritage conservation. I shall explain this in greater detail and also add some caveats – mild criticisms that readers may also interpret as recommendations.

I am neither an historian nor a cultural philosopher; I am an archaeologist. Despite this, I persist in writing about historical facts, and do hazard the occasional philosophical thought. I take full responsibility for any errors I make while doing so.

This book is not a research publication. Its chapters are not essays. They are my memories collected throughout ten years of unique research, and the thoughts and ideas I had along the way. The events are described faithfully as I remember them, in all sincerity. I stand surety for their accuracy, to the extent that memories can also be considered the truth.

The tales trace a one-way journey along a train line: from west to east, from the early round-ups to the final death camps. The former Nazi death camp Sobibor in modern-day Poland<sup>3</sup> is the terminus of that train line. I would like to make some remarks here about its excavation. There has never been anything even approaching a comparable investigation of any other

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<sup>3</sup> In accordance with Polish legislation, here I have written out in full what I mean by ‘camp Sobibor’. Every mention of ‘camp Sobibor’ in this book should be read as: ‘the former Nazi death camp Sobibor in modern-day Poland.’

camp in Europe. The archaeological research conducted in Sobibor was unique, for which the participating countries – Israel, the Netherlands, Poland and Slovakia – are to be commended. Especially now, since photographs of camp Sobibor were recently discovered, and what the photographs do *not* show is where the executions were held. That location is precisely what has been unearthed by the archaeologists. It is the combination of photographic and archaeological evidence that now gives an unprecedented and complete picture of how such camps operated.

The final step is yet to be taken, however. After ten years of research, many of the remains and structures have been exposed, and an estimated one hundred thousand artefacts preserved. This exceptional set of excavations deserves an academic publication, and the four countries involved have a moral and financial responsibility to do so.

In conclusion: no matter what I write, it will be injurious to someone. In this field, the breadth of the proverbial path I would need to tread in order to protect everybody's feelings is simply too narrow. I therefore offer my sincerest apologies in advance.

Ivar Schute

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## A Suitcase and an Umbrella

On the way home, my wife and I pass by the old Leiden police office in Zonneveld street. It is an attractive art-deco building that is now used for other purposes – I have no idea what. The façade still bears the blue lettering *Bureau van Politie*, and in red lettering, *Anno 1927*. In the glow of the street light, two suitcases are visible on the curb, carved in stone and standing beside one another. I am familiar with them, as they form part of a larger set. Pay a little attention in the city and they start jumping out at you, the abandoned suitcases of the abducted Jews, visible on four different street corners in Leiden.

On the night of 5 March 1943, the first Nazi roundup took place. The Leiden Jews had already been asked to register themselves ‘voluntarily’ one year earlier. This time, however, they were taken by force. One of the stone suitcases is located in front of the Central Israeli Orphanage and Shelter, *Machseh Lajesoumiem* (which translates as ‘refuge for orphans’) in Roodenburger street in Leiden’s southern district. It is a neat-looking, yellow-brick building with an enormous star of David emblazoned on the main entrance. I regularly walk through that door to see my GP, who has his practice there. The waiting room does double-duty as a memorial space, where patients are starkly confronted with the names of the victims. At every visit, my eyes glide past the names of all the children who were collected here and transported away by the police on 17 March 1943. On that night, all Jews who had not yet gone into hiding were rounded up and transported to the Jewish transit camp in Westerbork. The next (and final) stop after Westerbork was Sobibor, a death camp.

Of the 500 or so Leiden Jews, at least 271 were ultimately murdered, and most were arrested by the local police force working from that same art-deco building. At the unveiling of the stone suitcases, mayor Henri Lenferink emphasised this point, and spoke openly of the pain and shame that he felt in doing so. The historian and former director of the NIOD (the Netherlands Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies) Hans Blom went a good deal further in his speech, and warned against the complacency inherent in branding ‘outsiders and their internal henchmen as the ultimate cause and source of evil.’ He pointed out that Nazi ideology stemmed partly from an exclusion of the Jewish people that was already far more deeply-rooted and more widespread at that time, even in the Netherlands. And if this fact was to serve as an explanation, Blom’s claim is that we are failing to do justice to history, for the simple reason that *we* are its makers: history is the work of human hands. Blom says: ‘In

essence, the dynamics of the historic process are determined by the endless concatenations of the inexhaustible series of human actions and decisions, including those not taken.' I am strongly reminded of Daniel Goldhagen's 1996 book *Hitler's willing executioners*, which examines the onerous topic of collective guilt as the consequence of embracing a destructive ideology, with antisemitism as its foundation. Aside from the criticism of the book (it created massive shockwaves in Germany), Blom, like Goldhagen, says very simply and justly that all of our actions and inactions matter: yours, mine, and everybody else's.

The suitcases were made in 2010 by Dutch-Israeli artist Ram Katzir, 'in memory of the persecuted and murdered Jewish citizens,' as is stated on the small metal plaque beside them. Katzir sees luggage as the symbol of a lingering void, made visible in a material and an emotional sense. Suitcases without owners, seemingly purposeless, out in the open. He sees the city 'as a topographical map of absence,' and therefore calls his monument, titled *Baggage*, an 'anti-monument'.

As we wander past in the darkness, I notice something perched on the edge of the smallest suitcase (an occupational hazard of my trained archaeologist's eye). It is a small coin of some sort, and I hold it briefly in my hand. A button? I take it to the parking meter beside the suitcases, where there is a light shining. I still cannot discern it clearly, but it is not a button – at most it could serve as a press-stud. Something is written on it, a word and a symbol, but I cannot make it out, nor can my wife. Long live mobile phones: I take a photograph in the dim lighting and enlarge it on the screen. The word FULTON has been punched into the metal, with a symbol above it resembling a simplified cannabis leaf, with three long, narrow blades. I lay the insignia, which is what this would appear to be, back on the suitcase, and the two of us walk on into the night.

Back at home on the couch, I cannot get the image of out of my mind. I have seen dozens of Jewish monuments in my time, often with accompanying objects: wreaths, letters, candles, but mostly small stones, as a sign that the grave has been visited and as a testament to those departed. But why this coin, this token? I conduct a Google image search on the name 'Fulton', and recognise the logo immediately. Fulton is the name of an umbrella manufacturer in London that was founded in 1956, many years after the war ended, and which still exists today. Such websites often include a history of the business, and there I read about how a certain Arnold Fulton launched the (initially small) family business, and left a

flourishing enterprise to his son Nigel. Fulton is the Royal Warrant-holder, and according to the website, its umbrellas are in regular use by various members of the royal family. What more could an English business ask for? But this was a success story, and for my purposes, I was as much in the dark as before. Was that coin just placed there for no reason? Did it fall perhaps? Unsatisfied, I continue my search and find an answer.

Arnold Fulton was born in 1931 as a Polish Jew. His real name was Arnold Frucht, which he changed in order to sound less German when he began applying for jobs in post-war England. Fulton was the son of a successful Polish tailor, who employed seventeen men in his studio but fled to Warsaw with his wife in 1943. The orphaned Arnold, along with several hundred of his peers, was successfully rescued by rabbi Victor Sheinfeld and transported to England. He never left, but continues to honour his Jewish roots.

The final puzzle piece is still missing: who put the token there in the first place? It seems reasonable to suppose that it was no coincidence. Whoever did it must at least have known about the family history of Arnold Fulton. But why did they not just pick up and place the customary stone, why this particular token, of such an exclusive umbrella brand? It is with these questions that I am left standing in the rain.

Two days later, the seal is gone.

*Translation: Brent Annable*