

Symbolism, solidarity and gold teeth in the concentration camps

by
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In 1933, the first concentration camp opened in Dachau. On September 23 1940 and December 23 1942, the Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler ordered his SS doctors to recover gold teeth from cadavers and those of detainees « *which could not be repaired* ».

The order given on September 23 1940 of consistently recovering gold teeth was not applied immediately. It would only be so two years later during the Final Solution due to the acute lack of currency for the purchase of raw materials and which implied its enforcement. A French study mentioned the figure of 17 tons of dental gold coming from the camps. 25 kg of dental gold was recovered in Mauthausen for the duration of the war, from 100 to 500g per month in Buchenwald during the same period and 6 tons for Auschwitz. In Treblinka, from eight to ten kilos of gold were stocked in suitcases each week. 80,000 teeth were found in boxes during the liberation of the Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen camp. Post-war studies demonstrated that on average, 5 teeth were extracted per individual – a study that my personal research from archives of Auschwitz corroborated – at the rate of 3g of 22-carat gold per tooth. The obtained gold after remelting did not exceed from 2 to 3g (Kogon, 1999 ; Riaud, 2002).

If the end of the war revealed the horror of the camps to the world, the violent acts which were committed by the Nazis' bestiality and their war crimes or those against Humanity which were often all evil, it also helped the emergence of solidarity among those who fought to save their lives or those of others. Some men survived thanks to their self-sacrifice, altruism and generosity that we ought not to forget and that we should pass on to the future generations. So that no-one never forgets...

Johann Gruber (1889-1944), a Catholic priest

Director of the Institute for blind people in Linz, he was a staunch opponent of the Nazi regime. He did not hesitate to display his disturbing convictions to the Austrian government. This was used as a pretext for him to be tried and sentenced. He would not be rehabilitated until much later in 1999.

After a short stay in prison, he joined the Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp in 1940 and then, that of Gusen I.

After the discovery of Bronze Age tombs which were exhumed by the construction of the railroad line in Gusen, commando of Mauthausen, Father Johann Gruber was appointed kapo of the Gusen museum started by Himmler himself. Two to three months later, the Reichsführer SS appointed him Inspector General of Austrian concentration camps. As a result, he was authorized to leave Gusen for two days once a month.

He borrowed money from his contacts in Vienna and organized an enormous traffic. The organization simply started with cigarette trafficking, a very rare and precious commodity in the camps which served as commodity money. During Spring 1943, Father Gruber only took care of at least ten detainees. He exchanged cigarettes for food that he redistributed. The barter took place behind Block 19. Soon, at the beginning of 1944, they were sixty.

The Gruber organization still spread. It reached the morgue, the crematorium where the Father bought gold teeth which were turned into gold ingots in Vienna, then the ingots into bills and the bills into bottles of soup.

Every night, the cooks delivered to the Catholic priest fifty litres of soup, sometimes seventy-five, that he distributed by the sinks of Block 12. Francophile, he helped up to thirty-five French detainees and many other fellow prisoners from various nationalities.

On April 4 1944, Father Gruber was arrested. Meanwhile, his lawyer friend was shot in his Vienna apartment by the Gestapo and all the members of Gruber's network were captured.

Father Gruber was tortured for three days. On Friday 7 April, at 3 o'clock in the morning, he « committed suicide » with the help of the camp commandant Seidler who strangled him concealing his crime as a suicide. His body was found hung on a butcher's hook. As he was the member of the Austrian Resistance's network, he never said a word.

When his death was officially announced, everybody observed a minute of silence. Many detainees cried on that particular day.

Later on, the SS administration spoke of the embezzlement of dental gold and of foreign currency carried on behalf of others within the inside lining of clothes. The detainees never forgot Johann Gruber and nicknamed him the Giant of Gusen. To Cayrol, a fellow prisoner interned in the camp who was looking for resting his soul, he replied: « As for the soul, you'll think about it later. First, you need to eat. » He used to say to one of his companions in adversity: « Surviving is the only form of resistance in a concentration camp (Bernadac, 1969 ; Rousseau-Rambaud, 2012). »

The chalice of Dachau

Upon the liberation of the Dachau camp, following the advice of the Archbishop of Munich, a chalice was poured, a special chalice. The priest, who founded the chalice, used gold discovered in the « Canadas », that is to say the gold taken from the detainees who died in the crematorium: rings, jewels, eyeglass frames but also from teeth « recovered » in the morgue (Bernadac, 1969)...

Copper teeth from Birkenau

« Each day during summer 1943, in Birkenau, detainees would come to propose us some cigarettes and alcohol for brilliants, dollars, watches, gold dentures and other valuable objects gathered after the gassing operations. » Hence, a significant traffic of valuable objects started. The aim: to survive.

« Our material and living conditions were deteriorating day by day. No matter how much the SS sentries, who were on duty below the barbed wire next to the crematorium, tried to call upon us more and more often to propose us all sorts of commodities as well as tobacco and vodka, we had nothing left to exchange.

Once, Fisher, the service assistant of dissection had a brilliant idea which aimed at putting an end to our resource shortage. Indeed, he put forward the idea of organizing the dealing of yellow copper on a very large scale. This was not difficult for, in the stockroom of Crematorium V, there was a great quantity of light bulbs whose screw threads were made in yellow copper like the lamp sockets. Meanwhile, Fischer made a few casts aiming at producing gold dental crowns that he recovered with a thin layer of yellow copper just the way it was supposed to. Then he pounded the material and removed the crowns from their casts. For my part, I only had to fill in the inside of the tooth with a viscous plaster layer and we could think that they were true gold teeth.

After making several fake teeth, I brought them to a man who was waiting for me next to the barbed wire section. All the SS sentries knew perfectly well that a detainee from the special commando was dealing gold teeth. Therefore, I drew near to the fence cautiously.

A sentry approached me. The barbed wire separating us, I lured him with a handful of fake gold teeth to check if his lust for money was genuine. He reached out his arm to give me a string of sausages, a loaf of bread and some packs of cigarettes. Then, I handed the teeth to him and ran back to the crematorium, a little anxious that he might have immediately stumbled on what had been going on. I closed the door behind me with relief. No-one would come to question the deal anymore.

When the secret of the making of our teeth was well-known, people rushed on the yellow copper. It was a real « gold fever » which did not spare anyone. It was inconceivable that the unprecedented development of such a dealing ended up smoothly. And yet, the SS were far from suspecting our trick. It was highly likely that the buyers of this gold, which was supposed to come from a theft, did not dare showing it to outsiders for valuation. Thanks to Fischer's brilliant idea, our painful living conditions in the special commando were significantly alleviated (Müller, 1980). »

Oskar Schindler's ring (1908-1974)

A German industrialist, member of the Nazi party and an incredibly opportunistic businessman, Oskar Schindler made a fortune in the making of enamelware and kitchen utensils in Krakow by employing Jewish forced labourers. Thanks to them and his income, he created his own factory that he named Deutsch Emailwaren Fabrik.

While witnessing the 1943 raid on the Krakow Ghetto, he was deeply appalled by his compatriots's violent acts and he endeavoured to save the lives of many Jews. With the help of his wife Emily and his Jewish accountant Itzhak Stern, he saved the lives of more than 1,100 detainees by buying them out from the SS and more particularly from the commander of the Plaszow camp, Amon Goethe and by bringing them to Czechoslovakia. There, he made them work in an armament factory in Zwittau-Brunnltitz. Upon arriving at Auschwitz, he pulled some strings and succeeded in saving his Jewish

female workers who had been mistakenly sent to an extermination camp by the Nazi administration. He never hesitated to use his charisma, his art of diplomacy and his skills to carry through his rescue actions. To this end, he devoted the entire part of his personal property.

He decided to purposely sink his production firstly to save the Jewish workers of his commando whose living conditions were much different from those of other camps for they were decently fed and treated. Secondly, he did not want to slow down the Allies' progress with his arms production.

At the end of the war, he emigrated to Argentina where he became a farmer. It was a failure. Therefore, he came back to his native land in 1958. There, he once again failed in industry. However, he kept in touch with the people he had saved.

He was awarded the title « Righteous among the Righteous » in 1993; his 1963 initial request had met a refusal.

When the Zwittau-Brinnlitz camp was liberated, his Jewish workers offered him a ring made from a gold prosthesis which had been extracted from a worker's mouth to thank him for having saved their lives. The industrialist would never take it off.

He died on October 9th 1974 and was buried in the Christian cemetery of Jerusalem (Keneally, 1982).

Men recovering dental gold just outside a gas chamber at Auschwitz (clandestine picture) (Panstwowe Museum Oswiecim, 2004).



Dentures from Auschwitz and boxes with dental gold from Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen (80,000 teeth) (Gedenkstätte Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen, 2003).



Gold ingots molten from gold teeth extracted from dead detainees in the concentration camps (Yad Vashem, 1995).



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