From the Umschlagplatz to The Wiener Holocaust Library: Maria and Maximillian Wortman's Last Letters

Christine Schmidt

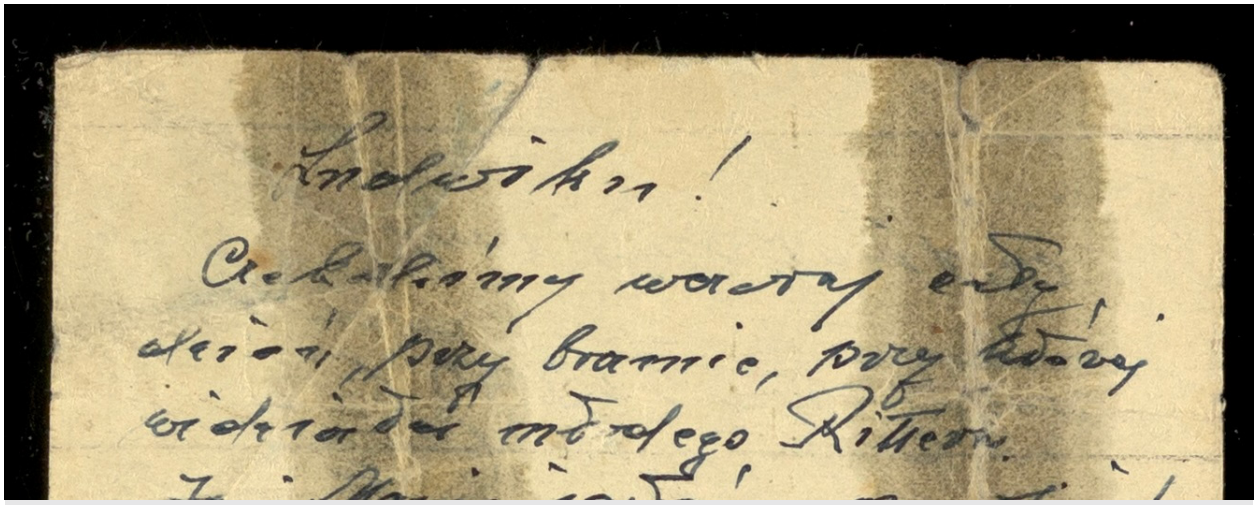

Fig. 1 Detail of Maria and Maximilian Wortman's letter from the Umschlagplatz to their relative, Ludwik. Estera "Dziunia" Markus (née Wortman) Collection. Wiener Holocaust Library (WHL) 2197.

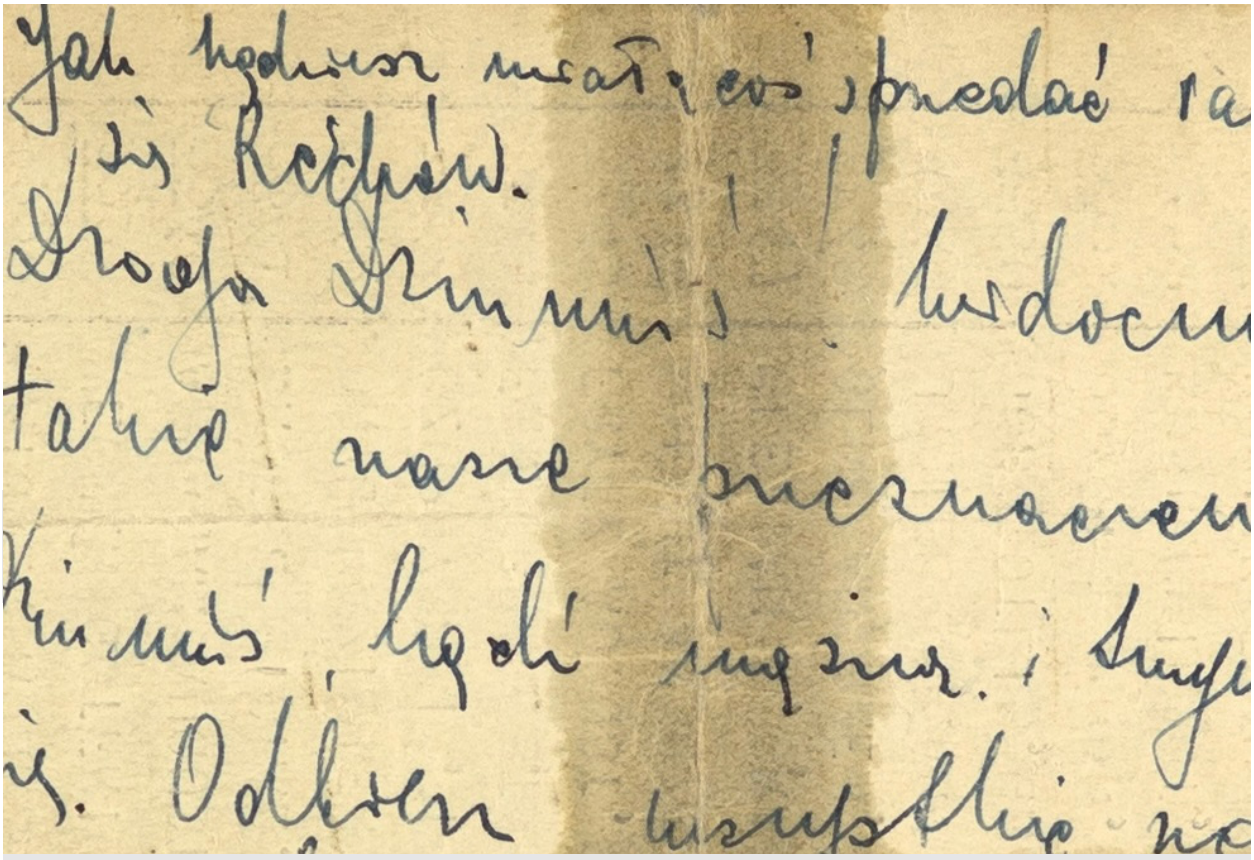

Fig. 2 Detail of Maria and Maximilian Wortman's letter from the Umschlagplatz to their daughter, Dziunia. Estera "Dziunia" Markus (née Wortman) Collection. Wiener Holocaust Library (WHL) 2197.

1 In September 1942, in the Warsaw ghetto in German-occupied Poland, Maria and Maximilian Wortman hastily wrote a letter to their daughter, Dziunia, from whom they had become separated; they also wrote to a relative, Ludwik, whom they hoped might deliver Dziunia's letter. The couple had been selected for deportation to the death camp Treblinka, and they were gathered on the *Umschlagplatz*, the railway siding from where the deportation trains departed. Their final words to their daughter are written on the reverse of a scrap of paper, a list no larger than 11 x 15 cm.

2 The first letter to Ludwik reads:

> Ludwik! We have waited all day yesterday next to the gate where you have seen young Ritter. I and Maria are on the official Judenrat [Jewish Council] list and have with us the official numbers. We found ourselves here accidentally. Ludwik, please do what you can. Come out for a moment to see us! We are waiting! We have money. Ludwik, we beg you. If there is no return for us, take care of Dziunia. We are the only ones she has left. Max and Maria.[1]

3 The second, partially coded letter to Dziunia reads:

> When you will have to sell anything ask Recks for advice . . .
>
> Dear Dziunius! Obviously this is our fate. Dziunius, be brave and cope. Collect everything from Halber and sell gradually. At the office, there are 2 rucksacks and father's coat, second at home. There is food in the rucksacks and in the oven. Collect everything. Butter is in the wardrobe. Dziunius, farewell and go courageously into life! Regards for all.

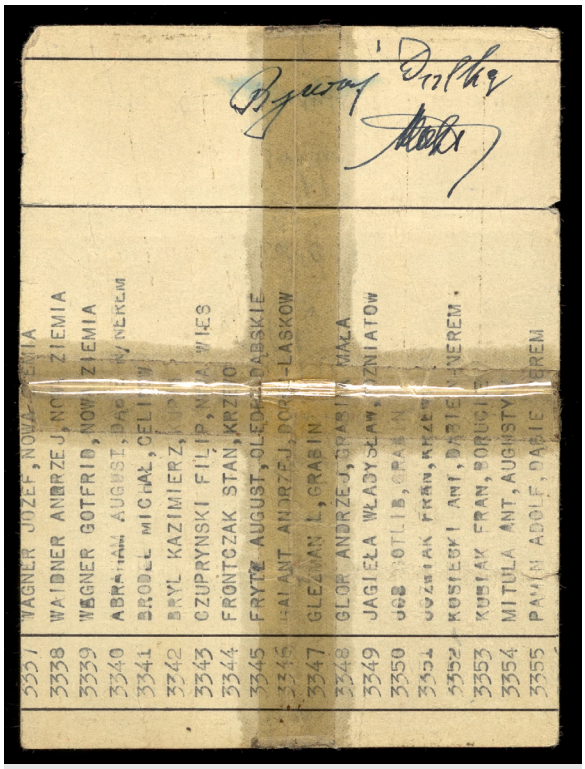

Fig. 3 Father's signature on the reverse of the letter to Ludwik. Estera "Dziunia" Markus (née Wortman) Collection. Wiener Holocaust Library (WHL) 2197.

4 The size of the two letters and the reuse of scraps of paper speak to the desperation, violence, and urgency of the genocidal context in which they were penned as well as the severe material shortages in the ghetto. The letters did reach their intended recipient, Dziunia, who survived, although their courier, Ludwik, did not. When he learned later that his wife and daughter were also taken to the Umschlagplatz, he tried to intervene on their behalf. After he was told he could see them, he was selected for deportation too.

5 The archive of the Wiener Holocaust Library has become the letters' final resting place, their storage in acid-free and water-protective folders and boxes speaking to the continued reverence with which Holocaust-related flat objects (documentation) are treated by archivists and conservators, and our ability to access them, interpret them and respond to them through their preservation.[2] The Wiener Holocaust Library in London is one of the oldest institutions continuously collecting on the Nazi period and the Holocaust. The Library was founded in 1933 by its namesake, the German Jewish scholar and activist, Dr. Alfred Wiener, as he recognized the dangers posed by the Nazi Party and their allies and began collecting and disseminating information to undermine their activities. In 1933, Wiener moved these efforts to Amsterdam and created the Library's predecessor organization, the Jewish Central Information Office (JCIO), to continue gathering documentation and to launch information campaigns to fight the Nazis. After the November Pogrom (*Kristallnacht*) of November 1938, Wiener and the JCIO moved again, this time to London, where the institution has remained in operation through today. It has served as a library of record for ninety years and is home to the largest collection of Holocaust-related documentation and published works in the United Kingdom. Among these are a significant number of personal document collections, which include tens of thousands of pages of personal correspondence exchanged before, during, and after the Holocaust. This includes the Wortman letters.

6 Thanks to Mike Stratton, a family friend of Dziunia's and the donor of these pages, we know more about their afterlife, the paths the letters traveled to the archive, and the material connectivity between the writers, the courier, the recipients, the donor, and the archive. Dziunia interprets the letter her parents sent her in a transcribed interview, kept and donated by Stratton, along with her documents:

> My parents were trying to tell [Ludwik] that they had money, that maybe he could do something to get them out of the train. You see, my father writes here that they are on the official list and that they have a number. If you had a number you thought that you were safe at the time and that you could do something. . . . That's my mother's writing. When you look at these letters, from those few words you could see that my mother was the stronger one. The way she writes, her hope always was for me. She tells me to be brave and tells me certain things, where the money was (she calls it *masło*, or butter in English). She comes up much stronger, but in real life she was the quieter one of the two. My father was very boisterous. But out of this comes her courage, she was stronger. She knew what was going to happen because she tells me to be brave.

7 Dziunia did not wish to part with the letters during her lifetime, and as Stratton recalled, "she always kept these letters on her—they were the soul and spirit of her parents." Both she and Stratton understood the potential sacrality of the letters for the recipient as well as for future readers of these objects. She reminded Stratton that he was the executor of her will, and that it

was for him to decide their ultimate fate after her death. In her interview she recounts nearly becoming separated from the letters:

> For many years I always had them on me, wherever I went. If I changed my handbag, I always kept these things with me. For some reason, I don't know why, one day I took the things out and left them at home. A few days later my handbag was stolen. Somebody walked in here, into the house, and stole the handbag. Just about two or three days before I had taken those letters out. Isn't it strange?

8 Dziunia engaged the letters in a kind of haptic veneration, imbuing them with a visceral sacrality that required their being physically close at all times. The fact that their oft-used holder, her handbag, was stolen just after she removed the letters adds to the uncanny significance of her need for physical proximity to the letters, as a kind of stand-in for her parents. The need for proximity makes sense, since the letters are saturated with the last traces of her parents' hands, the words they wrote on these scraps of paper, but then over time, imbued with her own presence, the way she continued to hold, read, and touch these pages over and over again from when Ludwik passed the letters to her in 1942 until her death in October 2015. As handwritten documents, the letters speak to a material intimacy between the writers and their recipient, and in their immediacy and bodily traces, stand in actual and metaphoric opposition to the vast amounts of state and privately produced, bureaucratic documentation that undergirded the mass expropriation, deportation, and murder of millions of victims.[3]

9 The meanings attributed to these letters did not end, however, with Dziunia's death or their storage in the archive. Through preservation, translation, curation, and display for the public, they took on new interpretation and meaning in 2023. I consider letters as objects, and understand that their afterlives, as Laura Levitt notes, "help us make meaning as they transform the profane into the sacred."[4] These letters had been displayed and interpreted in the Holocaust Letters temporary exhibition at The Wiener Holocaust Library in 2023, which I co-curated with Sandra Lipner. While personal letters are very often featured in Holocaust and other exhibitions, including those held at the Library, letters, postal history, and letter-writing during the Holocaust are rarely a singular focus as such of Holocaust exhibitions.[5] The exhibition focused on letters from the Library's archive derived from its personal document collections, which were often preserved in the first instance by refugees and survivors who had migrated to the United Kingdom and who eventually entrusted the Library with their collections.[6] The exhibition had two main curatorial themes that drove our choices: knowledge production and materiality. We explored how private correspondence written before, during, and after the Holocaust became sites of knowledge production, as well as how the materiality of letters reveals deeper meanings about their content and the mediation of archives in the production of knowledge. By curating and displaying personal, both typewritten and handwritten letters, the exhibition explored notions of authenticity, uniqueness, and voice.[7] The Wortman letters had never before been displayed in one of the Library's many temporary exhibitions, and Sandra and I chose them from among thousands and thousands of pages of letters in the Library's collections because we wanted to emphasize the importance of reading the materiality of letters (and their afterlives) as much as the words written on paper in order to access multiple layers of meaning held by objects. The curators aimed to reinforce the unique nature of individual stories, with a main underlying curatorial message to emphasize the importance of private letters as a source for research and as "tangible markers of conflict experience and, by association, as carriers of memory" in similar

ways to photographs and other personal objects.[8] Unlike photographs and personal objects, letters "carry voice through time and space."[9]

10 Moreover, as curators, we recognized and built our work on a significant body of new epistolary-centered academic research, both from within the field of Holocaust and Jewish studies, as well as in other historical eras, and from many different disciplinary, methodological, and thematic perspectives—including material culture and literary studies, anthropology, digital humanities, philatelic and postal history, and so on.[10] Therefore, the exhibition built on scholarship on the history of knowledge as well as on letters as a source, and positioned letters as objects, a somewhat contested notion in the literature.[11] The exhibition queried how the visual and physical features of letters, as well as their safeguarding, contribute to our understanding of these as sites of knowledge production and as objects in their own right. In the words of Zuzanna Dziuban and Ewa Stańczyk, we approached the letters as "surviving things" that "remain imbued with affect, permeated with memories (both actual and constructed), and burdened with conflicting narratives of the past."[12]

11 The Wortman letters provide a window onto the multiple aims of the exhibition and our curatorial questions, and the Interrogating the Sacred workshop helped frame my further thinking about these letters following the conclusion of the exhibition. In addition to their materiality, we also selected the Wortman letters for the exhibition because their content and physical characteristics speak of urgency and desperation, as well as tremendous love and care in extremis. They were among the few letters displayed written in Polish (much of the Library's collection is in German, due to its history as an institution borne of forced migration from pre-war Nazi Germany). Yet, mirroring in many ways the discussions we had with conservators at the USHMM workshop, this evocative materiality also presented us with challenges for display—the paper is very fragile, with messages written on both sides, and due to the limitations of the display case and need for security and conservation protections, we couldn't devise a mechanism for allowing visitors to simply handle them and turn them over. Because we wanted to ensure that visitors could examine their markings, size, and both sides as closely and safely (for the letters) as possible, we worked with Easy Tiger Creative to develop a display method that showed the reverse side etched onto a light acrylic base, which was backlit within a locked glass case (Fig. 4). This display base for the letters, which also held their translations, was simple, unadorned, and presented no distraction from other objects in the case. It was the only set of letters displayed on their own in a case, although the exhibition itself contained hundreds of pages of letters. The framing interpretive panel discussed how remarkably precise Holocaust knowledge emerged from letters people wrote to each other even before the terms "Holocaust" or "genocide" were applied. We told the story of the letters' writing at the Umschlagplatz briefly near the letters and left the interpretive rail purposefully blank—allowing the letters the "space" needed for close inspection, reflection, further interpretation, meaning making, and even wonder.

Fig. 4 An image of the two pages of letters sent by Dziunia's parents in the display case during the exhibition installation.

12 The Wortman letters also embodied in many ways my own affective reaction to their contents and afterlife: to the plight of parents separated brutally from their child before facing a violent unknown, and to Dziunia's legacy of grappling with her mother's courage in that moment, which upon reflection, revealed to her the quiet strength she had demonstrated throughout her life. The thought of saying goodbye to a child as they face the unknown with a slim hope that she would survive is nearly impossible and utterly unbearable to imagine.

13 While on display, the letters took on further new meanings alongside correspondence drafted in different contexts and often similarly extreme circumstances: ordinary or insignificant objects rendered extraordinary.[13] The letters make visceral the story of Dziunia's parents, their care for her even in the face of death. These documents traveled an incredible journey from the Umschlagplatz to Dziunia and continued with her over a lifetime as she escaped from the Warsaw ghetto, was transported to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, liberated, and emigrated to England following the war. The letters came to the Wiener Holocaust Library. Among the many other documents we have displayed in exhibitions at the Library, these letters made explicit how important personal Holocaust-era documents are as witnesses to lives lived, destroyed, and cherished. I realize now more keenly than I did then that these tiny fragments of fragile paper hold the last traces of those lives.

Citation Guide

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Notes

1. I would like to thank Zofia Glowacka for checking the English-language translations of the letters.

2. This discussion is prompted by Laura Levitt's *The Objects that Remain* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020). The author is grateful to the co-convenors (Levitt and Oren Stier) and participants of the lively and thought-provoking two-week workshop, Interrogating the Sacred at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM).

3. See, for example, the millions of pages of largely bureaucratic documentation held in the International Tracing Service archive, now known as the Arolsen Archives.

4. Levitt, *The Objects That Remain*, 123. My analysis of these letters was further developed through the Interrogating the Sacred workshop. I am thinking here in particular of the close perspectives the workshop's participants gained of conservation principles and practices, their particular malleability and responsiveness to various conditions and circumstances, wonderfully presented by the USHMM's team as well as USHMM Chief Conservator Jane Klinger, and the inherent tensions and balances needed between conservation, research, display, and interpretation. Through the two weeks of tours, intense discussions, and incisive group reflections, the workshop reinforced the need for close collaborative work built on significant trust among those who handle or otherwise engage with Holocaust objects: object donors and their families, heritage practitioners, curators, archivists, collections managers, conservators, researchers, educators, and so on. The workshop helped reinforce and deepen my understanding of letters as objects, and the multitude of meanings carried in their materiality.

5. Often framed as the last tangible links between victims, as forms of resistance, or descriptions of displacement and survival, letters exceptionally formed the basis of Yad Vashem's virtual exhibition series Last Letters, see here (last accessed 6 March 2024). For a helpful discussion of the display of handwritten texts in museums, see Chaim Noy, "Voices on display: Handwriting, paper, and authenticity, from museums to social network sites," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 26, no. 5-6 (2019): 1-18. My thanks to the

anonymous reviewer for recommending Noy's work.

6. Howard Falksohn, "The Wiener Library: A Repository of Schicksale," in *Refugee Archives: Theory and Practice, ed. Andrea Hammel and Anthony Grenville* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 27-40.

7. Noy, "Voices on display," 4.

8. Zuzanna Dziuban and Ewa Stańczyk, "Introduction: The Surviving Thing: Personal Objects in the Aftermath of Violence," *Journal of Material Culture* 24, no. 4 (December 2020): 381-390.

9. Noy, "Voices on display," 5.

10. See, for example, Eliyana Adler, *Survival on the Margins: Polish Jewish Refugees in the Wartime Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020); Shirli Gilbert, "A Cache of Family Letters and the Historiography of the Holocaust: Interpretive Reflections," *The Journal of Holocaust Research* 36, no. 4 (2021): 281-298, and Shirli Gilbert, *From Things Lost: Forgotten Letters and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009); Leora Auslander and Tara Zahra, eds. *Objects of War: The Material Culture of Conflict and Displacement* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018). For a complete bibliography on which the scholarship of the exhibition was drawn, see here.

11. Peter Burke, *What is the History of Knowledge?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015); on "flat" objects, see Lea David, "A Shoe, a Broken Watch, and Marbles: How Objects Shape our Memory and Future," Wiener Wiesenthal Institute Lecture, Vienna, 28 April 2022, and Raul Hilberg, Chapter 1, "Types of Sources," in *Sources of Holocaust Research: An Analysis* (Chicago: Ivan R Dee, 2001).

12. Dziuban and Stańczyk, "Introduction," 381.

13. Leora Auslander, "Archiving a Life: Post-Shoah Paradoxes of Memory Legacies," in *Unsettling History: Archiving and Narrating in Historiography*, ed. Sebastian Jobs and Alf Lüdtke (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2010), 139.

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