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Auschwitz Museum Publishes Prisoner Sketchbook: Witness to Extermination... By Alex Macbeth. Spiegel, January 17 2012

... Collections of the Auschwitz Memorial

Found hidden away in a bottle, the Auschwitz Memorial Museum has published sketches drawn by a prisoner at the Birkenau extermination camp. They provide a rare first-hand glimpse of life and death inside. The book is part of the museum's plans to launch a catalogue of 6,000 artworks in its archives.

The sketches are chilling -- prisoners arriving at a concentration camp, children being torn from their parents' arms, a guard casually smoking outside a gas chamber as bodies are loaded into a truck. The images, recently published in a book by the Auschwitz Memorial Museum, were taken from a unique sketchbook drawn around 1943 at the Birkenau camp. A former prisoner working as a watchman discovered the 32 sketches in a bottle near the death camp's crematorium in 1947.

"The Sketchbook from Auschwitz" includes the 22 pages of drawings from an unknown prisoner whose initials were apparently MM. They represent a rare first-hand historical account of the Holocaust. "These sketches are the only work of art made in Birkenau that depict exterminations," museum spokesman Pawel Sawicki told SPIEGEL ONLINE.

While the circumstances make it hard to identify or trace the author, details in the images themselves provide several clues as to when they were created. The main gate at Birkenau, for example, is depicted before an extension was added.

"The second wing of the main gate was built between 1943 and 1944, but is absent from the sketches. Thus we concluded that the sketches were drawn in 1943 or before. From our records we believe that the author would have worked in the hospital sector or gathering luggage from the ramp," Sawicki explained.

'Witness to Extermination'

The most striking aspects of the sketches in the book are the minute detail and the artist's emphasis on presenting documentary evidence. "You can clearly see that the author was determined to present the largest number of details," Agnieszka Sieradzka, an art historian with the museum and the author of the book wrote in a statement. "Badges of functionary prisoners, number plates of the trucks, train cars on the

ramp as well as block numbers are carefully depicted. The author of the sketchbook hoped that someone would find his work so that it would become a witness to extermination."

The Polish-English publication, launched by the Auschwitz archives on Jan. 16, is part of a larger commemorative project being undertaken by the museum. "The publication of the sketchbook is part of the museum's efforts to make more and more material from our archives available online," Sawicki said. The images were released to mark this year's 70th anniversary of the start of exterminations in the gas chambers at Birkenau.

This spring the museum, which received a record 1.4 million visitors in 2011, is also planning to publish a catalogue containing images from the 6,000 or so works of art preserved in its archive collection.