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## Editor's Desk

### Kristallnacht sets context for *any* Nazi-produced art

By Elana Kahn-Oren

This morning, I stood in the vast space of the Jewish Museum Milwaukee and held an artifact, a telegram sent on Oct. 4, 1944. Contained in a plastic sheath, the Western Union message was addressed to Milwaukeean Edward Weinschel.

It read: "WE RECEIVED FOLLOWING NOTICE FASCIST MURDERERS KILLED OUR PARENTS SISTERS BROTHER ALL CHILDREN KILLED AM WITH BROTHER WAR INVALID...."

Standing in the bare, uncarpeted room that will soon fill with exhibits, I felt the shattering. Again.

I am not new to Holocaust education; but still, I crumble. For me, a second generation American with deep and strong Jewish roots — I attended Holocaust lectures during Jewish summer camp and role-played about the Shoah with my Jewish youth group — still, the Holocaust is impossible to fathom.

I imagine Edward Weinschel receiving that telegram and the unimaginable again becomes real. A man sending a telegram to another man about his family's murder.

Five years earlier, the signs of an organized campaign to kill Jews were not subtle. On Friday, Nov. 9, 1938, Jews awoke to the sound of shattering glass as thousands of synagogues, Jewish homes and businesses were damaged or destroyed.

After just a few hours of violence, German streets were carpeted with glass. Storm troopers killed some 100 Jews. About 30,000 Jews were sent to Buchenwald, Dachau and Sachsenhausen, where hundreds died within weeks of arrival. The massive pogroms across Germany and part of Austria came to be known as Kristallnacht, "Night of Broken Glass."

In the 69 years since Kristallnacht, the Jewish world has devoted itself to remembering. As our survivors pass away, our children will be the first generation to live without first-hand witnesses of the Holocaust. Transmitting that history is more urgent than ever.

But the Holocaust is not only a story of Jewish tragedy; it is human history and it belongs in every history book and every school curriculum. Eleven million people were killed in the Holocaust — Jews, Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Gypsies, Communists, Socialists, homosexuals and the disabled.

Learning about the Shoah is critical not only



because, as philosopher George Santayana said, "Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it." Holocaust education can also be a tool to build healthy, tolerant societies.

By looking carefully at the Shoah — as individuals and as groups — we may peer inward and explore ideas such as diversity and tolerance, fear and conformity, and the depths of human evil.

#### Don't ignore history

Such learning is not a mere cultural choice but a requirement of modern societies. No discussion of Europe from 1933, when the Nazis took power, through the 1940s would be complete, fair or honest without an explanation of the Nazis and the piles of human bodies they left in their wake.

This is a relevant message for Milwaukee's newest cultural addition, The Milwaukee School of Engineering's Grohmann Museum, which opened on Saturday, Oct. 27.

The museum, which focuses on people and labor, does not have the luxury to highlight the work of artist Erich Mercker without providing context for his relationship with the Third Reich.

Mercker was hired by Adolf Hitler to highlight the magnificence of the Third Reich. As reported by Whitney Gould and Mary Louise Schumacher in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, one of Mercker's works in the collection "shows laborers cutting stone bound for the Chancellery in Berlin, the Reich's seat of

power, and others depicting bridges of the autobahn, one of Hitler's proudest achievements."

After the fall of Hitler's regime, the European art community shunned Mercker's work. But local collector Eckhart G. Grohmann is drawing new attention to the artist and defending his work for its value as a representation of human labor.

"When you have a government that wants to show the world how great they are in this kind of bragging thing, you can't blame the artist," Grohmann was quoted in the monthly magazine, "Wisconsin Builder."

But you also cannot ignore his history or the role of his work as Nazi propaganda. Yes, there are no swastikas on the works displayed. But still, Mercker painted the bright strokes of Nazi infrastructure and ignored the death camps, gas chambers and mass graves.

I am neither an art historian nor a museum curator and I have not yet visited the Grohmann Museum. But I do know that to display the work of a propagandist and not provide context is unfair to students, museum visitors and the memory of 11 million people murdered by Mercker's employer.

For the sake of human dignity and historical honesty, for the sake of Edward Weinschel and the victims of Kristallnacht, the museum is obligated to reveal the roots of Mercker's work and let that be part of the conversation.