Stories of Survival

OBJECT · IMAGE · MEMORY

A new travelling exhibition from the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center

When you’ve lost everything, a single object can take on extraordinary meaning.
ABOUT THE EXHIBITION:

A teddy bear, a set of house keys, a typewriter – everyday objects that ordinarily provide convenience or comfort take on deeper meaning and become storytellers, in their own right, when they are remnants left from a world destroyed. Stories of Survival: Object. Image. Memory. reflects upon the individual stories of 59 Survivors of the Holocaust and genocides and conflicts including Armenia, Bosnia, Cambodia, Iraq and Syria, Rwanda, and South Sudan, told through objects, photographs and personal reflections. Created by the Illinois Holocaust Museum and award-winning photographer Jim Lommasson, the exhibition includes large-format photographic prints of precious objects from a Survivor, on which the Survivor or their family member(s) reflect on the objects’ meaning directly on the print. The photographs are exhibited adjacent to the physical artifacts with text labels that present a period photograph of the Survivor, inviting audiences to explore how time and distance influence meaning and experience of these objects and their stories.

Through the objects and handwritten memories, themes of childhood, home, culture, and religious practice, but also war, violence, displacement, and exile emerge. These stories of survival resulting from incomprehensible inhumanity represent shared human experiences despite differences of time and place: experiences of resilience and courage, the fragility of life, family history, and hope for the future. The exhibition inspires visitors to reflect on their own families’ stories of immigration, the meaning behind their keepsakes and heirlooms, and the common experiences of people as they made their way to a new home. It also draws connections between genocides throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, prodding visitors to ask why the promise of “never again” remains unfulfilled.

The Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center in Skokie, Illinois (12 miles north of the city center of Chicago) is the third largest Holocaust Museum in the world, founded by Holocaust Survivors in response to neo-Nazi activities in Skokie in 1978. With the mission to “remember the past and transform the future,” the exhibition draws from the Museum’s significant collection of artifacts from Holocaust Survivors, while also pulling from rich connections with other genocide-affected communities. After hosting Jim Lommasson’s exhibition What We Carried: Stories by Iraqi Refugees, which shared reflections on Iraqi refugees’ beloved objects from their homeland, the Museum and Lommasson partnered to create an exhibition that expanded that vision to the experience of Holocaust and genocide Survivors. Stories of Survival is a scalable exhibition and can be adapted to the needs of museums and libraries and comes with educator materials, a family guide, docent scripts, and a beautiful companion catalogue. As part of the exhibition, the Illinois Holocaust Museum has partnered with the Tenement Museum, New York on its “Your Story, Our Story” web platform, which encourages visitors to photograph and share a family object and its significance on social media. Borrowing institutions can continue to contribute to this web platform.

CONTENTS:
Exhibition Components:
• 65-28 x 40” framed photographs
• Accompanying artifacts
• Digital files for overview texts and object labels
• Audiovisual component (equipment must be provided by hosting institution)
• Exhibition catalog (available for purchase)
• “Your Story, Our Story” web platform

The exhibition is available in two sizes:

Full size – Approximately 3,500 square feet; 325 running feet
• 65 framed photographs
• 30 objects, subject to condition of the object

Alternate size – Approximately 1,800 square feet; 160 running feet
• 32 framed photographs
• 15 objects, subject to condition of the object

The exhibition is also available solely with the framed photographs and without objects, as requested. Please contact the Museum for more information.

Accompanying Materials:
• Press kit (including high resolution images and exhibition style-guide)
• Educational materials including a family guide, pre- and post-visit packets for Jewish educators and secular educators, docent tour scripts for field trips and adult groups

Venue Requirements:
• Monitored and environmentally controlled gallery space;
  AAM General Facilities Report required for review

Exhibition Fees:
Full size:
• $40,000 rental fee + incoming shipping
• Travel and accommodation for IHMEC Registrar during install and deinstall
• Travel and accommodation for IHMEC Curator for opening event and/or docent trainings (optional)

Alternate size:
• $20,000 rental fee + incoming shipping
• Travel and accommodation for IHMEC Registrar during install and deinstall
• Travel and accommodation for IHMEC Curator for opening event and/or docent trainings (optional)

Rental fees for the exhibition with only the photographs are available upon request.

AVAILABILITY:
Beginning February 2019

ABOUT THE ILLINOIS HOLOCAUST MUSEUM & EDUCATION CENTER:
Illinois Holocaust Museum honors the Survivors and victims of the Holocaust and transforms history into current, relevant, and universal lessons in humanity. Through world-class exhibitions and programs, the Museum inspires people and provides a universal wake-up call to action: Take history to heart. Take a stand for humanity.

ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER:

PLEASE DIRECT ALL INQUIRIES TO:
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Installation Images

Stories of Survival
OBJECT · IMAGE · MEMORY

My name is Sasa Lewis and I am the person on the right side of this photograph, taken in 1946. My sister Dora Winiarz, is pictured on the left. No person was more responsible for my surviving the Holocaust than my sister.
Stories of Survival

OBJECT · IMAGE · MEMORY

Selected Object Images

Mirsad Causevic’s Recipes (Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1992)
On loan courtesy of Mirsad Causevic

“Things I managed to save from the camp: writing recipes, learning German, “cigar holder”...For writing we used aluminum foil and wrappings from cigarette boxes, which we received every second week from the Red Cross. When we didn’t have scheduled work detail we tried to occupy our minds as we wiled away the time inside the barn. Someone came up with the idea to use paper from cigarette box to write culinary recipes. Writing recipes of various dishes, we tried to fool our psyche and our hungry stomachs. While doing so we imagined eating this food.” — Mirsad Causevic

Domino Set of Olga Weiss (Brussels, Belgium, 1943)
Gift of Olga Weiss, in memory of Reginé and Jacques Kirschenbaum

“This domino set was given to me by “St. Nicholas” (the counterpart of Santa Claus), on December 6, 1943, when I was 7 years old. December 6 was the traditional date when St. Nicholas came down the chimney with gifts for Belgian children. At that time, I was hidden with my parents in a small town outside of Brussels. Because I was attending a Catholic school (under a false name), my parents wanted to be sure that I, like the other children, had received a gift from St. Nicholas, who by the way, wrote his name on the outside of the box, together with mine.” — Olga Weiss

Domino Set of Othman Al Ani (Baghdad, Iraq, 1992)
On loan courtesy of Othman Al Ani

“I brought this dominoes with me from Baghdad because it’s mean the great times I spent with my friends. I chose this dominoes from all other stuff because I know those old times may not back again. When I went to see my friends for last time before leaving my country, they gave this dominoes to me to keep it with me to remind me about all great times we spent together.” — Othman Al Ani

Mirsad Causevic’s Recipes

Irma Schwarz’s Cookbook (Germany, 1930s)
Gift of Ellen Vogel Glass and Ruth Vogel Glick

“Tante (Aunt) Irma was my mother’s older sister. As a young girl she went to work in the kitchen of a nearby resort. There she was introduced to gourmet recipes for her handwritten cookbook. Thus she became a fabulous cook. But after immigrating to Milwaukee, Wisconsin in May 1939, with our extended family, she only would cook for her husband and son. Unfortunately her only child, Arnold Schwarz passed away in 1948 at age 18 of acute Leukemia. As was the custom, single girls started their own handwritten recipe books and added on throughout their life. My mother, Hannah Vogel also had such a book, which I still treasure.” — Ellen Vogel Glass
An electric train set taken out of Germany by Jews fleeing the Holocaust.

A set of playing cards made from an empty box of crackers by concentration camp inmates in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Dresses and a cardigan sweater worn by two sisters — both children — who did not survive killings in Rwanda.

These precious items and dozens more like them have been gathered in a haunting exhibit opening July 19 at the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center in Skokie: “Stories of Survival: Object. Image. Memory.” The objects bear witness to the toll of genocide, a term coined to characterize the Holocaust but applicable to humanity’s seemingly never-ending campaigns to erase identity.

Which is the point of the exhibition: to remind us all that when one group of people is marked as different, alien, unwanted, less human, the result can be cataclysmic.

“Stories of Survival” imparts this lesson in intensely human terms. For rather than cite epic histories and copious figures, it brings us personal, closely held possessions: clothes, toys, photographs, letters, recipes and other seemingly ordinary items that the survivors of genocide — or their loved ones — managed to cling to.

Each item appears alongside a large photograph of it by Jim Lommasson, plus a handwritten description by a survivor or family member about the object’s meaning.

Conceived in anticipation of the museum’s 10th anniversary next year, “Stories of Survival” will serve as the institution’s first touring exhibition. From the outset, it was designed to explore not only the Holocaust but other genocides.

“Sadly, refugees and immigration has been in the news for far too long when we have millions of people displaced worldwide,” says Susan Abrams, CEO of the Illinois Holocaust Museum.

“This is a universal story. And Chicago is a city and Illinois a state of immigrants. So we should all understand that and have empathy. This (exhibition) is a way for us to communicate that.

“We want people to be able to walk in somebody else’s shoes, make that discovery for themselves. Not to be told it — but to feel it and experience it.” It’s impossible not to feel the human cost of genocide when you look at these items, which were cherished by people who lost those close to them or who never survived themselves. Each object represents an eye-opening narrative.

“It was important for us to show people that these everyday items are imbued with such importance when they are the only things you have left,” says Shoshana Buchholz-Miller, the museum’s vice president of education and exhibitions. “They’re not sentimental.”

All the Holocaust-related items were drawn from the museum’s collection, but because the museum does not gather materials from other genocides, staff needed to look elsewhere for the rest.

“We contacted the different communities through longstanding partnerships we’ve had because of programming and outreach to other institutions,” says Arielle Weininger, chief curator of collections and exhibitions.

“They sort of self-selected who would participate, and we asked them to offer up whatever was appropriate.”

Thus the exhibition encompasses genocides from Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, the Holocaust, Iraq, Rwanda, South Sudan and Syria.

To look deeper into the stories behind some of the items, we visited four of the survivors whose possessions are included in the exhibit and asked each the same questions: What happened? Why did you save these objects? Why is there genocide? How has this experience changed you?

Their testimonies (edited here for clarity and space) illuminate their heroism, not only for what they endured but for their willingness to share their histories with a world that doesn’t always want to listen.

In the end, their stories reaffirm that they themselves were the objects of genocide.
Ralph Rehbock
Born: Gothia, Germany
Nationality: Germany (Holocaust)
Object saved: Toy train set; 1938

What happened? In 1933, Hitler came to power. He realized that the German Jews that he would like to have left had not. So he passed the Nuremberg Laws. How did the Nuremberg Laws affect us? My father’s passport was taken away. My father’s driver’s license (was taken). My father’s job as a dental internee (was taken) because she was working for a non-Jewish dentist, and that was against the Nuremberg Laws.

Early in ’38, my parents decided that they needed to make contact with the family in Chicago, to see if they might be willing to sponsor us. My father said to my mother: “You go because they’re your relatives.”

So she, God bless her, was a goose lady, and she went to America, to Chicago, all by herself, by boat. She told what was going on in Germany and said (to relatives) that if you are willing, we would like to have an alliance of support from you, and I will take it back to Germany, and turn it into the American Consulate.

We were told that a date had been set for us at the American Consulate on the 10th of November, 1938. The three of us left our home, went to Berlin on the 9th, because we didn’t want to be late for our appointment on the 10th.

The night of the 9th, we looked out of our hotel window, and a synagogue which happened to be located across the street from our hotel was burning (the start of Kristallnacht, the “Night of Broken Glass”).

We didn’t know at that time, of course, that our synagogue in our hometown, six houses away, was also being burned at the same time. They came for my father in our hometown. And a young teenage girl who was house-sitting for us, a Jewish girl, could have said: “He’s in such-and-such a hotel, in room number so-and-so.” She didn’t.

She said, I don’t know. She immediately made a collect phone call to my father in the hotel room where they were staying, because she knew where that was. And they had a coded message that they had created between them saying that if someone were to happen into the house, she was supposed to say, in German, “The English lesson has been canceled.” Which had nothing to do with an English lesson, but it told my father that he should not come home again.

Surely it is the evening of the 9th, when all the other things were happening, the streets were also being burned, and why it was called the “Night of Broken Glass.”

So the next morning, which was the 10th of November, 1938, we came downtown to see the hotel, and a sign went up: No Jews allowed.

And we went on to the consulate, and all day long there was paperwork, paperwork, paperwork. And at 5 o’clock the next day, the mañana, the nurse, the American consul clerk, said: “We go home at 5 o’clock. Come back tomorrow.”

Well, we did come back tomorrow. But tomorrow was the 11th of November. The 11th of November was Armistic Day. The consulate was closed. A Marine guard took it upon himself to go into the town of Berlin, and went to the ambassador.

And he was willing to come back, open the gate for us, take us in and finish our visa so that we could leave. So Kristallnacht to us was very important in the sense that the teenage girl really saved my father, who otherwise would have been picked up with the other men that were arrested that night. And then that the Marine guard and the ambassador helped us. So now with that, together with the man in Chicago that was willing to do all the paperwork for us, we had four people that had interceded, and so we at the (Illinois Holocaust) Museum now call that being an upstander. They were upstanders.

So here it is now — the boat was leaving Southampton, England, on the 10th of December. My father, as my mother told it, sneaked on an airplane that he knew was going to England. And he got to England, and he got to his uncle’s house in England, and he waited for us.

My mother and I took a train to the Dutch border, and we were supposed to take another train from the Dutch border across Holland, (then go) across the English Channel, to ultimately get the boat to America. The people at the border, the Germans at the border, strip-searched us to make sure that there was nothing hidden and said to get dressed again and wait for the next train.

And a total stranger, number five now in our story, the total stranger came up to my mother and said: Don’t pay attention to them, come with me.

And she decided to take that route, rather than staying with the guys with the guns and the uniforms. And he (the stranger) knew a way of getting across the tracks into a local train on the Dutch side of the border. And since Holland was still a free country, that was then freedom.

And we went to his home, we got onto another train, we got across the English Channel, we got up with my father, and we took the boat on the 15th.

We got to New York on the 22nd of December, and a man was there to meet us and told us how to get to Chicago from there. We immediately went to Chicago and met up with the family that had sponsored us, and that’s how my father, my mother, and I — I got out of Germany.

Why did you save this object? My parents realized that two things were happening: One, that they were thinking of leaving, and then ultimately planned to leave; and what the opportunities were of what they could take with them.

They decided that something that would be important, besides some books and some (toy) blocks, would be important for me to have once we got to America was a Marklin train set.

My father bought that train set very close to the time that we were leaving, and it was part of what my mother packed up while he was in hiding, and then ultimately (flying) to England. So it was my mother that was doing all the packing into the container, and the train in its original box was sent to Chicago with the other belongings. We always had it in our house.

It means two things. It means that, one, my parents were very thoughtful, wanted something for me. Secondly, it is a connect with the first four years of my life, and the first 30-plus years of my parents’ life in Germany. I just felt that it was important for us to keep.

Why is there genocide? genocide only proves that the wars that we’ve had in past generations and through history, none of them were the war to end all wars, like was said about World War I. Ancient wars, to say nothing of wars based on religion, the Crusades, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, all those things happen because people had hate. Hate of one group or another.

And then it moved into the various ideologies, with the Armenians, and Bosnia and Darfur and now the hatred that’s shown in Europe to immigrants, even in Germany now, and some of our universities, where there’s now hatred for Israel and Jewish being expressed.

And so why is there that? And the why is that it’s, unfortunately, human nature that has presented itself in so many, many ways. Some political, some for religious regions. But it doesn’t seem to be made by politics — or anything else — to come to an end.

And that’s why we have to be so vigilant in protecting memory, so maybe people, particularly young people, can understand that if the early Nazis were bullies, the bullies of their day; and maybe they can understand why bullying in today’s world needs to be stopped, or needs to be dealt with when they see it happening in their schoolyard.

So we do as much as we can to make it known that the young people should be upstanders, as the five people that saved us, the five people that had interceded, and we at the (Illinois Holocaust) Museum now call that being an upstander.

How has this experience changed you? It changed me — that experience that we lived through and that my parents lived through — made me want to be involved; continue to be involved in scouting, continue to be involved in doing a program for disabled adults in Scouting, continue to volunteer. All kinds of things that I felt I could be of help, and speaking at the museum, my story.

Svin Duong
Area: Cambodia
Genocide: Cambodia
Objects saved: Copper urn, 20th century

What happened? (My father’s family) speaks Chinese. That’s why, at that time, they say all the Chinese, they kill them. So that’s why my dad’s family side, they’re all gone. Only him stays.

But he run. He run out from the Cambodian. He come to Thailand, then come to United States. That’s what he did. I have experienced the Khmer Rouge when I was seven.

We walk all day, all night. We walk, we see all the people to die that stepped on the bomb (land mines). And they say, be careful, the walking. You only stop what (you) have before, you stop after what (you) be OK. But if now, you catch the bomb, that make you dead.

That’s what I remember. I said, “Oh my God.” And no water. When we see the river, we want the water, see all the blood in the water.

That time, you know, Pol Pot, they almost kill me, Khmer Rouge. (They) say, “We’re going to kill you. And, you know, a little kid, (I) say: “Me, I want to look for my mom.”

That’s what I say. You know, that’s nighttime, no light. No nothing. Why did you save this object? The big piece (urn) is from my great-grandma (who lived in Germany now) that is happening. And in Europe to immigrants, even in Germany now, all those things happen because people had hate. Hate of one group or another.

And then it moved into the various ideologies, with the Armenians, and Bosnia and Darfur and now the hatred that’s shown in Europe to immigrants, even in Germany now, and some of our universities, where there’s now hatred for Israel and Jewish being expressed.

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How has this experience changed you? That time, (Khmer Rouge) made me scared. And right now, when sometimes I sleep, I still see all those things.

Right now make me so hurt. The people that lost parents, sister, brother. Like my dad that lost sister, mother, nephews. He doesn’t have big family. He have small family. He have only him and sister and two nephews.

Right now, he alone. He stay alone. He have only one child, only me; no sister, no brother. To stay alone, it hurts.

I changed myself when I come to the United States. I change myself in here. Change here to learn. I learn from the things I learnt about the job what I do, the things I learned driving. I can do by myself what I want to go.
Mirsad Causic
Born: Prijedor, Bosnia-Herzegovina
Genocide: Bosnia-Herzegovina

Objects saved: Recipes written on paper from cigarette boxes; playing cards made from empty box of crackers; 1992

What happened? I was a war prisoner in a concentration camp, for five months, very bad camp called Omarska, and Manjaca. And bunch of killings in front of my eyes. For example, in Omarska, which was one of the brutal concentration camps in Bosnia-Herzegovina, there was one room, or building, that was called the White House, that was just painted white, but that's why the guards call it White House. A building with four small rooms, 10 feet by 10 feet, and in each room, believe it or not, they squeezed around 100 people on top of each other.

It was summer time. Very warm outside. And inside there is no air conditioning. Only when they close the door, it's like 150 degrees in there, and people sweating. You pour your shirt off and squeeze, it's like you had a shower, actually. A lot of people died due to diarrhoea and losing the dehydration, you know.

First day when we came, actually, they line us along the house, White House, along the wall, and start beating us with anything they found in their hands. Battons, police batons, cans, tabs, school tables, chains. I mean it's hard to describe. It's screaming, people blood everywhere. I actually passed out.

I woke up in that room. And when I woke up, and there was another guy screaming, ran in the room. He was—I thought, like through the fog, that this guy had tattoos all over his body, and he looked and screaming like a wild animal. But he was actually black from the beginning I thought, like through the fog.

And they shoot him, that first day. Wild animal. But he was actually black from the beginning, I thought, like through the fog. They open the window a little bit. And then they open the window a little bit. And then one day, a lot of people passed out. That room with 100 people, we couldn't breathe. One day, a lot of people passed out in this, they're screaming and crying, and then they open the window a little bit. But when they close the door, it's like 150 degrees in there, and people sweating. You pour your shirt off and squeeze, it's like you had a shower, actually. A lot of people died due to diarrhoea and losing the dehydration, you know.

We go to prisoner to prisoner and ask him if he have any paper, cigarettes, because everybody was smoking. Used that paper and write recipes on that. We go to prisoner to prisoner and ask him if he have any new recipes. Or you with us. That's how we actually, during the five days, tried to find a comfort. But these recipes did, in my opinion, make feel like I actually felt more hungry than usual. When I was writing this recipes, I'm a Bosnian Muslim. That's my crime. What did I do to the who I am, to make them believe that I am their enemy, I have no idea.

I can say that I'm still asking myself, how can I live with somebody for that long, and then all of sudden I be their enemy? And how can somebody do this to so many people? How can they kill so many people for no reason?

So that's another goal I have: to find him.

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Immaculee Mukantaganira
Born: Makabola, Rwanda
Genocide: Rwanda

Objects saved: Her daughter Raissa Umotoni’s dress and cardigan; her daughter Claire Umotoni’s dress and cardigan; circa 1994

What happened? When I was a child, there was no peace in my region and in Rwanda. Sometimes we had to spend night in the forests, because we could not be in our houses, with the fear of being killed, because we're Tutsi. My parents' house was burned twice during my childhood.

It was just a challenge to grow up in the environment, just because, you know, Tutsi were denied education. Tutsi could not attend high school, to some parents will try to do everything possible for their children to go in private school. And private school, we don't have many. There were very few in the country. And so we had many Tutsis flee to neighboring countries, so that they can live their life, they can live without a fear of being killed.

For me, when I got married, and I had my children, and when in 1992 we realized that the genocide was being planned, and there was reason (to believe) Tutsi were going to be exterminated.

(The) government has been preparing, planning for the genocide. In the city, you could hear like shots everywhere. Military on the road are saying, “Every Tutsi will die, have to die.”

The strategy of killing people was to
during that time, I didn’t know my two girls had died. I didn’t know my husband was killed. Because I didn’t see them killing him.

I was hoping to see my two daughters, but they were gone. And I started telling myself, so now why, why did I survive? Everything I did, everything I tried, I was hoping if my husband died, at least my children will have a mother.

If my husband survived, I will see him. But they were gone.

That was the worst of my life. Surviving and not seeing them.

So now I know it has been 24 years after we lost them.

For so many years I didn’t — I kind of postponed finding the bodies of my girls. It was just so hard for me. And last year I decided to go and do it.

I wanted to find a skeleton, at least. But what I found was just unbelievable.

So I found the two girls, they were 5 and 3 when the genocide took them. So I was about to find their bodies, because I don’t want to say I only found bones. It’s their body; they were together. So I call them “body,” just to restore their dignity.

Why did you save those objects? When I went to find the bodies of my girls, when they found them, that was the only thing that can tell me that was them. That’s why I’m sticking to them. So I recognized those, it’s just unbelievable. Everything is gone but their clothes.

So I took them, and I decided to keep them. Because that’s the only thing from (them) that I have. Today they (would) have grown to conquer the world and they would be married, and they would be surrounding me. They were just bright kids. Very bright. God only knows.

Why is there genocide? I always ask myself that question. Why? Why? Why was it a genocide in Rwanda? Why was it the Holocaust? What makes people so evil? You know, to kill their neighbor. Because in Rwanda, when husband kill the wives if they were Tutsi. What makes people so evil to do that?

I don’t have an answer for that, because I don’t know what was in people’s mind. But what I noticed myself is that when I was hiding, I heard someone saying I am on my 943rd kill. And that sentence keeps, stays in my mind. And I’m thinking: What? I mean, how can someone say that so proudly?

And I realize, you know, genocide is planned. People don’t decide to do genocide overnight. And those (who) planned the genocide prepared to kill us. And they taught them to kill the enemies. And they tell: Those are your enemies, you have a common enemy. And they would tell: Tutsi are your enemy. But we were not. We were neighbors. We are good neighbors. We are all friends.

But they prepared them. They mentally brainwashed them. I felt like in 1994, the majority of the Rwandan population was illiterate. They didn’t go to school. Some did not even do primary school, others did not do secondary school.

When you don’t have education, you don’t have the critical thinking to decide for yourself. And you just follow blindly. So the elite who has his personal interest is using all his power and doing all he can to brainwash people. So my thinking is that education is critical to the well-being of a nation, of the society, and it’s critical for peace.

How has this experience changed you? The experience of the genocide has changed my life forever.

First of all, you don’t have your surroundings. So the loneliness and the care that you don’t have from those people — I had a family, very strong and very caring family. And we’re Christian people, and we had so many friends, and all of that was taken away in 100 days.

And so you find yourself in this world, and you’re trying to survive, but you don’t have the family that surrounded you — what is happening?

The women who were raped, I mean, it’s difficult. But it makes you more compassionate. I’ve become more compassionate. If I see someone falling on the street, I don’t care if they say: Be careful, because you don’t know, I will jump and grab him. That’s how I have become.
This wallet was carried by a Jewish soldier in WWII, where it slowed a bullet and saved the life of its owner. It’s among the many artifacts/mementos included in the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center’s new exhibit "Stories of Survival: Object. Image. Memory." | Miriam Di Nunzio/Sun-Times

This blood-stained dress from a 5-year-old girl killed in the Rwandan genocide is one of the many mementos included in a new exhibit by photographer Jim Lommasson titled "Stories of Survival: Object. Image. Memory." at the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center. | Miriam Di Nunzio/Sun-Times

Look around your house. Your bedroom. Your kitchen. Look at those items that have been amassed over the course of a lifetime, or passed down to you from generations long-gone.

Now imagine which one (or two) precious items you would choose to take with you on a moment’s notice — as you flee from religious persecution, war or worse. Or would all be left behind?

Visitors to the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center in Skokie will find the answers to those questions and more in a new exhibit, “Stories of Survival: Object. Image. Memory.” The exhibit, featuring a collection of personal mementos, everyday household objects, toys, clothing and writings, speaks to the lives of those lost and those who survived the Holocaust as well as genocides and wars in Rwanda, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Syria, Sudan and Cambodia. But unlike other exhibits from the museums’ vast collections (and others amassed from outside sources for this particular exhibition), the items in “Stories of Survival” are also depicted in the work of award-winning photographer Jim Lommasson, who combined his photos of the items with personal messages and stories written by survivors or their families. The photos speak volumes; their personal messages reveal even more.

“We’ve been working on this exhibit for two years,” said Lommasson, during a recent visit to the museum as the exhibit was taking shape. “These are stories of Holocaust and genocide survivors told through those items they brought with them as they escaped conflict. I photographed the objects and sent 13-by-19-inch prints to the survivors or their families and asked them to write something about the item or their family member, or the story of their homeland. Whatever message they felt the item conveyed to them. Whatever story they wanted to share. Then I took those stories and the objects and photographed them together and blew them up into these 28-by-48-inch prints, which make up the 65 photographs in the exhibit.

“All of the images tell a story,” he continued. “When the participants add the narrative to that story it brings another level to it. In essence it makes the photograph its own artifact because it now has hand-generated writing on it.”

Family members wrote letters or poems, embellished the photos with stickers, glitter or even colorful inked handprints of children just now learning the fate of their grandparents and other relatives. Some touched Lommasson in ways he could
never have imagined. “I guess a few of them really did make me pause for a while longer,” Lommasson said. “There is the tiny blood-stained dress, for example. A Rwandan mother didn’t know where the bodies of her 3- and 5-year-old daughters were after they were killed in the Rwandan genocide [in the 1990s]. When they opened a mass grave [in her village] over 20 years later [in 2017] she couldn’t recognize her daughters’ remains, but she recognized the dress that her 5-year-old was wearing when she was killed. When this dress came to me from the museum’s collection to be photographed I already knew the story, but holding this tiny dress and reading what the mother wrote, I just lost it.”

The mother, Immaculee Mukantaganira, chose to decorate the photo of the tiny dresses and a cardigan with stickers and glitter to celebrate the lives of her young daughters. “It’s much like you or I would put flowers on a grave,” Lommasson said. The mother writes about the pain of losing the two little girls and how her two daughters were always dressed in the adorable dresses. And how she would never be able to dress them again.

A leather billfold carried by a Jewish soldier in WWI shows a single bullet hole; in essence it slowed the bullet enough to wound but not kill or maim its owner. A typewriter, used to type exit papers or forge other documents to save the lives of Jews seeking to exit Nazi Germany, calls to mind images of the lifesaving paperwork generated during the machinery’s heyday.

“Documents are the most important things when you’re under siege,” Lommasson said. “A document can save your life. These were papers that allowed Jews to exit Germany or Austria and leave Europe altogether.”

“Changing someone’s name, nationality or date of birth or country of origin on a document could mean the difference between life and death,” said Arielle Weininger, the museum’s chief curator of collections and exhibitions. A collection of recipes, written by a concentration camp prisoner during the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the 1990s, might seem quaint at first, but they represent so much more. “These recipes, handwritten, are about ethnic foods,” said Weininger. “They’re a connection to your legacy and your culture. You’re heading to new parts of the world, longing for those times before the hardship, and suddenly these foods become the only things that will help tie you back to your culture.”

Most of the items included in the photographs and exhibit have never been seen before, which adds a wider scope to the museum’s overall mission. “We have the chance through this exhibit to bring a broader understanding of the collections. We looked at geographical span. We wanted to represent a wide variety of stories. Some Jewish refugees, for example, went to China, because you didn’t need papers to enter. Some escaped to South America. They took very different journeys to get to new lives.”

Other items in the exhibit include a dominoes game from a child in hiding during the Holocaust and a train set from a family taken during Kristallnacht. Not every object was a take-along. One remarkably preserved teddy bear would eventually bring joy out of such horrific events. “For whatever reason, the teddy bear was buried in a family’s back yard as the family fled the Nazis,” Lommasson said. “After the war when the survivors returned to their homes they found the bear. Can you imagine what that meant to them and to anyone who sees this bear? We all have teddy bears. So here is a connection, our shared humanity.”
This typewriter you see here was made & brought from Berlin, Germany to the United States in 1939. I really very appreciate your writer, as it was the actual that saved our 3-yr. old's life (Me) so far. In March of 1939, his very intransigent migrant left the U.S. and abroad & I had a break. I decided to move to Chicago. Blessed be the memory of my departed in Chicago. It was asked if they could sponsor us so that we could be able to come to the S.A. Unbelievable. Your letters, with their typewriter, inspired me to use relatives and assured them that we could not be a burden to them but would be a type of work to be financially