



A photograph found in the possession of Karolina Cohn's relatives. Is Karolina the girl in the picture?

The Archaeologists Excavating Nazi Death Camps in Search of Holocaust Victims' Untold Stories

For a decade, an Israeli archaeologist and his Polish colleague have excavated at the Sobibor death camp, removing some 70,000 objects from the blood-soaked soil – including a pendant belonging to a girl born just after Anne Frank. Who was that girl?

By [Ofer Aderet](#) Nov 25, 2017

FRANKFURT – On November 12, two shots of Bimber, high-proof Polish moonshine, were poured in a hotel room in a central part of this city. Yoram Haimi, from Israel, and his Polish colleague, Wojciech Mazurek, archaeologists of a rare breed who have harnessed the skills of their profession to go in a completely new direction, wished each other “Lehayim” and “Na zdrowie,” and smiled.

Within a few hours, their life project, launched 10 years ago, was set to record one of its highlights and to resonate far and wide internationally. But Haimi and Mazurek, whose usual habitat is generally full of soil or sand, aren't used to luxury hotels, suits and ties, handshakes with VIPs or microphones pointed at them by reporters. The alcohol, in this case, was meant to partially help dissipate the tension ahead of the big event awaiting them.

At 10 A.M. the next day, some 35 people gathered at 10 Thomasius Street, a small side street in the big city that serves as



That pendant that's believed to have belonged to Karolina Cohn. Credit: Yoram Haimi

Germany's financial center. They'd come specially for the event from three continents. In some cases, the impetus for the trip to Germany was the revelation of a huge secret: the fact that they are descendants of a Jewish family. Most of them didn't know they were relatives of each other; some of them didn't even know they were Jewish.

No one could remain indifferent to the hugs, kisses and handshakes of the dozens of people who until then had for the most part been complete strangers to one another, and now had suddenly become relatives. They had been “reunited” under extraordinary circumstances. Haimi and Mazurek, the patrons of the event, preferred to watch the historic spectacle from a few steps away.

A year earlier and 1,300 kilometers away, at the site of the former Sobibor death camp in Poland, the two archaeologists had pulled a harrowing object from the earth: a triangular silver pendant engraved on one side with the words “Mazal tov” (congratulations) in Hebrew, a date –

July 3, 1929 – and the name of the city Frankfurt am Main. The obverse features the Hebrew letter *heh*, an abbreviation for the name of God, and three Stars of David.

For 74 years it had been buried in the blood-soaked soil of Sobibor – a final remnant of the life of the young girl whose name and memory the Nazis sought to obliterate.

Following intensive archival work, Yad Vashem, the Jerusalem-based Holocaust memorial authority, concluded that the pendant most likely belonged to [Karolina Cohn](#), a Jewish girl from Frankfurt. For 74 years it had been buried in the blood-soaked soil of Sobibor – a final remnant of the life of the young girl whose name and memory the Nazis sought to obliterate. Underground, it had survived both the Nazis and the communist regime that succeeded them in Poland. Finally, about a quarter of a century after Poland regained its independence, it was pulled from the ground.

No one remains from Karolina’s immediate family to tell about her: Her father, Richard, her mother, Else (née Eisenmann) and her younger sister, Gitta, were, like her, all murdered in the Holocaust.

But Karolina Cohn does have dozens of relatives dispersed around the world. Over the past year they were tracked down, in the wake of a far-reaching detective-style investigation that began in January following the publication in Haaretz of a report headlined, “[A Jewish Girl’s Pendant Was Found at a Nazi Camp – and Now Yad Vashem Is Looking for Her Relatives.](#)”

On November 13, they gathered in Frankfurt to take part in the first-ever memorial ceremony for Karolina, in which four [Stolpersteine](#) – “stumbling stones,” as the concrete cubes that bear brass plates with the names of Nazi victims are called in German – were installed in front of the house at 10 Thomasius Street, from which she and her family were deported to their death in November 1941.

In an emotional speech that left few participants dry-eyed, Greg Schneider, the executive vice president of the Claims Conference, the Jewish organization that initiated and funded the ceremony, declared, “Seventy-six years ago, this week, Karolina Cohn was deported from here, from the city of Frankfurt. Ripped from the home she knew and forced into a cattle car for the harrowing journey to Minsk, to be imprisoned in the ghetto Today, we come to right a wrong. We lay a marker – a physical, tangible memorial to Karolina, reminding the world that she existed, that she mattered, that she was loved.”

Schneider went on to mention another Jewish girl who was also born in Frankfurt and murdered in the Holocaust – although in contrast to Karolina Cohn, her name, picture and life story are far better known: [Anne Frank](#) was born in the same city just two weeks before Cohn. She too received a pendant after she was born as a memento, bearing her birthdate; it has also been found. When she was 5, her family moved to Amsterdam to escape the Nazis, and from there she was deported in 1944 to Auschwitz and then to Bergen Belsen, to her death.

Did Anne and Karolina know each other? Did they attend the same preschool? Did their parents stroll together with their prams on the city’s streets? We will never know. We know of Anne Frank’s story “because of her own words, her testimony,” Schneider said. “We don’t have Karolina’s own words. But doesn’t she deserve the same? Doesn’t she deserve to be known, to be remembered?”

Karolina was one of 1.5 million Jewish children who were murdered in the Holocaust. Most left behind no name, no image, no life story. And that also could have been her fate, if the pendant hadn’t suddenly emerged from the earth.

Schneider’s words resonated on November 13 on the quiet street and penetrated deep into the hearts of the family members, who were constantly daubing their moist eyes. One of them, Helen Dimson, née Sonn, who had arrived in Frankfurt from London the day before, listened raptly with tears in her eyes, holding a flower that she afterward placed on the newly installed memorial markers. Dimson had never heard the name Karolina Cohn before this year. Last January, on her return from a Caribbean vacation, a jolting surprise awaited her. With the help of Israeli genealogist [Gidi Poraz](#), I located Dimson’s husband on Facebook and informed him that a pendant belonging to a forgotten relative of his wife had been found. I wasn’t alone: The couple said that their email inboxes and Facebook pages had filled up quickly with messages from distant relatives across the world.

Now, 10 months later, Dimson was in Frankfurt to pay her last respects. Equipped with a hand-drawn family tree, Dimson, whose father, Max, was a cousin of Karolina’s mother, said, “This is my connection to Karolina Cohn. Until not long ago, I didn’t know the first thing about it. My father never mentioned her name.”

Dimson was born in London, where her German-born parents had immigrated shortly before the war. Some of her relatives were murdered in the Holocaust; others grew up and later married non-Jews. “I grew up in a very small family, most of which is actually Catholic. Suddenly I discovered that I have a huge Jewish family all over the world,” said Dimson, who herself remained Jewish.



Anne Frank, who lived in the Netherlands during WWII, in 1941. Credit: AP



Helen Dimson Credit: Ofer Aderet

Dimson's new relatives hail from Japan, Hong Kong, Argentina, Africa, Nicaragua, Germany, Israel, Canada and the United States. They found each other through a girl whom none of them knew.

One of Dimson's newfound family members is Denise Stanaland, who traveled from Texas to take part in the Frankfurt event. After discovering her kinship to Karolina Cohn a few weeks ago, she decided forthwith to attend the ceremony. "My feelings are all mixed up inside me," she said. "I'm 63 already, and only now I'm finding out that I have family all over the world. Karolina Cohn reunited the whole family. That's the reason I came."

The four new Stolpersteine – for Karolina, her sister and her parents – joined some 70,000 similar memorial markers, which the German artist Gunter Demnig has installed across Europe over the past 21 years. They all carry the same information, documenting the name and year of birth of the person who lived, worked or attended school in the building next to which the stone is installed, along with the date and destination of his deportation and, in the event he was murdered, the year of his death.

Demnig, 47, a taciturn individual, was silent, too, when he installed the Cohn family's memorial stones. After completing the task, he packed up his tools and departed straight away for the next site. There's a long waiting list of individuals who were murdered or persecuted by the Nazis, whose names will be commemorated on stumbling stones, according to the project's [website](#).



Denise Stanaland. Credit: Ofer Aderet

In most cases, the installation of the cubes with the name plates gets little media coverage. The event has long since become routine. But when Demnig's van arrived at 10 Thomasius Street, the artist was mobbed by reporters from around the world. It's not every day that a memorial is installed for a girl after a pendant that she dropped on the way to her death was discovered decades after her murder, in an archaeological excavation.

From Morocco to Sobibor

The excavation began a decade ago. The idea of mobilizing archaeology – a science that often deals with millennia-old cultures – for the study of the Holocaust was the brainchild of Yoram Haimi, an archaeologist with Israel's Antiquities Authority.



The Stolpersteine – 'stumbling stones' - installed in memory of Karolina Cohn and her family. Credit: Ofer Aderet

The 61-year-old Haimi, who lives in Kibbutz Miflasim, in the Negev, was born in Tiberias to parents who immigrated from Morocco. Since 1999, he's worked in the IAA's southern district. The turning point in his professional life occurred about 10 years ago, after he saw an interview on Israeli television in which a woman related that she had tracked down her mother's long-lost sister through information she found at Yad Vashem. Haimi went to Yad Vashem to try to learn what happened to his maternal uncles, Jackie and Maurice Ben Zaken. The family originally came from in Morocco, though at some point the uncles moved to Paris. One ran a photography studio there, the other was a stained-glass artist. In 1943, they were arrested and sent to the Drancy concentration camp next to Paris. Thereafter, as far as Haimi knew, all trace of them disappeared.



The archaeological dig at Sobibor. Credit: Yoram Haimi

In Yad Vashem, Haimi found the names of the two in a document describing a transport that was sent from Drancy to the Sobibor death camp, near where the borders of Poland, Ukraine and Belarus converge today. Wasting no time, he flew to Poland, hoping to find documents there that would shed light on the fate of his uncles before their murder. In March 2007 he arrived at the site of the former camp, but was disappointed to discover that nothing remained of it – it was covered by trees planted after the war. Nor was there an orderly archive.

Together with Treblinka and Belzec, the Sobibor extermination camp was established in March 1942 as part of the Nazis' Operation Reinhard. While operational – the camp was shut down and bulldozed by the Germans in October 1943 after a prisoners' revolt – approximately 250,000 Jews were murdered there, according to Yad Vashem (170,000), according to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.). Only a few dozen inmates survived the Holocaust.

Haimi, whose work as an archaeologist has familiarized him with objects buried in the ground for thousands of years, refused to accept the fact that nothing was left of the camp. He decided to use the working methods he'd learned in the Negev to search for forgotten artifacts left behind by the Jews murdered at Sobibor.

A few months later, in October 2007, in "terrible cold," he recalls, he started digging with his new Polish colleague, Wojciech Mazurek, a native of Chelm who had studied archaeology in Lublin. The two quickly became close friends after were brought together by local residents, having received authorization for the excavation. As soon as a backhoe dug into the soil for the first time, items that had been interred there for decades started to appear.

Haimi has returned to Sobibor time and again in the intervening years. Together with Polish workers and volunteer archaeologists, and equipped with metal detectors and endless patience, he has come up with multiple finds in what has become the largest crime scene in modern history. Work of such a comprehensive and detailed nature has only been done at Sobibor.

To date he and Mazurek have rescued some 70,000 objects that belonged to Jews murdered at Sobibor. "The number is staggering," Haimi told me this month in his office in Be'er Sheva. On his computer screen he showed me photographs of perfume bottles, rings, chains, eyeglasses, handbags, jam jars, toothpaste, keys, scissors, boxes of cigarettes, wallets, hairpins and shoes – all of which once belonged to the Jews of Sobibor.

Particularly notable are the items featuring inscriptions in Hebrew. These include a ring engraved with the words, "You are consecrated to me [as my wife]"; a pendant on which appears "Palestine (E.I. [Eretz Israel])"; and another bearing the words "Shema Yisrael" (Hear, O Israel) and a depiction of Moses holding the Tablets of the Law.

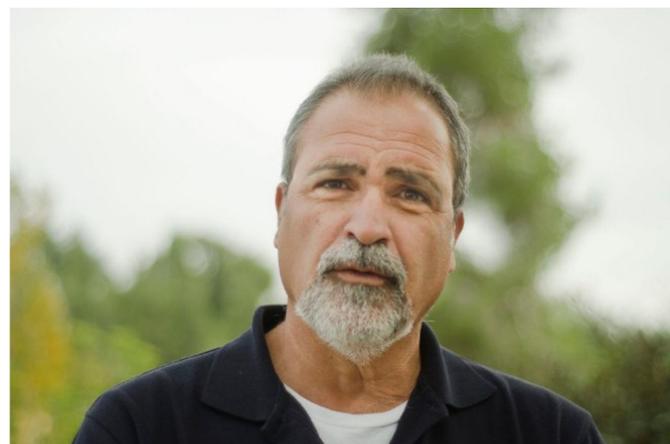
Behind every object is a person with a life story. Women, men, children, young and old – the Jews arrived in Sobibor in 1942-43 from Poland, Austria, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Slovakia, Holland and France. In the nature of things, the names and histories of most of the owners of these items will never be known, and the people they belonged to will be forever nameless. The Germans did not, in this case, keep exact records of those arriving on transports or of those incarcerated in Sobibor, in general.

Some of the objects the earth yielded contain identifying signs that made it possible to identify and find the families of the murdered owners. In 2012, Haimi and Mazurek's Polish workers found a metal disc with the name Lea Judith de la Penha. An investigation revealed that it had belonged to a girl who was born in Amsterdam in 1937 and who was murdered in Sobibor at age 6. Haimi tracked down family members in Holland and met with her niece, Esther, who sent him a photograph of Lea a week before she was sent to her death.

As soon as a backhoe dug into Sobibor's soil for the first time, items that had been interred there for decades started to appear.

Also found was a burnt disc bearing the name "Deddie Jacob Zak." He turned out to be a boy named David Zak, who was born in Amsterdam in 1935 and murdered in Sobibor at the age of 8. His niece, Liz, who survived the Holocaust, was located and arrived at the site of the death camp, where a memorial service was held for David in 2013, and she was given a replica of the disc.

Karolina's pendant was found about a year ago, at the spot where stood the structure in which women disrobed on their way to the gas chamber. What differentiated it from other items belonging to Jews that had been found there was that those objects bore names, whereas the pendant bears no name but rather a date (July 3, 1929) and the name of a place (Frankfurt) as well as the inscription, Stars of David and the Hebrew letter.



Archaeologist Yoram Haimi.



A burnt disc bearing the name 'Deddie Jacob Zak' that was discovered in Sobibor. Credit: Yoram Haimi



Deddie Jacob Zak, a boy whose name was found on a burnt disc in Sobibor.

The researchers' first task was to find out whether the date referred to a birth date, or to some other event, such as a bar mitzvah. It turned out after discovery of Cohn's pendant that Anne Frank, who was born in Frankfurt in that year, had a similar one, also bearing the date of her birth. Subsequently it emerged that in 1928 and 1929, the city's Jewish community had these pendants made for all newborn girls. Ten women, with no connection to the death camp, have been located who received a pendant like the one given to Karolina Cohn after their births, in 1928-29, also without names inscribed on them.

Once the research team knew that the pendant belonged to a Jewish girl born in Frankfurt on July 3, the next step was to identify all the Jewish females who were born in the city on that day and find out if any of them had been murdered in Sobibor. In fact, only one Jewish girl was born in Frankfurt on July 3, 1929: Karolina Cohn.

Her name was also found by researcher Dr. Joel Zisenwine, director of the online “Transports to Extinction” project at Yad Vashem, funded by the Claims Conference: The name was on one of the lists kept by the Nazis, and now found at Yad Vashem, of Jews deported from Frankfurt to Minsk on November 12, 1941. It’s known that Jewish prisoners were sent from Minsk to their death in Sobibor.

In addition, it turned out that in 1978, a relative of Karolina Cohn had filled out a “Page of Testimony” at Yad Vashem in which the girl’s personal details appeared. The pieces of the puzzle gradually began to come together.

Tracking down ‘Karola’

But who was Karolina Cohn? Once her name was known, historians, genealogists and journalists set out to track down every possible scrap of information about her. A key figure in this mission was Klaus Hillenbrand, an author and journalist with the Berlin-based newspaper *Die Tageszeitung*. Through a study he carried out at the Institute for the History of Frankfurt, the central archive of the State of Hessen, the International Tracing Service at Bar Arolsen, Germany, and in other archives in the country, Hillenbrand was able to piece together the story of Karolina Cohn’s short life.

“Karola,” as she was called affectionately, was born to a poor family in Frankfurt, where her father, Richard, had moved from Darmstadt. An upholsterer by trade, he also tried his hand at selling books and newspapers. In World War I, as a Jewish soldier in the Germany army, he was badly wounded and classified as disabled, and was thereafter unable to work. In 1928, he married Else Eisenmann, a seamstress from the town of Bad Orb. Eleven months later, Karolina was born; in 1932 a second daughter, Gitta, came into the world.

In 1933, when the Nazis rose to power, Richard’s social security payments ceased, leaving the family dependent on assistance from the Jewish community. Their dire economic situation forced them to move about between rented apartments. In 1935 they moved to what would be their last home, on the first floor of 10 Thomasius Street.

Approximately 30,000 Jews were living in Frankfurt in 1933 and many managed to flee the country – by 1939 there were only 14,000 – but the Cohns lacked the funds needed to emigrate during the period in which that option was available. They were in Frankfurt on Kristallnacht, in November 1938, when their synagogue was burned down. Karolina, who turned 9 that year, was henceforth forced to add the name “Sarah” to her name, as all Jewish women were compelled to do by the Nazis. (Men had to add “Israel” to their name.) In 1941, Karolina would have had to don the yellow patch and been prohibited from playing in public parks or attending a German public school. Most likely, she attended the large, veteran Jewish school Philanthropin (which still exists). However, this cannot be confirmed, as the Nazis destroyed the school’s archive.

In 1940, the Cohn family, forced to reveal its economic situation to the authorities in advance of the Nazi regime’s institutional plunder of the Jews, asserted that they owned no assets or real estate. On November 12, 1941, the family of four was herded onto train Da53 at the Frankfurt East station. The transport, carrying about 1,000 Jews, reached Minsk, in White Russia, after a harrowing six-day journey.

The train passed through Berlin, Warsaw, Bialystok and Vawkavysk (in Belarus). Survivors of it related that many died along the way, mostly from an acute shortage of water. They remembered sticking their fingers out of the windows to trap a few drops of rainwater for drinking.

Forced labor was the Jews’ lot in the Minsk ghetto. About a hundred Frankfurt Jews died the first winter from malnourishment, disease and cold. In 1942, gas vans entered the ghetto and killed the sick and those unfit to work. Was Karolina among them, or did she survive, only to be murdered in a subsequent Aktion? Or was she among those who were deported, in September 1943, when the ghetto was liquidated, to the Trawniki concentration camp, near Lublin, or to Sobibor? This will never be known for sure, because the Nazis did not keep an official record of these transports.

The fact that her pendant was found at Sobibor may testify to her presence there, but it’s also possible that a relative who was deported to that death camp after Karolina died elsewhere, retained it as a keepsake. Another possibility is that Karolina traded it in return for, say, a slice of bread, and the person who had received it was now murdered. We are unlikely to ever know exactly where and when she was murdered.

“Was Karolina crying? Screaming? Calm in the midst of hysteria? Was she wearing the pendant, grasping it in her hand? Did she drop it – with intention?” Schneider mused in his moving speech at the Frankfurt ceremony. “Sometimes,” he continued, “I imagine that Karolina dropped it intentionally, between the floorboards, as she prepared for her death, hoping that her clue would survive, even if she didn’t; hoping that someday this sign would be discovered and serve as a reminder to people – to us –



Relatives of Karolina Cohn gather to remember her in Frankfurt, Germany, November 2017. Credit: Ofer Aderet

of how innocent boys and girls were victimized in the Shoah and how they and the rest of the Jews of Europe were murdered. From the ground, Karolina is calling to us – to listen to her, to hug her, to embrace her humanity. At the least, to know that she existed.”

At present, the pendant is the only surviving vestige of Karolina. “It is one of the most important and most moving items found in the excavations,” Wojciech Mazurek, the Polish archaeologist, notes. “Finding the pendant was for us a moment of hope that we would be able to find traces of other people as well.”

His colleague Haimi, adds, “I am not a historian, but when we find objects such as Karolina Cohn’s pendant, we succeed in touching the Holocaust and not just talking about it. We are presenting the story of the Sobibor camp from a completely different angle.”

Haimi told me about the many difficulties he and his team endured on their way to finding items such as Karolina’s pendant. They have been compelled to stop the excavations often in the past few years, and not only because of the bitter cold and snow. Local forest rangers, who prohibited them from cutting down trees on the camp’s site, brought about a temporary halt to the project. Afterward, the “Polish version of Ma’atz [Israel’s former Public Works Department],” as Haimi calls it, interfered with the dig being conducted under a nearby road. The state prosecutor’s office, which called for a criminal investigation to be launched when skulls were found at the site, held up the team’s work, as did the Polish Jewish community, which demanded that the excavations not dishonor the dead.

Local plundering

Did Anne and Karolina know each other? Did they attend the same preschool? Did their parents stroll together with their prams on the city’s streets? We will never know.

During the excavations, Haimi discovered evidence that local antiquities thieves had stolen objects from the site in pirate digs carried out at Sobibor in the first decade and a half after the war. In addition, he described personal and institutional ego and power struggles, between various groups involved in financing and managing the digs, which hamper him, the simple person in the field, in doing his job. Now he is trying to maneuver between his desire to continue excavating and the fact that a museum and visitors’ center are currently under construction at the site. Haimi is also engaged in writing a doctoral thesis on the subject.

“There are a great many lacunae in our knowledge of Sobibor,” explains Holocaust researcher Prof. Havi Dreifuss, from the Jewish history department of Tel Aviv University and from Yad Vashem, who, together with TAU archaeologist Dr. Guy Stiebel, is supervising Haimi’s thesis. According to Dreifuss, Haimi’s excavations have already changed some of what is known about the camp, both in terms of its physical structure and its murderous activity. “The various objects he’s located make it possible to investigate the many different transports that arrived in the camp,” she says.



A photograph found in the possession of Karolina Cohn’s relatives. Is Karolina the girl in the picture?

In addition, the dig has revealed the escape tunnel inmates dug for the 1943 attempted revolt, and the remains of the camp’s gas chambers and crematoria.

Archaeological excavations were also carried out in the past at other Nazi camps, but only on a very small and partial scale. Haimi and Mazurek are the first to transform these methods into a genuinely professional and comprehensive undertaking. Asked the de rigueur question, “Why wasn’t this done previously?” Dreifuss replies, “For many years it was a direction that wasn’t thought about. When you look at the present work of Haimi and Mazurek, it really is possible to ask why it wasn’t done before.”

At the same time, she adds, “One has to remember that excavations in a death camp are no trivial matter.” In addition to the technical and bureaucratic hassles, Dreifuss notes that the excavations are being conducted in a mass grave, with all the complexity and sensitivity this entails. Indeed, the Polish Jewish community demanded that the work done at the site not dishonor the dead. Furthermore, the structures in the death camps were usually not made of concrete but of wood and other perishable materials. Haimi, she says, has proved that even under these circumstances, and decades later, “it’s possible to come up with many finds, and to extract important insights from them.”

All this gives one pause for thought. On the one hand, in other death camp sites, where the earth has been turned over and monuments or museums have been built, a proper scientific dig can no longer be conducted, “and one can only regret what might have been found there,” Dreifuss notes. On the other hand, we have to ask what else lies hidden below the surface in places where excavations are still possible.

Back to Karolina Cohn: Will we ever find out what she looked like? Know what her face looked like, or the color of her hair and eyes? Will we be able to identify her in a photograph of the period? In the past few months, Chaim Motzen, an Israeli businessman and amateur genealogist, has invested much time and many resources to try to expand what is known about the young girl. He got involved in the project after reading in Haaretz about the discovery of the pendant.

To date, Motzen's intensive historical detective work has turned up almost 100 relatives of Karolina around the world. He has found personal documents, letters, postcards and pictures of relatives. One of the photos, from relatives of Karolina, shows a man, a pregnant woman and a little girl in early-1930s Germany. Is this Karolina Cohn, who, if she hadn't been murdered, might now be an 88-year-old grandmother? Motzen believes it is she, and is pursuing his efforts to confirm his conjecture.

"It's important for me to prove that this history has not been erased," he says, "that the Nazis did not succeed in erasing Karolina Cohn."



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