

QUILT OF SHAME

**Original quilting
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**Originally developed in partial
fulfillment of HSS 128, Freshman
Honors Seminar: Living the Holocaust
[Dr. Roy Schwartzman, professor]**

Orientation to the Quilt of Shame

- **Objective:** To explore the lasting experience and multiple dimensions of shame surrounding the Holocaust, especially related to the Jews.
- **Quilt Description:** 9 square panels (10"x10"), overall dimensions 33"x33"
- **Rationale for the Medium:** The panels of the quilt demonstrate the coexistence of many types of shame felt by many different populations. The durable textile medium illustrates how the various facets of shame are tangible and lasting. Like the quilt itself, the legacy of shame is one aspect of the Holocaust that enwraps survivors, witnesses, perpetrators, and bystanders.

SHAME

A feeling of guilt
during imprisonment
and afterward



1

SHAME
A feeling of guilt
during imprisonment
and afterward.

2



3



4



9



5



6



7



8



SHAME

A feeling of guilt
during imprisonment
and afterward



1. SHAME

This square represents the overall theme of the wall hanging. It is the definition of shame according Primo Levi in *The Drowned and the Saved*. Individuals who experienced shame came from all different backgrounds and experienced many different instances that caused their shame. In oral testimony, we notice most instances of shame occur during times of silence. Lawrence Langer points out that the silence is an “effort to exonerate oneself of ‘guilt’” (especially the guilt that may accompany survival when so many others did not) and “when ashamed, many do not like to talk about it.”



2. FLAGS

This square represents the shame felt by the liberators from the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union. They were also witnesses to some of the degrading conditions of the camps. Howard Cwick was a Jewish soldier who liberated Buchenwald. The shame he felt, and surely other liberators felt, came from not liberating the camp in time to save more of the prisoners. There was one last gassing only a few minutes before the liberators arrived. Could it have been prevented if the liberators moved quicker? Also, as he and other soldiers were walking into the camps, an inmate came up to them and asked, “Why couldn’t you have gotten here sooner?” The man’s friend had died minutes earlier, and all the man wanted was for his friend to have known they were finally free. These were the instances when Howard breaks down due to the shame he feels.



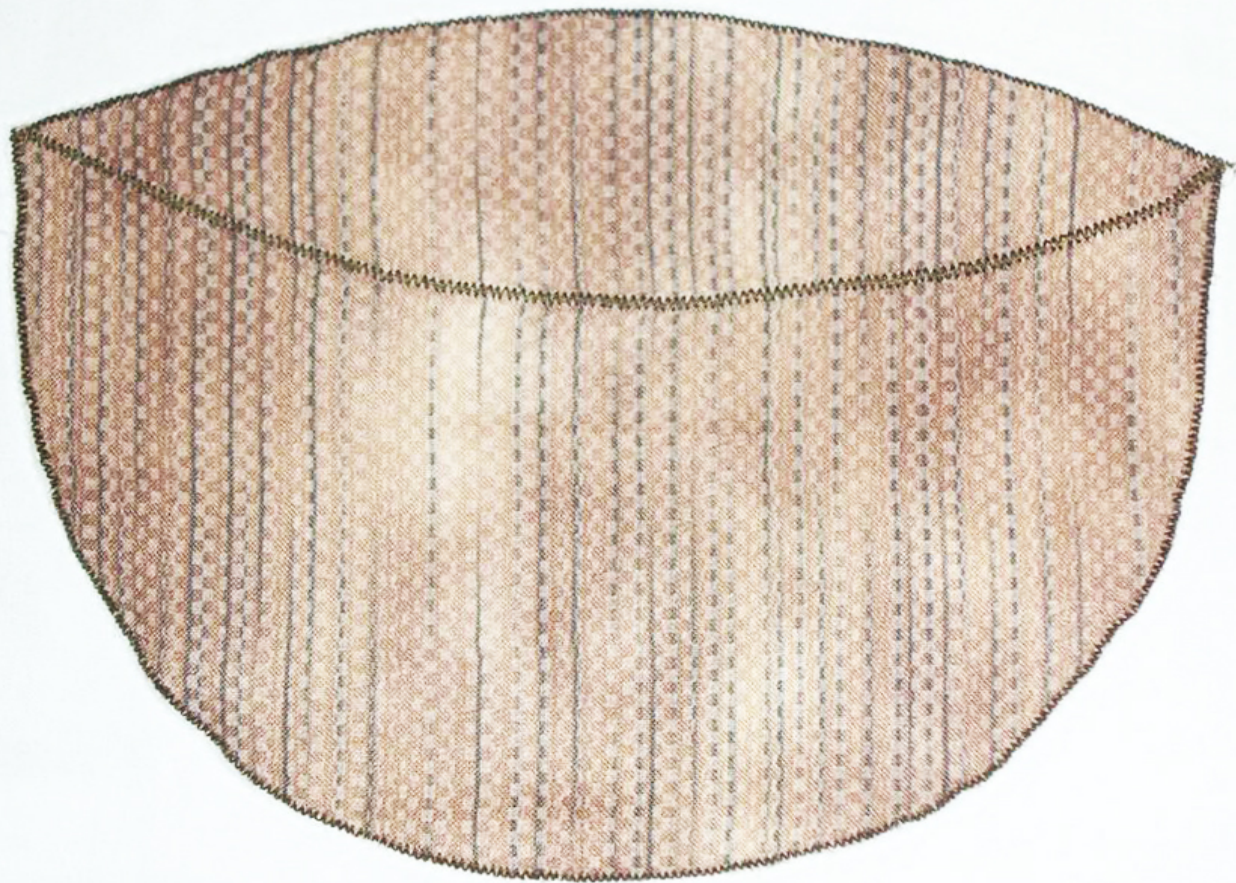
3. HANDS

The hands represent the Jews that escaped. They did not have to experience the horrible conditions of the camps and they could not do anything to help those who were confined in concentration camps or ghettos. In Howard Cwick's testimony a prisoner asked why the Jews in America weren't doing anything to help them. Cwick did not know the answer to this, and in his testimony he began to tear up when speaking of this instance. Because they couldn't do much to help, many Jews who were not directly victimized experienced deep shame. The hands show that even if they tried to reach out to victims they often couldn't quite reach them to help them.



4. WORLD

The world represents “worldly” shame felt by the bystanders throughout the world. These people are the ones who passively failed to act. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi states: “Those who faced the crime of others or their own, turned their backs so as not to see it and not feel touched by it.” They were “deluding themselves that not seeing was a way of not knowing.” In *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, Lawrence Langer points out that “the world betrayed the individual by promoting values that proved useless in the presence of catastrophe.” In this book he also refers to Holocaust survivor Leon H. who says, “The world stood still when we were burning.” Today the world is trying to compensate for “standing still” by dedicating towns to Jewish survivors and creating memorials for those who fell victim to the atrocity. We also see in Primo Levi’s book that many people apologize for what has been done and try to make excuses for those that committed the crimes.



5. BOWL

The bowl represents the form of shame experienced by prisoners in the camps. Ultimately it represents shame caused by the total dehumanization they experienced. Much of this shame they felt was because of continuous taunts from SS guards, kapos, and fellow prisoners. Concentration camp survivor Gizella Abramson shares how the “bowl” became a symbol of shame while confined in a concentration camp. She states, "They used to always scream.... They would scream and tell you, 'You are going to learn to be our slave or you are going to learn to just eat what we leave and lick the plates. That was their favorite saying: 'You will lick our plates, you will lick our spoons.'"

Susan Cernyak-Spatz also speaks about how the bowl was a symbol of dehumanization and shame. She explains how they had to urinate and defecate in the bowls when the guards would not let them use the buckets. These were the same bowls they ate out of. They were treated like animals and therefore saw themselves as animals. This thought caused them deep shame.



6. RAVEN

The raven stands for those who experience shame from stealing from their fellow prisoners, even their own family, in order to survive. Susan Cernyak-Spatz states how she and others “stole like ravens.” They stole things such as clothes, shoes, sheets, and food. They stole the items for their own benefit and took things from others who needed them more—all in order to survive.

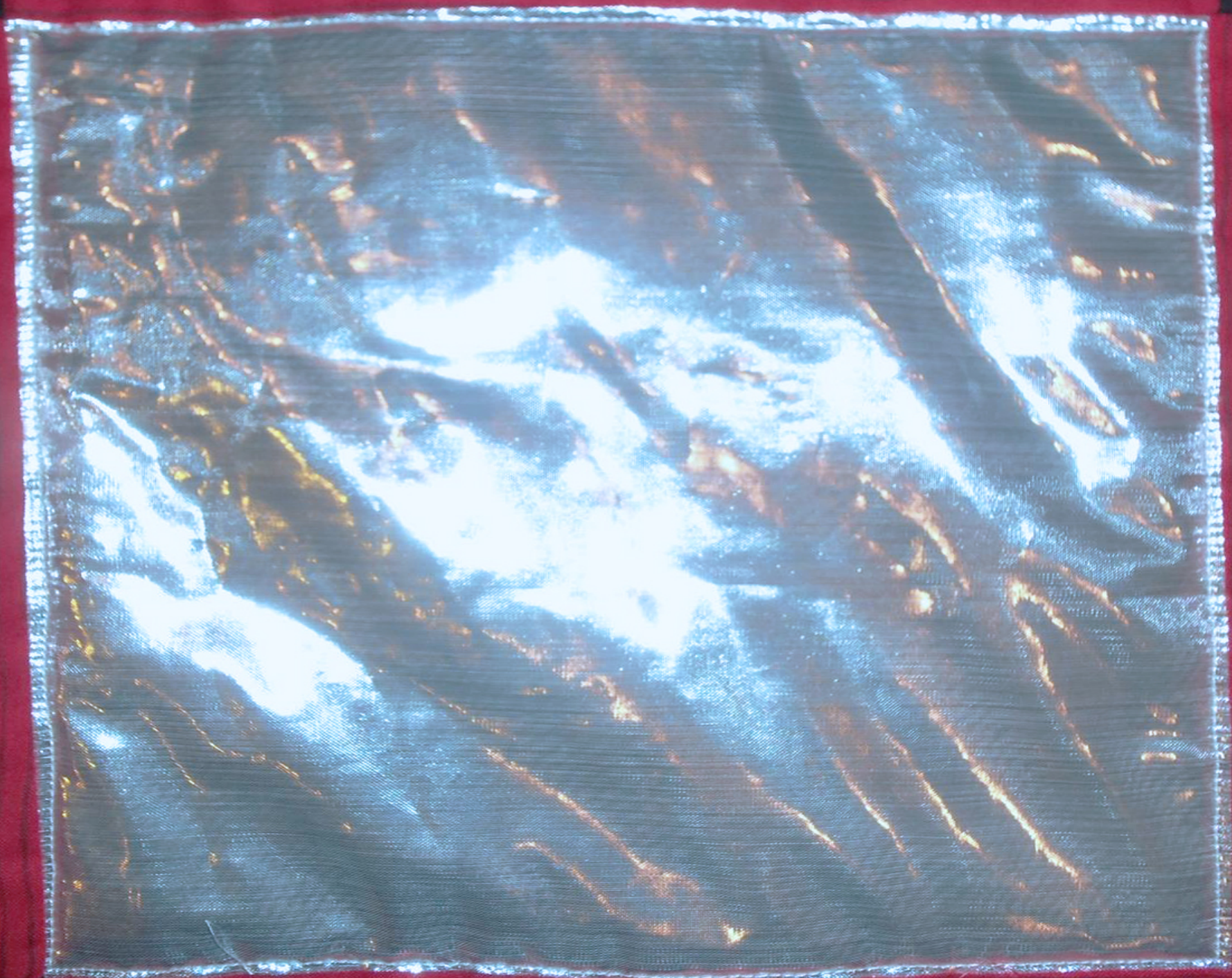
Primo Levi talks about stealing from his own companions and why they chose to do it. He says, “We were confined to the present moment.” Levi feels great shame for this, as do others who were in his shoes, and states how selfish he was in those times. Some survivors also feel that they may have caused an individual to perish faster by stealing that person’s food.



7. DROPS OF WATER

The water droplets stand for shame that comes from choosing not to help weaker prisoners in the camp. This theme comes specifically from Levi's book *The Drowned and the Saved*. He found a source of dripping water where he and his friend went to quench their thirst. They did not share their source with anyone else. After drinking from the source one day, he saw a man named Daniel who "was grey with cement dust and his lips [were] cracked and his eyes feverish." Daniel had seen them drinking from their source. Levi said, "I felt guilty." He wasn't sure if his shame was justified, "but shame there was and is, concrete, heavy, perennial."

The water also represents the shame resulting from dehumanization. That simple lack of hygiene made the inmates feel like animals. Gizella Abramson speaks about how there was no water for basic hygiene. She talks about how they had to rush to wash when they were lucky enough to be permitted a bath. The water would flow for only a few moments, not enough time for them to wash properly. Even when they "bathed," they still did not get clean.



8. MIRROR

The mirror represents how each of the survivors sees themselves in accordance to the shame they feel. No matter how hard they try they can't escape their shame. In their reflection they see the shame seeping through their appearance. Lawrence Langer says shame is something the survivors confront alone. Shame is like an "unsanctified eternal flame that memory feeds and nothing can quench."

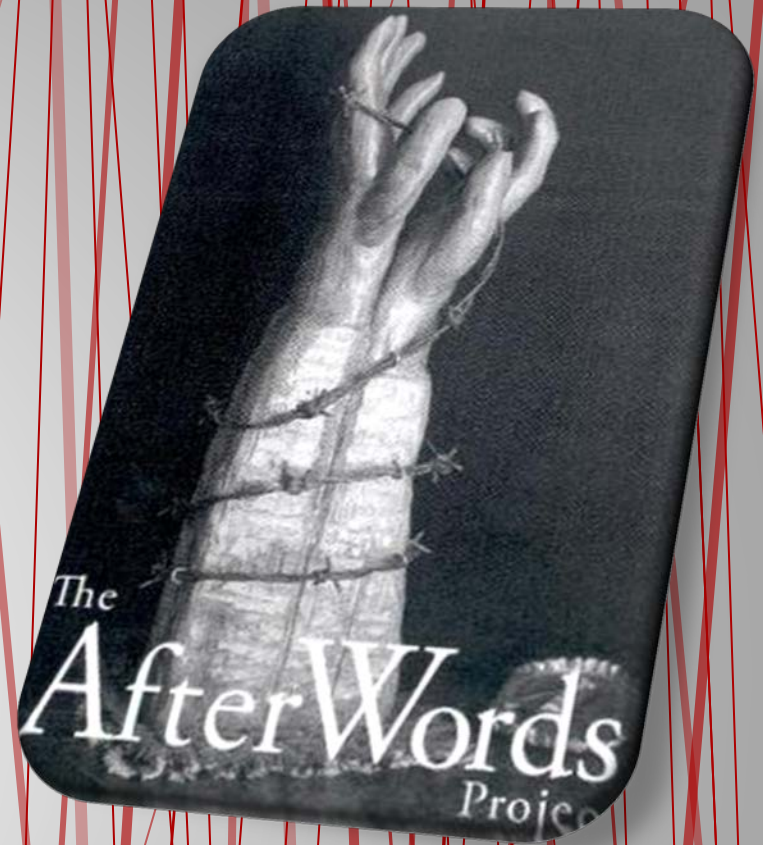
According to Primo Levi, when survivors 'see themselves in the mirror' they can't help but wonder if "you are alive in the place of another...a man more generous, more sensitive, more useful, wiser, [or] worthier of living than you?"



9. DOVE

The dove in the center represents peace of mind. No matter who feels the shame or what source a person's shame stems from, they can still find some peace of mind. They may not be able to "cleanses" themselves completely, but they can achieve peace within to deal with their shame. After coming to terms with shame, survivors may be able to attempt to rebuild their lives. This peace of mind may come through sharing testimony, thereby serving as a living witness for the dead. Susan, Gizella, and Howard were able to confront their shame. Their families, their service, and their testimonies attest to the pride of survival.

**“For the dead and
the living, we must
bear witness.”
-Elie Wiesel**



Thank you for taking time to learn about the Quilt of Shame and become more educated about the Holocaust!

-The North Carolina Council on the Holocaust and the AfterWords Project

Sources

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