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Dallas Holocaust Museum receives WWII artifacts - TJP News

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At a Wednesday, May 4 news conference, Robert M. Edsel discusses two artifacts donated to the Dallas Holocaust Museum/Center for Education and Tolerance by the Monuments Men Foundation for the Preservation of Art. Florence Shapiro, a former Texas senator and chairman-elect of the Dallas Holocaust Museum board, accompanies Edsel. Photo: Dallas Holocaust

Museum

By Ben Tinsley

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DALLAS — Robert M. Edsel has dedicated a major portion of his life to recovering artwork and cultural artifacts stolen by Nazi Germany during World War II.

Edsel, founder and chairman of the Monuments Men Foundation for the Preservation of Art, has penned three nonfiction books chronicling that pursuit. One of them was adapted into a movie. Along those same lines, Edsel recently donated two important artifacts to the Dallas Holocaust Museum/Center for Education and Tolerance. He displayed them for reporters during a special news conference held at the museum Wednesday, May 4.

Florence Shapiro, former Texas senator and chairman-elect of the Dallas Holocaust Museum board, accompanied him.

The first artifact is a handmade album of photographs documenting the identification and return of some of the millions of cultural treasures and works of art stolen by the Nazis during World War II.

The second is a seven-branched menorah — a symbol of the Jewish people and the state of Israel.

Edsel said he is pleased the Dallas Holocaust Museum — one of the city's most important cultural institutions — now has these items in its collection.

“They will be part of the Dallas Holocaust Museum collection, which is growing by leaps and bounds,” he said. “ ... With every

object there is always a story that goes along with it — a family whose life trajectory was changed if not ended as a result of World War II. These things stand as a reminder of the cultural destruction that is going on in the world today.”

The album contains 46 photographs showing daily work activities of the Monuments Men at the Offenbach Archival Depot.

Offenbach was a central collecting point in the American Sector of Germany for books, manuscripts and archival materials looted from the occupied countries by Nazis during World War II.

As he displayed the album during the news conference, Edsel explained how the final scene in the film *Raiders of the Lost Ark* was inspired by photos of the large areas the Monuments Men set up to examine and identify all the stolen artifacts.

“This is where Stephen Spielberg got the idea for that massive warehouse (in the last scene) that seems to run into infinity,” he said.

Monuments Man Cpl. Rouben Sami originally received this album from Monuments Officer Captain Isaac Bencowitz, director of the Offenbach Archival Depot, in recognition of Sami’s work at that facility, according to the museum.

Edsel said Sami, who is alive but ill right now, donated this album to the Dallas Holocaust Museum.

It is one of just a handful of such albums at the most important archives in the world such as Yad Vashem — The World Holocaust Remembrance Center, the National Archives in Washington, D.C., the New York Public Library and the Centre For Studies And Research at The Hague.

“It is in very august company,” Edsel said.

Elaborating more on the background of the album, Edsel said

one of the key contributions by Monuments Officer Captain Isaac Bencowitz was his proficiency with languages — he spoke nine of them and was an expert in Slavic.

Meanwhile, Edsel explained that the seven-branched menorah was brought home from Europe by an American soldier as a souvenir. The soldier gifted it to a friend who donated it to a Jewish woman who in turn tipped off the Monuments network about it through their toll-free phone number.

Edsel said the foundation continues to receive leads about recovered works of art and other cultural items through its toll-free 1-866-WWII-ART tip line, 1-866-994-4278.

The more commonly seen nine-branch menorah is called a chanukiyah and is used during Chanukah.

Edsel has channeled his efforts to recover lost art into a successful literary career — authoring 2006's *Rescuing Da Vinci*, and 2013's *Saving Italy*.

He also penned 2007's *The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History*.

A 2014 film based on the book, *The Monuments Men*, was directed by Academy Award winner George Clooney, who also starred in the production.

Edsel also is the co-producer of the Emmy-nominated documentary film, 2007's *The Rape of Europa*.

Florence Shapiro stood in for Museum President and CEO Mary Pat Higgins during the news conference. The former senator, whose parents survived the Holocaust, said Edsel's work really pulls at the heartstrings.

"This man has done a wonderful job," Shapiro said. "His commitment to the project is inspiring for so many of us."

Mary Pat Higgins, in an issued statement, said the donated artifacts would be proudly displayed in the Holocaust Museum's new facility planned for Dallas' West End.

Higgins said the artifacts would stand as symbols of reparation, restoration, Jewish continuity and perseverance after the horrors of Nazi aggression.

"The Monuments Men Foundation, in continuing the work of the Monuments Men, assures that our cultural heritage is protected and restored to its rightful place," Higgins said. "The foundation and its work inspire us to never forget what happened in those dark years and to redouble our efforts to fight prejudice, hatred and indifference for humanity's benefit."