Audio file

TFH - EP 2 - A Postcard From Hitler (2).mp3

Transcript

Cold Open:

One of the people who were on the welcome desk brought this postcard to me, and said, “What do you make of this?” And I looked at it and it was a postcard from the First World War. On the front there was a picture of a German castle, a Schloss, which all looked very sort of very jolly.

And then on the back there was some writing. And I peered at this writing, and the person who brought to me was obviously quite excited, and I was trying to read it. It was in German, in a cursive script, and they said, “look who signed it!” And what it was - it was a postcard from Adolf Hitler.

INTRO:

You are listening to Their Finest Hour, a podcast from the University of Oxford

Main transcript:

Hello! My name is Dr. Stuart Lee and I am the Principal Investigator on Their Finest Hour.

And I also worked extensively on the First World War projects that we ran which developed the Oxford Community Collection model. So just to give some background to that - we started those in about 2008 when we set up the Great War Archive. And the idea was to try to offer the public an opportunity to send to us material that they personally held related to the First World War.

This was in the days of user-generated content, or what we now call crowdsourcing. And we ran our very first collection day in the Public Library in Oxford - I have to say we didn't really know what we were going to get. And we had a few people coming along and bringing some nice items, and we photographed them there and then asked them a few questions, and they went into the Great War Archive along with material from other Collection Days which we ran around the country.

And this then expanded into Europeana 1914-18, which went across Europe. And we ran collection days in in all kinds of countries and institutions. And then we brought it back home for the centenary of the First World War, and ran Lest We Forget, where we adopted the model which we're now adopting for Their Finest Hour, where we trained local communities to run their own collection days.

So the first thing to say about a collection day is you really have no idea how big it's going to be, or how small it's going to be. So, for the most part, you would tend to get about 30 to 35 people coming in with their contributions, and you'd be standing at the window looking out on the lawn or the driveway to the event, and watching people walk up with a plastic bag and bring it in, or some sort of suitcase, and they'd sit at the desk.

And you had absolutely no idea what was going to be in the bag or what they'd brought in and it could be anything. It could be something very, very small. It could just be a series of service medals. It could be an object, a souvenir that had been brought back from the war, but more often than not it was letters, postcards, memoirs, all kinds of textual material that people had never seen.

What I would like to do is just sort of try and pick out a few highlights that I remember from those collection days. And I think it bears out a statement that one of our colleagues said - what we're finding these days is that 'the ordinary can become extraordinary, and the extraordinary can become ordinary'.

So that the one I would begin with, I think, came about when we were interviewed on BBC Radio Oxford, I believe, and we talked about the fact that we were running these collection days and that we would really welcome people to come in and bring this - any material that they had in their houses and, you know, in their attics, that sort of thing.

And we had someone come in, and they brought with them a photograph album and they said, "Oh, we heard your interview on the radio and we were just about to throw this out." And, in fact, I think, if I remember correctly, they said that it had just gone into the skip and they retrieved it.

What it was was a photograph album of an Army chaplain who was attached to the 44th Casualty Clearing Station. And, basically, he'd taken with him a small camera. And from the point he departed England all the way through the Western Front up to the occupation of Germany, he took a series of photographs and he put this in this scrapbook. And he would also collect mementos from the battlefield with some sort of observation maps from German soldiers, presumably dead, and so on. And I remember there was a particularly wonderful picture of him crawling out of the barrel of the 15 inch Big Bertha gun which had been captured, and posing at the end of this.

But what it brought home to me was that the fragility of these documents that, you know, every day, probably every hour, there is a danger of these being lost as people die, collections are passed on, houses are cleared, and that, you know, just every now and then stuff may just get thrown away, perfectly innocently. And we just managed to catch this, and it now sits in the Bodleian Library as a major item for people to look at if they want to see new photographic evidence from that period – particularly around towards the end of the war - September to December 1918.

The second item which I remember, and we've spoken about this a lot, is a matchbox – and this is where the ordinary becomes extraordinary, because there's nothing, you know, fantastic about a matchbox, but this was around the story surrounding this matchbox.

It contained a letter from Sergeant Major George Cavan, and he was in the Highland Light Infantry. He had a family - he had a wife called Jean and three daughters, and he went on training camp before he was sent off to France. And he was on the train going towards the South of England for embarkation to go towards France, and by chance the train passed through the station where his family lived. So he quickly scribbled on a piece of paper a note to his family, put it in a matchbox and threw it out the window.

The little note is, you know, it's completely inconsequential:

“Dearest wife and bairns,

Off to France. Love to you all.

Daddy

Signed, 29th of March 1918”

And I think the extraordinary thing about this is that, not only does it survive, the family kept it. But it was the last message that he'd ever managed to send to his family because he was killed only a few days after arriving at the front in France, and he's buried in an unmarked grave at Ypres.

And there was a little footnote to this that when we put it up on the collection, a member of the family living in Australia contacted us and said, “I think we're related to this George Cavan”. And we managed to put the family together, which was a lovely sort of postscript to that.

The item that came into the collection days that probably attracted the most attention – there were there were many that were noteworthy – but this was in Germany, in Bavaria.

I think I was manning a photograph digitization studio at the time. And one of the people who were on the welcome desk brought this postcard to me, and said, “What do you make of this?” And I looked at it, and it was a postcard from the First World War. On the front there was a picture of a German castle, a Schloss, which all looked very sort of very jolly.

And then on the back there was some writing. And I peered at this writing, and the person who brought to me was obviously quite excited, and I was trying to read it. It was in German, in a cursive script, and they said, “look who signed it!” And what it was - it was a postcard from Adolf Hitler, who was serving obviously in the German army at the time, to his friend Carl Lansammer. And it was 19th of December, 1916.

The actual postcard doesn't say much. I think from, what I recall, it said he'd gone to the dentist, but now he was keen to get back to the front, and that was it.

But it was extraordinary! I mean, it was this sort of strange artefact to hold in your hands that you knew that Hitler himself had held and this was his handwriting, and you were in possession of it. And all kinds of emotions go through you. You know you're touching history, but you're also touching evil almost, in a sense. But it really was this figure, that dominated so much of our lives and has had such an impact on Europe and European history and on so many people, was writing just this sort of mundane, boring note about going to the dentist.

So it was an odd rush of emotions, and again, it had a postscript to it that when we came back to Britain after the collection day, the press picked up on this story and the local newspaper in Oxford - in the days when you used to put billboards outside of news agents to attract you to go in and buy the paper - had the headline on one of these: “Oxford academic shocked to get postcard from Hitler!”

As if he just sent me this and I was somewhat surprised that I had heard from him for several years.

So those were three items that stuck out for me. But sometimes it isn't the item, it's just the event itself that sticks in your mind. And the events we ran in Germany were very interesting for all kinds of reasons.

But I think what came through there if I was to sort of take a step back and abstract from it was this almost cathartic experience for the people who brought in objects, because they felt this was the first time they could actually talk about what had gone on in the First World War - what their families and ancestors had experienced - because it was completely overshadowed and obliterated by what happened in the Second World War.

And equally the comment was that this was part of a continual history for them. You know, when they would talk about whoever it was in the First World War, if they'd survived, they wanted to tell you what had happened to them in the 20s and 30s, what had happened to them in the Second World War, and then what had happened to them in the post war division of Germany. It was one long, almost tragic saga of a country for 100 years.

The other time where I kind of felt this was when we were running a collection day in Dublin. And, again, this reached local media and national media, and attracted a lot of people. I think there were several hundred people and they were queuing out the door.

But, again, it was this sense of catharsis that for, bearing in mind the history of Ireland in the 20th century, this was the first time that people had had a chance to really talk about what their relatives had done in the First World War. Most of them obviously had fought in the British Army, bearing in mind the events in Irish history after the war, and in the 20s, this was something you just couldn't talk about, but now it felt that the time was right when they could start talking about that.

And I remember I was manning - I think one of the interview desks - and there were two gentlemen and they weren’t actually, together, but they both somehow ended at the desk and one of them had a lot of memorabilia from the Easter 1916 rising. And his relative had been on the side of the rebels, and I think had been in the GPO, but certainly around there and had been shot at but had survived, and this was some of the memorabilia from that Rising

And the other person at the desk was bringing mementos from his ancestor who had been in the British Army - an Irishman fighting in the British Army - who had then been positioned in Dublin and was probably shooting at the other person's grandfather.

And there was this sort of pause. And then they both looked at each other and just hit it off straight away and had a great conversation. And, you know, went off and, for all I know, were the best of friend. But it was just that reconciliation of something that almost 100 years ago had divided a nation so much which I saw happening before my eyes.

So we're obviously very excited about Their Finest Hour. We have no idea what will come in but we just hope it reflects the stories, the experiences of people from all communities across Britain and the Commonwealth, you know, who took part in the Second World War either as combatants in the armed services - but they may have been working in factories, or they may have been children who just remember things or, of course, as we increasingly find, their descendants, the people who were told the stories later on and who have picked this up and have memorialised them.

And I think that is really important.

Again, one last story from the First World War. We would often get people bring in medals of servicemen and servicewomen. And, you know, we could talk them through the medals and we could point out the inscription on the edge, which most of them didn't know were there, which, you know, bore the ancestors name.

And very commonly though you'd get in the Death Penny - this large 6 or so inch - I can't remember – a coin that was given to people whose relative had died. These were issued by the, you know, the millions and they were often accompanied by a letter from the King which was Photostatted. Many people got excited thinking it was originally a genuine document signed by the King, but it wasn't. It had been printed, so these were coming in quite often.

But what you would also find it wasn't so much the fact that you were getting these. It was the stories that surrounded it. It was the fact that in some families these sat in drawers or in attics and they only just discovered them. But, in other households these were mounted in these wonderful cases where they decorated them. They'd often put a photograph of the soldier - they'd put some sort of extra, maybe the last letter - they'd become a shrine and even some families, they would talk about how these were brought down once a year - maybe at the soldier's anniversary of their death, or their birthday, you know? And people would retell the story of him as an act of memory – of memorialization of the dead person.

OUTRO:

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