

EMBROIDERIES and HANDICRAFTS

Made in German prison cells at Cottbus and Waldheim
by condemned women of the Resistance
from the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Denmark, and Great Britain
while awaiting execution.

Many were "Helpers" of the AFEES.

This is an account of their creative work by one of them.

Charlotte (Lotty) Ambach

From the beginning of this account, it should be remembered that we prisoners were confined within cells except for the rare occasions when under guard we were taken to other places within the prison. At no time were we furnished materials for the purpose of making embroideries and handicrafts. Everything had to be acquired by devious means. Most of the items in this exhibit were presents for my mother, Elise Chabot - called "Mushka" - to honour her birthday on the 3rd of May, 1945. We were liberated by the Russians on the 6th of May. If they had not arrived so soon after the birthday, there probably would be nothing to exhibit. At unannounced intervals guards would search through the cells, and when they found our creations, they would confiscate them. Liberation before there was another search made it possible to preserve these cherished mementos.

NOTES AND COMMENTS ABOUT EXHIBITED ITEMS

Items in the exhibit are numbered in order to guide the viewer from these comments about related groups of items to the display itself. It is hoped that a few words explaining our situation will lead to an understanding to what otherwise might be looked at as only a collection of small objects made in German prisons.

Nos. 1, 3, 4, & 16 were made by me. On No. 1 is my prisoner's number, NN 4,000, the official way of referring to prisoners to be executed. The NN (or non nomen in Latin) in the prisoner number came to stand for "Nacht und Nebel" - or "Night and Fog" in English, the reason being that prisoners would disappear without warning in the night. I made Nos. 3 and 4 for Mushka's birthday on the 3rd of May. In Europe on the 1st of May it is customary to give friends and family members "Un brin de muguet" - or in English a sprig of lily of the valley, the flower you see in No. 4. It seemed appropriate to wait until Mushka's birthday to give her this flower, the two special days being so close to one another. In No. 16 are references to songs we would sing both before and during our imprisonment. The material in this item was formerly a rag that had served me as a handkerchief when I had a bad cold. After circumstances had made it possible to clean and dry it, I embroidered this. (A long list of the songs with comments about them and others is furnished in an appendix in order to avoid disruption in this guide for viewers of the exhibit.)

Nos. 6, 7, 9, & 15 were not made by the occupants of my cell. In the cell where they were made was a Belgian prisoner who in Brussels had owned and operated a shop that specialized in hand embroidery and selling goods like handkerchiefs, blouses, and dresses. She taught her craft to some of her cellmates, and the result is the lovely embroideries you see. Note especially in items Nos. 9 and 15 the lace edging that was done with needle and thread.

Nos. 6 & 7 with the initials M and L, which stand for Muschka and Lotty, were made for holding soap powder - about a thimbleful. On rare occasions we were assembled and marched under guard to showers - a luxury seldom enjoyed!

Nos. 5, 8, & 13 are embroidered in the colours used in the flags of the Allies - red, white, and blue for France, the Netherlands, Great Britain, and the United States and black, gold, and red for Belgium.

Nos. 11, 12, & 14 were inspired by two French songs we often sang: "Tu es partie pour un voyage. Adieu, famille. Adieu, voisins." (You have left on a trip. Farewell, family. Farewell, neighbours.) and "Mais quand nous rentrerons!" (But when we return!) Note: the three embroideries were made by Joke Folmer, Nel Lind, and Jet Rozenburg.

MATERIALS (LOOTED!) AND THEIR USES

Needles were essential if we were to embroider and make some of the handicraft creations. Being prisoners, we had to wear the uniforms that were issued. In order to keep them repaired, the prison guards ever so often on a Sunday would bring sewing and darning equipment to the cell. This was an occasion to "organize" some "loot" for our own devices. When the guards came in the evening to collect the supplies for repairing uniforms, we would have used up more yarn than had in fact been required! Also, if lucky, we might find on our occasional walks in the prison yard a broken needle, a scrap of yarn or coloured thread, or some other useful bit of material. We could then return broken needles and for each one keep a good one. The pieces of thread we found were sometimes barely an inch long. As a result we had to stick the needle into the right place in the material, then thread the bit of yarn through the eye of the needle and pull it through to the other side. Next came a repetition of these steps on the other side. It was front to back, back to front, then a repetition of the process until the scrap of yarn or thread was used up. A painstaking, time-consuming activity! After all, when assigned chores had been completed, we could go nowhere.

A valuable source of thread was the pretty little navy blue scarfs that were issued with our grotesquely hideous uniforms. The synthetic material felt silky, and pulling threads from it, some quite long (almost like threads from a spool), became a favourite pastime that provided a very special material for our creations.

Other than embroidery we made objects like dolls, animals - and even rosaries. The makings for these creations came from our sabotage activities when we were doing required work assignments in our cells. We had to process three types of materials, all of them salvaged from farming operations: corn husks, twine, and feathers. (They were dirty when they arrived in the cell, and dust would accumulate in our ill-ventilated quarters while we worked on them. The only source of fresh air was a small window high on the wall. It was not a healthy environment to work in - or to live in.) The Dutch designations for these activities were MAIS (corn), TOUW (twine, cord, string, et cetera), and VEEREN (feathers).

MAIS: A huge pile of dried cobs with husks would be dumped on the cell floor. We had to remove the husks from each cob and then soak the husks in water. Next we would tear them into narrow strips from which we made braids about one inch wide and eighty to ninety feet long. They were given to others for fashioning simple, useful objects like doormats. However, one of our group, an Australian, diverted some of the husks with cobs to her own purposes. She made dolls by pulling the husks downward from the cob to form large skirts and then covering the cob in blouses, wraps, and scarfs made from loose husks and other materials. They were gorgeous, and they represented different periods in history. All of them unfortunately were seized during cell searches.

TOUW: The strings and cords of different thicknesses were made of natural as well as synthetic fibers, and they had been salvaged mainly from agricultural enterprises. Our task was to remove the knots and to separate the materials according to kind. As was our custom, we would steal any materials we could use for our own projects, the principal one being the

creation of footwear to replace what had been furnished us. Wearing prison shoes made with wooden soles and metal-hard, thick leather uppers, had resulted in footsores that would not heal. As a substitute we made espadrilles. Some of the heavier materials could be braided and sewn together to make soles. We fashioned uppers from softer materials by making large, flat braids, almost a kind of weave. (Fortunately the guards raised no objections.) One of our companions found enough fleecy material to weave for herself a vest, which she wore under her prison uniform for greater warmth.

VEEREN: We were given bags full of feathers. Our task was to strip the soft down from the quills and collect it in bags. The quills were to be put into separate bags, and most of them were. However, we would deliberately botch the job by setting aside bits of quill and then mixing them in with the down, in a way to recreate what we had started with. To the extent that we could without getting caught, we would divert some of the down for our own uses. Stuffing it into straw mattresses increased our comfort level. And using soft down for toilet paper rather than dried corn husks, while hardly ideal, diminished our level of discomfort!

THOUGHTS FIFTY YEARS AFTER

Now, after half a century thinking back to those times both of physical squalor and of mental and emotional misery and pain, I must say that I am astonished at the way we coped. Aside from the uncertainty about our own future, we suffered anxiety about the fates of our fathers, brothers, husbands, sons, and fiancés. I remember the generosity of some, the moral support of others, the kindness and gaiety in adversity of still others. We found outlets in our creativity which made our day-to-day existence more tolerable. We even experienced moments of hilarity thanks to our sense of humour. Despite the passage of time certain memories of events and people remain vivid in my mind.

**APPENDIX FOR ITEM 16
THE SONGS WE SANG BEFORE AND AFTER PRISON CONFINEMENT**

- A) Hoping for: "The Yanks are coming!"
- B) Longing for: "Home, sweet home again."
- C) A Dutch (Netherlandish) song: "De lucht is blauw, kom mee, kom gauw." (The air is blue, come along, come quickly.)
- D) Anticipating the future: "When the lights go on again all over the world."
- E) Suppressing desperation: "But we don't talk about that."
- F) A French song: "Il est long le chemin qui conduit à ma Belle." (It is long the road that leads to my Beauty - or sweetheart.)
- G) Thinking of the boys we helped: "Silver wings in the moonlight."
- H) Hearing the boom of a cannon at noon from the 13th of April and onwards: "Don't give up, Tommy Atkins!"
- I) Wishing for a smoke: "While a cigaret is burning."
- J) A French student song: "Que l'on nous verse à boire." (Let somebody pour us a drink.)
- K) Hungry, hungry, ravenous: "Ma, I miss your apple pie. Ma, I miss your stew!!!"
- L) Still hungry and wanting more food: "Hey, little hen . . . when, when, when will you lay me an egg for my tea?"
- M) A Dutch song that expressed our feelings about the prison authorities: "Laat de baas de p... maar krijgen!" (Let the boss get the pox!)

