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Hitler's postcards and bombproof bibles: The remarkable results of Europeana 1914-18

By Culture24 Reporter | 02 May 2012

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The bible that saved Kurt Geiler's life, as a soldier in World War I, is on public show thanks to the Europeana 1914-18 project

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When a series of roadshows were held across the continent by Europeana 1914-1918, a project inviting people to share their World War I stories, 2,000 people turned up.

Almost 50,000 photos of objects, letters and diaries from the period have been uploaded to a dedicated website as a result. But no-one could have anticipated quite how powerful the artefacts offered would be.



Markus Geiler with the bible which saved his grandfather

© Frank Drauschke

"I found it hard to believe that, at a local event to record ordinary people's stories, I was seeing a previously unknown document in Hitler's own hand," admits Dr Stuart Lee, of Oxford University, who says he felt "a shudder run through me" when a greetings postcard from the future German leader – written as a 27-year-old soldier in Nuremberg, and suggesting that he had problems with his teeth and spelling – surfaced.

"Europeana's project is remarkable in that it can bring in the most meaningful story in a person's whole existence, as well as the mundane and mis-spelt jottings of the future dictator."

As astonishing as the card is,

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it's still the tip of the iceberg. In Preston, 85-year-old Joan Almond accompanied a typed manuscript recounting the wartime experiences of her father, John Stafford, shedding illuminating light on post-traumatic stress disorder years before it was officially recognised.

"I think the war must have haunted him a lot, especially when you read his account," she reflects. Stafford served in the Battle of the Somme and lay injured for two days until comrades carried him across "Death Valley" to save him.

"My mother used to encourage him to write down his experiences. It seems to have had a calming influence."

Oxford University is providing exceptional expertise for the project, enthused by a previous scheme, the Great War Archive, in 2008.

Open days have been held in Germany, England, Ireland, Luxembourg, Denmark and Slovenia, where centenarian Slavko Zupan popped in twice, bringing a bottle containing a decorated wooden crucifix made by a Russian prisoner of war, held by Zupan's family since 1916.

Markus Geiler provided pictures of the bible which saved his grandfather's life by absorbing shrapnel. The grenade responsible killed his fellow troops as they slept. "I am here to show how a family story can actually become part of the collective memory of Europe," he says.

"I hope that there will be many, many such stories, and the European idea will develop even further when people deal together with the past and tell each other their stories."

The Dublin roadshow proved one of the finest examples of this, attracting more than 600 people in lengthy queues. Political sensitivities have prevented Irish participation in the war being comprehensively visited, but stories from the session included that of Joseph Heapes, whose daughter-in-law, Máire, revealed how he met the love of his life while imprisoned in Germany.

"People pass their stories down their families," points out Jill Cousins, the Executive Director of Europeana, who says the campaign represents "a new approach to cultural history".

"The project's success highlights the huge interest that Europeans have in their shared history, linking people's own stories to the official histories of the war that we're collecting from the national libraries and archives."

► Visit www.europeana1914-1918.eu for more.

More pictures:



Kurt Geiler (left) in service during the war

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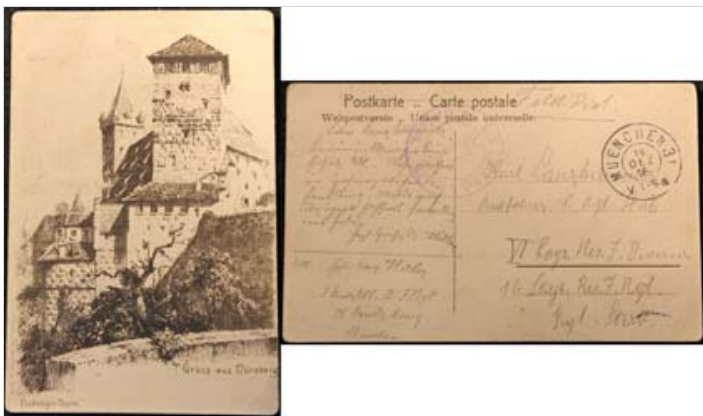
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