



Gold, silver and other metal coins of a Holocaust victim's collection are seen on a velvet tray in the Balatoni Museum.



Metal coins of a Holocaust victim's collection are seen on a velvet tray.

Buried treasure poses Holocaust puzzle for Hungary museum



An archaeologist, Hungarian Ferenc Redo examines a metal coin of a Holocaust victim's collection in the Balatoni Museum in the town of Keszthely, 200 km west of Budapest. — AFP photos

A vast and "unique" trove of antique and Roman-era coins, unearthed in what was one of Hungary's wartime Jewish ghettos, is proving a conundrum for historians. Thrilled with the chance discovery of the 2,800 gold and silver coins spanning decades and continents, researchers are in the dark however about who collected and then hid them. That the coins were buried under a house whose one-time owner, the likely collector, is presumed to have been murdered in the Holocaust deepens the mystery.

According to a Hungarian Jewish organization, the hoard also exposes how gaps remain in what is known about Hungary's Jews during World War II. The current owners of the house in the town of Keszthely, 190 kilometers (120 miles) southwest of the capital Budapest, stumbled across the coins in February during work on the cellar. They were likely hidden by a Jewish owner who was later deported to a Nazi German death camp in 1944, said Balint Havasi, director of Keszthely's Balatoni Museum where the items are currently exhibited. "It's a priceless collection that can also help us learn about the Holocaust," Havasi told AFP.

'Sealed and buried'

In a letter to the museum, the building's current owners explained how they had been digging a hole in the cellar after pumping out groundwater when they came across the hoard. "We slowly dug out five carefully sealed and buried glass jars," reads the letter seen by AFP. "When we opened one of them, we were greeted by an amazing sight, just like in a fairy tale: hundreds of coins, real treasure," it continued. "We hope that it can return to its legal owners one day."

The finders have requested anonymity,

according to the museum, which also declined to reveal the exact location of the house. Although the coins have not been valued, Havasi said that the collection was "unique... in terms of geographic spread, time period—from antiquity to 20th century—and the large volume".

'Tragically, not continued'

Almost half of the coins are from Pannonia, which was a province of the Roman Empire that covers modern-day western Hungary, according to Ferenc Redo, an archaeologist and coin expert. The others are mostly antique coins from around the world, including pre- and post-revolutionary France, 19th century German territories, and both Tsarist- and Soviet-era Russia. Many are from even farther afield, including South America, Africa, Asia and British-ruled India. "It's sad that someone put together such a worldwide collection but tragically could not continue," Redo told AFP.

Engraved clues?

As well as the owner's identity, how the collection was amassed is unknown. Engravings on jewelry also found in the jars suggest that the items may have belonged to the Pollak family, who were well-known Jewish traders in Keszthely before World War II. Almost all of the town's once flourishing Jewish population died in the Holocaust, and no descendants of the possible owners have yet been traced.

In May 1944, the town's Jews were forced into a ghetto, of which the house where the coins were found was a part, said Gabor Rejto, head of the EMIH Unified Hungarian Jewish Congregation in Keszthely. Two months later, they were transported from Hungary to the Auschwitz death camp, he added. A total of 829



Jews—around 15 percent of the town's population at the time—were deported from Keszthely. Only 64 of them survived. Today, the community has around a dozen members, Rejto said.

Metal coins of a Holocaust victim's collection are seen on a velvet tray.

'Unanswered questions'

"The discovery shows how there are still many unanswered questions about the Holocaust in Hungary," he told AFP. An estimated 600,000 Hungarian Jews were killed in the Holocaust, most in Auschwitz. Many victims were never identified or remains found. The museum plans to digitalize the collection and enlist archivists and historians to scour the Pollak family tree in search of descendants. If no owner can be found, the collection will revert to ownership by the state. "We also hope the exhibition will spread the word about the coins, and that a legal owner will turn up," Havasi said. — AFP



Water buffaloes participate in a race in Chonburi.

Prized Thai buffaloes show off speed in muddy race

Splashing across a muddy field with men sprinting behind them, prized water buffaloes blow past cheering spectators in eastern Thailand yesterday in a rare display of bovine speed. Tractors have largely replaced the big beasts in daily work but farmers in Chonburi have preserved the more than 100-year-old racing custom to mark annual rice plantings. "Before, we used buffaloes to plough rice fields. When our work was done, we held the buffalo race as relaxation," said owner Thanin Sae-tiew, 52. "It has since become our tradition."

Pairs of horned buffaloes thunder to the finish line while a racer grasping a red plough tries to hold on until the end or face disqualification—and excited laughter from the crowd. It's less about winning the 3,000 baht (\$100) prize than pride in victory, though the best buffaloes can fetch higher prices when sold. And they are treated to fancier food than most livestock. Racer Noppadol Pornpaipan, 22, says his animals are fed boiled rice, eggs and chicken extract in the evening.

But come race day they get a special meal of rice mixed with a little shark fin soup that supposedly boosts buffalo energy. The normally slow-moving buffaloes can still be seen dotting the rural landscape but the rise of mecha-



A handler tends to water buffaloes as they participate in a water buffalo race in Chonburi. — AFP photos

nized farming has made them less essential. Some worry that younger generations will lose touch with older ways of life but the race provides a way of keeping the history alive. "I feel good that I'm preserving the Thai buffaloes so they will not disappear," Noppadol said. — AFP



Water buffaloes participate in a race in Chonburi.



Handlers tend to water buffaloes as they participate in a water buffalo race.



A handler tends to water buffaloes as they participate in a water buffalo race.