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# Importance of Particular Groups of Objects in the Identification of Victims of the Katyn Massacre in the Case of Finds from Kharkiv

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The researchers have been focused increasingly on war crime archaeology in recent years, e.g. the most significant until now scientific and logistic achievements which were archaeological-exhumation works carried out 30 years ago, related to searching for mass hidden graves of Polish officers, policemen and other civil servants murdered in spring of 1940 by NKVD in Katyn, Kharkiv and Mednoye. These were the first survey researches performed abroad on such a huge scale by Polish archaeologists. Obtained information concerning exact burial locations, the number of victims, burial ground sizes and final identification of the method and murder weapon which contributed to confirmation, verification and completion of our knowledge included in documents concerning the truth of The Katyn Massacre. Experience gained and excavation methodology of those mass graves exploration was presented and reported in detail in numerous publications (Głosek 1995; 2001; 2011; 2021; Kola 1995; 1996; 1998; 2001; 2005; 2021; Młodziejowski 1995) outlining cognitive possibilities and research directions for future studies and challenges. One of the most important tasks was the victims identification which was possible thanks to objects found with the bodies. This article objective is to present new obtained knowledge, using particular types of objects (personal movable property) and their systematization. Moreover, the article authoress, also working on the restoration of these objects and deciphering inscriptions placed on them, wanted to indicate particular object groups significance in the victims identification.

KEY-WORDS: The Katyn Massacre, war crime archaeology, graves of Polish officers, victim identification

Polish researchers have been focused increasingly on war crime archaeology in recent years. A good example of this, and the most significant scientific and logistic achievement until now have been the archaeological-exhumation works carried out 30 years

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ago, related to The Katyn Massacre. This was the search for mass hidden graves of Polish officers, policemen and other civil servants murdered in spring of 1940 by the NKVD [The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs; in Russian: Нарóдный комиссари́ат внóутренних дел (*Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del*)] in Katyn, Kharkiv and Mednoye. These were the first research projects of this type performed abroad on such a huge scale by Polish archaeologists. The information obtained concerned exact burial locations, number of victims, burial ground sizes and final identification of the method and murder weapon which contributed to confirmation, verification and completion of our knowledge included in documents concerning the truth of The Katyn Massacre. The experience gained and excavation methodology of those mass graves exploration was presented and reported in detail in numerous publications (Głósek 1995; 2001; 2011; 2021; Kola 1995; 1996; 1998; 2001; 2005; 2021; Młodziejowski 1995) outlining the cognitive possibilities and research directions for future studies and challenges. One of the most important tasks was the identification of victims which was possible thanks to objects found with the bodies. The objective of this article is to present this newly obtained knowledge, using particular types of objects (personal movable property) and their systematization. Moreover, the author, based on her work on the restoration of these objects and deciphering inscriptions on them, also indicates the significance of particular objects groups in the victims identification.

Between 1995–1996, the fourth forest-park zone in Kharkiv, now Ukraine, was explored by a Polish expedition supervised by professor Andrzej Kola from the Institute of Archaeology of Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, conducting archaeological-exhumation works connected to research concentrated on establishing the circumstances of the murder by the Russian authorities Polish prisoners of war and locating places of their burials. The task was to determine the exact location of the mass graves, measure the sizes of the burial pits and estimate the number of human remains (Florkowski 1998: 57). The research was also to confirm if the identified graves include bodies of Polish officers brought to Kharkiv from the camp of Starobilsk from 5th April till 12th May 1940 (Kola 2005: 56). Based on survey drilling (4674 boreholes) made over an area of about 1.5 ha, using manual geological drills every two meters, 75 mass graves of various size with shapes close to rectangles or squares were identified (Kola 2001: 131). All pits were dug manually to the depth of about 2 m. 60 burial pits included remains of representatives of the local community killed by the Soviet authorities and the next 15 were identified as graves containing Polish victims (no: 5/91, 22a/91, 5/94, 6/94, 7/94, 17/95, 19/95, 26/95, 28/95, 29/95, 30/95, 36/95, 40/95, 45/95, 52/95). Due to time limitation not all of the located graves were completely explored and exhumed. The others, both Soviet and Polish were exhumed only partially and the number of victims was evaluated basing

on anthropological measurements (Kola 2005: 102, 111). The researchers were able successfully to count 4302 persons buried in the Polish graves, including two women. Four graves called “dry” contained skeletonized human remains, the remained burial pits contained remains preserved in the form of adipocere (putrefied tissue). The average density of the layer with human remains and Polish personal objects was about 70–80 cm (Florkowski 1998: 60; Kola 2001: 133), with bodies placed in general composing layers in 6 or 8 levels. In graves called “wet”, the level of water during their exploration reached from 60 to 75 cm above the pit bottom (Kola 2001: 132). Water from precipitation collected in the basins created by the burial pits dug into impermeable loess sediments, creating an environment which slowed down significantly the decomposition of the dead bodies. Exploring the Kharkiv pits, the archaeologists reported bodies in various stages of decomposition: from skeletonized remains found in dry graves or the highest top levels of wet pits to a partially decomposed compact putrefied body mass (Florkowski 1998; Kola 2001: 147; 2011: 132; Drążkowska 2010: 97–100). Removing soil layers from the first grave it turned out that the pits contained not only human remains, but also a great number of various objects made of materials like: wood, textile, leather, metal, paper, glass, plastic and rubber. The condition of the graves contents was varied and depended generally on deposition environment, but also on the decomposition state of the bodies and the murderers attempts to obliterate the traces of crime made in various periods, like burning the officers’ belongings directly after the execution (evidenced by a layer of burned objects observed in one of the graves; no 26/95), but also drilling through graves in the 1970s–1980s using mechanical bores with diameter of 60–80 cm, which caused grinding and destruction of the remains and many objects placed there (Kola 1998: 34; 2001: 132). The condition of several items also resulted from the material they had been made of.

Objects excavated from wet graves were covered with a fat and wax mass difficult to remove, sealing them completely deforming their shapes and making difficult to identify (Drążkowska and Grupa 1996: 78–90; Grupa 1998: 75–83; Drążkowska 2001: 145–153). The most time-consuming treatment was cleaning objects made of organic materials – wood, leather, flax, cotton, woollen clothes and wool (Drążkowska 2010: 97–98). Removing all these impurities was a great challenge for the restorers of the archaeological objects, although on the other hand that mass coating caused the objects to be preserved in a relatively good condition isolated from an unfavorable destructive environment and protected them from excess drying. The researchers found about several thousand objects in the graves, part of which were in a very poor state and not suitable for further successful conservation. These were initially cleaned *in situ*, if it was possible. They were redeposited in the grave after

first being examined to detect whether they contained any information useful in the identification of a person. Some thousand artifacts were prepared for transportation and taken to Poland for proper conservation work, which proved to be very difficult and demanding for our restorers. New methods had to be implemented very often and apart from conservation work, researchers had to decipher and note all the information found, because in the investigation, every item was evidence of crime (Drązkowska 2001: 145–150; 2011:183–190). All conservation treatments were performed very carefully, precisely cleaning the objects' surfaces not to destroy written information.

Complete analyses of inscriptions were made after completing conservation work. Several persons read and noted the texts and later other persons read them anew and verified them. The knowledge served for victims identification in the broad meaning, because some inscriptions were very detailed giving exact personal data, while the others, unfortunately the majority were very general and basic. That basic identification was possible thanks to objects without any inscriptions found the most often. The first basic stage of recognition started with those very items when graves of soldiers, civilians, local people were distinguished, and when later Polish officers' graves were searched for among the many others in the Kharkiv NKVD cemetery. The first determinant used for verification of the graves were Polish military buttons with the image of an eagle, found inside the drill during first survey boreholes. Particular pits included various numbers of found objects like: uniforms and their elements, military caps, footwear, belts, clasps, report bags, epaulettes, headgear, medals and distinctions. Some other elements – objects manufactured in Poland, sometimes with names of their producers were also very helpful (Kola 2005: 74, 142, 146, 187, 203–206):

- toothbrush with inscription: J. OSETOWSKI SKŁAD APTECZNY MIŃSK MAZOWIECKI
- china cups with inscription: ĆMIELÓW (grave 7/94)
- soapdish with inscription: MYDŁO PRZETŁUSZCZONE OLIWKOWE E. MARYNOWSKI I S-KA WARSZAWA (grave 26/95)
- bottle with inscription: MORSZYŃSKA SÓL GORZKA (grave 26/95)
- container with toothpaste and inscription MYDEŁKO DO ZĘBÓW WARSZAWSKIE LABORATORIUM CHEMICZNE S.A.(grave 26/95)
- mug with inscription: KRYNICA W ZIMIE NOWE ŁAZIENKI (grave 26/95)
- mug with inscription: PRACA (grave 5/94)
- medicine bottle with inscription: SANOK (grave 6/94)
- pocketknife with inscription: GERLACH NIERDZEWNE (grave 26/94)
- mug with inscription: WŁOCŁAWEK (grave 7/94)
- glass with inscription: KONSERWY PUDLISZKI WŁAŚĆ. ST. FENRYCH (grave 19/95)

- brass tin with inscription KOMUNIKANTY (grave 7/94)

All objects with Polish language words: printed, or handwritten documents, books, letters, postcards, single notes, inscriptions on wedding rings and devotional objects served as the basis for identification of the victims' nationality, for instance:

- holy medal with inscription: PAMIĄTKA Z PIELGRZYMKI DO LOURDES (grave 7/94)
- holy medal with inscription: O MARYJO BEZ ZMAZY POCZĘTA MÓDL SIĘ ZA [...] KTÓRZY SIĘ DO CIEBIE UCIEKAMY (grave 26/95)
- gorget with inscription: PAMIĄTKA PROMOCJI NA PODPORUCZNIKÓW OSTRÓW MAZOWIECKA 15.X.1938 (grave 6/94)

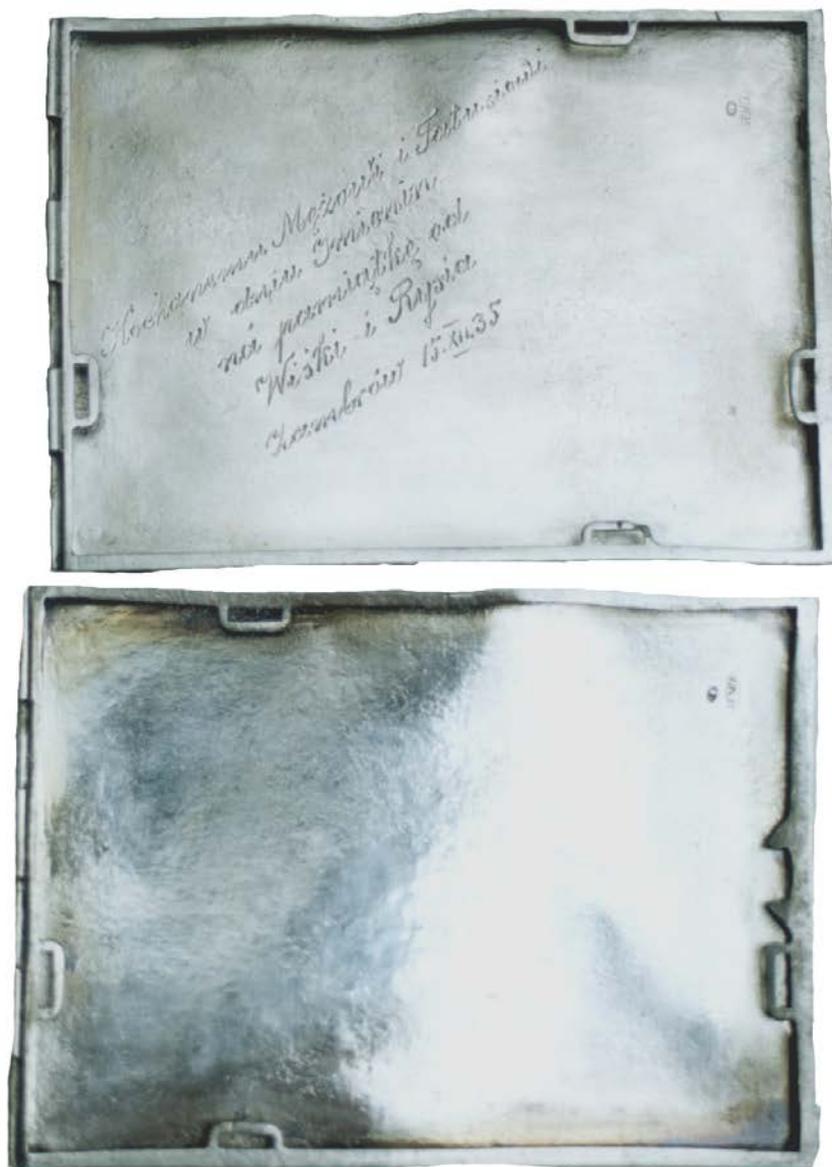
Notes engraved on cigarette cases are also worth attention (Grupa 2001: 119–144), although they did not include names and surnames of their owners (Kola 2005: 143, 175, 187, 207):

- wooden cigarette case with inscription: PAL DRANIU SWOJE (grave 17/95)
- wooden cigarette case with inscription: KW NAJDROŻSZEJ ZOCHNIE – KOCHAM I TĘSKNIĘ (grave 7/94)
- wooden cigarette case: UCZUCIE TO POTĘGA – MAŁY ADAŚ (grave 19/95)
- wooden cigarette case with inscription: ZACNEMU KUMPLOWI W NIEDOLI JC. 1939–1940 (grave 7/94; Fig. 1)
- metal cigarette case: KOCHANEMU MEŻOWI I TATUSIOWI W DNIU IMIENIN OD WIŚKI I RYSIA, ZAMBRÓW 15.XII.1935 (grave 26/95; Fig. 2)

Items of Polish origin helped to identify graves as Polish ones and that was the first and basic stage of the recognition, but the same objects served for obtaining more detailed knowledge. Some of them, particularly wooden cigarette cases, had inscriptions confirming the fact that the officers murdered and buried in Kharkiv were brought there from the Starobilsk camp (essential information for the investigation). The place name was often completed with the date –1940 or 1939–1940, which marked the time of imprisonment. The researchers reported many objects, including personal items containing various inscriptions helping to identify people. Data consisted of monograms, but also complete names and surnames. They were classified into groups and placed in diagrams marking on what kind of objects they were found (Kola 2005: 114–292; Grupa 2001: 119–144). Many texts on metal objects had been professionally engraved before the war – inscriptions on cigarette cases, watches, wedding rings and other rings, seal-rings and a gorget. A pre-war origin was also attributed to cufflinks, leather wallets, a pen, a lighter, wooden walking stick, textile handkerchieves and clothes labels. On pipes, flasks (Fig. 3), mess tins, but also some metal and especially wooden cigarette cases the inscriptions were scratched during the officers stay in the Starobilsk camp (Figs 1 and 4).



**Fig. 1.** Cigarette case with an inscription inside the cover: TO A NOBLE MATE  
IN MISERY J.C. 1939–1940. After: Kola 2005: fig. 81.



**Fig. 2.** Silver cigarette case with engraved inscription: TO OUR BELOVED HUSBAND AND DAD ON HIS NAMEDAY FROM WIŚKA AND RYSIO, ZAMBRÓW 15.XII.1935. After: Kola 2005: fig. 134.



Fig. 3. Aluminium flask with scratched inscription: J. GIBASIEWICZ BF. After: Kola 2005: fig. 76.



Fig. 4. Wooden cigarette cases with inscriptions: STAROBIELSK 193 –1949. After: Kola 2005: fig. 78.

Table with inscriptions

KINDS OF INSCRIPTIONS: INITIAL LETTERS
REPORTED ON: handkerchieves, wedding rings, seal rings, cutlery, mirror, lighters, cigarette holders, pipes, metal and wooden cigarette cases, cufflinks, drinking glass fragments, mess tins, flasks, metal box, leather wallets and horse-shoe shaped coin purses, a pen, wooden walking sticks, a toothbrush, scapulars, wooden device for taking off officer boots, clothes brushes
KINDS OF INSCRIPTIONS: INITIALS WITH DATES
REPORTED ON: wedding rings, obverse of a holy medal, metal and wooden cigarette cases, cigarette holder, watch
KIND OF INSCRIPTION: INITIALS WITH DATES AND TEXT
REPORTED ON: wedding rings – L.J. 18 II.1939 BOŻE BŁOGOSŁAW NAM – HK 17XI.1937 USQUE AD FINEM
KIND OF INSCRIPTION: DATE WITH TEXT
REGISTERED ON: seal ring with inscription: 15.10.1936 Od Rodziców
KIND OF INSCRIPTIONS: COMPLETE MALE OR FEMALE NAMES WITH DATES
REGISTERED ON: ring and a wedding ring
KINDS OF INSCRIPTIONS: COAT-OF-ARMS AND INITIALS
REPORTED ON: seal ring, wooden cigarette case, pocket watch
KIND OF INSCRIPTION: NAME INITIAL AND COMPLETE SURNAME
REPORTED ON: – cover of a metal cigarette case: E. RZEWUSKI – metal spoon handle: TOKARSKI CZ.
KIND OF INSCRIPTIONS: COMPLETE NAMES AND SURNAMES
REPORTED ON: wooden cigarette cases, flasks, canteens, medical doctor's stamp
KIND OF INSCRIPTION: COMPLETE NAMES, SURNAMES, DATE AND DEDICATION
REPORTED ON: – gold watch: KOCHANEMU DOWÓDCY PPOR. STANISŁAWOWI SITKOWI W DNIU IMIENIN Wdzięczni .... BORUJSK 8.V.20 (grave; Fig. 5) – silver cigarette case: W DNIU IMIENIN PANU POR. ALBERTOWI HOLLANDOWI MAŁŻ. F. M. RUCZYŃSCY 17/II.34 – wooden cigarette case: STAROBIELSK 15.IV.1940 R. NA PAMIĄTKĘ WSPÓLNEGO POBYTU W NIEWOLI RUDECKI



**Fig. 5.** A golden pocket watch with engraved inscription: TO OUR DEAR COMMANDER LIEUTENANT STANISŁAW SITEK ON HIS NAMEDAY GRATEFUL .... BORUJSK 8.V.20. After: Kola 2005: figs 81, 224.



**Fig. 6.** Dog tag – obverse: Tadeusz Bukowski KAT., reverse: PŁOCK 1911. After: Kola 2005: fig. 37.

However, there were also objects univocally identifying the victims – these were military dog tags (Fig. 6). These small aluminium oval discs with transverse cuts contained personal data – name, surname, religion on one side and on the other – identification number/first letter of district, name of local command and the date of birth. Some inscriptions were difficult to decipher due to the material which was deposited on them by decomposing bodies, or they were damaged, covered with corrosion and impurities. The cemetery in Kharkiv delivered a total of 62 dog tags: 10 items in 1991, 10 in 1995, and 42 in 1996 (Kola 1998: 36).

More detailed information was read in found letters, postcards (Fig. 7), documents and handwritten notes made by the prisoners in calendars, notebooks, on cigarette paper and newspaper margins. Documents containing personal data included school certificates, ID cards, postcards, doctor's certificates, a book of sports club membership, military booklet, visit cards, employment contract, rent receipt (Fig. 8), free train tickets card, medal certificate, distinction card for Lviv defense. These objects were kept in wallets and uniform pockets.

Archaeologists found some other material indicating the time of the committed crime and being direct evidence – these were newspapers found in graves printed in Russian, Ukrainian and Polish propaganda papers from March and April of 1940.

Handwritten notes found in some concentrations are particularly interesting. Texts written in pencil have preserved in the best condition. The collection of documents included a PKO bank cheque book, visiting card, postcards, a pocket calendar was found in a leather wallet belonging to Alojzy Babiński, Lieutenant of 73 regiment of Katowice. The calendar pages were covered with handwriting in pencil reporting his every day of imprisonment starting with 3rd of October, when he was taken prisoner until the night of 5/6th April



Fig. 7. Postcard of lieutenant Władysław Wejsflog. After: Kola 2005: fig. 62.

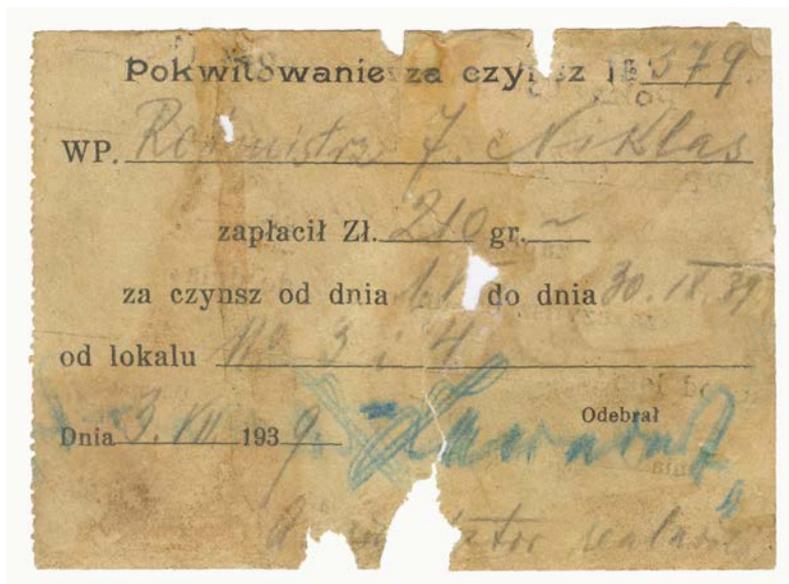


Fig. 8. Rent receipt for captain J. Niklas from July 1939. After: Kola 2005: fig. 73.

when he was taken with prisoners transport from Starobilsk to Kharkiv (Kola 1998: 38; Grupa 2001: 157; Grupa and Kaźmierczak 2001). These notes are a priceless source of information concerning the camp life, but it also registers several other names of co-prisoners, also successfully identified. Another invaluable document and knowledge source concerned four tiny and delicate pieces of cigarette paper hidden in a leather glasses case (Fig. 9) which contained pencil-written names of Starobilsk camp prisoners (Grupa and Kaźmierczak 2001). The verses composition suggests that 98 of them were written with division into groups and blocks, but unfortunately not all of them were identified (Kola 1998: 41). Some other information was delivered by the notes called the “Socha List”, and fragments of reports of the block commander? (Grupa 2001: 157).

We successfully deciphered 347 names found in dog tags, various objects, documents and handwritten notes, although these deductive results are not identical with particular persons or identification of their remains (Grupa and Kaźmierczak 2001: 3). Conservation treatments lasted four years and the objects went afterwards to the Katyn Museum in Warsaw. Despite the period of nearly 30 years from completing the works, the article’s author has been maintaining restoring protection over the exhibits and the Museum staff has still been working on identification of next victims (Karwat and Kowalska 2017).

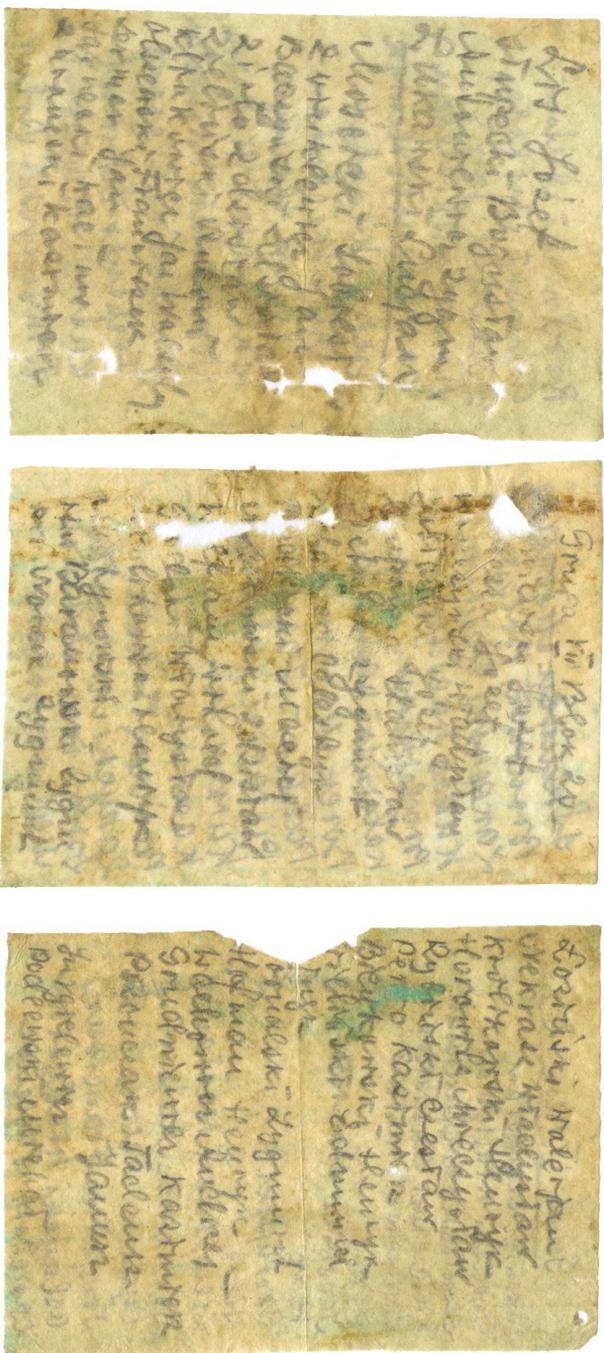


Fig. 9. Cigarette paper with Starobialsk prisoners' names found in a leather glasses case. After: Kola 2005: fig. 30.

As the range of that research has become popular recently, there are more and more sites concerning archaeology of crime. Human remains are frequently accompanied by objects belonging to victims, depending on a site category and a kind of studied crime. Items containing written information and personal data are found rarely, but every object, based on the experience of the researchers of the Katyn massacre, should be treated with particular care and attention, because it can bear precious information helpful in victims' identification.

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