

OPERATION BERNHARD

# Perfection or Death

Concentration camp inmates took great care in forging British bank notes.

History's grandest monetary forgery scheme unfolded in World War II Germany when the Nazis forced 142 Jewish concentration camp inmates at Sachsenhausen to produce counterfeit Bank of England notes in an effort to destabilize the British economy. Known as Operation Bernhard, the undertaking was described in *The Counterfeiters* (2007), an Austrian movie that received an Academy Award in 2008 for "Best Foreign Language Film."

To my surprise, not one stamp or coin collector I knew had ever met a veteran of Operation Bernhard. So, I tracked down three men whom I believed were the last living survivors of the famous counterfeiting operation.

On August 24, 2008, I and fellow collector Fred Schwan visited the Ohio home of 87-year-old Hans Walter, the only survivor living in the United States. Walter was born in Berlin on December 14, 1921, and immigrated to America on December 30, 1950. He was happy to meet us, but clearly was disappointed when we told him it now is possible to distinguish between genuine notes and those that he and fellow inmates produced at Sachsenhausen. Walter made it clear that he would not be alive today had anyone been able to identify the counterfeit notes.

In August 2009, I traveled to Berlin, where Walter had arranged for me to meet his dear friend and fellow Operation Bernhard survivor Isaak "Jack" Plapler. Born on November 11, 1919, in Kassel, Germany, he remained in Berlin after the war. Plapler kindly welcomed me into his home, which ironically is near the same railroad line that leads to the site of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

We met again on January 31 in Berlin, where I arranged a special dinner for him at his favorite Greek restaurant. At 91, Plapler still drives a car, is full of energy, sings in his temple choir, and has a great sense of humor. I love spending time with him.

Then, on February 4, 2010, I spent a few hours with Adolf Burger at his home in Prague. The best-known survivor of Operation Bernhard, Burger was born on August 12, 1917, in what is now Slovakia. His memoirs were the basis for the award-winning film.

Very serious and focused,



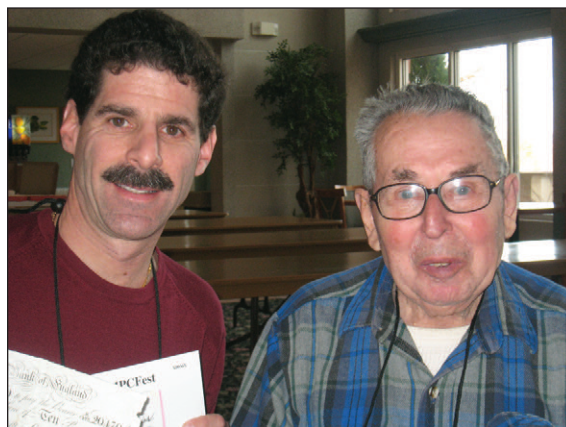
▲ This counterfeit £5 note was produced during World War II by the men of Operation Bernhard while they were confined at Sachsenhausen (below).



Burger wants to ensure the Holocaust is not forgotten. Immediately after the war, he started collecting documents related to Operation Bernhard and wrote the first of several books as early as 1945. His latest effort, *The Devil's Workshop*, was published in 2009 in nine languages. His role in the counterfeiting operation was limited, as he was pressed

into service later in the war; nevertheless, he has worked hard over the years to make certain the story does not die.

Like Walter and Plapler, Burger is very proud of how "perfect" the counterfeit notes were. He acknowledged that it may be possible today to tell the difference between the forgeries and genuine bills, but that in 1943-45 it was highly improbable. Burger said the hardest part was getting the paper just right and making watermarks good enough to withstand scrutiny by bank experts. Had the war continued, he has little doubt that the Operation



▲ Author Danny Spungen (left) with Operation Bernhard survivor Hans Walter at "MPCFest X," a military currency event in Ohio last April.

PHOTOS: HERITAGE AUCTION GALLERIES (NOTE), ISTOCKPHOTO/GIORGIO FOCESATO (SACHSENHAUSEN) & DANNY SPUNGEN



▲ In Berlin, Spungen met with Isaak "Jack" Plapler (left), and in Prague with Adolf Burger (right), who has written extensively about Operation Bernhard. Burger's memoirs were the basis of the screenplay for the 2007 film "The Counterfeiters."

Bernhard team would have perfected the U.S. \$100 bill. "We were close," he said.

Burger has visited the United States only once—in 2008 he came to Los Angeles to accept an Oscar statuette for *The Counterfeiters*. "It's a nice movie," he said. "It's not how we lived, but it did bring attention to this true story." However, according to Burger, "The ending was stupid. I was portrayed as a hero. I was not. One person tried to take

[a counterfeit note], and he was killed."

Because the number of Holocaust survivors is quickly dwindling, it is an honor to visit with them and hear their stories. Meeting the three Operation Bernhard survivors was especially meaningful, not only because I collect and study these counterfeit notes, but also because of the significant role these men played in numismatic history.

—Danny Spungen

