

Bizarre burial prods Holocaust angst

By Jim Galloway

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Before sunrise on a cold March morning in 1970, a rabbi and an architect slipped over the fence to Greenwood Cemetery in Atlanta to scout out a burial site for four bars of soap.

A hasty funeral service was conducted later that afternoon — Jewish law required quick interment for the green-gray cakes, which had surfaced days before. About 35 people, most of them survivors of European concentration camps, gathered around a small hole dug at the base of the local Holocaust memorial.

None had any doubt that the soap bars were made from human beings.

The architect, Ben Hirsch,

devoted a chapter to the incident in a memoir published this spring and urged scholars to take a closer look at the topic.

As a result, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum has barred Hirsch from conducting a book-signing on its premises in Washington. Emory University professor Deborah Lipstadt, who triumphed over a Holocaust denier in a British libel trial this year, endorses the decision.

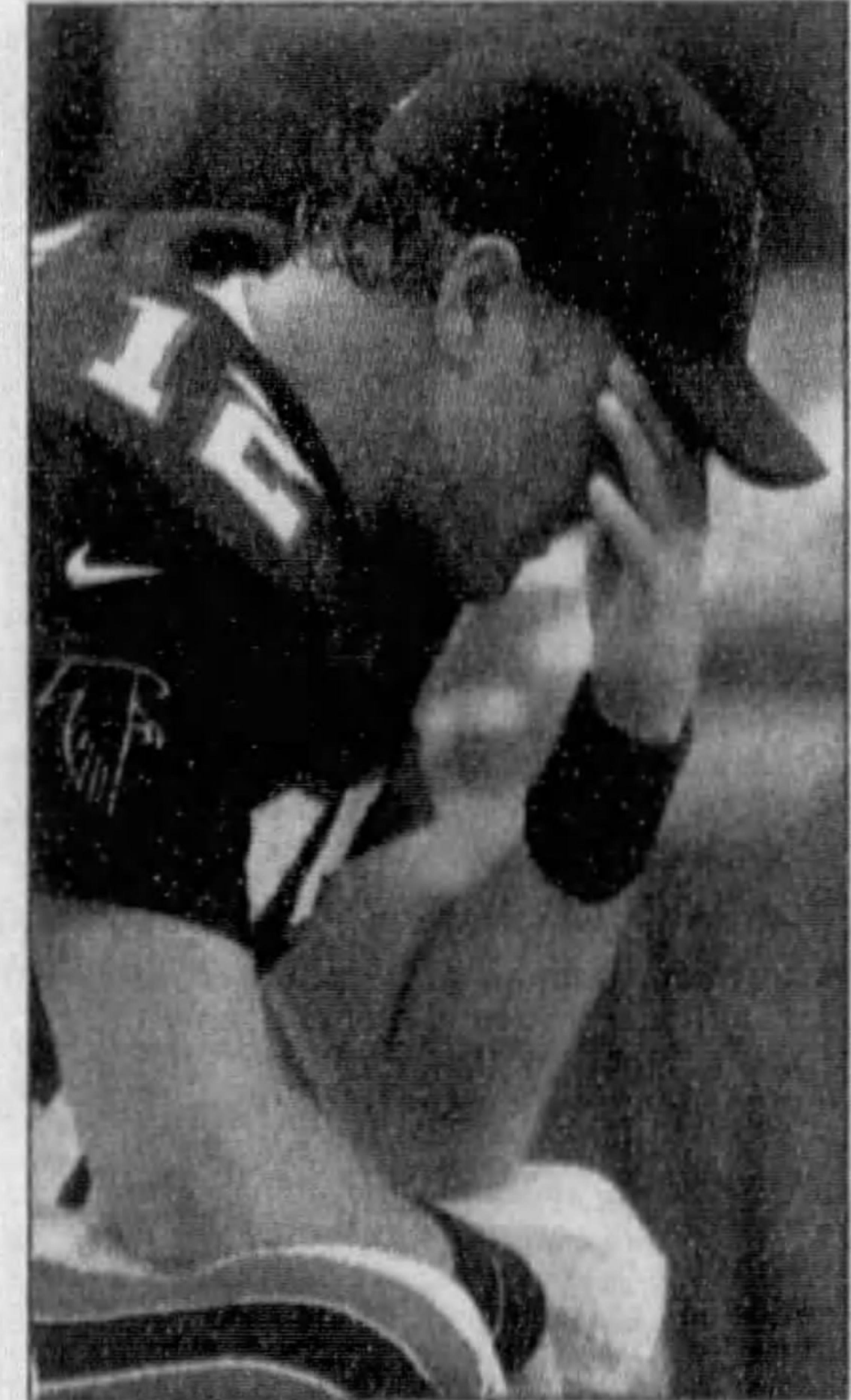
During World War II, the Nazis killed millions through gassing and starvation, torture and firing squads. They conducted bizarre human experiments, harvested hair and gold fillings, and used human skin for lampshades. But there's no proof that Nazis made soap of their victims, museum officials said,

and the institution won't endorse any book that argues otherwise.

"[Hirsch] was advocating that we explore what is essentially a dead end," said Peter Black, chief historian at the Holocaust museum.

The issue has become a bone of contention between scholars and the dwindling number of Holocaust survivors, who now watch a post-World War II generation take control of their story. "I think I've piqued the fraternity," said Hirsch, 68, who still designs churches and synagogues in metro Atlanta.

But more than a generational rift is at work. The making of soap from murdered humans has long served as a particularly hor-



BEN GRAY / Staff

Dismal day

Falcons quarterback Chris Chandler sits out the final minutes of Sunday's 41-20 loss to the Rams after being pulled in the fourth quarter. (Turn to E1, E4-5)

➤ PLEASE SEE Soap, A4

Soap: Scholars, survivors debate details of Nazi crimes

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rific example of the Final Solution's depravity.

"It is something that symbolizes the ultimate horror of using every molecule of the murdered," conceded Black, the museum historian. Survivors are loath to see that symbol reduced to a 60-year-old rumor.

Survivors wonder whether, in an effort to secure the historical record against those who argue that the Holocaust never happened, scholars have set a standard for proof that is too high — and have unilaterally cut off the debate.

"There's a religious issue here," Hirsch said. "These are not just bars of soap. They were buried as if they were human beings."

And that indeed raises the uncomfortable question of what lies in the cemetery off Cascade Road.

Skepticism, but no censorship

Officials at the Holocaust museum in Washington emphasize that they are not censoring Hirsch or any other survivor. "Hearing a Different Drummer" (Mercer University Press) remains on the shelves of the museum's bookstore.

But a book signing would be interpreted as a sanctioning of Hirsch's views, officials said.

Hirsch had timed the signing to coincide with a November reunion of Jewish children who were sheltered from the Nazis by a French network. Hirsch was one of them. His parents and two siblings died in the camps.

Most of "Different Drummer" is devoted to Hirsch's experience as a U.S. soldier in postwar Germany. But in the 10 pages of Chapter 23, he expresses his disappointment in the verdict of historians on Nazi soap-making. He cites the example of his uncle, a chemist who was forced to work in Auschwitz making soap.

Hirsch says his uncle, who died in the 1950s, confessed to Hirsch's brother that he had saved his own life by using human corpses — something that historians say never happened.

Hirsch also tells the story of the four bars of soap in Atlanta. They were found by a Jewish soldier who was part of a U.S. force that liberated a concentration camp near Stettin, Germany, near Frankfurt. The soldier saw the soap cakes, which had been stamped "RIF."

Historians say the initials stand for *Reich Industrie Fett*, or Reich Industrial Fat. But at the time, the "I" was widely interpreted as a "J," and the initials for *Reines Juden Fett* — or Pure Jewish Fat.

The soldier stuffed the soap bars in a bag and took them home. He eventually married a concentration camp survivor. Twenty-five years later, the couple was living on LaVista Road in DeKalb County. The soap bars were stashed in the basement.



JOHN SPINK / Staff

Architect Ben Hirsch kneels by the Atlanta burial site of bars of soap supposedly made from the bodies of Holocaust victims. Most experts believe they are just ordinary soap.

One night, the husband came home from work and found that his wife, having run out of detergent, was using the soap on the laundry. As he explained what they were, they both became highly disturbed.

At 3 a.m., the distressed couple called Rabbi Emanuel Feldman of nearby Congregation Beth Jacob, who consulted rabbinical scholars in New York and Israel, then set the burial service in motion. Feldman accompanied Hirsch to the cemetery on that early morning in 1970.

New scholarly sources yield nothing

"I don't think [the soap bars] would be buried if they were found today," said Lipstadt, the Emory historian. She is a member of the Washington museum's executive council.

One problem with scholarly research of the Holocaust has been the seamless manner in which World War II flowed into the Cold War. The dropping of the Iron Curtain sealed away many of the facts from the first generation of Holocaust scholars.

But a great rush of information has come in the last two decades with the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, site of some of the worst Nazi atrocities, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Nothing in the newly opened archives has shed any light on the topic of making soap from Jews, historians say. "We haven't found anything yet that would give us something to grasp onto, that we didn't have in 1945," said Peter Black, the Holocaust museum historian.

The Washington museum now has a standardized summary that is faxed to

those who inquire about Nazi soap-making. Included on the fact sheet:

■ "The soap rumor seems to have been first mentioned in the United States media in 1942."

■ A recipe for soap in German, dated February 1944, was found tacked to a piece of plywood at the Danzig Anatomical Institute in Poland. The recipe calls for fat, but does not refer to human fat, the museum says.

■ Raul Hilberg, the dean of Holocaust historians, has cited the testimony of the post-war mayor of Danzig, who said 350 bodies were found at the plant, along with a caldron containing the remains of boiled human flesh. But Hilberg failed to verify the authenticity of the testimony, the museum statement says.

■ The testimony of two British POWs who labored at the same plant "is contradictory and inconclusive," the museum says.

What historians say they lack are bills of lading, evidence of a manufacturing plant or receipts of purchase or exchange — documentation the Nazis carefully maintained for other noxious enterprises.

"If you look at all the evidence available about Nazis experimenting with human beings ... the composite of all that evidence cannot permit you to conclude that this happened," said Black. He compares the soap-making stories with the myth of Hitler's Jewish ancestry.

But survivors think historians may be too strict in their criteria, citing the museum's statement that "There is absolutely no evidence to indicate this was ever done on an industrial basis or in a centrally directed fashion."

"Yes, there was no mass production," agreed Morris Spitzer, 77. "But yes, there was production in smaller quantities at many of the [extermination] camps." Spitzer, a camp survivor and resident of the Bronx, N.Y., is trying to obtain recognition for a photograph of a 1946 funeral procession in Sighet, Romania, involving bars of soap collected by the village.

The proven facts are 'bad enough'

Holocaust history is constantly being adjusted as new evidence and research surface.

Hilberg, the eminent historian, has recommended that the number of European Jews killed by the Nazi machine be revised downward, from 6 million to 5.1 million. And even that number now may be nudged slightly up — based on even fresher information coming out of the former Soviet Union.

Such revisions, while common enough in other historical fields, are handled with extreme care, with the expectation that Holocaust deniers will twist any change in the record into a retreat from the truth.

But Lipstadt, the Emory professor and author, said deniers aren't driving the standards of historians. "If deniers are a concern, they are down at the bottom," she

said.

At the top is a desire for rock-solid historical accuracy. "It's important because you don't want people to say it's demi-fiction," Lipstadt said.

Soap-making has been a handy metaphor for Nazi cruelty, she said, but its disappearance from the catalog of Nazis atrocities shouldn't make much difference. "The truth that we know is bad enough. We don't need the soap," she said.

If Lipstadt has a regret, it might be that the matter might have been handled more diplomatically. Early in her career, she stated categorically that soap-making by the Nazis never happened. If she had it to do again, Lipstadt said, "I wouldn't say [the Nazis] never did it. I would say we have no evidence." She would leave the door slightly cracked.

"If they dug up those bars of soap and DNA tests showed they were made from human beings, I would say, 'Oh, my God, we need to take another look at this,'" Lipstadt said.

Science has no answers now

But science is an unlikely arbiter when it comes to what is buried in Atlanta's Greenwood Cemetery.

The Holocaust museum says it has tested some bars of soap for human DNA and found nothing.

But even if human DNA were found in the suspect soap, it probably wouldn't prove anything, according to Connie Kolman of the C.A. Pound Human Identification Laboratory in Gainesville, Fla.

A specialist in tracing ancient DNA, Kolman said the bars of soap in Greenwood Cemetery probably do contain some human genetic material. The problem is one of contamination. Regardless of whether they were made from humans, human beings were involved in the production.

Anyone who has touched the cakes has left minute DNA material on them, including the housewife on LaVista Road, the scientist said.

A DNA test could not distinguish between the genetic material left by the casual handler, Kolman said, and material left by a human ingredient. "It'd be nice if science could provide an answer for this, but right now there's no way," she said.

That limitation doesn't upset everyone. Rabbi Feldman, who conducted the Atlanta burial service for the bars of soap in 1970, was recently contacted in Israel via e-mail.

Asked if he favored exhuming the small soap casket, the rabbi replied, "Maybe it would be best for it to remain a mystery."

► **ON THE WEB**: For more on the soap allegations: www.nizkor.org/features/techniques-of-denial/soap-01.html

ajc.com

See our Web site for excerpts from Hirsch's book.