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## Interview: Simon Cohen

By *Simon Round*  
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### The Simon Round interview

Some people collect stamps, some collect postcards and others collect art. Most are proud to have their collections on display. Simon Cohen's collection is more unusual and he is rather ambivalent about it. He has around 1,600 pieces, of which most are tucked away in a back room and rarely see the light of day.

Cohen's speciality is antisemitic memorabilia - cartoons, sculptures, books and even board games. He started his collection in 2000 in response to what he perceived as an increase in antisemitic activity. His thought was that such a collection could be used to discredit the Jew haters. Although he has mixed feelings about the large number of hateful images he now possesses - a selection of which are now on display at the Jewish Cultural Centre - he feels that he is doing something worthwhile by exposing antisemites.

He says: "It's a mad thing to do. Of course, I'm not attracted by this stuff but I wanted to put it together to make people aware that a flirtation with evil images is a bad thing."

Cohen, who retired as a consultant at University College Hospital in 2007, is a self-confessed obsessive who collects not only what he calls "antisemitica" but also Jewish children's books, haggadot, prints and maps. The antisemitica comes from all over the place - everywhere from Jewish dealers to German auctions. It covers a wide spectrum, from the mildly derogatory to the obscene.

Cohen says: "The illustrations in Israel Zangwill's book, *Children of the Ghetto*, portrayed Jews in a derogatory manner - and that was from a Jewish author. There are some examples of English antisemitism which are actually quite funny. In fact it annoys me that some of it is funny. On the other hand, there are horrific images portraying ritual murder, the blood libel, ritual infanticide and deicide."

Cohen has a specific purpose in displaying the images. "We compare historic images with current ones. By juxtaposing modern images in the media - whether far-right, far-left or Islamic - with images from the Nazi period, you can see that the themes are pretty much the same."

He acknowledges that the idea of displaying images like these in public provokes controversy. "There are plenty of people who say we should not put it on - that people might come and see it and take the wrong lesson from it. But I somehow think it

unlikely that racists will come to the LJCC to view this exhibition. Others say that this is not our problem, it is the problem of the non-Jews. But I'm worried that it has an adverse impact on Jews' image of themselves."

While Cohen keeps most of his collection packed away in drawers and boxes in his spare room, some of them are framed and on the wall, though certainly nothing from the Nazi newspaper, Der Sturmer. "I'm not supposed to have favourites but I quite like a cartoon of Yasir Arafat on the cross with the caption 'Do not kill him twice', which was drawn at the time of the siege of the Church of the Nativity."

There is also much that is sickening, including Jews being portrayed as rats and spiders, Jews collecting blood from a woman who has had her throat cut and Arab images of Israeli settlers drinking Palestinian blood.

Cohen realises that not everyone would understand why he would want to buy such material. It is certainly not for financial gain. It is not uncommon for him to pay more than three figures for items - even more on occasions - though he is not keen to be too specific for fear that his wife will be annoyed. He says: "I don't collect things as an investment. If I see the money back I'll be very happy. The antisemitica market is very small and quite volatile. If a collector dies it badly affects it - this is an old man's hobby after all. I love hunting for the stuff but I'm terrible at organising it. And it's quite common for me to buy the same thing twice. If I liked it the first time, I'm likely to like it the second time too."

He is open to offers for the antisemitica collection. "I would actually like to get rid of the whole thing - my wife can't bear it. I think I'm coming to the end of my antisemitic period," he jokes.

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