



**Kobe's tarock.  
The concentration  
camps' narrative**

### **About the artist**

The deck of tarock cards was drawn by the artist and architect Boris Kobe in 1945 at the Allach concentration camp. Kobe was a graduate of architectural engineering in 1929 in Ljubljana. Between 1930 and 1931, he continued his studies in Paris, where he studied painting. After Paris, he returned to Ljubljana where he worked as a freelance artist and started lecturing at the Architecture Department, and in 1938 he became a City architect of Ljubljana.

In the beginning of 1945, Kobe was arrested (he took part on the side of the Liberation front against the occupation) and imprisoned in the labour workshops in Ljubljana. In February 1945 he was deported to Dachau concentration camp and later transferred to Überlingen (March) and finally to Allach (April) where he stayed until the liberation. In the weeks after the liberation, he drew the set of concentration camp tarock cards.

After returning from the concentration camp, he became a professor of perspective and art design in Ljubljana. After 1946, he lectured freehand drawing as well as colour and perspective studies at the Department of Architecture. He also worked as a book illustrator and set designer. This important architect, graphic and painter died in 1981.

### **Card description**

The concentration camp tarock cards were not meant to play with, but to depict the “power games” at the concentration camps. It was a game between life and death and the cards inspire us even today with the strength of the human will and creativity, even in the darkest moments of human existence. It is believed that the mistakes in the card design, that prevent the cards from being played smoothly, had been made on purpose, as the cards were drawn to serve as a medium for the artist to express the horrors he had seen and experienced in the concentration camp.

The deck of concentration tarock cards consists of 54 individual cards – respectively drawings. The cards retain the Austrian traditional set of 22 trump cards and 32 colour cards, however, the size proportion is changed, as each card is 9cm high and 6cm wide, and not as narrow as tarock cards traditionally are. The technique is ink and colour pastel – the materials that were found at the camp. The trump set depicts the story of life in the camp. The first eleven trumps show themes such as (personal) hygiene or feeding, some

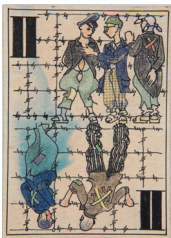
of the cards have a bitter comic feel of the conflicts, while the other half, from trump XII to XIX, reflects the violence the prisoners felt, the cruel and inhumane treatment. The trumps also represent three phases of the camp life as the artist experienced personally. Following this we can also pursue Kobe's deportation through the three concentration camps – the first eleven trumps depict Dachau and entering the camp; the next seven speak of Überlingen, then three speak of ending of his imprisonment in the Allach concentration camp while the number XXII (Skys) stands out on its own.

The interesting twist of this pack of cards is that ten of spades and ten of clubs are depicted as aces instead of "10", which makes the game impossible to play accurately. This intentional flaw speaks for the fact that these tarock cards were not merely a game, but a medium, which spoke a story of deeper meaning – the story of life and death, and finally of life overcoming it all.



### **Pagat – I**

Pagat is a child from a concentration camp, a highly qualified thief out of necessity. Through Iztok Durjava the card depicts a young man who is taking off his camp clothes and is changing into tattered, but non-the-less civilian clothes. For the player pagat is a valuable card, which is being chased throughout the game. If carried out well, the player will play pagat as the last card (pagat ultimo). This lad had seen the end of the war and is now coming home.



### **II**

After the prisoners had changed into camp clothes it was time for quarantine, which was separated from the camp with barbed wire. In February 1945, the camp prisoners wore a variety of different and pitiful clothes which were not suitable for winter at all. After the arrival of a new labour force, the striped clothes were given to those working outside the camp. Yet in the Dachau concentration camp, the prisoners wore all sorts of headgear, from police caps, Soviet budyonovkas to handkerchiefs and one could also see bare heads.



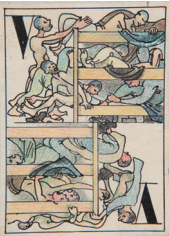
### III

A concentration camp prisoner is tied to a pillory with a sign "I am here again." The prisoners who tried to escape were either shot on the run or recaptured and used to intimidate others.



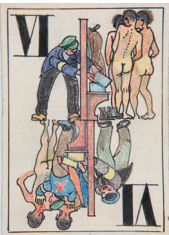
### IV

While being counted, the prisoners had to follow the orders from the camp guards: "Take off your hats! First row! Sides!"



### V

There was constant quarrelling in the sleeping barracks. The bunk beds were made in three to four levels. There was gossiping, quarrels and fights. The air condition in the room was bad as well – in the middle of the room there was little air, while by the windows there were draughts and were cold in the winters. In addition, the screams: "Everyone in bed! Switch off the lights!" and in the morning "Wake up! Go, go, go!"



### VI

The routine when entering the Dachau concentration camp was the following: first all personal belongings were taken from the prisoners, and then they had to undress and while they were naked they had to go and have their hair shaved off.



### VII

After shaving, there followed disinfection with a strong germicide, which was applied all over their bodies with a brush.



### VIII

While waiting for meals many prisoners struggled with each other trying to be served. Those who tried to push their way into the queue were hit on their head with a ladle.



## IX

After the meal there was a special kind of order "Free cauldron!" which meant that the prisoners were allowed to grab the cauldron and lick it.

## X

After a meal, the demand for cigarettes was high but they were very scarce. Those who did not have any cigarettes could only watch and scrounge for the cigarette butts.



## XI

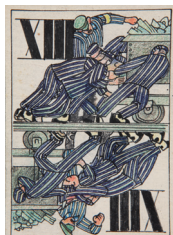
New arrivals came on foot to the Dachau concentration camp, carrying their luggage with them. One of them was too weak and the SS guard, whose hand we can see at the side of the drawing, shot him. The rest of the group then had to carry the body with them.



## XII

"Something is wrong!" and a layer of rock falls down and buries a worker. "Is he dead?" "No, thankfully, just badly wounded. His collar bone and ribs are broken," re-counts the story of a friend, Anton Jež. Many

died because of the falling rocks in the pits. Their friends carried them, wounded or dead, back to the surface.



## XIII

Those who were in charge of the carts, had to push them fully loaded all the way to the lakeshore and empty them there. It often happened that a cart derailed and the prisoners had to lift it back onto the tracks.



## XIV

If the prisoners were not obedient to orders, they were severely punished and their inmates had to watch the punishment. Those who were marked with a clear shaven stripe in the middle of their head, the so-called "camp lane" haircut, were given even harsher treatment.



## XV

On the way from the pit to the railway station, the prisoners were accompanied by kicks from the SS camp guards and the bites of their dogs. If any of the prisoners dared to look aside he was hit by the rifle butt in the back. Prisoners wore their food bowls on their backs. Anton Jež remembers: "Once a guard hit me in the back. Luckily, I was in the middle of the group and the guard dog could not bite me."



## XVI

Sundays were the day for the so called "flea summons". Until the beginning of 1945, this tormenting nuisance was more or less taken care of, but in April 1945, fleas almost took over the Überlingen concentration camp prisoners.



## XVII

Two prisoners had to wake up early in the morning and carry all the prisoners who had died during the night and the morning from their bunk beds onto a pile. Mortality among the prisoners was high all the way to the liberation and after it. Anton Jež recalls: "On the second day after the liberation I went on an exploratory walk around the Allach camp and discovered a pile of more than 80 bodies. One of the caretakers of the dead

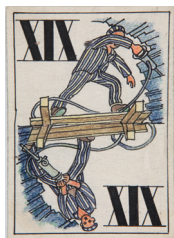
was my schoolmate and neighbour Ivan Golob. We were both caught in Ljubljana in April 1944 and sent to Dachau where our paths separated – he was sent to Natzweiler concentration camp and I to the one at Neuaußing. In the summer of 1945, we returned home together, both with deep scars in our souls. He still lives a remote life and does not want to recall these terrible memories."

## XVIII



This drawing depicts a twelve-hour shift. Sometimes the shift was prolonged, even though the prisoners were already exhausted. On these occasions, they had to extend the tracks or load the carts with coal at the railway station for example. If they did not do the work they were beaten.





### **XIX**

Anton Jež recognised the man on the card and said: "This is my schoolmate Marjan Ogrizek from Ljubljana. He worked with the demolition hammer, as it required a lot of strength. He was an athlete and an excellent singer. However, the work made him so weak that he died on the day of the liberation in Allach. He was as young as I was and as young as my "sleeping comrade" (schlafkammerad) from the Aufkirch concentration camp, who also died on the same day as Ogrizek in Allach. The first time I saw this depiction I immediately screamed: This is Marjan!"



### **XX**

Finally, the concentration clothes were thrown away and the prisoners could take a warm shower. After the liberation, they came in contact for the first time with the kind-hearted African-American soldiers of the US army.



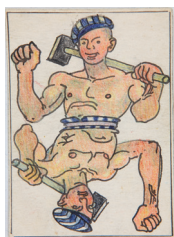
### **Mond – XXII**

The second strongest trump depicts the Allach concentration camp and the striped prisoner clothes in flames. After a week of recovery, they started sending the survivors back to their homes on trucks. Anton Jež commented on the card: "We were human once again. I was in the "panzergrenadier" uniform (motorised infantry) and beside me was Dr. Mirko Černič in the US uniform. We also had a Slovene flag."

Boris Kobe had not forgotten to draw the traditional symbol of this card – the moon (the German word, Mond).

### **Skys – XXII**

Skys is the strongest of the trumps and on this card we can see two survivors, two triumphal prisoners. From their hats and their faces, we can see that one comes from the east and the other one from the west. Their fists in the air symbolise human strength and solidarity.





### **The King of Hearts**

The drawing represents a gluttonous, prominent camp prisoners smoking a cigar.



### **The King of Diamonds**

This card represents the two most influential camp prisoners, the kapo and the scribe of the department. In front of them, one would need to take off his hat and stand very quietly out of respect.



### **The King of Spades**

Two fat, prominent camp prisoners; one was holding a piece of bread with margarine and a black pudding in his hand. He could be the work kapo who was called "the fat one", who was penalised because of stealing food.

### **The King of Clubs**

The one real king of the concentration camp was death, who had the power over them all. Symbolically this card is the opposite of Skys.

### **The Queen of Hearts**

There is worry on the face of this reader. Was the cause for this worry bad news from home, of her beloved, her husband or children?

And yet, letters were a rare pleasure, a journey of the mind to some other place.



### **The Queen of Diamonds**

Her hair grew a little bit again but another disappointment followed – another head shave.

### **The Queen of Spades**

This card depicts the cruelty of the supervisors over younger and more beautiful inmates.



### **The Queen of Clubs**

The girl is wondering about her fate. With her eyes closed or open, she is dreaming of a better world.





### **The Knight of Hearts**

Brutal, dark kapos trample on the pale and emaciated inmates.



### **The Knight of Diamonds**

Kapos are swearing while beating up their inmates.



### **The Knight of Spades**

Rejoicing kapos are riding on the inmates they have just beaten up.



### **The Knight of Clubs**

Kapos stole packages of food from two prisoners, who managed to "organise" themselves a ration.

## **The Jack of Hearts**

Two young caretakers are carrying half-dead or dead patients. Their faces reveal their feeling of helplessness and despair. The scene resembles the Christian motive of the Pieta.



### **The Jack of Diamonds**

From the drawing, we can recognise that one of the two men wielding the demolition hammer comes from the east and the other one from the west.



### **The Jack of Spades**

The drawing shows a working duo with the full gear: a shovel, pickaxe, hammer and a food bowl. The food bowl was always carried close to the body, so no one could steal it.



### **The Jack of Clubs**

The camp scribes are calling the suspicious inmates. They were always loud and irritated.





### **Aces and the ace of hearts**

Boris Kobe made a change to the traditional set of tarock cards by changing the ten of spades and the ten of clubs to aces. It is possible that with this change he tried to prevent the cards from being played.

On the ace of hearts, he followed the traditional depiction of a rider but gave it his own imprint. The hallmark on Kobe's concentration tarock card is a toy rider with an insignia "PRINTED BY KOBE BORIS NO. 142841 KZ ALLACH". His Dachau concentration camp number shows that he was first deported to Dachau in February 1945 and then transported to Überlingen.

The description of  
Boris Kobe's concentration camp tarock is  
mostly summarised in  
the memories of Anton  
Jež from the Oswald  
Burger's publication  
Der Stollen, 74-88,  
Überlingen: Verein-  
Dokumentationsstätte-  
GoldbacherStollen und  
KZ Aufkirch, 2005.

