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**Paper title:** Photographic Testimonies. An Integrated Visual History of Survival and Resistance: An Extended Study

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## Introduction

I am incredibly thankful to the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah for the immense support for this project and the ongoing help and assistance. I want to thank Dominique Trimbur and Lena Talvy specifically and also everyone involved in the grant program of the Fondation. Without their help, this study would not have been possible and I tremendously appreciate the support over the last years.

This paper is on my postdoctoral project, situated at The Richard Koebner Minerva Center for German History at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem with a post-doctoral grant from the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah. The title of my project is “Photographic Testimonies. An Integrated Visual History of Survival and Resistance” and I will introduce my research from the extension of my study.

## Research Approach

At the core of my project are visual sources that are part of survivor estates, usually stored at memorial sites. I am especially interested in how visual material were used by concentration camp survivors to construct meaning in the immediate aftermath of their liberation.

First, I will present a quote that originally inspired me to study this topic by Greek Mauthausen survivor Iakovos Kambanellis:

*“After the assassination of Kennedy in November 1963 and the fall of Khrushchev shortly afterwards, Cold War tensions were rising again and peace seemed far away. That was the moment when I realized that I had seen the picture of the post-war world in its inchoate form - in the summer of 1945, in the microcosm of liberated Mauthausen. Iakovos Kambanellis, 1995”*

[English translation by the author]

Iakovos Kambanellis observed that during the days of liberation, survivors created a variety of very distinct meanings concerning what has been done to them by the Nazis and their helpers. Their shared experience in Mauthausen led to vastly different interpretations of what the experience and the reasons for their deportation mean for a postwar reality. During my PhD project at the University of Haifa, I found survivor estates stored at memorial sites that represent this early meaning-making on very individual levels. I was especially interested in visual material survivors used to tell their stories and create visual narratives that aimed to convey their meaning-making. Eventually, this led to my postdoctoral project that is separated into two parts:

## Research Design

- Part 1: An analysis of various types of visual sources in survivor estates concerning how survivors documented and narrated crimes committed against them and an interpretation of the meanings attached to these images.
- Part 2: An investigation into the transmission of visual narratives by examining how these images are implemented and adapted across various formats.

Methodologically, I utilized the analytical approach of an “Integrated Visual History” that I developed for my PhD thesis that is built on theories and methods by a variety of scholars of different academic backgrounds such as Ulrike Pilarczyk, Ulrike Mietzner, Erwin Panofsky, Amos Morris-Reich, and Saul Friedländer.

In this paper, I want to elaborate on two cases from my source material: two visual narratives by Buchenwald survivors, representing contrasting processes of meaning-making.

## Research Aim

My aim is to highlight the sheer spectrum of vastly different interpretations of survivors about the meaning of their concentration camp experience (in this paper on the example of Buchenwald) – both on a personal level, as well as in regards to messages they aimed to convey to various audiences – and to contextualize the emergence of what would later be called Holocaust memory in the days of liberation.

However, before diving into these cases, it is crucial to understand the historical context of these differing points of views: the so-called prisoner society that reflects the categories the SS administrations of the concentration camps forcibly put deportees in. Each prisoner was supposed to be assigned a clear category based on the reasons of their deportation that reflect various aspects of Nazi ideology: various types of racism, social Darwinism, anti-Marxism, nationalism, militarism, homophobia, and underlying antisemitism as a general framework. The experience of prisoners in the concentration camp system was inherently different based on these categorizations and this influenced their post-liberation meaning-making.

## Case Study 1

My first case study is Georges Angéli, a non-dogmatic French leftist. During his time of incarceration at Buchenwald concentration camp, he was involved with the camp underground and managed something extraordinary: together with comrades of the camp resistance, he took clandestine photographs under huge personal risks. Additionally, he took photos during the days of liberation: meaning on the one hand that he photographed during this time period with a camera that he probably found in the SS photo studio and on the other hand quite literally that he took SS pictures that he found in the camp. Based on these visual material, Angéli created albums that he intended to be used for educational purposes. As far as it is documented, they never reached the wide audience that he anticipated. In the 1990s, he handed them over to the Buchenwald Memorial. In the following, the focus is on a specific part of these visual documents, namely an album page on – what Angéli refers to – fascist education, inscribed with the following text by him:

*“EDUCATION FASCISTE*

*faire un jeu de la guerre pour éprouver la joie de tuer*

*Le COMMANDANT de BUCHENWALD*

*(Pister)*

*et ses tueurs dont les plus jeunes étaient les plus terribles”*

## “FASCIST EDUCATION

Playing a war game to experience the joy of killing

The Commander of Buchenwald

(Pister)

and his killers, the youngest of whom were the most terrible”

[English translation by the author]

The album page is a collage of photographs that Georges Angéli ostensibly found during the liberation of Buchenwald: the portrait of a German officer and young SS recruits. Above the text, there are photographs of young boys playing with toy weapons and posing as soldiers. As far as archivists at the Buchenwald Memorial found out, none of the pictures was actually taken at the concentration camp or shows members of the Camp-SS. However, Angéli used them as visual evidence in his narrative: the roots of the crimes committed at Buchenwald was a distinct type of fascist education and militarist indoctrination of children. He used the same photographs in other collages and adapted the text, however his core message remained the same. Despite his aspiration for these albums to be used in education, they seemed to never have reached the intended audience. Angéli had joined the Communist party in France after his liberation but left after a few years.

### Case Study 2

My second case study for this paper is the story of Alfred Stüber who also was a prisoner at Buchenwald concentration camp. Stüber belonged to a different category to Angéli (who was labeled as a “political prisoner”) because he was a German Jehovah’s Witness – a religious

minority that was mainly persecuted by the Nazis for refusing to serve in the German military. Just like Angéli, he was also connected to photography in the camp as he was forced to assist in the so-called identification service (*Erkennungsdienst*), the official SS photo studio. These departments were a standardized part of all main camp administrations and responsible for photography in the camps. Similar to Angéli, also Stüber documented the days of liberation with a photo camera that he most probably took from that studio.

After he left the liberated camp, Stüber gave public presentations about the Buchenwald concentration camp and his experience as a prisoner. As is documented in his estate at the Buchenwald Memorial, these presentations were advertised in newspapers. His estate also contains written texts on small pieces of paper that he seemed to have used during his presentations. Additionally, references to background music is mentioned as are photographs that he showed and that formed the main narration of his *Lichtbildvorträge* or slide lectures. His materials for the lectures include 28 pages with some transparent papers and handwritten notes. Additionally, there are two post scriptum pages (*NS*).

Stüber's main presentation centers around photographs in the liberated camp that he took on April 11, 1945. He describes the concentration camp as a whole with various historical aspects relevant to the camp's history. Furthermore, he talks about other concentration camp, thus including aspects of both the history of Buchenwald and the camp system that he did not witness personally. His main intention seems to have been to provide a "non-biased report" ("*kein Tendenzbericht*", as he puts it), emphasizing an overview of Nazi atrocities more broadly from an almost neutral point of view.

In contrast to this deliberately objective report, the two pages marked “NS” are very different in narration, tone, and most probably intended audience. Presumably, they were intended for his own survivor community and addressed Jehovah’s Witnesses whom he singled out specifically:

*“The Jehovah’s Witnesses were the most humiliated, the most undignifiedly treated.”*

[English translation by the author]

Intriguingly, his written presentation gives an intimate insight into an interpretative framing of the concentration camp experience of a survivor community that is seldom addressed in commemorative events or memory culture. In contrast to more general “lessons” from history, the documented narrative highlights the religious understanding by Jehovah’s Witnesses of their story of persecution as Stüber explains:

*“The destruction of the Jehovah’s Witnesses was a foregone conclusion, but things would turn out differently! Therefore, you too should take new courage: Trust in Almighty God and do not fear people or organizations that will fade away like the grass. The battle of the Almighty that lies before us, called ARMAGEDDON, will be followed by the new world of eternal blessings in which righteousness dwells. Stand now on the side of the Kingdom of God so that you may remain alive in the coming decision!”*

[English translation by the author]

Stüber’s estate includes more material that highlight his meaning-making within his survivor community, as demonstrated in a letter to another Jehovah’s Witness:

*“How glorious to be able to follow the signs that prove Jehovah to be true, even if all are lying. How wonderful and what a privilege to be Jehovah's messenger to a generation that will experience the END. And how promising it is to be allowed to survive that end—if Jehovah wills!”*

[English translation by the author]

There is an obvious discrepancy between the two versions of Stüber's presentation that relate to intended audiences and the effect of the respective narration. Stüber seemed to have intended to reach a broad audience with a more distanced presentation, emphasizing various groups that suffered at the hands of the SS. Within his own community, he elaborated on his personal religious interpretation and messages he wanted to convey – a type of meaning-making that seemingly never reached an audience beyond the core group of survivors and members of their religious congregation.

Stüber's estate also contains letters by German audience members that described what his presentation meant for them. A quote from a letter from an anonymous listener (original in German):

*"The concentration camps, these sites of organized mass murder, are a terrible indictment against National Socialism and its advocates - not against the German people, the majority of whom did not know about the atrocities in the concentration camps.*

[...]

*[All prisoners] were and are conscious or unconscious champions of a new, better world [...] Once this new world, this new order, which we all want to help build, has been created, it will become clear that the nameless sacrifices of the millions of martyrs in the concentration camps were not in vain."*

[English translation by the author]

Strikingly, the meaning that the audience member took from Stüber's presentation was not part of Stüber's own concept – at least the documented parts. The letter is indicative for that even when there is a specific message intended to be conveyed via a testimony, the actual recipients might create a completely new meaning that they understood to be authentic based on an eyewitness report.

## Conclusion

To conclude, I believe that previously overlooked (visual) sources offer insight into the early processes of meaning-making by survivors. Survivor estates are an especially fruitful type of source collection as they are very personalized and frequently contain materials that are not documented in other collections (for instance, perpetrator documents that survivors took during the days of liberation). Comparing types of meaning-making stored in such collections with more general narratives and framings in memory culture indicates that already in the immediate aftermath of liberation, hegemonic interpretations began to take shape within the specific context of the emerging Cold War. I argue that historicizing these early narratives – both those that vanished and those that endured – helps contextualize the developments of modern meaning-making in contemporary Holocaust memory.