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Title: Photographic Testimonies. An Integrated Visual History of Survival and Resistance

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Overview

My research project deals with visual sources created or collected during the Holocaust or its immediate aftermath by survivors. These materials comprise photographs, photo series, photo albums, sketches and collages, among which are stolen SS photos, photos taken in secret or during the days of liberation and reenactments of atrocities, as well as other unique motifs, that are frequently put together in albums. These collections are usually stored privately or in archives as estates. My project is separated into two parts. The first aims to uncover new sources for how survivors visually documented and narrated crimes done to them, and decipher the meanings attached to these images. The second investigates the transmission of visual narratives behind images by focusing on their implementation and adaptation in various formats. I am interested in how the images were used and whether the messages conveyed changed the originally intended meaning that survivors attributed to them. My project is designed as an 'integrated visual history', a methodological framework that I defined in my PhD thesis as a tool for a critical and multi-step photo analysis as well as a theoretical approach in studying photographs. My aim is to contribute not only to historical research but due to my main focus on visibility, also cultural studies, art history, visual culture and the broad

interdisciplinary fields of Holocaust studies, culture, education and memory, that are very much influenced by visualizations, not least due to new forms of Holocaust representation in the digital age.

I would like to give an introduction to my project that I call “Photographic Testimonies. An Integrated Visual History of Survival and Resistance”. I am conducting this project as a research associate at the Hebrew University Jerusalem. I will introduce my approach and my visual sources that are at the core of my presentation by showing two case studies from my collections. My postdoctoral project focusses on visual sources created or collected during the Shoah or its aftermath by survivors. Visual sources include a variety of different types of documents, ranging from photographs, photo series and album, sketches, collages, pieces of art and others that are archived in estates of survivors. My postdoc builds on my PhD project that focused perpetrator photographs, however it extends my focus methodologically and thematically. It also extends into the postwar period. During my PhD project, I developed a methodology that I called “integrated visual history” that is based on the works by Erwin Panofsky, Ulrike Pilarczyk, Ulrike Mietzner, Saul Friedländer and Amos Morris-Reich. I will not elaborate on this methodology too much though due to the limited time but will mainly focus on the collections of sources. I will introduce them via two distinct examples that are vastly different from each other but together form the base of my project with distinct research questions that are part of my broader set of questions.

Case Study 1

The first case study deals with art works created by Simon Wiesenthal that he created during the days of his liberation by American troops at the Mauthausen concentration camp. Wiesenthal, of course famous for his postwar activism to prosecute Nazi war criminals legally, was a professional architect and accomplished artist. His art work consists of visualizations that illustrate his personal experience immediately after liberation with the intention to tell a specific narrative about the camps – and this is what I am specifically interested in: survivor narratives created and documented in visual sources. My initial interest on these art pieces concerned the meanings that Wiesenthal attached to them, so I asked: What meanings did Wiesenthal and other artists create in their visualizations of their experience of persecution in the immediate postliberation period and in the case of Wiesenthal, to what extent did this experience influence his activities to confront the Nazi past?

There are two pieces of art that Wiesenthal created that are representative for his broader art collection that I would like to describe now. The first piece of art shows a scene from the quarry of the Mauthausen concentration camp which was at the heart of the whole Mauthausen camp complex which was very much focused on forced labor. In the middle of his art work Wiesenthal shows the so-called “Stairs of Death” as they were remembered by former prisoners. SS guards are visible on the back of the painting and in the foreground. There are two guards forcing prisoners to run up the stairs with heavy stones on their back. At the center of the art piece is a prisoner who is lying on the ground, begging for mercy as a guard is about to hit him with a stick.

His second work resembles art historical depictions of forced labor in its aesthetic and mise en scene, concretely, it refers to Jews working as slaves in ancient Egypt. We see the enormous stones that resemble the building of pyramids but that also represent the stones that were carried

up the “Stairs of Death” by prisoners in the previous picture. We also see a guard watching over prisoners with a whip who are being dragged up a crane in a very archaic depiction of violence and forced labor.

These two pieces of art were part of a book that Wiesenthal published immediately after liberation and which was republished in the 1990s. The paintings had descriptions added to them by Wiesenthal, the following two were attached to the pieces I have just referred to:

“186 steps they had to carry the heavy stones up in the quarry (weighing over 50 kilos by personal order of Heinrich Himmler) all day long while being beaten by the Capos and SS men, crawling under the heavy load until they collapsed. Then they received the coup de grace from the watchtower.”

„They did not need modern construction machines. Neither did they needed outdated ones. No machines at all. Human power, or more specifically ‚subhuman power‘, replaces everything. It is the cheapest source of power.“

These two pieces of art were consequently not merely art which was supposed to speak for itself but part of a narration about the Mauthausen concentration camp that Wiesenthal created in his book. It is part of a specific narration that relies on visual illustrations. If we compare Wiesenthal’s motifs with SS photographs of similar motifs we realize that they depict very similar scenes. For instance, a SS photograph was taken of the same stairs that Wiesenthal painted. On the SS photo, however, we see prisoner work presented as efficient and the workers as objectively productive – of course only according to the visual terms of the SS and without any signs of violence. The prisoners are shown carrying stones on their back in orderly columns, guards are barely visible except under close inspection of the picture. We also have SS

photographs of other places of forced labor that are usually depicted in objectivizing visual language, reminiscent of factory photography and following a school of visualization that visualizes work seemingly rationally and without any considerations of the working conditions of those conducting the labor. The main very obvious difference, I argue, between these two depictions besides of course the differences in visual source type is the focus on violence in Wiesenthal's depictions and the total absence of violence in the SS photographs. Furthermore, the visualizations that share the same motifs are part of fundamentally contrasting narratives.

I am interested in these pieces of art – and this has not been an in-depth analysis so far – because they are a very specific type of visual source that I interpret as visual testimonies, especially in connection to the way they were published and their accompanying descriptions. They must not be understood as objective visualizations of the past but as part of meaning-making and the creation of narratives of those who made them, often with distinct morals and messages. Furthermore, I argue that in Holocaust education, at memorial sites and in museums, these visualizations by survivors help break the perpetrators' gaze that often dominate our contemporary imaginations of the past with its seemingly objective visualization of the camps by raising questions of perspective, intentions and aims of visualization, both in the form of photos and films as well as art. Perpetrator photos are in stark contrast to the subjective visualizations, specifically in art. The comparison between these visualization types, however, raises broader questions concerning perspective, the intentions and aims behind these images.

Case Study 2

The second case study I would like to present is from another concentration camp. The photos that I am about to describe are stored at the Buchenwald Memorial – Wiesenthal estates is stored at the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies. These second examples focus on the category of secret prisoner photographs – photos that were taken as part of broader resistance activities in the concentration camp system, in this case specifically in Buchenwald. I chose these examples as they reflect my interest in the motifs prisoners thought to be quintessential to capture in order to provide representative images of the concentration camps for a postwar audience and what messages they wanted to convey via these images.

One example of that collection from Buchenwald shows a scene from summer 1944 in the vicinity of the Buchenwald crematorium which is visible on the left side of the picture. On the right side, we can see the barbed wired fence of the camp and a watchtower in the background. On the meadow in the foreground on the right, we see a striking detail – at least from a contemporary perspective (but as we will see also something specifically noteworthy from a historical perspective): persons lying on the ground of the opposite side of the crematorium. It is difficult to identify details but it seems that they are half naked or naked people. Another version of the picture is part of the estate of Georges Angéli, a French prisoner at Buchenwald. The second version doesn't show the figures on the right side, they were artificially erased from the image. We know from other sources connected to the photos that this was probably done by Angéli himself who took the original photographs.

The erased figures were actually concentration camp prisoners who relaxed next to the crematorium on a Sunday because the photos were taken in secret and could therefore only be taken on a Sunday when at least parts of the prisoners were allowed some leisure time. Already from Angéli's perspective, these seemingly contrasting image elements of a building connected

to extreme violence on the one side and relaxation on the other side was discomforting and deemed problematic for the purpose of the photographs. The picture element potentially disturbed the message which was supposed to be conveyed via the images. Angéli decided that it was better to erase this aspect of the camp's history, although this photograph is one of the very few that were taken by prisoners in secret that showed other prisoners during the existence of the camps. Consequently, we see already in an early stage of usage a transformation of the visual material according to the needs of those who took them and wanted to use them for a specific audience.

The crematorium as a motif was also not only documented by prisoners – as was the case with the Mauthausen “Stairs of Death” – but also by SS photographers. In contrast to Angéli's secret photo that did not allow considerations of artistic visualizations, an SS photo of the crematorium from an album is strikingly different in its design which gives the impression of a well-designed image – a good photo considering photographic conventions. The visual narratives that were supposed to be conveyed were additionally fundamentally contrasting to Angéli's intention: The secret prisoner photograph intended to document a place of violence and the crimes committed by the Camp SS. In contrast, the Camp SS depicted the building as part of the modern facilities of the concentration camp more broadly. Consequently, it is not only important to reflect upon what a picture shows but also what the picture's function was in its concrete context of usage.

The examples of secret prisoner photographs from Buchenwald are part of collections that I work with which are defined by visual narratives attached to photos that survivors created for postwar audiences. These materials consist of pictures taken by prisoners as well as photos they stole from perpetrators and on which they attached new meaning to. These meanings are connected to their ‘economies of demonstration’ and deciphering them goes beyond a photo

analysis alone. The term ‘economies of demonstration’ refers to Amos Morris-Reich’s study of race and photography in which he investigates the role of photographs in their complex process of usage. The motifs themselves might not be that special as they could also have been taken by someone else, however the meanings attached to them create specific narratives that I plan to decipher in-depth in my postdoctoral project.

Further Cases

Currently, I work with the following estates of survivors that include vastly different visual materials, however they are all connected by their intention to create specific visual narratives of the crimes done to them. More collections will be added throughout the project:

- Simon Wiesenthal: Jewish-Austrian survivor of various camps, among them KL Mauthausen. Wiesenthal created unique collages based on SS photographs and accompanied by short descriptions and poetry.
- Georges Angéli: French survivor of KL Buchenwald, professional photographer, took secret photos at the camp. After liberation he used them in public presentations and exhibitions which are documented in photos and texts.
- Rudolf Opitz: German prisoner at KL Buchenwald, professional photographer, smuggled photographs out of the camp, and was caught and murdered by SS men.
- Francisco Boix: Spanish survivor of KL Mauthausen, professional photographer and Republican fighter in the Spanish Civil War. He photographed the arrival of US troops and the following days with a stolen SS camera from the perspective of a liberated prisoner.
- Jaroslav Skliba: Czech survivor of KL Sachsenhausen who worked at the KL Sachsenhausen identification department (the SS photo studio). Together with other

prisoners, he hid photographs of Soviet POWs who were murdered by SS men. In the last stage of the war, he managed to secretly take photographs during a death march.

- Rudolf Wunderlich: German survivor, escaped from KL Sachsenhausen and saved various SS photographs, he was politically active after his liberation in the German Democratic Republic.
- Erling Johann Schjerven: Norwegian survivor who also worked at the KL Sachsenhausen identification department and smuggled photographs out of the camp during his evacuation via the so-called ‘White Buses’ rescue operation. Schjerven included the stolen photos with accompanying texts in an album about the years of his persecution.
- Rudolf Friemel: Austrian prisoner at KL Auschwitz, Communist and volunteer in the Spanish civil war. His estate includes a unique photo of his wedding at KL Auschwitz.

The Project's Aims

The aims of my project are separated in three parts that correspond to the three phases of my project; currently I am in phase 1.

Part 1: Localize hitherto overlooked (visual) sources

Find new sources for how survivors visually documented and narrated crimes done to them.

Part 2: Postwar meaning-making:

Investigate the transmission of visual narratives and their implementation and adaptation in various formats, e.g. political papers and lectures, public presentations, early memorials, ceremonies, etc.

Part 3: Forgotten Holocaust narratives:

Create a public platform (e.g. traveling exhibition, workshop, publication) to present and discuss early Holocaust narratives of survivors and localize the genesis of modern Holocaust memory in the context of the Cold War and its aftermath.

Lukas Meissel, PhD, is a historian and research associate at the Hebrew University Jerusalem with a postdoc grant from the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah (Paris). He wrote his PhD thesis at the University of Haifa, Israel, and earned BA and MA degrees in history and contemporary history at the University of Vienna, Austria. Prior to his studies in Israel, Lukas worked as an archivist in the Jewish Community of Vienna and in various Holocaust studies and education projects. Lukas received fellowships and grants in Israel, the USA, Germany, Austria and France, as well as the *Herbert-Steiner-Anerkennungspreis* 2015 and the *Theodor-Körner-Preis* 2021 awards. His research, lectures and teaching focus on Holocaust studies and education, visual history, and antisemitism, on which he has published in international peer-reviewed journals. Beyond articles and edited journals, Lukas published an award-winning monograph about perpetrator photography in the Mauthausen concentration camp and edited volumes about Holocaust studies and education. See, for instance: *Mauthausen im Bild. Fotografien der Lager-SS. Entstehung – Motive – Deutungen* (Vienna: edition Mauthausen, 2019) [Mauthausen in Images. Photographs of the Camp-SS. Origin - Motives – Interpretations]; *Aufregende Forschung. Zeitgeschichtliche Interventionen von Hans Safrian* (Vienna: new academic press, 2022) (with Jutta Fuchshuber). [Unsettling Research. Contemporary Historical Interventions by Hans Safrian].