

**FONDATION POUR LA MEMOIRE DE LA SHOAH**  
**SEMINAIRE DES BOURSIERS/« JEUNES » CHERCHEURS**  
**SOUTENUS AU TITRE DU PROGRAMME HISTOIRE DE L'ANTISEMITISME ET DE LA SHOAH**  
**LES RECHERCHES SOUTENUES PAR LA FONDATION POUR LA MEMOIRE DE LA SHOAH,**  
**2020-2022, 6-7 JANVIER 2022**

Lukas Meissel, MA

Presentation of PhD thesis:

**The Perpetrators' Gaze. SS Photographs taken at Concentration Camps**

Academic affiliation: University of Haifa, Israel

Contact: [lmeissel@campus.haifa.ac.il](mailto:lmeissel@campus.haifa.ac.il)

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper is a brief overview of my PhD project that focuses on photographic practices in Nazi concentration camps, specifically those images taken by SS men of *Erkennungsdienste* (identification departments), between their founding in 1936 and 1945. The term *Erkennungsdienste* refers to police institutions that had existed in a variety of modern police forces since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Within the concentration camp system, these departments were responsible for the production of photographs for the camp administrations, higher SS institutions and SS members. The images produced there include portraits of deportees, photos of prisoners conducting forced labor, construction sites and buildings in the camps, corpses of murdered inmates, events such as ceremonies or visits by delegations and Nazi officials, as well as private photographs of SS personnel.

The primary aim of the project is to not only investigate exactly what these pictures show, but to interpret them as visual perpetrator narratives of the concentration camps. I suggest that, although these photographs highlight how the camps were supposed to work according to the SS, in truth they represent an idealized reality which never actually existed. Accordingly, they should not be interpreted as authentic visualizations of the camps, but as an expression of ideological and practical aspirations of the perpetrators which are seldomly preserved in other types of sources beyond images. A central argument of the project is that the photos played a decisive role in legitimizing the camps within the SS and, at certain points, beyond the inner circle of perpetrators.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND STRUCTURE**

The *Erkennungsdienst* photographers either directly or indirectly referred to common photographic genres in their pictures, such as identification photography, industrial photography, crime scene photography, police photography or anthropometric photography. In my research, I seek to decipher these genres by analyzing selected SS photos and series of images, and to explore their arrangement, the perspective of the photographer and the aesthetic of the pictures. This photo analysis serves as the methodological framework to answer my project's central research questions:

1. What was the purpose of establishing standardized identification departments within Nazi concentration camps, and what do these pseudo-police institutions tell us about the self-conception of the SS?

2. Do SS photographs present specific visual narratives of the concentration camps, and if so, what information do they contain which is not documented in written sources?
  
3. How did victims or bystanders experience photography at concentration camps and how can their counter-narratives, or counter-images, contribute to a deeper analysis of the SS photos?

Structurally, these three questions form the basis of my research. Furthermore, they represent the focal points of the three main chapters which deal with **‘institutionalized perpetrator photography’**, **‘visual perpetrator narratives’** (particularly photo albums) and photographed/non-photographed violence – summarized as **‘the visible and the absent’**. Each of the three main chapters is then structured according to three key words, which refer to the functions and motifs of the analyzed photographs:

1. Identification, policing, propaganda
2. Documentation, representation, commemoration
3. Violence, war, race<sup>1</sup>

The SS photographs are interpreted as manifestations of the ‘perpetrators’ gaze’, meaning they present a very specific view on the camps that can include practical and ideological aspirations. Yet, the pictures also represent an imagined reality, constructed by the perpetrators, rather than the actual circumstances of the camps.

---

<sup>1</sup> These categories are based on my 2015 MA thesis about photographs from Mauthausen which was a primarily descriptive and not analytical approach towards camp photography and serves as the base for my PhD project as well as for articles I published about the visual history of the camps. The MA thesis was recently published as a monograph: Lukas Meissel, *‘Mauthausen im Bild’. Fotografien der Lager-SS. Entstehung – Motive – Deutungen* (Vienna 2019).

Therefore, they can be understood as images of ideological aims of the perpetrators instead of authentic visualizations. Furthermore, the *Erkennungsdienst* photographs are not simply visualizations of the camps, but became part of the crimes committed there. The images were used to legitimize the actions of the SS by visually creating evidence for alleged escape attempts and murders, to cover up the terrible living conditions of deportees, and to create an image of ‘professional businesses’, as run by forced laborers. In contrast to common conceptions of photos as authentic sources, I argue that the SS pictures deliberately do not show what they suggest: rather, the images conceal the reality of the camps instead of showing it.

## **SOURCES AND ARCHIVES**

Ultimately, the SS destroyed a vast number of photographs from camps in the last stage of the war, in an attempt to conceal the extent of their crimes. However, many photos were saved; prisoners hid them in the camps and/or acquired them after liberation, some photos were found by Allied soldiers, while others were collected for archival collections or for post-war trials. Today, most of these photos are stored in the archives of memorial sites and museums. Selected images from these photo series constitute the base of my sources. Additional relevant materials include written documents such as files of SS photographers, correspondences of concentration camps with other Nazi institutions, post-war testimonies, ego documents and oral history interviews. Due to the general lack of explicit archival holdings concerning photography from the camps, it is necessary to investigate a broad range of sources to find necessary information beyond perpetrator documents, such as written and oral sources by survivors and bystanders. Additionally, visual sources created by prisoners, including clandestine photos, post-liberation pictures taken by survivors and artworks

are considered here as well. In general, the perspective of prisoners towards perpetrator photography is essential to consider, as they highlight the other side of the photos: that which was not supposed to be photographed.

This study presents fundamental sources of SS photographs from six concentration camps across Nazi occupied Europe: Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Groß-Rosen and the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex. The specific selection of these camps is determined by the photos from their *Erkennungsdienste*, which are representative for the majority of such preserved photographic motifs. Additionally, these camps cover different phases in the genesis of the concentration camp system, and reflect various changing functions implemented by the SS such as the repression of political opponents, forced labor, the exploitation of prisoners and systematic mass murder.

## LITERATURE

Analytical studies of Holocaust photography, including the *Erkennungsdienst*-pictures, were initiated by the groundbreaking works of Sybil Milton in the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> However, during the 1990s, scholars focused primarily on the role of photographs in the memory of the Nazi crimes. This approach was influenced by the broader discipline of memory studies, for instance by significant works of James E. Young<sup>3</sup>. Cornelia Brink<sup>4</sup> and

---

<sup>2</sup> For instance: Sybil Milton, "The Camera as Weapon. Documentary, Photography and the Holocaust", *Simon Wiesenthal Annual* 1 (1984), 45-68.

<sup>3</sup> James E. Young (ed.), *The Art of Memory. Holocaust Memorials in History* (Munich/New York: Te Neues Pub Group, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Cornelia Brink, *Ikonen der Vernichtung. Öffentlicher Gebrauch von Fotografien aus nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern nach 1945* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1998).

Habbo Knoch<sup>5</sup> addressed the perception of Holocaust photos in post-War Germany and raised awareness of the different usages of pictures. Yet, these studies mainly focus on the post-war period and the afterlives of the images, and less on the production of photos by perpetrators.

Janina Struk's analysis of Holocaust photography is particularly beneficial for this PhD project, as she explicitly deals with how the SS wanted to present the concentration camps to the German public.<sup>6</sup> Another important work for my study is a catalogue of photographs taken in concentration camps, in which the contribution by Ilse About addresses pictures produced by *Erkennungsdienste*.<sup>7</sup> Ute Wrocklage also investigates photographs of this nature, and emphasizes their placement in the administrative structure of the concentration camps.<sup>8</sup> Further studies by Daniel Uziel, and his understanding of photographs as a part of Nazi crimes, is crucial for this PhD-project, as well as <sup>9</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman's in-depth analysis of a photo series containing four images taken by *Sonderkommando*-prisoners is of high importance for reflecting on the perspective of victims.<sup>10</sup> The ethical questions raised by Didi-Huberman, especially concerning the dangers of voyeurism and the limited potential of

---

<sup>5</sup> Habbo Knoch, *Die Tat als Bild. Fotografien des Holocaust in der deutschen Erinnerungskultur* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Janina Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust. Interpretations of the Evidence* (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Ilse About, "La photographie au service du système concentrationnaire national-socialiste (1933-1945)", in: Clément Chéroux (ed.), *Mémoire des camps. Photographies des camps de concentration et d'extermination nazis (1933-1999)* (Paris: Marval, 2001), 28-53.

<sup>8</sup> For instance: Ute Wrocklage, „Das SS-Fotoalbum des Frauen-Konzentrationslagers Ravensbrück“, in: Simone Erpel (ed.) *Im Gefolge der SS: Aufseherinnen des Frauen-KZ Ravensbrück. Begleitband zur Ausstellung*, (Berlin: Metropol, 2011), 233-251.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Uziel, *The Propaganda Warriors. The Wehrmacht and the Consolidation of the German Home Front* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout* (Paris: MINUIT 2004).

photographs to grasp the horrors of the camps, are central for all research conducted on Holocaust images.

Recently, new insightful studies that deal with perpetrator photo albums were published by teams of researchers, specifically about the Auschwitz camp complex and the Sobibor death camp.<sup>11</sup> Their important contributions prove the huge potential of photo analysis and the usage of pictures as sources beyond illustrations, specifically in reconstructing networks. Wendy Lower moved even beyond the analysis of specific series of pictures and build a monograph on a single photograph that showed the murder of a Jewish family.<sup>12</sup>

New findings of sources prove that many photographs are still undiscovered and that further research in archives beyond memorial sites and collections of perpetrator documents are required. For instance, an article in the *Bulletin de l'amicale de Mauthausen – Déportés, familles et amis* included paintings by survivors that contextualized well-known SS photographs from the Mauthausen concentration camp, convincingly showing the essential role of the victims' perspective in (photo) analysis of perpetrator sources.<sup>13</sup> Another example is the recent finding of photographs at the Union of Persecutees of the Nazi Regime (VVN-BdA) from the Zeithain camp that

---

<sup>11</sup> Tal Bruttman, Stefan Hördler, Christoph Kreuzmüller, *Die fotografische Inszenierung des Verbrechens. Ein Album aus Auschwitz* (Darmstadt: wbg Academic, 2019); Christophe Busch, Robert Jan van Pelt, Stefan Hördler, *Das Höcker-Album. Auschwitz durch die Linse der SS* (Darmstadt: wbg Academic, 2016); Bildungswerk Stanisław Hantz e. V./Forschungsstelle Ludwigsburg der Universität Stuttgart (eds.), *Fotos aus Sobibor - Die Niemann-Sammlung zu Holocaust und Nationalsozialismus* (Berlin: Metropol, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Wendy Lower, *The Ravine. A Family, a Photograph, a Holocaust Massacre Revealed* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> *Bulletin de l'amicale de Mauthausen – Déportés, familles et amis*, no 362 / October 2020.

document Soviet POWs in German captivity.<sup>14</sup> Photos like these are significant complementary sources for my thesis and a clear indication that further research in victims' collections is required to fulfill the aim of my study to integrate the prisoners' perspective.

Conclusively, despite there being numerous studies on perpetrator photo series and albums, and the role of pictures in Holocaust Memory, a general history of the production of photos in Nazi concentration camps is still a research desideratum. This is surprising, considering the wide utilization of Holocaust photographs, which are frequently used as illustrations, though often without any indication of their context of origin and original function. In this respect, there is a danger that they can reproduce perpetrator narratives inscribed in these images in the present. Thus, my PhD project will increase awareness of the problematic nature of visual sources, particularly those created by Nazi photographers. The impact of this will not only affect academic Holocaust Studies, but can also be applied to the wide aspects of Holocaust Education, which frequently includes visual material. In my role as a guide at the Mauthausen memorial site, I acquired firsthand knowledge and understanding of such pedagogical practices. Combined with my academic research, this experience also forms the base of my analytical investigation of photographic practices in Nazi concentration camps.

---

<sup>14</sup> «Aufsehenerregender Fund - bisher unbekannte Fotos aus dem Kriegsgefangenenlager Zeithain in Leipzig entdeckt», <https://www.stsg.de/cms/zeithain/aktuelles/aufsehenerregender-fund-bisher-unbekannte-fotos-aus-dem-kriegsgefangenenlager> (25.01.2021).



## METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH APPROACH

The selected photographs presented within my study are analyzed according to Ulrike Pilarczyk and Ulrike Mietzner's so-called serial-iconographic photo-analysis (*Seriell-ikonografische Fotoanalyse*) as was originally introduced to the field of social sciences.<sup>15</sup> This methodology consists of two main parts: a systematic quantification of (parts of) collections and qualitative analyses of representative images. First, clearly defined samples of collections will be listed in a detailed database. The aim of this first step is to assemble the iconographic contents from the photographs themselves. This allows for the building of a hypothesis, which will be applied to selected photographs that appear representative. The analysis of the selected pictures will be done in a four-step model: The pre-iconographic description, the iconographic description, the iconographic interpretation, and the iconological interpretation. In a follow-up step, the photo analysis will be complemented by Saul Friedländer's concept of an 'integrated history', therefore visual sources, oral history interviews and reports by survivors and victims will play a major role in contextualizing the 'perpetrators' gaze'.<sup>16</sup> The theoretical approach of the thesis is based around questions concerning the position of the photos within their 'economies of demonstration', meaning to investigate the places of these pictures in the complex process of their usages. I refer here to Amos Morris-Reich's use of the term in his study about race and photography.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Ulrike Pilarczyk, Ulrike Mietzner, *Das reflektierte Bild. Die seriell-ikonografische Fotoanalyse in den Erziehungs- und Sozialwissenschaften* (Bad Heilbrunn: Julius Klinkhardt Verlag 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews. The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939* (New York: Harper 1997).

<sup>17</sup> Amos Morris-Reich, *Race and Photography. Racial Photography as Scientific Evidence, 1876-1980* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press 2016), 85-86.

A central approach of this study is to interpret the SS pictures as photographic genres, and to understand them as tools in the legitimization of the crimes committed at the camps and not simply as visualizations. Deciphering these genres allows for an interpretation of the images beyond their visual content and contextualization within their historical and cultural setting. For instance, series of pictures from different concentration camps depict deported Soviet POWs, who were due to be murdered and were, indeed, killed in the days following. In these pictures, SS photographers used visual strategies, as established in the genre of anthropometric photography and widely used by the Nazis (as the recent findings from the Zeithain POW camp prove) to construct stereotypical images of Jews, referring to the antisemitic trope of 'Judeo-Bolshevism' that legitimized the German war of annihilation against the Soviet Union. The photographs presented the deported Soviet POWs as representatives of the 'Judeo-Bolshevist' state and ideology, and therefore "justified" their subsequent killing. Accordingly, the SS photographs not only visualized an antisemitic ideology, but constituted tools in the process of defining targets for mass killing and legitimizing their acts of violence and murder.

The usage of photography in the process of killing becomes clearer through another example. According to the standardized regulations at concentration camps, SS photographers were supposed to document so-called 'unnatural deaths'. They were tasked with taking pictures of prisoner suicides or dead bodies of camp inmates who were shot whilst trying to escape. These 'crime scene photos' were then attached to death case files by the camp administration. Survivor testimonies prove that these 'unnatural deaths' were in fact usually murders committed by SS guards, and often the victims were Jewish deportees who were, in contrast to other prisoner groups at concentration camps, systematically murdered. The SS photographs were set in the

photographic genre of crime scene photos to turn them into evidence for the rightfulness of the SS' deeds at the camps, with regards to contemporary police practices. However, a critical photo analysis enables me to uncover this strategy, as it becomes evident that the SS photos do not show any common details required in police photography, such as the identity of the dead person, the environment or possible clues that would question the SS' account of the circumstances of death. This comparison emphasizes that the photos were not intended to investigate crimes, but rather to cover them up.

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVE**

My PhD project aims to contribute to the field of Holocaust studies by highlighting the importance of photographs as unique sources, particularly concerning the history of the concentration camp system. I argue that visual sources are not only relevant as supplements, but that they contain information that is not preserved in written documents. Photographs taken and developed in police-like identification departments, and their various functions ranging from identifying prisoners, categorizing and administrating them, as well as conducting pseudo-police work such as investigations of deaths, raises questions concerning the self-understanding of the Nazi perpetrators, and their ideological aspirations in the context of a modern police state. Photo albums documenting various aspects of the camps act as representative visual accounts of what roles the respective camp was supposed to fulfill, while commemorative albums offer unique insights into the perpetrators' narratives, and how they understood their roles, which is seldom preserved in other documents. The ostensible absence of violence in the images indicates the paradoxical value of photos,

as expressed by Francisco Boix, a Spanish survivor who was forced to work at the Mauthausen *Erkennungsdienst*:

‘That was only for the pictures, whereas in reality it was entirely different.’<sup>18</sup>

Francisco Boix’s important testimony about camp photography emphasizes the significance of counter-narratives to the perpetrators’ stories, as engraved in their pictures. Similarly, survivor accounts enable an investigation of what the SS did not want to be seen, therefore they serve the ultimate goal of this study: to break the ‘perpetrators’ gaze’ manifested on SS photos and to serve as a call for awareness to not use perpetrator photography uncritically as illustrations, and therefore avoid reproducing the dehumanizing visual narratives formerly created by the SS.

The deconstruction of these perpetrator narratives is the core of my PhD project, especially since many SS photographs are nowadays an integral part of Holocaust education, or referred to in popular visual depictions of Nazi atrocities. Therefore, my study aims to emphasize the problematic nature of these images, which continue to shape contemporary imaginations of the Holocaust, by highlighting that which the SS photographers did not want to show: the realities of the concentration camps and of those who suffered there.

---

<sup>18</sup> Witness account of Francisco Boix, Nuremberg Trial Proceedings Vol. 6, 45th Day, 29.01.1946, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/01-29-46.asp> (02.08.2018). See also the biography of Francisco Boix: Benito Bermejo, *Francisco Boix, el fotógrafo de Mauthausen* (Barcelona: Editorial RBA 2002).