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EXHIBITION TEXTS

Museum für Fotografie
Flashes of Memory. Photography during the Holocaust
24 March – 20 August 2023

Visual documentation is one of the major factors in shaping historical awareness of the Holocaust. Alongside archival documentation of the period's events and the research on these records, visual documentation has contributed significantly towards knowledge of the Holocaust, influenced the manner in which it has been analyzed and understood, and affected the way it has been engraved in the collective memory.

The camera, with its manipulative power, has tremendous impact and far-reaching influence. Although photography purports to reflect reality as it is, it is essentially an interpretation of it, since elements such as worldview, values and moral perception influence the choice of the object to be photographed as well as how it is presented. When visual documentation is also used as a historical document, its use requires attributing the greatest of importance to these components.

Different parties photographed during the Holocaust. For the Nazi German regime, the visual media played a crucial role in propaganda as a means of expression and a tool for manipulating and mobilizing the masses. This kind of documentation attests to Nazi ideology and how German leaders sought to mold their image in the public eye. Conversely, Jewish photography was a component in the struggle for survival of the Jews imprisoned in the ghettos, and a manifestation of underground activity that testified to their desire to document and transmit information on the tragedy befalling their people. The Allied armies, who understood the propaganda value of photographing the camps they liberated, documented the scenes revealed to them, bringing in official photographers and encouraging soldiers to document the Nazi horrors as evidence for future war crimes trials and in an effort to re-educate the German population.

This exhibit presents a critical examination of documentation through the camera lens, focusing on the circumstances of the photograph and the worldview of the photographer, while referring to the Jewish photographers' different and unique viewpoints as direct victims of the Holocaust.

All items on display are replicas of the originals, except the cameras. The exhibition is curated by Vivian Uria, Director of the Yad Vashem Museums Division.

Political photography and filming in Nazi Germany
In the years following World War I, photography became a widespread pastime in Germany, both professionally and as a hobby. The Nazi Party was greatly aware of the importance of visual media as a propaganda and recruitment tool. As a result, this sector was developed vigorously after its rise to power. The Nazification (the process whereby the Nazi regime took

over aspects of German life) of photography was first expressed in official photography, which served its communications efforts, the movie industry, and government institutions. Nazification was also significant in amateur photography, with the Party extending its patronage to photography clubs and periodicals. These processes were clearly reflected in the representation of the Jews in antisemitic propaganda and their increased persecution as documented by private photography.

“Today, many millions in many countries read [them] in the papers… hear them on the radio… and see them illustrated in pictures broadcast via the most modern technical means over continents and oceans to the great news agencies, or in innumerable copies in weekly news digests in movie theaters across the globe. Thereby public opinion is created.”
Joseph Goebbels, "PK," Das Reich, no.20, May 18, 1941, p.2

Two Viewpoints on Photography in the Ghettos
The first ghettos were established in German-occupied Poland at the end of 1939. During 1940, their number grew rapidly. Most ghettos were created as a temporary and haphazard way to isolate the Jews from their surroundings. However, the majority eventually became the permanent residence for hundreds of thousands of Jews.

Tens of thousands of photos were taken in the ghettos, mostly by German photographers but also by several Jewish ones. Many of the German photographers acted in an official capacity for several different organizations of the Nazi state. Others photographed for personal objectives. The few Jewish photographers who managed to work in the ghettos did so in an official capacity for the Jewish ghetto leadership.

However, both by German and Jewish photographers, the borders between official and private photography were oftentimes blurred. The bias in German official photography was clear, and aimed at conveying various propaganda messages. In contrast, Jewish photography was carried out for the most part as a survival strategy vis-à-vis the Germans, with the goal of documenting and displaying a more realistic view of life in the ghetto.

Liberation of the Camps – Function and Distribution
Visual documentation played a central role for the Allied nations in revealing Nazi persecution, as well as displaying their own moral superiority vis-à-vis the fascist enemy.

The Soviets were the first to liberate the concentration camps. Since private photography was almost nonexistent in the USSR during the war, visual evidence of liberation by Soviet forces remained in the hands of the official photographers. In contrast, the British and Americans encouraged their troops to engage in private photography in the liberated camps, as part of the effort to disclose Nazi crimes to the public as widely as possible. Another important consideration was the collection of visual documentation for trials of German war criminals, which the Allies planned to hold after the war.

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To a great extent, liberation photos and films, including those that were staged, molded the collective and visual memory of the Holocaust for generations to come.

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