

Eyes from the Ashes

BY ANN WEISS

AS PABLO NERUDA RIGHTLY OBSERVED, “There is no space wider than that of grief, there is no universe like that which bleeds.” And while that is true, *The Last Album* offers an antidote to unending pain, by showing— not spilled blood— but rather blood pulsing through veins of life. Instead of letting death claim the last word, we are returning to an earlier time, an innocent time when such horrors were not imaginable. By showing these individuals in their normalcy, rather than in their victimhood, I choose to put the final punctuation on their lives, not on their deaths.

Books are usually written by the living. This book is different. Its principal voice comes from the dead. But they are not dead...yet. No ordinary photographs, these are the personal photos brought by Jews deported to Auschwitz–Birkenau. These photos do not depict the familiar nightmare images of death; instead we find ourselves immersed in the details of life—ordinary moments which cease to be ordinary when viewed in the momentous historical context of these exceptional times.

While many of the people on these pages never knew each other, they have become linked, not because of the way they lived, but because of the way they died.

Images ordinary and extraordinary coexist, side by side. The mundane becomes exceptional, because of what these photos are: the last vestige of a murdered people. But the ordinary is also ordinary, reassuringly so, because of what these photos have been, and still remain: innocent moments captured in innocent times.

In most histories, we know the names, the places, the dates, in short, the facts of an event. In this history, through a lexicon of personal photographs, often we know

none of these common elements because there is no one left in the world to tell us. Instead we read history in a pair of eyes.

We see people at play, at work, at school, on vacation, in settings both familiar and remote, at a time before they were targeted for extinction. Most importantly, we see them, not in the dehumanized state that the Nazis would have us remember them but alive and vibrant, exactly the way they wanted to remember themselves.

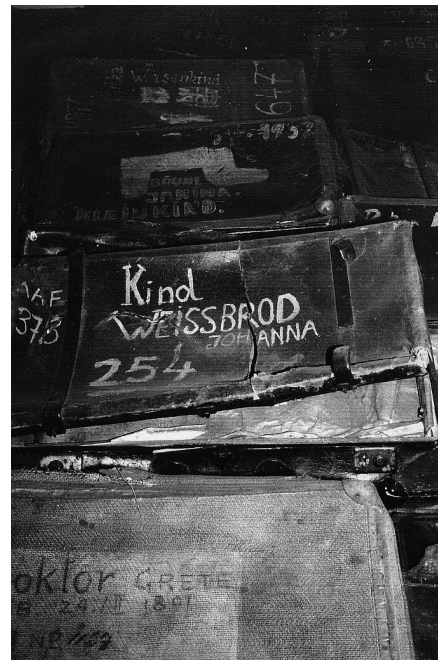
By looking at these sacred last photos carried into the bowels of Auschwitz-Birkenau, we see the most intimate view of who these people were, who they loved, and what mattered most to them. These are the very photos they chose for their own remembering.

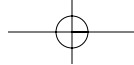
The Photographs: Background and History

These photographs are part of a rare collection of approximately 2,400 photos found in 1945 after the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland. We know of no other such collection that exists. Personal photographs were deliberately destroyed during the war when their owners were brought to Nazi labor and death camps. And yet, somehow, this one collection survives.

By war's end, two-thirds of Europe's Jews were dead. In countries like Poland, Latvia and Lithuania, the proportions were even higher, with nine out of every ten Jews murdered. The photographs that accompanied the victims on their journey to death became their last tangible vestige of home, especially when they were separated from everyone they knew. As one survivor, speaking for many, commented

Suitcases confiscated from Jews at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Many photos were found in such suitcases.





on the photos: “The Nazis treated us like animals, not even animals, like sub-human beings. The pictures reminded us we were still human and that somebody loved us, once upon a time.”

From the moment I first saw these photos, I have been haunted by them, shattered by them, humbled by them, and ultimately inspired by them.

To each face, each pair of eyes, I ask a silent question as I probe each image for an answer; “Did you survive?” Then I search and I hope. Too often, the question is answered with a silence more deafening than any human cry.

Survivors have shared both the best that they have experienced and the worst that they have endured—their memories, their secrets, their dreams, and their nightmares. At times, what they could not bear to tell their own children, they have told me, as I became surrogate child or lost friend. As their listener, I consider it both a grave responsibility and a sacred honor to be worthy of their trust and of their memories. I am a *shaliach*, an emissary, a messenger for the photos—no more, no less.

As I continued to search each photo, eventually I began to ask a new question. Survivors have always told me how their loved ones died. To each photo, I now ask my question, “But how did you live?” Even when no survivors remain to tell the story, the photos themselves yield their own powerful answers.

The final word belongs to the victims, expressed through their photographs in this, their last album. And rather than allowing death to have the last word, I have chosen to put the final punctuation on life, as I believe they would have done.

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A brief reverse chronological history follows to provide a context for the photos.

Finding the Photos The year was 1986, before trips to Eastern Europe became common. A group of Jews active in communal affairs had been handpicked for a special diplomatic mission. We were led by Art Paikowsky, now an independent consultant, then working on behalf of the Federation of Jewish Agencies. I was in the company of prominent and philanthropic leaders, having been offered one of the coveted places because of my investigative reporting a few years earlier during “Operation Moses,” Israel’s daring rescue of Eritrean Jews, who had walked out of a primitive, persecuted life in Ethiopia to the Sudan where they were airlifted into Israel in 1984.



Auschwitz I entrance gate in morning light, taken on author’s first visit to Poland, 1986. The famous slogan “ARBEIT MACHT FREI” translating to “WORK MAKES YOU FREE,” taunted prisoners with false hope, yet the inverted “B” of the sign, tried to alert new prisoners that life here in Auschwitz-Birkenau, like the “B,” was inverted, insane and upside-down. The Jewish prisoner, forced to produce the sign, ingeniously found a way to give warning.

Though I was not on this trip to document, I could not stop myself from viewing everything through the lens of a camera and through the eyes of a researcher.

Auschwitz–Birkenau, which has become the archetype for death in the vernacular of the Holocaust, was the site of Hitler’s largest killing and slave labor facility. As a German scholar recently said, “Everything is measured by Auschwitz.” On the grounds of Auschwitz–Birkenau, a need for solitude compelled me to leave the group. There I felt the presence of those I never knew, and experienced a profound need for silence.

In preparing myself for the trip, I studied and read and felt and thought about the history of this region to such a degree that I probably knew more about life in Auschwitz in 1943 than about life in Philadelphia in 1986. The State Museum of Auschwitz–Birkenau, conceived under Communist rule in the 1950s, then almost completely ignored the fact that Jews had been murdered there. The situation is currently being corrected with the help of an International Advisory Council working with the Auschwitz Museum to renovate, preserve, and improve the facility. Even in Birkenau, where 90 percent of the victims were Jewish, the entrance sign under which we walked on that first day pointed out that millions of Poles had been killed there, never mentioning that these Poles were killed, not because they were Poles,* but because they were Jews.

We were given a detailed tour of Auschwitz I, a facility designated principally for political prisoners, which is now a series of museum buildings. I found it harder and harder to stay with the tour. The Auschwitz guide droned on, rattling off facts, as if she were reciting a grocery list. Her tone and manner belied the fact that she was speaking about the destruction of human lives.

*This sign has since been removed and numbers revised for accuracy.



I separated myself from the guide. When the group left with the guide, I remained in a room filled, floor to ceiling, with shoes once belonging to the prisoners. Alone, I studied their broken forms, and thought of their owners.

After a long while in the silence, I began to search for the group. Running from gallery to gallery, from building to building, I heard voices in the distance. As I ran down a long corridor, an employee approached me and asked, "Maybe you'd like to see what's in this room?" I answered, "Yes." And in the dim light, a key was taken out of a pocket and a door, rarely opened for strangers, was unlocked. I stepped into the room, and apparently, when I saw the photos, I began to shout for my group. A few heard me, and several, including Mark Solomon and Jerry Frezel, joined me in that room.

The author copying photographs at Auschwitz. It took several trips to copy the twenty-four hundred photos in the collection. The process began in 1988 and continued until the early 1990s.

Photo Accuracy: A Philosophy and a Practice This book is true, even if some of the facts are not. By that I mean that although I care deeply about accuracy and have tried to ensure accuracy by securing multiple identifications, inevitably there will be mistakes, since many who knew the truth are already dead and people remember events in different ways.

I have chosen to privilege the truth of survivors' experiences, knowing there are times when only a lone survivor's account might exist. Although sometimes a date or detail might conflict with a published account, I continue to believe in the essence of the survivor's account—since it is the essential truth of survivors' own experiences, their own memories, their own feelings. As Charlotte Delbo, French survivor of Auschwitz affirms in her scathing account, *None of Us Will Survive*, "Today I am not sure that what I wrote is true. I am certain it is truthful."

In recording the survivor accounts that accompany the following photos, I have chosen to privilege the truth of the survivors' experiences above all else.

—Ann Weiss

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A photo in the newspaper caught her eye. It accompanied an article about my upcoming speech at Barnes & Noble. Just before I was to begin speaking, I was summoned to the phone and a woman began to ask about the photo of the man holding a young child. Did I know which photo she was talking about? How could I not. It broke my heart every time I looked at it.

Finally she blurted out, "That is my Daddy!" Stunned, I asked her the obvious question: "Are you the

child in the picture?" Miriam then unfolded the story of her father, Leibl Henesh:

Leibl Henesh was taken to slave labor camp early in the war and his wife Rosa and two children, a boy of 2 and a girl of 3, were left behind. Somehow, Leibl managed to escape, but could not return home for fear of his life. He sent message after message to Rosa, but all his messages were met with silence.

[continued on page 113]

While more than 99 percent of the photographs portray Jews, there are approximately two dozen photos of uniformed Nazis co-mingled in the corpus. It is possible that these Nazi images were used as an outer "cover" to help hide the forbidden Jewish photographs. None of these Nazi photos have been included in this volume.