

The Dark Heritage of Holocaust Exterminators at Leisure

Written by Martin Duffy

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MARTIN DUFFY, MAY 22 2022

A video of holocaust exterminators and their victims was posted on YouTube in 2008 as “The Unbearable Lightness of Being a Nazi”. The original film clip had been entitled “Happy Nazis”. This gruesome documentary disclosure portrayed off-duty Nazis while train arrivals at Auschwitz were selected to be gassed. Few subjects in dark heritage have now been as comprehensively researched as the identity of perpetrators of the holocaust. In holocaust studies, identification constitutes a systemic discipline, with its own epistemology and phenomenology converging in a whispering of sacred investigative protocol. This sets heinous holocaust actions and their actors apart from the generic field of mass violence or genocide research. Indeed thanks to Simon Wiesenthal, an industry of institutes and museums emerged to hunt Nazis. However, and despite these efforts, due to the strictness of Nazi security, images of concentration camps, and especially of the off-duty activities of camp staff, are rare.

This article will look at two fully authenticated collections, the so-called Auschwitz Album which details the reception of Hungarian Jews, and what is usually referred to as Karl Höcker’s photograph album (Lustig, 2016) which pictures SS staff at leisure- like a kind of bizarre holiday album. The latter’s images were described upon discovery as “shockingly gleeful”. Indeed newspapers upon discovery quickly dubbed the video-clip, “Happy Nazis (2008.) It was clear that the secret photographs reveal how Nazi exterminators spent their free time without any sense of conscience. This latter document covers official visits and ceremonies at Auschwitz and personal photographs of Auschwitz camp staff parties. There is now, we are assured, no danger of a “Hitler’s War Diaries” fiasco as forensic photographers have completed their verification. The Auschwitz Album is the only surviving visual evidence of the process leading to the mass murder at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Taken with Höcker’s photos we have a unique convergence of mass murder and Nazi off-duty celebration. We have the mass gassing, and then the SS party-time in two albums.

The Auschwitz Album is indeed a rare photographic record of the Holocaust. The Sonderkommando photographs are the only discovered pictorial evidence of extermination at Auschwitz II-Birkenau in Poland. Taken by photographers from the camp’s Erkennungsdienst (“identification service”) their identity is not verified but believed to be Bernhard Walter or Ernst Hoffmann, respectively SS director and deputy director of the Erkennungsdienst. This unit fingerprinted and photo ID’s viable” surviving prisoners (those who had not been selected for extermination). Those who were destined for the gas chambers were largely undocumented and rounded up unceremoniously like cattle.

The album possesses a total of 56 pages and some 193 photographs (Hellman, 1981.) Originally, the collection was perhaps 25% larger, but prior to depositing at Yad Vashem, some pictures were donated to identifiable families. Not all of those have been returned to Yad Vashem. The pictures document the processing of Hungarian Jews from Carpathian Ruthenia in the summer of 1944 from their train boxcars to the selection process under SS medical supervision. This separated those who were considered fit for work from those who were to be sent to the gas chambers. The photographer followed groups of those selected for work, and those selected for death to a birch grove just outside the crematoria. The photographer also documented the workings of the Kanada storage facilities, where the looted belongings of the prisoners were sorted before transport to Germany. These images graphically visualize a factory production line. Indeed, processed animals at a slaughter-house might be treated with greater

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dignity

The Auschwitz album's survival is remarkable, given the efforts made by the Nazis to keep the "Final Solution" a secret. Equally noteworthy is the story of its discovery. Lili Jacob (later Lili Jacob-Zelmanovic Meier) was selected for work at Auschwitz-Birkenau, while the other members of her family were sent to the gas chambers. The Auschwitz camp was evacuated by the Nazis as the Soviet army approached. Jacob passed through various camps before Dora concentration camp, where she was eventually liberated. Recovering from illness in a vacated barracks of the SS, Jacob found the album. Inside, astonishingly, she found pictures of herself, her relatives, and others from her community. The coincidence was astounding, as Nordhausen-Dora camp was 400 miles away, and that over 1,100,000 people were killed at Auschwitz. The album's existence had been known publicly since at least the 1960s, when it was used as evidence at the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials. Nazi-hunter Serge Klarsfeld visited Lili in 1980 and convinced her to donate the album to Yad Vashem, and agreed an edited collection. This was re-published by Peter Hellman (Gilbert, 1981.)

As for the Höcker Album featuring ceremonies at Auschwitz, incorporating four Sonderkommando photographs at Auschwitz (1944; probably taken by Alberto Errera) and Wilhelm Brasse, prisoner photographers at Auschwitz. The album also shows that in the final months of the war — after the Soviets liberated concentration camps in the east — SS officers at Auschwitz continued to revel in their social functions. Photographs include Karl Höcker playing with his pet German Shepherd, lighting up a Christmas tree, and joking with other Nazi officials. There are also photographs of the SS officers wining and dining nearby Auschwitz. Other photos show the Nazi officers enjoying a relaxing time sunbathing and eating blueberries at Solahütte (or Solahuette), a famous Nazi holiday camp that was located less than 20 miles from Auschwitz. These images offer an unfathomable contrast to the horrors that happened during the Holocaust and serve as a sobering reminder that "merely possessing an appetite for life and its simple pleasures is no guarantee that a person will not just as eagerly take life and forever deny those same pleasures to others".

The Auschwitz Album provides unique visual evidence of the largest extermination centre created by the Nazis, the symbol of the Holocaust and of mass murder at Auschwitz-Birkenau. This transport of Hungarian Jews from the area of Carpathian Ruthenia arrived at the ramp of the extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau in May 1944. In the photos we see the men, women and children step out of the overcrowded train visibly traumatised. They have no clue that they have just been delivered to a death factory and that few of them will survive. Survivor and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel described his delivery as a teenager at Auschwitz:

Hand in hand we followed the crowd as tannoy speakers instructed us, Men to the left, women to the right. Eight words spoken indifferently without emotion. Eight short simple words... I did not know that at that place, at that moment, I was parting from my mother and my sister forever.

Most Jews were sent immediately to the left, to their death. Many of them came from the Berehovo Ghetto, which itself was a collecting point for Jews from several other small towns. Early summer 1944 was the apex of the deportation of Hungarian Jewry. For this purpose, a special rail line was extended from the railway station outside the camp to a ramp inside Auschwitz, like cattle to the slaughter. They were gassed under the guise of a harmless shower; their bodies were cremated and the ashes were strewn in a nearby swamp.

The Nazis not only ruthlessly exploited the labour of those they did not kill immediately, they also looted the belongings the Jews brought with them. Even gold fillings were extracted from the mouths of the dead by a special detachment of inmates. The photos show the entire process except for the killing itself. The purpose of the album is unclear. It was not intended for propaganda purposes, nor does it have any obvious personal use. Probably it was prepared as an official reference for a higher authority, as were photo albums from other concentration camps. Lilly never hid the album and news of its existence was published many times. She was even called to present it as testimony at the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt during the 1960s. She kept it all the years until the famous Nazi-hunter Serge Klarsfeld visited her in 1980, and convinced her to donate the album to Yad Vashem (Gilbert 1981.)

In 1994 the album was restored in Yad Vashem's conservation laboratory and computerized into its databank. The staff of the archive was able to compare and match the pictures with aerial photos taken by the US Army Air Force in

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1944-45. In 1999 the entire album was scanned with the highest quality digital equipment. In Karl Höcker's album many photographs are taken at Solahütte, a little known SS resort some 30 km south of Auschwitz. Archival records reveal that the SS rewarded Auschwitz guards with a trip to Solahütte. Though there are photos taken upon visits to Solahütte throughout the album, a series of photographs document a social gathering at Solahütte for the SS hierarchy (Grief, 2005.) In attendance were some of the most notorious officers of the concentration camp system. Rudolf Höss, the former commandant, returned to Auschwitz in 1944 (Krauss, 1966.) Josef Kramer, sometime commandant of Auschwitz; as commandant of Bergen-Belsen, he was nicknamed, "Beast of Belsen."

Dr. Josef Mengele is shown selecting "specimens" for his medical experiments. Höcker and Baer are photographed in conversation with Höss, Kramer, and Mengele. Perhaps the most extraordinary photograph depicts an accordionist leading a sing-along for SS officers. In the front row of the group are Höcker, SS-Hauptscharführer Otto Moll (gas chamber chief), Höss, Baer, Kramer, Franz Hössler (commander of Birkenau's female prisoners), and Mengele. These are some of the only known photographs of some of these men at Auschwitz. Several pages cover a day trip for SS Helferinnen (female SS as communications specialists) on July 22, 1944. They arrive at Solahütte and run down a ramp accompanied to the music of an accordionist. Several photographs entitled "Hier gibt es Blaubeeren" (Here there are blueberries) shows Höcker passing out bowls of fresh blueberries. Only miles away on the very same day, prisoners were starving and the gas chambers were at full speed.

Several pages depict a ceremony on September 1, 1944, commemorating the opening of the SS military hospital at Birkenau. Scores of Nazi officials including many of the physicians (most notably Dr. Eduard Wirths and Dr. Carl Clauberg) and nurses attended the ceremony. The Allies bombed the field hospital on December 26, 1944, killing five SS personnel. The album also contains photographs taken most likely in the aftermath of that air raid. Höcker's photographs, captioned "Beisetzung von SS-Kameraden nach einem Terrorangriff" (The Burial of our SS Comrades after a Terror Attack), show horse-drawn hearses, coffins, and mourners (Grief, 2005.) One month later, Soviet troops liberated Auschwitz.

Shortly after World War II, an American intelligence officer living in Germany uncovered this Höcker album of photographs chronicling SS officers' activities at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The US Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. received this photograph album in 2007. The rare images show Nazis singing, hunting, and even trimming a Christmas tree. They provide a chilling contrast to the photographs of Jewish victims. A comparison of Höcker's album to the "Auschwitz album" is revealing. The original owner of that album, Lili Jacob (later Zelmanovic Meier), was deported with her family to Auschwitz in late May 1944 from Bilke (today in Ukraine), a small town near Berehovo in Transcarpathian Rus, part of Hungary (Krauss, 1966.) They were off-loaded on May 26, 1944, the same day that professional SS photographers photographed the arrival of the train and the selection process. In the album, Lili Jacob first found a photograph of her rabbi but then also discovered a photo of herself, many of her neighbors, and relatives, including her two younger brothers Yisrael and Zelig Jacob. She brought the original album with her when she immigrated to the United States. Later published many times, these images went into evidence at the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial (in which Lili Jacob testified and in which Karl Höcker was a defendant). In 1983, Lili Jacob donated the album of photographs of her transport's arrival in Auschwitz to Yad Vashem.

We also cannot establish why the album that Lili discovered was created; possibly, the original owner was Richard Baer, Höcker's superior. Baer was not only the commandant of Auschwitz when the Hungarian Jews arrived but also the commander of Dora-Mittelbau, where the album was discovered. Viewing the two albums together, they allow us to witness how the SS created two alternative views of reality. What is most striking about Höcker's Auschwitz album is that there are no photographs of prisoners. It is purely celebratory.

Though Höcker's album does not depict any criminal act, its amorality derives from these SS leisure activities juxtaposed with the magnitude of the crimes they are enabling. This is documented in the video *The Unbearable Lightness of Being a Nazi* (2008) created at Yad Vashem. Only we must recap that these are the "pictures at play" of the staff of the most notorious death camp the world has ever known. In the video, Regina Speigel (Auschwitz Survivor) explains:

You know you look at these pictures they look almost like normal people... (but) they're devils. There is something

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inhumane because how you can sit there and know what is happening to people there and enjoy.

Rebecca Erbelding (U.S. Holocaust Museum Archivist), interviewed for the video, notes:

In December 2006 I received a letter in the mail. This gentleman, who requested to remain anonymous wrote to the museum and said that he had World War II era photographs in his possession that he thought we might be interested in. He believed the pictures...to be taken in and around Auschwitz, Poland. I was quite doubtful of this actually because very few people have pictures of Auschwitz, however I requested more information from him and he said, can I just send you the album I have? I said, sure. So, at the beginning of January 2007 an album arrived on my desk, Federal Express, and I opened it up and there was a photograph album clearly marked Auschwitz 21st June 1944.

This album was found in Germany at the end of the war by an American soldier. The album belonged to a Karl Hooker, adjutant to the Commander of Auschwitz. Rebecca Erbelding explains:

His job was to know everything before the Commandant did and to make sure that things ran smoothly... he supervised a team of women known as Helferinnen... telephone communication specialists...every time a group of Jews came in on a train, they would be in charge of saying, this many people came in, this number was selected for forced labour and this number were selected for the gas chambers. And he would sign off on that before it was telegraphed to Berlin. So, he knew absolutely everything that was going on. I think the most chilling thing is the time period that this is taken. These are not random officers who are at the resort....This is the A team. This is people who were brought in specifically before the summer of 1944.

By stark contrast, and fully knowing about these grave violations, they are pictures "at party". Joe White (Holocaust Historian) observes: "By this point, at least in terms of *Birkenau* killing capacity it reached its apex and the killing capacity was so expanded that for body disposal they were beginning to use open pit cremation beyond the crematories". Rebecca Erbelding adds, "In those photographs I recognize Dr Josef *Mengele*. And once we saw him then we knew the album as truly something really special because, as we knew there weren't supposedly any photographs of Mengele taken in the camp".

Mengele, known as the "Angel of Death", conducted heinous medical experiments on women and children. In perhaps the most remarkable photograph in the album, he stands amidst a gallery of leading Nazi killers at a sing-along. Rebecca Erbelding elaborates: "Now to me the front row of the album is the most interesting because it's the hierarchy but they're all in a row, they're all lined up, they're all smiling and laughing at the sing-along. I mean at the end of one of the most horrific periods of murder in one place in human history it's astonishing..."

Researchers at the holocaust memorial museum are still finding new clues in these rare photographs. Regina Speigel (Auschwitz Survivor) recalls: "All these writings, even today it doesn't look nice, all these tattoos...people would ask me, did it hurt, and I said this was the least of our problem..." There were no sing-alongs in Regina's world only a deep dark abyss from which she thought she would never emerge. How dark that abyss was can be seen in the only other Auschwitz album known to exist. The Lilly Jacob album was named after the woman who discovered the photographs. Viewed alongside each other these albums show forensic photographic evidence that, "between the middle of May and the beginning and the beginning of July 1944, four hundred and thirty-seven thousand Hungarian Jews were sent to Auschwitz. 80% were selected for death upon arrival. The SS had already configured that figure, like a cattle cull. These women and children unbeknown to them, are taking their last steps towards the gas chambers. Meanwhile SS staff were having parties to reward themselves for conducting mass murder.

Regina Speigel remembered:

When they told us to go into the showers, that, so help me God, I will never forget, that was the first time that I pushed myself in because I figured maybe they are burning gas off again. Might as well do it to me first so I don't hear anybody else scream and of course I came out wet minus my hair. And of course, that's when they put my number on. But that was Auschwitz for me...

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Rebecca Erbelding adds:

I really think the album in the coming years will be of great interest to people who study the psychology of genocide and the psychology of perpetrators....Those pictures were taken on a day where transports were coming into Auschwitz 20 miles away and people are pretending to cry in these images that they don't have any more blueberries to eat. I mean the duality of this is astonishing. So, I think the album also raises questions of bystander (culpability)....are these girls as guilty as the people putting the Zyklon B in the gas chamber? I mean, they're at Auschwitz, they know what's going on, where does guilt fall?

The images seared into Regina's mind are of the family, friends and neighbours sent to their deaths and of Nazi soldiers brutalizing them. Regina Speigel states:

I could see their haunted faces, and you know it's a funny thing, when they took him away, they didn't beg for mercy because they knew there was no mercy. But they turned round to us when we were still standing on sidewalks, please remember us - remember us - because nobody likes to go on to oblivion not to be remembered.

Rebecca Erbelding concludes:

And that's one of the things that's really difficult about this album and raises so many questions. Because they don't look evil in this album, they look like normal people like you and I and how does a person get to that point where mass killing is socially acceptable and morally acceptable to a person. It is very difficult and I think that this album, you know, just raises that question even more than it's already been raised by the Holocaust itself....

Together these two collections document the normality of the killing machine which was created in Nazi concentration camps such as Auschwitz. They show a ubiquitous culpability across the cadres of German society, civilian staff not just military. Mass murder had become so routine, and the SS view of the Jewish population was one of such de-humanization, that their off-work socializing might be likened to farmers after a pig slaughtering. Taken with the absence of evidence of any kind of opposition or conscientious objection to participation in this kind of mass slaughter, one is forced to the inescapable conclusion that German society had at that time acquired a universal disregard for Jewish people as fellow humans. This rather suggests that Aryan doctrines had percolated into the very sinew of German society, and must force us to conclude that Nazi propaganda has been amazingly effective.

When one examines the personal profile and civilian employment of these SS staff (doctors, nurses, teachers, bank clerks, administrators, military reserves) one must hypothesize how their mindsets could have allowed them in a brief few weeks to go from these routine civilian jobs to mass killers. Psychiatry has pondered how this transformation could have occurred in such a brief period of time, and how ordinary civilians acquired the psychology of state assassins. These two unique photographs albums, especially when viewed from the lens of the US Holocaust Museums investigation, "The Unbearable Lightness of Being a Nazi" suggest a phenomenological alteration of seismic proportions. The dark heritage of holocaust exterminators at leisure shows just how German society had descended into a Nietzschean nightmare.

Nietzsche's writing about the crisis of nihilism received their ultimate expression in Nazism. Nietzsche became the primary thinker for those Nazis looking to justify their beliefs with philosophy and espousing soldiers as the *Übermensch*. The will to power was adopted by the Nazis as a key psychological insight. The philosopher Alfred Baeumler claimed Nietzsche had prophesied the rise of Hitler and fascism in Germany. The sense of a super-race banqueting in merriment as the slave class were sent to the gas chambers is an extremist image of such descent. The darkest heritage is therefore surely these disturbing images of "Nazis at play".

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About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.