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From the Image of Record to the Image of Memory: Holocaust Photography, Then and Now

Barbie Zelizer

One of the least understood dimensions of photography involves the ways in which photographs help the public construct, understand, and remember the past. This chapter discusses the popular reliance on photographs as a filter on the past by examining Holocaust photography and its recycling. Using published photographs of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps in 1945 as a forum for discussing the cogency of photography over time, the chapter argues that photographs have helped create a specific kind of memory about the Holocaust that inflects both how it is remembered and how its memory shapes popular experience of other atrocities of the modern age.

The shared visual memory of the atrocities of World War II is in part a naturalized recollection whose discussion has been both vivid and sustained. While cultural critics as varied as Theodor Adorno (1973, 362), Jean-François Lyotard (1988, 56–57), and George Steiner (1969, 123) have continued to lament the difficulties in finding a way to express what happened in the Nazi concentration camps, atrocity photos have demonstrated a haunting capacity to linger long beyond the journal, newsmagazine, or newspaper that first displayed them.¹ Perhaps the best known of all contemporary statements

attesting to their power was that of Susan Sontag, who first saw the visuals as a young girl: "When I looked at those photographs, something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying" (1977, 20).

This chapter is intended to address the mechanisms that help the public remember in a way often similar to that described by Sontag. It is an extension of the work of French scholar Maurice Halbwachs (1980 [1950]), who in the tradition of Emile Durkheim and George Herbert Mead emphasized the shared dimensions of the act of remembering. Halbwachs's premise, since adopted by many others, stipulated that memory is a fundamentally social activity accomplished not in the privacy of one's gray matter but via a shared consciousness that molds it to the agendas of those who invoke it. To quote one memory scholar, collective memory is a tool "not of retrieval but of reconfiguration [that] colonizes the past by obliging it to conform to present configurations" (Hutton 1988, 314). It acts as a kind of history-in-motion, moving at a different pace and rate than traditional history and thriving on remaking the past into material with contemporary resonance.

The shared memory of Nazi atrocities has been in large part tied up with the atrocity photos published in the U.S. and British press once the concentration camps were liberated in April of 1945, a period of dramatic changes in journalism in the United States and Britain. The rising status of the image in news was generating tension with its main competitor, the word. Although photographs had been around for nearly a hundred years, at the time of World War II they were still considered largely a feature of yellow journalism. Photographers were called "pictorial reporters" or "newspaper illustrators" rather than photojournalists, and images were seen as adjunct carriers of information that needed the intervention of journalists to make sense (Zelizer 1995a, 1995b). Yet with the camps' liberation, the press needed to establish an authoritative record of what it was seeing, and images became central in doing so. For many, pictures offered the crowning proof of what the liberating forces saw.

During the liberation the press was called upon to shape public belief, opinion, and action in a way that challenged most expectations of what had been happening inside the camps. Although there had been rumors of Nazi atrocity and horror, only when members of the press entered the camps and sent back documentation of what they found there was the distant public moved beyond skepticism. Yet were they ready to do so? This chapter argues that they were not. The press had not sufficiently thought out how to pro-

cess images as news, and photographers had not yet organized standards of common practice. From the vantage point of the evolution of journalism, it was here that the record of the liberation becomes particularly interesting. Tensions between word and image, reporter and photographer, rested at the foundation of what was seen on the camps' liberation, and, by implication, they remained at the core of what is still remembered about the camps.

Photography on the Eve of World War II

The record of the liberation of the camps was produced on the back of tremendous technological advancement clouded by considerable professional ambivalence concerning the ascent of photographs in news. Newsreels, radio, and faster and better wire service connections for reporters were co-opted in photography by faster lenses, smaller cameras, flashbulbs, and, by 1935, an improved means of transmission: wirephoto. But photographers and reporters did not process technological advancement equally. It was, said one editor, a time filled with "doubt and uncertainty" (cited in Stott 1973, 79). News organizations closed, and polls in the United States declared that one in three individuals disbelieved what they read in newspapers (cited in Marzolf 1991, 134). Photography, in contrast, was experiencing great popular appeal. The success of documentary photographers during the early 1930s; photography's co-optation in films, newsreels, and the tabloid press; and experimental picture formats of certain photographers all showed that it was possible to use the photograph for important social aims. That notion had direct bearing on news photography.

That is not to say that either reporters or photographers were very interested in the other. Photographers were curiously indifferent to the idea of accommodating images to current events. Even as World War II was enveloping more of the so-called free world, photographers remained indifferent to what they could do to join the war effort. As late as 1941, trade journals focused on joining camera clubs rather than the military and on tourist photography of Toledo and Madrid rather than documenting the Spanish civil war (Mason 1939; "Why Join?" 1941).

Journalists were also ambivalent about images. They knew that they needed them, but they also knew that images set in place another language that could ultimately undermine the authority of words. Issues of photographic representation began to be addressed at professional forums both in Britain and the United States, including the British Institute of Journalists, the National Union of Journalists, the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE), and the American Association of Teachers of Journalism, and

by 1938 dailies reported that the use of photographic cuts had increased 40 percent since 1931; still, it was only partial homage (Brandenburg 1938, 8).

Some reporters argued that photographs should be denounced altogether, saying that "we're on our way backward to a language of pictures, to the Stone Age of human intelligence" (Brown 1938, 404, 408). The work of photographers, said one British journalist, "is important and valuable but it is *not* journalism, and I am not prepared to receive them as journalistic colleagues" (Higginbottom 1935, 119). Other news organizations advised reporters to begin carrying cameras, and courses were set up to train them in photography ("Gannett Reporters" 1932; Price 1944b, 52). But the pictures they produced were of "chinless women, headless men, and tipsy buildings" (Blanchard 1935, 57). And while certain editors told their reporters to snap three shots of everything "in hopes that at least one could succeed," others discarded the use of certain types of cameras because they proved too complicated for reporters to handle (Blanchard 1935, 58). Still other reporters deflated the importance of photography, constructing it as a medium of record and arguing that pictures would be an "adjunct of the daily news" that would help journalists better report the news (Stanley 1937, 5). Photography, said one British editor intent on resisting suggestions that British photographers join the National Union of Journalists, was in "complete parallel with machine typesetting" and nothing more (Higginbottom 1935, 119).

So reporters in the press admitted photography but only in predetermined ways, as "fillers and story illustrations, but not a principal method of telling the news" (Kany 1947, 10). What was emphasized was photography's role in providing a medium of record that catered to its referentiality, indexicality, and ability to reference a real-life object. What was undermined was the image's cogency as a symbolic tool and its universality, generalizability, and ability to position a real-life referent within a larger interpretive scheme. That meant that journalists, in inviting photographers into their midst, emphasized the former over the latter. They welcomed photographs only so long as they figured they would help denote things happening in the real world, playing an indexical role in news rather than an interpretive one. It was assumed that photography could help bolster journalism's authority for relaying the events of real life, supporting its aspirations toward objectivity and helping reporters become better journalists—or at least so went the refrain before the war.

Yet atrocity photos were produced through an inversion of that logic. Photographs became effective ways of marking Holocaust atrocities by playing less to their effectivity as referential documents of a specific camp, in a

specific place and time, and more to their effectivity as symbols of the atrocities at their most generalized and universal level.

Photographs as Document and Symbol

The liberation of concentration camps at the end of the war came in the middle of the birth of modern news photography. Although Russian forces had been involved in liberating some camps on the Eastern Front in earlier months, the involvement of U.S. and British liberating forces did not occur until April 1945. At the side of front-line commanders went photographers and reporters who documented what the liberating forces were seeing.

The circumstances for documenting the scenes of the camps were difficult, however, and much photographic documentation resembled a situation of "making do" on the part of amateur, semiprofessional, and professional picture-takers. Photographs were of varying quality, often the result of bad weather, faulty equipment, and uneven training and experience. As Sgt. W. Lawrie, a photographer with the British Army Film and Photographic Unit said, "We did what [we] saw at the time" (cited in Caiger-Smith 1988, 11). Many photographs lacked standardization and did not contain delineating features such as captions, credits, or a precise relationship with the texts they accompanied. That meant that the U.S. and British press often provided inadequate visualization of what was happening in the camps.

To an extent, the lack of standardization in news photographs of the time mattered less than it might have in documenting other events of the war. The press was acting within a larger mission that concerned the documentation of atrocities. Not only did different kinds of reporters and photographers need to cooperate with each other in order to join the war effort, as has been argued about the reportage of World War II in general (Marwick 1982), but the press also needed to bear witness to what it was seeing—to take responsibility for what was seen and respond. That mandate was set in place when Gen. Dwight Eisenhower visited the camps, was horrified, and commanded the press to "let the world see." The press complied at once, and reporters and photographers within a hundred miles of the camps changed direction to tour them. Bearing witness, then, imposed a moral obligation on those recording the camps' liberation that went beyond the professional mores surrounding either journalism or photography.

How did these parameters shape the pictures of the camps that appeared? One spread that appeared in *Picture Post* in October 1941 conveyed the broad boundaries by which the experience of Nazi oppression was typically depicted. Affixed to an article entitled "The Terror in Europe," the text used

eight uncredited images, none of their origins clear, to illustrate life under the Nazis. Each photograph depicted a moment of oppression and was captioned by one-word phrases such as "Starvation!" or "Hanging!" The first image was a reprint of an eight-year-old photograph of Nazi policemen on the roof of a building. "This is an old picture," the caption read. "The date on its back is 1933. We publish it just because it is a picture of 1933. For in that year, Nazis . . . began to hold down the free elements inside Germany" (Walker 1941, 7–13). The photographic image had been deployed less for its news value than for its valence as a symbolic marker.

Two other photographs in the series bear closer examination. One, captioned "Horror!," showed two weeping women (fig. 5.1). The subcaption read: "Their homes burnt. Their men killed. Their country crushed under the jackboot. These Polish women weep, as millions weep in the occupied territories."

The photograph carried no identifiable place or date, no definitive details about the individuals being depicted, and no credit or other information about the individual or agency who took the shot. It also had no direct relationship with the text that accompanied it. The lack of definitive or referential detailing created ambiguity about the reason for the pictures coming



Figure 5.1. Polish women weeping, October 1941. (AP/Wide World Photos)

together other than the fact that they illustrated the Germans' war machinery. The images made better sense within a broad interpretive scheme about Nazi brutality than within a tight frame documenting a specific instance of violence.

Yet another photograph in the series showed a similarly generic depiction of brutality: a close-up shot of a Nazi guard facing down a group of prisoners. The caption told readers of "The concentration camp! The rule of the rubber truncheon! The rule of the barbed wire fence. Inside the Third Reich alone, there were 100,000 victims in concentration camps in 1938. Now there are camps all over Europe" (Walker 1941, 9, 8). The image lacked referential indices because nowhere did the caption specifically mention a certain camp, a certain action, or a certain date. In retrospect its almost civilized pose of the Nazi guard and prisoners conveyed little of the horror that would soon characterize photos of the camps, yet at the time such a photograph was typical of the available documentation.

Equally important to what was presented was what was not shown. No identified place or date accompanied the photographs, there were no definitive details about the people being depicted, nor were there any credit lines. The images depicted generalized moments of suffering, but the relationship between the pictures and the accompanying text remained ambiguous.

This thrust away from the contingent details of what was being photographically depicted characterized most photographs of Nazi atrocities. Many photos lost their referentiality in face of their invocation as symbols, their connection chipped away as they became less definitive indices of a specific place or location and became more general reminders of the atrocities of Nazism. It was within the move from referentiality to universality that the pictures became particularly meaningful. Within a general story about the German war machinery it mattered little where in Germany a specific picture had been taken. What remained important was that the picture depicted life under the Nazis. Yet referentiality was what journalism was expecting photography to uphold, suggesting an inversion of what it was expected to do for journalism.

The tension between referentiality and symbolism became clearest when considering the difficulties reporters faced in recording the story of the liberation. They offered concrete narratives grounded in particular details of a camp's terrain or in the accounts of real people. These narratives, in themselves an index of referentiality, were accompanied by basic problems of credibility. Who could believe what these reporters had to tell? They began to deal with the deficiencies of their reportage by making comments that admitted insuffi-

ciencies of language, genre, and words themselves. The atrocities, said one, went beyond words: "I dare not, I cannot write the whole story" (Ditton 1945). Buchenwald was "more horrible than the printed description" said another (Hibbs 1945, 22). Reporters underscored how difficult it was for them to process what they saw into plausible narratives. Bearing witness involved concretized narratives pitched closely to the details of what was being witnessed.

It was here that images came into play. They extended the authority of the press by being used as confirmatory tools that upheld the veracity of what news organizations needed to report. The photographs that became available on liberation were too numerous and varied to be published in any U.S. or British publication at any one time. Scores of photographers, professional, semi-professional, and amateur as well as soldiers bearing cameras, accompanied the liberating forces into the camps and took snapshot after snapshot of Nazi brutality. Yet as with reporters, the photographers faced an inherent limitation on the representativeness of the images they took. On the one hand, the fact that images froze moments in time worked against their ability to represent what was happening, with photographs of the camps' liberation portraying not the Holocaust itself but rather a partial depiction of its final phase. What photographers were able to depict in the concentration camps provided only a small picture of the consequences of years of forced torture, harassment, and eventual death. Few photographs of the camps in the period before liberation had been available—fewer still of the death camps on the Eastern Front. Many images portrayed only one post-liberation moment that depicted varying configurations of life and death, freedom and deprivation. As Mavis Tate, a British M.P., commented, "You can photograph results of suffering but never suffering itself" ("Europe's Problem" 1945, 25).

While journalists used words to bear witness by turning the story into a concrete and grounded chronicle of the liberation itself, photographs were used to position targets of depiction within a larger story of Nazi atrocity. Doing so derived from a recognition that images were instrumental to the broader aim of enlightening the Western world about what the Nazis had done. When Eisenhower proclaimed "let the world see," he implicitly called upon photographs to help him accomplish that aim. It was photography's aura of realism that could convey the "appropriate truth about atrocity" (Taylor 1991, 56). Like words, photographic images could help the world bear witness. Photography did so by drawing upon its dual function as carrier of truth-value and as symbol, helping the public come to grips with the meaning of the events at the same time they saw them.

Photography's role in documenting the camps immediately underscored the difference between images and words. As with words, photographs represented scenes that pushed the boundaries of representation and did not convey the enormity or extent of what had happened. "I have written [this] only because I thought I ought to," said one observer in an author's note to an editor three months after visiting Buchenwald. "*Au fond* I don't like horrors any more than you do. It probably won't be believed—even with the dozens of photographs I have taken" (Codman 1945, 54).

Pictures offered graphic representations of atrocity that were difficult to deny. Photographers, one reporter claimed, "sent pictures so horrible that no newspaper normally would use them, but they were less horrible than the reality" (Denny 1945, 9). They were "irrefutable evidence of Nazi degradation and brutality" ("Long Rows of German Victims" 1945, 8M). Photographs captured the atrocities in an explicit, and therefore potentially persuasive, manner and appeared to intervene less with the target of depiction than did words. Rather than authenticate the unbelievable details of the camps by pitching concrete accounts closely to the events they described, images constituted a device of representation that could be used to interpret at the same time that it depicted. That meant that words were most effective in telling a grounded story of liberation, but images were able to present a broader story of Nazi atrocity.

Thus, images flourished as a mode of documenting the camps, and these stark, naturalistic representations of horror became readily available in large numbers after liberation. Turning out roll after roll of film, photographers relentlessly depicted the worst of Nazism: bodies turned at odd angles to each other, charred skulls, ovens full of ashes, and weeping German civilians alongside massive human carnage. Within days of the arrival of photographers in the camps wire services were flooded with explicit and gruesome snapshots of horror the likes of which had never before been seen on the pages of the U.S. and British daily and weekly press.

The images did not often bear a definitive link to the stories they illustrated. One typical photograph was used alongside the official report compiled on the liberation of Buchenwald in April 1945. While the verbal report constituted one of the most detailed (and indexically powerful) narratives of the camps, presenting verbatim numbers, routines, death counts, and horrific procedures in considerable detail, the picture that accompanied it showed little more than three gaunt men and the caption offered little information ("Official Report" 1945, 9). There was no date, no attribution, and little identification of the objects of the camera. The public viewed the image and

knew little about who the men were, where the picture was taken, or who took it. Even at the time of the liberation a different degree of detailing was expected from images and words. Pictures were set up as universal accompaniments to the boldly indexical narratives at their side. Again, it was a reversal of the role expected of photographs in news.

How else was the thrust toward symbolism achieved? First, it was achieved through captions. It is important to remember that photographers had not sufficiently thought out the ways in which news captions differed from other kinds of titles for other kinds of photographs. It was not even clear whether photographers were responsible for titling the pictures they submitted. And so captions often bore a mystical quality that left their relationship to the image unclear. One set of photos of a stack of human bodies, depicted alongside a crouching U.S. army major, appeared twice within a week in two separate U.S. publications, *Newsweek* and *Time*. The same stack of bodies was identified as being at two different camps: Buchenwald and Ohrdruf (Knauth 1945, 42; Newman 1945, 52). On the level of referentiality—that is, an image's ability to denote a specific action in a specific time and place—the caption specifying Buchenwald was wrong. Yet on the level of the image's universality, that wrong information mattered little. At a more general level the image provided proof of the atrocities, even if they were labeled as being in the wrong place.

Symbolism was also achieved through the lack of identification of either photographers or photographic agencies. Photographers throughout the war lamented the lack of accreditation they were accorded. Sometimes their pictures were given no credits, and sometimes the credits were buried at the back of a journal or newspaper. Only in rare cases did a photographer actually see his or her name published, and the best scenario for which most could hope was getting the name of their photographic agency into print. In mid-April 1945 the *Illustrated London News*, for instance, thought enough of a four-page supplement on the atrocities to detach more than twenty pictures from the journal and added a cautionary note to keep them shielded from children. Yet it did not think enough of the photos to accredit even one ("German Atrocities" 1945).

Photographers were not happy about the lack of accreditation. One even went on record in a trade journal, complaining of the second-class status they seemed to receive from news organizations to the extent that they only received credits for truly remarkable pictures (Price 1944a, 64). Throughout the war, conflicting directives circulated that called on the various military, service, and news organizations to lend credit to either photographic agencies

or the photographers themselves. All of this was problematic because it helped chip away at a certain moral authority surrounding the initial recording as news. Similar deficiencies and contradictions in the original photographic record are still exploited frequently by those seeking to deny that the Holocaust ever happened.

Finally, symbolism was achieved through presentations that seemed to suggest that events depicted in the photographs could have taken place anywhere in the Third Reich and any time under its reign. In the British journal *Picture Post*, for instance, pictures were set up in ways that forced them to extend the meaning of the accompanying text substantially beyond the text itself. One six-page article appeared on May 5, 1945, under the title "The Problem That Makes All Europe Wonder" and recounted the importance of the atrocity photos: "A flood of news-pictures, a crop of unforgettable first-hand accounts of conditions in German concentration camps, have set Europe and the world asking one question: How is it possible?" (7). Yet despite the strong lead-in the images were used as accessories to text that boldly used a question-and-answer format. The pictures remained symbolic markers of the problem in its broadest form. At the top of the page were silhouettes—identified neither as individuals or groups—and readers were told nothing of the individuals' location or who was depicting them. The only information provided was that they were "Inside the Wire." The questionable linkage between picture and text was again a given rather than an aberration of the camps' coverage. Thus the photographs were invoked less as identifiable markers of specific activities and more as representative indices of general wartime circumstances. Images were pushed from fulfilling the role of referentiality to that of symbolism surrounding the war and the potential for human evil.

The image's symbolic quality was also achieved by universalizing the content of the atrocity story. Visual discourse was pushed from a specific reference to one camp or one victim to a universal discussion about the atrocities at all the camps. For instance, images generalized the territory of the camps not by tracking concrete routes to crematoriums as reporters did but by using one image of one camp to illustrate generic stories about the atrocities, thus generalizing the territory at hand. One such example involved a courtyard shot of rows of bodies at Nordhausen. The shot, which appeared in numerous newspapers, news magazines, and journals, was produced through revealing documentary patterns. Both the *Times of London* and the *Boston Globe* published it, but with no credit. The *Boston Globe* printed the picture on April 17 but said it had been taken on April 12. The *Washington Post* printed it ten days later (April 27) but did not mention that it had been

taken earlier. The caption in most cases admitted that the photograph had been taken at Nordhausen, but in at least one case the same image was affixed to an article about the camp at Ohrdruf ("At Nordhausen" 1945, 6; "Bodies in Nordhausen" 1945). The *Picture Post* used it along with eleven other photographs, only two of which, both from Nordhausen, were identified by location ("Problem That Makes" 1945, 7–11). Thus images of territory created strong links between many locales of suffering under the Nazis, links partly lost in the concrete verbal reports of journalists. In that way the locale of one specific camp and action became representative of the larger terrain of the Nazi regime.

Images also presented variegated representations of the act of bearing witness. Four types of witnesses were depicted: reporters and photographers, soldiers, German civilians, and foreign officials. In each case, images stood for the many years of war in which witnesses to atrocities had come forward but were generally disbelieved. Pictures of a delegation of journalists and editors that visited the camps shortly after liberation, for example, were circulated widely following the junket (fig. 5.2).



Figure 5.2. American editors visiting Buchenwald, April 16, 1945. (National Archives and Records Administration)

What was odd about the image was what was not seen—whatever the reporters were looking at. The photo showed people viewing the atrocities but not the atrocities themselves. It was a way of prolonging or freezing the act of witnessing in a way not possible in the narratives of reporters, where witnessing became a part of a more chronological, ordered textual representation. In fact, the pattern of depicting witnesses and not atrocities extended to all types of witnesses. Similarly, readers saw picture after picture of people looking at pictures, whether POWs being forced to look at the photographic evidence, German citizens looking at photographs, or British nationals on the home front brought in to examine the visual evidence. Such shots not only displayed the horror of the atrocities and the centrality of the act of witnessing but also underscored the primacy of photography as a preferred tool for recording the parameters of the event.

Thus, visual representations of both witnesses and territory underscored links with broader interpretive schema by which it was possible to universalize what had happened. The same features in the hands of reporters closed interpretation by grounding the narratives in the here and now. In one, interpretation was closed off; in the other, it was opened up.

How did this relate to the original accommodation of images by which reporters marked the photographs as referential indices? In a sense, it inverted them. Because standards for using photographs had not been sufficiently thought out, the press inadvertently allowed the photograph's symbolic force to flourish over its referential dimensions. One final example illustrating the thrust away from referentiality can be found in *Stars and Stripes* ("The Pictures Don't Lie" 1945, 2). Intended as a rebuttal to lingering claims that atrocity photos had been faked or otherwise forged, the article tackled the authenticity of images. But the image it used to illustrate its claim was telling for its own lack of referential traits. The image that depicted the burned corpse of an unidentified laborer was uncaptioned and unattributed. Although the photograph, a depiction of a slave laborer, was in fact from the Signal Corps and had arrived over the wires complete with extensive documentation that said it had been taken in Leipzig, such documentation did not gain entry into the press, even in a piece on the authenticity of pictures.

If that was the case at the time of the liberation, it has persisted even more so ever since. An uneven attentiveness to the details of a given photograph at the time of its original recording has enhanced its status as a symbol over time. Memory work concerning the Holocaust has capitalized on the dimensions of photography set in place at the time of the camps' liberations.

Generalizeability, universality, and different interpretive schema have all made sense as the frames through which to remember Nazi atrocities. Atrocity photos have become particularly viable vehicles for shaping different acts of recollection. They have continued to do in memory what they did at the time of the camps' liberations—to move the atrocity story from the contingent and particular to the symbolic and abstract.

One image of liberated prisoners at Ebensee, taken on May 7, 1945, for example, has been used many times over, not the least of which in a *Newsweek* article thirty years later. The article discussed a gathering of Holocaust survivors in New York City, and the picture was captioned "Survivors on Liberation Day" (Woodward 1975). There was no mention of Ebensee or of any of the other details that had initially accompanied the image. The photo also appeared as an index of the camps' liberations under such captions as "Concentration Camp Survivors" (Adler 1983, 62); "Prisoners on Liberation Day" (Woodward 1975, 72); or, wrongly, "Death Camp Survivors" (Woodward 1980, 97). The same picture was used as the cover for the catalog to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's ongoing exhibit on the liberation of the camps. There, too, it was captioned "Liberation 1945" (*Liberation 1945* 1995, cover photo).

This rather hearty thrust toward using photographs as symbols rather than as tools of referential documentation suggests that photographs and photography entered newswork precisely along the least expected fault lines for doing so. The fact that photographs resonated as symbols not only as reportage but also as a mode of remembering suggests the need for a closer examination of the way in which they become co-opted in memory work. It is worthwhile to examine the ways in which two specific photographs have been recycled in memory: a Signal Corps photo of the Buchenwald barracks and one by Margaret Bourke-White of a group of men behind the barbed wire of Buchenwald.

The Buchenwald Barracks Photograph

A picture of the Buchenwald barracks has been one of the most frequently recycled photos from the camps (fig. 5.3). At each instance of recycling the disjunctions between the image of record and the image of memory have become clear.

The image originally appeared in both the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* in 1945 and depicts prisoners leaning against bunks (Denny 1945, 9; "Hitler's Slaves" 1945, 3). Titled simply "Slave Laborers at Buchenwald," it quickly resurfaced appended to various other publications ("Racks



Figure 5.3. Survivors in Buchenwald barracks, April 16, 1945.
(National Archives and Records Administration)

for Slave Workers” 1945, 18; “Report on German Murder Mills” 1945, 8). Attributed to the Signal Corps and various press associations but not to a specific photographer, the picture had already moved from signifying Buchenwald’s liberation to signifying the liberation in general. Readers were told that they were looking at freed slave laborers in an unidentified camp. It was thus not surprising that the same image turned up in later literature on the Holocaust marking the liberation story but not Buchenwald. *Newsweek*’s cover story on the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz spoke of that camp in its text, but the picture depicted Buchenwald (Nagorski 1995, 58–59). The photograph appeared alongside Holocaust recollections by Elie Wiesel, who appeared in the shot. The familiar discrepancy between the place of the text and the place of the image was in this case transported into memory.

An eradication of the original details associated with the photograph was more often than not the case. Over time, the image moved even farther from the scene it originally depicted as visualizing atrocities was invoked to signify a wide range of treatments of the war that included articles about Holocaust deniers, Holocaust education, and so-called Holocaust politics. One journal repeated earlier errors of interpretation when it used the photograph to illustrate an article on British Holocaust revisionist David Irving (Good-

man 1982, 33). While the text told of Irving's thesis that Hitler had not condoned or ordered the Jews' systematic extermination, the photograph was wrongly captioned as a depiction of "death-camp survivors." Repetition of the earlier inaccurate representation of Buchenwald, now within an article about Holocaust revisionism, underscored how little those using images in news were able to critique their own practices.

Other presentations of the photograph, similarly underscoring the problematic linkage between image and text, appeared regularly. The image was repeatedly captioned wrongly as that of "death-camp survivors" and mistakenly associated with Dachau in one publication (Gilbert 1988, 239; Woodward 1977, 77). One news item in *MacLean's* used the same emaciated bunkmates of Buchenwald to illustrate a story of a reunion of former Buchenwald prisoners. The photo was juxtaposed to a second picture that depicted four men, now in their sixties, smiling and mugging for the camera ("Buchenwald Remembered" 1979, 12). The images' juxtaposition implied that the reunited former prisoners were in fact depicted in the earlier image, although that was not the case. Rather, the image's invocation set in place an additional historical inaccuracy. The men pictured at the reunion had been incarcerated at the camp as non-Jewish Allied POWs, whereas the picture presumably portrayed Jewish inmates. Because different treatment was accorded the two groups of prisoners, the visual comparison between then and now was invalid not only on historical grounds but also on representational ones. The then and now comparison set in place a far crueler analogy between them and us, and the photograph's seemingly innocuous invocation as a piece of memory work inadvertently vulgarized at least one premise about how Nazi brutality was inflicted.

Not surprisingly, the photograph also resurfaced in other modes of representation. It adorned an advertisement for the Church of Scientology that called for increased German compensation to Nazi victims ("No Remorse, No Recourse" 1995). It also provided a reality marker of a 1993 art installation by Judy Chicago, who embroidered pastel-colored creatures atop the forlorn male faces in the barracks (fig. 5.4). Entitled "Double Jeopardy," Chicago's work addresses the issue of gender in the camps, and she juxtaposed the painted experiences of women to the "black and white photographs of male experiences: The men's activities [provide] the historical context for the women's, a metaphor for the fact that women are generally impacted by the historic events that men orchestrate" (Chicago 1993, 126).

In each case the image was used in ways that allowed its users to move beyond a simple reminder of Buchenwald's liberation. Not only did it help

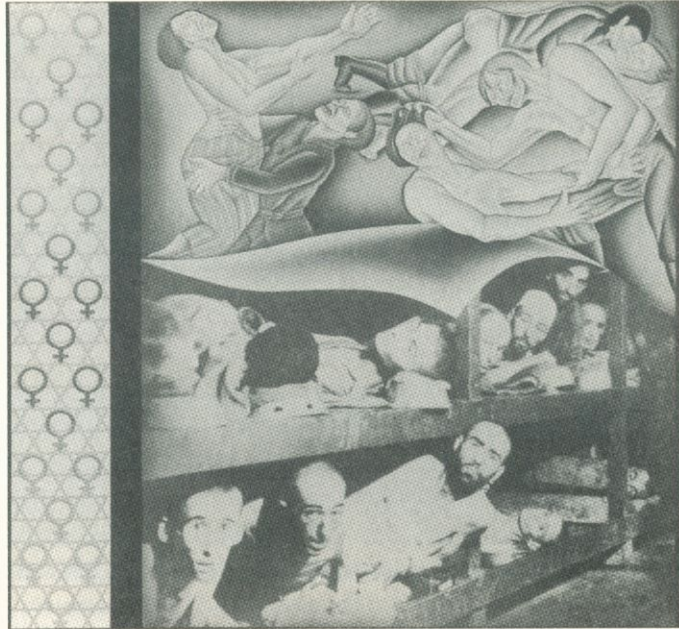


Figure 5.4. "Plates 7 and 8, Double Jeopardy," from *Holocaust Project: From Darkness into Light* by Judy Chicago. (Copyright © 1993 by Judy Chicago, text and original artwork. Copyright © 1993 by Donald Woodman, photographs. Used by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Books USA, Inc.)

them recall the horrors of one camp in particular, but they also recalled the atrocities and the Holocaust in ways that fit present-day agendas. In many cases this contemporary placement signaled the surrender of the image's referentiality to its symbolic status, even in cases where that surrender consolidated old errors and introduced new ones. This was a new shape to the act of bearing witness, where the target of attention was memory and memory's invocation as a catalyst for present-day agendas.

The photograph received an additional referential life years after the liberation. Following its publication and recycling, two individuals in it took on a public identity. Wiesel and Mel Mermelstein, a Los Angeles businessperson, both identified themselves as prisoners in the depicted bunks. Mermelstein, who in the 1980s successfully challenged the claims of the revisionist Institute for Historical Review in court, was portrayed in a U.S. newsmagazine holding a framed copy of the original photograph (Beck 1981, 73). In keeping with the thrust toward using the story to mark memory, in

the more recent image the original photograph's attribution and captioning were both displaced to accommodate those of the more recent shot.

What do such uses of the Buchenwald barracks photograph tell us? Like other cases, perhaps less illustrative but no less central, each twist underscores memory's fundamentally variable nature. Memory worked in unexpected ways as well as in many temporal directions at once. A repository of photographic images reflects a fashioning of their re-presentation, not necessarily because certain images supported the original photograph's presentation but because they helped launch new rhetorical arguments. Photographs have spawned a simultaneous before-and-after life as memory tools, invoking recollections of the atrocities of the Holocaust on many levels. Yet in an age in which the media cogently recycles historical information at will, that raises questions about the use of photographs as memory tools. Underlying the recycling of the Buchenwald barracks photograph was an event that over time has come to resemble less and less its re-presentation in memory.

The Buchenwald Barbed Wire Photograph

Similar patterns of recycling characterized the uses over time of a Margaret Bourke White photo entitled "Survivors behind Barbed Wire, Buchenwald 1945." The shot depicts scores of male prisoners clutching the camp's barbed-wire fence, newly neutralized of its electric current (fig. 5.5). The photograph had apparently not been published at the time of the liberation, however, and appeared for one of the first times in a *Time-Life* retrospective more than a year following liberation (Goldberg 1991, 37). Yet it has since become one of the most widely circulated photographs of the camps.

The photograph has likely appeared more often than any other individual atrocity photo, underscoring the degree to which visual documents that worked less effectively in the original record have easily resurfaced as vehicles of memory work. It has been recycled in dozens of Holocaust retrospectives; in anniversary issues of journals and magazines; and in overviews of photojournalism (*Life Celebrates 1945* 1995, 30–31; *Life: Fifty Years* 1986, 192; *1945: The Year of Liberation* 1995, 10; *150 Years of Photojournalism* 1989, 47). It has appeared in features as wide-ranging as a 1960 retrospective marking twenty-five years of *Life* ("Moments Remembered" 1960, 100) and in an overview on the photography of World War II that appeared in the mid-1990s (Voss 1994, 40). In that case it was used ironically to signal a chapter entitled "Putting the War in Focus: The Photographers." It was also reproduced in numerous books on photojournalism that from the late 1970s onward began to include



Figure 5.5. "Buchenwald, April 1945." (Margaret Bourke-White, *Life Magazine* © Time Inc.)

photos from concentration camps as part of their repository of good photojournalistic images. Numerous scholarly books likewise devoted pictorial space to the atrocity photos in their overviews of the profession, and each reprinted Bourke-White's photograph (Goldberg 1991, 37).

The photograph has also appeared in other domains of visual representation. It was considered a candidate for inclusion into a Leonard Baskin memorial to FDR in the late 1970s, and in 1989 *Time* selected it as one of the ten great iconic images of photojournalism because it "informed the world about the true nature of the Holocaust" (Carter 1978, 56). Baskin was thought to have wanted to incorporate "the horror of concentration camps with a scene like Margaret Bourke-White's memorable photograph through barbed wire" ("Icons: The Ten Greatest Images of Photojournalism" 1989, 47). Audrey Flack's "World War II (Vanitas)" of 1976 and 1977 reproduced the photograph by positioning it inside an opulent still-life of butterflies, roses, and carefully decorated pastries (fig. 5.6). The juxtaposition of the two sets of images was peculiar in that it embedded the male survivors more deeply within the photo. They peered out not only from behind the barbed wire but also from behind the objects of the still-life. The object was to show "memory receding in space: My idea was to tell a story, an allegory of war. . . . I wanted to shock" (Flack 1981, 78–80).



Figure 5.6. "World War II (Vanitas)" by Audrey Flack, incorporating a portion of the Margaret Bourke-White photograph "Buchewald, April 1945." (Copyright Time Inc., courtesy Louis K. Meisel Gallery, New York)

The photograph's use as a commemorative tool, despite its not having been published at the time of the event, reveals critical features about memory work. An event's constitutive features can be blurred or rearranged in order to make memory effective. Images can work better in memory, where they are frequently positioned within alternative interpretive schema, than as tools of news relay.

From the Image of Record to the Image of Memory

What does the transformation from the image of record to the image of memory reveal about the workings of visual memory? Photographs, both at the time of the liberation of the concentration camps of World War II and in the years since, have been instrumental in helping to interpret Nazi atrocities. That opening of narratives has challenged journalistic modes of representation that argue that the more horrific the image, the more detailed its anchoring needs to be. The press, however, has tended to provide fewer cues

when information has been most unbelievable. At some point images seem to take over reporters' responsibility to document what they had seen.

This raises numerous questions about the role of photography as an aide-mémoire. One set of questions has to do with the shape of technological adaptation in newswork in which photographers became part of newswork despite the efforts of reporters. The photograph's emergence as the preferred tool of documentation in this particular news event was due primarily to circumstances that made its mode of documentation the more viable and illustrative mechanism of proof. But in retrospect those circumstances, coupled by photography's resulting triumph, helped consolidate the photographic image as a vessel of verisimilitude, particularly in events that require contested levels of evidentiary proof. The fact that this has not been adequately addressed in photojournalism itself, particularly the potentially enormous power attached to photographs as cultural documents, is an oversight that needs correction, particularly in an age where image-making technologies have increased in variety and sophistication.

The other set of questions has to do with the shape of memory. Journalism set up the photographic image to offer conclusive evidence of atrocities in the camps. For those who had not experienced the Holocaust firsthand, public belief hinged on the photograph. That offered certain limited representations of what had happened that were restricted in the nature, detail, scope, magnitude, and generalizeability of what they were able to document. The fact that people still repeatedly say that they remember the Holocaust through its images suggests a narrowing of memory over time that has come with the passage of years to favor a simplified tracking of the past. In conjunction with such a thrust it is no wonder that Holocaust photos are recycled in strategic and highly formulaic ways. Memory in such a view thrives on the impulses of simplicity and familiarity, which the visual domain represents so effectively.

Yet because the press at the time adopted uneven standards for processing images as news, and perhaps due to a more general need for universal markers and symbols of the atrocities, images of the camps were transformed from definitive indices of certain actions to generalized and symbolic markers. That raises important questions about why Holocaust representation continues to focus on the question of universalization. That pattern was already set in place at the time of the camps' liberation through circumstances that had more to do with the technicalities of processing images as news than with anything inherently connected to the atrocities themselves. That, in turn, raises other questions about the circumstances that create representation and

shape the recollections of that representation. It is only when "literal memory ends [that] cultural memory can begin" (Alter 1993, 117). Yet often cultural memory begins when it is least expected. In the case of Holocaust photographs, it began in the establishment of the original record from which memory springs.

Notes

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1. Crudely paraphrased, Adorno lamented the inability to write poetry after Auschwitz, Lyotard asked how one measures an earthquake whose instruments of measurement have been destroyed, and Steiner declared that the world of Auschwitz resided beyond speech.

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