

Retracing Violence, Reshaping the Gaze, and Challenging the Collection

An Interview by Zuzanna Dziuban with Margit Berner, Curator of the Anthropological Collection of the Natural History Museum in Vienna

Zuzanna Dziuban: Our special issue *Displaying Violence* deals with the ways in which museums display political violence, but also with the violence of museum display and the structural violence of the museum as an institution. I feel that all three aspects of the idiom relate to your project, which resulted in the 2020 publication *Final Pictures: The 1942 'Race Study' of Jewish Families in the Tarnów Ghetto*¹ and the exhibition *The Cold Eye: Final Pictures of Jewish Families from the Tarnów Ghetto*, shown in Berlin in 2020 and in Vienna in 2021.² Both, the book and the exhibition, are the result of years of research into materials you discovered at the Natural History Museum in Vienna in 1997: a fragmentary documentation of a 'research project' carried out in 1942 by two physical anthropologists, Dora Maria Kahlich from the Anthropological Institute of the University of Vienna and Elisabeth Fliethmann from the Institute of German Eastern Research (IDO) in Krakow. The 'study' concerned the genetic inheritance of 'racial' characteristics, designed to prove 'racial inferiority' of people constructed as Jewish, and included a comparative analysis of parents and their children – 106 Jewish families living in the Polish town of Tarnów in 1942, then part of the German General Government. The 565 people were forcibly subjected to the 'study' and treated by the anthropologists as disposable research 'material'. Shortly afterwards, the vast majority of them were killed in the Holocaust. Some of the materials from the 'study' survived, dispersed among various institutions, including the Natural History Museum in Vienna, and

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25365/oezg-2023-34-1-17>



Margit Berner, Natural History Museum Vienna, Burgring 7, 1010 Vienna, Austria; margit.berner@nhm-wien.ac.at

Zuzanna Dziuban, Institute of Culture Studies and Theatre History, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Bäckerstraße 13, 1010 Vienna, Austria, ERC Project Globalised Memorial Museums; zuzanna.dziuban@oeaw.ac.at

- 1 Margit Berner, *Letzte Bilder. Die "rassenkundliche" Untersuchung jüdischer Familien im Ghetto Tarnów 1942/Final Pictures. The 1942 "Race Study" of Jewish Families in the Tarnów Ghetto*, Berlin 2020.
- 2 *Der Kalte Blick. Letzte Bilder jüdischer Familien aus dem Ghetto von Tarnów/The Cold Eye. Final Pictures of Jewish Families from the Tarnów Ghetto*, Berlin 2020.

were long forgotten. In *Final Pictures* and *The Cold Eye*, you used these documents to reconstruct the fates of the people subjected to this violent investigation – contextualizing them with personal stories, survivor testimonies, family pictures, and other documents –, but also to discuss the role of physical anthropology during National Socialism and its active role in shaping, legitimizing, and implementing Nazi violence. Your project also provides an important insight into the process of acknowledging the involvement of the Natural History Museum and other anthropological institutions during the Nazi regime and its aftermath, which only began in Austria in the 1990s. This is also where I would like to start our conversation – with a question about the context of the discovery of the documents from the ‘race study’ carried out in Tarnów in the archives of the Natural History Museum.

Margit Berner: In 1997 and 1998, the Department of Anthropology undertook a systematic survey of all collections related to National Socialism as part of a larger project initiated by the University of Vienna and the provenance research of the Federal Ministry for Education and Cultural Affairs.³ While searching for collections and documents related to the activities of anthropologists during this period, I found a box with anthropometric photographs, and some file folders with documents, including a collection of fingerprints, labelled “Tarnów 1942”. It was immediately clear to me that these were documents produced in a highly violent context, but I did not know exactly what I was looking at. Unlike other collections we found at the time, I had no information about the provenance of this collection and the circumstances under which it had been assembled and deposited in the museum.

Fortunately, at the time of this research, I happened to come across a book by historians Götz Aly and Susanne Heim in a Viennese bookstore, in which they quote from the correspondence between anthropologists Dora Maria Kahlich and Elisabeth Fliethmann about their joint project in Tarnów in 1942.⁴ Shortly afterwards, Aly came to Vienna to give an academic lecture in which he also referred to this project. I approached him and said “you know, we have this collection in our museum”. I was able to find out that it ended up in our institution in the 1980s. One of the anthropologists, Dora Maria Kahlich, who worked at the Anthropological Institute of the University of Vienna before and during the war and was dismissed from her post after the war but continued her career at the Viennese Institute for Forensics, kept some of the Tarnów documents there – and they were handed over to the Natural History Museum after her death. At that time, during the 1980s, the collection

3 Untersuchungen zur anatomischen Wissenschaft in Wien 1938–1945. Senatsprojekt der Universität Wien, 1998.

4 Götz Aly/Susanne Heim, *Vordenker der Vernichtung. Auschwitz und die deutschen Pläne für eine neue europäische Ordnung*, Berlin 1991.

would still have been considered important in the context of racial research, which had not yet been delegitimized or seen as part of National Socialist legacy of violence. Not long afterwards, Aly again gave me another impetus for further engagement with the collection – he let me know that some of the ‘research materials’ collected and created in Tarnów in 1942 were listed in the inventory of the Smithsonian Museum of National History in Washington.⁵ I applied for a fellowship at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), which allowed me to consult the Smithsonian’s archives. It was then that my actual research into the Tarnów project began. I was finally able to match the photographs discovered in Vienna with biographical data, as the biographical sheets of the people subjected to the ‘race study’ were among the documents held at the Smithsonian. I also researched the archives of the USHMM but did not find as much as I hoped about Tarnów and the study.

With the help of the staff of the USHMM Registry of Survivors, I was able to find two survivors of the Tarnów families, Victor Dorman and Steve Israel, depicted in the anthropometric photographs who live not far from Washington and whom I was able to visit. My idea at the time was to share documents and information with them rather than to conduct interviews, which was not my area of expertise. The survivors and relatives were always very interested in these photographs and documents. But it was also always a process. I had to approach them step by step: starting with a letter, asking if those named in the biographical books were members of the family, informing about the character of the documents, what they contained, what the context of their production was. The relatives were incredibly moved, and it was also very moving for me. On the one hand, because, as I learned, I was talking to the only survivors of the families ‘researched’ in the Tarnów ‘study’, and on the other hand because I was shocked to find that there were so many about whom I could find no information at all – apart from what the anthropological collection itself contains. It shocked me that there were so few that I could reach and so many families where no one survived. It was then that I became fully aware of the meaning of such collections for the relatives and the importance of understanding the significance of historical research in this context. For me, the contact with the survivors was important because it allowed me to cope with all of the dimensions of this project. It helped me to carry on – otherwise you sometimes feel it is too much.

Dziuban: I am fascinated by the number of archives that you had to consult to piece together the scattered collection of the 1942 ‘race study’. It was somewhat surprising to learn that some of the documents ended up in the Smithsonian Museum of

5 Gretchen E. Schafft/Gerhard Zeidler, “Register to the Materials of the Institut für Deutsche Ostarbeit”. Finding Aid, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Natural History – namely the wartime holdings of the Institute for German Eastern Research. The trajectory of the collection is really interesting.

Berner: It was also interesting for me to see that so many documents ended up in so many different archives. Some were with the researchers, like the photographs and folders kept by Kahlich, and some might have been with Elisabeth Fliethmann, but they disappeared. It was the documents she left at the Institute for German Eastern Research (IDO) in Krakow that I was able to find at the *Smithsonian*. At the end of the Second World War, parts of the IDO and its documents were moved to Bavaria. And they were among the captured records that were taken to the US after the war. The anthropometric data and photographs were of interest to the Smithsonian to add to their collections. However, they were neglected until the above-mentioned inventory was compiled and the holdings of the institution were made public. When I came to the USHMM in 2003 to do research, the staff were also surprised to find a Holocaust collection so close, across the street. Later, those materials were photographed and the originals transferred to the archive of the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland. The personal files of many people involved in the project are in the Federal Archives in Berlin. And many documents are in the private possession of the survivors and their relatives or in memorial museums. All these documents have to be traced in order to tell a complete story, and it was part of my research to follow all these traces and scattered documents.

Dziuban: Could you briefly describe the ‘anthropological research’ carried out by Kahlich and Fliethmann in Tarnów, and the violence it entailed?

Berner: Thanks to all the archival research, we now have quite a lot of documents that allow us to reconstruct this ‘study’, although it is not documented where exactly it took place. But because I am also trained as an anthropologist, it was quite easy for me to describe how the research was done, because during my studies I also came across the methods that were used in Tarnów. And we know from other investigations that there was a standard procedure and a special set-up that was followed. From the letters exchanged between the anthropologists and the officials in Tarnów, we know about the direct involvement of the district and town administration, the SS, the Gestapo, and the Security Service in making the study possible. The Jewish Council was coerced into providing the family names of the people to be subjected to the ‘study’. The investigation was carried out quite quickly, within a period of two weeks. Kahlich came by train from Vienna to Krakow with her secretary and a student, and travelled to Tarnów with Fliethmann and some assistants from the IDO. They were accompanied by a photographer, Rudolf Dodenhoff. He took all the anth-

ropometric photographs, while Fliethmann took some of the pictures of the women, especially the nude ones – these photographs have not survived. In fact, over the course of my archival research, I was able to find two interviews in which survivors talked about the anthropological investigation. They provide a very different insight into these procedures than the documents produced by the anthropologist and the objectification they entailed.

As mentioned before, it was a very strict, standardized procedure: first biographical data and health information were recorded, then physical measurements were taken. Later, the colour of the eyes, lips, skin, and hair was determined, and the shape of the ears and the type of hair examined – some hair samples were taken for further research. The anthropologist would also take fingerprints and draw the structure and colour of the iris. Finally, Dodenhoff took anthropometric photographs from four different perspectives, and in some cases people had to pose naked for full body pictures. The objective was to study genetic inheritance and how the children's generation inherited racial features from their parents.

Dziuban: In your book *Final Pictures* you write: “my two anthropological predecessors from fifty years ago, both trained at the very institute where I studied, had used methods similar to my own, and their collection of photographs and completed surveys were now housed in my own place of work.”⁶ I was very struck by this quote and its implications for thinking about one's own positionality as an anthropologist, but also about the (dis)continuities of the institutional history of the discipline of anthropology and of the Natural History Museum. It is a big question, but how have they – research institutions and museums – dealt with this legacy of violence?

Berner: Yes, I studied human biology in Vienna in the 1980s – it was exactly the same institute where Kahlich worked during the war. Some of the methods and instruments that I learned about had already been used in the nineteenth century. And, of course, there was a continuity in methodology. When I started my studies, ‘racial research’ had not yet been delegitimized, it was still in school- and textbooks. There were continuities. It was only later that I began to study and understand the history of the discipline. In the late 1980s, scholars began to investigate the contribution of medicine to the Nazi regime – especially the euthanasia programme; the focus on anthropology came later, in the second half of the 1990s, including at the Natural History Museum. It was then, I would say, that institutional self-reflection began. It was a process with many external drivers. For instance, it was prompted by the criticism from journalists, scholars, and a parliamentary inquiry into the so-called

6 Berner, *Letzte Bilder*, 2020, 13.

‘race gallery’, which reproduced Nazi-like ‘racial classification’ and exhibited human remains. The gallery was opened at the museum in the 1970s – and only closed in the 1990s. The impetus came from the outside, but had an impact on the museum.

In addition to the Tarnów photographs, we found other collections and documents from the Nazi period in the museum – for instance, documentation of a racial ‘survey’ carried out by museum anthropologists in September 1939 on 440 male Jews who were declared stateless and imprisoned in the Vienna football stadium; a collection of skulls of concentration camp victims, acquired by the anthropological department from the Anatomical Institute of the University of Posen (Poznań) in 1942. The museum also held skeletons of members of the Jewish religious community that had been removed from the Währing Jewish cemetery during the war. The remains were reburied in 1947, but the crania of the concentration camp victims remained in the museum until 1991. In the late 1990s, the museum’s Department of Anthropology and the University’s Department of Contemporary History initiated a project with a similar objective to mine on Tarnów: to reconstruct and portray the lives of the people reduced to objects of anthropological ‘research’ or ‘material’, as Kahlich labelled them in one of her letters. Historian Claudia Spring, for instance, did this for the people subjected to the so-called Stadium Study, the vast majority of whom died in Buchenwald. We researched their biographies and contacted their relatives to commemorate them and their stories.

Dziuban: In *Final Pictures* you follow this trajectory, but in addition you focus on anthropometric photography as a medium, or rather a modality, of the violence perpetrated against the Jews of Tarnów in and through racist research. At the same time, your project is about reappropriating the photographs and turning them against themselves – shifting the lens from ‘racist biology’ to historical analysis and giving names and biographies to the people subjected to the violent, objectifying gaze. How did you conceptualize the ethics of this project?

Berner: It was a process that arose from an awareness of the importance of these pictures, but also from the difficulties of tracing the people captured in them, and the question of how to show these photographs, whether or not to show them, how to handle them. At many stages of my research, I felt helpless. But I think it was the encounters with survivors, with the families of the people captured in the photographs, the discussions with historians and scholars from other disciplines that shaped the ethics of this project. There were those who said, “these are terrible pictures, you cannot show them, you are using them again and you are doing it as an anthropologist” – is this a repetition of violence? But the stronger position, which was also shared by the relatives, was that we need to broaden the context of these collections and see them as an

incredibly important source for Holocaust research and research on the crimes of the Nazi regime, as personal memories, and as documentation of the institutional history of the museum, which has an obligation to face and disseminate it. This shift, or rather the reappropriation, the broadening of the context in which they are located, could be considered a research ethics in this case.

Dziuban: In 2020, your book project has been turned into an exhibition. How did the project *The Cold Eye* come into being?

Berner: After a break in my research on the Tarnów collection, I finally visited Yad Vashem in Jerusalem in 2015. Its archival collection had been digitized and I was able to find more traces. It was there that I met Götz Aly again and told him about my project. He suggested turning it into an exhibition. I decided to write a book and already had the manuscript, so there was a lot of material for the exhibition. At first, I thought about doing it in Vienna but it was not easy to find a suitable venue. Aly approached the directors of the Topography of Terror Foundation and the Foundation Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. This is how the project came about. In the end, I think it was very fortunate that we had this collaboration because it brought so much additional expertise to the project. It was really good to cooperate and work with these institutions and experts in Holocaust research. The exhibition opened at the Topography of Terror Foundation in October 2020. In 2021, it was shown at the House of Austrian History in Vienna, before returning to Berlin. This summer it will travel to Tarnów.

Dziuban: Just like the book, the exhibition highlights the photographs taken during the anthropological ‘study’, which also foreground the eponymous ‘cold eye’ – the eye of ostensibly cold ‘science’ – but which is in fact deeply prejudiced, othering, and violent. So I would like to ask you again about the challenges and considerations behind the curatorial choices, first and foremost, whether and how to show these photographs.

Berner: The question of how to present these photographs was a subject of discussion from the very beginning, and a preliminary decision was made at the start of the project as to how to show them. For me, it was important to show these pictures and to show them all – all the people who had been subjected to the ‘study’ had to be represented. When we were joined by a team of designers, they suggested to display the anthropometric pictures in a way that made them less accessible, in contrast to the personal and family photographs that we had collected. We all agreed with this idea. From the outset, it was crucial for us to introduce a strong tension and oppo-

sition between the 'cold' gaze of the 'racial science' and the family gaze. The only exception is the part of the exhibition on physical anthropology where we contextualize the anthropometric photographs and show how they were made and used. But by contrasting these photographs with the family photographs and embedding them in this context of the exhibition, we also recast their meaning as historical sources, refocusing on the historical events behind them and projecting the family framework onto them. This decision was not primarily driven by a theoretical approach to photography. It was more about constructing an emotional proximity: the visitors to the exhibition, or the readers of the book, should see these two moments – see these terrible, violent photographs, but be reminded that there are human beings in them, made into specimens.

Dziuban: I must admit that when I was reading your book, I did not once just flick through the pages with the pictures from the 'race study'. I looked at each one of them carefully, trying to read them, imagine the people depicted, trying not to participate in the 'cold' gaze, but unsettled by the feeling that I was reproducing it anyway.

Berner: Yes, that is why it is so important where they are shown. If you show them in the Topography of Terror or in the House of Austrian History in Vienna, contextualized, and challenged, the meaning of these pictures changes. This is what I have tried to do in my book – to embed them somehow, not to present them directly, but in a context that prepares the reader for what is to be seen. And there is another reason why I think it is important to show these pictures. Exactly because they are the last pictures, and in many cases the only ones that have survived. Of course, if you have family pictures to contrast them with, to break this coldness, it is better to show them as well. For the majority, however, this was not the case. These pictures were taken a few weeks before the Holocaust started in Tarnów, and the vast majority of those depicted, sometimes entire families, did not survive the war. This also provides an insight into Nazi violence and its scale. This is why I decided to show all the pictures in the book. In a sense, *Final Pictures*, in the way it presents these photographs, is an archive, but it is also a memorial. It is a memorial for all the families from Tarnów who perished in the Holocaust.

Dziuban: We spoke about the legacy of National Socialism in your institution, which has been dealt with for some time. Calls for the decolonization of anthropology departments and natural history or ethnographic museums came to Austria a little later. I was curious how you position your project and other activities of the museum vis-à-vis these debates.

Berner: Similar projects could be carried out for the colonial collections that we have at the Natural History Museum. But the situation with these collections is sometimes different because we do not have as many documents and a different cultural background. Indeed, provenance research started in Austria and Germany with the collections from the National Socialist period and the involvement of science in the violence, but there is a lot to be learned by going back because these legacies are intertwined. In recent years, provenance research on human remains has not only been carried out at the request of communities or institutions of origin, but has also become a task of the museum's Department of Anthropology. Human remains were repatriated to Australia in 2012 and to Hawaii and New Zealand in 2022. In 2021, a research group at the museum started investigating colonial contexts as part of a project called KolText, supported by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Arts, Culture, Public Service and Sport (BMKÖS). One of the aims of the project is to reconstruct the provenance of some of the objects and remains in the Department of Anthropology.