

## Acts of Resistance

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*About Auschwitz*: photographs<sup>1</sup> and information exhibited at Vanier during the 2003 Annual Cégep Holocaust Symposium.

In Sept 2002, I traveled to Poland with my older brother George (born Oct 1939 in Poland early in World War II) and our friend, Eda (born Nov 1945 in Lodz, Poland after the War) to visit the places and streets where our parents grew up, as well as Auschwitz Birkenau, a destination they narrowly evaded. Others in our families did not.

As we walked through one of the barracks of Auschwitz, now a museum, I noticed Eda passing a unique and startling hazy image. The photograph jumped out at me. The caption stated: *Auschwitz II Birkenau 1944: Burning Dead Bodies*. I wondered: did the Nazis take this photo? The guidebook added, about this and two other photos: “taken in secret and at great risk by one of the camp inmates in 1944, they show some women being driven into the gas chamber and the burning of the corpses on the funeral pyre.”<sup>2</sup>

Perplexed, I wanted to know more: given the brutal conditions and reality of Auschwitz Birkenau life, how was it possible for an inmate to take (or as I used to remind my students, make) a photograph? How could someone have the liberty to hold camera to eye and choose a moment to record? Where did the camera come from? What happened to the photo? How and where was it printed? Were there other photographs?

Thus began a research project that took me beyond the resources of the internet to the United

States Holocaust Memorial Museum Library and Archives, as well as four local libraries. Information about the process of making the photographs is sparse. I continue to exchange email messages with the Head Archivist at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum and a historian in Berlin. Though I am still working with the material in preparation for a presentation at the 2005 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences (formerly known as The Learned), I will share with VCTA Newsletter readers some of what I learned about the only known photographs taken by prisoners working in the crematoria in concert with the Camp resistance. Through this project, I became aware of the extent of complicated underground resistance activity carried on by both women and men in (and around) the Camp – a fascinating study; unfortunately, I also encountered the ferocity of holocaust deniers, driving much of the work of historians to counter their claims.

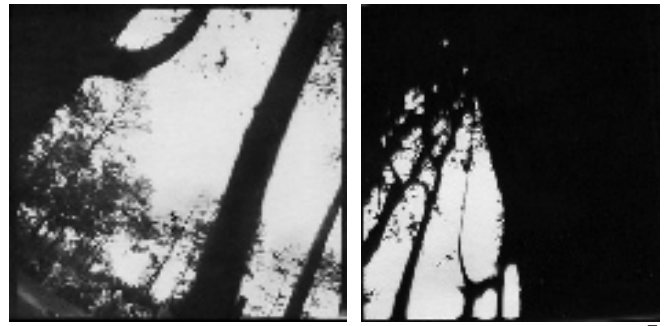
Variouly referred to as one of the “famous Polish Resistance photographs”<sup>3</sup>, Sonderkommando photographs<sup>4</sup>, and “so-called” Sonderkommando photographs,<sup>5</sup> the photo on the wall as reprinted in the photograph above is only part of the original – cropped to highlight the “interesting” part – the horrific activity occurring when the numbers of bodies to be cremated reached a peak in mid-August 1944.<sup>6</sup>



Frequently reproduced to highlight their content, these photographs differ from those made by SS photographers of early prisoners, construction scenes and the arrival of the Hungarian Jews in the spring of 1944. However, the full uncropped version “makes it possible to identify and precisely locate the scenes and the position of the photographer,”<sup>8</sup> underscoring the point of view of the photographer hiding inside the crematorium doorway. “To reframe it is to act as if Alex [the photographer] were able to take the photograph freely in the open air.”<sup>9</sup> Four photographs in all were “snapped” – another from within the doorway and two out in the open clearly shot “from the hip.”

Jean-Claude Pressac, who began his research as a Holocaust denier, but renounced his position, uses the photos to determine specific facts about the place and operation underway. Most significant for me: though one person pressed the shutter to record the images, the taking / making of the photos was a *collective action*. The elaborate plan involved many people and points to the extent of careful organized underground resistance activity at Auschwitz.

Several members of the Sonderkommando, squads (13 in all) of mainly Jewish prisoners working in the crematoria who were responsible for emptying the gas chambers and burning the corpses,<sup>10</sup> “beginning with those of its predecessors,”<sup>11</sup> were desperate “to record the crimes committed by the Germans in the Auschwitz gas chambers.”<sup>12</sup> The evidence of photographs would warn others to resist getting on the trains and attract the attention of the Allied forces.



A camera in Auschwitz:

Information about how the camera was obtained is contradictory – one source claims that a “Polish civilian worker Modarski, who worked on the grounds of the camp, smuggled a camera into the camp...concealed in a double-bottomed cauldron full of food, which was delivered to the Sonderkommando.”<sup>13</sup> It may have been obtained from within the camp; the resistance movement ordered their “comrades in “Canada,”\* whose job it was to classify the victims’ belongings, to locate a camera.”<sup>14</sup> Or “even the Sonderkommando had the possibility to take a camera from the undressing rooms,” since the victims arrived in Auschwitz with valuables, including money, jewelry, small bags, and other belongings. “It is quite possible that the camera came from the Lodz transports”<sup>15</sup> – the city my parents fled on Aug 31, 1939, the night before Hitler invaded Poland.

In a 1987 interview,<sup>16</sup> former Spanish Freedom fighter and anti-Fascist David Szmulewski claimed that prisoners damaged the roof of the crematorium to create a need for a repair team. “Working as a roofer, Szmulewski had more access and freedom to move around the camp without being suspected by the guards”<sup>17</sup> He lowered the camera, hidden in a false bottom of a bucket, into the crematorium to members of the Sonderkommando below and then kept watch from the roof. Alter Fajnzylberg, from France and also a Spanish Civil War veteran, testified<sup>18</sup> in 1985 that four people were present: he and brothers Szlomo (Szlojme) and Josek (Abram) Dragon, at Auschwitz since Dec 1942,<sup>19</sup> guarded and determined the moment when Alberto “Alex” Errera,<sup>20</sup> a Jew from Greece, “quickly took out his camera and pointed it toward a heap of burning bodies and pressed the shutter.”<sup>21</sup> Then the photographer hid between some trees in the

courtyard and another picture was taken as the women and men undressed in front of the trees. Alex “tried to escape shortly after the event and was shot at the beginning of September 1944.”<sup>22</sup>

“The exposed film was taken back to the main camp where Helena Szpak-Daton, who worked in the SS canteen, concealed it in a toothpaste tube and smuggled it out of the camp”<sup>23</sup> on September 7, 1944. A secret message, addressed to the PPS (Polish Socialist Party) Brzeszcze Group leadership, was handwritten in Polish<sup>23</sup> by Józef Cyrankiewicz and Stanislaw Klodzinki (active in the left-oriented Polish resistance movement at Auschwitz<sup>24</sup>):

*We are sending you pictures from Birkenau, from a gassing operation. The picture shows one of the pyres in the open air, on which corpses are burned, when the crematorium cannot keep up with the burning. In front of the pyre lie corpses, waiting to be thrown on the pyre. The other picture shows one of the places in the little woods, where people undress supposedly for a shower, and then go to the gas. Send the enclosed pictures immediately to “Tell.” The pictures can be enlarged and, we feel, be sent further on.*

“Tell” was the pseudonym of Teresa Lasocka-Estreicher of the PWOK (Home Army unit in Cracow),<sup>25</sup> “an active member of the Cracow underground organization Assistance for Concentration Camp Prisoners.”<sup>26</sup>

In May 1944, the Sonderkommando had been forced to dig huge pits,<sup>27</sup> since the Crematorium was not efficient enough.

“The pictures reached Cracow,”<sup>28</sup> but not the Polish government-in-exile in London. When they were printed, by whom, or whether in Brzeszcze (7 miles from Auschwitz) or in Cracow, is not certain. Apparently, the negatives never left Lasocka’s possession. Prints were, however, used in the 1947<sup>30</sup> Krakow trial of the Main Commission for Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland against “40 major Auschwitz criminals.” The original negatives have been lost; the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum has two sets of contact prints, those donated in the 1960s by Wladyslaw Pytlik, a member of the Brzeszcze resistance, and the originals in 1985 by his wife, Danuta Pytlik.<sup>31</sup>

This story is rendered even more poignant as we learn the horrific details of the torturous

treatment meted out to “Iranian-Canadian photojournalist Zahra Kazemi who died in Iranian custody on July 11, 2003, almost three weeks after she was arrested for taking pictures outside a prison during a student protest in Tehran.”<sup>32</sup>

\* The word “Canada,” inmate slang for large storerooms of personal effects stolen from recent arrivals at Auschwitz, symbolized wealth and abundance. During the process of sorting and classifying, workers had the opportunity to “organize” (that is, “lift”) items; at great personal risk, they contributed precious objects to the underground.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [www.vaniercollege.qc.ca/events/holocaust03/crawley\\_exhibition.html](http://www.vaniercollege.qc.ca/events/holocaust03/crawley_exhibition.html)

<sup>2</sup> Kazimierz Smolen, *Auschwitz Birkenau Guide Book*, Oswiecim: State Museum, 2002, p 9

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Claude Pressac, *Auschwitz: Technique and operation of the gas chambers*, New York: Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, 1989, p. 422-42

<sup>4</sup> Dan Stone, “The Sonderkommando Photographs,” *Jewish Social Studies*, Spring 2001, 7:3, p 131-148

<sup>5</sup> Dr Piotr Setkiewicz, Head of Archives, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, email correspondence, March 24, 2005

<sup>6</sup> Pressac

<sup>7</sup> negatives #280, 281, 282A, 283A, Setkiewicz, email correspondence, April 7, 2005. Also, Jean-Claude Pressac, “Auschwitz: Technique and operation of the gas Chambers,” [www.mazal.org/Pressac/Pressac0470.htm](http://www.mazal.org/Pressac/Pressac0470.htm) (3/15/2005)

<sup>8</sup> Pressac

<sup>9</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman. “Images, in spite of all,” lecture given at Northwestern University, Feb 13-18, 2004 [www.mauriceblanchot.net/actualites/fev04/gdh/](http://www.mauriceblanchot.net/actualites/fev04/gdh/) (3/22/2005)

<sup>10</sup> [www.nizkor.org/faqs/auschwitz/auschwitz-faq-07.html](http://www.nizkor.org/faqs/auschwitz/auschwitz-faq-07.html) (3/23/2005)

<sup>11</sup> Primo Levi, quoted in Georges Didi-Huberman

<sup>12</sup> Alter Faynzylberg, “Testimonies of Former Prisoners,” Declaration, cxiv. 57-58; Auschwitz State Museum Archives, *Auschwitz: A History in Photographs*, p 42-3

<sup>13</sup> Setkiewicz, March 24, 2005

<sup>14</sup> Ber Mark, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, Israel: Am Oved Publishers Ltd, 1985, no page number

<sup>15</sup> Andreas Kilian, [www.sonderkommando-studien.de](http://www.sonderkommando-studien.de), email correspondence, April 1, 2005

<sup>16</sup> Pressac

<sup>17</sup> The Holocaust Center of the United Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh <http://www.ujfnc.net/4-4.html> (3/29/2005)

<sup>18</sup> Faynzylberg

<sup>19</sup> Ronit Roccas, “We did the dirty work of the Holocaust”: Sonderkommando Auschwitz, May 2, 2000 / haArez [www.hagalil.com/shoah/holocaust/greif-0.htm](http://www.hagalil.com/shoah/holocaust/greif-0.htm) (3/ 21/2005)

<sup>20</sup> Andreas Kilian, Der „Sonderkommando-Aufstand“ in Auschwitz-Birkenau, [www.shoa.de/kz\\_auschwitz\\_soko\\_aufstand.html](http://www.shoa.de/kz_auschwitz_soko_aufstand.html) (3/ 29/2005)

<sup>21</sup> Faynzylberg

<sup>22</sup> Kilian, email correspondence, April 8, 2005

<sup>23</sup> Setkiewicz, March 24, 2005

<sup>24</sup> Mark

<sup>25</sup> Danuta Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle 1939-1945*, New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1990, p 233. They were also members of the international Auschwitz Combat Group (p. 518-9)

<sup>26</sup> Setkiewicz, March 24, 2005

<sup>27</sup> Danuta Czech, p xii

<sup>28</sup> Filip Muller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, New York: Stein and Day, 1979 p 53

<sup>29</sup> Hermann Langbein, *Menschen in Auschwitz*, in Setkiewicz

<sup>30</sup> Czech

<sup>31</sup> Setkiewicz, March 24, 2005

<sup>32</sup> [www.cbc.ca/news/background/kazemi/](http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/kazemi/)(April 4, 2005)

<sup>33</sup> Mark, p 246-7