Forgetful Memory and Images of the Holocaust

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In September of 2001, I had just begun teaching an undergraduate course entitled “Writing (and) the Holocaust.” When my students and I arrived in class on the eleventh, we’d each heard that something was terribly wrong in New York and Washington. By the next class, we all knew, and had seen, the worst: images of the explosions near the top of the World Trade Center towers, images of firefighters and office workers covered in debris from their collapse, and the repeated images of tangled steel while construction workers, police, and firefighters searched for the dead. We didn’t directly confront the event the first couple of weeks of the semester; we didn’t have to. In trying to understand how to build a knowledge of the events of the Shoah, it was impossible to hold at bay the profoundly disturbing questions about the narratives we build to explain such events, whether of 9/11 or of the Shoah. Those narratives and their alternatives—the narratives of anti-Semites, of the ill-informed, and of the conspiracy theorists—inevitably became linked together, and the images that cut across those narratives seemed both to serve as an anchor for them and to undermine them at almost precisely the same time. In the case of 9/11, it was perhaps the images most of all that seemed indelible, and, oddly enough, while we were unable to shake the unending film loop of planes crashing into buildings and the towers’ collapse, it was the still images that had the most profound effect. In the weeks and months after 9/11, The New York Times’ “Portraits of Grief” and their outstanding photojournalism recording the excavation of the site in lower Manhattan presented aspects of the event that the narrative accountings of it—who was to blame, whether the United States, in its “imperialism,” brought this on itself, whether Osama Bin Laden was Hitler or just another

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Saddam Hussein—simply could not. Having read about Andreas Hillgruber’s *Two Kinds of Ruin*—in which he proposes that the Holocaust was a secondary, and subsidiary, horror in the context of the destruction of the Nazi Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front—my students and I knew full well what narrative could do to events. Here were accounts of the event that, by many of my student’s lights, were simply contradicted by the facts and by what they saw, and yet by many if not most historical criteria, those accounts were perfectly plausible. What my students and I saw, particularly in the still images that confronted us day after day in the wake of that particular disaster, disturbed our sense of those narratives, and worked against the collective memory of those events.

In this essay I explore how photographic images of atrocity—in this case, images from the Holocaust—work to undo some of our assumptions about how historical narratives work, and in fact, at a more fundamental level, disturb the cultural memory that allows us to engage in, and to write ourselves into, history. In the end, this exploration will yield some implications for contending with other, more recent images. More important, I want to suggest a way of reading these photographic images that yields, as a byproduct of knowledge, something that might be called “forgetful memory,” aspects of the event at the center of the photo—its object—that simply cannot be integrated into the narrative we build to contain it. Forgetful memory is made visible when we are confronted with a narrative or an image that is both intimately tied to other narratives and images that we take for history—images that stand in for the events of history that, like the Shoah, we would rather not know—and also intimately linked to a narrative or an image that is ours alone. Between these two memories, the collective and the particular, comes the trace of the event that is neither “history’s” nor “ours.” Much of the work done in the last several years on visual rhetoric has rightly concluded that the visual—photographic and screen images, paintings and other plastic arts—provides a corrective to the language of narrative that can only go so far to account for multiple human experiences. To cite only one obvious example, *Enculturation*’s 2001 special issue on visual rhetoric offers nearly a dozen essays that consider how images—of Mother Teresa juxtaposed with Princess Diana (Helmers); of “found” family photographs (Mauer)—produce knowledge for the viewer that wouldn’t otherwise be available, and certainly wouldn’t be through writing. Diana George in “From Analysis to Design: Visual Communication in the Teaching of Writing” makes a correlative case: students may, through the use of images, construct arguments that provide glimpses from their cultural and individual memories that are otherwise invisible to teachers and to others. What I think much of this work misses, though, is the extent to which images, particularly images of or associated with violence and atrocity, indicate a void or crux of memory. These images point, for the writer and the viewer alike, to aspects of neither cultural nor individual memory but to that which has dropped out
of memory altogether, and which profoundly disturbs what we are able to write: as history, as personal narrative, or as an engagement with the world. If collective memory consists of our reconstructions of past events through their receptions and mediations of the event’s occurrence, “forgetful memory” is the interruption of the fabric of memory by the trace or effect of the event that it can’t contain.¹ Forgetful memory doesn’t retrieve the lost event; instead it produces what might be called a memory-effect, a sense of displacement that disrupts the viewer’s ability to construct any narrative of, or to sympathize with, the object of the image at all. Far from offering historians and other writers a glimpse of the event, it confounds writing and—as I saw with my students during the fall of 2001—forces them to grapple with what resides at both the image’s, and writing’s, margins.

I. FORGETFUL MEMORY

In her book on photographic images of atrocity, Remembering to Forget, Barbie Zelizer describes a photograph of a young boy, well-fed and well-dressed in a sweater and short pants, walking down a road whose distant curve enters a forest (Fig. 1). His attention is focused on something outside the frame, to his right; behind him, barely visible and a good hundred paces away, are two women rapt in conversation. The road is dusty and the sky is clear. What makes the photograph horrifying is that just to the boy’s left, strewn along the road’s embankment and in the woods beyond, are over a hundred corpses, anonymous bodies dressed not in rags or blankets but in ordinary clothes. Zelizer includes the photograph as one of several from the end of the second World War that depict German children who refuse to bear witness to atrocity; the photo’s caption—it’s unclear whether it was supplied by the photographer or by editors of the magazine (Life) for which it was taken—explains that this is a Jewish boy outside the concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen. The boy is identified by the curators of the German Historical Museum, where the photograph now resides, as a Belgian Jew, Sieg Mandaag, “[who] survived the dying after the liberation of the camp by the British Army” (Honnef and Brenmeyer 202).

What do we make of this photo, the confusion over its object, and the part it plays in the construction of memory, particularly memories of the Holocaust? Zelizer’s thesis in Remembering to Forget, like James Young’s in At Memory’s Edge, is that memories of the Holocaust, particularly for those two and three generations removed from it, are built through the compilation of historical documents, testimonial accounts, and images. As they are mediated by historians, the media, and other narratives, familial and cultural, such memories come down to us—individuals—already well wrought. The repetition of images, especially those associated with the atrocities in Belsen, Majdanek, and other locations on the terrain of the Final Solution, force the viewer to see, as if he or she were there, the bodies and the crematoria and
the starvation; but they are also necessarily mute, and require a stabilizing context for the viewer to integrate what would otherwise be beyond the pale of knowledge. For Zelizer, this is the double edge of the medium: while the photographs force the viewer to bear witness—which “constitutes a specific form of collective remembering” (10)—the captioning and the context in which the photo is seen determine to a large extent the object of witness. So, while “[o]ne did not need to be at the camps [since] the power of the image made everyone who saw the photos into a witness” (14), the question remains: just what did the viewer see? Photographs, for Zelizer, are indexes of collective memory that serve for us, as we pay attention to ethnic cleansing and other disasters of our own making, as a background.

The photograph of Sieg Mandaag, though, seems to tell another story. While we may integrate it into a narrative of witness to atrocity, to do so would be to place it into a collective memory that we have already learned to accommodate. As Zelizer, Young, and the increasing number of scholars who have become interested in the rhetoric of the visual have made abundantly clear, photographs like these—taken as
an index of a collective memory—are also the medium of a collective amnesia. Sieg Mandaag stands in for us: we’ve seen such images again and again, as the young Belgian child must have seen corpse after corpse; and our accommodation, like the child’s, allows our attention to be diverted from the memory of atrocity (which is, after all, not our own) and from the atrocity much closer to home. But that photo of the boy at Belsen is also an index of what cannot be remembered. What is beyond memory has a presence and a force that disrupts what we think we know about events depicted again and again in photographs, film footage, and movies. In the context of the Holocaust, we and our students have seen the bodies and the camps, in both color and in black and white, over and over. We’ve seen them in film footage of the liberations, and we’ve seen the locations of the events, decrepit and overgrown, in films like *Night and Fog* and *Shoah* and, perhaps, in person. These images work as the raw material out of which we’ve constructed a knowledge of the Holocaust, and when we see contemporary images of atrocity—either in some recent issue of the *New Yorker* magazine or in, say, *Schindler’s List*—we remember. But there is, in the image of Sieg Mandaag—in his appearance amid the destruction—something that exceeds this recollection, this memory we have built for ourselves of the Holocaust, and that disturbs it.

It is this excess, forgetful memory, that works against the grain of what we generally think photographs can do. Normally we think of still photographs as arresting the object and—unlike narratives, which in their repetition reveal subtle differences from telling to retelling—fixing it in cultural memory. The French historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet, with Holocaust denial and its pernicious effects on history and memory on his mind, worries that it is the language of history that reduces events to collectivities. What happens to an individual in Auschwitz, what is remembered and written as testimony, is collected together with all other such remembrances and taken as an amalgam, and we say that such-and-such happened in Auschwitz (or maybe more insidiously, we know that such-and-such happened there). The writing of the historian, like the writing of our students, often is straightforwardly assertive: because the collection of testimonies, documents, and other evidence of the events of the Holocaust has been inscribed in such a durable narrative, it often doesn’t allow for the trace that indicates the experiences of the individuals, or aspects of the event that would be otherwise forgotten. There is no room in this sort of collective memory—one that would stand in for history—for individual memory to intrude upon or interrupt the narrative. And yet the attempt by the historian to write a memory that eliminates individual memory, what at memory’s foundation is lost (the manner of death and the quality of suffering), is foiled by representation’s uncanny ability to register just that absence.

The question of forgetful memory is not confined to the matter of the Holocaust. It is, rather, bound up in broader questions of representation. The apparent
reality and immediacy of photographic and other visual representations do not respond to the question of whether they adequately provide access to the events they presumably depict. The ugly quarrels over the images of the war in Iraq provide an illustrative case in point. The middle pages of the New York Times’ “Nation at War” section contained a photocollage of images taken during the twenty-four hours before the paper went to press. Early in the war, the photos mainly depicted U.S. soldiers in nameless locations outside the cities of southern Iraq—dirty and tired-looking, they showed what we thought war looked like based upon the earlier Gulf War. As the war proceeded, and photojournalists made their way to the cities of Nasiriyah and, eventually, Baghdad, more and more photos appeared of Iraqis reeling from the violence and, in some cases, of the injured and dying in hospitals and on battlefields. The Times’ letters section was filled with protest: the photographs of dirty American soldiers and of the dead and wounded were too graphic and too violent; when photos began to appear of Iraqis welcoming soldiers into Baghdad, others complained that the images were jingoistic and overstated the degree of approval in Iraq of the war. The photos, in other words, depicted too much “reality” and not enough. The shock or pain the viewer feels upon seeing an image is related to the experience depicted, and—in the case of the photographs of suffering—the viewer is tempted to say that his pain is equivalent to or a repetition of the victim’s. And yet other letter-writers noted, presciently, that these photographic representations are simply that, representations, which mediate the viewer’s reaction to both the medium and its object, distancing the viewer from horror, and giving him or her access to the event by transforming it into cultural memory or historical knowledge.

Both these models equate the object of representation with either the viewer’s individual memory or with his or her ability to construct a cultural memory that makes the experience commensurable with other objects or events. But how is it possible to say that any remembered experience can be likened to the experience of the panicked citizen of a Polish shtetl loaded onto a windowless gas van with his family, whose destination was a forest outside of Chelmno? How is it possible to say that we understand the event—the death of a single person, or that person’s family, in the midst of a process of destruction either forty years ago or as recently as September 2001 or early April 2003—by connecting it to a cultural memory that is read as “atrocity” or “Holocaust” and built through documentary films and historical facts? Conventional models of memory, in other words, suggest that by bringing the experiences of individuals to life through the image, either through feeling or through knowledge, we can bring back or replicate the experiences themselves. But neither of these models allows for the possibility that there is something in the experiences and events themselves that exceeds our ability to identify with or come to know them. They don’t explain why the viewer of an image from the Holocaust recalls the image of corpses of Tutsis floating like white logs in Lake Kivu in Rwanda; they
II. FORGETFULNESS AND IMAGES OF THE HOLOCAUST

How do photographic and artistic images effect the displacement Marianne Hirsch associates with the traumatic memory that imprints itself on the witness and that is associated, but only associated, with the irrecuperable event that forms its source? Zelizer’s book focuses on images made immediately before and during the liberation of the camps in the East and in greater Germany, photographs that were collected by photojournalists traveling with the Allied Armies (mostly the British and the American, though she also accounts for some images collected by the Soviets). But there are countless archives and collections of photographs that were taken, either officially or surreptitiously, to catalog the liquidation of Jewish civilization in Europe.

Two such collections are the Photo Archive of the Prussian Cultural Trust, which was opened in what was then West Berlin in 1966 and to which have been added over seven times its initial number of photographs (now over seven million), and the collection of images of Jewish children deported to the East from France between 1942 and 1944 which was culled by Serge Klarsfeld, between 1993 and 1996, from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Yad Vashem, and survivors’ and relatives’ albums. These two collections, in particular, contain photographs whose images at times do not speak directly to atrocity or war, and whose contexts—particularly in the case of Klarsfeld’s photos—only partly account for the disruptive capacity of the images. Like the Times’ photographs of those who were killed in the World Trade Center disaster that so affected my students, they provide an example of how photographic images indicate a forgetful memory that cuts across the broader contours of a historical or cultural memory of the Holocaust.

The photographs from the Prussian Photo Archive appear to be the most susceptible, in Zelizer’s terms, to being “stripped of their referential power,” their connection to a specific time and place, because the captions that connect them to that context are so brief. Zelizer makes the point that photos used in newspaper and magazine accounts of atrocities at the time of the camps’ liberations were rarely linked by caption to specific camps or to the photographers who served as witnesses. Instead, the images were meant to stand in for the larger atrocity and metonymically substituted the memory constructed by the photographs for the witnesses’ presence (or, in the case of American readers, absence) in the midst of the event. It is true that some of the photos in the Prussian Archive depicting life in the Warsaw ghetto, or
the liquidation of the Jews of the Russian pale of settlement, are familiar to most of us, and may well serve as a memory-by-proxy of the Holocaust.

The photos I’ll pay attention to here, however, are those that—while indicating a disaster (though the particularities of time and place can only be indicated by their captions)—also carry with them signs of some other event. These are photographs that, to our second- or third-generation eyes, create a knowledge and a memory of the events in Europe in the years between 1933 and 1945, memories that bear the weight of history and compose a tapestry of destruction that is all too familiar to us. And yet these photos also indicate—at their margins, or in what cannot be captured by the camera but which is just off to one side, or just prior to the instant the shutter closes—something lost, forgotten, and yet which troubles the memory conjured by them.

In a photograph taken in what the caption tells us is late 1940, in Warsaw (Fig. 2), the center of the frame is taken up by an open wood-paneled door to a nondescript gray building. The building itself is institutional, probably built in the very late part of the nineteenth century, made of sandstone and pillared. On either side of the door stand three men, each in military-style peaked cap, one in a dark uniform, and two others, to the door’s left, in light coats. As the caption on the photo tells us that this is the Jewish Council office, we can surmise that these two men, in ill-fitting uniforms and, in one case anyway, badly made shoes, are Jewish police, and each seems to be looking at the individuals who are coming out of the door of the building. Just inside the open door stands a man in bowler hat.
hat, buttoning his coat, who cannot be more than five feet tall. He is following a couple, a man in a full-length coat and a woman beside him in a frock coat, a leather purse slung over one arm, a lovely hat on her head and—is it possible?—stockings. The man seems to be saying something to her, and her left hand, reaching for her head, seems to be in gesticulation, perhaps in response. Under her right arm is either a book or a set of documents.

Out of the line of sight of any of the pictured individuals, but very much in that of the viewer, is the man in the photograph’s lower left. Sitting on the second of the two steps of the entryway to the office, and either asleep, passed out from hunger, or dead, he wears a rumpled dark coat and some type of hat. His head is bent sideways and is just barely propped up on the elbow of his left arm. His legs are sprawled out in front of him in no particular direction, and as he lies there, his mouth hangs open. Unlike the others in the photo, his face is hollowed by shadows: he is not well fed, or well dressed, and he is, more like the man just leaving the building than the police to the sides of the door or the couple exiting just before him, unable to return a glance. On the margins of the photo in more ways than one, he is neither engaged in the drama of departure from the building, nor a central figure in the composition of the photograph.

This is no image of atrocity but, in the context provided by the Prussian Archive, simply one of several hundred photographs of “Poland under German Conquest,” and further contextualized as one of a number of images of ghetto “street scenes” taken in 1940 and 1941, before the terrible privations of the later years of liquidation and transportation. It accompanies other photographs of life on the streets of Warsaw: women engaged in conversation in front of a kiosk, a couple—a man in a peaked cap and a woman, perhaps his wife, in fur coat, knit hat, and purse in front of a door through which bearded men and others enter and exit quickly, judging from the blur—caught looking behind them at the photographer, three women walking arm-in-arm down the center of a street. The bustle of activity in front of the door of that building, like the bustle of activity in each of the other street scenes from these years, seems less to create a memory of the Final Solution than to build a memory connected to a collective sense of a European past, a fast-paced urban engagement with bureaucracy and barely concealed commerce whose inhabitants apparently express the full range of human emotions we might expect. Barely visible—if visible at all—in many of these images are the armbands on which appear the mandatory sign of expulsion, the Stars of David that identifies their wearers as Jews.

And yet, just at the margins of the photograph of the police office, lies this man: not quite a corpse perhaps, but certainly not able to make his way through the door. Starkly visible in this particular photo is an image and a memory of the bureaucracy of the Final Solution: its bizarre cast of characters comprising Jewish men who become instruments of the concentration of the Jews of Europe, who look no more or
less “Jewish” than those in any of the other individuals in the frame; former inhabitants of Warsaw, now crammed inside its ghetto, who look as if they’ve lived in a city all their lives and who refuse to walk to the office of the police in anything but smart clothes; and the nondescript building. Just as visible here, but just to the edge of the frame, is the one who undermines this well-wrought narrative, and this well-founded memory, of the urban bureaucracy of the ghetto: who is this man, and how did he come to be here? More important, what calamity is it that no one, not a single person pictured here, seems to notice that he’s there? (Or is it not calamity at all, but simply the callousness that comes of living in a crowded city, one that allows us to step over those who don’t have a place in our, or anyone else’s, commerce?) This one man, without a clearly marked role and without an identity at all inside the frame of the photograph, troubles the image whose caption seems to provide it a coherence in the context of the officialdom of the Final Solution, and opens the door to what will be painfully evident less than a year later, when the starving, anonymous, and barely visible inhabitants of the ghetto move from the margins of the photographs to the center. It works against the memory that would allow us to keep the date and place of the photo—“Warsaw, late 1940”—sealed off from the dates and places and memories of atrocity we know too well—“Auschwitz, late summer 1944,” “Dachau, summer 1945.” There is, in this marginal image, a trace of something lost to (collective) memory. It complicates the strong narratives of history, those with which we have become familiar (perhaps too familiar) and which force us to consider aspects of reality—of this particular reality, but perhaps also our own—that can’t be managed by language.

Included in the Prussian Archives are countless photographs of children and families, some during the early years of the ghettos, and some—heartbreaking photos—that document the toll the concentration took in the months just before the liquidations of 1942 and 1943. By far, the most wrenching images are from the ghetto in Warsaw, images that include families sitting together on curbs, a mother emaciated, nearly dead, with her children—perhaps fed from her ration of food—clearly aware of the situation, at her side; and of five- and six-year old boys, looking like little old men with hollow eyes, begging for handouts. One image in particular, this one from the Lodz ghetto, seems much less explicitly about the tragedy of the ghetto. Captioned “Boy Feeding Younger Child, Lodz Ghetto, 1942,” it shows a boy of between ten and fourteen, crouched or sitting against a wall, holding a can of what might be soup in his left hand (Fig. 3). With his right hand he is lifting the spoon into the mouth of a toddler, a child of perhaps two years old who could easily be his sister, standing at his side clutching the lapels of her coat with both hands. Neither child suffers from the hollow cheeks or the fatigue that comes with starvation; though dirty, neither child is dressed in rags as are many of the children pictured from the Warsaw ghetto in those same years.
What is striking about the photograph is the determination in the visage of the older child, whose lips are pursed either in imitation of and sympathy with the younger child’s eating, or in what might be brotherly impatience with a younger sibling. Equally striking is the younger child’s appearance: slightly grimacing either because the soup is hot or, more likely, because she is hungry, she seems to be watching something outside the frame of the photo, but not the photographer, as she stands slightly pigeon-toed in her sandals. Remarkably, there is what appears to be a ribbon in her hair. What is striking about the photo, in other words, is what cannot be explained. The image is indicative of an object with which we are familiar, and even without the caption we could take some fair guesses about the memory it intends to evoke. The boy’s cap, the grainy background, the absence of adults, all speak to that well-defined image of the events in eastern Europe that took place in and outside the major urban areas of Warsaw, Lodz, Riga, and Krakow. But it indicates beyond what it contains, and invokes an absence, a space at the center of the photographic and memorial image, that evades the cultural memory of which it is a part. That absence—the relationship between the two individuals pictured, what occurred just before and just after the photo was taken, where (and who) the children’s parents are, and who put that impossible bow in the little girl’s hair—bothers the image. Potentially drawing the viewer’s attention away from the object of memory, the destruction by attrition of the ghetto in Lodz before its liquidation in 1943, it evokes other memories, individual memories, that cannot be contained by the photo’s frame: which viewers are reminded of a cousin, or a child, or an incident, of their own, an incident that occurred well...
outside of the context of Lodz, of 1942, and of the desperation of rationing, but which is nonetheless indicated by this photograph that apparently means to focus attention on something else? There are at least two memories here. There is the one forged, in conjunction with the caption, of the events that occurred in Poland, in the major cities that included Lodz, a memory of the Final Solution. But there are also forged, apart from that broader memory, myriad other memories that flash before the eyes of the viewer and tear at the fabric of the collective, and of what we think we can know about the events at the center of the frame.

Serge Klarsfeld’s attention is likewise focused on children, but outside the contexts of their destruction. If the Prussian Archive focuses its attention on the calamity of the Shoah by forming a mosaic of images in a metaphorical association—street scenes, images of liquidation, photos of National Socialist propaganda, news images of the camps’ liberations and of the resettlement and the trials after the war—Klarsfeld’s photos of children transported from detention camps in France to death camps in Poland are largely repetitive, metonymic, and with few exceptions simply full-on shots of individual children. Klarsfeld’s aim is made clear in his preface: after putting together a huge book that simply listed names, dates and places of birth, nationalities, and the convoys on which seventy-six thousand Jews were transported from France to Auschwitz, he became “gripped with an obsession [. . .] to know their faces,” particularly the faces of the children (xi). The heart of the book is essentially a photo album, composed of single photographs—many of them posed formal and informal snapshots outside the context of destruction—that captures the children as they might have appeared in the well-worn pages of albums that they themselves might have kept as remembrances for their own children had they survived. Klarsfeld, in other words, is consciously building a memorial, a collective memory of a generation of French Jewish children that has been lost. But what interests me here, again, is what escapes memory in some of these photos, and how the photos themselves seem to invoke it.

Of the posed photographs, the two of Aline Korenbajzer are among the most striking. Most obviously, Aline is a beautiful child, with the fine features we have come to associate—an association formed in its own complicated way—with tiny beauty-pageant competitors like Jon Benet Ramsey. The first photograph, on the verso page, is of head and shoulders, and the child appears to be looking directly at the camera (Fig. 4): her blonde hair is quite long for a child of two or three, and it is pulled away from her shoulders to reveal only a necklace, while the child’s arms are crossed to prop her up. The second photograph, which in Klarsfeld’s book is on the recto page facing the first, has the child standing in a photographer’s studio in front of an arras and a small chair, on which is seated a nude porcelain doll. Aline has a hand on the seat of the chair, and is facing forward and just to the right of center; she has on a striped dress, knee socks and white ankle-high shoes, and tiny bracelets on
each wrist. Her chin is just barely tucked into her collar, and it looks as though she’s either posing awkwardly or slightly dubious about the photographer.

Like many of Klarsfeld’s photographs, this one was likely chosen from among several that were donated by surviving family members or borrowed from the archives of Yad Vashem or the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Like many of the photos in the book, it shows the child without any sign that she would be exterminated less than a year after it was taken. Even with the caption, we know only about where the child lived and the name of her mother, along with the roundup and the convoy that sealed her fate. We are clearly meant to forge a memory of this child as she was and as she might have been, had she escaped the destruction of occupied France. And yet like many if not most of Klarsfeld’s photos, this one—in particular, this one—poses as many problems for Klarsfeld’s aim as it provides a context and a narrative for it. This child, blonde and blue-eyed, who wears bracelets and necklace, and whose mother took such care to have her photographed as though she were a much older child, both stands in for the countless other images of children lost, and works against them. Klarsfeld’s book is clearly intended to forge a memory of what was lost; but it is difficult, if not impossible, for any one of us or our students to begin to create a narrative—or a history—that would link the image of this beautiful child to the unimaginable (or, if one were to be cynical, of the too imaginable) destruction entailed in that loss. What we’re left with is just that loss, and not a knowledge of what happened: by evoking the image of this child, Klarsfeld has instead evoked her loss as something that simply can’t be written, at least not in terms of history and perhaps not even in terms of our or our culture’s memory.

There are other photos in Klarsfeld’s book that function in the same way, moments in his litany of names and images that
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arrest the series. One is the photo of Irène Simon, standing casually in a clearing in a park, who smiles into the camera while she holds the hand of an unseen individual who remains outside the photo’s frame (Fig. 5). It takes a moment—particularly if you focus on her hand—for you to recognize that the blotch on her dress, just over her heart, is the yellow star emblazoned with the word “juif.” Another is the cluster of photos of the Rozenblum family, set into an oval that contains head-and-shoulders shots of the unnamed mother’s four children. The oval is set inside a grave marker, whose partial Hebrew is unreadable outside the frame of the photograph but for the word l’zakbor (“in memory”) inscribed just above the oval, and whose French is partly readable just below, mémoire de ma chère (“in memory of my dear ones”). There are also the occasional photos of children, perhaps the only ones that survive, stapled unceremoniously to identification cards, photos that were taken for bureaucratic reasons on the spot (and we can tell because the children’s hair is rarely combed, and each holds a small slate on which is written a number that corresponds to the number of the card) (Fig. 6). Occasionally included in the collection is that rare identity card, like Samuel Gutman’s, that was created before it was necessary to stamp the word “Juive” on each one, and which includes not a photograph taken on the spot but a posed sitting in which the crudely painted balcony scene—with a church steeple in poor perspective—is visible behind him (Fig. 7).

Each of these photographs works both with and against the grain of knowledge: taken as a series, they represent the vastness of what was lost in the deportations from France; but each photograph on its own arrests the series at least in part because the photo’s object is not just the child, and not just the visible contexts of that child’s family, or her village, or evidence of her life. The photo’s object, taken in the context of the narrative accounting of the Holocaust that we, or that histori-
ans, or that our students struggle to write, also indicates aspects of the child’s life, and of the child’s destruction, that can’t be written as memory, ours or anyone else’s. At their margins is an unspoken and immemorial past. Perhaps it’s only that past invoked by the opening and closing of the shutter of the camera, the moments in whose midst the image is taken and which are lost except as traces that reside in the curious faces of Klarsfeld’s children. Perhaps it’s the past marked by the names of detention camps stamped across the faces of the children in identity cards, places and names whose histories seem incongruous with the histories of children who appear happy. Perhaps it is the moment at which kaddish is said by a distant relative at the unveiling of a monument on whose face is inscribed the image of children, arrested (photographically and temporally) for the viewer. These incongruities of time and place, of a collective memory and memories lost and marginal to the greater narrative, interrupt Klarsfeld’s memorial.

III. “Figures of Memory and Forgetting”

Hirsch defines postmemory as the traumatic memory-effect produced by photographs and other images created during and immediately following the event. Un-
like in the first generation, the photographic image is not connected to the viewer’s experience of the past, but that experience is “created” through “figures of memory and forgetting” (222), and so the repetitive litany of images has the effect of a trauma by invoking that which is not available in the image or the mnemonic recollection. These photographs, like the stills of the destruction in lower Manhattan, or like those that appear in our newspapers more than we would like from the more recent
destruction in the Middle East, impress upon viewers who weren’t actually there on
the spot a trace of the event as it is lost. “[T]he image shows that time cannot be
frozen: in the case of Holocaust photos [. . .] the impossibility of stopping time, or of
averting death, is already announced by the shrinking of the ghetto, the roundup,
the footprints pointing toward the site of execution” (224). The photo, in other
words, undoes the tidy narrative provided by memory.

It is this memory-effect—the effect of the forgotten and immemorial event—
that Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger attempts to render in mixed-media works. If it’s
ture that the margins of the photographs in collections like the Prussian Photo Archive
and Klarsfeld’s memorial undo the collective memory of what is at the center of the
photograph, Ettinger’s paintings, which cite rather than represent images from pho-
tographs taken during the Shoah, seem to focus their attention on that very margin.
In what Griselda Pollock calls “after painting,” Ettinger uses the “found photo-
ograph” as the anchor to a collage that “prevents a fall back into a fixed image” and
“keeps to the margins and thresholds where another process of meaning is glimpsed”
(Pollock 143–44). The work “makes possible another kind of vanishing point—
beyond appearance—that is not located [. . .] in the binary opposites” such as sub-
ject/object or, perhaps, history/memory (144). As a consequence, the choices she
makes in her paintings seem much more self-conscious than those intimated by the
photographs taken of the ghetto and are at least as self-conscious as Klarsfeld’s choices
of snapshots used in his album of implied atrocity. Ettinger’s images speak as much
about the trauma of what lingers at the back of memory as they do about the blud-
geon of atrocity itself. Her collection of collage-paintings is entitled Autistwork, con-
noting, vaguely, a sort of autistic inner space of the mind that inhabits neither the
“here” of the image’s origin nor the conscious representation of the image in word
or narrative or visual representation. It includes realistic images, text, what Alain
Kleinmann calls the “annulled image” (in which the object of representation is
scratched out or disfigured by the artist in such a way that the blot itself becomes the
object of memory [Feinstein 233–36]), and vaguely recognizable photographs seen
through a pointillist or impressionist screen of paints and washes.

Ettinger’s paintings are quite explicitly about the aftereffects of the Shoah. This
child of survivors says, “My parents are proud of their silence [. . .]. But in this
silence all was transmitted except the narrative. In silence nothing can be changed in
the narrative which hides itself” (qtd. in Pollock 137); it’s as if in her paintings, she
wants to indicate the trauma of memory that transmitted itself silently. Like
Hirschfeld’s trope of memory and forgetting, the work seems to resist the narrative
closure that would be reproduced easily in the second and third generation as narra-
tive. Several of the images Ettinger uses in her paintings are from collections widely
available, including one or two from the Prussian Archives and from Klarsfeld’s book.
Eerily similar to the couple making its way out of the Jewish Council office in War-
saw described earlier, one of the images used over and over again in Ettinger’s work is of a couple walking briskly down a street accompanied by a second man. The setting could as easily be Paris as it could be Warsaw, and because of the poor focus of the camera it’s difficult to tell whether the whitish blotch on the lefthand lapel on the man’s coat is a magen-David-shaped patch. The photo, like others included on the walls of an entranceway to a portion of the exhibit of Ettinger’s work in Villeurbane in 1992, includes casual photos and street scenes that are integrated into the impressionist-like images recast in the paintings as ghostly afterimages that reside just out of reach of collective memory.

Another image repeated again and again is less easy to see, and in reviewing the literature surrounding Ettinger’s shows, I cannot find that the original image was hung as correlative to the paintings in which it appears. Those paintings, the most striking of which is a single oil that you might imagine is superimposed upon the photographic image, is entitled “Autistwork No.1,” and it depicts four figures, probably female, in purples, blues, and whites (Fig. 8). One of the women is clearly cradling what appears to be a child, and even in the context of the exhibition, which includes images of women and, in its accompanying literature, questions the possibility of the female subject position as fixed by the history of painting, it seems to suggest something beyond what it portrays: the child, it seems, is being clutched, not cradled. In fact, this image is a repetition of one of the photos in the Prussian Archive, one which has been reproduced in the U.S. Holocaust Museum’s permanent exhibit as part of its narrative of the Einsatzgruppen but which in fact depicts events in Poland in 1943: two dozen women, naked and huddled together in a line, stand at the bottom of a low grassy rise (Fig. 9). In front of them, partly occluded from view, are two uniformed soldiers, and just beyond are strewn the clothes the women have just been ordered to remove. In the line are also two children: one of perhaps four in one woman’s arms, and the smaller child of perhaps two that appears in Ettinger’s image. The caption tells us that the women are lined up for execution in Mizocz in 1943.
Speaking of other images of execution, Hirsch says that photos like these don’t allow us to see a point before and a point after the photo was taken in which we might imagine another life, another existence, other possibilities. Rather, these women “were already killed by the murderous Nazi gaze that condemned them without even looking at them. This lethal gaze reflects back on images of European Jews that precede the war, removing from them the loss and nostalgia, the irony and longing that structure such photographs from a bygone era” (235). There is no narrative of before and after which we can imagine and to which we can tie the images of destruction; rather, the image speaks to an event we simply cannot know: the annihilation that has been predetermined, and that we know can’t escape from Barthes’s punctum, the point of life before which and after which we have to construct narratives of memory and which are only understandable from the perspective of the death of the one depicted. Rather, there is something uncanny about the image because the punctum is unmoored: not only are these women and children now dead, whereas in the picture they live; in fact they are already dead at the point when the picture is taken, deprived of self under the Nuremberg laws and stripped of their dignity as they stand naked at the bottom of a hill. Such a punctum, one dead on arrival, is unavailable to us, and it is unavailable to Ettinger as she cites the photo in “Autistwork No.1.” But because it is unmoored from memory—Ettinger was born a good ten years after the event and is a child of its silence—its reproduction as an image can’t “desensitize us to the ‘cut’ of recollection;” it instead has the
effect “of cutting and shocking in the ways that fragmented and congealed traumatic memory reenacts the traumatic encounter” (Hirsch 237). It is a figure not of memory but of forgetting, of what escapes the image and the narrative that might tell us what we’re seeing.

Let me conclude by laying out some of the implications of forgetful memory and the image. One of the difficulties we contend with during a time when images seem to take precedence over text—during a time when, as W.J.T. Mitchell has put it, we have taken a pictorial turn—is how to avoid taking their incessant repetition as a substitute for the real or for history. My students told me, with little irony at all, that as they watched the planes crash into the World Trade Center they thought it looked just like a movie, evidence enough that the effectiveness of a visual representation has come dangerously close to supplanting evidence of the event as the benchmark of authenticity. Barbie Zelizer reminds us that the repetition of the image, if it works to produce a collective memory of atrocity unconnected to a place and a name—to the materiality of the historical event itself—empties the image of the particularity of the disaster and we are left only with a shell: this, we think, is the Holocaust; Rwanda and 9/11 and Iraq are simply reinstantiations of “the Holocaust.” Treating the photographic image of the atrocity as one more vehicle through which we and our students can produce knowledge of the events that form their object simply repeats the two dangers of narrative representation, the dangers of “writing” the Holocaust—we are either lulled into believing that images and narratives are interchangeable, both of them substitutions for the event in the past; or we see the image as somehow giving us a better or more “real” representation of the event because it seems to fix that event in ways that the written text, with the endless possibilities for interpretation and revision, seems incapable. Photographic representations, like textual representations, of atrocity may indeed be instruments of knowledge. But at least in the case of the representations I’ve cited here, and in the case of others—and other more recent examples—their repetition doesn’t just repeat instances of the same; each instance is distinct from the one just before or just after it, and it is this nonidentity that eventually makes itself apparent and shatters the collective memory that has no point of origin in the atrocity itself. Speaking of the image of Sieg Mandaag as he makes his way past the corpses outside Bergen-Belsen, Edith Wyschogrod says that regardless of questions historians might ask about this child, or of these corpses, or any other reality depicted by the photo, “[S]o long as the boy in his uncanny flight is permitted to break into the narrative of what is depicted, the child’s face becomes the escape route for an unsayability that seeps into the visual image and contests any narrative articulation of what the camera captures” (142). Or, to put it in my students’ terms, the still photographs taken of the aftermath of the destruction of the WTC call up aspects of the event that cannot be easily integrated into the narratives of the deaths of innocents, or the war on terror, or American imperi-
alism, aspects that prevent them from easily making connections between atrocities, between the name of “the Holocaust” and the name of “9/11”. Those images produce, in Hirsch’s terms, a memory-effect that invokes a forgetfulness rather than a memory, since the memories produced or invoked—collective or personal—aren’t memories of the event at all, since none of us was there on the spot.

One of the most troubling pedagogical implications of forgetful memory is that the dictum “never forget” associated with so much Holocaust testimony is essentially naïve. That dictum suggests that if we can only bear in mind the image of the National Socialist atrocities against Jews, we’ll recognize their successors in other, more recent images. In fact we make a mistake if we think, or allow our students to think, that there are natural connections among atrocities simply because they seem to have an uncanny effect: such a connection empties the events of their historical particularities—the logic of the Final Solution and the militant clerics’ fatwas against Americans and Zionists may bear a family resemblance, but it’s one that could just as easily be hidden by the connection of images from the camps and from 9/11. Instead, because forgetting is not memory’s opposite but its double, a forgetful memory would require not a looking back—the desperate attempt to make out the details of the image so that we may see some passing resemblance to it in future atrocities—but a looking forward. The disaster of the Holocaust that has been, we presume, captured on film and in other visual images cannot be remembered. But it exists as a crux that is embedded in the images and makes itself present only as a rupture of historical and individual memories, and it requires a writing that works against what Jean-François Lyotard called “the monopoly [. . .] of the cognitive regimen of phrases,” that narrative of history that is so well-worn and well-understood that it runs the risk of letting us think we can “know what it was like.” It should be a writing that lends an ear “to what is not presentable under the rules of knowledge” (57), to that which is forgotten.

Edith Wyschogrod, citing Emmanuel Levinas, notes the difficulty of writing and the persistence of what lies behind it: “[T]he image is not to be grasped as simply indicating an absent object. [Images occupy] the place of objects ‘as though the represented object died, were degraded, were disincarnated in its own reflection.’ [. . .] The image [. . .] hold[s] beings and discourses in abeyance, bracket[s] them, opens a space of disclosure beyond iconicity that is homologous with the nondiscursiveness of the face” (91). Survival in ghettos or death at the end of a French railroad line, called up by the images in the Bildarchiv, or compiled by Klarsfeld, or reconstructed by Ettinger; the deaths of those working on the top floors of the World Trade Center or those rushing there to save them, called up by images in the Times or in the New Yorker; in each case the objects themselves have died. They are degraded, disincarnated, and forever lost to memory. What is left is the image that opens a space beyond representation and the object, a space that is “homologous
with the non-discursiveness” of the event itself. This way of seeing the image, or any of the images discussed here, doesn’t give us a way to write or remember the events whose object is apparently depicted in a photograph, or painting, or narrative. It does, however, give us a sense of the contours of memory, of what lies at its margins, and of how the marginal disrupts our knowledge of and our ability to easily write the event. And it provides a point of entrance—or of departure—for the event as it produces an effect that cannot be remembered at all.

Notes

1. Forgetful memory can be distinguished from “absent memory,” what Henri Raczymow calls mémoire trouée, literally “breached memory,” whereas absent memory is a “lack of memory” of the event, filled with voids, blanks, and silences, accompanied by a “sense of regret for not having been there” (Fine 187), forgetful memory makes itself felt as a presence, though a terrifying one, that is characterized not so much by loss as by physical trauma. Forgetful memory, too, makes itself apparent as a disruption or a gap in the narratives of memory we construct of events, and the events are therefore inaccessible either to the one who was there or to the one who wasn’t; but whereas the second-generation witness experiences regret at this inaccessibility in absent memory, there’s no such regret in forgetful memory. In fact, the witness—the viewer of the photograph, the one who listens to or views a testimony—is overtaken by a sense of the event, as though it came unbidden. Forgetful memory is not quite the same thing, either, as Marianne Hirsch’s notion of “postmemory,” which is an effect of the repetition of images as they are “adopted” by the second and third generations, but it shares with postmemory the notion that the image, like the image of the boy in flight from Belsen (Fig. 1), has a traumatic effect upon the viewer that disrupts rather than conforms to collective memory or knowledge of the object depicted.

2. Sybil Milton and Roland Klemig serve as editors for the published collection in the Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz (see Henry Friedlander and Sybil Milton, eds., Archives of the Holocaust: An International Collection of Selected Documents, Volume I, Part 2: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz Berlin [1939–45]); the captioning on the photos is limited to a line of description, a date, and where the photo was taken. Klarsfeld’s collection, published as French Children of the Holocaust: A Memorial, contains a fair amount of text, though that which accompanies the photos themselves is mainly limited to names, ages, domiciles, places of arrest, and the convoys on which those depicted were transported.

3. It could be argued that the New York Times’ series, “Portraits of Grief,” comprising photographs and brief life stories of those killed in the September 11 attacks, function in precisely the same way.

4. Pollock links Ettinger’s painting to a psychoanalytic tradition that understands representation as a language that unwittingly reveals aspects of the real.

5. See Christine Buci-Glucksmann’s essay, particularly the section on the connection between the image and “screen,” in Ettinger 60–68.

Works Cited


Pollock, Griselda. “After the Reapers: Gleaning the Past, the Feminine and Another Future, from the Work of Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger.” Ettinger 129–64.


