Doctoral thesis abstract by Jörn Wendland

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The Portraiture of the Impossible Image

Picture Stories by Prisoners in German Concentration Camps and Ghettos

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1. Synopsis

How is memory of the Holocaust illustrated? The doctoral thesis project presented here deals with this subject matter by taking a close look at picture stories that were created by victims of National Socialist persecution and extermination policies in concentration and detention camps, ghettos, hiding places as well as on the run. Some of these stories were only finished after the liberation.

Starting from an art-historical point-of-view the thesis will do the first fundamental research on the still unpublished as well as the published picture material. The project is striving for an analysis of the picture stories' structure and content as well as for a comparative study, which is to embed the stories in the context of visual art on the one hand and the written testimonies of the Holocaust (diaries and memoirs) on the other hand. The aim of this procedure is to perceive these picture stories as independent works of art instead of simply reducing them to the circumstances of their genesis. The thesis also intends to include a catalog of the existing picture stories as well as profiles of the artists.

2. Subject Matter and State of Research

Subject Matter

The autobiographical picture stories can be approached from the *literary* as well as from the art-historical side. A literary approach is possible because both the pictorial and the written forms of memory represent the artistic digestion of personal experiences. Both of these art forms share the basic need to bear witness to the inhuman conditions their creators experienced and suffered in the numerous National Socialist places of terror.

Primo Levi wrote in his final book in 1987: "My religious friend had told me that I survived so that I could bear witness. I have done so, as best I could, and I also could not have done so; and I am still doing so, whenever the opportunity presents itself."¹ The artists of the picture stories made drawings of their sufferings for the same reason - in order to ", record what I had seen and observed" (Alfred Kantor)², to "tell the truth in contemporary" history" (Thomas Geve)³ and to create "a graphic, convincing, and permanent testimony" of those times, one that ensures that the past should not be forgotten, so that something similar will not happen again." (Helga Weissová).⁴

¹ Levi 1989, p. 83. ² Kantor 1987, n.p. ³ Geve 1997, p. 28.

⁴ Weissová 1998, p. 14.

On the other hand, of course, the picture stories need to be examined from the *art-historical* side as well since they represent a conversion of real life memory, the visualization of the personal biography into pictures and drawings. In successive picture sequences the artists show the different stages of National Socialist persecution and extermination such as flight and deportation, arrival in the concentration camp, selection, starvation, hard labor, death and liberation.

In the doctoral thesis project the two above-mentioned elements, the *illustration of the personal biography* and the *art form of picture sequence*, are treated as the main features of the autobiographical picture stories. They can be differentiated from other picture collections of the so-called Holocaust-art⁵ inasmuch as those do not share these main features – picture sequence and autobiography. The collection of 42 greeting cards for Erwin Olszówka⁶, for instance, does not have a picture sequence with actual plots. Also many of the drawings that were compiled as collections after the liberation do not have either autobiographical elements (such as the illustration of certain events or divisions of time) or one event being illustrated in several picture sequences.

All of the autobiographical picture stories to be analyzed in the thesis were painted and drawn in concentration and detention camps, in ghettos or in hiding places within the National Socialist sphere of influence, some were finished shortly after the liberation. The creators were children as well as amateur artists and professionals.

Due to the dates of their origin we can draw a distinction between two groups of picture stories, which differ from each other in stylistics, picture and drawing material as well as in subject matter: The first group consists of those works that were drawn as picture diaries in the camps, the second one of those that were created immediately after the liberation.

The most extensive one of Geörgy Beifeld's (later George Byfield) works that have been studied so far is part of the first group. It comprises about 400 pictures and allows us a unique insight into the fate of a Jewish forced laborer in the Hungarian army. What makes

⁵ So far the term "Holocaust art" has not been sufficiently defined in specialized literature but, depending on the work, has different emphasises concerning content, time or topography. In the thesis project the term "Holocaust art" includes the works of all art forms that were created in the concentration and extermination camps as well as in the ghettos and detention camps between 1933 and 1945. Also to be included in this definition are the works that were created by survivors shortly after the liberation since their works of art, even if produced without hardship or shortage of drawing material, are testimonies of the surviving artists' sufferings during the Nazi era.

⁶ For information on this collection cf. Kunst in Auschwitz 2005, pp. 236f.

this picture story extraordinary is the multitude of written diary entries that come with it, so that picture autobiography and text autobiography merge in this work.

Quite a different biography is presented by Josef Nassy, who was one of the few African Americans who were being kept prisoners in the Bavarian detention camps Laufen and Tittmoning. Unlike the prisoners in the concentration camp Dachau nearby, the prisoners in these detention camps were usually not brutally forced into working, and they normally had sufficient food thanks to the food-packages sent by the Red Cross. Nevertheless Nassy's about 200 paintings and drawings illustrate the everyday restrictions like barb wire, watch tower, walls and prison bars.

Other prisoners did not have the chance to turn their experiences into art until their liberation. Thomas Geve from Berlin, who was deported to Auschwitz at the age of thirteen and who also survived the concentration camps Gross-Rosen and Buchenwald, committed his memories to paper in 79 pictures right after the liberation in April 1945 while still in Buchenwald. Alfred Kantor, on the other hand, could use parts of the sketches he had drawn in the concentration camps Terezín (Theresienstadt), Auschwitz and Schwarzheide, completing his picture story with a total of 127 pages in July 1945.

State of Research

It was not until rather late that in art-historical research the drawings and paintings by prisoners of ghettoes and concentration camps were considered an important part of art history. Altogether, literature on Holocaust art was for a long time being faced with the problem that the single works of art were regarded simply as historical documents and proofs for the existence of the Holocaust; their independent artistic value was disregarded all along. An important basis for a more profound treatment of the works created in the camps were the studies by Nelly Toll, Miriam Novitch, Mary S. Costanza and others, who had been dealing with important particulars since the 1970s.⁷ Of the more detailed studies that followed, Janet Blatter and Sybil Milton's study, which attempted for the first time a systematic understanding of Holocaust art,⁸ stands out as well as Ziva Amishai-Maisels' landmark study on the difference between depiction and interpretation in the artistic representation of the Holocaust.⁹

Some important aspects of Holocaust art however are still insufficiently explored: Up to now the limiting of the works to the circumstances of their genesis has been, amongst

⁷ Toll 1978, Novitch/Davidovicz/Freudenheim 1978 and Costanza 1982.

⁸ Blatter/Milton 1981.

⁹ Amishai-Maisels 1993.

other factors, an obstacle to a critical look into the manifold art-historical influences or the different cultural pictorial traditions.¹⁰ Certain groups of artists are under-represented in specialized literature as well because art-historical research often focuses on works by professional artists.¹¹

While specialized literature, despite certain above mentioned restrictions, discusses the individual pictures of Holocaust art at least to some extent, the picture collections have hardly been noticed in the science of art so far.¹² Most of the few existing studies deal with only one work of art and don't go beyond descriptions of the work's state or beyond brief individual analyses.¹³ Consequently, wider questions of the narrative structures and contents of the picture stories haven't been discussed up to now, just as overviews exceeding particular works don't exist at all. Characteristically, there isn't even a uniform terminology used.¹⁴

Literary-critical research on the other hand has dedicated considerable space to the written autobiographical memories.¹⁵ Numerous studies are based on James Young's influential book *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust. Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*, in which Young assumes a constructivist approach of Holocaust literature.¹⁶ The problem of authenticity resulting from this as well as the forms of narration are the subject also of Phil C. Langer's work.¹⁷ Since there are no comparable studies in Holocaust art, his studies of time structures and authentication strategies in Holocaust literature can also be transferred to the picture stories.

¹⁰ Only lately do we find approaches to a different perspective, e. g. in the catalog of the exhibition "Kunst in Auschwitz 1940-1945" (art in Auschwitz 1940-1945), which sees the works of art that were created in Auschwitz in the tradition of the academic painting technique of the 1920s and 30s. Cf. Kaumkötter 2005, pp. 23-31.

¹¹ Thus, the works by children, young people and prisoners without any artistic education are often ignored in art-historical research because they are regarded as artistically less important. Glenn Sujo, for instance, leaves works by children aside because in his opinion only artists with an education are trained in seeing and consequently have a visual awareness of the iconographic sources. Sujo 2001, p. 19.

¹² One reason for the lack of research interest is undoubtedly the fact that there is no literature on the narrativity of picture stories in general because only in recent years have studies on narrative theory become established. Cf. Nünning 2002.

¹³ E.g. Rahe 1993, Salmon 1997, Staar 1997, Hoffmann 2003, Horbelt 2005 and Stargardt 2006.

 ¹⁴ E.g. "Bilder-Tagebuch" (picture diary) in Thomas Rahe, in: Rahe 1993, p. 35, "cycle" in Sonja Staar, in: Staar 1997, p. 23 and p. 24 and "Bildbericht" (picture story) in Detlef Hoffmann, Hoffmann 2003, p. 185.
¹⁵ E.g. Reiter 1995, Günter 2002, Düwell 2004 and Eichenberg 2004.

¹⁶ Young 1990 (first published in 1988).

¹⁷ Langer 2002.

3. Central Questions and Aim

Central Questions

The knowledge of the insufficient state of research raises basic questions about the structure and content of the picture stories, which shall be discussed in the planned thesis:

- How is memory being structured? The basic hypothesis of this question is that similarly to the literary testimonies of the Holocaust¹⁸ – the picture stories are formed mainly by the time structure, by which the prisoners arranged their fragmentarily recalled experiences into daily or monthly sections, or in sections sorted according to places. What is most important here, is the time when the pictures were created as well as the question if the pictures are - like diary entries - mirroring a short period of time, or if they structure the experiences differently due to the artist's knowledge of the outcome of the events - similarly to the accounts of experiences that were written after the liberation. Is the narration in the picture stories therefore more fragmentary or more chronological?
- What is being remembered? Which subjects are important to the prisoners and which are not? Is it rather personal experiences that we find in the picture stories or is it recurring picture motifs like persecution, deportation, the arrival in concentration camps, daily life in those camps and liberation? What role do stylistic elements play in the illustration of the subject, like color, characteristic artist style, picture and drawing material?
- What is the difference between the picture stories and individual pictures in Holocaust art? Does the narrativity of the picture stories generate different associations of meaning than the individual pictures do? Are there also differences as far as the contents are concerned?
- According to Ziva Amishai-Maisels a transformation took place in Holocaust art after 1945. The artists turned from the depiction to the interpretation of the Holocaust using elements of a Holocaust iconography like barb wire, crematory chimneys, mother and child or *Memento Mori*.¹⁹ Do we find such metaphorization in the representation of the Holocaust in the picture stories as well?

 ¹⁸ For information on the structure of the diaries and autobiographies see Young 1990, pp. 25f.
¹⁹ Amishai-Maisels 1993, pp. 131-154.

To maintain the independence of the work of art and to avoid a culprit's perspective²⁰ that is reduced to the circumstances of the work's genesis, we need to include the art-historical context in our analysis as well. The central questions are:

- Which motifs or styles from art history appear in the picture stories?
- Do the picture stories create a new form of picture autobiography? Or do they make use of older traditions of the picture story?
- Can we observe varying cultural picture traditions in the stories?

An essential point of the thesis concerns the authenticity, which is central on all levels of Holocaust art (production, creation, reception and evaluation).²¹ Many artists believe that describing the experiences in the camps in an "authentic" way is the main duty of the picture stories.²² According to Martinez the term "authentic" is used for the creator, the reference, the creation and the function of a work of art.²³ The following questions are to focus especially on the substantive emergence of a work of art, which may contribute to the authenticity – Phil Langer speaks of "Authentisierungsstrategien" (authentication strategies).²⁴

- What artistic devices are used in the picture stories to generate authenticity?
- Are the picture stories that were drawn in the camps more "authentic" than the drawings created after the liberation? Are there differences in the representation of the events?
- Is it possible at all for picture stories to meet the demand for authenticity?

Finally, we need to discuss the close connection between visual and literary memory. Here we have to draw a distinction between two aspects: First, an analysis of the picturetext correlation in the picture stories, since all of them not only have a visual level but also a textual level in the form of legends or longer text passages.

Second, a comparison between the picture stories and selected examples of written diaries and autobiographies, for which we may also use the works of those authors who not only drew picture stories but also wrote their memories down. In direct comparison these works very clearly demonstrate the differences as well as the elements the two art forms

²⁰ Cf. Kaumkötter 2005, p. 23.

²¹ Cf. Martínez 2004.

²² See statements above by Alfred Kantor, Thomas Geve and Helga Weissová.

²³ Martinez 2004, p. 12.

²⁴ Langer 2002, p. 74.

have in common.²⁵ Thomas Geve wrote that his autobiography from 1929 to 1945 "are really pictures set in words".²⁶

- To what extent do the text elements support the message of the pictures' content? Or do they develop an individual story line that differs from the drawings?
- Do picture memory and text memory have similar narrative structures?
- Are there differences in the representation of the various subjects?
- How is authenticity presented? Are there comparable structures?

Aim

The autobiographical memories of the survivors are of great importance for the construction of a cultural memory of the Holocaust. According to James Young "none of us coming to the Holocaust afterwards can know these events outside the ways they are passed down to us. ⁴²⁷. Thus, by analyzing the pictorial memories, which specialized literature has widely disregarded up to now, the planned thesis project will represent an important contribution to the examination of these testimonies.

It is the aim of the thesis to have a closer look at the visual memory of victims of the Holocaust by examining their autobiographical picture stories. We want to demonstrate the specific characteristics of their contents and structures as well as place the stories into the context of Holocaust art. Another aspect to be analyzed is the special relation of the picture stories and the literary testimonies of the Holocaust. For this analysis the project will rest on the hypothesis that a comparison of the visual and the literary memories will prove that there are generally applicable structures of a common Holocaust autobiography.

It is also of great importance for the thesis to regard the picture stories as independent works of art. In the foreground of the examination of the works will be art-historical questions, nevertheless the artists as well as the special conditions of the works' genesis in the concentration camps and ghettos shall not to be ignored in this analysis.

Inasmuch as a critical understanding of picture stories is lacking so far, the thesis also strives to create an index of works, which is to take stock of all existing picture stories

²⁵ According to the current state of research following artists have in addition to the picture stories also written down their life stories: Thomas Geve, in: Geve 1958, Wolfgang Szepansky, in: Szepansky 2000, Nelly Toll, in: Toll 2003, Alfred Kantor, in: Kantor 1971 and David Friedmann in his diary [an excerpt is published in: Dachauer Hefte, S. 152-169], kept in the Leo Baeck Institute, New York. The long text passages in Geörgy Beifeld's work also remind one of a written diary.

²⁶ Letter from Thomas Geve to the author, dated September 24, 2005.

²⁷ Young 1990, p. vii.

from the different museums, archives and memorial sites. In addition to the index the thesis will, if possible, also include profiles of every single artist.

4. Methodical Procedure and State of Sources

Methodical Procedure

From the methodical point of view it is useful for the planned study to divide the picture stories by the respective period of their genesis, that is before or after the liberation. This allows a comparison on a synchronic as well as a diachronic level, through which differences and common elements of the picture stories can be brought out more clearly. The synchronic level comprises picture stories that originate in the same period of time, and is to show common elements in structure and content. On the diachronic level there will be a comparison of picture stories originating in different periods of time. In order to reduce the host of material it is useful to limit the number of topics to be examined.

The findings gained from this comparison shall then be contrasted with the selected examples of literary memory (diaries and autobiographies). For the highest comparability possible it is essential that the selected works were created under similar circumstances. Thus, it seems practical to draw a comparison between works that were created within the same concentration camp or ghetto, provided there is sufficient material for this working method.

State of Sources

The current state of sources for the doctoral thesis project is difficult since even those picture collections that have been published often lack exact details on size, picture and drawing material as well as origin. What makes the access to the existing material ever harder is the fact that the archives of memorial sites and museums hardly ever have any published and complete catalogs of their art collections.²⁸

There are different reasons for this: Frequently, a work of art cannot be ascribed to an artist any more or the signature is not decipherable. Another reason might be that names and work are known but further information is missing because the artist's track is lost after 1945. Other works of art again are distributed to different museums or, being stored

²⁸ However, most museums, memorial sites and institutes allow more or less restricted public access to a selection of their works of art. The most extensive catalogs – in part accessible on the internet – are in possession of the *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* in Washington, the *Leo Baeck Institute* in New York and the memorial site Yad Vashem in Israel. Some memorial sites, e.g. those in *Buchenwald*, *Bergen-Belsen* and *Dachau*, offer short surveys of their art collections.

in private estates, are inaccessible to research. Last but not least it is the horrible conditions in the concentration camps that contributed to the fact that many works of art are destroyed or preserved only in fragments.²⁹ Considering this meager state of sources it is

Sources that come into consideration for the thesis project are first of all the picture collections that have been published. Complete details on the works being rare, though,³⁰ independent treatment of the originals might be necessary. In order to reach an adequate level of commentary vis-à-vis the picture collections, even the 'til now unpublished works will have to be assessed.

not possible for the thesis project to claim completeness.

According to the current state of knowledge of the sources and the present state of research, the works of art that are relevant to the doctoral thesis project are found in the galleries of the memorial sites and museums of the following countries: First of all, in Germany the *Bergen-Belsen Memorial*, in Poland the *State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau*, in Switzerland the *Archives of Contemporary History* as well as in Israel the *Ghetto Fighter's House* and *Yad Vashem Art Museum*. Important works in the USA are found in the *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* in Washington, in the *YIVO Institute for Jewish Research* as well as in the *Leo Baeck Institute* in New York. Further picture stories are the private property of individuals in Czechia, Israel and the USA.

²⁹ For example David Friedmann's artwork from 1941 to 1945, that he created during his incarceration in the ghetto of Lodz (including a picture diary of the ghetto life) and in Gleiwitz I, a sub-camp of Auschwitz, is lost except for one original drawing, which is in possession of the *State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau* today. ³⁰ According to the current state of research complete details on the works are only found for the publications by Thomas Geve and Helga Weissová.

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Felsenthal, Liesel: "Gurs 1941", picture diary, created in Gurs 1941, now in the collection of the *Leo Baeck Institute*.

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Irsai, Istvan: Series of 8 panels in one picture, created in Bergen-Belsen 1944, now in the collections of the *Bergen-Belsen Memorial*.

Lederer, Fritz: "In the Eruv of Theresienstadt", series of 24 engravings, created in 1946, 20 prints in the collection of Gerhard Schneider, Germany.

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Nassy, Josef: Series of about 200 pictures, oil, chalk, watercolor, created in Laufen and Tittmoning (Bavaria), now in the collections of the *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*.

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