Chapter 12

The Afterlife of the Barefoot Rabbi and the Making of an Iconic Holocaust Photograph*

Yechiel Weizman

There are certain images we know too well, such as the frightened boy from the Warsaw Ghetto, the old woman holding the hands of some unknown children on the way to the gas chambers in Auschwitz-Birkenau, and the man pointing a rifle at a mother trying to protect her child. While these iconic images do not represent the viewpoint of the Jewish victims—indeed, most of them were taken by the perpetrators of anti-Jewish atrocities—they have become by now metonymic representations of the Jewish fate that determine the aesthetic vocabulary of a global Holocaust memory. As such, they are constantly being reproduced and often abstracted out of their original context to become "visual shorthand for the Holocaust" (Wollaston 2010, 439).

One of these iconic Holocaust photographs features a religious Jewish man wearing a *tallit* (prayer shawl) and *tefillin* (phylacteries), which appear to have been damaged and torn apart. He is standing in the middle of a square, barefoot, his head bowed down, and his hands folded across his chest. At his feet, we notice several men, lying down facing the ground,

*I would like to thank Yohai Cohen for providing me a copy of the captioned photograph analyzed in the chapter as it was displayed in Yad Vashem's museum and Shlomo Strauss for sharing the source on architect Yeshayahu Ilan and his buildings with me. I would also like to thank Krzysztof Kocjan for his useful comments.

their hands behind their backs. Behind the man, there are around eight Germans in uniforms, some staring directly at the camera, others clearly amused by the scene. This single photograph was, and still is, the subject of various historical (mis)interpretations regarding the nature of the depicted events, the location of the scene, the fate of the photographed people and the circumstances behind its creation and discovery. These conflicting versions gave birth to numerous analyses, including theological readings, and turned the photograph into a decontextualized and recontextualized emblem of both Jewish suffering and spiritual defiance.

This chapter deconstructs the myths surrounding the photograph and traces its concrete and symbolic trajectories in museums, memorial sites, family narratives, and academic and popular publications across the world (Lower 2021; Porat 2010; Shneer 2020). Analyzing the multiple lenses through which the photograph, as a historical document *and* an image, is

Figure 12.1. Moshe Hagerman standing in the market square in Olkusz, as part of the events of "Bloody Wednesday," July 31, 1940. *Source:* Courtesy of the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, Poland. Used with permission.

being framed, understood, and reproduced, this case study shows how certain iconic Holocaust images are prone to become malleable objects, susceptible to Rashomonic accounts invoked by different actors to support competing ideological, political, and historiographical narratives.

This case study also demonstrates the extent to which our historical knowledge and cultural memory of the Holocaust and other atrocities is intrinsically dependent on perpetrators' photography. What happens when we try to understand, or remember, the Holocaust through German photographic documentation? What are the ethical implications of visualizing and contemplating Jewish history through photographs of Jews as persecuted objects? Highlighting the problems (and temptations) of seeing Jewish history through the victimizers' lens, I wish to critically analyze the various framings and uses (or abuses) of iconic Holocaust photographs, but also try and see them as part of a creative-hermeneutical attempt to reclaim and subvert the oppressive German gaze.

But let us first focus our gaze on the man in the center. Moshe Yoel Hagerman, the son of Yitzhak and Malka, was born in 1898 in Olkusz, a midsized town in southern Poland between Kraków and Katowice. On the eve of World War II around one quarter of the 10,000 local inhabitants were Jewish. In many of the written and oral postwar accounts attached to the photo, Hagerman is presented as the town's rabbi or the local *dayan* (religious judge). Yet he was neither. Hagerman worked as a *melamed*, teaching Torah to young children, directly employed by the Jewish community (Starostwo Powiatowe Olkuski n.d.). He was married to Fruma (born 1903), and they had four kids: Yitzhak Paltiel (born 1923), Avraham Leyb (born 1925), Malka Fayga (born 1929), and Shaul Nathan (born 1930).

The chain of events that condemned Hagerman to stand barefoot in the square and to become an endlessly reproduced symbol of Jewish humiliation unfolded on July 15, 1940. By then, Olkusz was annexed to the Third Reich, bordering the General Government from the east. The Jews were still living in their houses at that time, but they were already ordered to wear a white armband with a Star of David and were subjected to economic restrictions, forced labor, and arbitrary violence. On this mid-July day, a German policeman who served in the local civil administration was shot dead during the night in his house, which had been confiscated from a local Polish physician. The identity of the assailants was unclear. According to local rumors, the murder was committed by Polish underground fighters, but later it turned out that he was probably killed by armed robbers who broke into the house. As a reprisal, the next day, the Germans gathered

twenty Poles (non-Jews) from the region and executed them outside of town (Kocjan 2017, 37).

The second stage of the collective punishment took place two weeks later. This time, Jews were also targeted. Early in the morning on Wednesday, July 31, members of the German Police and *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD), the Security Service of the SS, started moving from house to house and violently forced all adult men (between fifteen and fifty-five according to several versions), Jews and non-Jews, to report to several concentration points around town, where they were beaten and abused for several hours. The largest group was brought to the market square where they had to lie down, facing the ground, under the blazing sun until the afternoon (Dressen, Riess, and Klee 1988, 7–15). Although most Jewish recollections of this day describe it as an attack singling out solely Jews, the German policemen did not differentiate between Jews and non-Jews, who were lying side by side on the square. The men were hit with clubs and whips; some suffered kicks to their heads. Others were selected randomly and forced to run back and forth while carrying rocks or underwent various forms of physical torture. According to several accounts, two men, one of them an Olkusz-born American Jew, died from their wounds. A few days later, as some versions recall, a local priest who was badly injured passed away in the hospital. Polish and Jewish witnesses recall that for several days the square was tainted in red from the blood of the victims (Blumenfeld 1996; Dror-Blady 1998; Forman 1996; Mentlewicz, Szczygieł, and Zubowa 1984; Sypień 2020; Rotner 1998; Vaytsman 1997; Yashiv 1972). Many of the persecuted men could hardly walk back to their homes and needed several days to recover from what later came to be known as "Bloody Wednesday"—*Der Blutiker Mitvokh* in Yiddish or *Krwawa Środa* in Polish, reflecting the two distinct memory cultures that determined the conflicting perception of the events.

The local Polish commemorative events and historical publications surrounding *Krwawa Środa* in the postwar decades portrayed the events in the framework of the Polish-national martyrdom and tended to ignore the fate of the Jews, exhibiting mostly photographs that do not show the particular abuse of the Jews. Though both Jews and Christians were indeed targeted that day, traditional-looking Jews received a special treatment, as both Jewish and Polish accounts recall, and as is evident from the available rich photographic documentation (Levin and Uziel 1998, 14–15). As in other parts of Nazi-occupied Poland, the abuse and humiliation of Jews was not ordered from above but was rather a spontaneous practice performed by the German occupation forces, many of them coming into contact for the first time with those "Jews from the east," who figured prominently

in Nazi propaganda (Uziel 2001). As occurred in Olkusz on this day, several Jews had their beards cut off and were forced to pose for the camera in derogatory positions. It is not clear what exactly led to the encounter between the Germans and the man who would become, unwillingly, the Jewish emblem of "Bloody Wednesday." Testimonies of Olkusz survivors claim that Moshe Hagerman was met by a group of policemen who barged into his house and found him in the middle of the morning prayer, wearing *Tefillin* and *Tallit* (Yashiv 1972, 128). After being led to the square, some two minutes' walk from his house, at a certain point he appeared to have caught the attention of the unknown photographer whose camera followed him throughout his day of torments. Hagerman figures in several other photos, in which he was told to pose for the camera in various degrading positions, alone or together with other Jews. In some of the photographs his *Tefillin* are still intact while in others he is bareheaded. In one of the photographs (fig. 12.2), we see him accompanied by a young man, who was identified as his nephew Lejbush, as he is being forced by a German policeman to dive in the nearby river, fully clothed.

Figure 12.2. Moshe Hagerman being forced to dive in the river. Olkusz, July 31, 1940. *Source:* Courtesy of the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, Poland. Used with permission.

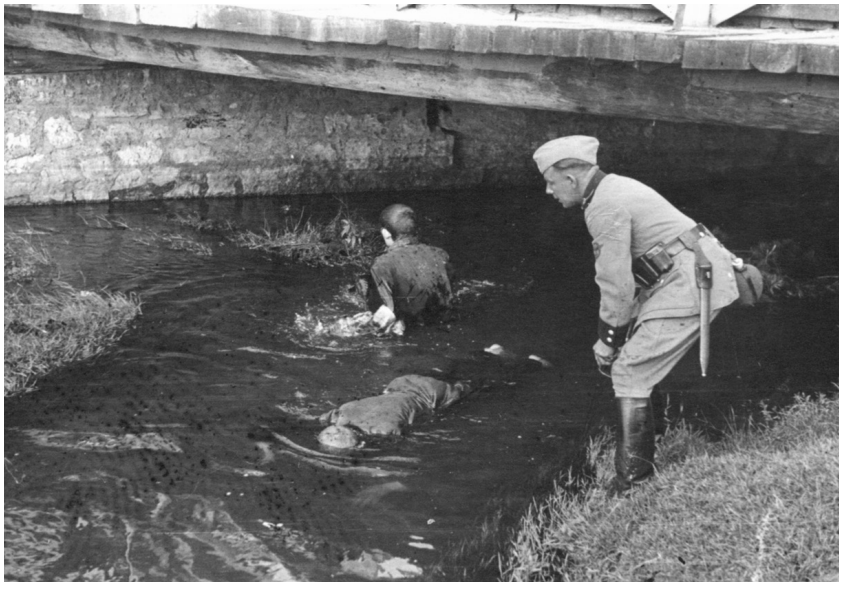


Figure 12.3. Moshe Hagerman (encircled) stands with a group of Jews in the market square. Olkusz, July 31, 1940. *Source:* Courtesy Photo Archives of Yad Vashem. Used with permission.

In a video testimony recorded by Yad Vashem, Dror-Blady (1998) provided details on the minutes leading to the moment captured in the most iconic frame. Dror was among those who were forced to lie down in the square, and he recalls that he was positioned very close to where Hagerman was standing, to the extent that he could see how the Germans split apart the black parcel of the *tefillin* and ordered him to place it again on his head. According to his version, right before the destruction of the phylacteries, one of the Germans asked Hagerman to explain the nature of those items he is wearing. After Hagerman explained that these are ritual objects used for prayer, the German allegedly said: "But God is no longer with you, the Jews, he is with us," pointing on his belt's buckle which was inscribed with the writing "Gott Mit Uns" (God with us). At the end of this long Wednesday, Hagerman—like the rest of the town's men—returned to his house injured and abused. Not long after, Hagerman, together with the entire Jewish community, was incarcerated in the local ghetto. From there, in June 1942, Hagerman and his family, along with the vast majority

of the Jewish community, were deported by trains to Auschwitz where they were probably murdered in the gas chambers immediately upon their arrival (Kocjan 2017, 102–45).

Like other iconic "heroes" of the Holocaust, Moshe Hagerman owes his sad fame to the perpetrators' visual documentation. From the early days of the invasion of Poland, the camera became a "metonymic extension of the Nazi weaponry" (Prager 2008, 22). Whether made by professionals from the propaganda units attached to the advancing troops or by amateur photographers—German soldiers, policemen, and civilians who brought their cameras with them to their posting—the perpetrators' photographic documentation is the major source for visual historical evidence of the crimes against the Jews and other groups (Levin and Uziel 1998; Loewy 1997; Struk 2004). Whereas photographs capturing the actual killings are very scarce, there is an abundance of photos from the ghettos as well as from earlier stages of the war in the east. Scenes depicting the poverty and hunger in the ghettos' streets were published in propaganda publications, entrenching and corroborating the perception of the Jews as a deadly and dangerous threat and thus justifying their persecution as a crucial act of self-preservation. At the same time, sights of humiliated and defeated Jews (and other, mainly Slavic populations) were used to convey a victorious message from the front (Knoch 2001).

While representatives from the propaganda units often had clear objectives when taking pictures—very often carefully designing the mise-en-scène and giving direct stage instructions to the Jews—personal photos taken by nonprofessionals were far less orchestrated and seemed to have multiple purposes and different motives. Soldiers and policemen in transit would often capture images from the ghettos out of stereotypically fueled curiosity or exotic fascination, while others appear to have been motivated by a sense of historical awareness and a wish to document the events—whether out of a feeling of ideological superiority or, to a lesser extent, some moral sensibilities and a desire to document the atrocities of war (Gutterman and Springer-Aharoni 2013). Very often those who carried their personal camera were not merely taking pictures, but rather documenting their own abuse and humiliation of Jews, particularly those who appeared to them as bearing "typical" characteristics. Many of these items were reproduced and found their way home to Germany as postcards sent from the front to the families. Similar to official photographs, they also appeared in the press and newsreels. Such images also circulated among the occupation forces, who would collect and purchase them as souvenirs and trophies. Negatives,

prints, and even entire albums were found at the end of the war by the liberating forces and the survivors, in deserted German posts or on the bodies of fallen soldiers (Gutman and Gutterman 2002). We do not know who stood behind the camera on that particular Wednesday in Olkusz's market square, but most probably it was not the work of any propaganda unit, but rather a spontaneous documentation of a policeman who wished to capture the abuse of the town's population, particularly the Jews, turning the camera into a participating observer in the scene and taking an active part in the humiliation.

The Circulation of the Photograph

There exist several dozen photographs documenting the events of "Bloody Wednesday" in Olkusz, and stories of the circumstances behind their development and discovery are varied. According to a popular version in Olkusz, repeated in slightly different nuances in local publications and memoirs, after the violent events several armed Germans brought the negatives to the studio of the local photographer Włodzimierz Dębiec, forcing him to develop them. As the story goes, Dębiec risked his life and secretly kept some prints of the photographs for future generations (Dziechciarz 2018). The Polish photographer placed these copies in a box and buried it in the garden until the end of the war. He later brought it to the postwar Polish authorities. Interestingly enough, however, according to this local story the secret prints were not those showing persecuted Hagerman. Instead, they depicted the general terrorization of the town's men.

Jewish accounts of the negatives' recovery tell a similar story, but frame it precisely around the single photograph showing Hagerman surrounded by the laughing Germans. These accounts emphasize the Jews' part in disseminating the memory of "Bloody Wednesday" and further narrate it as a particular anti-Jewish event. In later testimonies, Olkusz survivors also mentioned a Polish photographer as the one who made the secret prints, but claimed it was a woman. After the war, when the first Jews returned to town, this version goes, she approached them and deposited the negatives in the hands of the few survivors—who later brought the materials to Jewish institutions (Dror-Blady 1998; Ziegler 1995). Other sources give an entirely different version of the photograph's discovery. According to the caption accompanying Hagerman's photo published in a 1983 Polish edition of

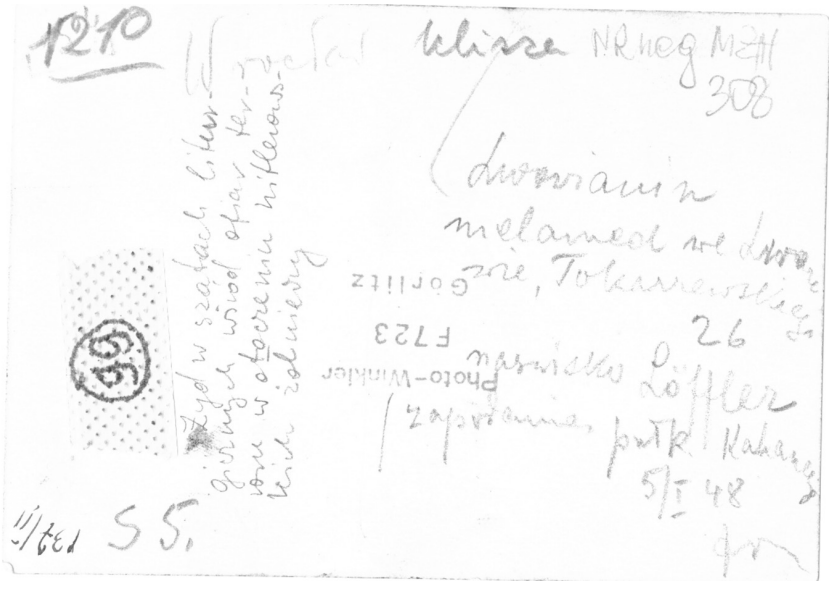
Adam Czerniaków's diary from the Warsaw ghetto, the photograph, which shows "bodies of Jews and smiling Germans," was found on the body of a dead German soldier (Fuks 1983, 240).

The rapid and extensive circulation and reproduction of the photograph after the war make it hard to unequivocally trace its provenance, but it appears that, as early as the 1950s, many Holocaust documentation and commemoration centers around the world received copies of the photo, directly or indirectly, through one source—the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw (ŻIH). Established in 1947 as the successor of the Central Jewish Historical Commission, one of the institute's main tasks was to collect testimonial sources of the destruction of Polish Jewry, among them photographs. The ŻIH soon became a leading arbiter in preserving and interpreting the visual documentation of the Holocaust in Poland.

According to the ŻIH, the original print, from which probably all other copies were reproduced, arrived in their possession shortly after the war, through one of the different branches of the Jewish Historical Commission that operated in Poland in the immediate postwar period, collecting testimonies and evidence of the genocide. On the back of this particular print, we can notice a stamp of "Photo-Winkler" from Görlitz, a city located on the German-Polish post-1945 border. Such a photo studio did exist in Görlitz under the management of Adolf Winkler and probably was still active in the first postwar years. While the negatives were never found, the stamp on the back of the photo, the fact that it arrived at a very early stage at the ŻIH, and the latter's experts who examined the photo, allow us to conclude with high probability that this single photo stored in Warsaw is most probably an original one, that is—developed directly from the negative in the German studio. When and how the negative arrived in Görlitz and how the original print ended up back in Poland remain unknown. Among the many photographs from "Bloody Wednesday," only one other carries the stamp of "Photo-Winkler"—the photo of Moshe Hagerman and his nephew forced to dive into the river (fig. 12.2).

The first identification of the photograph occurred in 1948 by workers of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. According to the hand-written text on the back of the original photo, it depicts "a Jew in liturgical vestments among victims of terror surrounded by Nazi soldiers." Another text identifies the scene as taking place in the formerly Polish city Lwów (after 1945 Lviv in Ukraine), and the man at the center as a *melamed* named Löffler, from Tokarzewskiego St. 26. The source for these details is mentioned

Figure 12.4. The back of Moshe Hagerman's original photograph. *Source:* Courtesy of the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, Poland. Used with permission.



as Colonel David Kahane, the Chief Rabbi of the Polish Army, who gave his testimony in 1948. This version remained the official identification of the ŻIH archive until the early 2000s. Archives and research centers around the world that received copies of the photos have also presented them as originating from Lwów.

While this early attempt of identification, albeit wrong, represented a perception of the photograph as a historical source depicting specific incidents and people, in its later trajectories this historical-forensic approach was abandoned, as the photograph entered the symbolic-visual vocabulary of the emerging Jewish and universal memory of the Nazi atrocities. Already during the 1950s, it started appearing in exhibitions and publications and became an often-reproduced image (Schoenberner 1960, 36). In most instances, the photograph appeared either without any specific or localized context, or merely illustrating the humiliation, abuse, or murder of the Jews. When concrete details did appear, they were always false and tended to portray the events in generalized, archetypical terms. An article titled "*Kiddush Hashem* [martyrdom] in the Ghettos," published in the New-York

based, Yiddish newspaper *Forverts* on the Holocaust Memorial Day in 1959, was accompanied by a half-sized photo of Hagerman. The caption went as follows: "A scene from Warsaw ghetto. A barefoot rabbi is reciting Kaddish over the murdered Jews in Warsaw ghetto, wearing *tallit* and *tefillin* as the Nazi murderers are laughing" (Menes 1959).

The paradigmatic status of the Warsaw ghetto in the Jewish memory in the first postwar decades, as a metonym of the Holocaust, might account for the choice to place the scene in the Warsaw ghetto—a location that is both specific and an abstract realm of memory—but various locations were also mentioned. On an undated old postcard, which can still be found in online public auctions, the photo bears the inscription "Tormenting Jews in Minsk [Belarus]," in English and Russian. In a publication from the 1990s,

Figure 12.5. Moshe Hagerman in the market square in Olkusz, July 31, 1940 (inscribed as "Kiddush Hashem [martyrdom] in the Ghettos"). *Source: Forverts*, April 19, 1959.

the photo is claimed to capture a massacre in Żarki, a small town not far from Olkusz, wherein "a Jew wearing his prayer shawl and phylacteries recites Kaddish over bodies of Jews murdered by the Germans" (Arad 1990, 81).

The Kaddish version became one of the most popular explanations attached to the photograph, framing it as a graphic visualization of traditional patterns of Jewish memorialization and further turning the anonymous man into an emblematic Jewish martyr. Insisting to put the words of the ancient Jewish prayer in Hagerman's mouth, might have also reflected the wish to endow the Jewish victims with a certain agency, thus perhaps inverting the original essence of the photograph as an act of humiliation, created by and for the victimizers.

In the 1960s, several survivors from Olkusz stumbled upon the photograph and immediately recognized the events and identified Hagerman.

Figure 12.6. Moshe Hagerman in the market square in Olkusz, July 31, 1940 (inscribed as "Tormenting Jews in Minsk," undated postcard). *Source:* Public domain.

In 1972, with the publication of Olkusz's Yizkor-book, it appeared together with an elaborated historical context, but this did not affect the creative interpretations from further circulating and evolving. With the opening of the old historical museum of Yad Vashem in the 1970s, the enlarged photograph accompanied, uncaptioned and unidentified, the part of the exhibition on "Persecution and Atrocities." From conversations with senior Yad Vashem employees, I learned that over the years visitors used to hear various interpretations from the museum guides, which usually provided false details, arguing that the people lying down are dead and that Hagerman would soon join them.

In a 1990 letter to Yad Vashem, Mosheh Vaytsman, an Israeli survivor from Olkusz who was among the men persecuted in 1940 in the square, requested that the institution tell the real story behind the photo. Leaving it uncaptioned and unexplained, he argued, falsifies history and disrespects the victims. In response, Yitzhak Arad politely thanked him, but wrote: "The information you provided us in your letter is indeed important and we strictly preserve it. However, we usually don't mention the name of photographed people or personal details, but rather the event in its historical context" (Arad 1990). This short correspondence is telling, as it reflects two competing understandings regarding the meaning and use of Holocaust photographs and of their mnemonic significance. Arad's response expressed a perception—common in Holocaust institutions until the 1990s—which tended to treat photographs as a vessel of collective memory and a means to convey some general historical message. Conversely, the survivor's personal appeal scoffs at the idea of obscuring the individuality of the depicted victims in favor of deriving some generalized, historical impression, and insists that treating the photograph as a concrete historical document is the only adequate memorialization. In 1993, after the renovation of Yad Vashem's museum, a caption was eventually attached to the photo that indeed ascribed it to Olkusz. Yet again, it provided the usual story: "A Jew in a prayer shawl and desecrated phylacteries jeered by German soldiers as he is forced to recite the prayer for the dead over the bodies of murdered Jews, Olkusz, Poland 1940."

Mosheh Vaytsman, the author's grandfather, stood at the center of another episode connected to the photograph when in 1998, the weekly leaflet *Sichat Hashavua* (Talk of the Week) distributed in synagogues in Israel by Chabad (Hasidic dynasty, a.k.a. Lubavitch), shared with its readers a "recent revelation" on the origins of the photograph and the identity of Hagerman, following the alleged discovery of an old Swiss-Yiddish

newspaper clip that brought the story behind the photo. The report again told the version according to which Hagerman was allowed to say Kaddish over his dead brethren before joining them, bringing a direct quote from a "wartime diary" of Mosheh Vaytsman, who, according to the leaflet, died in the Holocaust and left a testimony on what had happened in Olkusz on this day (Brod 1998).

The saga of misidentification and misinterpretation of this single photograph unfolded also outside the boundaries of Israel. In 1995, it was exhibited in Germany as part of the controversial "Wehrmacht Exhibition," which revealed the involvement of the German army in war crimes and civilians' murder during WWII, thus dispelling the long-standing myth according to which the Wehrmacht's soldiers were not involved in the Holocaust. Apart from the nationalist and defensive backlash against the exhibition, critics have also argued that several of the photographs presented in the exhibition as evidence of the Wehrmacht's crimes are false, since the perpetrators are not soldiers of the army, but rather the SS, SD, or even Soviet forces. One of the contested photographs was that of Moshe Hagerman, which was shown in the original exhibition with the caption: "A selection in a Polish city. An amateur photo from a series." The accompanying historical catalog argued that doctors and commanders of the Wehrmacht carried out the selection, and further narrated the scene. "The rabbi, the main motif of the photograph, stands calm, resigned to his fate and at the same time aloof," explained the text, and suggested that he was either selected to death as an old man who is unable to work or was held accountable for the entire community as a member of the Jewish Council (*Judenrat*) (Heer and Naumann 1995, 488–89). In the revised version of the exhibition six years later, the photograph from Olkusz was no longer included after it turned out that soldiers of the army were not involved in the events and that the story of this particular selection never happened (Struk 2004, 232n30).

Horizons of Expectation

False interpretations and competing identifications of Holocaust photographs are not a new phenomenon (Porat 2010; Struk 2004, 200–206). The versatile and creative accounts that were often attached to the photographs were encouraged by the lack of historical details on many of the depicted events and by a general archival policy that usually did not treat photographs as historical evidence, but rather as symbolic images of certain aspects of

the Holocaust. This phenomenon is also a result of the need to "identify" oneself in the historical image, and of the symbolic and iconic status of the photo that legitimizes its decontextualization and flaccidity (Kielbach 2009). The extent to which a certain photograph acquires this Rashomon-like status is therefore a result of our own expectations and interpretive patterns, and the evocative power of the photograph, its composition, and its symbolic potential. When we look at such images, writes Brad Prager, "our understanding of them is predicated on the projection of knowledge and desire—or, one could say, horizons of expectation—onto those we see depicted" (Prager 2008, 34).

In the case of the famous photograph from Olkusz, these "horizons of expectation" coincided with its specific content and form, which appear to possess all of the visual traits to become such malleable, symbolic representation. Almost everything in the photograph begs for a figurative interpretation and seems to converge around a clear and scripted symbolic nexus. The uniqueness of the photo is located both in the presence of charged symbolic objects and gestures and in the relations between its elements. The traditional appearance of Hagerman, his deformed religious articles and shabby clothes, and his lowered, submissive gaze stand in contrast to the confident and nonchalant posture of the Germans, their amused and curious expression and direct stare, and the neatness and order of their physical appearance. It almost seems as if someone directed this scene to conform to a known and expected narrative. Every button in the Germans' uniforms is in place, the hunters and the hunted fulfill their role in this eternal struggle between the evil perpetrators and helpless victims. The juxtaposition of the lying, faceless Jews and the upright expressive Germans creates a symmetrical contrast, as if to set the stage for Moshe Hagerman, whose central and special role is also emphasized by his bare feet, as opposed to the high German boots and the lying men's shoes.

The composition of the photograph works to distinguish Hagerman from the surroundings and creates the impression that he is placed in an internal sphere of his own, at the same time vulnerable and inviolable, almost protected from the terror around him. This somewhat unbreakable persona is all the more emphasized by the position of his hands, folded as a shield, protecting some inner untouchable self. The circumstance that Hagerman is barefoot also supports this reading, as it is both as a symbol of humiliation and a semiotic marker of the proximity to the divine presence. The symbolic power and iconic potential of the photo, thus enable us to understand how and why so many viewers allowed themselves to arrive at the almost foregone

conclusion after this visual build-up—condemning Moshe Hagerman to be "shot after he is shot," to paraphrase Marianne Hirsch, as an omnipresent martyr, abused and sublime at once (Hirsch 2001, 24).

It is precisely this combination of horror and sublimity that constitutes the lure of iconic Holocaust photographs and accounts for their ahistorical and abstract status (Brink 2000). Several scholars have critically emphasized the extent to which iconic Holocaust photographs delimit our opportunity for historical understanding and prevent us from inquiring into the use and origins of the photographs (Brink 2000; Crane 2008; Hirsch 2001). But while the prevailing perception of such images tends to decontextualize the historical reality, at the same time they are often being recontextualized into a sophisticated narrative that seeks to transcend and redeem the past, in a way that "exemplifies sacrifice and redemption" at the same time (Brink 2000, 143).

Cornelia Brink terms such photographs "secular icons," but the reception of Moshe Hagerman's image is everything but secular. Fitting into the familiar pattern of Jewish martyrdom and religious resilience, the humiliated man, who seems to possess an unbreakable inner essence, surrounded by his tormentors and wearing his desecrated crown, barefoot and looking down the earth, also evokes the most iconic Christian imagery. Encountering this photo for the first time, the suffering Hagerman reminded Olgerd Dziechciarz, a Polish poet and journalist from Olkusz, of the famous painting *Christ Carrying the Cross* by Hieronymus Bosch. "I cannot help thinking that the painting and this photograph have something in common. They are so mystically charged that I can see God's hand in both of them. Moshe Hagerman, just like the other Jew from almost two thousand years ago, has a face full of inner peace. It is as if he does not care that there are people around him who want to degrade him" (Dziechciarz 2002).

The association to the Nazarene was also made by the Polish-born, Israeli author Ka-Tsetnik (Yehiel De-Nur), when contemplating the same photograph. He too, reads Jesus into his vision of Hagerman's image, but invertedly "re-Judaizes" him through his creative interpretation of the photograph, in which he sees a revelatory moment of transcendence in the face of pure evil. In his last, and most enigmatic, book, *Shivitti: A Vision* (originally published in 1987 in Hebrew), Hagerman figures as a leitmotif and a divine revenant who accompanies the author's hallucinatory impressions recorded under the influence of LSD, with which he was treated in the Netherlands in an attempt to cure his acute post-traumatic syndrome. In the forward to this psychedelic and mystical reenactment of his Auschwitz

experience, he mentions the photograph of "the Jew on the wall," which is hung over his desk.

> For the first time I took note that the normally square case of the head tefillin was spread into three peaks, like the three strokes in the Hebrew [letter] *Shin* (ש), and was perched like a crown on the head of the Jew. . . . Any moment now a bullet would dispatch him to join the row of corpses lined at the feet of the rollicking German fraternity of warriors. But it was not the moment of shooting that was of significance here. Anyone could see this, once in touch with the hidden light radiating from the face of the Jew. . . . Just look at the serenity on his face! And at those eyes, the way he looks down at the spot where he will fall in another moment! His hands are folded, defying description, as does the light beaming from his bare feet . . . before he falls among the dead lined up on the ground, the horizons suddenly flare blue into other-worldly incandescence such as I've never seen. (Ka-Tsetnik 1998, xvii–xix, 5)

De-Nur might have been disappointed to learn the true story behind the photograph. His mystical analysis, however, provides an articulated rationale to the common narrative that elevated the confrontation between the victims and the victimizers to a dramatic, symbolic level and inevitably places the captured events as a deterministic prelude for the ultimate *Kiddush Hashem*—which is also portrayed as a moment of epiphany. His reading of Hagerman's image reflects the extent to which photographs became both a mnemonic medium and a prism through which we understand the meaning of Jewish history after the Holocaust. The Jew is transformed from a humiliated victim into a triumphant martyr, who defies the German attempt to crush his spirit, turning the photo into an iconic one, in the original religious sense of the word.

Seen in this light, it is understandable why attempting to provide a concrete and detailed historically contextualized explanation of the photograph threatens to interfere with the irresistible temptation of transcending the photograph to theological dimensions. Knowing that Hagerman, as well the rest of the Jews in the photo, returned to their houses at the end of that day, it might be hard to treat the photo as a "photographic image of transcendence," as posited by David Patterson (2018, 209). Moshe Hagerman is thus being deprived of his individuality and becomes a vessel for

divine presence, and the concurrent Nazi attempt to destroy it. "It is . . . a photograph of the Nazi assault on transcendence itself," writes Patterson (211). But this attempt, he argues, is doomed to fail, and only reinforces what it wishes to destroy. "Rabbi Hagerman is surrounded not by the wings of the Angel of Death but by those who would obliterate the Angel of Death, the Angel of a Thousand Eyes, who is also an emanation of the glory of the Infinite" (211).

This attempt to extract some redemptive meaning in the image of the suffering and humiliated Hagerman has also received a surprising permanent manifestation in spatial terms. The Architect Yeshayahu Ilan, who designed several monumental synagogues and *yeshivoth* in Israel, was inspired by the famous photograph from Olkusz while conceiving his unique buildings, whose roofs are shaped in the form of spread wings. The desecrated *tefillin* on Hagerman's head appeared to him "as some kind of a winged '*Shin*' [the

Figure 12.7. Pachad Yitzhak Yeshiva, Har-Nof, Jerusalem, early 2020s. Photo by Yechiel Weizman. *Source:* Courtesy of the photographer.

Hebrew letter ש]" (Ilan 1992, 52). The image of the obliterated-winged *tefillin* reminded him of the Talmudic story of Elisha the man-of-the-wings (*Elisha ba'al kenafayim*), who disobeyed the Romans' prohibition to wear *tefillin* and managed to escape execution thanks to a miraculous intervention that turned his *tefillin* into wings of a dove. Combining these two sources, Ilan integrated the image of the degraded religious object into his architectural signature, expressing the sublime inversion of the Jewish persecution. As can be seen in the photograph below, the three wings–shaped roof of the building of the Jerusalemite *Yeshiva* he designed, is supposed to resemble both the Hebrew letter *Shin* (ש), which is printed on the *tefillin*, as well as the torn item on Hagerman's head—which appears to be split into three parts.

Since the early 2000s, Holocaust institutions around the world have been putting an emphasis on meticulous research of visual materials and attempts have been made to identify the protagonists and the historical reality captured in photographs. With the opening of the new museum in Yad Vashem in 2005, the iconic image from Olkusz appeared in the new exhibition, this time with an elaborated and correct depiction of the events, and with Hagerman's name. But this did not stop the photograph from being circulated, cropped, misinterpreted, and used in various theological and ideological contexts—now aided by the rapid development of digital reproduction methods and social media. Once in a while, Hagerman is used in Facebook discussions as a polemical tool, in order to protest, for example, against the alleged mocking of the *tefillin* in the famous Israeli satire show *Eretz Nehederet*, or to attack those who oppose attempts to persuade high school students in Tel-Aviv to wear *tefillin*. In all of these heated posts, the logic was patent; "How dare you mock or oppose the *mitzvah* of *tefillin*, while the victims of the Holocaust gave their life to wear it" (Hagag 2018).

The digital afterlife of Moshe Hagerman demonstrates the innumerable circulation of Holocaust images and their unlimited flaccidity and applicability, but in a sense, these examples are merely a new manifestation of the *mesirut-nefesh* (self-sacrifice) trope in Jewish tradition—which acquires its authoritative visual ratification through the iconic status of certain photographs in the age of technological reproduction. The fusing of such photographic evidence with rooted ideological patterns and mnemonic practices constitutes a traditional-modern Jewish way of seeing Jewish suffering and devotion, which functions as a powerful and persuasive interpretative mechanism of Jewish history. Ironically, this emotional line of reasoning makes use of the Nazi humiliating gaze in order to propagate a narrative of proud Jewish identity. In a New York internet bulletin of *Chabad* New York, Hagerman

was again invoked by an author who reported on his encounter on a plane with "a group of young Israeli youth who belonged to a certain anti-religious movement." After failing to convince them to put on *tefillin* and being laughed at, he was approached by a woman who asked his permission to talk to the boys, assuring him that she will be able to persuade them "in two minutes." After telling the group about her parents who survived the Holocaust and "built a true Jewish home founded on *Torah* and *Mitzvos*," she told them about the photograph and asked them, "which man in the picture do you identify with, the Jew or the Nazi?" In an instant, writes the reporter, all members of the group rolled up their sleeves and asked to put on the *tefillin* (Elisha 2017).

While Hagerman's image continues to be reevoked, reproduced, and remolded as an argumentative token in the public sphere, recently it returned "home," to the concrete space of present-day Olkusz. Only after Hagerman became a worldwide poster boy for the Jewish humiliation and sublimity, he was adopted also as a local symbol, a representation for the fate of Olkusz's murdered and absent Jews. When visiting the town today, one can see him accompanying memorial plaques and public billboards, cropped and abstracted from the larger photograph, as some sort of saint in his own monadic transcendence universe. But his transformation into the town's Jewish logo transpired as part of a bitter and dissonant local struggle on the commemoration of the Holocaust and World War II in the public space. After decades of collective forgetfulness of the town's Jewish fate and focus on the Polish suffering, Hagerman's image was summoned by local non-Jewish activists to reconquer and redesign the town's mnemonic landscape, forcing the current inhabitants to come to terms with the unsettling Jewish past but also generating a defensive and nationalist backlash against the "Judaization" of the wartime narrative. Since the 2000s, local politicians and activists from Olkusz, for example, have repeatedly complained that Holocaust museums and publications around the world are portraying the events of "Bloody Wednesday" as solely anti-Jewish, while completely ignoring the persecution of the Christian-Polish population (Dańko 2006).

The omnipresence of Holocaust photographs has created a new system of visual representations and eidetic language through which we understand, imagine, and remember the Jewish fate. This post-Holocaust "way of seeing," however, is based mainly on a photographic endeavor that was an integral part of the dehumanization and humiliation of the victims. "When we confront perpetrator images," Marianne Hirsch reminds us, "we cannot look independently of the look of the perpetrator" (Hirsch 2001, 26).

Figure 12.8. The cropped image of Moshe Hagerman printed on memorial tablets in the Jewish cemetery, the place of the former synagogue, and the market square in Olkusz. Photo by Yechiel Weizman. *Source:* Courtesy of the photographer.

Some scholars have suggested that the adequate ethical course of action to deal with such materials is "choosing not to look" or adopting a "ban" on images created by and for the victimizers (Crane 2008, 22). But as Ulrich Baer argues, "To insist that the meaning of Nazi-photographed images is established exclusively by their creators' intentions and uses, implies that the Nazis have subdued the force of critical analysis with their murderous assault on the means of respectful commemoration" (Baer 2002, 174). The many afterlives of the photograph from Olkusz, while often depriving its protagonist of his individuality and falsify history, in many ways demonstrate how Nazi visual documentation is being "reclaimed" in order to emphasize Jewish resilience in the face of horror. There is a certain insistence to extract a deeper, higher meaning from the Jewish helplessness, thus inverting the original meaning invested in the photograph by the perpetrators. The problematic act of decontextualizing and exploiting the image of the barefoot Hagerman is perhaps some kind of a hermeneutical act of reappropriating the gaze, which turns Nazi visual documentation *of Jews* into *Jewish photography* and transforms the Jewish victims from the camera's passive objects to its agent subjects.

As for Moshe Hagerman, he will probably continue to stand in the square, forever barefoot, forever cropped, forever copy-pasted, caught in the intersection of opposing gazes and trapped between the wish to salvage him from the reach of the Nazi lens and the refusal to release him from his many roles he has come to fulfill so well.

Works Cited

Arad, Yitzhak, ed. 1990. *The Pictorial History of the Holocaust*. Macmillan.

———. 1990. To Mosheh Vaytsman. Private archive of the author.

Baer, Ulrich. 2002. *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*. MIT Press.

Blumenfeld, Sam. 1996. Interview 18894. Interview by Lillian Gewirtzman. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation. August 22. https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/18894.

Brink, Cornelia. 2000. "Secular Icons: Looking at Photographs from Nazi Concentration Camps." *History and Memory* 12 (1): 135–50.

Brod, Menchem. 1998. "Every Photograph Has a Name" [in Hebrew]. *Sichat Hashavua*, no. 625 (December 25).

Crane, Susan A. 2008. "Choosing Not to Look: Representation, Repatriation, and Holocaust Atrocity Photography." *History and Theory* 47 (3): 309–30.

Dańko, Ireneusz. 2006. "Władze Olkusza prostują przekłamania Yad Vashem." *Gazeta Wyborcza Kraków*, July 14. https://krakow.wyborcza.pl/krakow/7,44425,3485687.html.

Dressen, Willi, Volker Riess, and Ernst Klee. 1988. *Schöne Zeiten: Judenmord aus der Sicht der Täter und Gaffer*. Fischer Verlag.

Dror-Blady, David. 1998. Interview 0.3, 11107. Yad Vashem Archives. October 10.

Dziechciarz, Olgerd. 2002. "Książka o Zagładzie." *Gazeta Krakowska*, December 12.

———. 2018. "'Krwawa środa' w oczach Henryka Osucha." *Olkuski Przegląd*, August 19. https://przeglad.olkuski.pl/krwawa-środa-w-oczach-henryka-osucha/.

Elisha, Bentzion. 2017. "Story: 'Which Man Do You Identify With?'" *Crown-Heights.info*, July 11. https://crownheights.info/something-jewish/583804/story-man-identify/.

Forman, Tzila. 1996. Interview 0.3, 3747379. Yad Vashem Archives. April 4.

Fuks, Marian, ed. 1983. *Adama Czerniakowa dziennik getta warszawskiego*. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe.

Gutman, Israel, and Bella Gutterman, eds. 2002. *The Auschwitz Album: The Story of a Transport*. Yad Vashem Publications.

Gutterman, Bella, and Nina Springer-Aharoni, eds. 2013. *The End! Radom and Szydlowiec through the Eyes of a German Photographer*. Yad Vashem Publications.

Hagag, Tsahi. 2018. "In Eretz Nehederet They Are Using Tefillin as a Setting for a Joke . . ." [in Hebrew]. Facebook, May 18. https://www.facebook.com/TsHagag/posts/420953698316262/.

Heer, Hannes, and Klaus Naumann, eds. 1995. *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941–1944*. Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung.

Hirsch, Marianne. 2001. "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory." *Yale Journal of Criticism* 14 (1): 5–37.

Ilan, Yeshayahu. 1992. "Places" [in Hebrew]. In *The Synagogue's Structure in Israel, 1948–1992*. Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design and the Ministry of Education and Culture. Exhibition catalog.

Ka-Tsetnik. 1998. *Shivitti: A Vision*. Gateway.
Kielbach, Judith. 2009. "Photographs, Symbolic Images, and the Holocaust: On the (Im)Possibility of Depicting Historical Truth." *History and Theory* 48 (2): 54–76.
Knoch, Habbo. 2001. *Die Tat als Bild: Fotografien des Holocaust in der Deutschen Erinnerungskultur*. Hamburger Edition.
Kocjan, Krzysztof. 2017. *Zagłada olkuskich Żydów*. Fundacja Kultury AFRONT.
Levin, Judith, and Daniel Uziel. 1998. "Ordinary Men, Extraordinary Photos." *Yad Vashem Studies* 26:280–93.
Loewy, Hanno. 1997. "'. . . Without Masks': Jews through the Lens of 'German Photography,' 1933–1945." In *German Photography 1870–1970: The Power of a Medium*, edited by Klaus Honnef, Rolf Sachsse, and Karin Thomas. Dumont.
Lower, Lower. 2021. *The Ravine: A Family, a Photograph, a Holocaust Massacre Revealed*. Head of Zeus.
Menes, A. 1959. "Kiddush Hashem in the Ghettos" [in Yiddish]. *Forverts*, April 19.
Mentlewicz, Lesław, Bogdan Szczygieł, and Gabriela Zubowa, eds. 1984. *Krwawa środa 1940: Z dawnych dni ziemi olkuskiej*. Wydział Kultury, Kultury Fizycznej i Sportu Urzędu Miasta Gminy Olkusz.
Patterson, David. 2018. *The Holocaust and the Nonrepresentable: Literary and Photographic Transcendence*. State University of New York Press.
Porat, Dan. 2010. *The Boy: A Holocaust Story*. Melbourne University Press.
Prager, Brad. 2008. "On the Liberation of Perpetrator Photographs in Holocaust Narratives." In *Visualizing the Holocaust: Documents, Aesthetics, Memory*, edited by David Bathrick, Brad Prager, and Michael D. Richardson. Camden House.
Rotner, Bella. 1998. Interview 48316. Interview by Anita White. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation. October 26. https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/48316.
Schoenberner, Gerhard. 1960. *Der gelbe Stern: Die Judenverfolgung in Europa 1933 bis 1945*. Bertelsmann Sachbuchverlag.
Shneer, David. 2020. *Grief: The Biography of a Holocaust Photograph*. Oxford University Press.
Starostwo Powiatowe Olkuski. n.d. File 240. Archiwum Państwowe w Katowicach [State Archive in Katowice].
Struk, Janina. 2004. *Photographing the Holocaust: Interpretations of the Evidence*. Routledge.
Sypień, Jacek. 2020. *Krwawa Środa 1940 w Olkuszu: wybór źródeł*. Instytut Pamięci Narodowej—Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu & Urząd Miasta i Gminy Olkusz.
Uziel, Daniel. 2001. "Wehrmacht Propaganda Troops and the Jews." *Yad Vashem Studies* 29:27–65.
Vaytsman, Moshe. 1997. Interview 31636. Interview by Miriam Thau. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation. May 18. https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/31636.

Wollaston, Isabel. 2010. "The Absent, the Partial and the Iconic in Archival Photographs of the Holocaust." *Jewish Culture and History* 12 (3): 439–62.

Yashiv, Zvi, ed. 1972. *The Olkusz Yizkor Book* [in Hebrew and Yiddish]. Organization of Former Residents of Olkusz in Israel.

Ziegler, Walter. 1995. Interview 4410. Interview by Neil Smith. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation. August 8. https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/4410.