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English 101
Spring 2005

Art of the Holocaust:

A Glimpse of Hell

by

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There are no words that begin to capture the obscenity of the Holocaust. Words simply do not carry enough terror, repulsion, or death; they are solely letters, in this case, mere sounds, music even. To begin to understand the Holocaust—Hitler's man-created hell that deprived life of six million Jews, communists, handicapped, and other social undesirables from 1933 to 1945—one must read the art, study its colors and lines, and become the victims themselves. Live the painting, the drawing, the sculpture. Visually suffer.

The reasons for creating artwork during such a gruesome extermination period are widespread, differing by age and the extremity of living condition: to create records and proof of daily torture, to detach or break free from psychological confinement for survival interest, to preserve one's sanity through artistic resistance and creative expression, to remember one's previous life (and in doing so, Judaism), and to make sense of and reconcile one's brutal situation. Despite the variety of reasons, there are recurring themes and symbols in the artwork: skeletal existence, dualism of self, the eye,

the butterfly, and suicide. In addition, the artists use dramatic color, texture, and line to convey the intensity of their lives at the moment of creation. Some of the artists played upon these themes and incorporated artistic techniques, while exploring Frankl's theory of the meaning of life. While originally, Holocaust victims had personal reasons for creating art, the works of art are historically imperative in providing accurate documentation.

Carroll Lewin states that "even today, poets and [artists]…may have more decisive roles than historians in shaping popular images of the past," confirming the importance of Holocaust artwork, and art as an historical documentary tool.[1] In addition to bearing witness for such a dehumanizing period in time, the paintings and drawings are the most accurate descriptions of psychological and physical imprisonment, as exemplified in Buresová's painting *Dormitory* (Figure 1), in which skeletal-like frames are inhaling their last breath behind bars. Living skeletons are also shown in Boris's *Small Camp of Buchenwald* (Figure 2) where the mentally dead are dragging the physically dead to their final destinations: a massive hole in the ground.[2]

Such haunting images such as these skeletal creatures and mile long graves are emphasized in the artwork to educate the world on the daily events within the typical concentration camp. When the concentration camps were inspected by the German government (to confirm that they were purely labor camps) all artifacts such as gaseous Zyklon B cylinders and weapons were hidden, creating a deceiving façade. The camps

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[1] Lewin, Carroll McC. "Negotiated Selves in the Holocaust." Ethos 21.3 (1993):295-318. Ethos. 11 April 2005 http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=00912131%28199309%2921%3A3%3C295%3ANSITH%3E2.0.CO%3B2-U

[2] Sujo, Glenn. Legacies of Silence: The Visual Arts and Holocaust Memories. London: Phillip Wilson Publishers, 2001.

looked well-kept, the prisoners, human. All was seemingly well.[3] With the concealment of evidence, only artistic accounts can testify against the barbaric medical experiments, demands such as burying the living, the ways in which infants and toddlers were killed, what was to come of them after their death, and lynching stations and whipping benches.

Works by David Olêre and Gyorgy Kádár depict these themes of torture. In Olêre's *The Table* (Figure 3), an eight month pregnant woman is strapped down to a table while two Nazi men insert a sharp piece of metal into her vagina to kill her unborn child. The expression on the woman's face is sickening; her eyes are bloodshot and mouth is completely open.[4] Infants that have the luck to be born (or in this case, misfortune),are thrown in the air and used as gun targets. In Kádár's *An SS Game: A Child Tossed on the Prye* (Figure 4), a naked infant is shown weightlessly in the air, with a machine gun pointed at his head. The lines that surround the small child are jagged; they are chaotic and deep in hue which symbolizes the resulting confusion and bitterness from watching such a "frivolous game". In Olêre's *Lampshade* (Figure 5), a Nazi has ordered a Jewish artist to paint a lampshade for his family back home. It was not until he completed his painting when he was told that the shade was made out of Jewish skin.[5] In *The Whipping Bench* (Figure 6), Kádár draws a Jew being dragged upon a table where he will most likely be whipped until numb, if not until death.[6] His fellow Jews, who are forced to watch this heinous activity, are drawn as black and faceless, expressing the necessary

[3] The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Washington, D.C. 2002: February.
[4] Olêre, David and Alexander Oler. Witness: Images of Auschwitz. Texas: Westwind Press, 1998.
[5] Olêre, 62.
[6] Kádár, Gyorgy. Survivor of Death, Witness to Life. 1998: November. Vanderbilt University.

duality one must have in order to preserve some form of sanity. This dualism is present in several pieces of work.

This theme of dualism is interesting to consider, especially in times involving death or any experience that is scarring. Those who are tortured for a long period of time must create an alter-person within themselves for the purpose of psychological survival. In this extreme case, the victims had to create a new image of self; the past and the future were falsified, their families were rearranged, and most of all, their religion transformed from something that connected them to G-d, to something that would kill them. In addition to adjusting to their new "culture of terror" that contributed to their dualistic self, sometimes the victims were forced to be the persecutors, killing their fellow Jews. In this sense, they must separate themselves, they must identify with the Nazis for the sake of their own lives.[7] They must ignore their Jewish identity, and adopt the mindset of a full-blown Nazi. In addition to the dualism within the camps, Robert H. Abzug points out that the rescuers had to create an alter-ego in collecting the skeletons—dead and alive. In order to be productive as a rescuer, one must denounce the bodies as inhuman, and ignore the vast proportion of the genocide.[8]

In the artwork, we see this necessary dualism. In Adler's *Orphans* (Figure 7), there are two characters. One is resting, his eyes are dreaming and he is hunched over and comfortable. The other is completely alert, wide-eyed, terrified. One is the victim, the other, a free person—both are Jews. Adler's colors are all muted; she incorporates a burnt yellow but for the most part, she uses deep blues and greens.[9] The geometric

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[7] Lewin, Carroll McC. 307-315.
[8] Abzug, Robert H. Inside the Vicious Heart. *Double Vision*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. 3-44.
[9] Sujo, 15.

shapes express the rigidness of the regime. These sullen colors parallel to the darkness within the concentration camp; the same darkness that has entered the Jewish soul as a unified entity. The alert Orphan's eyes are white, symbolizing purity and innocence within hellish boundaries.

The eye is an interesting symbol in many works of art. More often than not, the eye is looking up (symbolizing hope and belief in G-d), or looking ahead; rarely will one find a tearful expression. In *Orphans*, the eyes show duality and fear. We see the widened eye reoccurring in the pieces of work, in Olêre's *Collecting Provisions* (Figure 8)[10] and Kádár's *Selected for Death* (Figure 9).[11] In these works, the wide eyes are mostly accompanied by an open mouth, expressing shock of the moment, and shock of the evil capacity of mankind. This expression, as a whole, describes the speechless and voiceless nature of the victims. Also in *Selected for Death*, the intensity of the moment is enhanced by the thick charcoal strokes and the sharp contrasts between the blacks and whites. The black and white coloring also parallels to the dualism of that time: right or wrong, Jewish or Nazi, dead or alive. Besides adding dramatic feel, the colors also convey psychological constraints.

While the black and white contrast accurately depicts the dualism and serious nature of the Holocaust, the use of color in the artwork is also of importance. The gloom and psychological darkness associated with the concentration camps and the entire Nazi system is counteracted by these vibrant images: bright butterflies, fulgent flowers, and tantalizing trees. There is more color in children's artwork, but ultimately, the color

[10] Olêre, David and Alexander Oler, 72.
[11] Kádár, 27.

within the artwork—their dream worlds, their escape—is there because it is absent in their real lives, their lives as prisoners.[12]

In the children's art, optimism creeps into their depictions of life. Helga Weissova, a child imprisoned in the Terezin concentration camp, was told by her father to "draw what you see". Many of her earlier drawings and sketches, surprisingly, are full of life, innocence, and sunshine. Her colors are pleasantly vivid –the skies aglow, the stars, dazzling.[13] The children's paintings showed a ray of hope, ambitious thinking, and of course the simplicity of an innocent child. Their drawings, such as flowers and butterflies, are just some of the unexpected but understandable symbols in their work.[14]

The butterfly, along with other things of or relating to motion such as airplanes and maps, represents gentleness, wonderment, spirit, and flight. In these works, caterpillars curl up in tightly bounded cocoons, private and secure worlds, and then transform into a completely different insect, the butterfly. The butterfly, as exemplified in Freidman's *The Butterfly* (Figure 10)[15], would then rise above, wistfully flutter through wide open skies. This entire process is very symbolic of a prisoner-child's mindset: living in protected seclusion, and emerging as a new thing with a revised outlook on life. This descending transformation is a process; it includes several stages, and requires patience. Their patience is brave and selfless, and this quality is mind-boggling considering their proximity with death. In the adult pieces, we feel this sense of urgency,

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[12] Volavková, Hana. …I Never Saw Another Butterfly… New York: Schocken Books, 1993.
[13] Weissova, Helga. Draw What You See: A Child's Drawings from Theresienstadt. New York: Wallstein Verlag, 1998.
[14] Volavková, 46.
[15] Volavková, 29.

this burning desire to escape through instant death (namely, suicide), versus a slow and painful end marked by starvation, mental suffering, and laborious conditions.

Suicide is primarily an adult theme in the artwork, although suicide lurked in the minds of seven year olds.[16] In *Suicide in Barbed Wire* (Figure 11) by Weissova and *The Suicide of a Hungarian Physician* (Figure 12) by Kádár, there are more undulating, automatic movements within the human body as if their souls were escaping their frames in comparison to the subtle motion expressed in the children's work. In Weissova's work, we see a shadowy soul escaping the body, rising above the death chambers that end at the horizon, and the endless captivity. The intensity and use of black in Kádár's work is also of signifigance: the only thing that is purely white in the drawing is the barbed wire. Traditionally, white symbolizes purity and clarity, thus suggesting that death by choice (versus death by imposed exhaustion and torture) is visionary, and even correct. The drawings of the human frames are angular and inflexible, which parallels the inflexibility of their fates, and also the unforgiving barbed wires which have confined them physically and mentally.

While the adults' and children's art differ in this respect, there are common themes that surpass generational boundaries: these include the preservation of Judaism, and remembrance of the past (their houses, families, and life styles). In *Mercy and Grace* (Figure 13), Olêre depicts friends and family congregating together, praying for loved ones and remembering the holidays. In this picture, there is light, symbolizing hope, along with the symbol of the eye, looking up.[17] On days of fasting, delicious hot food

[16] Weissova, 137.
[17] Olêre, 70.

would be prepared to torture but also to destroy the traditions of Judaism.[18] This perpetuation of Judaism depended on the Jews preserving the holidays, as shown in this drawing. It is amazing that the faith did not diminish, and, if anything, grew stronger and gave their lives meaning.

Finding this meaning, this guiding light, in the absence of logic was probably a more difficult task than living (or surviving, rather) in the death camps. Viktor Frankl's logotherapy is based around the human existence and the human's search for meaning. He believes that while people can assist in discovering meaning for an individual, finding meaning is an individual responsibility. According to Frankl, one can discover meaning in three ways: by creating a work or doing a deed, by experiencing something or encountering someone, and by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering. Frankl, a Holocaust survivor himself, unavoidably suffered. Frankl once said regarding his experience:

> I had wanted simply to convey to the reader by way of concrete example that life holds a potential meaning under any conditions, even the most miserable ones. And I thought that if the point were demonstrated in a situation as extreme as that in a concentration camp, my book might gain a hearing. I therefore felt responsible for writing down what I had gone through, for I thought it might be helpful to people who are prone to despair. [19]

According to Frankl's theory, the meaning of life differs from day to day, hour to hour, and that what matters is not the meaning of life in general, but the meaning of life at a given moment. While enduring Holocaust-like conditions is probably the most traumatic, life-altering experience, Frankl argues that meaning can be sought. Artists like Kádár, Weissova, and Olêre, in their search for meaning, felt the responsibility to record the

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[18] Holocaust museum.

[19] Frankl, Victor. Man's Search for Meaning. New York: First Washington Square Press, 1984.

world around them, and somehow make sense of it; transfixing the situation and finding truth.

Frankl's truth is that "love is the ultimate and highest goal to which man can aspire." The art of the Holocaust all holds truth: it portrays the resulting confusion and the absence of humanly love, the love Frankl deems truthful. In addition to expressing these realities, creating the artwork in itself is an act of finding truth, a way of actively and creatively exploring the value of one's life.

While most of the artists created art for self-serving reasons, such as searching for meaning, it turns out that the art may be more important in proving the Holocaust's existence and educating the masses on such a devastating time. In a study conducted about the knowledge of the Holocaust, open-ended questions were asked about the genocide.[20] Only 25% of the subjects gave correct answers (although the entire 25% did not include words like "extermination"), 8% to 13% gave vague or incorrect answers, and 18% to 28% blatantly admitted that they had no idea what the Holocaust was, who it involved, or where it took place. There were clearly correlations between education levels and Holocaust knowledge, therefore ignorance was found to be a cause. In addition to ignorance or low education levels, indifference proved to be a determinant in minimal Holocaust knowledge.[21]

The art of the Holocaust can bridge this gap of ignorance and indifference. Not only is art more engaging than a history text book, it is easier to understand. The images

[20] Questions were as such: 1. Open ended questions: What was the Holocaust? ("Correct" answers included words like genocide, killing, Jews, etc.) 2. Multiple choice questions about facts of the Holocaust: Which of the following were prosecuted? a. Jews, b. homosexuals, c. Communists, d. all.

[21] Smith, Tom W. "A Review: The Holocaust Denial Controversy." The Public Opinion Quarterly 59.2 (1995): 269-295. The Public Opinion. 11 April 2005 http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0033362X%28199522%2959%3A2%3C269%3AARTHDC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-Z.

of torture and the gauntness of the figures will not only provoke curiosity, it will captivate people and express the internal feelings experienced when living among death. Visual aesthetics and stimulation will attract people, thus decreasing levels of indifference. At times, the art may even be a better tool for education: there is more emotion in the art, providing a human element, and potentially eliciting more response. The art of the Holocaust must not be overlooked; in fact, it should be taken more seriously. Only art can convey the screams of the Holocaust…