



Exposed Memories

Family Pictures in Private and Collective Memory

Edited by Zsófia Bán and Hedvig Turai

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AICA

International Association of Art Critics

Hungarian Section

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Introduction

Within the recent general discussions of cultural and historical memory, in Europe the extension of the family known as the European Union has drawn special attention to the problems of belonging, homeland, exile, and homecoming, as well as language, trauma, and memory. When daily politics continuously insists on probing into who has the right to remember what, with whom, and where, it is no coincidence that we have chosen to examine the role of family pictures in private and collective memory. We believe that the notion of family best expresses the problems of belonging, be it belonging to a people, a nation, or any other type of family. The notion of family offers itself from multiple perspectives: family as homeland, family as space and time, family as burden, heritage, package, family as loss and absence, family as cliché, family as conversation, family as memory or the absence of memory, family as identity, family as history, or family as narrative, to mention only a few. The more we immerse ourselves in this topic, the more obvious it becomes that we are not always in a position to decide who or what belongs

where, or to what extent belonging is often purely a question of tradition, habit, or, at times, of prejudice.

Historic events and turning points often deeply interfere with the integrity and fate of families, and consequently, the (self-)representations of family are often involved with this larger context. One of the most intriguing fields in the research of cultural memory is, undoubtedly, the study of family pictures, a topic equally involving artists, historians, literary and art historians, sociologists, and anthropologists. Post-structuralism, feminism, and the notion of micro-history have all contributed to the rise in significance of personal genres in all disciplines. After “grand” history was revealed to be constructed along the lines of particular ideologies and interests, which meant that we could no longer take notions of objectivity and truth for granted, it seemed as if the private sphere, and within it the family picture, were able to promise a more legitimate truth.

According to Pierre Nora, how a society wishes to see its future also determines what it wishes to remember from its past, and this is what, in turn, offers meaning to the present, which connects both past and future. We can have no inkling of what future generations will have to know about our lives in order to understand their own; therefore we are obliged to salvage and archive everything (or at least to try). As Christian Boltanski, one of the artists Éva Forgács writes about, expressed, “[...] the effort still to be made is great. So many years will be spent searching, studying, classifying, before my life is secured, carefully arranged and labeled in a safe place—secured against theft, fire and nuclear war—from whence it will be possible to take it out and assemble it at any point. Then, being thus assured of never dying, I may finally rest.”¹ We no longer possess the past but become one with it. Family pictures play a highly complex role in the process of remembrance, as they are able not only to capture memory but also, at times, to stand in for it.

Supplemented with two additional essays, this volume is a selection of the presentations given at the conference *Exposed Memories: Family Pictures in Private and Collective Memory*, organized by the Hungarian section of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) in conjunction with the International Association of Word and Image Studies (IAWIS) at the Goethe Institute in Budapest (November 10–11, 2006). Given the topic’s strong in-

terdisciplinary nature, the conference covered a wide range of disciplines with the participation of well-known local and international experts and artists working in this field. A number of exhibitions associated with the conference were also organized (Hungarian University of Fine Arts, Barcsay Hall; Studio Gallery; Institute of Contemporary Art, Dunaújváros), presenting artists in whose work the family features either as concrete story or as metaphor.

What prompted us to turn to this topic is a long and often painful series of memorial acts that have taken place in Hungary since 1989, acts that are meant to interpret and reinterpret the past, often focusing on topics and events that previously had been considered taboo for collective memory (such as the role of national politics in the Holocaust, Stalinism, or 1956). In 2005 we commemorated the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II, and a year before that we observed the sixtieth anniversary of the deportation and extermination of the Hungarian Jews and Roma, while 2006 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the revolution of 1956. These historic events are linked equally to private and to collective memory, and all of them have abundant visual documentation in private and public collections.

The first part, titled “Photo as Autobiography,” contains pieces based on the analysis of photographs that develop family or community narratives. An example of the latter is the study by Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer in which, taking the perspective of collective and transgenerational memory, the authors discuss photographs of the local Jewish population taken by street photographers in Cernăuți, Romania, before and during the war. Nancy K. Miller seeks to unravel the story of an American immigrant family, her own, with the help of photographic and material memories, and in the process her great-grandfather’s cut-off *payess*, preserved through great vicissitudes, becomes a metonymy for unanswered (and unanswerable) questions. The telling of Jay Prosser’s unusual, adventure-filled family history is based on a photograph that survived two boat trips between Singapore and India, as well as four years in a refugee camp. His piece discusses how photographs are able to address colonial issues both from a personal and social perspective.

The second part goes under the title of “Photo and Text,” as it contains two studies that focus on the literary uses of the photograph. Heinz

Ickstadt's piece discusses works by two radically different American authors from this point of view. One is Richard Powers, in whose novel *Three Farmers On their Way to a Dance* the story is triggered by a photograph taken by August Sander that the author saw in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Even though this photograph is not a family picture, Powers' interpretation of it literally and metaphorically transforms it into one by using the photo to unravel the family history of the protagonist, as well as that other story/history that the author and the readers have in common. The other analyzed work is the autobiographical *Dictée* by Korean-American writer, filmmaker, and performer Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, who uses photography, along with other visual media, to undermine the linearity and coherence of the narrative. Her book is an experimental work juxtaposing visual and textual elements taken from Western as well as Oriental culture. This is how Cha, who arrived in the United States from Korea at the age of eleven, makes an attempt to initiate a polemic-provocative dialogue with the dominant culture, while at the same time seeking her own, lost mother tongue, culture, and history. Zsófia Bán offers an interpretation of German author W.G. Sebald's last novel, *Austerlitz*, the cult work of an author who acquired fame partly by his highly controversial use of images. Instead of being used for purely illustrative purposes, the images inserted in the text often are, or seem to be, family pictures meant to powerfully destabilize the narrative, as well as the meaning and documentary status of the images. This method is perhaps most conspicuously applied in this work by Sebald, set in the context of the Holocaust.

In the following section, titled "Private and Public Archives," the essay by Rob Kroes looks at the role photography played in the ways immigrants in their new American setting maintained relations with those who remained in the "Old World," as in the early years of immigrant history the decision to start a new life often meant a definitive and irrevocable break with the past. Géza Boros's essay is a gripping analysis of the post-1989 visual memory of the "kids of Pest" who fell in the 1956 revolution or were executed in its aftermath. Instead of the photographs taken during the course of the revolution, which often depicted them as armed fighters, family and private photographs are used on the tombs of these youth and the memorials erected for them. While searching for an explanation of this phenomenon, Boros also analyzes the changes in of-

ficial and private memorialization processes. András Bán provides an important summary of the history of collecting private photos in Hungary, its motives and drawbacks, while also raising the unavoidable problem of how, in today's media-saturated world, it is increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to conduct a systematic research of private photos. Suzana Milevska explores, through the works of Macedonian artist Liljana Gjuzelova, the contradictions between official and private archives, official and private histories—that is, borrowing a term from Hal Foster, she “an-archives” them.

The next chapter is devoted to the different types of family album. Logan Sisley considers the works of writers and artists who explore the visual representations of homosexuality within the frames of family albums. This cannot be done in any other way but by undermining the dominant narratives of the family albums, as these narratives traditionally exclude the presence of homosexuality, thus often elaborating a visualization of absence. The essay by Ágnes Berecz analyzes Ágnes Eperjesi's *Family Album*, in which, as a topos of contemporary art, the artist uses both real and fictive family albums to construct (auto)biographical and historical counter-narratives, alternative history. Ágnes Eperjesi's family pictures go back to pictograms printed on transparent packing materials, and she uses them as film negatives. Placing these in the enlarger, she generates scaled-up images, complementary colors, and inverted tonal values. With this method she examines the connection between photography and truth, as well as recycling and circulating consumer items and their pictures.

Finally, in the part titled “Object/Photo/Reality,” Éva Forgács analyzes the works of two artists, Christian Boltanski and Ilya Kabakov, and how they went from questioning photography's reality value to letting something more real take the place of photography—the object itself. Boltanski, who originally created works of art from family albums, later turned to collecting personal objects that he arranged into albums or glass cases, in which the objects are equally parts and documents of a life, like photos themselves. Kabakov often collects residues of objects—in other words, trash—for the same purpose. Éva Forgács elaborates on how, in the works of Boltanski and Kabakov, objects assume the role of photos in transmitting personal narratives, and how this contributes to questioning reality in contemporary art. The closing essay by

Hedvig Turai is about an exhibition that originally was a collateral event of the conference on which the present volume is based. In *Home Museum* the artist duo Katarina Šević and Gergely László created an installation, a museum-like context where they exhibited the objects they found in the course of cleaning and repairing the Šević' Croatian summer house, which was destroyed in the civil war of the former Yugoslavia. The found objects are substitutes for the pictures in a family album, as well as the narrative of the story of the house, since cleaning and archiving can be understood equally as working through the past and working through the experience of war. The “house” can stand for a real house, as in this installation, as well as for a human being, a historical period, or the history of a country or a culture. The essays in this volume thus intend to investigate these many fascinating aspects and forms of family pictures.

Zsófia Bán and Hedvig Turai

Notes

1 Christian Boltanski, flyleaf of the artist's book *Recherche et présentation de tout ce qui reste de mon enfance 1944–1950* (Paris, May 1969). Reprinted in *The Archive: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Charles Merewether (London: Whitechapel; Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 25.

PHOTO AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Incongruous Images

“Before, During, and After” the Holocaust^{*}

Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer

I. The Photo Donation

(U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C., 1998)

In the summer of 1998, our parents/in-laws, Lotte and Carl Hirsch, visited the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) photo archive, where they had been invited to donate some of their family pictures from Czernowitz, the East European city where they were born, grew up, and survived the Holocaust.¹ The photos were intended to enhance the museum’s small archival collection of images from that city and the Bukowina province of which it had once been the capital. Selected pictures would be cataloged by date, place, and type, and labeled with additional information provided by the donors. Some of the photos, Carl and Lotte were told, might be chosen for display on the museum’s Web site.

^{*} An earlier version of this article was published in *Exponált emlék: családi képek a magán- és közösségi emlékezetben*, ed. Zsófia Bán and Hedvig Turai (Budapest: Hungarian Chapter of International Association of Art Critics, 2008), the Hungarian language edition of this volume. This version also appeared in *History and Theory* 48 (December 2009) with a thoughtful response by Geoffrey Batchen.



1. Cernăuți, Herrengasse, 1930s



2. Cernăuți, Herrengasse, 1935

It has been the goal of the museum's photo curators to document and display Jewish life in Europe broadly, before, during, and after the Holocaust, balancing the archive of atrocity photos that dominate the museum's permanent exhibition. Over the years, the museum archive has thus acquired many photographs through private donations as well as from images scanned from books and collected holdings in other institutions. In Washington, we observed Carl and Lotte's donation, and the oral history interview that accompanied it, with close interest, because we wished to gain some sense of how such a photographic archive is constructed, and of the assumptions and presuppositions that shape its development. Since both of us viewed the Washington D.C. museum as a site where an "official story" of the Holocaust (and of the Jewish life that was destroyed by it) was displayed for public consumption and archived for scholarly study, we wanted to learn more about how that story takes form, and about the role that visual images play in shaping it. According to what questions and suppositions are images selected for the archive, both by individual donors and by the archivists who receive, catalogue, and display them? And what role do private family photos play in the archive's composition?



3. Lotte Hirsch and friend, Cernăuți, Herrengasse, 1930s

Lotte and Carl approached the donation with divergent interests and investments. Carl, an engineer by profession, was systematic. He had researched the archive and its mission and carefully read the instructions sent to potential donors. At home, he had searched through his albums and photo boxes and chosen images that he believed would be of interest to the museum—a very small number. He picked out the only remaining, somewhat torn and faded, portrait of his parents—their wedding photo from circa 1910; a picture of his mother and her sisters dating from the 1930s; some school photographs from the elementary and high schools he had attended; and a few pictures of his la-

bor Zionist youth group, Hashomer Hatzair—portraits of members as well as informal snapshots of summer outings and trips.² He selected no pictures of his brother and two sisters, or of other family members, and no informal snapshots of himself. He did, however, bring some twenty additional images to the museum, all of them connected to his institutional affiliations, schools, and job before the war. He labeled each photo with a brief description, dating it carefully, and identified all the depicted persons he could remember.

Lotte was much more hesitant, almost resistant. Why would a museum be interested in some poor-quality snapshots of her friends and relatives? Or in school pictures of her class in the Hoffmann Gymnasium? Who would ever care to look at what after all were private images, meaningful only to her and her family and friends? At home, she had gone back and forth examining the photo albums and boxes, choosing, discarding, but also considering backing out of the donation altogether. She did have just one photo she believed to be significant: a portrait, taken in the 1920s, of her father's Freemason lodge—of a group of affluent, well-dressed, rather plump men and some of their wives (no doubt invited for a special occasion), looking quite cheerful and self-satisfied.



4. The Labor Zionist youth group *Hashomer Hatzair*, 1929

Eventually, she decided to bring this photo and about a dozen from her own collection to the museum: school photos of students and teachers; photos of outings at the local riverfront; photos of fun times with other young people. Finally, she added some of herself with relatives and friends taken by street photographers on Czernowitz's main street, the Herrengasse, as it was called in the era of Austrian rule. These were among her favorites, she said. (Figs. 1-3)

At the museum, the archivist began the donation interview with Carl. She asked him to provide his family history and to supply the names, birth, and death dates of his parents and grandparents. After doing so, Carl succinctly described his family's flight to Vienna when Czernowitz was threatened by Russian forces during World War I, the death of his father (a soldier in the Austrian infantry) at the end of that war, Carl's own evolution from observant Jewish practice to secularism, and his membership and involvement with the Zionist youth group Labor Hashomer Hatzair. (Fig. 4) He presented a brief account of

Romanian nationalism and anti-Semitism in the 1920s and 1930s and told how these increasingly impinged upon the lives of Jews in his native city and Romania at large. He explained about Czernowitz's large German-speaking Jewish population and their profound assimilation to the Austro-German culture they had acquired during the Habsburg era. He spoke of their continued identification with that culture and the German language even after Czernowitz was annexed by Romania (and renamed Cernăuți), and then the Soviet Union (and renamed Chernovtsy), and even after many tens of thousands of the city and province's Jewish inhabitants were deported or dispersed by the Holocaust.

The archivist then asked him to focus on his recollections of the war years in Cernăuți. Carl explained, with exact dates and precise details, about the first Soviet occupation of the city in 1940, and about the retreat of the Soviets and the return of Fascist Romanian forces with their Nazi-German allies in the summer of 1941. He also told of the Jewish ghetto that was established in the city, and of the deportations of Jews to Transnistria in October 1941 and the summer/fall of 1942. He explained that he and his family were able to evade deportation by acquiring special waivers to remain in Cernăuți—authorizations given to some professionals like himself (a civil engineer working for the Romanian railroad) identified as essential for the city's functioning.³

And then it was Lotte's turn. Except for inserting a detail or small correction on a couple of occasions, she had been listening intently, without interrupting. Carl had already explained so much, and with such authority; what could she be expected to add? But then she also told about her family, childhood, schooling, and university study of languages—and about the war years. The archivist prompted her further, but with questions different from those she had asked Carl. She wanted to know about Lotte's home life during the war, especially during those middle years of Romanian/German rule, marked by deportations and severe menace. "What did you do? How did you spend your days?" she asked. "I was home with my mother, father, and sister," Lotte responded, "and after Carl and I married in the ghetto, with Carl's sisters and mother as well." She gave a few German lessons to a Romanian officer, she added, and he brought them some food in exchange. It was actually not an unhappy time for her, she explained. She and Carl got together with whatever friends were left in the city, spent the night at each

other's houses so as not to violate the curfews, played cards and talked. But they also spent many of their free hours trying to sell household items in order to buy food—and then trying to find the food that they could barter or buy from the farmers that brought it into the city.

Lotte's narrative was not a smooth one. She made astute observations, but the questions she was asked did not seem to fit into any conventional and expected narrative frame, as Carl's had. The story of daily life under Fascist rule and persecution was not one she had spoken about at great length before. Would she have been more comfortable, we later wondered, telling her version of Carl's historical account, the more dramatic "master narrative" punctuated by anecdotes about decisive action, good fortune, dangers evaded? This narrative contained the core account of their survival that both of them had related to us on a number of previous occasions. And yet on this occasion, Lotte did convey the humiliation of wearing the yellow star—what it *felt* like to be marked publicly in that way. Through voice and affect, she clearly communicated her sense of sadness and loss. The home she had so cherished as a child had indeed turned into a place marked by danger and threat.

The photos visibly affected Lotte emotionally, and we were moved to be witnesses to the memories they so evidently evoked, as she contextualized them and placed each, briefly, into her life narrative.

The archivist selected some of the photographs and discarded others with confident gestures. What determined the choices, we asked her? An important material consideration, she responded, was the quality of a print. But more importantly, she was not interested in photographs that could have been taken anywhere (she rejected Carl's precious portrait of his parents). She preferred images of public and institutional rather than personal, familial life. She was thrilled by the image of the Masonic lodge group to which Lotte's father had belonged, and quickly called over one of the museum's resident historians working on a project on Freemasons to show it to him. And she also selected all the photos taken on the city's main commercial street, the Herrengasse. From every European city or town, she emphasized, she wanted to have at least one pre-Holocaust photo showing Jews in normal circumstances, walking comfortably and confidently down its main street.