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Europäische Sommer Universität Ravensbrück 2015 — A Reflection

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Barbara completed her BA in History and Political Science at the University of Florida, focusing on post-World War II family memory and Holocaust studies. After moving to Berlin, she began her MA in Global History at the Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. In addition to pursuing her studies, she works as a student assistant at the Institut für Zeitgeschichte and the Friedrich-Meinecke Institut. Placing the Holocaust in a global historical context has enabled a broadening of her research interests to also include a legal historical perspective, particularly with regard to the construction of the concept of statelessness.

My trip to Ravensbrück for the *Europäische Sommer Universität Ravensbrück* (23-28 August 2015¹) marked my third time visiting the largest Nazi concentration camp for women. Upon arriving in Fürstenberg, the nearest town, I realized that this would be the first time that I wouldn't need to make the thirty-minute trek through cold rain from the train station to the memorial site. Instead, a shuttle picked us up from in front of the station, just outside the *Gaststätte* I've never seen open, and left us right in front of the youth hostel's main building. 144 Euros later, I'd received the key to a room which I was to share with another student. The rooms, located in former SS houses, have been refurbished to look like those in a youth hostel, linoleum included.

I was late and had missed the introduction given by Insa Eschebach, the head of the *Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück*. The first session was to take place in the SS garage building, which now houses Ravensbrück's archive, administration offices, and a temporary exhibition space. The first three lectures, each of which was followed by a question and answer session, stayed true to the theme of the summer school: "Photography in Concentration Camps". Each approached the topic slightly differently—Sandra Starke focused on the cult of photography, its links to Nazi race ideology and photography's everyday uses by the SS; Lukas Meissel dealt with the *Erkennungsdienst*² in Mauthausen; and Ulrich Prehn with various photo albums produced by members of the SS in concentration camps.

With an hour or so for lunch and coffee and cake, discussions continued in smaller, though by no means intimate, groups. I attended Ulrich Prehn's session, where we were able to look more closely at the Ravensbrück SS photo album. It

¹ I was only able to attend the Ravensbrück summer school from the 24-28 August. According to the schedule distributed to all of the participants, the first day included an opening ceremony that took place at Technische Universität Berlin, with a few welcoming remarks and an evening reception.

² In Nazi concentration camps, the *Erkennungsdienst* was an "identification service", tasked with producing photographic documentation of the concentration camps, including taking snapshots of newly arrived prisoners.

was difficult not to be impressed by the depth of discussion coming out of this interdisciplinary group, which had brought the most seasoned experts into conversation with the newly interested. One woman in particular whose name I unfortunately never caught (so much for networking), was restoring the Ravensbrück SS photo album and therefore had very intimate knowledge of how the original was made, which proved essential for our analysis of the album's potential use. The album cover's impractical size, combined with the flimsy 3 mm wire that was meant to hold it together, the extremely thin paper which barely supported the photos glued onto it, and the dust on the front but not on the back, laid to rest the knee-jerk assumption that the creation of such an album was intended for distribution as propaganda.

The first day ended at 17:45 with a reception at 18:30 in Fürstenberg, right on the water, with the boats, the ducks, the mosquitoes and spiders, a glass of wine, and bad jokes about some Holocaust museum exhibits' obsession with the colors red and black. At 23:30 we returned to Ravensbrück and went to sleep next to friendly roommates in clean beds.

The following day was to start at 9:00 with a tour of Ravensbrück. I was late again and unknowingly tagged along with the group led by Matthias Heyl, head of the pedagogical department at Ravensbrück. He gave a tour that was much more a conversation between himself and the historical *Spuren*, traces, left in the concentration camp, where he grappled with questions that even after thirteen years he'd been unable to answer, explained both his closest and most difficult relationships with survivors, and pointed to problematic parts of the exhibit. At issue was always the ownership of memory.

Lunch was followed by another lecture, bearable primarily because we'd seen coffee and cake being set up outside while entering the garage building. Up next, a two-and-a-half-hour long session that afforded six "young academics" the chance to superficially brush over unfinished projects, giving each the opportunity to be evaluated and questioned by other students and scouting professors rotating from table to table. The interest in each project quickly grew strained, less because of the quality of the projects and more because of the speed-dating format they were presented in, which loaded them with unimportance. The purpose of the rotating session was much less linked to taking seriously the ideas of young people, and tied much more to the socialization process of academia. The aim was to create a space for networking.

Not everyone was able to last the two-and-a-half hours allotted to the six "young academics" and left the session early, hungry and numb from the indiscriminate use of the word "interesting". Too early for dinner, they were left to fend off the swarms of bees that each summer take up residence near Ravensbrück's Schwedtsee, across from which Fürstenberg is clearly visible. Schwedtsee, a mass grave accessible by boat, is the site where the ashes of Ravensbrück's victims had been

dumped from the crematorium. The youth hostel has canoes and kayaks available for rent to those unaware.

I do not remember when the last lecture ended, but I know it was good because the lecturer was charming, Czech, and had studied under Norbert Frei, everyone’s biggest academic crush.

The following day’s sessions were to begin at 10 instead of 9. Again, three hours of lectures, then lunch, more coffee and more cake, two hours of group discussion, summary and commentary on the day, dinner.

An hour after the start of dinner, *Night Will Fall* (2014) was shown, a documentary by André Singer on the shelved—and until last year unfinished—official British documentary film *German Concentration Camps Factual Survey*. The film was based on footage shot during the liberation of concentration camps in 1945. *Death Mills* (*Die Todesmühlen*), perhaps more well-known, is a shortened version of that British documentary film. All draw from the same footage, which represents the most graphic recordings of the horror of the Holocaust. *Night Will Fall* needed to be handled with care and sensitivity. But, placed in the space of a “movie night” after an exhausting two days of lectures, the need for pause and reflection was ignored. Instead, a quick question concerning information on the documentary’s director. It was inappropriate in its banality. The floodgates had been opened and a discussion amongst those in the first rows, unaware of the pained expressions of those behind them, began, only to be brought to an abrupt halt by the pleading of a representative from the *Internationaler Freundekreis Ravensbrück* to “remember the victims”.

The hours that followed were spent in a saddened anger in the company of those who didn’t want any. Why was there such an insistence on creating an artificial normality in the space of a concentration camp? It was difficult to ignore the senselessness in directing my thoughts, and I escaped from conversation into an exhausting sleep.

The next day, some words were said regarding how showing interest in detail was just the way some people connected to a topic. The speakers, though met with applause from some, failed to respond directly to the concerns of those who had walked out early in protest of the discussion following the film. The introduction to the film had not provided adequate preparation for the images that were to be projected before us, either. This could have been remedied by including a pause for reflection following the film and, for those who would have wanted to, a chance to reconvene to discuss the effect of the film. I expect that this suggestion, offered by others at the summer school as well, will be incorporated in the program next year. But there is something more. Implicit in the focus on “just the facts” was the expectation that the audience, due to its interest in the Holocaust,

should have been accustomed to coming across such footage. It prioritized the development of the “skill” of distancing, often misunderstood as a requisite for handling Holocaust sources.

There was no response allowed to this “last word” and the day progressed as planned, artificially redirecting our attention to another three-hour long lecture session. The first presentation of the day was given by Nathalie Roelens from the University of Luxembourg, who had arrived earlier that day and had not witnessed the unintended tensions that had developed the evening prior. Her presentation was refreshing, and made use of literary theory to look at the connected images of aerial photos taken by the Allies of Auschwitz on 23 August 1944 and those taken by the *Sonderkommando*³ of piles of burning bodies in August 1944. Placing the photos in the context of Allied inaction, she underlined how the vertical gaze of the aerial images of atrocity served in maintaining the false ignorance of the Allies by removing the detail shown in the *Sonderkommando* photos. Her presentation also related these images to text and testimony surrounding them, and inquired into how such connections affect our understanding of the event that is photographed. The questions that she introduced as a result of this analysis dealt with the construction of truth coming from a multitude of images and forms, which, viewed from our position of freedom, might lead to a trivialization of horror by dealing with evidence of horror, but not with horror itself.

Roelens’ workshop later that day was the smallest out of the three. Our group of eight discussed Georges Didi-Huberman’s book *Images in Spite of All*, Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory”, and Roland Barthes’ idea of a photograph as a certificate of existence. The discussion was engaging because it struck a good balance between sharing knowledge and learning from others. The strangeness of the previous day was filed away as an anomaly in otherwise invested, engaged research that not only gives space for emotion but cannot exist separate from it.

This feeling continued throughout the day, with a presentation on the clandestine photos taken by Joanna Szydłowska of Barbara Pietrzyk and Maria Kusmierczuk, two of the “*Kaninchen*” of Ravensbrück forced to undergo torturous “medical” experiments. The day ended with a photo exhibit that had been put together by students from the Muthesius University in Kiel and the Berlin Weißensee School of Art, which explored the process of producing images of *traces* left in the space of a concentration camp.

The last day began earlier than usual with two lectures, the latter of which, given by Kathrin Hoffmann-Curtius, examined the use of Holocaust photos in the fine arts after 1945. It was an excellent presentation to end on. After the last coffee and cake session, all participants of the summer school reconvened one final

3 The *Sonderkommando* in Auschwitz was a “special squad” tasked with burning corpses of victims, only to be themselves killed and replaced after a few months.

time in the former SS garage for a reflection on the program. The commentators were Petra Bopp, Stephan Matyus, and Janina Struk, all of whom had been very engaged in the week’s program, be it through presentations of their own or simply by being available for thoughtful discussion. Despite the last day of relative calm, the commentary and critique remained focused on what had until then been left out of discussion. The three spoke on the need for reflection, for a chance to place and understand emotion in the space of the Ravensbrück concentration camp.

The critique was challenged by a few very vocal members of the audience, resolutely maintaining that there is no division between research and emotion—a point which no one had actually been contesting. Some even went so far as to rudely invite everyone to take another trip to Ravensbrück, where they could have all the time they needed for reflection. In reframing the discussion, in being unwilling to listen, they missed the point.

The strict schedule and routine of the summer school discouraged taking time for experiencing the space as a *Gedenkstätte*. The focus on networking, which allowed for the world of academia to overtake the delicate and sensitive space surrounding us, combined with the luxuries of shuttle services and too much cake, side-lined the process of learning, both from each other and from the site itself. It is unusual to have the opportunity to discuss history in the same location as where it transpired, not least because such locations are rarely equipped with an infrastructure that would allow it. Layering the intentions of education and remembrance over the concentration camp’s history makes such opportunities all the more complicated, and, for that reason, all the more important to reflect upon. Fruitful discussions do not require blank canvases, and the desire for a normalized conference hall atmosphere in the middle of a concentration camp was unnecessary. The problematic construction of such an artificial space served as a distraction.

It is unfortunate—and perhaps unfair—that this critique has taken a place of primacy in my memory of the summer school. Looking over my notes, I realize that my understanding of the role of photographs in Holocaust memory and my refusal to view the camera as a stagnant actor comes from the countless lectures and discussions at this summer university. The team given the thankless task of organizing such an event did an excellent job. Still, the relationship between the world of academia and the space of a concentration camp needs to be reevaluated, especially if we are to appreciate what lessons are being offered quietly to us by a space of mass atrocity.