

Chapter One

A CLOSE LOOK AT THE PHOTOGRAPH

Introductory note

An important first step toward understanding this picture involves looking at it closely, so that our subsequent discussion can be grounded in what is actually there, rather than in what we might assume to be there or think we see.

A case in point is Peter Fischl's poem, "To the little Polish boy with his arms up,"¹ based on a memory of the photo, not written with the picture in view. In this poem, Fischl refers to a Star of David on the boy's coat, when in fact there is no such star – nor could there be, since in the Warsaw ghetto, Jews aged 12 and older were required to wear armbands on their right coat-sleeves, rather than stars sewn onto the front of their coats as was the case in other occupied territories. (Some years ago, the poem was nevertheless accompanied on a website by an altered version of the photograph, on which a star had been added to the boy's coat – making the photograph consistent in that respect with what the poet thought he had seen.² A more obvious solution would have been to correct the poem.) Fischl also refers in his poem to "many Nazi machine guns" aimed at the child, when in fact one submachine gun is pointed in the boy's direction, which of course is more than enough to constitute an outrage.



My reconstruction of a manipulated version of the photograph, with a star added to the boy's coat.

On an entirely different level, and in a manner which in no way reflects negatively on the authors of these descriptions, others have also somewhat overshoot the mark in commenting on the photograph. For example, in a speech made to the *Bundestag* in Berlin on January 27, 2000, Elie Wiesel referred to the photo, stating:

There is a picture that shows laughing German soldiers surrounding a Jewish boy in a ghetto, I think probably in the Warsaw ghetto. I look at it often. What was it about that sad and frightened Jewish child with his hands up in the air, that amused the German soldiers so? Why was tormenting him so funny?³

And James E. Young also described the boy in the photograph as “surrounded by laughing German soldiers.”⁴ There may well be a smirk on the face of the SS trooper holding the submachine gun, but to speak of “laughing German soldiers” tormenting the boy, goes beyond what we actually see.

Even so straightforward a question as the number of German soldiers in the picture has been subject to imprecise observation. Jaroslaw Rymkiewicz described the photo in some detail in his novel, *The Final Station: Umschlagplatz*, pointing out that he has “pored over the photo” for decades. Yet of the twenty-three people he counts in this photo, he sees “nineteen Jews and four Germans,”⁵ when in fact there are five German soldiers clearly visible, the one Rymkiewicz probably missed appearing in the background, at the upper edge of the picture, toward our left.

While allowances should certainly be made for poetic license in all of these cases, it is important that the present study take its point of departure in a careful examination of what the picture actually shows. And in order to refer to specific persons in the photo with some precision, I have taken the liberty of assigning a number to each, cited in squared brackets in the description that follows.

Preliminary observations

Appearing in the photograph are twenty civilians, largely women and children who are visible to varying degrees, and five German soldiers. There may well be more people present beyond the boundaries of the picture or within the shadows of the archway but we will confine our discussion to those we can discern. All of the civilians whose hands we can see hold either one or both of them in the air, signaling surrender.

Though all five soldiers are presumably armed, only one weapon is plainly visible in the picture: a submachine gun held by the most prominent SS trooper [2] just behind and to the right of the boy in the foreground [1]. And although that trooper is clearly wielding his weapon, it would not be entirely accurate to say that the gun is aimed directly at the little boy. A straight line drawn along



the barrel of the gun and extended in the boy's direction would pass through the outer edge of his left coat sleeve and through the lower left corner of his coat, ending in the gutter, just beside the boy's left foot. Still, the gun is threateningly aimed in the general direction of the boy. What is undoubtedly the muzzle of another gun, not aimed at anyone in the picture, is visible just behind the more prominent trooper's left elbow, and held by a soldier [11] who for the moment is uninterested in the little boy.

Three of the soldiers [2, 11, 12] are grouped on the right side of the photo; a fourth [10] stands in the archway and appears to be looking directly at the boy, leaning slightly to his left to get a better look, while a barely noticeable fifth [19] is at the upper edge of the photo, toward our left, and probably can't see the boy from where he is standing.

The main trooper [2] stands out in relation to the four other soldiers in that:

- a) nothing blocks our view of his entire person, while all the others are at least partially eclipsed;
- b) he is both closer to the camera and better illuminated than the others, the sunlight highlighting a number of the contours and surfaces of his face, helmet and torso, with the result that we can clearly see his features and expression as well as his body-language;



c) he is the only one who appears to be looking at the camera and even posing for the picture, while the others seem to be caught off-guard and unaware that they are being photographed;

d) the woman in the left foreground [3] appears to be turning her head in order to look at him, and the woman in the archway [8] also appears to be looking at him – making him an object of other people’s gaze within the photo;

e) his smirking composure, surveillance stance and weapon-wielding all suggest that he is in command, that it is for his sake that the prisoners hold their hands up and that he, more than anyone else we can see, is the arbiter of their fate.

Of the twenty prisoners, four are children: three boys [1, 6, 9] and a girl [5]. There is one teenage male [7] carrying a white sack over his shoulder in the central background of the picture. Seven of the prisoners are women, three of whom [3, 4, 8] we can see with relatively little obstruction while we can just make out a tiny portion of the faces of four others [15, 20, 21, 23]. The remaining eight prisoners whose faces we can see at all [13, 14, 16,

17, 18, 22, 24, 25] are men wearing caps; they might be in their 40s or 50s, though this is guessing since their faces are largely obstructed.

The woman whose face we can see most clearly [4] does not look particularly worried, nor does the little girl [5] standing beside her and who is presumably her daughter. The woman’s hands are both raised and on her right arm, a white armband is visible.

At least one other person – the woman [8] standing before the gateway – also wears a white armband. While all the other captives over the age of 12 are presumably wearing similar armbands, they are not visible in the photo. And the little boy with his hands raised, who is probably about 8 years old, wears neither armband nor any other emblem marking him as Jewish. (On some copies of the photograph, there is a small, lighter patch under his collar, not to be mistaken for a yellow star.)

The boy stands out from the other prisoners in the picture in that

- a) he is positioned in the middle of a space immediately before the camera, just to the right of the central foreground, and with the other prisoners and soldiers forming a kind of semi-circular frame around him, with the result that he appears to be standing alone in empty space;
- b) sunlight illuminates his oversized cap (turned slightly askew), some contours of his face, outgrown coat, bare legs and shoulder bag;
- c) the bareness of his knees also catches our attention, signaling both childhood (he does not yet wear long pants) and the vulnerability of exposed skin;
- d) our view of him is not obstructed by any other person in the photograph;
- e) his posture, with hands symmetrically raised and angled, framing his face, and our clear and nearly frontal view of the look of terror in his face – he is the only captive to appear terrified – make him the primary focus of attention in the photo.



These are some of the reasons why it is standard practice to refer to this picture as the photograph of the little boy in the Warsaw ghetto with his hands raised, though that child is only one of 25 people appearing in the picture.

With respect to the boy's special status in the photo, Herman Rapaport commented incisively both on the incongruity of a gesture of surrender enacted by a child, and also on the boy's isolation from the other captives in the photo. Rapaport wrote:

It is curious that the child's gesture and expression are peculiarly unchildlike, as if the child were acknowledging that he fits the role of someone who could be a threat to the Third Reich. In part, this is underscored by the photograph's composition, in which the child is seen as isolated from the group, an isolation or unprotectedness

that suggests that he is being singled out for punishment. Indeed, whereas the other persecuted figures are standing near one another for support – some children peer at the camera from behind the adults – the composition of the photograph suggests that the child with raised hands in the foreground is incongruously taking on the brunt of something he cannot possibly understand (p. 200).

And in a subsequent passage, Rapaport described “the boy’s standing apart from the other hostages as if he alone were answerable” (*ibid.*, p. 205).

The frightened little boy is apparently looking at something or someone off-camera, to our right – according to Rapaport, “what must be (they are off camera) weapons directly pointed at him” (*ibid.*, p. 196). Another slightly taller boy [6], whose face is just to the right of the woman’s in the foreground [3], is looking – anxiously perhaps – at something or someone off-camera to our left, while the little girl [5], and possibly the woman beside her [4], appear to be looking at the photographer, as does the main SS trooper [2] as already mentioned.

At least several of the prisoners [3, 7, 8] are holding bags of various kinds, and the boy himself [1] seems to have some kind of pack on his back, suggesting that they have had a chance to assemble some belongings in preparation either for a failed escape attempt or for their captivity. They may now be on their way to “resettlement.”

However, at the moment the picture was taken, the prisoners and soldiers appear to be standing in place, with their feet firmly planted on the ground, though one or two shoes may be partially lifted (in the lower left corner of the picture). It is conceivable that this scene was prolonged momentarily for the sake of the photo. The picture is captioned: “Pulled from the bunkers by force” (*Mit Gewalt aus Bunkern hervorgeholt*). That the caption is arbitrary in this case is fairly obvious. Other photos, such as the two below which were not included in the *Stroop Report*, show people literally being pulled from an underground bunker.



Photos used with permission of the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation, Office for the Preservation and Dissemination of Archival Records.

There is no sign of any kind – such as disheveled or dust-covered clothing – to indicate that the captives in the photo of the boy with his hands raised were “pulled by force” from anything that might rightfully be called a “bunker.”

Five properties of the photograph

The reader is asked to bear in mind that all allusions to “the viewer” in this section refer to post-war spectators of the photo, whose sympathy lies with the victims, and that the relationship of the SS to the photograph they took and the special meanings it had for them alone, will be treated elsewhere in this book (on pp. 71-80 below).

(1)

Many of the pictures Margaret Bourke-White took at Buchenwald in 1945 showed scenes that were difficult for her to look at and for the viewers of her photos to bear. As she herself stated:⁶

I saw and photographed the piles of naked, lifeless bodies, the human skeletons in furnaces, the living skeletons who would die the next day... and tattooed skin for lampshades. Using the camera was almost a relief. It interposed a slight barrier between myself and the horror in front of me.

But in contrast to those painful glimpses of horror, the picture she took at Buchenwald that has become what many consider a photographic icon, is one that does not require that we brace ourselves in order to look at it: it is her photograph of survivors behind barbed wire, taken at Buchenwald on April 28, 1945, and appearing in *Life Magazine* on May 7, 1945:



MARGARET
BOURKE-WHITE/*Time Life*
Pictures/Getty Images



ABOVE: Photo by Heinrich Jöst © Günther Schwarberg, Hamburg.⁹ The caption reads: "Most probably these were sisters. I can't say whether the younger one was already dead. She never moved."

LEFT: Photo of a ghetto child © Krakow Photographic Society.

Vicki Goldberg wrote that "for many people, particularly younger people, this is the image that springs to mind when they think of the camps." And in considering why this particular image has become such an important one, Vicki Goldberg suggested that

Bourke-White's photograph may have become iconic partly because it suggests more horror than it depicts. She took many pictures of piles of dead bodies, many of men more skeletal, more obviously at death's door, more shocking than these. I suspect that this photograph has become a historical marker partly because it presents a level of pain that is just within the range of tolerance.⁷

Similarly, Marianne Hirsch contrasted "images of children who are not visibly wounded or in pain," such as that of the boy from Warsaw, with "other images of emaciated, dirty, visibly suffering children taken in the Warsaw ghetto – images that have never achieved the same kind of visual prominence as the little boy with his hands up."⁸

Marianne Hirsch was most concerned with the drawbacks of these less unbearable images of child victims, suggesting that such images impede a "working-through" of the traumatic past and encourage instead a process of "obsessive

Photo by Joe Heydecker.¹⁰ *Das Warschauer Ghetto* © 1983, 1999 Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, München.



repetition” or “acting-out,” as well as “appropriative identification” – a form of *overidentification* of the spectator with the victim, due to a lack of distancing devices.

One of the dangers she saw in this kind of relationship to Holocaust images is a “blurring of important areas of difference and alterity: context, specificity, responsibility, history.”¹¹

This is doubtless an important issue for those whose interest lies in developing theoretical models that deal with photographs in relation to memory and the overcoming of past traumas. In the present context, however, our focus is not on theorization of that kind, but rather on the power of that photograph to capture and hold the viewer’s attention. And in this perspective, the fact that the picture is not so terribly painful to look at, is an important asset.

What we have then is a photograph that does not cause us to recoil because looking at it is too distressing. On the contrary, it draws us in and holds us spell-bound. But at the same time, although our eyes meet no faces distorted by starvation, or skeletal limbs showing through filthy rags, there is an implicit mortal threat hanging over the captives in the picture, and we can understand that their appearance of physical well-being, recorded at the moment the picture was taken, might well have been a thing of the past in a matter of days, hours or even minutes after the shutter was snapped.

(2)

A second property is so obvious that it could easily be overlooked: the *outrageousness* of the scene.

In this photo, a seven or eight year old boy is forced to assume a posture of sur-

render that belongs to the world of soldiers. All boundaries between military and civilian, adult and child, have been abolished. The protective instinct grown-ups are presumed to experience in relation to children, has been replaced in the figure of the SS man by the threat of imminent execution. The child, like all the other captives in the picture, is nothing more than prey in his eyes.

(3)

Among the compositional values of the photograph is one that concerns the boy's placement in the picture with respect to the Golden Section.

If a line were drawn vertically through the center of the boy, it would bisect the picture along its horizontal axis in such a way that $5/8$ and $3/8$ of the photo lie on either side of the line. This approximates the Golden Section, defining a visually privileged position within the picture. Similarly, if along the photo's vertical axis, a line were drawn dividing the picture at the $3/8$ and $5/8$ point, that line would traverse the boy's cap, so that the intersection of the two perpendicular lines – indicating a focal point “to which the spectator's eye is immediately attracted”¹² – lies very close to the boy's face, optimally situated in terms of purely visual logic.

The boy also occupies a space that is his alone, framed by a semi-circle formed



by other captives and soldiers; for this and other reasons already mentioned (p. 15 above), he is clearly defined as the central figure in the photograph.

Yet despite the fact that the picture is routinely described as the photo of the boy with his hands raised, there are also multiple centers of interest in the picture, so that the viewer's eyes can settle on virtually any one of the figures and consider the story it has to tell, momentarily giving it his or her full attention. This variety of faces and stances the viewer can ponder, gives the image an inexhaustible quality, and makes the photograph at one and the same time both a picture of the boy and a portrait of a group with at least fifteen or twenty centers of interest for the viewer to explore.

(4)

It would be difficult to imagine a photograph in which more polar opposites were in play than in the picture at hand: SS vs. Jews, perpetrators vs. victims, military vs. civilians, power vs. helplessness, threatening hands on weapons vs. empty hands raised in surrender, steel helmets vs. bare-headedness or soft caps, smugness vs. fear, security vs. doom, men vs. women and children. These and other interwoven polarities are all part of the same fundamental opposition which structures the visual field and contributes to our experience of it as being multi-faceted and richly textured in its unity.

(5)

Vicki Goldberg described the iconic quality of certain photographs in the following way:

The Greek word *eikon* originally meant a portrait or representation, sometimes carrying a memorial connotation. In Christianity it became a sacred painting or sculpture. Today the word extends to secular images with so strong a hold on the emotions or the imagination that they have come to serve as archetypes. I take secular icons to be representations that inspire some degree of awe – perhaps mixed with dread, compassion, or aspiration – and that stand for an epoch or a system of beliefs. [...] the images I think of as icons almost instantly acquired symbolic overtones and larger frames of reference that endowed them with national or even worldwide significance. They concentrate the hopes and fears of millions and provide an instant and effortless connection to some deeply meaningful moment in history. They seem to summarize such complex phenomena as the powers of the human spirit or of universal destruction (*op. cit.*, p. 135).¹³

Certainly the photograph of the boy with his hands raised has all of these qualities: exerting a strong hold on the emotions and imagination of the spectator, it is awe-inspiring and offers an effortless connection to the historical moment when the Nazis carried out their genocidal project with industrial efficiency.

The photograph makes the meaning and shape of that event a visually accessible reality for us and in a way that enables us to see it up close and as it was reflected in the eyes of its victims and perpetrators. It is as representative of that event as any photograph could be, and this is precisely why those who deny any genocidal intent on the part of the Nazis have taken so great an interest in undermining the meaning of this photo, as will be seen repeatedly in the course of this book.

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Without presuming to explain with any certainty why this photograph stands out as it does from other Holocaust images, I believe that the five properties mentioned above – the relative intactness of the victims, the outrageousness of the central image, specific compositional values, a network of interwoven polarities (including the presence of both perpetrators and victims within the image), and the degree to which it offers us a close, awe-inspiring and effortless connection to the period – are among those factors that contribute to the unique status of the picture.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

- 1 Peter Fischl's poem, written in 1965 and published in 1994, is currently accessible at <http://Holocaust-trc.org/FischlPoem.htm> Teachers using "To Be or Not To Be," the "Lesson Plan Written for Peter L. Fischl's Poster/Poem, 'To the little Polish Boy Standing with His Arms Up'" (available on paper and also at http://www.holocaust-trc.org/pboy_lp.htm), should be cautioned that the booklet contains factual errors about the photograph. On page 2 of the booklet, written by Judy Luehm Junecko but based on an outline by Peter Fischl, it is stated that the photograph of the little boy with his hands raised "was taken by the Jurgen Stroop photographers for Hitler's birthday as a gift, by publishing the photo in the 'Stroop Report' Newsletter in 1943." The *Stroop Report* was anything but a newsletter, as will be clear to anyone who reads Chapter 2 below. And there is no evidence whatsoever to link the taking of this photograph, or the making of the *Stroop Report* (in May 1943) with a present for Hitler on his birthday (April 20), though it is commonly claimed that the SS operation that began on April 19, 1943 to clear the Warsaw ghetto of its remaining inhabitants was timed by Himmler

- as a birthday present for the Führer. (See for example http://www.britannica.com/original?content_id=1474.)
- 2 The altered photograph can still be seen on another website, http://www.voorhees.k12.nj.us/middle/Holocaust/child_of_warsaw.htm, where it was placed in good faith by a teacher who was unaware at the time that the photo had been altered.
 - 3 Elie Wiesel's speech, on the occasion of The Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Holocaust can be found in its entirety at http://www.gainfo.org/SFPT/Amnesia/German_Parliament_President_Holocaust_Remembrance_Day_Speech_27Jan2001.htm
 - 4 *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust* (Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 140.
 - 5 *Op. cit.*, p. 325.
 - 6 <http://www.uiowa.edu/~policult/politicalphotos/holocaust2.html>
 - 7 Vicki Goldberg, *The Power of Photography. How Photographs Changed Our Lives* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991), p. 37.
 - 8 "Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy," in *Acts of Memory. Cultural Recall in the Present*, eds. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, Leo Spitzer. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999), p. 17. Hirsch also describes the boy in the Warsaw photo as "not visibly hurt or harmed or suffering" in "Nazi Photographs in Post-Holocaust Art: Gender as an Idiom of Memorialization" (*op. cit.*).
 - 9 Günther Schwarberg, *In the Ghetto of Warsaw. Heinrich Jöst's Photographs* (Göttingen: Steidl Verlag, 2001), photo No. 57. Heinrich Jöst was a Wehrmacht sergeant and amateur photographer stationed in a Warsaw suburb. He entered the Warsaw ghetto on September 19, 1941, and took 137 pictures on that one day. The photos remained locked in Jöst's desk until 1982.
 - 10 A laboratory assistant in PK 689 (a propaganda unit or *Propaganda Kompanie* active in the Warsaw ghetto from the start), the anti-Nazi Joe Heydecker, who wasn't even authorized to enter the ghetto, did so at considerable risk, illegally photographing within the ghetto walls on three separate occasions in February and March of 1941. These photos from the spring of 1941, along with a final photograph taken in 1944 after the ghetto had been destroyed, were published many years later in book form. Joe J. Heydecker, *The Warsaw Ghetto. A Photographic Record 1941-1944*. Foreword by Heinrich Böll (London: I.B. Tauris, 1990), previously. pub. in São Paulo Brazil in 1981 and Munich in 1983.
 - 11 Marianne Hirsch, "Nazi Photographs in Post-Holocaust Art: Gender as an Idiom of Memorialization" (*op. cit.*).
 - 12 J. K. Popham, *Pictorial Composition* (London: Pitman, 1954), pp. 32-33. See also my own *Elements of Picture Composition* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1986), p. 35.
 - 13 Readers interested in considering other iconic photos might wish to see Huynh Cong (Nick) Ut's "Children Fleeing a Napalm Strike," taken on June 8, 1972, and currently accessible at: http://www.1stcavmedic.com/napalm_girl.htm Equally interesting in this perspective is Joe Rosenthal's photograph taken at Iwo Jima on February 23, 1945 and entitled: "Old Glory goes up on Mt. Suribachi" – an image that can now be accessed at: www.yale.edu/yale300/democracy/may1text/images/Rosenthal.jpg