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Pető, Andrea

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Death and the Picture. Representation of War Criminals and Construction of a Divided Memory about World War II in Hungary

Andrea Pető
Central European University, Budapest

Abstract

The chapter aims to analyse private and unpublished photos covering the execution of Hungarian war criminals to prove that the interpretation of photography helped create alternative space with respect to the dominant anti-fascist interpretation.

A cikk a népbíróságokról készült magántulajdonban és levéltárakban őrzött képek alapján bizonyítja, hogy a fényképek, mint történelmi forrás jellegzetességei miatt, mint a szelektivitás, ikonográfia lehetőség nyílt arra, hogy a képek eredeti anti-fasiszta értékeit 1989 után átértelmezzék.

Introduction

This chapter was born of my research project on transitional justice after World War II. I combed Hungarian archives for pictures of perpetrators whose court case documents at the people's tribunal I was reading in the Archive of Municipal of Budapest[1]. I found these pictures taken from the same spot 39 years from each other in the collection of the Hungarian Museum of Criminology. The first photo (Fig. 1a) shows an execution during the Habsburg Monarchy. The courtyard where the gallows stood was guarded and watched by men in uniform representing the institutionalized form of a legal ceremony. The photographer took this photo from inside a room.

The other photo (Fig. 1b) was taken of the execution of war criminal László Ferenczy (1898-1946), minister without portfolio in the Szálasi government, who was brought to the bar to hear the final verdict of the people's tribunal on 31 May 1946. The courtyard in this case was full of interested parties. Only a few of them were in uniform. The photographer was a part of the audience admitted en masse into the building complex the

Fig. 1a
Courtyard of execution of Mihály Vájgel in 1907.
From: Bűnügyi Múzeum, Budapest (Hungarian Museum of Criminology).

Fig. 1b
Execution of Ferenczy in the same courtyard.
From: Bűnügyi Múzeum 280.

see how Ferenczy would be executed. A place was available for him inside the building, not on the courtyard or on the roof. I was impressed by the similarities and differences in how we look at executions: Mihály Vájgel was convicted and executed as a criminal, while Ferenczy was a war criminal, holding an official position in the Hungarian state, responsible for thousands of deaths during World War II. The execution was still photographed from the same room. Looking at photographs about executions challenges historians in various ways and in this chapter I would like to list some of these challenges.

The first ethical challenge for a historian is what Liebman called the "double vision" when the researcher is at once a witness to an execution and an ethnographic observer in search of qualitative data[2]. Looking at dozens of photos of corpses is an encounter with the mysterious but definite end of human life and all of us have our own personal experience of dead bodies[3].

Second, photos of corpses also pose a methodological challenge for historians. The photographs of people's tribunals cannot be analysed by a method to describe what is to be seen in the picture; we need to get away from looking at pictures as documents describing events 'as they were'.

The third dilemma is a political dilemma of interpretation. It is a commonplace that history is written by the victors; therefore one might also raise the question if history is also photographed by the victors? I claim in this chapter that, in the case of the war criminals executed after World War II in Hungary, victory over fascism was not necessarily bolstered by visual sources; and photography as a medium opened up space for re-conceptualization of the memory of the Second World War in Hungary and helped the construction of counter-memories questioning the 'justice of war'. After analysing the photographers and the iconography of the interpretation I argue that photography was one of the narrative mediums which, because of its temporal dimension, its tendency to be selective, and its convincing ring of authenticity, undermined the dominant anti-fascist narrative after 1989.

Photographers and photographs

Execution of Hungarian war criminals was widely documented. Not only the accredited journalist but also people in the audience used to take photos, even climbing up to the gallows to secure a better view. New types of cameras became cheap and easy to use. The press also published photos in an increasing number, and newsreels documented the event for viewing at the movies.

The photographers themselves are rarely identifiable unless they were successful professional photographers such as Reisman, Escher, Karossa who stamped their names on the back of the photos[4]. Professional photographers were commissioned to take photos by newspapers or by a news agency. Historians studying this period however are unlikely ever to possess a complete list of all photos of such events, because besides the official

Fig. 2a
Photographers.
From: Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum Fotótára 98-30.

Fig. 2b
Photographers.
From: Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum Fotótára 98ME2.

Fig. 2c
Photographers. Bárdossy execution.
From: Bünügyi Múzeum 159.

photographers there were thousands of private documentalists (Figs. 2a, b, c). Some of these photos, without acknowledgement to the author, are available in the archives if the researcher is ready to dig in dusty boxes.

The war criminals were photographed to prove to those who were not present at the execution that these men were dead, and the act of death in its irreversibility was immortalized as a lesson for future generations. Some of these photos became iconic, reproduced in textbooks and monographs about the period. Photographs about dying were not selected as icons but as photos documenting death.

In these photos the photographer him- or herself is not important but the genre and the iconography determines the photo and the meanings negotiated around the photo. Photos of executed Hungarian war criminals speak about 'disappearance' in a double sense: the photographer, as author of the image, is eclipsed by the medium he or she is using, while the executed war criminals also disappear from the field of moral respon-

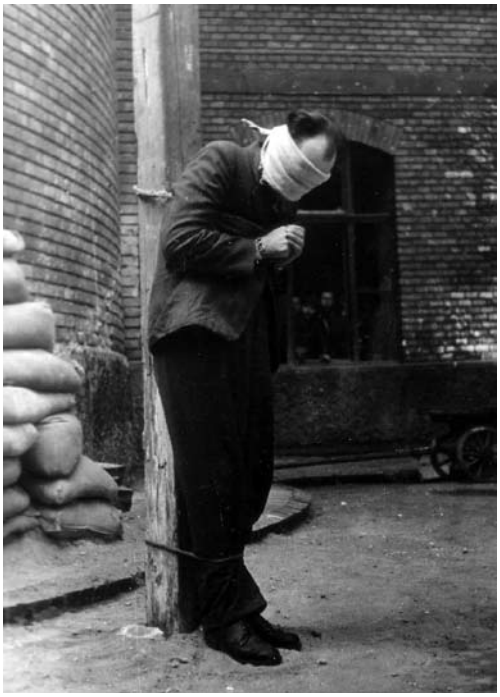

Fig. 3a
Basch execution.
From: Bünügyi Múzeum 233.

Fig. 3b
Basch execution.
From: Bünügyi Múzeum 233.

sibility and become victims of the execution in the eye of the viewer because of the iconography of such photos.

Multiplicity of Interpretation

Post-war transitional justice was a unique process in Hungary. The people's tribunals were legal institutions which were expected to make an end of an era and to define what war crime is. The decree regulating the people's tribunals in Hungary was published on 5 February 1945, just one day after the first death sentence was carried out in the name of the tribunal at Oktogon square in Budapest (I will be using the photos of this below). The people's tribunal sentenced at least 146 people to death, among them former Prime Ministers and Ministers of War, including Ferenczy. In Budapest approximately 70,000 people were sentenced to imprisonment of differing length[5].

Photographs, visual images, are special sites for constructing different and conflicting interpretations of the selfsame event and hence contributed to the formation of divided memories about World War II in Hungary[6]. After 1945 in Hungary, two parallel traditions of memory of the past developed and interacted, constructing each other with the weapon of enforced memory and party-controlled amnesia, as well as rivalry between representations authorized by different social actors. For one group the war started when the Red Army crossed the Hungarian border and the justice of the war was questioned, while for the second group the presence of the Red Army not only meant that their lives were secure but there was also a promise of social justice[7]. As Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan pointed out, "collective memory is not what everybody thinks"[8], it can belong to smaller communities; it can be produced, cultivated, and constructed at the level of families or smaller communities. After 1989 and the collapse of communism, the hegemonic history archives were opened and not only documents but visual sources became accessible to researchers. The pictures found had hence not been selected for publication before and did not become iconic. Photos which were kept and preserved in family archives also found their way to the public, mostly on internet archives. Visual representation is nowadays becoming more and more important, and sites constructing collective memory opposing anti-fascist history-writing are beginning to emerge on the internet using photos which were omitted previously. Even if the photos were taken with the aim of documenting the death of war criminals as in the case of Ferenczy, viewers of the photo today have a different understanding of the same photo. The methodological differences between visual and textual sources are covered by an extensive literature[9]. In this chapter I use Perlmutter's distinction between how visual sources were constructed, received and perceived in order to prove that a multiplicity of interpretations are possible in the case of photos showing executed war criminals, and this for a number of different reasons[10].

The newspapers published the account of the people's tribunal trials which were intended to create consensus as to the role of Hungary in the war: that is, the end of an era;

those who were responsible are now punished. The photos explain the events, forming and shaping the popular memory of them[11]. The photos in this chapter are non-iconic pictures but they were first taken and later seen. From the hundreds of photos taken of the execution of war criminals a few were selected for publication in the papers, thus becoming icons for reproduction in exhibitions and history textbooks.

A photograph is a representation and an object at the same time, which is given various meanings depending on the time and period. The canonized meanings necessarily create counter-canonized meanings and the fight for the monopoly of interpretation started immediately after the executions. It is an issue of power whose pictures we remember and who gives the meaning to what we think we are seeing. Repeated viewing of the photos is itself the process of *Verarbeitung* [elaboration] of the Past. According to Barthes, the photo is always given meaning in a dialogue with other sources. It does not have a meaning of its own. Attaching and depriving of meaning depends on what we know. We read pictures on the basis of what we know, our visual literacy[12].

The unidentifiable photographer who took the photo of Ferenczy had a different memory of the event from the judge, or the policeman keeping order, not to mention the relatives of the executed war criminal or his former comrades. These photos were taken by photographers standing side by side in the courtyard, while the decision which segment of the event would be shown depended on the will and intention of the publisher. Each of the actors in this process had a very special perspective, systems of knowledge used for interpreting the photo.

I would like to support this argument by paraphrasing the term of the two bodies of the French Kings: the private or fleshly, and the public, imagined body[13] – with three different photos taken of the same event: the execution of Szálasi, the head of the Hungarian Quisling government (1944-1945). The corpse of Szálasi was not shown the way the bodies of the executed German war criminals in Nurnberg were shown, but it was decided to show a step in the process of execution so that the death itself was not documented[14].

The first private photo of the execution (Fig. 4a) was kept in the archives; the second one (Fig. 4b) formed the cover of a popular and widely read magazine. The third photo (Fig. 4c) was retrieved from the "whisperer" internet site with the subtitle: "Meeting with the light". These all negotiate a very different meaning of the same execution, if we follow Perlmutter's distinction. The "whisperer" is an extreme right-wing website, which aims to "whisper" the "real truth" about the history of Hungary, forging a counter-memory to leftist history writing. It thus emphasizes Szálasi's martyrdom. The wide uncensored availability of photos on this webpage offered a space for its users to upload their private, hidden, treasured pictures about World War II. Those private photos were uploaded in huge numbers; never seen before, they were not selected as canonised iconic photos by the editors of journals, they were not 'public' and had no space in the dominant anti-fascist visual discourse.

Fig. 4a
Execution of Szálasi: three viewpoints.
From: www.suttogo.hu

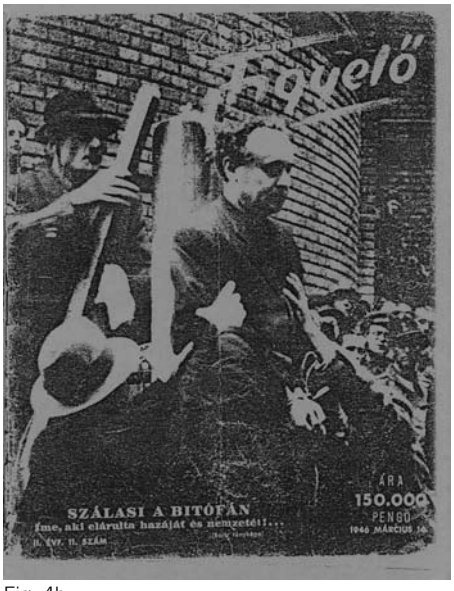

Fig. 4b
Execution of Szálasi: three viewpoints.
From: www.suttogo.hu

Fig. 4c
Execution of Szálasi: three viewpoints.
From: www.suttogo.hu

The selfsame photograph can be interpreted very differently depending on the community doing the interpreting. The meanings of photos are negotiated through reading the text or listening to the explanation in the newsreel. The photo fills up the representational field with different contents, which negotiate meanings. A photo itself is meaningless, only the viewer can attribute meaning to it.

The audience at executions attended because of official duties, or because they volunteered to be present. The tickets given out for the executions were obtained out of curiosity, revenge or sympathy. Women were present in great numbers at the trials but were not admitted to executions till the Democratic Association of Hungarian Woman (MNDSZ) petitioned otherwise, using the argument that women in uniform had already proved they deserved to be admitted to see executions[15]. In the prison courtyard not everybody who had a camera was convinced of the legality and the necessity of the people's tribunals. Other viewers constructed their own meaning of the photograph; they wanted to 'read in' a different meaning to the photo with respect to the dominant anti-fascist communist discourse that was widely and constantly hammered home after the Second World War. Some photos were kept within families until 1989.

These execution photos are open to official and alternative interpretations. The formation of counter memory came about through visual sources. Through this visual narrative strategy war criminals became victims: symbolizing Hungary as a victim of the Stalinist *Justizmord* [judicial murder].

Photos were taken so that they could be looked at again several times. But they also served as a site for the formation of counter memory via the photo's function as socialising repetition in a different visual narrative mode, which made it possible for the sense of injustice to become imprinted.

Social memory is a consensual memory within a small community. This memory is constructed through rituals, and in these rituals iconic pictures play an important role. After 1945 collaboration and responsibility were redefined in Europe. Various different narrative strategies were possible. Stevenson has pointed out that "Power is not solely based upon material dimensions, but also involves the capacity to throw into question established codes and to rework frameworks of common understanding"[16]. In the case of these photos 'power' was wielded in determining who was guilty of war crimes. The genre of these pictures put the subject executed into focus while the victims of his crime became invisible, which is deeply unjust. Visual justice plays no part in the photographs of executed war criminals. The anti-communist counterculture questioned the legitimacy of people's tribunals; while constructing a visual rhetorical mode which in turn repeated the injustice. Generations transmit not only the frames of memory, but also the visual cognitive processes which produce those frames. Clashes between different local memory cultures were constructed, transmitted and perpetuated through pictures.

Iconography and gaze

Besides documenting that the executions had happened, photographs had a disciplining function as well. Foucault connects power with the gaze, meaning how the disciplining power operates with visual methods. For the viewers such photos held a message: a symbolic message about social discipline. The executions after 1945 were open to the public, which was a novelty in the Hungarian penal system. With the Enlightenment public executions had been moved into state institutions: into prison courtyards or specialised cells in prisons. However at certain historical moments in the 20th century public executions regained their importance as far as disciplining power was concerned. Viewing executions in 1919 in Hungary during the "Red Terror" of the Bolshevik revolution, and later during the "White Terror" following the Republic of the Council, formed and constructed visual literacy and collective memory. During World War II executions were carried out at isolated places closed to civilians: prisons, work camps, military establishments, concentration camps. It was the last and final phase of the war when the Arrow Cross used all possible disciplining powers, including

Fig. 5
Lynching of a Red Soldier by the "Whites" in Hungary in 1919.
From: Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum Fotótára

public killings, to create a feeling of terror. These killings however are not documented by photos: it was only the exhumations after the end of the war that shed light on the devastation. After the war, executions of war criminals were organized in semi-public space: although they took place in the well-guarded prison courtyard, the public was admitted. The audience was permitted to take private photos of the event and the event was widely reported by the press with photographs by way of illustration.

The first war criminal executed in Budapest reminds us of a widely publicised photo of a lynching during the "White Terror" (Fig. 5). Repetition of the image, except for the white gloves, served as a site for legitimising the communist rule in Hungary after 1945 (Figs. 6a, b). After these executions, which brought astonishing public participation, the decision-makers moved executions back into a more controlled space, the prison, which served an intermediate space: though controlled by the legal system, it was also open to highly selected spectators[17].

Fig. 6a
Rotyis, Szivós' execution.
From: Bünügyi Múzeum 001.

Fig. 6b
Rotyis, Szivós' execution.
From: Bünügyi Múzeum 002.

Looking at the visual representation of executions has a very specific visual narrative frame. Visual literacy is first of all influenced by the visual representation of the execution of Christ and the technique of execution makes us think via the image of Christ's death.

These photos of executed Hungarian war criminals (Figs. 7a, b, c) necessarily follow the same iconographical pattern as the execution of Christian martyrs. There is no other way to look at the descent of Andras Kun, the bloody handed executioner, leader of a paramilitary squad of the Arrow Cross, except by "reading or seeing into it" a meta-

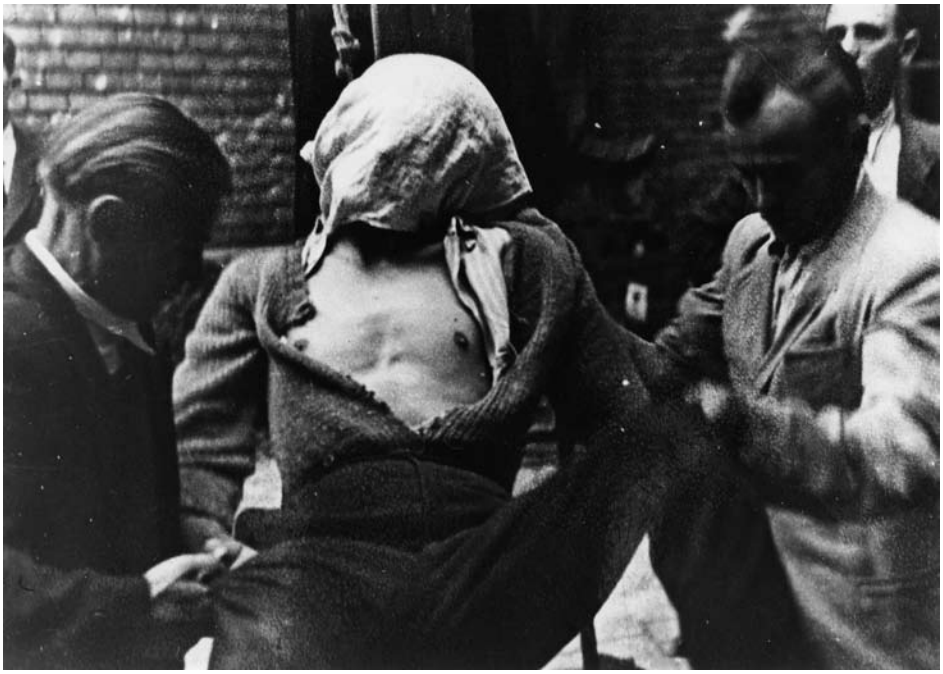

Fig. 7a
Iconography of executions:Andras Kun's descent from the gallows.
From: Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum Fotótára 83-771.

Fig. 7b
Iconography of executions: Execution of Bárdossy.
From: Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum Fotótára 62-202.

Fig. 7c
Iconography of executions: Execution of Imrédy.
From: Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum Fotótára 64-2989.

meaning, the Deposition of Christ[18]. These photos, which were not published and not canonized, follow this direct iconographical pattern, suggesting an innocent victim and a cruelly unjust legal system.

Conclusions

I am arguing that these photos of the execution of Hungarian war criminals did not serve the purpose of post-war anti-fascist ideology because of the role photographs played in constructing the memory of World War II in Hungary. These photos mark a crucial step on the way to becoming "History", following the typology of communicative and cultural memory by Assman[19]. I argued in the previous sections why photos cannot be analysed by the analytical methods historians normally use for texts and also why this type of photo represents a special temporality open to renegotiation of meaning[20].

Cesare Beccaria argued back in 1764 that execution is the nation's weapon against the non-complying individual. If the effect of execution is bitterness and sympathy, then

its aim has failed because it has failed to constitute a deterrent. In the case of Hungary, selected photos were canonized but other pictures were also known and being circulated. Of course, some photos were not seen by anyone except the photographer him- or herself, and not published either. This photo below shows an unidentified female war criminal, catalogued as "Manci" (diminutive for Margaret) in the National Museum, which illustrates our point. As far as I know, there was no woman with a name of Margaret executed after World War II. Neither the Museum nor the numerous researchers on the war over the past 60 years have invested time or energy in figuring out who she was or eliminating this entry from the back of the photo which is kept in a non-catalogued box under the label "People's tribunal trials". "Manci" probably participated in killing and looting in the last months of the war. In the photo we see that the executioners' most important concern was her sweater just minutes before her death. How troubling is it to look at pictures showing an elderly, respectable-looking woman about to be executed? Would our historical memory of World War II be very different if the methodological and theoretical challenge posed by death and the genre of photography had been acknowledged earlier? This chapter has been an attempt to prove that it would.

Fig. 8
The unknown executed female war criminal catalogued as "Manci" in the Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum Fotótára 83-766.

Notes

[1] I would like to express my thanks to Péter Baki, Tamas Urbán, Katalin Jalsovszky and Ákos Tasnádi from the Museum of Photography, Museum of Crime, of Photograph Collection at the National Museum and Budapest Municipal Archive who helped me to find photos about people's tribunals.

[2] J. Liebman, *Women, Genocide and Memory: The Ethics of Feminist Ethnography in Holocaust Research*, in "Gender and Society", 2004, 18, pp. 223-238.

[3] See more on this A.S. Crane, *Choosing not to Look: Representation, Repatriation, and Holocaust Atrocity Photographs*, in "History and Theory", 2008, 47, pp. 309-330.

[4] Mariann Reisman (1911-1991), Károly Escher (1890-1966), Sándor Bojár (1914-2000).

[5] The exact numbers are unknown due to lack of research. See L. Karsai, *The People's Court and Revolutionary Law in Hungary, 1945-1946*, in I. Deak, J.T. Gross, T. Judt (eds.), *The Politics of Retribution in Europe. World War II and its Aftermath*, Princeton 2000, pp. 233-252; A. Pető, *Problems of Transitional Justice in Hungary: An Analysis of the People's Tribunals in Post-War Hungary and the Treatment of Female Perpetrators*, in "Zeitgeschichte", 2007, 34, pp. 335-349.

[6] See more on this A. Pető, *Gendered Memory of Military Violence in Eastern Europe in the 20th century*, in S. Palatschek, S. Schraut (eds.), *The Gender of Memory. Cultures of Remembrance in Nineteenth-, and Twentieth-Century Europe*, Frankfurt - New York 2008, pp. 237-253.

[7] See more in A. Pető, *Memory and the Narrative of Rape in Budapest and Vienna*, in D. Schumann, R. Bessel (eds.), *Life after Death. Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe*, Cambridge MA 2003, pp. 129-149.

[8] J. Winter, E. Sivan (eds.), *War and Remembrance in the 20th Century,* Cambridge 2000, p. 9.

[9] See more P. Burke, *Eyewitnessing. The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, London 2001; E. Edwards, J. Hart, *Introduction*, in *Photographs as Objects*, New York 2004, pp. 1-16; S. Kracauer, *Photography*, in "Critical Inquiry", 1993, 2, pp. 421-436; K. Robins, *Into the Image: Culture and Politics in the Field of Vision*, London, 1996; I. Gaskell, *Visual History*, in P. Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, London 2001, pp. 187-217; S. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, London 2003.

[10] D.D. Perlmutter, *Visual Historical Method Problems, Prospects, Applications*, in "Historical Method", 1994, 4, pp. 167-184.

[11] J. Taylor, *War Photography? Realism in the British Press*, New York 1991, p. 56.

[12] R. Barthes, *Rhetoric of Image*, in N. Mirzoeff (ed.), *The Visual Culture Reader*, New York, 2nd edn. 2002, pp. 70-73.

[13] E.H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: a Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, first published in 1957, Princeton 1981.

[14] The war criminals executed at Nurenberg were photographed in a standardised way in the morgue, with an identification tag.

[15] On the debate see Magyar Országos Levéltár [Hungarian National Archive, henceforth MOL] E-1c. Box No. 2. Bö. 1466/1945 p. 5.

[16] N. Stevenson, *Cultural Citizenship*, London 2003, p. 4.

[17] In 1956 during the Hungarian revolution lynching at Köztársaság square also played a role in creating a visual link.

[18] See C. Zemel, *Emblems of Atrocity. Holocaust Liberation Photographs*, in S. Hornstein, F. Jacobowitz (eds.), *Image and Rememberance. Representation and the Holocaust*, Bloomington 2003, pp. 201-219.

[19] For Assman's communicative and cultural memory argument see J. Assmann, *Kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Identität*, in J. Assmann, T. Hölscher (eds.), *Kultur und Gedächtnis*, Frankfurt am Main 1988, pp. 9-19.

[20] E. Domanska, *Toward the Archentology of the Dead Body*, in "Rethinking History", 2005, 4, p. 405.

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