

Surviving images: Holocaust photographs and  
the work of postmemory.

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## **Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory**

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of  
Postmemory

## I. Rupture

"One's first encounter with the photographic inventory of ultimate horror is a kind of revelation, the prototypically modern revelation: a negative epiphany. For me, it was photographs of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau that I came across by chance in a bookstore in Santa Monica in July 1945. Nothing I have seen—in photographs or in real life—ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously. Indeed, it seems plausible to me to divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after, though it was several years before I understood fully what they were about. What good was served by seeing them? They were only photographs—of an event I had scarcely heard of and could do nothing to affect, of suffering I could hardly imagine and could do nothing to relieve. When I looked at those photographs, something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead, something is still crying." <sup>1</sup>

\*

"I made a thorough search of my father's desk. I opened every pad and every box in every drawer. . . . In the right bottom drawer I found gray cardboard boxes. There were black and white photographs of dead bodies in them. In several photographs hundreds of bony corpses were piled on top of one another in bony heaps. I had never seen a dead body, not even in a photograph. . . . This is what death looked like.

Not every body in the photographs was dead. People were standing up, but they didn't look human. Their bones stuck out too much. You could see the sockets where one bone connected to the next. Some were naked, some wore striped pajamas that fell off their bones. One man tried to smile. His face was more frightening than the expressionless faces—he was reaching for life, but it was too late. . . . 'U.S. army' and a series of numbers was stamped on the back of each photograph.

My mother told me that the photographs were taken by Mr. Newman. He was a photographer for the Army when they liberated the **[End Page 5]** concentration camps at the end of the war. His photographs were evidence at Nuremberg for what the Nazis did.

I took the photos to class to show the other third-graders what had happened in the camps. My mother had gone through the photos to remove the ones she thought were too upsetting, but I wanted to take all of them, especially the upsetting ones. . . . I believed my friends had no right to live without knowing about these pictures, how could they look so pleased when they were so ignorant. None of them knew what I know, I thought. I hated them for it." <sup>2</sup>

\*

Two encounters, one described by Susan Sontag in 1973 in *On Photography*, the other by Alice Kaplan in *French Lessons* in 1993, twenty years later. Sontag was twelve in 1945 when she first saw those pictures, Kaplan was in third grade, eight or nine, in 1962 when she found them, in the desk of her father who had been a prosecutor at Nuremberg and who had recently died of heart failure.

Both of these encounters with what Sontag calls "the photographic inventory of ultimate horror" occurred in childhood. Although one of these writers is a contemporary of the Holocaust and the other a member of the

second generation, both encounters are marked by the same rupture, the same child realization of death, inconceivable violence, incomprehensible evil. The same sense that the world will never again be whole; that "something broke." In both texts, the descriptions of these encounters are carefully dated and situated: they serve to position the authorial subject in a generational space defined by its visual culture, one in which images such as those found in the privacy...

Surviving Images:  
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*I. Rupture*

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