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Child in Warsaw Ghetto, 1943

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The role of photos in understanding the Holocaust, when pictures of people near death or dead helped prove Nazi brutality, has long been central to the broader understanding of news images. Reflecting a complicated and unstable tension between the truth-value of what they depict and the symbolic force of what they represent, Holocaust images are a litmus test for the parameters by which news images work. What to show, when to show it, to whom, and for which purposes, are among its related issues, many of which surface whenever news photos of difficult events appear.

But Holocaust pictures can also teach us about how creatively a photograph stretches across time. Going beyond the issues of accuracy, fidelity, and reliability associated with a photo's display as news, Holocaust pictures show how news images build renown by moving beyond the news. Specifically, these photos show us that news images persevere by often orienting to the messiness involved in the symbolic nature of mnemonic representation, rather than the truth-value of what was depicted as news.

Perhaps nowhere is this as much the case as with what is widely known as the image of the Warsaw Ghetto boy. The photo, which portrayed a young boy being herded from the Warsaw ghetto under a Nazi machine gun, came to emblemize the deportation of thousands of Jews from Poland in 1943. Taken after an attempted ghetto uprising, it caught the deportees on their way to Treblinka where they were believed to have perished. The picture documented one moment in that process, as a group of women, men, and small children was being shepherded from the ghetto under the watchful eye of Nazi guards. Front and center to the image was a small boy, his arms raised in terror above his head.¹

The photo, now emblematic of the depravity of life under the Nazis, embodied the sheer helplessness of people in the throes of mass eviction. Looking frightened and confused, they anxiously peered in all directions. Only the guards' movements remained steady, their guns turned solidly on the group. The boy stood somewhat apart from the others. Half their size, he was simply dressed—dark-colored knee socks, short pants, an oversized beret, and knee-length pea jacket. Eyes widened in vulnerability and fear, he was the only figure in the photograph to look frontally at the photographer. The photo, in later views, became “one of the indelible images of history,” called a “symbol of the Holocaust.”²

But widespread familiarity with the picture was not always the case. The conventions by which it emerged as iconic speak to how memorability can emerge more in conjunction with an image's recycling into non-news environments than with the news itself.



Figure 1.15 Unknown photographer, Untitled, Warsaw, Poland, 19 April 1943–16 May 1943. Courtesy of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum/Dodge Chrome.

The photo did not initially appear as a news photo. Taken by the personal photographer of the Nazi officer who masterminded the ghetto's evacuation and used it for a 76-page scrapbook on the action, the picture first came to attention after the war when Allied forces found the scrapbook. It was publicly displayed during the Nuremberg Trials of 1945 and 1946, when it helped convict the soldier holding the gun on the boy, but received no major media coverage and remained largely unknown beyond tribunal discussions. Only ten years later did it begin to achieve renown: In 1956, it appeared in Alain Resnais's Holocaust film, *Night and Fog*, and over the next five years graced the first book of Holocaust-related photographs (*Der gelbe Stern*, or *The Yellow Star*), a German exhibition of photographs of Nazi crimes against European Jewry, and at the opening remarks of the second public tribunal connected to the Holocaust—the internationally televised trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961. By the early 1960s, news organizations began reproducing the photo in reports on the trial or the guard's execution, and it subsequently inhabited books on the Holocaust, museums such as Jerusalem's Yad Vashem or Amsterdam's Anne Frank House, and Holocaust paintings, films, poems, and TV series. By then, ghetto survivors had begun to give the boy in the photo constructed identities that mirrored their own loss.

Key to the photo's recycling into non-news venues was how easily its universal dimensions could be transported into other contexts. Its representation of broad suffering, facilitated by the fact that the boy remained anonymous and his actual death was never confirmed, made his depiction a stand-in for the

suffering of others. When people later attempted to identify the boy as a depiction of themselves, there was a strong resistance to his identification. Each time a person made claims of being the boy, newspaper headlines celebrated his emergence. But much of the public remained suspicious, in *The Times*' words, "concerned that the symbolic power of the picture would be diminished were the boy shown to have survived."³

Each display of the photo has enhanced its memorability. Through it all, the suggestion of bodily harm, the child's anonymity, and the image's ambiguous end were central to maintaining the image's power as a depiction of universal suffering. As one observer noted, "Whose child is he? It doesn't matter, because they will all eventually perish. Yet the child alone is surely all of us."⁴

The image of the Warsaw Ghetto boy thereby shows how a news photo's durability often has little to do with its initial function as news. Rather, its use-value is enhanced when news pictures stretch beyond the news environment. The less initially made clear about what a picture depicts, the farther can it move from the news, showing that the power of news images derives as much from their neighboring environments as from the news itself.

Notes

- 1 See Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) and Barbie Zelizer, *About To Die: How News Images Move the Public* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), where I discuss it as an image of "possible death."
- 2 David Margolick, "Rockland Physician Thinks He is the Boy in Holocaust Photo Taken in Warsaw," *New York Times*, 28 May 1982, B1; Clay Harris, "Warsaw Ghetto Boy: Symbol of the Holocaust," *Washington Post*, 17 September 1978, L1.
- 3 Margolick, "Rockland Physician," B1.
- 4 David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984): 295.