

# Marianne Hirsch & Leo Spitzer

## WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE?

### Archival photographs in contemporary narratives

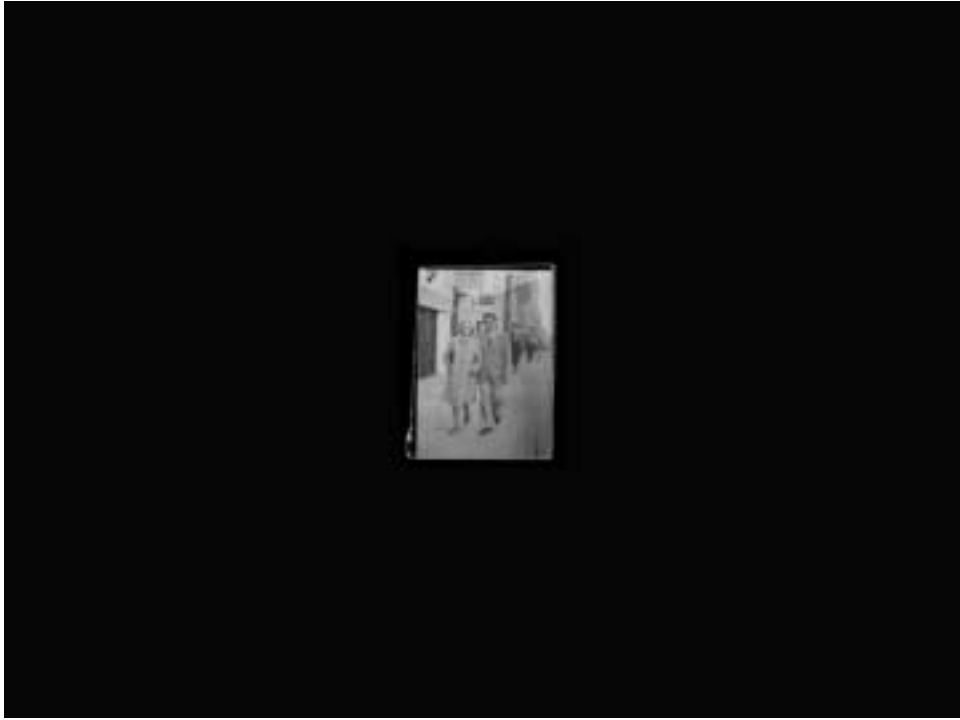
*This article considers the important role of archival photographs in the work of historians, artists and writers of the generation after the Holocaust. Powerful “points of memory” linking past and present, memory and postmemory, individual remembrance and cultural recall, photographs can offer evidence of past crimes and function as haunting specters that enable an affective visceral connection to the past. And yet, photographs may also be limited and flawed historical documents, promising more than they can actually reveal. The article argues that such ambiguous evidence may be a resource for historians seeking to grasp and transmit the past’s emotional truth.*

Au mois de juin 1942, un officier allemand s’avance vers un jeune homme et lui dit: “Pardon monsieur, où se trouve la place de l’Etoile?” Le jeune homme désigne le côté gauche de sa poitrine. [In June 1942, a German officer approaches a young man and asks him: “Excuse me, sir, but where is the Place de l’Etoile?” The young man points to his left lapel.]

(Modiano 12)

*This is the only photograph of my parents Carl and Lottie Hirsch, taken during the war years and it is tiny, 2.5 × 3.5 cm, about the size of a 35 mm negative, with unevenly cut edges (figure 1). I have always loved this image of a stylish young couple—newlyweds walking confidently down an active urban street. The more difficult it was to make out the details of the faded and slightly spotted black-and-white image, the more mysterious and enticing it became to me over the years. In it, my mother is wearing a flared light-colored half-length coat and attractive leather or suede shoes with heels. She is carrying a dark purse under her arm. My father wears well-cut pants and dark leather shoes, and a tweed jacket that looks slightly too small. Details of their facial expressions are difficult to read, but their strides appear animated, matching, their arms interlaced, my mother’s hands in her pockets. The picture must have been taken by one of the street photographers on the “Herrengasse” (Strada Iancu Flondor) in Czernowitz/Cernăuți (today, Chernivtsi, Ukraine) who took the photos that populated my parents’ albums and those of their friends—photographs dating from the 1920s and 1930s. Equally small, they were no doubt developed and sold to clients on the spot. This picture’s radical difference is marked on the back, however, where my father’s handwriting reads “Cz. 1942” (figure 2).*

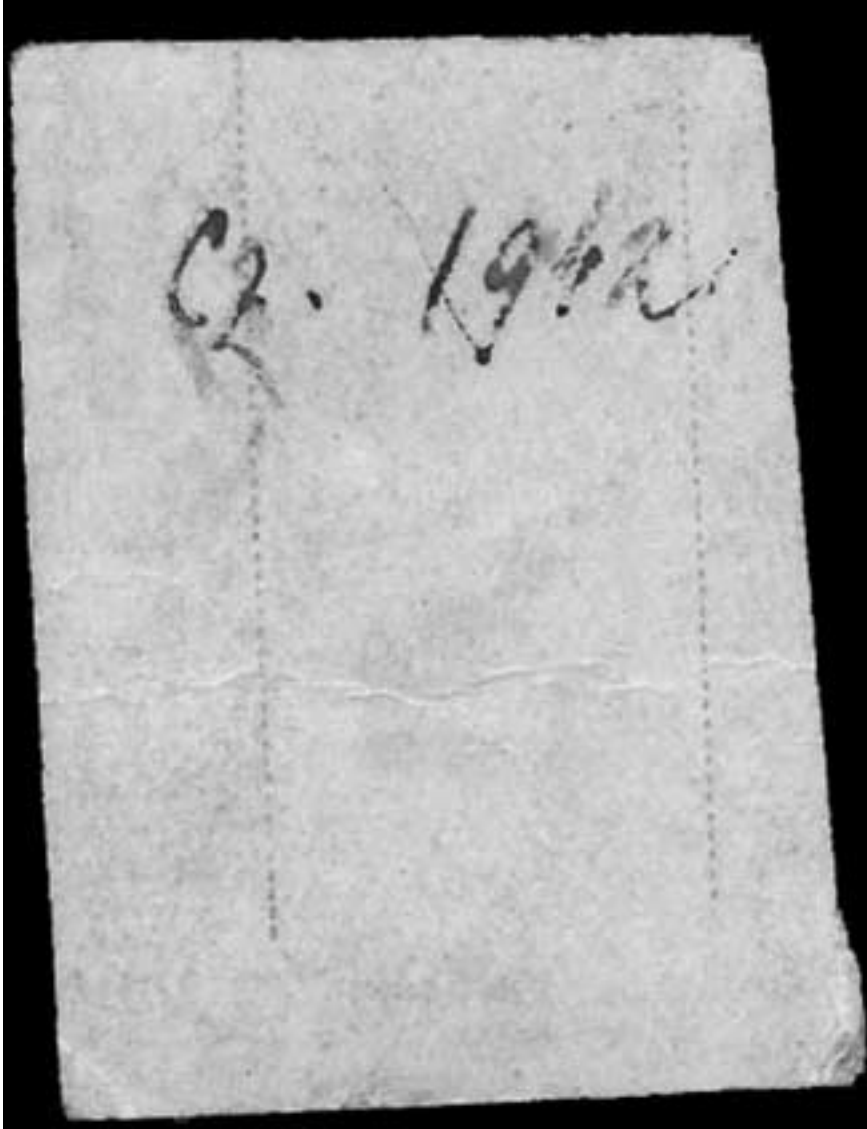
In 1942, Czernowitz/Cernăuți was again a Romanian city, ruled by a fascist Romanian government that collaborated with Nazi authorities. Two-thirds of the city’s Jewish population—some 40,000 persons—had been deported to Transnistria in the fall of 1941, about half of those perishing from hunger and typhus during that winter, or murdered, either by Romanian gendarmes



**FIGURE 1** Carl and Lotte Hirsch, Herrengasse in Cernăuți. Hirsch/Spitzer family archive.

or Nazi troops. Those, like my parents, who were still in the city, had been issued special waivers by the city's mayor or the region's governor as Jews who were deemed necessary to the city's functioning. After the Jewish ghetto into which they had been forced was largely emptied and dissolved, they were permitted to return to their own homes, but they were subject to severe restrictions, a strict curfew, and were obliged to wear the Yellow Star. Men were routinely taken off the street to do forced labour. Later (or earlier, depending on exactly when the picture was taken) in the summer of 1942, they would have been vulnerable to a second wave of deportations to Transnistria or further east, across the river Bug into German-administered territories and almost certain death.<sup>1</sup> Nothing in the picture betrays the hardship of the time. Carl and Lotte are not visibly suffering; they do not look starved, unhealthy or afraid. The photograph is not comparable to pictures of Jews in Warsaw or Łódz streets taken in 1942—images of acute misery and deprivation in ghettos or other restricted quarters.

"Here we are during the war", my parents once said to me, with what I took to be some amount of defiance. This photograph had been a measure for me of the difference between my parents' way of telling the story about their experiences during the war years and the much more dire and frightening narratives we read and collected from other survivors and witnesses. The photograph seemed to confirm Lotte and Carl's version of events: what they thought of as their "relatively lucky circumstances", and the "youth" and "young love" that helped them to endure and keep up their spirits. Still, I became increasingly puzzled by the little picture's incongruities: by its refusal to testify to what I knew to be true of the context in which it was taken—a time of persecution, oppression and totalitarian constraints in which photography itself took an ominous turn from a medium of personal and familial remembrance to a threatening instrument of surveillance. Flipping the little photograph from front to back, I was unable to get its two sides to match up.



**FIGURE 2** "CZ. 1942": Verso of photograph: Carl and Lotte Hirsch, Herrengasse in Cernăuți. Hirsch/Spitzer family archive.

### The little picture

When we began to write about the wartime in Cernăuți, this photograph was one of very few images we had on hand from there that might supplement the many written documents, memoirs and oral testimonies on which we were basing our understanding of the place and time. However small and blurred, however seemingly incongruous, it was a valuable piece of evidence that, we hoped, would give us some greater insight into the texture of Jewish wartime life in this city. Eager for it to reveal itself even more to us, we digitally scanned and enlarged it, blowing it up several times, searching to find



**FIGURE 3** A spot? Hirsch/Spitzer family archive.

what might not be visible to the naked eye (figure 3). Amazingly, as it came up to about  $10 \times 14$  cm on the screen, the image and the story it told changed dramatically—at least on first glance. All of a sudden, it looked as if there *was* something on Carl Hirsch's left lapel that had not been noticeable before. A bright, light spot, not too large, emerged just in the place where Jews would have been worn the Yellow Star in the spring or fall of 1942. Perhaps the picture was not as incongruous as we had thought: perhaps it would indeed confirm the darker version of the story we had learned and absorbed from so many other accounts. We printed the enlargement, took out magnifying glasses, went up to the window and used the best lamps in our study to scrutinize the blow-up. We played with the enlargement's resolution on the computer in Photoshop, sleuthing like detectives to determine the exact nature of the spot (figures 4, 5, 6 and 7).



**FIGURE 4** Enlargement 1. Hirsch/Spitzer family archive.

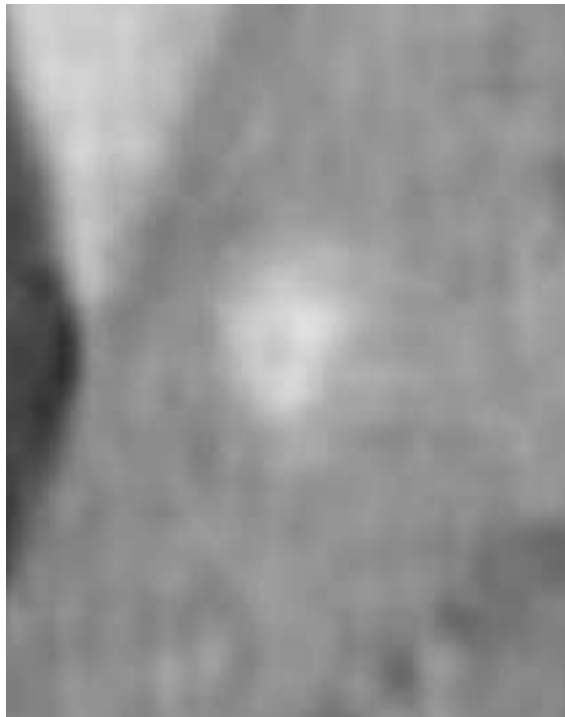


**FIGURE 5** Enlargement 2. Hirsch/Spitzer family archive.

The spot's edges remained blurry. Yet did their shape not suggest points? This *must* be the Yellow Star, we concluded, what else could he be wearing on his lapel? We blew the picture up even more, then again, even a little more; yes, of course, it had the *shape of the* Jewish star. We began to reread the photograph's content, its message, against Lotte and Carl's facial expression and body language that were now also much more clearly visible. We remembered some of their stories about the star, about how they sometimes went out without it, daring fate, to buy groceries more easily, or simply to re-experience their former freedom and mobility. The stars in Cernăuți were not sewn on, but affixed with safety pins: young people like Carl and Lotte sometimes wore them on the *inside* of their coats, illegally, but able to show them should they be stopped by the authorities. Yet if that, indeed, explained the seemingly missing star in Lotte's case, would the couple not have been afraid to have their picture taken by a street photographer?



**FIGURE 6** Enlargement 3. Hirsch/Spitzer family archive.



**FIGURE 7** Enlargement 4. Hirsch/Spitzer family archive.

The smiles with which they greeted the camera and, indeed, the fact that they had stopped to *buy* the photograph after it was developed, gave us no such impression.

We sent the enlarged photo to Lotte and Carl. “There is a small spot on my lapel,” Carl wrote in an email, “but it could not be *the* star. The stars were large, 6 cm in diameter. Maybe I should have written 1943 on the photo. They did away with the stars in July of 1943.” “And if that is a star,” Lotte wrote, “then why am I not wearing one?” In a later email she said: “Yes, it was definitely taken on the Herrengasse during the war, and to me it looks like a star, but the date is causing us problems.” In fact, we later found two other photographs of Czernowitz Jews wearing the Yellow Star; these photographs are dated “around 1943” and “May 1943” (figures 8 and 9). Their stars are larger and more distinctive than the spot on Carl Hirsch’s lapel, but they also are walking through the city—seemingly on the “Herrengasse”—having their picture taken by a street photographer, and evidently purchasing the photograph after its development. Like Lotte’s and Carl’s, their stroll also seems “normal,” as though the temporal and political moment in which they were snapped and the “otherness” they were made to display were hardly relevant.



**FIGURE 8** Ilana Schmueli and her mother. Reproduced by kind permission of Ilana Schmueli.

It may not be possible to determine exactly what, if anything, Carl has on his lapel. Perhaps *it is dust*—no more than a small dot of dirt on the print. Our receptions of the photograph, the questions we pose in examining it, the needs and desires that shape our viewing, inevitably exceed the image’s small size and its limited ability to serve as evidence. Even after its enlargements, the results of our persistent efforts to penetrate beyond its mysterious surface are intriguing, but also inconclusive. No doubt, our determination to magnify and enhance the picture—to zoom in, blow-up, sharpen—reveals more about our own projections and appropriations than about life in wartime Greater Romania. As Roland Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida*:

If I like a photograph, if it disturbs me, I... look at it, I scrutinize it, as if I wanted to know more about the thing or the person it represents... I want to enlarge this



**FIGURE 9** City Dermer, Berthold Geisinger and unidentified person, May 1943. Reproduced by kind permission of City Dermer and Berthold Geisinger.

face in order to see it better, to understand it better, to know its truth... I decompose, I enlarge, ... I *retard*, in order to have time to *know* at last... Alas, however hard I look, I discover nothing: if I enlarge, I see nothing but the grain of the paper. ... Such is the Photograph: it cannot *say* what it let's us see. (99, 100)

So then, what can we learn about a traumatic past from photographs? Ulrich Baer recently noted that such photographs in the context of trauma constitute a kind of

“spectral evidence,” revealing “the striking gap between what we can see and what we can know” (Baer 2). Addressing the Second World War and the Holocaust, in particular, he argues that they mark a crisis of witnessing and “call into question the habitual reliance on vision as the principal ground for cognition” (181). Nonetheless, photography has functioned as one of the principal forms mediating the memory of this period. In recent years, a powerful memorial aesthetic has developed around archival photographs and objects from this era, inviting us to look more broadly into what knowledge they can, in fact, offer us from that past. The writings and artistic productions of, for example, Art Spiegelman, Patrick Modiano, Henri Raczymow, Anne Michaels, W. G. Sebald, Christian Boltanski, Mikael Levin, Tatana Kellner, Shimon Attie, Audrey Flack, Lorie Novak and Muriel Hasbun, to name but a few, employ photographs—revealing them to be both limited and flawed historical documents, as well as powerful “points of memory” linking past and present, memory and postmemory, individual remembrance and cultural recall.<sup>2</sup> Indeed in our experience, these pervasive photographic images in the works of second- and third-generation artists, along with other material remnants of the Holocaust, do more than supplement the accounts of historians and the words of witnesses. Haunting spectres, they not only signal a visceral material connection to the past and carry its traces forward, but they also embody the very fractured process of its transmission (figures 10 and 11).



**FIGURE 10** Christian Boltanski, *Reliquaire*, 1989. Mixed media (in Danilo Echer [Ed.] *Christian Boltanski* [Milan, 1997]). Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery.



**FIGURE 11** Muriel Hasbun, *¿Sólo una sombra? (Familia, Łódz)*, 1994. Courtesy of Muriel Hasbun.

### *The Dark Room*

In order to gain some insights into this postwar/post-Holocaust generational aesthetic, we turn now to *The Dark Room*: Rachel Seiffert's recent novel about German memory of the Second World War.<sup>3</sup> The three distinct stories around which this novel is structured are linked not by their plot, but by their exploration of the problems posed by photographic evidence and how these have evolved between the 1940s and the 1990s, connecting witnesses to their children and grandchildren (Horstkotte 275–293).

Helmut, the protagonist of the first story (which takes place in Germany during the war) is a bystander to its developments. Exempted from Wehrmacht service due to a severe physical disability, he works as a photographer's assistant and is able to witness and record on film some of the events in his native city in the early 1940s. In the section's climactic moments, Helmut watches through a camera's viewfinder and

photographs a scene the narrative describes though his eyes, but that he does not interpret: "There are trucks and uniformed men shouting and pushing... Through the lens he sees possessions scattered: clothes, pots, boxes, sacks kicked and hurled across the muddy ground. An officer stands by screaming orders." (Seiffert 27). Helmut is agitated, frightened, but perhaps also exhilarated by what he is seeing, and he photographs furiously. "In the viewfinder his eyes meet the eyes of a shouting, pointing gypsy. Others turn to look, frightened angry faces in headscarves, hats and in uniform too" (28). However, when Helmut returns to the studio and develops his film, he is severely disappointed. The blurred, grainy photographs just refuse to show what he observed earlier in the day: the medium is simply inadequate, wrong. "The bright skirts of the gypsy women are just drab rags in his photos... The dark SS uniforms blend into the soot-black walls of the buildings making them almost invisible... He blows up the image, but the grain evens out the angry lines on the face of the officer who was screaming orders by the jeep, and he barely looks like he is shouting" (30). The list of the photographs' failures goes on. Ultimately, deeply disappointed, Helmut throws both the negatives and the prints into the trash can. All that remains is the enormous disjunction between the effect of the scene of witness and Helmut's encounter with his photographs: the frenzy of the moment gives way to frustration, rage, even self-hatred.

Helmut's failed photographs illustrate the belatedness of photographic looking and the temporal disjunction between the moment an image is taken and the moment it is developed and viewed—a disjunction that, paradoxically, is no less enormous within the very brief time frame of the scene in the narrative (no more than several hours) than it is for second-generation viewers like us. Helmut's photographs are destroyed; the most important ones in his act of witnessing were never even taken. Photographs, Helmut's responses indicate, are shaped by intense emotion—in this case, by fear, nervousness, inadequacy. In this first story of *The Dark Room*, Rachel Seiffert establishes the interested nature of photographic evidence, the partial view of the photographer, the contingency of the images that survive.

And yet, in the book's second story, taking place at the very end of the war amid arrests, flight and relocation and the ensuing chaos, photographs are accorded enough evidentiary power to be burned, torn up and buried. Here a mother and daughter trying to protect the Nazi father from accusation, and themselves from association with him, destroy photographs and family albums that can implicate all of them. Yet the evidentiary authority of photography is also utterly undermined, when, at the end of the section, the mysterious Tomas is found to be using an identity card and picture that clearly belongs not to him, but to a Jew who, Tomas reveals, had been killed in a camp. Why Tomas is impersonating this Jew, what he is trying to hide under this false identity, what the ID card has to do with the blue number tattooed on his arm, remains as ambiguous as the other photographs that are being used as pedagogic displays after the liberation of concentration camps in Germany. When the daughter, Lore, and her young siblings walk through various small towns on their way to Oma's house in Hamburg, they occasionally confront large blurry photographs tacked up in central locations. Silent crowds of onlookers surround these images.<sup>4</sup> Like Helmut, Lore can take in the scenes depicted in these photographs only viscerally; she is incapable of identifying their context or of interpretation:

In front of Lore is a picture of a trash dump, or it might be a heap of ashes. She leans in closer, thinks it could be shoes... She steps forward out of the group, smooths

out the damp creases with her palms. A whisper sets off behind her and makes its way around the group. The pictures are of skeletons, Lore can see that now. (76)

These pictures had been glued to a tree, but with the adhesive still wet, they have rippled upon drying. Daring to touch them, to flatten them, to step up close and then back again, Lore reveals their details to the crowd. Yet neither her stroking touch nor the more distant vantage point of the onlookers help the girl understand what the pictures reveal. The images stay with her; they remain visible behind her eyelids. She is relieved when she hears adults suggest that the Americans may have staged the frightening photographs. Indistinct, unidentifiable, difficult to connect to her experience, the pictures carry a very different kind of evidence for Lore than the factual one that those posting them had most likely intended. Through their sheer emotional force, they spell out for her that crimes were committed, that those around her, even her parents, may be implicated. Yet they also remain impenetrable and inexplicable: blurry visuals of horrific scenes encountered among onlookers responding with whispers, throat-clearing, silence or audible protests of denial and rationalization.

In these first two stories, Seiffert's point of view remains close to that of her young, uninformed, yet ultimately deeply (if indirectly) implicated German witnesses, and she records their responses in great detail. These illustrate the act of traumatic seeing, in which the image—at first felt affectively and not cognitively—acquires meaning only belatedly, in retrospect. Even later, more meaningful insights and deeper comprehension are blocked by conscious and unconscious needs—by desires and resistances, both individual and collective. Knowledge remains partial, fragmentary, with its enlightening components both partially revealed and blocked from exposure.

*The Dark Room's* third story then jumps ahead several decades and one generation, focusing on Micha, the grandson of a Waffen-SS officer, Askan Boell, who served in Belarus and did not return to Germany from a Soviet prison camp until 1954. The story traces the grandson's painful research into his Opa's past and his difficult realization that his grandfather was present when masses of Jewish civilians were killed in the summer and fall of 1943. Photographs are Micha's main research tools: he brings a 1938 picture of his grandfather to Belarus and shows it to witnesses who recognize Boell as one of the SS Germans who were there in 1943. However, the photographs primarily serve to bring home the disjunction between the kind grandfather Micha remembers and the Nazi killer he suspects him to have been. Micha's sister insists: "They don't show anything, the pictures. They're family shots, you know? Celebrations, always happy. You can't see anything." Yet Micha "does not want to believe her", does not give up the attempt to find "truth" in the photographs: "*He always looked away from the camera, though. Did you notice that? After the war*" (266; emphasis is from the original). Together, grandson and granddaughter, brother and sister, try to read the grandfather's postwar feelings in conventional, opaque, family snapshots. Why did Opa look away from the camera in family photographs? Did it mean he "had eyes only" for his grandchildren, standing beside him? Or did it mean he was feeling guilty about his crimes?

Micha wants and needs something from the photographs that they cannot possibly convey. However much he studies them, carries them back to Belarus and around Germany, they remain unreadable, always saying either too much or too little. At most, they can serve to identify Askan Boell to the Belorussian collaborator Kolesnik and to gain the latter's confirmation of the grandfather's presence in Belarus in 1943. Yet even

here we find out more about Micha's affective response than about participation and guilt. "Micha has put the photo on the table, so that the old man won't see that his hands are shaking" (256). Kolesnik's testimony is general, vague, describing Nazi killings and the Soviet arrests of the culprits, leading Micha to ask again and again: "*Did you see my Opa do anything?*" (258; emphasis is from the original). Repeatedly prodded, Kolesnik eventually admits that, yes, he *knows* that Askan Boell participated *because all the Germans who were there did*, with the exception of one who shot himself. Askan must have done it, like the others. The evidence is there, but it is not incontrovertible; the old collaborator had been present, but he was not an explicit eye-witness to Boell's participation in killings.

There are no pictures of him holding a gun to someone's head, but I am sure he did that and pulled the trigger, too. The camera was pointing elsewhere, shutter opening and closing on the murder of another Jew, done by another man. But my Opa was no more than a few steps away. (264)

Thus, the crucial, confirming, photo was *not* taken, or *did not* survive, and so the third-generation retrospective witness is left only with the ambiguous evidence carried by the photographs he inherited, and onto which he projects his own anxieties, needs and desires—feelings disproportionate to what the pictures can, in fact, support. The truth about the past always seems to lie somewhere else, just beyond the frame. At most, the photographs can gesture toward that elsewhere, and be powerful conduits between what was then and what is now. A question thus emerges: Can this type of ambiguous but affective evidence—what Ann Cvetkovich has termed "an archive of feeling"—be mined as a resource by historians seeking to grasp and transmit the past's emotional truth?

## Points of memory

Pervasive in the personal, scholarly and artistic work of postmemory, photographic documents bring the contradictions of the archives we have inherited into the open. Invariably, archival photographic images appear in postmemorial texts in altered form: they are cropped, enlarged, projected unto other images; they are reframed and de-or re-contextualized; they are embedded in new narratives, new texts; they are surrounded by new frames. Muriel Hasbun's composite memorial images can sharpen our analysis of this postmemorial photographic aesthetic and the psychic structures that motivate it (figure 12). Hasbun crops and reframes archival photographs, superimposes them on one another, reconstitutes them to alter their color, surrounds them with written text, with twigs that look like barbed wire or with old wooden frames, prints them on linens she inherited from her grandmother, and installs them amid aural recordings of music and conversations about them. The images that result are often blurry, out of focus, partial, hard to read. In spite of their obscurity—an obscurity the artist actually augments in her installations—Hasbun describes them as a "refuge against silence and forgetting" and as means to "transcend generational amnesia."<sup>5</sup>

Hasbun's work results from her own hybrid background as the daughter of a Polish Jewish mother who survived the war with some of her family in hiding in France, and a Palestinian Christian father who immigrated to El Salvador where



**FIGURE 12** Muriel Hasbun, *¿Sólo una sombra? (Ester I)*, 1994. Courtesy of Muriel Hasbun.

Hasbun grew up. The images and objects Hasbun includes in her composite photographs and installations stem from multiple sites and archives, coming together through her own combination, synthesis and recreation. Even the multilingual titles of the projects that recall her mother's survival in France, with their parentheses and question marks (*Solo una Sombra? (Only a Shadow?)* and *Protegida (Watched Over)*)—inscribe the tentative, ambiguous and diasporic quality of Hasbun's postmemory work. In one part of the triptych *Protegida: Auvergne—Hélène* entitled *Mes enfants—Photographe Sanitas, 1943* (figure 13), Hasbun overlays a photo of two young children and a letter dated Paris, 3 January 1942 addressed to “Mes enfants” (my children). “I would love to have some photos of my two dolls,” the letter says, “preferably dressed in their winter clothing and taken around the house.” Did the writer, the artist's grandfather who was hiding in Paris, receive this studio picture of these two “dolls”, his grandchildren hiding with his wife and daughter in Le Mont Dore, or does Hasbun bring together the letter



**FIGURE 13** Muriel Hasbun, *Mes enfants* – Photographe Sanitas, 1943. Courtesy of Muriel Hasbun.

and the photograph in an act of retrospective repair? The composite image is as blurred as it is haunting, signaling loss, longing and desire, but giving no specific insight into the circumstances of the letter or the photograph. Exhibiting the material imprint of the writer's hand, the indexical trace of the children who posed for the photograph, and of Hasbun's own postmemorial act of reframing, the image becomes a site in which present and past intersect with one another. What do we actually learn about Jewish survival in France by looking at Hasbun's images? The composite installations inscribe and highlight the inscrutability of the images and the questions they raise, as well as the artist's (and our) present needs and desires to find out more about her mother's or grandmother's past lives (figure 14).



**FIGURE 14** Muriel Hasbun, *Hélène's eye*, from the series, "Protegida: Auvergne < Hélène," 1996–2002. Courtesy of Muriel Hasbun.

Hasbun's images, like those of her contemporaries, resist our desire to see more clearly, to penetrate more deeply. They are often cropped in unexpected and frustrating ways: in *Hélène's eye* we see only half of Hélène's, her great-aunt's, face, and the face is blown up, almost distorted. On the other side of the triptych, Hélène B/Hendla F. (she changed her name from Finkielstajn to Barthel to survive) holds the ID photograph that was attached to identity cards with the two different names (figure 15). We see only her mouth and her hand; we cannot look into her eyes. And yet the voices playing in the background of the pictures of Ester, the sister of Hasbun's grandfather whom he did not find until 1974, reveal another dimension of knowledge and transmission:

In my darkroom, I was looking at the portrait of Ester, its image projected on the paper. Only a shadow? Impossible. The brittle leaves from an earlier autumn had already been transformed by the light. Upon finishing the portraits, I wrote to Ester: "When I make these pictures—cuando hago estas fotografías—it's as if I were finding what has been underneath the shadows—es como que si encontraria lo que estaba debajo de las sombras—or what lives inside our hearts—o lo que vive dentro de nuestros corazones." [Ester:] "I remember, in the camp I worked... Every Sunday when we don't work, we sit all the girls and look at the pictures. It was not important it was the pictures of us, but pictures from the home... The first thing, when I came here, the first thing that I asked, 'Have you pictures?,' the first thing."<sup>6</sup>



**FIGURE 15** Muriel Hasbun, *Hélène's eye*, from the series, "Protegida: Auvergne < Hélène," 1996–2002. Courtesy of Muriel Hasbun.

In relation to memoir and testimony, and to historical accounts and scholarly discussions, as within new artistic texts, archival images function as supplements, both confirming and unsettling the stories that are explored and transmitted. On the one hand, they are imperfect documents, as Seiffert shows, already deeply problematic when they are taken; on the other hand, they embody an alternate discourse, create an opening in the present to something in the past that goes beyond the information they record. As Andrea Liss writes, they have the "potential to provoke historical memory and to confront the viewer's subjectivities" (86). The fantasies they call forth are deep and often inarticulate and uncontrollable, capable of provoking ethical

attempts at mourning and repair, but also unwanted and illicit identifications.<sup>7</sup> Visual images of trauma are, as art historian Jill Bennett argues, beyond the logic of representation, possessing “the capacity to address the spectator’s own bodily memory; to *touch* the viewer who *feels* rather than simply sees the event, drawn into the image through a process of affect contagion” (36; emphasis is from the original). As such, she insists, vision “has a very different relationship to affective experience—especially to experience which cannot be spoken as it is felt. The eye can often function as a mute witness by means of which events register as eidetic memory images imprinted with sensation” (35). In enlarging Hélène’s eye, Hasbun calls attention to this capacity of the eye to “register” affect through vision.

We have found Roland Barthes’ notion of the punctum helpful in describing this relationship of photographs and objects from the past to memory. As we have argued previously, we think of images and objects that have come down to us from the past as points of memory.<sup>8</sup> The term “point” is both spatial (such as a point on a map) and temporal (a moment in time), and thus it signals the intersection of spatiality and temporality that is inherent in the workings of personal and cultural memory. The sharpness of a point pierces or punctures: like the punctum, points of memory puncture through layers of oblivion, interpellating those who seek to know about the past. A point is also small, a detail, and thus it can convey the fragmentariness of the vestiges of the past—tiny images on faded cracked paper. Points of memory can produce insights that pierce and traverse temporal, spatial and experiential divides. As points multiply, they can convey the overlay of different temporalities and interpretive frames, mitigating straightforward readings or any lure of authenticity. We think of this notion in response and as an alternative to what Pierre Nora, in a profoundly nationalist conception of cultural memory has termed “lieux de mémoire.” Points of memory, small, fragmentary, mobile and portable, unlike Nora’s stable and nationally sanctioned “lieux,” are trans- or supranational, better suited to the diaspora memorial cultures that define the post-Holocaust imaginary.

As points of memory, photographs, objects and remnants from the past interpellate the postmemorial subject powerfully. They communicate in a different register; open up an alternate memorial discourse. That is perhaps why we want and need so much from them. Following Barthes, we might say that while some images merely give information about the past, like Barthes’s “studium” (25–27), others prick and wound and grab and puncture, like the “punctum”—unsettling assumptions, exposing the unexpected, suggesting what Barthes calls “a subtle beyond” or the “blind field” outside the frame. For Barthes, the punctum is first a detail in the image, one only he notices, often because of some personal connection he has with the image. This acknowledged subjectivity and positionality, this vulnerability and this focus on the detail—the ordinary, everyday—belongs to the needs and desires of postmemory work. For Barthes, the punctum is about visibility and invisibility: once a particular detail, however off-center, interpellates him, it screens out other parts of the image, however central or primary these might initially have appeared (49–51). Retrospective witnessing is torn between different details, different interpretations of the archive: in our own case, between the front and the back of the image.

In the second part of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes reconceives the punctum, bringing to it another dimension—time: the incongruity or incommensurability between the meaning of a given detail *then*, and the one it holds *now*. In staring at an image or an

object from the past, we know, Barthes says, both that it “has been” and that it will die, change, be lost. The punctum carries the knowledge of inevitable loss, change and death, and that inevitability constitutes the lens through which, as humans, we look at the past. Yet, as Michael André Bernstein warns, reading the past backward through our retrospective knowledge is a dangerous form of “backshadowing”, which he defines as “a kind of retroactive foreshadowing in which the shared knowledge of the outcome of a series of events by narrator and listener is used to judge the participants in those events *as though they too should have known what was to come*” (16; emphasis is from the original). The work of postmemorial reading entails juxtaposing two incommensurable temporalities, exposing and keeping open the disjunction between them.

When we blew up Carl and Lotte Hirsch’s photograph to the point where all contrast was gone, but where it revealed that curious spot on Carl’s lapel, we were searching for the confirmation of our own understanding of the past, one that fundamentally contradicted what the picture made visible. We very much wanted to challenge its seeming air of normality—the way it fitted like any other everyday snapshot into a page of a photograph album without proclaiming the irregularity of the place and time in which it was taken. And, like the artists who re-employ documentary images in their contemporary works, we felt we had to amend, and tweak, and modify the picture for additional reasons as well. We needed to open up the range of effects and meanings it contained, as well as those we were projecting onto it. Looking at the picture now, we realize that in it Carl and Lotte are *already* survivors, alive within a fortunate minority that had been spared a terrible fate. They are on the Herrengasse, but they are not supposed to be there; they have outstayed their welcome in this city of their birth. They are looking, shyly, smilingly, toward a future they could not, cannot foresee. This is the knowledge a retrospective witness brings to a photograph that, as Barthes says, “tells me death in the future” (96).

In wanting to restore to Carl and Lotte’s photograph the hardships it seemed to be eliding, we adopted, we now see, the backshadowing glance which Eve Sedgwick has recently termed “paranoid reading”—anticipatory, eager to unveil hidden violence and to expose unseen danger (123–151). Through this reading, we wanted to find and reveal the negative lurking within and outside the frame of the image and, through our vigilance, somehow, to protect Carl and Lotte, walking down the Herrengasse, from the terrible fate that in hindsight we know could have been—and, in the summer of 1942, could still be—theirs. Yet archival photographs also challenge their viewers not to impose retrospection to the point where a photograph’s own temporality and surface, however delicate and contingent, is erased. While this photograph qualifies the grand historical narrative we have of the time, it also requires (again, in Sedgwick’s terms) a more generous “reparative reading” than the paranoid scrutiny we initially employed (128–129, 146–151). Such a reading would leave ambiguities unresolved, providing an expanded context for a more affective knowing. Was Lotte and Carl’s photograph taken in 1942 or 1943? Were they wearing a Yellow Star, or not? If it was 1942, and they walked on the Herrengasse without it, trying to pass, why did they not fear a photographic record of their transgression? Why did they stop to buy the photo? Did their purchase accentuate an act of resistance? Alternatively, if they were both, in fact, wearing a star (Lotte, perhaps under a turned-up coat collar) were they humiliated by the photograph, yet

nonetheless defiant enough to buy it as a record of an outrage Jews were forced to endure? Or, perhaps, was the inscription on the photograph's back indeed an error? Was it taken in 1943—after the stars were discontinued in Greater Romania? The Herrengasse stroll, in that case, would attest to a moment of greater freedom, increased hope, following Carl and Lotte's fortunate evasion of mass deportations, but if so, then what is the spot on the lapel?

Muriel Hasbun's *Mes enfants* raises similar puzzling questions and incongruities. First the date: as Hasbun writes, the letter was written "in the first days of January 1943. The date on the letter is 1942, but the postmark (on the dorso) is 1943, which probably meant my grandfather made a mistake since it was the new year. They had already been hiding in Le Mont Dore since August of 1942."<sup>9</sup> How were her grandparents able to correspond if both were in hiding in different places? How was it possible for Jews who were passing or hiding to have their children's pictures taken in a formal photography studio such as "Photographe Sanitas?" Would they not have been afraid of detection and exposure through these two revealing media? As though to underscore the dangers that the rather benign, if blurry and haunting, image seems almost to be eliding, Hasbun includes another image on the back of the pedestal on which this picture is mounted. "'Mes enfants' has 'El lobo feroz' on its dorso, which I've rephotographed from a book that came out after the war, telling the story of WWII to children, called 'La Guerre chez les animaux', and the big bad wolf is Hitler (the wolf has a swastika on the armband)" (figure 16).<sup>10</sup>

By considering, rather than dismissing, these multiple and contradictory readings of Jewish existence during 1942–1943, by leaving ambiguities unresolved, we—like Hasbun—broaden the boundaries of our understanding and tap into a deeper register of intergenerational transmission. We gain an access to what the stories about this past do not readily reveal: the emotional fabric of daily life in extreme circumstances, its after-effects in the process of survival. If our search was indeed successful in revealing the traumatic wound that seemed so strangely absent from the tiny image in the album, our scrutiny of the picture also reveals the indeterminacy of that wound and the unlocatability of its source. Yet it also reveals that as much as survival might be a struggle against the memory of trauma, structured by forgetting or denial, the mark is there, present, even if it remains submerged, disguised, invisible to the naked eye. Extracting whatever information we can from fragmentary documents, unreadable sources and blurry, indeterminate, spots in a tiny pale image, we also realize that allowing the image to fade back to its initial size, we might be able to make space for the possibility of "life" rather than "death in the future."

### *Gémissements de désespoir*

W. G. Sebald is perhaps one of the most articulate practitioners of the photographic memorial aesthetic we have been exploring in this article. His novel *Austerlitz* not only develops a meta-photographic discourse that is certainly more layered and complex than what we find in Seiffert's novel, but he also includes a great number of archival images that both underline and complicate what he says about photography and memory. Two particular photographs relate directly to family history the protagonist is so anxiously trying to recover throughout the novel. They are given to him by Vera, the woman in



**FIGURE 16** Muriel Hasbun, *El lobo feroz* (*La guerre chez les Animaux*, c. 1945). Courtesy of Muriel Hasbun.

Prague who knew him and his parents before the war. She found them in a volume of Balzac's *Colonel Chabert* on her shelf. Describing the photographs, Austerlitz tells the narrator what Vera said to him about them:

I heard Vera again, speaking of the mysterious quality peculiar to such photographs when they surface from oblivion. One has the impression, she said, of something stirring in them, as if one caught small sighs of despair, *gémissements de désespoir* was her expression, said Austerlitz, as if the pictures had a memory of their own and

remembered us, remembered the roles that we, the survivors, and those no longer among us had played in our former lives. (Sebald 182).

It seems to us that this may be the clearest articulation of what we fantasize and expect of archival photographs: that they have a memory of their own that they bring to us from the past; that that memory tells us something about ourselves, about what/how we and those who preceded us once were; that they carry not only information about the past, but enable us to reach an emotional register. That they require a particular kind of visual literacy, one that can decode the foreign language that they speak, for in Sebald's formulations, they do not just utter "small sighs of despair," but they do so in French, "*gémissements de désespoir*." The work of postmemory consists in "learning French" (as it were) to be able to translate the "*gémissements*" from the past into the present and the future where they will be heard by generations not yet born.

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## Notes

1. For the Holocaust in Czernowitz/Cernauti and the deportations to Transnistria, see Carmelly; Carp; Coldewey et al.; Heymann; Ioanid; Shachan; Sella.
2. For definitions and elaborations of "postmemory", see Hirsch, *Family Frames*, "Projected Memory", "Surviving Images"; Liss.
3. We are grateful to Susan Winnett for suggesting the Seiffert novel to us. See Horstkotte for a reading of Seiffert and postmemory.
4. For a discussion of such display photos, see Brink (82–99).
5. See <http://www.zonezero.com/exposiciones/fotografo/muriel2/default.html>. For other examples of Muriel Hasbun's artistic work, see [http://www.corcoran.org/exhibitions/Exhib\\_current.asp?Exhib\\_ID=106](http://www.corcoran.org/exhibitions/Exhib_current.asp?Exhib_ID=106) and <http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/cf/hasbun.htm>.
6. Transcript of soundtrack in Hasbun's installation, Triptychon: "Protegida: Auvergne-Hélène."
7. See Radstone and Ball for discussions of such illicit structures of identification.
8. We first define the notion of "points of memory" in Hirsch and Spitzer, "Testimonial Objects." Our discussion here is adopted from that article.
9. Muriel Hasbun, e-mail communication with the authors, 19 April 2004.
10. Muriel Hasbun, e-mail communication with the authors, 19 April 2004.

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