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## INCONGRUOUS IMAGES: “BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER” THE HOLOCAUST<sup>1</sup>

MARIANNE HIRSCH AND LEO SPITZER

### ABSTRACT

When historians, archivists, and museologists turn to Eastern European photos from family albums or collections—for example, photos from the decades preceding the Holocaust and the early years of the Second World War—they seek visual evidence or illustrations of the past. But photographs may refuse to fit expected narratives and interpretations, revealing both more and less than we expect. Focusing on photos of Jews taken on the main avenues of Cernăuți, Romania, before the Second World War and during the city’s occupation by Fascist Romanians and their Nazi-German allies, this essay shows how a close reading of these vernacular images, both for what they show and what they are unable to show, can challenge the “before, during, and after” timeline that, in Holocaust historiography, we have come to accept as a given.

*Keywords:* street photos; Holocaust photos; archival practices; “before, during, and after the Holocaust”; “affiliative” look; memory; backshadowing; Czernowitz; Cernăuți; Chervivtsi

### I. THE PHOTO DONATION

(U.S. HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM, WASHINGTON, DC, 1998)

In the summer of 1998, our parents/in-laws, Lotte and Carl Hirsch, visited the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) photo archive where they had been invited to donate some of their family pictures from Czernowitz, the Eastern European city where they were born, grew up, and survived the Holocaust.<sup>2</sup> The photos were intended to enhance the museum’s small archival collection of images from that city and the Bukowina province of which it had once been the capital. Selected pictures would be catalogued by date, place, and type, and

1. An earlier version of this article was delivered as a talk at the conference “Exposed Memory: Family Pictures in Private and Public Memory” held in Budapest, Hungary, in 2007 and published in Hungarian *Exponált emlék: családi képek a magán- és közösségi emlékezetben*, ed. Zsófia Bán and Hedvig Turai (Budapest: Hungarian Chapter of International Association of Art Critics, 2008).

2. For historical and cultural background on Czernowitz, see Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); *Jüdisches Städtebild Czernowitz*, ed. Andrei Corbea-Hoisie (Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag im Suhrkamp, 1998); Hugo Gold, *Geschichte Der Juden in der Bukowina*, 2 vols. (Tel Aviv: Olamenu, 1962); *Czernowitz: Die Geschichte einer ungewöhnlichen Stadt*, ed. Herald Heppner (Cologne: Böhlau, 2000); Florence Heymann, *Le Crépuscule des lieux: Identités juives de Czernowitz* (Paris: Stock, 2003).

labeled with additional information provided by the donors. Some of the photos, Carl and Lotte were told, might be chosen for display on the museum's website.

It has been the goal of the museum's photo curators to document and display Jewish life in Europe broadly, before, during, and after the Holocaust, balancing the archive of atrocity photos that dominate the museum's permanent exhibition. Over the course of years, the museum archive has thus acquired many photographs through private donations as well as from images scanned from books and collected holdings in other institutions. In Washington, we observed Carl and Lotte's donation, and the oral history interview that accompanied it, with close interest because we wished to gain some sense of how such a photographic archive is constructed, and of the assumptions and presuppositions that shape its development. Since both of us viewed the Washington, DC museum as a site where an "official story" of the Holocaust (and of the Jewish life that was destroyed by it) was displayed for public consumption and archived for scholarly study, we wanted to learn more about how that story takes form, and about the role that visual images play in shaping it. According to what questions and suppositions are images selected for the archive—both by individual donors and by the archivists who receive, catalogue, and display them—and what role do private, family photos play in the archive's constitution?

Lotte and Carl approached the donation with divergent interests and investments. Carl, an engineer by profession, was systematic. He had researched the archive and its mission and carefully read the instructions sent to potential donors. At home, he had searched through his albums and photo boxes and chosen images that he believed would be of interest to the museum—a very small number. He picked out the only remaining, somewhat torn and faded, portrait of his parents—their wedding photo from ca. 1910; an old picture of his mother and her sisters dating from the 1930s; some school photographs from the elementary and high schools he had attended; and a few pictures of his labor Zionist youth group, *Hashomer Hatzair*—portraits of members as well as informal snapshots of summer outings and trips.<sup>3</sup> He selected no pictures of his brother and two sisters, or of other family members, and no informal snapshots of himself. He did, however, bring some twenty additional images to the museum, all of them connected to his institutional affiliations, schools, and job before the war. He labeled each photo with a brief description, dating it carefully, and identified all the depicted persons he could remember.

Lotte was much more hesitant, almost resistant. Why would a museum be interested in some poor-quality snapshots of her friends and relatives? Or in school pictures of her class in the Hoffmann Gymnasium? Who would ever care to look at what after all were private images, meaningful only to her and her family and friends? At home, she had gone back and forth examining the photo albums and boxes, choosing, discarding, but also considering backing out of the donation altogether. She did have just one photo she believed to be significant: a portrait, taken in the 1920s, of her father's Freemason lodge—of a group of affluent, well-dressed, rather plump men and some of their wives, no doubt invited for a spe-

3. For this Zionist youth group, see Jaakow Posiuk-Padan, "Die Geschichte des 'Haschomer Hazair' in der Bukowina," in Gold, *Geschichte Der Juden in Der Bukowina*, II, 145-152.

cial occasion—looking quite cheerful and self-satisfied. Eventually, she decided to bring this photo and about a dozen from her own collection to the museum: school photos of students and teachers; of outings at the local riverfront; of fun times with other young people. Last, she added some of herself with relatives and friends taken by street photographers on the Herrengasse, Czernowitz’s main street, as it was called in the era of Austrian rule. These were among her favorites, she said.



Figure 1. Street photos from Lotte Hirsch’s collection

At the museum, the archivist began the donation interview with Carl. She asked him to provide his family history, and to supply the names, birth, and death dates of his parents and grandparents. After doing so, Carl succinctly described his family’s flight to Vienna when Czernowitz was threatened by Russian forces during World War I, the death of his father at the end of that war in which he had been a soldier in the Austrian infantry, Carl’s own evolution from observant Jewish practice to secularism, and his membership and involvement with the Zionist youth group, *Hashomer Hatzair*. He presented a brief account of Romanian nationalism and anti-Semitism in the 1920s and 30s, and told how these increasingly impinged upon the lives of Jews in his native city and in Romania at large. He explained about Czernowitz’s large German-speaking Jewish population and their profound assimilation to the Austro-German culture they had acquired during the Habsburg era. He spoke of their continued identification with that culture and the German language even after Czernowitz had in fact been annexed by Romania (and renamed Cernăuți), and then by the Soviet Union (and renamed Chernovtsy), and even after many tens of thousands of the city and province’s Jewish inhabitants had been deported or dispersed by the Holocaust.

The archivist then asked him to focus on his recollections of the Second World War years in Cernăuți, and Carl explained, with exact dates and precise details, about the first Soviet occupation of the city in 1940, and about the retreat of the Soviets and the return of Fascist Romanian forces with their Nazi-German allies in the summer of 1941. He also told of the Jewish ghetto that was established in the city, and of the deportations of Jews to Transnistria in October of 1941 and the summer/fall of 1942. He explained that he and his family were able to evade deportation by acquiring special waivers to remain in Cernăuți—authorizations given to some professionals like himself (a civil engineer working for the Romanian railroad) identified as essential for the city's functioning.<sup>4</sup>

And then it was Lotte's turn. Except for inserting a detail or small correction on a couple of occasions, she had been listening intently, without interrupting. Carl had already explained so much, and with such authority, what could she be expected to add? But then she also told about her family, childhood, schooling, and university study of languages—and about the war years. The archivist prompted her further, but with questions different from those she had asked Carl. She wanted to know about Lotte's home life during the war, especially during those middle years of Romanian/German rule marked by deportations and severe menace. "What did you do? How did you spend your days?" she asked. "I was home with my mother, father, and sister," Lotte responded, "and after Carl and I married in the ghetto, with Carl's sisters and mother as well." She gave a few German lessons to a Romanian officer, she added, and he brought them some food in exchange. It was actually not an unhappy time for her, she explained. She and Carl got together with whatever friends were left in the city, spent the night at each other's houses so as not to violate the curfews, played cards and talked. But they also spent many of their free hours trying to sell household items in order to buy food—and then trying to find the food that they could barter or buy from the farmers who brought it into the city.

Lotte's narrative was not a smooth one. She made astute observations, but the questions she was asked did not seem to fit into any conventional and expected narrative frame, as Carl's had. The story of daily life under Fascist rule and persecution was not one she had spoken about at great length before. Would she have been more comfortable, we later wondered, telling her version of Carl's historical account, the more dramatic "master narrative" punctuated by anecdotes about decisive action, good fortune, dangers evaded? This narrative contained the core ac-

4. For the deportations and Transnistria, see Ihiel Benditer, *Vapniarka* (Tel Aviv: Jack Blitzstein, 1995); Matias Carp, *Holocaust in Rumania: Facts and Documents on the Annihilation of Rumania's Jews, 1940–44* (Budapest: Primor, 1994); *Shattered! 50 Years of Silence: History and Voices of the Tragedy in Romania and Transnistria*, ed. Felicia Carmelly (Toronto: Abbeyfield Publishers, 1997); Julius Fischer, *Transnistria: The Forgotten Cemetery* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1969); Matei Gall, *Finsternis: Durch Gefängnisse, KZ Wapniarka, Massaker und Kommunismus. Ein Lebenslauf in Rumänien, 1920–1990* (Konstanz: Hartung-Gorre Verlag, 1999); Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, "'There was never a camp here': Searching for Vapniarka" in *Locating Memory*, ed. Annette Kuhn and Kirsten McAllister (New York: Berghahn, 2007); Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania* (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 2000); Nathan Simon, *"Auf allen Vieren werdet ihr hinauskriechen": Ein Zeugenbericht aus dem KZ Wapniarka* (Berlin: Institut Kirche und Judentum, 1994); Avigdor Shachan, *Burning Ice: The Ghettos of Transnistria* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1996).

count of their survival that both of them had related to us on a number of previous occasions. And yet on this occasion, Lotte did convey the humiliation of wearing the yellow star: what it *felt* like to be marked publicly in that way. Through voice and affect, she clearly communicated her sense of sadness and loss. The home she had so cherished as a child had indeed turned into a place marked by danger and threat.

The photos visibly affected Lotte emotionally, and we were moved to be witnesses to the memories they so evidently evoked, as she contextualized them and placed each, briefly, into her life narrative.

The archivist selected some of the photographs and discarded others with confident gestures. What determined the choices, we asked her? An important material consideration, she responded, was the quality of a print. But more importantly: she was not interested in photographs that could have been taken anywhere (she rejected Carl's precious portrait of his parents). She preferred images of public and institutional rather than personal, familial life. She was thrilled by the image of the Masonic lodge group to which Lotte's father had belonged, and quickly called over one of the museum's resident historians working on a project on Freemasons to show it to him. And she also selected all the photos taken on the city's main commercial street, the Herrengasse. From every European city or town, she emphasized, she wanted to have at least one pre-Holocaust photo showing Jews in normal circumstances, walking comfortably and confidently down its main street.

Much, of course, could be said about all this: about the interview at the museum and the photographic selection process there—about the speed and confidence with which the archivist seemed to have chosen the photos for the archive, and about her preference for public and institutional over personal and familial images. Much could be said about the gendered nature of the questions she asked Lotte and Carl respectively, and the narratives they, in turn, provided. In the remainder of this essay, however, we want to focus on the street photos in particular. In light of the archivist's desire to acquire photos of Eastern European Jews in circumstances of pre-Holocaust "normalcy," it is fascinating to consider what these Czernowitz/Cernăuți street photographs *do* and *do not* in fact reveal to us—about the place, about Jewish life in that city before and during the war, and about the role of family photos in individual, social, and cultural memory. A close look at these vernacular photos, we suggest, can supplement and at times even challenge the written and oral accounts of witnesses and the interpretation of historians and of descendants.

## II. LOOKING AT STREET PHOTOS

As in so many other European and American cities in the decades between the First and Second World Wars, street-photographers on Czernowitz/Cernăuți's main pedestrian shopping and coffee-house streets photographed passers-by and strollers—earning money by selling small prints of the images taken. The photographs were made with portable, compact, tripod-mounted box cameras using foldable optical viewfinders and single-speed shutters tripped by a non-removable cable. The image was exposed on 2.5 x 3.5 inch direct-positive paper (sometimes

on postcard stock with an imprint of a photographic studio) that was developed on the spot in a tank attached to the camera. This relatively quick procedure—a predecessor of “instant” Polaroid technology—permitted photographers to offer the public inexpensive, finished, souvenir pictures to take home or, in cases where the photographers were sponsored by a studio, the opportunity to order enlargements or more formal posed portraits.<sup>5</sup>

Numerous street photographs exist in the family albums and collections belonging to Jewish Czernowitz/Cernăuți emigrants or their present-day relatives, and over the course of the past few years (through word-of-mouth interest and an internet listserv request) we acquired copies of many such images—some from the 1920s, the majority from the 1930s, but also a few that particularly stand out, from the Second World War years, the early 1940s. Like the archivist in the USHMM, we assumed that the images would confirm our understanding of Jewish life in Cernăuți before and during the war; in fact, however, it took persistent looking and no small amount of self-scrutiny for us to allow the photos to testify to the more complicated past to which they wanted to bear witness.

Certainly, when one looks at the street photos of passers-by and strollers one sees in almost all of them that the persons centrally depicted seem to project a sense of confidence and comfort. In the vast majority of the street photos we acquired in our research, that characteristic seems as consistent as the fact that the people pictured are usually walking, on the move—subjects of a quickly snapped photo, not a posed one. The street photos are telling objects, portraying how individuals perform their identities in public: how they inhabit public spaces and situate themselves in relation to class, cultural, and gender norms. Indeed, the desire to recall and display such a performance may be one factor explaining why persons bought and kept the original photos (or their enlargements), and why they exhibited them in family albums. When they are then transferred from a personal/family holding to a public archive—as in Lotte and Carl’s Holocaust museum donation—these images, at the juncture of private and public, of domestic and urban space, bridge a gap between memory and history.

Conveyed within these street photos is the essence of all photography: the photographic “capture” of an image at a particular moment in time—the fact that a photo (in the pre-digital era) is assumed to “adhere to” its referent and as such, as Roland Barthes has observed in *Camera Lucida*, “in Photography [we] can never deny that *the thing has been there*,” that the image depicts something “‘that-has-been’ . . . absolutely, irrefutably present” before the camera.<sup>6</sup> Hence the documentary value of photographs to an institution like the Holocaust Museum that aims to construct an authoritative historical archive while also hoping to reactivate and re-embody it as memory. Each of the street photographs also reflects a place and a space—an urban street location depicting buildings (in often recognizable architectural style), as well as storefronts, display windows, and commercial signs.

5. For explanations of the technology of street photography, see “Scott’s Photographic Collection: Chicago Ferrotyp Company, Mandellette Postcard Camera.” <http://www.vintagephoto.tv/index.shtml>, accessed July 9, 2009.

6. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 76-77.

These are background to the street strollers, to be sure, but they also carry information about the larger social context in which life in this city took place. This “information,” which Barthes called the “studium,” contributes to historical understanding.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, the connection between the viewer and the individuals depicted in the images—whether these viewers are contemporaries of the subjects in the photo, familial descendants, or more distant, unrelated, observers—provokes the work of memory in a way we have termed “postmemory”: through the inherited remembrance of subsequent generations.<sup>8</sup> In fact, like all photographs, these street photos also reflect something “already deferred” (to quote Barthes again), not only the instant of time when they were snapped but the change-over-time central to their historicity—change between photos of the same subject, as well as of different subjects on the same street, taken at different moments in time; and change between the time when these photos were actually snapped and the present time when we, as viewers, look at them.<sup>9</sup>

People who look at these photos, whether in private collections or in public museum holdings, do of course bring knowledge to them that neither their subjects nor photographers would have possessed. Not only may these viewers be able to contextualize the images historically, inserting them within a broader tapestry of cultural/collective or personal/familial remembrance, but they also bring to them an awareness of future history—of events-yet-to-come that could not have been known to the subjects of the photographs or their photographers at the time when the photos were taken. This is at the heart of the Holocaust Museum archive’s desire for them: in the archive’s conception, they reveal a normalcy and a social integration that was then violently disrupted and destroyed with the beginnings of persecution, ghettoization, and deportation. Familial descendants might recognize in the photos some of the fabric of family life that had been passed down through stories and behaviors; extra-familial viewers might connect to them in a different way: through their own repeated exposure to a shared transgenerational archive of private and public street images that provide visual glimpses into urban life of the past. The very conventional nature of street photographs, and their place in the family album, invites an “affiliative” and identificatory look on the part of viewers.<sup>10</sup> Through such a look, viewers can project familiar faces and scenes onto them, adopt them into their own repertoire of familial images, and, in this way, use them to re-embodiment memory in a “postmemorial” way.

7. *Ibid.*, 25-27, 41.

8. For postmemory, see Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); M. Hirsch, “Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory,” in *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*, ed. Barbie Zelizer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 215-246; M. Hirsch, “Marked by Memory: Feminist Reflections on Trauma and Transmission,” in *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*, ed. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougas (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 71-91; and M. Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (Spring, 2008), 103-128. See also Andrea Liss, *Trespassing through Shadows: Memory, Photography, and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

9. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 77.

10. Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 93-94, 254-256.

When viewed as nothing more than historical documents, however, the street photos from Czernowitz/Cernăuți are quite limited. On first glance, we might in fact see them as the archivist had hoped—as images of urban Jews in apparent comfort, strolling down a busy main street of an Eastern European city in the years before the outbreak of the Second World War, seemingly belonging to the place, indistinguishable from other persons who share their economic background. In Lotte Hirsch's collection of street photos, and in all the others we have amassed and viewed, the clothing worn by the strollers—generally fashionable and frequently elegant if not ostentatious—suggests their class situation and affluence, their membership in the city's bourgeoisie, and their public assertion of this fact.

Indeed, in their seemingly casual walk down the city's main avenues, and in their apparent willingness to let themselves be photographed and to purchase the prints, the persons photographed seem to be publicly displaying their freedom to inhabit and to claim public spaces and to move through them, *flâneur*-like, at ease and in leisure within the urban landscape, declaring their unmarked presence there, glancing about but also ready to be looked at and to be seen.



Figure 2. Poets on the “Herrengasse,” 1930s: a). Paul Celan (courtesy Mark Fichman); b). Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger and Else Schächter (privately owned, printed by permission of Hoffman und Campe); c). Moses Rosenkranz, center, and Alfred Margul-Sperber, right (From *In der Sprache der Mörder: Eine Literatur aus Czernowitz, Bukowina*, Literaturhaus Berlin, 1993).

And yet what remains *invisible* in these photos, or hardly perceptible behind the palpable display of Jewish bourgeois comfort, is the assimilationist trajectory that this class identification manifests and represents. Only through a comparison and contrast—with “shtetl” Jews residing in Cernăuți’s nearby villages, with less affluent working-class Jews, or with impoverished non-Jews relegated to the background and perhaps invisibility in the photos—can one begin to gain a concrete, visual sense of the class mobility and differentiation that Habsburg-era Jewish emancipation had engendered and enabled here. These are the historical, economic, and cultural layers that the snapshot of one moment in time cannot possibly reveal. To access these layers we must bring other sources to bear on images—sources, however, that because of the limitations of their own medium, may provide only partial knowledge about the past circumstances they record.

Thus, perhaps even less apparent in the street photographs than the process of class aspiration and Jewish assimilation is the fact that the city through which the strollers move is no longer Czernowitz, the “Vienna of the East,” the liberal, predominantly German-speaking city with which the large Jewish bourgeoisie there had so strongly identified. Physical evidence of the transformation of the Austrian Czernowitz into the Romanian Cernăuți, to be sure, can be detected in some of the photos: street names have been changed, and they as well as the store signs and placards are written in Romanian, not in German. The ideological environment accompanying the Romanian takeover, however, is hardly evident: the reality that, not long after the political transfer to Romania at the end of World War I, the region’s new rulers instituted a strict policy of Romanianization that had immediate, dire consequences for Czernowitz Jews. Under its rubric, the Romanian language was instituted as the language of transaction in business and governmental affairs, and as the primary language of instruction in state schools. Romanian-born nationals were also privileged in professional and public appointments and promotions, and Romanian cultural institutions and nationalist values were foregrounded to the detriment of others. Jews were relegated to the status of Romanian “subjects,” not “citizens,” and many of the emancipatory civil and political rights that they had acquired were taken away from them. Most ominously, the street photos do not even hint at the existence and rapid and virulent growth of Romanian anti-Semitism and Fascism in the 1920s and 1930s—the increasing restrictions, quotas, discriminatory exclusions, harassment, and violence that Jews came to face and endure under Romanian rule. It was, for example, outside of the Café l’Europe on the Strada Iancu Flondor (as the Romanians had renamed the Herrengasse)—almost directly across the street from where photographers snapped pictures of strolling passers-by—that an incident occurred in the fall of 1926 that fed right-wing Romanian anti-Semitic hatred, and that resulted in the assassination of David Fallik, a Jewish student.<sup>11</sup>

The photos, moreover, cannot disclose to us the contradictions at the heart of the city strolls: that the middle-class Jews depicted within them continued in large measure to live and walk through the street, as though they were really still in Habsburg Czernowitz and not in Romanian Cernăuți. In all likelihood, the conversations they had with each on their street walks, in the stores, at the cafés, like those at home, were in German and not in the mandated Romanian. In not being able to reveal their subjects’ adherence to the language and life-ways of the past, the photos cannot expose either the nostalgic yearning for a lost world of yesterday or the resistance to Romanianization and the restrictive political and ideological environment that was, in effect, taking place even at the very moment that they were being snapped.

11. See Berthold Brandmarker, “David Fallik,” in Gold, *Geschichte der Juden in der Bukowina*, II, 174-175; *Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives*, RG 25.006M, roll 4, “Chronology of Anti-Semitism in Romania, 1926-1927,” 18 (on microfilm, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum); Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation Building, and Ethnic Struggle, 1918-1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 79-80, 85-86; Hirsch and Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home*, chaps. 3-4.

“In spirit,” the poet Rose Ausländer wrote of this interwar period, “we remained Austrians; our capital was Vienna and not Bucharest.”<sup>12</sup> The poets depicted in Figure 2 above—Alfred Margul-Sperber, Paul Celan, and Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger—all wrote in German throughout the period of Romanian rule. With the benefit of historical contextualization, therefore, the pre-Shoah “normalcy” and “comfort,” and the documentation of Jewish “belonging” that the Holocaust Museum archivist wanted the street photographs to display, is significantly compromised.

Moreover, nowhere does the limitation of the chronological schema of “before, during, and after the Holocaust” that structures the museum archive’s selection and display appear more problematic than when we consider the Cernăuți street photographs from 1942 and 1943. In fact, these photos challenge the visual record that has traditionally shaped the museological exhibition of this period. And, we want to suggest, they also fracture the family album’s affiliative look.



Figure 3. a). Ilana Shmueli and her mother (courtesy Ilana Shmueli); b). Berthold Geisinger (left), Dita (surname unknown), and Heini Stup (courtesy Silvio Geisinger)

Depicted above are two photos dated “1943” and “around 1943” that exhibit Jews wearing the yellow star. Yet in every other way these images very much look like the street photos from the prewar era. Some two years before these photos were snapped, however, in the fall of 1941, about two thirds of the city’s Jewish population—around 40,000 people—were deported to the ghettos and forced labor camps in Transnistria, where about half of their number perished. Those who were still able to remain in the city, like the subjects of these photos, endured severe restrictions and strict curfews, and were obliged to wear the yellow star. Men were routinely taken off the street to do forced labor. In the summer/fall of 1942, there was a second wave of deportations to Transnistria or further east, across the Bug River, into German administered territories, and to an almost certain death.

12. Rose Ausländer, cited in *Unerkannt und (un)bekannt: Deutsche Literatur in Mittel- und Osteuropa*, ed. Carola Gottzmann (Tubingen: Francke, 1991), 209.

By 1943, therefore, when these street photos were taken, it was not at all clear that there would not be further deportations or “cleansings” of Jews.

In all likelihood, during such a time of extreme oppression and totalitarian persecution, photography itself—and public photography especially so—came under suspicion as a potentially threatening instrument of surveillance and exposure. The street itself becomes quite literally, in the terms Walter Benjamin used to describe the ominous Paris photographs of Eugène Atget, “the scene of the crime.”<sup>13</sup> And yet these street photos seem to refuse to testify to the alarming context in which they were taken and that we, as postmemorial viewers—viewers in subsequent generations—stubbornly want to expose in them. As in prewar times, the Jews they depict are walking through the city—ostensibly on the former *Herren-gasse*—and are having their pictures taken by a street photographer. Most curiously, they also purchased the photos after their development. Their stroll seems “normal,” as though the temporal and political moment in which their photos were snapped, and the mark of “otherness” that they were publicly forced to display with the yellow star, were hardly relevant.

The two photos are certainly different: Ilana Shmueli (now an Israeli writer and poet) and her mother do perhaps look somewhat apprehensive; only the young Ilana is looking at the photographer while her mother looks straight ahead, seemingly avoiding the photographer’s gaze. This photo shows the two women on a bare and isolated street, perhaps at a time of day when few others were out walking around. They appear to be, in every sense, exposed. In contrast, the three young people in the Geisinger/Stup photo look more carefree: two of them are smiling, and the third, Bertold Geisinger, on the left, while looking somewhat puzzled at the photographer, does not appear to be intimidated. In this image, the street is busy and the photo reveals a great deal of the contextual information that we seek in such images—street signs in Romanian, fashionable clothes, affect, and gesture—that truly present a snapshot of a moment. And yet both photos raise the same set of questions: How could their subjects walk down the street during this terrible time with such apparent ease and freedom? Why did the photographer, surely not Jewish, take pictures of Jews who were so publicly marked by the yellow star? Was his interest merely in selling the print—a monetary one only—or were there other motivations as well? How did he look at his subjects; how did he see them? Did he view his own role as that of a witness to victimization or as a disengaged bystander distanced from the fray? And why, in turn, did the walkers stop to buy the street photo? Can we interpret their purchase as an act of defiance or resistance against the humiliation to which they were subjected? Or did they buy it in the same spirit that earlier street photos had been bought, with a sense of a future—with the intent or will, in other words, to archive it within their family album or collection and hence to transmit their story, this particular story, to generations yet to come?

Looking at these photos now, we do need to be sensitive to Michael André Bernstein’s warning that reading the past backward through retrospective knowledge can be a dangerous form of “backshadowing”—in his words, “a kind of retroac-

13. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 226.

tive 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*.<sup>14</sup> Yet the task of looking at photos from the past requires the ability to expose and maintain an awareness of the disjunction between the incommensurable temporalities of then and now. What, in this sense, can these truly incongruous photos tell us about the past, about our present relationship to it, and about photography's evidentiary value?

We again see that, as historical documents, they raise more questions than they answer. They do indeed testify to differences between Cernăuți and other Eastern European cities like Łódź or Warsaw, where no such commercial photos of Jews walking on streets outside of the ghettos could have been snapped at this time. Like wartime diaries and survivors' memoirs, they can also tell us something about moments of relative normalcy that exist even in extreme circumstances, and provide us with glimpses into tranquil instances that helped to keep some hope of survival alive.

But it is as memorial objects that these street photographs pose the greatest difficulty. If these photos were bought and placed in family albums in the effort to transmit history and memory, they challenge the postmemorial viewer by resisting and defying the affiliative look that characterizes family photos. On the one hand, they appear to fit into the family album like the street photos from an earlier period. On the other, we would argue, our perception of and apprehension regarding the yellow stars arrest and confound our look, rendering us unable to integrate the "Jew star" into the rest of the picture that we see. In each photo, the star is Barthes's punctum as detail, but a detail that, once perceived, annihilates the rest of the image. In Barthes's words, it "rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces [the viewer]."<sup>15</sup> The total image, in its apparent normalcy, cannot hold or absorb that detail: we either separate that detail out, or we refuse to see it at all. In Benjamin's terms, the star is the "shock" that "bring[s] the mechanism of association in the viewer to a complete halt." Only captions, Benjamin insists, can enable speculation and understanding. Without them, images remain "bound in coincidence."<sup>16</sup>

The Geisinger/Stup photo is instructive in this regard. While, as the caption added by Lilian Madfes (who gave us the photo) states, the men visibly wear the star, the woman in the middle, smiling and not looking at the photographer at all, wears something that looks like a large white kerchief in the same spot on the left where a star would have been displayed. Is she perhaps not Jewish and not in fear of being seen without the star? Or might the star be covered by her hand, perhaps for the instant the photo is snapped, or by the kerchief itself? At the center of the photo, wearing a bright white blouse, she is the figure that immediately attracts our gaze, and the kerchief provides us with an alternative focus within the im-

14. Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 16.

15. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26.

16. Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 215.

age—an alternative punctum that permits us to block the stars from view long enough so we can take in the entire scene. Our look follows the trajectory of the color white that dominates the photograph: when our eyes move from the white raincoat, to the kerchief, to the white socks, they are momentarily able to bypass the two stars—momentarily, because, unavoidably, the stars finally attract and absorb our gaze, making it difficult to see anything else. The stars, invisible at one moment, become hypervisible, and thus shocking and arresting, at another. It is this visual oscillation between the wildly divergent details of the image that allows us, finally, to look at this picture and to adopt it into the family album. And it allows us to accept the will to normality that drives these city strolls in moments of extremity.

An image from our own family has evoked a similarly oscillating look for us. It is a tiny street photograph of Carl and Lotte strolling on the Herrengasse (Strada Iancu Flondor as it was then called), one that has always been in one of our Hirsch family albums.<sup>17</sup>

“Here we are, during the war,” Carl said to us some years ago, when we looked at this small photo together. We had always wondered how Lotte and Carl could walk down the street during the war with such an air of normality, but we did not become aware of the photo’s radical incongruity until we extracted it from the album and turned it over, verso, and saw that Carl’s handwriting on the back side dates it precisely: “Cz.1942”—a year when Jews in Greater Romania were required to wear the yellow star and suffered major hardship and persecution. But no star is visible in the image, nor does the affect that one would expect from photos taken in Cernăuți during that devastating time seem to be present within it. When we began to write about wartime in that city, we digitally scanned and enlarged the little street photo, blowing it up several times, searching to find what it might help us to learn about the wartime in Cernăuți, and what might not be visible to the naked eye.

Amazingly, when it came up at about 4 x 6 inches on the screen, the image and the story it told seemed to change dramatically—at least on first glance. All of a



Figure 4. Lotte and Carl Hirsch “Cz. 1942”

17. A more detailed account and analysis of this image can be found in Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, “What’s Wrong with This Picture? Archival Photographs in Contemporary Narratives,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 5, no. 2 (July 2006), 229-252.

sudden, it looked like there *was* something on Carl'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 worn the yellow star in 1942. Perhaps the picture was not as puzzling as we had thought. 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. 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, and even more—yes, of course, it had the shape of the Jew star. But was it?

We began to reread the photograph's content, its message, against Lotte and Carl's facial expression and body language—which were now also much more clearly visible. Still, the incongruity between their appearance and bearing and what we knew about the events of the time did not diminish. All of our frenzied sleuthing merely opened more questions, related to the ones posed by the other two wartime street photos: if Carl Hirsch is wearing a star, then why is Lotte not wearing one? If they went out without it, illegally, why did they stop to buy the photo? Weren't they afraid of detection? Or, possibly perhaps, is there in fact no star in this little street photo? What if the spot on the lapel is dust—nothing more than a small dot of dirt on the camera lens that had blocked out a minute detail on the developed photo? Or what if the date on its verso side is incorrectly marked? What if the photo was really snapped in the later months of 1943, after Romania no longer required Jews to wear the yellow star? These questions, unfortunately, have no definitive answer. Certainly, the mystery associated with this little photo again illustrates the contradictions embodied in images of Jews walking down Eastern and Central European city streets during the war—the oscillating look they elicit, and the difficulties we have in integrating the yellow star into the affiliative and narrative context of the family album.

Why these difficulties? Diaries, testimonies, and memoirs, including the stories of Lotte and Carl that we have heard repeatedly, should have precluded our surprise at seeing these ordinary strolls through the streets of Cernăuți in extraordinary times. The prewar street photos and the wartime ones resist not only what we think we *know* about this past but what we think we can and should *see* in any visual records from and about the time. The prewar images disguise the persecutions that led up to the war, and the sense of danger and threat that was already present in the city though not captured in the images. Similarly, in testifying to a will to normality and ordinariness during wartime extremity, the wartime photos challenge the visual landscape of atrocity that dominates the memorialization of the Holocaust.

Both thus enable us to consider the specificity of photography, especially vernacular street photography, as a medium of historical interpretation. While testimonies and diaries record subjective reflections and private experience, photos taken in urban spaces bear witness to public acts and encounters. The incongruity we find is thus not in the images themselves, but in the events these images record and prompt in those who look at them—the events of their production, their purchase, and the retrospective acts of looking to which they give rise. Perhaps,

ultimately, they tell us more about what we want and need from the past than about the past itself.

### III. THE PHOTO SELECTION

(BUKOWINA JEWISH MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND CULTURE, CHERNIVTSI, 2008)

“What about the photos of Jews on the Herrengasse wearing the star in 1942/43?” we asked Natalya Shevchenko, the curator of the new Bukowina Museum of Jewish History and Culture, when we discussed with her the composition of the case that was to contain the Holocaust displays. It was May 2008 and we were in Chernivtsi to consult about this museum, which was scheduled to open in the fall on the occasion of the city’s 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration. The museum had not been planned by the municipal government, however, but by the Jewish Federation of Ukraine in Kiev, and the Holocaust display was an afterthought. Initially, the planners had intended to feature two hundred years of Jewish life in the region up to the start of World War II but did not want to include the war years in the exhibition, and certainly not the Holocaust, in order, as they put it, to “focus on life and not death.” For them, the focal era to be displayed was the “before:” the thriving Hasidic life in the villages, as well as the development of secular culture in the city, highlighting the contribution of Jews to civic, political, and artistic growth. And yet, ultimately, in response to the objections of Czernowitz survivors around the world who, through internet communications, had been outraged to learn that the museum was intending to display “pictures of family reunions, weddings, smiling faces” while totally excluding “shootings, deportations, and mass emigration—the most fateful aspect of our history,” as one of them noted, planners were convinced to include one case on the Soviet occupation of the city in 1940–41 and another on the Holocaust years. We quickly discovered in our conversations with the historian in charge of this display and with the museum curator that these two cases were, for them, the most difficult to conceive.

“The Holocaust display will have three parts,” Oleg Suretsov, the historian, told us through our translator, Natalie. “We begin with the summer of 1941, the Einsatzgruppen killings in the villages, the shootings by the Pruth river, the yellow star. Then we have the Cernăuți ghetto and the deportations in the fall of 1941. And then, life in Cernăuți between 1942 and 1944 for those who were spared. We plan to show one or two deportation photos but Transnistria itself will not be included.” Oleg continued to show us a few documents that had been selected for the display cases: a ghetto ordinance and some identification cards marked by a yellow star. “There are so few images and objects from that period: we don’t know how to make the exhibit compelling,” he added. What, we wondered, could be more stunning than the street photos displaying the Jewish star from 1943? “See, here are two of them.” We had brought the photos of Ilana Shmueli and Bertold Geisinger with us. “The stars are very visible, and yet these Jews are strolling down the Herrengasse (Strada Iancu Flondor) as they did in previous times. Don’t you find these fascinating testaments to the will to normality in times of extremity? Surely your visitors will be moved as well,” we insisted, sharing some of our speculations about these images.

It was hard to read Natalya's expression as she shook her head, hurriedly searching through her files. She pulled out a picture of a young man with a depressed look in his eyes, dressed in tattered and patched clothing, wearing a large yellow star. The background was blank but the image was labeled "Return from Transnistria." "This is the one we must show," she said. "Look at the others—they are smiling. They give the wrong impression."

We knew this image well since it had first been reproduced in Hugo Gold's massive two-volume *Geschichte der Juden in der Bukowina*. As one of only a handful of photographs identified as being from Transnistria, this picture has been invested with a great deal of historical and symbolic importance. Besides this image, the archives contain only a few photos of the deportation marches, a few of the crossings over the Dniester River into Transnistria, a number of images of the



*Zurück aus Transnistrien*

Figure 5. "This is the one we must show"

Jagendorf foundry in Moghilev, but none of the other ghettos or camps, and a few of repatriated orphans at the end of the war. Nothing in this image of the young man, however, links it to its attributed source, and, in fact, we had always been skeptical of its label. The most obvious problem is the yellow star: Jews in Romanian-administered territories were no longer required to wear the yellow star after 1943, and repatriations from Transnistria did not begin until early fall of 1944. The armband, marked XII, also does not match historical accounts of the Transnistria deportations or repatriations.

Indeed, it may be its very simplicity and lack of specificity that enables the young man's photo to acquire the representative status that appealed to the Chernivtsi curator and made it an appropriate icon for this very small museum exhibit. The look in the young man's eyes, the yellow star, the tattered clothing all evoke the extreme hardship, humiliation, and suffering associated with "deportation" and "camp life." Its iconic status overrides the mismatch between its label and the factual information it carries. The Cernăuți street photos may be too complicated and ambiguous, too incongruous, to serve as icons of the "Holocaust experience" for which the historian and the curator were searching. The fuller and more layered story that they tell might, indeed, "give the wrong impression" to hurried visitors looking to be emotionally touched by an exhibit case called "The Holocaust."

The historian Sybil Milton has shown that many, if not most, Holocaust photos have come down to us like this one, without specific information about the photographers, or about the context, place, or exact date of production. Photographs are often archived or exhibited with very incomplete or inadequate attributions,

mostly indicating current ownership, rather than the original site where they were taken: “Although more than two million photos exist in the public archives of more than twenty nations,” Milton writes, “the quality, scope, and content of the images reproduced in scholarly and popular literature has been very repetitive.”<sup>18</sup>

With their preference, the Chernivtsi curators, like the archivists at the USHMM, place themselves within a well-known trend. They display images that readily lend themselves to iconicization and repetition. But although this choice may allow them to stir viewers’ emotions and to gain their sympathetic attention, it also impedes troubling the well-known narratives about this time. It restricts their visitors’ engagement with the Holocaust’s more complex—and less easily categorized—visual and historical landscape. And, in so doing, it delimits the rich interpretive possibilities that this vast archive of private and public photographs can open and enable.

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18. Sybil Milton, “Photography as Evidence of the Holocaust,” *History of Photography* 23, no. 4 (Winter 1999), 303-312. Note that Milton’s count emerges from the 1980s before Soviet and other Eastern European archives were opened.