Witnessing or re-imagining? Provincial ghetto in a lens of Gentile photographers

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on the collection of some pre-war pictures and Holocaust photographs from a provincial Polish town. Located in two photographic studios hundreds of pictures spanning several decades supply the token presence of discontinued life and coexisting communities: Jewish and Gentile. The Jewish past of the town just like that of many other Eastern European shtetls is often presented separately from that of other local communities. This creates the notion of 'theirs' and 'ours', with the latter extenuated by the absence of one of the parties. The pictures reflect everyday life, not as separated by cultural, religious or language variants but very much an intertwined. The likeness of people captured on a photographic film is one of the few pieces of proof that they existed, a silent reminder but also, a form of witnessing. The photographs can also be seen as a meeting space. This paper, therefore, will look at how visual evidence allows us to track traces of people, places and objects that are no longer there addressed from a perspective of a photographer, the witness and participant of the dreadful events. It will also ask the question of how the latter can helps us to 'materialise' memory, understand the past through visualisations and make us secondary witnesses.

Key words: Photography, Holocaust, memory, remembering, witnessing, Jewish history, ghettos, Second World War, Poland

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Photography is a response to a multitude of social needs. It is used to, as Susan Sontag puts it 'furnish evidence', capture reality, create reality, memorise, survey, communicate and celebrate. It provides opportunity to project who we want to be seen as and how we want our world to be seen. In photography we can be both subjects and orchestrators of an experience, whether staged or spontaneous.

For a historian, photography can be a great source of inspiration and evidence. We analyse different forms of photographs with great curiosity. We look for little details in style, people and places captured on film, as well as examining the overall picture. We search for a story that can be used to research history. Photography can give us a sustainable image of events in which we are not directly involved (Keilbach 2009, 54). However, since its emergence in the 19th century photography has often been scrutinised for its relationship to reality. Its ability to reflect 'historical truth' has also been questioned. In recent years however, photography has moved to the centre of historical enquiry

and philosophical disputes. The capacities and limitations of photography as a mean of historic narrative are explored in academia and beyond. Raphael Samuel (Samuel 1999, 342) argues that the 1970s brought a first subtle change in approach to photography as a meaningful source for history research. Although reluctant at first, historians started to turn to old photography. This could be linked to a realisation that visuals are not strictly product of the 20th century with its technical advancements but constituted part of culture and society a hundred years earlier. Perhaps, after all, pop culture of the 1960s and 1970s was not unique in its preoccupation with everyday objects, scenes and people? Samuel also argues that the 'visual turn' was dictated by the curiosity of the 'other', people from the past to whom we can compare ourselves (Samuel 1999, 350). Moreover, art historian David Freedberg (1991) argues that images engage us cognitively to produce both identification and emotions, which can make historians uncomfortable. This is particularly true when it comes to Holocaust photography which causes the majority of people avert their eyes, makes them see without seeing. However, it can be argued that precisely because of that historians play a pivotal role in giving Holocaust photography a context. By asking how the visuals were made, used, distributed and received historians awaken the true 'power of images' in furnishing evidence and extending witnessing.

Holocaust photography, although popularised by numerous exhibitions and museum displays have rarely been researched by historians. It is, indeed, a bit surprising considering that photography along with film have been used to document the war. Moreover, both played an evidential role in post-war trials and continue to be utilised as primary means of memorising the Holocaust (Schneer 2015, 38). This view is also shared by Michael Berkowitz in his latest book *Jews and Photography*.

Photography has played an important role in modern Jewish life. As Jeffrey Shandler notes, photography has provided many opportunities for the Jews to engage with the modern world. Although initially regarded as suspicious, especially by the ultra-orthodox Jews who often perceived photography as violating the non-image making laws (Shandler 2004, 8), it quickly became a popular medium. It also became apparent that photography could be a lucrative business which wouldn't require massive financial investment. Compared to other professions, there were very little restrictions as to Jewish involvement in a photography business (Berkowitz 2015, 30) also in the 19th century Poland. The wandering photographers were typical for cities and town not having regular photographic studios. The time of a temporary residence in a particular place was shaped by popular demand. Often while in residence, experienced photographers used to take on apprentices who, after the training period, would open their own establishments or, join the legions of travelling professionals. The logistic burdens which involved frequent transportation of heavy but fragile equipment were usually balanced out by a relatively quick and easy profit. The trade attracted Jews to whom the canvassing business model was not a novelty. After the initial period of mobility which allowed keeping business related costs to a minimum making savings much easier, many photographers would opt for permanent studios. It is very likely that the residents of Zarki would travel to Czestochowa, a nearby large industrial city to have their pictures taken. A handful of early family photographs bear the logos and signatures of studios therein.

However, Polish Jews did not just readily stand behind the camera but also as often, in front of it. So called cabinet portraits become very popular and fashionable in the second half of the 19th century. Photographs that were cheaper (although still pretty expensive) and more convenient than traditional painted portraits, gave the less wealthy and affluent a taste of luxury, a pinch of fantasy. Special artists were employed to create fanciful, often elaborate and realistic settings in which subjects would be planted to complete the scene. Their poses would usually be rather stiff and in some cases, somewhat unnatural. The photographed usually look serious with rather stern expression. They are dressed in their best attire, heavy cascading dresses for females, sharply ironed suits that were hoped to elevate their social position even if just temporarily. For many traditional small town Jews in Poland it would be one of the rare opportunities to engage with technology and through it, with the modern world. Some of these portraits capture important events for example, engagements or matrimonies, other depict religious or cultural activism but they all aim to commemorate, to freeze the moment.

During the latter part of the 19th century Polish Jews also become engaged in photojournalism and documentary photography. Michal Greim, who also worked as a travelling photographer was one of the first to document the life of the provincial Polish Jewry. Jewish photographers would become the story-tellers of the pre-war life of their community and in some cases, also the captors of its end. Photographic documentation of the pre-war Jewish life in Poland is dominated by the photographers who were more or less insiders. Amongst many Jews who professionally stood behind the camera several names deserve special attention.

In 1921 Alter Kacyzne, a Polish Jew from Vilna was commissioned by the New York based Yiddish newspaper to take pictures of the 'old word' (Kacyzne et al., 1999, 15). Similarly to Kacyzne in the 1920s and 1930's Ze'ev Wilhelm Aleksandrowicz started to work on a photographic series that took him not just around Poland but also Europe and beyond. He was particularly interested in capturing his fellow Jews on the streets of Poland and Palestine.

There were also Jewish photographers who documented the tragedy of the Holocaust and the lives in the ghettos. In 1940 'Foto-Forbert' studio was commissioned by the American Joint Distribution Committee, commonly known as 'Joint', to take pictures of the Warsaw ghetto. The aim was to document the terrible ordeals that the Jews of the biggest European ghetto were subjected to. 'Foto- Forbert' operated in the Warsaw ghetto taking photographs of well-known actors, Jewish elite and the Nazi occupiers (Struk 2011, 89). Similarly to its pre-war style, 'Foto- Forbert' photographers continued to capture large-format photographs, meticulously and orderly posing groups and individuals which appear in sheer contrast to the ghetto's despair. The visuals also largely juxtapose materials gathered by the Nazis. The majority of photographs taken by the perpetrators fall into two categories, documentation and sensation. For official purposes pictures were taken in ghettos and concentration camps to supply visual documentation and reports for the illustrated press (Keilbach 2009, 63). German press in particular showed camps as 'educational and corrective institutions' and ghettos, as necessary isolation measures that prevented spread of diseases, moral depravation, crime and essentially, sanitised the society.

The element of sensationalism came predominantly from amateur pictures taken by German soldiers and various ghetto tourists who, in a truly touristy way took snaps of the ghettoised world around them. Amongst these photographs one can find some reoccurring themes, for example, shots of the Warsaw ghetto tram marked with a Star of David, candid street photographs which often unveiled terrible living conditions and barb-wired walls. Private pictures also showed executions, shootings, beatings and other forms of violence. Sometimes Jews were asked to pose and smile for the camera, another time German soldiers lined up in front of a pile of bodies. An overwhelming majority of such photographs were taken for personal use, snapshots from a gory theme park, from a world that was physically, morally and emotionally detached from the reality. Frequently such snapshots were sent back home along with candid letters reporting on military life in the east. Unlike 'Foto-Forbert's' pictures, visuals taken by the perpetrators aim to dehumanise their subjects. Often shot for strictly documentary and statistic purposes visual reports like the Auschwitz album, which contains over 190 photographs, reveal systematic objectification of the Jews (Gutman et al. 2008, 43). Referred to in seemingly human terms as' deployable men/women' and 'non-deployable men/ women', similarly to many Warsaw ghetto Jews photographed by the Germans, newly arrived Hungarian Jews were photographed in a way that reinforced anti-Semitic stereotypes. Undignified, dishevelled, scared, hurled together, looking away from the camera or, looking shyly at a cameraman men, women and children of the Hungarian transport fulfilled visual biases created by the Nazi propaganda such as the Jews lacked hygiene, could not be trusted, had neither pride not honour and were essentially just vermin.

Meanwhile, Forbert's camera gives its audience a sense of order and peace far away from the chaos of the ghetto. An intentional symmetry of composition and poses evokes dignity and humanity instead of drama and horror of the ghetto. The latter seemed in congress with the reality and therefore, often dismissed as a depiction of life in a ghetto. This may also result from a generalised expectation for trauma to be shown through the prism of chaos and brutality. However, it can be argued that the tragedy of the Holocaust photography does not always come from what is shown, but mostly from the perpetual absence of those depicted.

In his 'Camera Lucida' Barthes remarks that photography is brutal. Its brutality, however, is not due to the horror depicted in pictures but because "it brutally enters one's gaze and nothing about it can be rejected nor changed" (Barthes 1988, 76). In his personalised philosophical debate Barthes once again refers to photography as immobilising subjects, making time stand still and therefore, depriving its audience of catharsis. At the same time, "in Photography [we] can never deny that the thing has been there that the image depicts something 'that-has been'... absolutely, irrefutably present" (Barthes 1988, 25).

As Andrea Liss puts is for a generation once removed (or even twice removed) from the real horror, such photographs (of the Holocaust) repel some of us and cause us to turn away. For others, Holocaust documentary photographs shock in the opposite direction, hypnotizing vision and luring the viewer in. (Liss 1998, 5). Holocaust photography does not always stun and shock with its violence. The latter does not have to be explicit. The averted gaze can be a result of incomprehension between a relatively harmful visual ('Foto-Forbert') and a historic context. The absurdity of clean,

sharp lines and orderly poses is obvious for those, who are direct witnesses, survivors, Holocaust experts but also average spectators, museums and galleries visitors. However, with the passing of time and witnesses the unavoidable questions of photography's role as a testimony arise. The complexity of trauma and the expectations for trauma to be expressed through violence and brutality make matters even more challenging when analysing photography as testimony. Photography is unable to provide a multisensory impact, it is also incapable of existing without a degree of staging. At the same time photography is expected to fulfil a role of a history lesson (Liss 1998, 4).

When compared to other artistic media, photography have a much stronger attachment to reality and, in many cases mirrors it. This is not to say that sometimes photography does not aestheticise reality. It does, even documentary photography. However, as Pavel Buchler also explains, photographs "keep under constant tension the fragile links between the residue of lived moments and memory, between where we have been and who we are (what we are always becoming)" (Buchler 1999, 105). What is proposed here, is one of the first attempts to look at Holocaust photography which authors were neither victims nor perpetrators yet, very much privy to the life of a provincial ghetto. The starting point is a collection of recently found Holocaust pictures from a Jewish town in the Upper Silesia region. Uncovered in two photographic studios, hundreds of pictures spanning several decades are leftover tokens of family life, forgotten people and coexisting communities in rural Poland. Within those photographs evolves the story of Jewish life before its annihilation. For over 75 years the negatives sat unseen. First batch was located in the photographic studio of a local family. Hundreds of pictures spanning a couple of decades, supply the token presence of family life, forgotten people and coexisting communities. Mr Bozek, whose photographic studio was established in 1930 in Zarki, once a bustling Polish-Jewish town, was a passionate 'world collector'. His neighbourhood was not big in an urban sense. Before the Second World War, Zarki had around 4000 inhabitants, of whom 57% (1921 census) were of mosaic faith. Zarki have had a long history of the Jewish settlement. Zarki's Jewish history dates back to late mediaeval period. In the 17th century Zarki are already known as a provincial multicultural town inhabited by ethnic Poles, Russians, Germans and Jews. In 1827 there were over 700 Jews living in Zarki (27% of the population), in 1864 as much as 61% of residents were Jewish although separated from the Warsaw-Vienna train artery, the town continued to develop, mainly as a hub for local commerce and crafts. Christians and Jews flocked to Zarki to sell their goods at the weekly farmers' market taking place on Wednesdays. In the late 18th century there were already 2 synagogues in Zarki and the third, neo-romanesque synagogue was built in 1870. It is the only remaining synagogue in Zarki but also, one of the few standing and relatively unchanged synagogues in the region.

The second batch of negatives also originates from Zarki and was taken by a local gentile photographer Mr Bacior. Unlike Mr Bozek, Jozef Bacior was initially an amateur photographer. He was a factory worker from the nearby Myszkow who had learnt the trade from books. He did not have a stationary photographic studio until after the war. This had had an impact on the type of shots taken by Mr Bacior. An overwhelming majority of his photographs was taken outside, in various places in Zarki and depicts Jewish residents of the town.

The pre-war photographs show both Jews and Gentiles 'being there', living alongside, momentarily caught in their staged or seemingly casual poses. It is a small slice of their existence often arranged by the cameraman whose invisible presence is reflected in his subjects' behaviour. A middle-aged man, his wife and a small dog – all sat on a blanket - a summer Sunday picnic perhaps? The male tries to look casual, seemingly unaware of a camera lens, but his efforts are betrayed by an upside down newspaper. The newspaper might inform a spectator of his identity and political inclinations – Jewish and leftist. Another man and another park scene; he is sat in a deck chair in a stripy pyjamas, with Yiddish newspaper spread in front of his eyes.

I learnt that the park around Zarki used to be a popular destination for all locals. The dry and well-maintained woodland with a small, crystal clear stream running across provided much needed respite from the industrialised and polluted neighbourhoods of the Zaglebie and Upper Silesia region and the crammed settlements of Zarki. There, we also meet what seems to be a happy family. A little girl wears what seems to be folk-inspired clothes. I am pretty sure her blouse is embroiled with blue cornflowers. The little boy salutes in a Polish military manner. Suddenly the past is turned into an object of 'tender regard', sentimentality and reflection.

Yet photography is also, in Sontag's words, 'a reminder of death', the most violent end of an entire community. This is especially striking when we look at a ghetto photography. It is not the form nor the content of these photographs that is most haunting but our knowledge of the immanent end. Interestingly, the batch of pictures handed to me only contains a couple of photographs with violent undertones. Those were, however, not taken by a Polish photographer but a Nazi one. We do not know who took them. One can only assume that they were captured for a documentary purpose and developed in a local photographic studio. Mr Jan Bozek who was its owner recalled that German soldiers used to come to develop their snaps in his studio. They were equipped in great quality cameras, excellent film and photographic paper which they always used to bring with them. They did not initially oppose photographic activity in Zarki ghetto which was established in February 1940 in the central area of the town. It remained an open ghetto for the duration of its existence only marked by warning signs. Over 3000 Jews from Zarki and neighbouring villages had been ordered to reside within the marked area until October 1942 when the ghetto was liquidated. Almost all Zarki's Jews were subsequently sent to Treblinka. Around a 100 people remained in Zarki and were later transferred to Auschwitz. A selected few were sent to Radomsko and Czestochowa ghettos. The open status of the Zarki ghetto allowed both photographers to work in the area. Similarly to Warsaw's 'Foto-Forbert' Bozek and Bacior faired pretty well , especially in 1940 and 1941 when after the initial period of unsettlement , life seemed to go as normal. And it is this relative normality that the many pictures taken by Mr Bacior in particular capture.

However, archival documents reveal a different story. German troops arrived in the area almost immediately after the invasion of Poland on the morning of 1st September 1939. Three days later, on 4th September Nazis arrested over a hundred people, mostly Jews who were subsequently executed. Following Haydrich's Schnellebrif of 21st September 1939, like in many other townships

of General Government, an official ghetto was swiftly established in Zark along with the Judenrat. The latter mainly consisted of the pre-war members of the Jewish council. As Trunk remarks, "the Germans found a reservoir of Jewish communal leaders already available in occupied Poland" (Trunk 1996, 43). Although in many cases, the outbreak of the war and sudden military occupation interfered with the functioning of the councils and their institutions, members of communal networks often remained active. In Zarki, the Council of Elders (Altenstetrat) was predominantly made of the pre-war activists initially led by Moszek Josek Zielonka, a former leader of the Jewish Council (sztetl.org.pl). A report from April 1940 reveals there had been 12 members of the Judenrat nominated by the town's mayor who were divided into commissions. Initially, their main role was to provide relief for ever worsening situation of the Jews. The Altenstetrar received no financial support other than that derived from monthly collections (5zl 30gr per adult) but even these 'continued to failed rapidly' as many were too impoverished to contribute any more. Moreover, around 25% of Jewish homes in the town centre were destroyed by German bombs in the first few days of the war which subsequently, caused housing problem intensified by waves of voluntary and forced refugees. The Council was obliged to, "at least feed them and provide enough money so they could continue their journey if they wished to" ((JDC - Archives: Zarki) which added even more strain to an already small budget.

Restrictions on Jewish commerce intensified over time. Numerous reports sent to Jewish Distribution Centre in Warsaw indicate rapid expulsion of Jews from their businesses. In the spring of 1940 some Jewish grocery shops still existed in the area. Their functioning was, however, hinderer by numerous restrictive Nazi regulations, the lack of supplies, high prices (mainly black market prices) and the proximity of the border between General Government and the Reich (2 kilometres). The latter was particularly significant. The closest train station linking Zarki with the industrialised regions of Upper Silesia and Zaglebie was located in the nearby Myszkow incorporated into the Reich. Before the outbreak of the war, almost 80 % of Jewish income came from small trade and crafts, mainly shoemaking and tannery. The majority of products had been sold to large Silesian urban centres which became difficult to reach after new borders were drawn. As a result, many Jewish businesses in Zarki collapsed without direct German intervention leaving many with no source of earnings.

The report from 7th November 1940 clearly pictures progressively worsening situation of the community:

> We are helpless against continuing expulsion of the Jewish poverty. Moreover, we have not received any support since 13th May of this year (...) Each person is entitled to 100 grams of bread per day. Due to the lack of funding, the Jewish Council had to discontinue any social support and relief despite the large number of people requesting assistance. (JDC - Archives : Zarki)

The situation in the Zarki ghetto was neither unique nor particularly worse than elsewhere. The proximity of the countryside provided some albeit hugely disproportionate relief. Although there is no doubt smuggling did take place, it was incredibly risky for both gentile and Jewish counterparts. One of the few photographs depicting traumatic events from the Bozek collection

shows what could be a strip search. A man and two boys, presumably Jewish smugglers stand with their trousers down in front of a military man leaning on the rifle. The presence of objects and clothes scattered around may suggest they have just been caught red handed. Their heads are shaven, most likely due to either existing or potential head lice infestation. It is also possible the trio was captured while hiding outside the ghetto and their pending nakedness is an obvious way to determine Jewishness. There is no clear indication of when exactly the photograph was taken. According to Jozef Bozek's son, also a photographer, the picture had been captured by the Nazis to document the event and subsequently developed in the studio. Its chronological ambiguity and the lack of identification opens it up, as presented above, to an extended interpretation. Our knowledge of the traumatic events of the Holocaust, often intimate familiarity with the Jewish suffering dictate audience's understanding of similar visuals. Because these terrible events of the WW2 remain beyond comprehension but at same time, make a crucial part of our historical and cultural education, we feel obliged to give such photographs a tangible meaning. The search for identification seems one of the focal tasks when dealing with Holocaust photography. Clément Chéroux, a historian of photography who organised "The Memory of the Camps: Photography of the Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camps" exhibit points out that although many Holocaust photographs have been widely published and reproduced since the end of the war, there is still an urgent need to approach them in a critical and documentary way (Farmer 2010, 117). It can be argued that by entering collective imagination and memory the visual sources of a genocide, Holocaust in particular, become iconographic but their documentary value is often forgotten. They become deeply buried under multiple assumptions, interpretations, symbolism and emotional responses which are less likely to be associated with textual sources. All above intensify the need for historians to undertake, what Cheroux calls, archaeology of the photographic document (Farmer 2010).

The compulsion to 'identify' is also part of what Marianne Hirsch calls 'postmemory', the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before (Hirsch 2008, 106). The latter is often typical for the second or even third generation who would have been brought up in the shadows of their parents' or grandparents' memories, recollections, personal documentation including photography of the Shoah. The third generation seems particularly keen to explore the evidential and documentary value of their ancestral pictures. Interestingly, it is often not just a search for historical and family identity but also curiosity driven journey that aims to explore ordinary life before and during the Holocaust. It can be argued that 'choosing not to look' would be more common amongst the second generation of survivors, 'choosing to look' is more preferential for the third generation. Although there isn't one reason for it, one might want to consider cultural practices such as narrated Holocaust documentaries and fiction films as providing catharsis for emotions but also familiarising with the trauma in a way that might reduce the Shoah to a successfully packaged product. The still growing artistic media attention to the Holocaust visual representation can overshadow the need to understand Holocaust's photography documentary value.

Out of over 700 Bacior's photographs taken in Zarki, less than a half was captured during the war. An overwhelming majority was taken outside, mainly in a park or a woodland, at a riverside and in

backyards. These images fall into the category of street photography, one of the most popular styles in the 1930s. One simply could not walk down a main street in any European city not to encounter street photographers or makeshift photo studios. Like many other photographers of the period, Jozef Bacior was of a working- class background and maintained a full-time factory job before the war. He simply could not afford to open a photographic atelier at this point so he continued to take candid snaps of his, often better established, subjects. Both pre-war and wartime images captured by Bacior continue a nineteenth century tradition of portrait photographs. His narrative is simple yet alluring, his photographs often strikingly detailed, measured and sharp. Nothing seems accidental because Bacior's relationship with his subjects is carefully constructed to be much like that in the 19th century studio portraits- sharply focused, static yet collaborative and consensual. Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer call such relationship 'affiliative' evoking 'affiliative postmemory' which is derived from the contemporarity and familiarity with the Holocaust as well as the connection with family photography (Hirsch and Spitzer 2009, 163).

In his 1972 essay John Berger discusses 'photographs of agony' (Berger 1980, 39), types of pictures that capture our attention exactly because the pain presented in them overwhelms the viewer. Through their display of extreme events and raw suffering they evoke compassion and lead to, what Berger calls, 'shared suffering'. The latter is profound, often sudden but also, generates a feeling of helplessness. There is nothing that a viewer can do to alleviate suffering and violence when confronted with the photographs of Henryk Ross from the Litzmanstadt ghetto, captures from the Nazi ghetto tourists or the Auschwitz album. The suffering extends beyond gazing. Some spectators may have a personal or family story directly, or indirectly attached to the photographs. Moreover, these photographs stand at a juncture of numerous spheres, for example, private and public, domestic and urban and therefore, are capable of bridging gaps in history and memory (Hirsch 2008). At the same time they are also capable of evoking and misshaping memories. However, this does not seem to be the case with the photographs taken by both Bacior and Bozek in Zarki.

A closer visual analysis seems justified to gain a better understanding of the collection in the context of 'photographs of agony'. The majority of Bacior's photographs adhere to some relatively unified and consistent aesthetic and pictorial rudiments regardless of the period (pre-war and wartime). His subjects are almost invariably well-dressed with immaculate hair and bright faces. This is not surprising as in those days people used to get dressed up to go to town, let alone to have their pictures taken. Whereas the latter does not seem that unusual for a contemporary observer of the pre-war images, the wartime photographs might strike as incongruous in a specific historical context – the immanent advent of the Holocaust in Zarki. And it is not just the fact that the street/ outdoor photography continued in Zarki while thousands of local Jews were ghettoised, persecuted and murdered, while the river of desperate refuges continued to flow through this town, but also the banality of images. The photographs captured by Bacior during the war in and outside Zarki ghetto are unashamedly vernacular, common in style. They reflect everyday life, not as detached from the fabric of the locality, but very much an integral part of it. It is clear that Bacior's subjects simply wanted to look good, not Jewish or Gentile, but handsome and pretty. Alive. These photographs

show Zionist youth with their collars ironed sharply, while a young dark-haired smartly dressed woman steps into a vegetable garden looking directly at the cameraman. We meet a couple of boys casually standing by the riverside, leaning against a big tree, their gazes slightly averted. There is nothing particularly unusual about the photograph until we spot boys' armbands, the unmistakable sign of their situation. We then become instantly arrested by the image, arguably because of its banality which stands in such contrast to our knowledge of what is to come. When confronted with vernacular photographs taken in the ghettos, we almost instinctively ask "how and why could these people casually pose in the countryside; how could they just walk down the street looking seemingly free and unburdened?" Our own knowledge of the terrible destruction, the familiarity, historical and special proximity of the Holocaust makes it difficult to comprehend what Bacior's photographs contend – that life went on. Judging by the number of the wartime pictures that survived in Bacior's collection, snaps were taken eagerly and commonly, almost exclusively outdoors making Zarki and the Zarki ghetto Bacior's photographic studio. The subjects are very often in the centre of a picture perspective, surrounded by a partial view of the landscape (frequently gardens with particular preference for bushes and shrubs or, fields) or town's architecture. We see people posing, smiling, tilting their hats, walking confidently in the streets, the banality of life which elicit conflicting emotions. On one hand life went on as normal with people trying to get on with their daily activities as well as dipping into small pleasures and a bit of casual entertainment. On the other they had to cope with regular shootings, refugees, forced labour and the overall shortage of supplies. Despite everything that we know, the terrible retrospective knowledge we bear, Bacior's images support what some ghetto residents confirmed as well: it was not an entirely unhappy period and ghetto was not just gloom and doom (at least for the time-being). We also find no obvious signs of the Holocaust neither in the attitudes of the subjects nor in the way they are photographed, at least not until one spots the 'band of shame' and apply our knowledge of what is to follow. Upon closer inspection the contemporary observer notices that some people try to hide or even have already taken off the band. Amongst the unexpected normalcy of the setting their bands stand out both to the viewer and the photographed. It would be easy to jump to conclude it could be an act of defiance but the only thing that the observer can be sure of is that they (Zarki Jews) were once present or, as Barthes puts it "every photograph is a certificate of presence" (Barthers 1988, 87).

Unlike in other known collections of photographs that have already been mentioned in this article, Bacior's subjects choose to pose for the camera. There are no under obligation to fulfil a forceful narrative, to pretend. Moreover the intimate landscapes of deep suffering, dyeing and death are not presented either. Although undoubtedly posed and partially directed by the photographer, Bacior's pictures reveal culturally coded gestures that depend on decisions made by his subjects.

Finally, there is also the question of a photographer and his role as a witness. By his own admission, although not professionally qualified, Bacior had had a knack for photography and wanted to make it his career. He had taken pictures of the Jewish inhabitants of Zarki during the war just as he would capture them before. Similarly, photographs that depict non-Jewish residents before

and during the war were taken predominantly to supply professional experience and financial means. Today they carry evidential force and are perceived as a form of witnessing but in 1940 they were mainly seen as candid photographs.

Perhaps both Bacior and Bozek could be defined as observers, *the flâneur,* whose aim was to derive *'l'éternel du transitoire'* ('the eternal from the transitory') (Butler 2007, 133). The latter has been analysed by Walter Benjamin in a context of a modern metropolis which is explored by an observer, a window- shopper in a search of elements that remain immune to the process of decay. Although incapable of showing how things really were, both photographers who once strolled the streets of Jewish Zarki bring up the world of the living, animate the past. Their lenses intently focus on observations while at the same time, they remain visitors in the ghettoised landscape. Moreover, their cameras create the dialogue between the past and present that establishes the usable version of history.

It'd be difficult to argue that both photographers were not witnesses in a cruel theatre of war. They were participants, also suffering but at the same time experiencing the torment of others through the interface between the eye and the camera. As such they were observers, looking for best poses, backgrounds and situations, slightly detached due to a physical barrier that both the camera and the peculiar space of the ghetto created. On the other hand, their relationship with their subjects involved witnessing, more than gazing. Even if only momentarily they were still experiencing the difficulties of life in the perimeter of an isolated and stigmatised space.

Photography provides an opportunity to renew the old world. The 'Jewish myth' of small Polish towns often overshadows the quest to get to know the 'real' people though some efforts are being made to give memory its rightful place. It can be argued that like in many other places in Poland, also in Zarki, the myth sometimes provides a convenient excuse not to explore the most painful part of history. The lack of Jewish presence during most of the year remains in gross disproportion to their overwhelming presence as symbols. The collective imagination of the locals is much more populated by Jews than the streets of Zarki. Those perceptions are like the shadows of the past, spirits revived and returning often in a fantasised form. While the Polish side is well defined, it is a Jewish entity that remains unclear, foggy, half real and half mythological. Not so much a set of specific people, a tangible demographic, social, economic or religious category, but rather a phenomenon living its own life as a product of symbolic culture. But the cameras of Bacior and Bozek testify to the past. The likeness of the Jewish residents captured on a photographic film proves that they existed, or that 'things happen'. In the collective memory of the locals, the multicultural past of their town indeed occupies some symbolic space which can be extended further by engaging with the photographs. Writing about 'postmemory', Mariane Hirsch highlights the role of photography in testifying and remembering even amongst more distant, uninvolved viewers (Hirsch and Spitzer 2009, 169). Subsequently, I believe that the collection of pictures from Zarki indeed plays an important role in the process of testifying, remembering as well as further contextualising Holocaust photography.

Pictures, as observed by Barthes, have evidential force. They allow us to track traces of people, places and objects that are no longer there. They can also 'materialise' memory (Zelizer 2001, 3), and help

us understand the past through visualisations. Although it might not be possible to build a full understanding of the past from the snippets that photographs deliver, photographers can be seen as witnesses. The collection of visuals from Zarki does not show a re-imagined world, a historical landscape of suffering altered by those who captured. On the contrary, despite not showing any atrocities commonly associated with the WW2 and the Holocaust, they do testify of the world that once existed. It is, therefore, hoped that a further study of the collection can provide not only a better insight into the connected lives of the communities and Jewish history of the region, but also raise historical awareness.

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Photographs:

1. Author: Jan Bozek, Zarki. Exact date unknown, probably 1940.

2. Author: Jozef Bacior, Zarki. 1937. In the photograph: Samuel Bornstein with his grandmother.

3. Author: Jan Bozek, Zarki. 1940?