

# ESTHER SHALEV-GERZ

## Does Your Image Reflects Me?

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Hannover is a modern city. Everything today has its place, including memorials to the crimes of National Socialism. On the relevant dates, we gather in remembrance, we meet, and the press reports on the obligation that memory imposes on us.

Just outside the city is Bergen-Belsen, a location that goes unmentioned in advertising for Hannover. Bergen-Belsen, the location of the death camp, is a green open space, like a heathland park. Next to the car park is the sober functional building for the rituals of remembrance, for film, photography and the written word. Beyond it is the site of the camp with its winding paths. The raised right angles of the mass graves are like pieces of lawn. With inscriptions such as "2,000 dead" and "5,000 dead". A large, sweeping altar, the site for commemoration.

This location does not have a contemporary form for communicating the past to us. It is situated in a wood, next door to army training grounds and railway sidings, which are still in use. This camp, which arose here due to its proximity to military facilities and transport routes, has slipped out of history. We can only understand it in its present form if we open ourselves to the historical accounts. The location of Bergen-Belsen has no real relevance to everyday life in the nearby city.

Shortly before our son was born, my father died. This gave me the opportunity to finally read the files of his "denazification" dating back to 1948, which he had withheld from the whole family. In this process of family archaeology I gradually immersed myself in his desperate attempt to deny as far as possible his knowledge of the crimes of the Third Reich and to conceal, re-interpret and gloss over the facts. He, who had attended two training courses at a school on the periphery of the concentration camp in Dachau during his career as an administrative officer in the SS, wanted to convince his judges that he knew nothing of the reality of this camp or of its importance in the incarceration of its occupants, the denial of their rights and their extermination.

This act of family archaeology was accompanied by the attempt to comprehend where our country stands today, in our peculiar state of transition, from the active processing of the past to a wish to grasp the categories for the development of the future. The question I repeatedly put to my friends and colleagues was: "Where did Anne Frank die?" Some of them knew that she didn't live to see the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen camp. When I put this question to Esther Shalev-Gerz, artist and longstanding friend, she answered, "Where was Anne Frank born?" I had forgotten that she was born in Frankfurt. This

brought us back to the country of my home and where Esther Shalev-Gerz has produced many works on the subject of remembrance. I then asked her if we ought to risk a project for our generations of the children of the victims and the children of the perpetrators; a project on the subject of the absence of remembrance in our towns, on the problem of dealing with memories which are no longer our own.

Joint visits to Bergen-Belsen and many discussions made it clear just how complex the issue is. Esther Shalev-Gerz researched and read at length on the topic for well over a year and gathered the available material. For herself she also sought a way of responding to our topic with her own personal history.

One thing is certain: Only by talking and listening, passing on first-hand experience, images, emotional glances and moments, can we bring ourselves to the point where remembrance is converted into action. As Walter Benjamin put it, "History is like a text in which the past has embedded images". It is up to us to develop the products of the process of remembering, convert them into the material of the present: in terms of patterns, encouragements, and ideas to stimulate visions and thought.

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Bergen-Belsen and Hannover: Two locations only 40 kilometres apart. Two women talking together about their lives at these locations during the Forties of the last century. Each tells her tale and listens to the other's tale. They don't know each other, and is not until the official opening of the exhibition in Hannover that they will meet. Two women: one a Jewish survivor from Poland, the other a German.

He who speaks cannot see himself; and the speaker needs someone to speak to, says Esther Shalev-Gerz. Each tells her tale and listens to the other's tale. In the pictures of this installation, we see only them. Their stories stem from the same period, but their locations are different: Hannover and Bergen-Belsen. Only in the shared space of telling and listening does a link develop between them. Does your image reflect me? It is the ear and eye of the observer that are capable of establishing the link between these two people. We as the observers and listeners step before the monologues of these women and their silent listening. We are aware of both stories, but to follow them individually, we have to grant them twice the time. In this installation, we therefore have to shift our location, just as when we step before the videos of the listener. If we wanted to observe the listening women, we would have to stay in the installation for almost three hours.

The women speak and listen facing the camera. We, the observers, see these images; those who sit there and speak or sit and listen see themselves and not the other. It is what the two women have to tell that creates a shared time at two different locations. This is a journey through time to locations devoid of remembrance.

The artist met people who were willing to talk about themselves and their stories from this period and she listened to them. These stories encompass human events, life, youth, love, dreams, birth and death. The terrors in the life of one are different from those in the life of the other. The artist got both of the women to speak. Through contacts with friends in Paris she found one of them in Hannover, the city from whose museum the commission for this installation came. Charlotte Fuchs, now over ninety, talks of her life as a young woman, actress and mother in a city whose political system she did not share. She tells of

her attempts to organize little escapes in the liberal artists' milieu and to come through the Nazi period as a person with moral fibre. And she reports of her last meeting with her husband, stationed as a soldier close to Bergen-Belsen, and of his death shortly before the end of the war. Esther phone the other woman, Isabelle Choko, after a meeting of survivors of the Bergen-Belsen camp; she offered her the chance to participate in the project. This young girl's odyssey, her "first life", ends in the ghettos and camps of the Nazis. She goes through appalling experiences, loses both her parents in the ghetto and camp, and ultimately, only a young girl, is the only family member to survive.

Hannover is a modern city in which memories of Bergen-Belsen are revived only on historic occasions. Bergen-Belsen today is a park, a museum of history. Anyone who walks down the paths today has to work his way back through the layers of cultivated remembrance at this location. No huts, no pictures of people, no signs of the presence of those tens of thousands who were killed here in such a short period. This park is an open space punctuated solely by raised turf graves, gravestones and memorials.

This is where the pictures of Bergen-Belsen today were taken by the artist for her installation. The first one shows the ruins of the delousing centre, an archaeological site. The second shows an old water trough, filled today with earth. Another picture from one of her visits shows a group of soldiers at a toll bar that separates the camp grounds from the adjacent military site and was also the camp entrance. Soldiers on an exercise in the light of winter. Difficult to say in what country or place these pictures have been taken. Where is the place, and what has been happening here?

In the archives of the Bergen-Belsen camp, Esther Shalev-Gerz found a point of contact between a picture she had already taken on site and a photograph taken in 1945. The latter shows, by the historic trough, two women. One of them is washing, a headscarf covering her head, clothes covering her body. She is preoccupied by her work, bending down to the surface of the water. The other is standing on the edge of the trough, half naked and smiling. Overcoming any shyness, she reveals herself to be a beautiful young woman. Her smile is directed at the person taking this photograph at the time of the camp's liberation.

The historic photograph establishes a link with the images of today, which shows a place where remembrance isn't possible. It grants us an opportunity to construct a memory, and guides us into our own visual conception of those who survived. We have seen the dead in the testimony of the liberators, in photographs and films. But we are closer to those who survived and of whom we can at least make a picture of our own and respond to their smile from the past. Walter Benjamin described this process as follows: "History is like a text in which the past has embedded images like on a photosensitive plate. Only the future has the chemicals to develop this picture in all its sharpness" (Walter Benjamin, *Ges. Schriften*, Frankfurt/Main 1980, vol. I, 3, p. 1238).

And finally, the two sets of four photographs of the two speaking and listening women. In these portraits they meet, the speaking and the listening women. Here is the first, fictitious place of their encounter.

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The surviving victims left our country, the rubble of central Europe, the liberated camps

and destroyed cities. They left our survivors and with them they left us, their children. As the rubble was being cleared away around us, we grew up here without us, the children of the witnesses and the children of the perpetrators, experiencing anything of all this. I grew up in this growing absence of conscious remembrance. As the rubble around our houses vanished, we developed a consciousness of Now that obliterated all history. Everything was new – from the house built on the rubble of an old one through to family histories that all started after capitulation, after the war.

It was the defeat that brought us torment and shame. The old adversaries were still etched on the minds of our parents as alternative images, though they remained foreign to us because for many years in our lives we saw none of them, didn't talk to them and learned nothing about them and about their present or past. And it was a long time before we learned of the victims.

Xenophobes, some of whom are German, dispute a history shared with outsiders (or with their victims). That is their way of evading memories: by denial.

In the short term, the wars that our leaders started and that we lost for them prompted confessions and new understandings. One such understanding was the notion that no war should ever again issue from German soil. This was justified by the historic lessons from recent wars. Today we encounter the distorted variants of these lessons as the justification for our participation in new wars. Such a perversion of historic lessons can probably be explained by the absence of general remembrance and knowledge in our society. For only from their presence could joint action be placed on a joint foundation.

This means that without our remembrance, without memories passed on, renewed and newly appropriated, we shall not find a way of dealing with the murkier spots on our maps, past and present.