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The Jerusalem Report

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'ANOTHER EXPULSION?'
Disengagement opponents appropriated the photo for a poster last summer, adding an orange star to the boy's coat

ESTEBAN ALTEMAN

What If the Boy Survived?

Zohar Shavit

IN 1982, REACTING TO PRESIDENT Ronald Reagan's call to Israel to stop its bombardment of Beirut, the American leader having characterized the results of the shelling as "a holocaust," prime minister Menachem Begin showed reporter David K. Shipler, of *The New York Times*, the famous photo of the child with raised hands surrendering in the Warsaw Ghetto: "Look at this child. Look at the fear in his eyes, how he tries to raise his hands, and look at this mother, looking at the other Nazi soldier lest he open fire at the child. Such children were killed — one and a half million for six years, brought to Auschwitz, Treblinka, Maidanek, etc. This is holocaust."

Indeed, since the 1960s, that 1943 photo has held iconic status as a symbol of the

The photograph of the child with his hands raised from the Warsaw Ghetto remains one of the most haunting images of the Holocaust. Some of its power comes from our uncertainty about the fate of its central figure.

atrocities of the Holocaust. The boy with his hands in the air was seen as carrying upon his tiny and helpless shoulders the entire fate of European Jewry and the

whole diabolical story of the Nazi plot against the Jews.

Richard Raskin's book is, on the face of it, a study of the history of this photo. Despite its popularity (or perhaps because of it), there is much misinformation out there about the image, not only on the level of interpretation, but also in terms of the basic facts. In this sense, Raskin, an American-born and -educated professor of media studies at Aarhus University, Denmark, has had to explore uncharted territory, and to amend many widely held misconceptions. Raskin is well read in the literature on the Warsaw Ghetto, and manages to unfold the history of


the photo with much sensibility, passing on to the reader the relevant and often complicated and contradictory information that exists, without upsetting the fluency or lucidity of his narration.

The photo's first appearance was in an internal German document known today as the Stroop Report, after Jürgen Stroop, the SS major general who was responsible for the crushing of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in the spring of 1943. After the war after being captured by the Americans, Stroop was put

on trial for war crimes by the American and later Polish authorities. He was executed on March 5, 1952, unrepentant to the end.

Stroop's report was compiled in praise of the crushing of the revolt, and to justify the time Stroop needed to put it down — it lasted from April 19 to May 16, nearly a month, instead of the three days originally anticipated.

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A Child at Gunpoint
By Richard Raskin
Aarhus University Press
192 pp.; \$33 (paperback;
available in the U.S. from
David Brown Books)

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ed. Only then could Stroop write: "The Jewish Quarter of Warsaw Is No More" — the title he chose for his report. The 53 photos were meant to serve as additional evidence that he and his men were heroes, and that the Jews were a dangerous enemy, "a group of bandits," as some of the captions described them.

It is not at all evident that all the photos, including that of the child, were indeed taken during the Warsaw uprising. Among the several people who have claimed to be the child, one testified that the photo was taken at the Hotel Polski, which was situated at 29 Długa St., outside of the ghetto; the well-dressed people behind the boy, carrying their luggage, suggest that this is not a far-fetched possibility. Their state is very different from that of people who were photographed as they were being pulled out of the ghetto bunkers, wearing dusty clothes and without bags, though it can be assumed that they all shared the same terrible fate.

Raskin describes at least four different

1960 book "Der gelbe Stern" ("The Yellow Star"), the first German-language collection of Holocaust photographs, and its use later that year as a poster for the first exhibition on the Nazi crimes in Germany. It also appeared in Life magazine that autumn, accompanying an interview with Adolph Eichmann.

Why did Schoenberger choose this particular photo, out of a long sequence of images, detailing the destruction of the ghetto, to appear on the poster of the exhibition? Why take a photo made for the use of the Nazis rather than photos that were taken in the Ghetto, some by opponents of the regime, photos that are far more distressing and more difficult to look at? The photo is not a literal depiction of the horrors of the Holocaust: It does not show people being either degraded or murdered. That various people have identified themselves as the child even adds a dimension of hope and survival.

Raskin suggests that it is precisely the fact that the picture is not so terribly painful

contributing to the transformation from a mere photo in a report into a symbol.

The mildness of its representation of the Holocaust, combined with the possibility of attributing to it a story in which all boundaries between military and civilian, adult and child, have been abolished, responded to the need of people in the 1960s to learn about the Holocaust without going into the ghastly details. Raskin suggests that there was a hunger for Holocaust stories, but ones that were not too hard to bear, such as the tale of Anne Frank's diary.

Raskin presents the various interpretations of the photo — political, historical and artistic — and, in so doing, demonstrates that its meaning is in the eye of the observer. Some, like Hannah Arendt, interpreted the physical stance of the German as archetypical of German-Nazi behavior. Among Palestinians, the figure of the Jewish boy has been replaced by a Palestinian child, and the soldier by an Israeli. For Menachem Begin, the child became a symbol for Jewish suffering and proof that the State of Israel is the ultimate guarantee for such scenes being avoided in the future. For the settlers evacuated from the occupied territories in Gaza this past summer, it became a symbol for a child of the settlers driven away from his home.

Some interpreters, even professional historians, added elements to enhance their interpretations: In a poem, Peter Fischl refers to a non-existent Star of David on the boy's coat, others claim that the German soldier is pointing the gun at the child or that the soldiers are laughing.

Indeed, this is what "A Child at Gunpoint" is all about: Even after researching in all possible archives and interviewing all possible witnesses, Raskin must acknowledge that there are aspects of the photo that remain enigmatic. What remains beyond doubt is the highly manipulative power of memorization processes and how fragile and unreliable even "hard" facts such as photos can be. In this sense, Raskin's book is much more than a detailed account of the circumstances in which a certain photo was taken. It is a most instructive case study of memorization and of the highly manipulative manner in which we choose to remember our past and interpret it. ●

Zohar Shavit is a professor of cultural research at Tel Aviv University. Her book "A Past Without Shadow," which analyzes the construction of the past in German children's books, was recently published by Routledge.

The desire to find a real person who will endow a human touch to the iconic figure is comprehensible

people who have been identified as or who claimed to be the child in the photo, and not surprisingly, each time one has appeared, it has caused something of a media sensation. The desire to find a real person who will endow a human touch to the iconic figure is comprehensible. Even Holocaust deniers like David Irving and Robert Faurisson have evinced interest. The latter got especially ecstatic about the boy's possible survival, as if it were proof that the other millions were not exterminated either, as if the survival of the icon is proof of the survival of the persons it stands for.

THE PHOTO DIDN'T ATTRACT much attention until the 60s, although the U.S. chief counsel, Supreme Court justice Robert H. Jackson, explicitly referred to the Stroop Report in the opening statement for the prosecution at Nuremberg. The first person who brought it to the attention of the Western world was French film director Alain Resnais, who included it in his 1956 documentary "Night and Fog." But it acquired its international fame largely from Gerhard Schoenberger's

to look at that made it an icon. That the observer can complete the story told by the photo, which records a moment in the lives of people who themselves will probably be dead within a matter of days, hours or even minutes, is what gives it its power.

A viewer who knows nothing about its historical context could read it as a photo taken during any war, when soldiers of the conquering army evacuate innocent citizens. Moreover, the soldier is not even pointing his weapon at the surrendering group, none of whose members seem terribly frightened. They do not convey the great suffering we associate with the camps or residents of the ghetto. As a matter of fact, the photo doesn't immediately make it clear that the subjects are Jews. Only a very careful examination discloses the armband ghetto inmates were forced to wear. Only prior knowledge of where and when the photo was taken, and who its subjects are, give the image its meta-historical significance.

The fact that the boy is a little set off from the rest of the group makes him look both less anonymous and also as if he is facing the German soldiers on his own, undoubtedly