

**PHOTOGRAPHY ETHICS IN AUSCHWITZ:  
THE STORY OF WILHELM BRASSE**

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For my Gideon Klein research, I explored the role of photography during the Holocaust. The story of Wilhelm Brasse moved me immediately. A photograph is made: framed and selected by the vision of the photographer. Photographs tell an inherently limited truth. In her introduction to *Portraits in Life and Death*, Susan Sontag reflects:

“Whatever their degree of ‘realism,’ all photographs embody a ‘romantic’ relation to reality.”

As photographers, we choose the vantage point from which to shoot photographs, adjusting perspective.

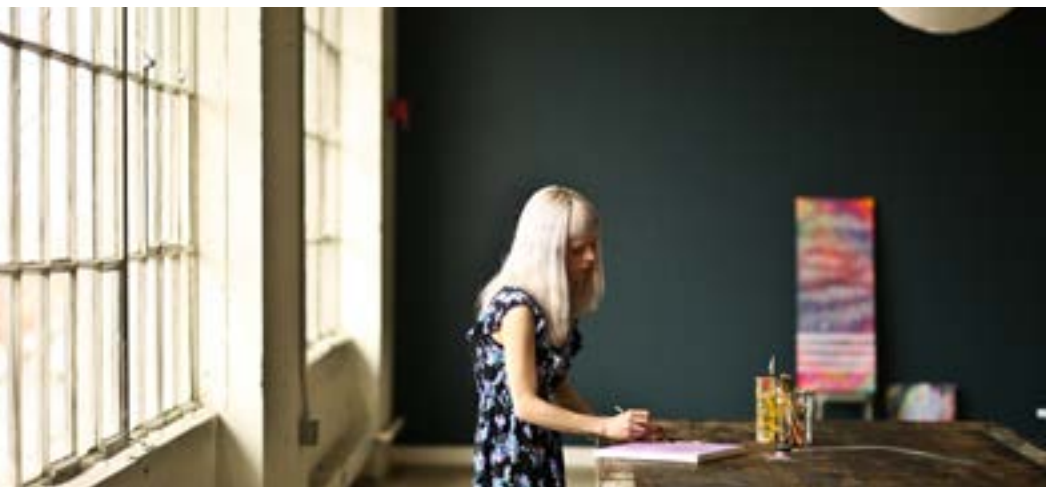
On another level, the ways in which interface with our subjects, most poignantly in the realm of portraiture, has a profound effect on the resultant images and the stories such images tell. How one views the subject dictates the impact of the photograph at hand, and context is paramount.

I have photographed artists living with homelessness and disability in the States, Mayan weavers in Guatemala, Syrian refugees in Jordan, and post-genocide society in Rwanda. These are demographics about whom the media and society have widely un-nuanced portrayals and views; photo-journalists are critical in shaping the public’s story of these people.

I believe the majority of the tropes that define the aforementioned misconstrued people and spaces worldwide derive largely from a perspective of exploitation- a desire to fit an obvious, albeit destructive and fallacious, narrative.

It is ethically tenuous to photograph people in their most vulnerable and distraught state. Still- what is the line between exploitation or voyeurism, and social justice journalism and preserving the historical record?





Wilhelm Brasse was born in 1917 to an Austrian mother and Polish father. He learned photography in his aunt's studio in Krato-wice that was seized in the German invasion of Poland in 1939.

In August of 1940, while attempting to reach France, Brasse was intercepted by Nazi forces. On August 31, 1940, 22 year-old Wilhelm Brasse arrived in Auschwitz camp with about 400 other Polish prisoners. He was admitted as prisoner 3444.

After submitting to forced labor for six months, Brasse was put to work for the Erkennungsdienst, which was the identification service charged with producing photographic documentation throughout the camp. The Erkennungsdienst was headed by SS Sergeant Bernhard Walter, notorious for his hedonism and brutality.

The Nazi's were obsessed with documenting their crimes, and consequently enlisted Polish prisoners in tasks ranging from designing, writing, retouching and photographing—which became Brasse's designated role in the camp.

Brasse was the ideal candidate—he spoke German, and had worked in a photography studio in Selesia. Polish was forbidden. Brasse later recalled:

**It was an order, and prisoners didn't have the right to disagree...I couldn't say 'I won't do that.'"**

Brasse's role was initially centered on taking identity photographs of all incoming prisoners- a role for which he is known today. Those summoned to be photographed had their faces shaven, with shirts legibly embroidered with respective numbers and triangles, all in a specific color. At times set by SS guards, prisoners were queued in front of block 26 in numerical order, with the intention of facilitating the photographer's work.





The photographs were taken from three angles: one from the profile, one of the face directly and another of the face with a hat for men, or a shawl sometimes for women. The vast majority of the prisoners were photographed wearing striped uniforms, though there exist a few images of prisoners in civilian clothing. In the bottom left corner of the photographs, there are respective camp numbers, nationality, the reason for which a given prisoner was in the camp and the “KL Auschwitz” reference.

Walter, the SS guard, was sadistic in his desire to photograph suffering and death. He and his assistant were infamous within the camp for rushing to photograph prisoners who had been shot attempting to escape, or who had hanged themselves. With the arrival of Auschwitz camp doctors and the first Jewish prisoners, the camp photography became significantly more macabre. Brasse was soon tasked shooting not only identity photographs, but also with documenting horrific medical experiments throughout the camp.

Brasse had to photograph any prisoner considered to be of anatomic interest to doctors—the diseased, deformed, disabled and even prisoners with unique tattoos— as well as children, many of whom were subjected to acts of blatant sadism. Most procedures were performed without anesthetic.

When doctors Eduard Wirths and Josef Mengele performed pseudo-scientific experiments, they asked Brasse to document the procedure. Brasse later described:

“I had to take colour photographs of these experiments but this film was sent to a lab in Berlin. They said the work was about research for cancer of the womb but they could have been doing anything.”

Given that this report engages with questions on the ethics of looking at images of atrocity and suffering, I debated over the inclusion of Brasse's atrocity images in this report—and decided against it. Surely, the subjects would not have wanted to be photographed or seen in such compromising positions. Also, because Brasse was involved in shooting photos but also developing those shot by S.S. guards around the camp, it's hard to attribute specific images to individual photographers. Furthermore, such images speak more to the grave nature of Brasse's tasks, which, while of great relevance, nonetheless tends to overshadow Brasse's intimacy, connection and tenacity. Given the nature of this project, I think it would be a disservice to Brasse and his subjects alike to share photographs from the medical experiments.



SS officers believed the experiments reflected a tremendous degree of eugenic innovation; the photographic documentation was a mechanism of historically preserving radical changes in racial science.

For Brasse, however, shooting the photographs was of course tremendously distressing; such distress was paramount in his decision to save the photographs later on. In a 2005 interview, Brasse confided:

“I made photographs of young women for Dr. Mengele. I was aware that they were going to die. They didn’t know - to photograph these women and to know that they were going to die was so highly distressing. They were so full of life and so beautiful ...”

From January of 1944, Auschwitz was the epicenter of the genocide against Jews. Brasse was ordered to shoot photos at the ramps, where new prisoners arrived, and also around the camp’s gas chambers. He was also tasked with developing and printing films from SS personnel, many of whom, as aforementioned, took a sick pleasure in capturing images of suffering.

Brasse later recalled, in reference to an image he was forced to print:

“It was a photograph of an elderly woman taken at the moment when she was entering the gas chamber, just to see her face - to see her reaction - her face was terrible, frightened and with a horrible expression.”

By mid-January of 1945, however, Brasse was one of only a few left in the Erkennungsdienst. Walter, in a panic and in light of the Red Army's advances, demanded that all the negatives and photographs be burned. Wilhelm Brasse and Bronisław Jureczek, both of whom worked in the photo library, were to destroy all documentation.

Their work was supervised by Bernhard Walter, the head of the Erkennungsdienst. Brasse and Jureczek were determined to save as many photographs and negatives as possible. Jureczek described:

“We put wet photographic paper and then photographs and negatives into a tile stove in such large numbers as to block the exhaust outlet. This ensured that when we set fire to the materials in the stove only the photographs and negatives near the stove door would be consumed, and that the fire would die out due to the lack of air. Moreover, I had deliberately scattered a number of photographs and negatives in the room of the lab. I knew that with the hurried evacuation of the camp, no one would have time to gather them all and that something would survive.”

When Walter left the laboratory, the two removed the undestroyed images from the furnace, and then boarded up the library to prevent further access. **They saved 38,916 photographs in total.**

After the Red Army arrived at the camp on January 27, 1945, the camp's photographers were essentially forgotten—lost amidst attempts to understand the deaths of the more than one million Jews and thousands of others who perished in the camp.

Brasse and nearly 60,000 other prisoners were marched westwards from the camps until he was deposited at the Mauthausen camp in Austria. Following the camp's liberation by U.S. troops in 1945, Brasse returned to Zywiec in Poland—close to the camp. There, he married and had two children.

He tried to return to photography, but was too haunted by his memories. He described his attempts to pick up a camera again:

“Those Jewish kids, and the naked Jewish girls, constantly flashed before my eyes. Even more so because I knew that later, after taking their pictures, they would just go to the gas. I saw all those big eyes, terrified, staring at me. I could not go on. These are things you can never forget.”

Brasse's story reminds me of the centrality of relationships in photography. Sontag wrote that:

“All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt.”

This sentiment manifests in Brasse's work, not just symbolically but literally.

Brasse's perspective was a somewhat paradoxical one, for he was himself a non-Jewish prisoner and therefore viscerally connected to the prisoners he was photographing, but concurrently, owing to his role and identity, he was separate.

And yet, Brasse had a unique ability to put people at ease- to somehow make the impossibly vulnerable and tragic into brief moments of empathic respite, and of human connection.

Multiple accounts describe Brasse as warm and endearing with guards and prisoners alike. He admittedly developed relationships with other prisoners, and in a later interview confided:

“I tried to calm them.”

The identity photographs were engineered to dehumanize, and yet in Brasse's hands they became a mechanism of humanization. Being cast in the role of photographer was a cruel twist of Brasse's passion. His use of the photographs as an opportunity for empathy was a twist on Nazi intentions.





Reflecting upon photography's tenuous relationship to mortality and immortality alike, Sontag describes:

“Photographs instigate, confirm, seal legends. Seen through photographs, people become icons of themselves.”

Brasse's photographs exemplify this observation. These are images and individuals the Nazis sought to literally erase-- memories that, if not for their pictures, may have been construed differently by history's hand.

Simultaneously, the individuals photographed are deprived of dignity and agency. They have no choice over their participation in these shots, and they have no choice over the consequent consumption and spectatorship the images generate.

Is there a distinction between the historical acknowledgement the portraits bestow, and the moral ambiguity over voyeuristically 'looking' in the decades since? When the spectator at hand has no ability to address the plight of the photograph's subject, what are the ethical ramifications of gazing? In other words, does looking equate to harmful voyeurism in the absence of political utility?

The answers to these questions are necessarily ambiguous, and subjective. We as spectators occupy tenuous ethical territory; we have to confront the ramifications for the people photographed, and, like Brasse, accept their judgement.





In her essay, “In Plato’s Cave,” Sontag writes:

“Photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing.”

To that end, I believe dignity, respect, nuance and banality are central to reality; these are things “worth looking at” and, these consequently characterize the images I seek to capture. I always offer people the opportunity to view their image on my camera when shooting digital; I want people to have autonomy and elective capacity over how they appear in my photographs.

Photography is an intrinsically and intimately relational art form and mode of storytelling, one which Sontag describes as a “relation to the world that feels like knowledge — and, therefore, like power.” In my work, I seek to return this power to the subject. I see my photography as a vehicle for people to share their own stories, and to dictate which versions of themselves they want to share.

**Brasse’s work will always be a benchmark for me.**

## **WITH GRATITUDE**

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