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After the Holocaust

by Elizabeth Daley, qboro Editor
04/08/2010

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"It is important to remember that the camera isn't neutral," writes Sybil Milton, in her essay, "The Camera as Weapon: Documentary Photography and the Holocaust."

For documentary photographer Loli Kantor, the camera is a tool used to turn history into art and art into history. Kantor started taking pictures of Eastern European Holocaust survivors in 2005 as part of a personal project aimed at documenting people like her own parents who both survived the Holocaust.

"I really wanted to meet survivors who lived in Eastern Europe who stayed there after the war, and it evolved into a much deeper project," Kantor said.

Today, Kantor's work hangs in the Dutch Kills Gallery in Long Island City's Silks Building. Since she is self-funded, she sells her photos. Still it is sometimes hard to let go of pictures that have such meaning to her.

Kantor depicts Holocaust survivors who are rapidly dying off in different villages in Ukraine and provides entry into their stories. One woman she photographed was Regina Berkowitz of Truskavetz, Ukraine. Berkowitz was 10 years old when she was taken to Auschwitz with her family. Her life was spared when a German officer saw her playing with a cat in the selection line and took pity on her. Berkowitz's mother and brother were sent to the gas chambers and she has taken care of neighborhood cats ever since.

Kantor's photos are haunting yet affirming. Her black and white images of elderly Ukrainian Jews show that indeed, they have survived, yet specters of their loss are apparent.

The years Kantor has devoted to embedding herself in different communities has allowed her to capture images that convey a level of aloofness and ease which often comes with familiarity. She wants her work to play a role in documenting Jewish history, and undoubtedly, it will.

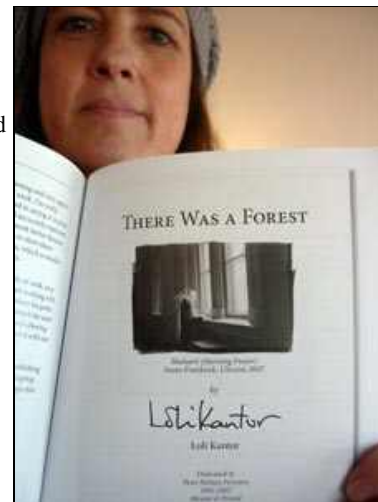
Images have long provided important clues for understanding the past. During the Nazi era, pictures were important tools of propaganda, as leaders turned Germans against their Jewish neighbors. The power of photography was again displayed as American soldiers' photos of concentration camps showed U.S. citizens the grim reality in Europe.

Signs outside French and Dutch concentration camps explicitly prohibited photography, and control of media outlets may have enabled Germans to commit largely unseen crimes.

"The sights I have just seen are so unbelievable that I don't think I will believe them myself until I have seen the photographs," wrote Margaret Bourke-White, a Life Magazine photographer sent to capture images of the concentration camp at Buchenwald.

Among the personal items Nazis destroyed were photographs. Kantor never had access to the type of snapshots showcased in albums. Photographic evidence of her family was either destroyed by the Germans or lost in the chaos surrounding World War II. Kantor has no idea what most of her grandparents looked like and little evidence of her parents' childhoods.

Today, Kantor takes both color photos and black and white palladium prints, juxtaposing the past and the present. "I didn't want to only focus on the Holocaust for this project. it's also about how the Jewish communities are surviving," Kantor said.



Loli Kantor with one of her photographs. Photo by ELIZABETH DALEY