

'Not to Tiptoe Away in the Face of Suffering:' Why we Look at Holocaust Photographs

Presenter: Valerie Hébert

In December 1941, German SS and Police and their local collaborators shot 2,750 Jewish men, women, and children at a beach in Šķēde, near Liepāja, Latvia. To the best of our knowledge, an SS security service officer named Carl-Emil Strott was the photographer. He circulated among those about to die, apparently, with a whip in hand. Of the twelve images documenting the massacre, there are only three where one or more of the subjects look back at the photographer. Among these three, there is one where we see a subject actively trying to hide her face from the camera. Her name was Sorella Epstein, and she was just ten years old. We don't know why Sorella did this. Despair? Terror? Shame? A combination of all, perhaps felt with such intensity that this child defied the uniformed German man who compelled the attention of the four women beside her.

When we look at any photograph, the photographer's perspective becomes ours. When it comes to bucolic landscapes or carefree family snapshots, this is an attribute: we feel part of the beauty, the happiness. But in the case of photographs documenting physical and /or emotional suffering, replicating the photographer-subject relationship takes on fraught ethical weight. Perpetrators deployed cameras as weapons to deepen their subjects' humiliation and as a privilege of their domination. Their victims may look back at the lens, but the circumstances negate consent. Moreover, the images in their immutability extend the violence and degradation in perpetuity. They represent suffering without end and without purpose. In December 1941, Sorella hid her face from Strott. Today she hides her face from us. In this paper, I offer a justification for looking anyway.