Taking the Sonderkommando Photographs
A Praxeological Approach[1]

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Introduction

In 1944, four pictures were clandestinely taken by prisoners within the Auschwitz concentration camp and eventually published in *Przekrój*, a Polish newspaper, in the summer of 1945. Since 1955, these photos have been part of the main exhibitions at the Auschwitz memorial,[2] and they continue to be displayed in various exhibitions about the Holocaust all over the globe. Over the years, they have become the subject of movies, documentaries, fictional works and scholarly writing. Although the photographs are omnipresent in that way, information about how they came into being is still very limited, and a number of questions remain: How was it possible to build an underground network of prisoners from Auschwitz I as well as from the restricted area of Auschwitz II Birkenau, the Sonderkommando prisoners? Where did the camera come from and how was it smuggled into the area of the gas chambers and crematoria? Who took the photographs? Was it possible for a single person to take them entirely on their own? Would it have been possi-

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1   This article is based on two talks I gave in December 2022, the first at the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure's (EHRI) conference »Reflections on Images of the Holocaust in Central and Eastern Europe« in Budapest, December 8, 2022, and the second at the conference on »Friktionen. Für eine politische Wissensgeschichte des Ausstellens/Friction. For a Political History of Knowledge of Exhibiting« in Göttingen, December 8-10, 2022. The findings presented here will be analysed in more detail and within a broader context in the first chapter of my dissertation.

2   See Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Department of Archival Documents/Archiwum Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau [APMO], 13 IV 1979 r Tom 40, Szenariusz, p. 27.

ble to conceal the camera under a jacket to take the pictures? What was pic-
ture-taking like using what we now call a historical camera? In order to ad-
dress these questions and thereby develop a deeper understanding of these
complex images, I aim to find out more about the act of picture-taking itself.
By tapping into additional sources of knowledge that lie beyond letters, court
documents and testimonies, I argue that we can fill in some of the informa-
tion gaps and even shift the questions and narratives surrounding this series
of photographs, which I will henceforth refer to as the *Sonderkommando pho-
tographs*, in line with the term used by Dan Stone.[3]

In the first part of this article, I examine the limitations of the historical
approach, which draws on contradictory testimonies and sources. I assert
that, faced with such limitations, it is more beneficial to use a ›praxeologi-
cal approach‹[4] when attempting to trace the origins of the Sonderkommando
photographs, and specifically when reconstructing the practical conditions
of their creation. Drawing on Michael Polanyi's concept of ›tacit knowledge‹,
I find that we know more than we can tell using language. I further assume
that practical experience can reveal this »more« to us. For example, embedded
in the Sonderkommando photographs lies information about how the series
was taken, such as how the size and weight of a camera influences the manner
of picture-taking, how the shutter speed and accessibility of different buttons
impacts the photographer's movement and how the film's sensitivity to light
determines the position the photographer chooses to shoot from. To capture
these conditions of photo production I decided to handle the historical cam-
eras and take pictures with them myself. In doing so, I sought to unearth the
›tacit knowledge‹,[5] which Polanyi defines as an underlying knowledge that
includes embodied knowledge such as skill. In handling historical cameras
myself and experiencing the act of photographing, I seek to unearth this ›tac-

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3   See Dan Stone: »The Sonderkommando Photographs«, in: *Jewish Social Studies. New Series* 7
    (2001) 3, pp. 131-148.

4   See Lucas Haasis/Constantin Rieske: »Historische Praxeologie. Zur Einführung«, in: id.
    (eds.): *Historische Praxeologie. Dimensionen vergangenen Handelns*, Paderborn: Ferdinand
    Schöningh 2015, pp. 7-54; Karl H. Hörning: *Experten des Alltags. Die Wiederentdeckung des
    praktischen Wissens*, Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft 2001.

5   I understand ›tacit knowledge‹ following Michael Polanyi's concept of ›tacit knowing‹ as
    knowledge that we can't express verbally, and follow him in the assumption that »we can
    know more than we can tell«, Michael Polanyi: *The Tacit Dimension*, Garden City, NY: Dou-
    bleday 1966, p. 4.

it knowledge‹ adding it to the historical research on the Sonderkommando photographs, thereby transforming it into ›explicit knowledge‹.[6] This, in turn, could be used to fill in some of the gaps surrounding the circumstances of the act of picture-taking in the case of the Sonderkommando photographs. Finally, I would like to show how combining the origin of the photo series – found through praxeological research – with the narratives about the Sonderkommando photographs – based on the findings of historical methods – might allow us to understand and write a different story.

Towards this end, I will use primary sources to reconstruct a narrative about the circumstances of the picture-taking as well as the controversial debate on authorship. Over time, photographs within the series of four images were published in various versions. The publication of certain versions of individual photographs led to the narrative that Dawid Szmulewski, an Auschwitz survivor and active member of the camp's resistance movement, was the photographer. This narrative was eventually deconstructed, however gaps remained within the alternative narratives that scholars have been unable to fill in. When we take a closer look at these different narratives, it becomes obvious that the topic of the Sonderkommando photographs causes friction. This friction occurs not only between different narratives but also within each narrative. To lessen the friction and fill in some of these knowledge gaps, for example the question of whether one single person could have taken all the pictures by themselves, I will follow the chronology of the publication of the Sonderkommando series as well as the use of individual photographs within the series aiming to examine how the narrative around the Sonderkommando photographs shifted over time according to usage, interest and research questions. Charting the rather detailed documentation of the established narrative is necessary so that I can re-examine it in a second step through the ›praxeological approach‹.

The Publication and Use of the Sonderkommando Photographs

On 14 June 1945, the Polish journal *Przekrój* published an article containing two photographs from inside the Auschwitz concentration camp dating back to August 1944. To my knowledge, this was the first time these photo-

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6 See Carl Frappaolo: »Implicit Knowledge«, in: *Knowledge Management Research & Practice* 6 (2008), pp. 23-25, DOI: 10.1057/palgrave.kmrp.8500168, see p. 23.

graphs were published. One of the photographs shows naked figures walking through a small forest. The caption reads: »Prisoners stripped of clothes go into the gas chambers«.[7] The second photograph shows a group of clothed men staring at and walking through a number of naked bodies lying on the ground outside. There is smoke and a fence with trees in the background. The *Przekrój* article not only printed the photographs, but also explained their context, stating that they were taken in 1944 by »›Dawid‹, a member of the organisation of political prisoners of the Oświęcim-group«.[8] To be able to take the photographs secretly, the article goes on, a camera had been smuggled into the camp that »Dawid« could then hide underneath his jacket.[9]

When the Sonderkommando photographs were used as evidence of crimes against the Nazi perpetrators in Kraków in 1947, Jan Sehn, the investigative judge in charge of the trial against Rudolf Höss, presented the same two images as the journal *Przekrój*. However, Sehn used a version that showed a slightly different image section. In his version, one more prisoner of the Sonderkommando is visible on the right side of the image. The file documenting the Höss trial reflects that during the trial, the photographer is neither mentioned nor discussed. It is not even stated that he should be sought out for questioning.[10]

And yet, between 1946 and 1967, Dawid/David Szmulewski is named as the author of the published versions of the photo series. Both through Szmulewski's own telling and through the stories of others that turned him into a near mythical figure, the narrative that Szmulewski was the photographer emerges. Not only does he give interviews about taking the photographs, but so do his friends. Szmulewski seems to be a very ambivalent historical figure. While he seems to be involved and well-known in the underground activities in Au-

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7 The caption underneath the article states »więźniowie« – the nominative plural masculine, as opposed to the nominative plural feminine »więźniarki« – which means male prisoners or at least a group of prisoners of both genders. This is interesting because in later publications these prisoners are always declared female. In one retouched version the bodies are explicitly made to look even more feminine; see Bernhard Schoenberner: *Der gelbe Stern: Judenverfolgung in Europa 1933 bis 1945*, Hamburg: Rütten & Loening 1960, p. 162.

8 Unknown author: »Aktion Höss«, in: Przekrój (no. 14), 15.06.–21.06.1945, p. 7, https://prze-kroj.pl/archiwum/numery/14/4 [accessed on 15.10.2023].

9 See ibid.

10 See APMO, H11 – Okręgowa Komisja Badania Zbrodni Hitlerowskiej w Polsce Nr. Dz. 54/47, Tom 11, p. 50.

schwitz during the Second World War, as well as in the Auschwitz Committee and the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial after the war, he doesn't seem to have significantly impacted the resistance movement, the Auschwitz Committee or the Auschwitz trial. He is not mentioned in the reports and scholarly work on the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial or in the biography of the leading German executer who worked closely with both Jan Sehn and Dawid Szmulewski.[11] While Szmulewski portrays himself as Sehn's colleague in the search for and (re-)collection of Polish testimonies for the German prosecutors to use in the Auschwitz trial, Sehn's biographer mentions that Szmulewski was received as someone who assisted Sehn in his work and who practically guarded him during his frequent trips to Germany.[12] On the one hand, this makes him a somewhat involved and known historical figure, while on the other hand, it demonstrates that he wasn't influential enough to have left distinct traces. According to journalist S. L. Shneiderman, »[h]is friends would give […] evasive excuses, never telling [anyone] the real reason Szmulewski shunned the limelight«.[13] Thus, the traces he left are hard to follow and, in many cases, inconclusive. Therefore the vague narrative that arises around him and the Sonderkommando photographs is hard to solidify into anything substantial.

We do know that Szmulewski was born in Koło, Poland, as a Polish Jew. According to his autobiography, he underwent a *Hashara* – training to get a certificate to move to Palestine – in 1934.[14] He worked, for example, as a personal driver in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv before enrolling in the International Brigades to fight in the Spanish Civil War. After being imprisoned in Paris for travelling without a passport, he was sent first to Drancy and then to Auschwitz.[15] In the Auschwitz concentration camp, he became part of the resistance movement. In the 1960s, we know that Szmulewski's story was still circulating. In 1960, Szmulewski gave an interview to Juri Suhl that wasn't

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11   See Hermann Langbein: *Der Auschwitz-Prozeß. Eine Dokumentation. Band 2*, Wien: Europa-Verlag 1965; Irmtrud Wojak: *Fritz Bauer: 1903–1968. Eine Biographie*, München: Beck 2009.

12   See David Szmulweski: *Zikhroynes fun viderstand in Oyshvits-Birkenau*, Paris: Cité Imprimé 1984, pp. 288ff.; Filip Gańczak: *Jan Sehn und die Ahndung der Verbrechen von Auschwitz. Eine Biographie*, Göttingen: Wallstein 2022, p. 170.

13   S. L. Shneiderman: »Photographs from the Auschwitz Hell«, in: *Congress Bi-Weekly* 32 (1965) 1, pp. 5-7, see p. 6.

14   See Szmulweski: *Zikhroynes fun viderstand in Oyshvits-Birkenau* (footnote 12), p. 16ff.

15   See Hauptstaatsarchiv Wiesbaden [HStAW], hhstaw_461_nr_37638--52_0263, David Szmulewski: Testimony Auschwitz Trial, July 13, 1961.

published until 1967. This interview seems to be the most detailed version of the Szmulewski narrative of taking the Sonderkommando photographs in Auschwitz II Birkenau.

The way journalist S. L. Shneiderman presented the Szmulewski narrative in a 1965 article published in the journal *Congress Bi-Weekly* suggests that it has become common knowledge that Dawid Szmulewski, »the personal security of Poland's Prime Minister, Jozef [sic!] Cyrankiewicz«,[16] is the photographer of the Sonderkommando photographs. Shneiderman states how he had unsuccessfully tried to get an interview with Szmulewski for years.[17] In all versions of the narrative, as well as in his autobiography, it is stated that Szmulewski was part of the roofer commando in Auschwitz and that this position enabled him to move between the *Stammlager* Auschwitz I and Auschwitz-Birkenau.[18] The claim that Szmulewski was a roofer and therefore was able to move between the camps and could even be called into the Sonderkommando, if need be, plays an important role in the narrative. Szmulewski's position as a roofer would have enabled him to enter the restricted area of the Sonderkommando prisoners to repair a roof that the members of the Sonderkommando had deliberately destroyed for the sole purpose of getting Szmulewski access and opportunity to take the pictures.[19] The survivor and roofer of the Auschwitz concentration camp, Mordechai Ciechanower, states in his autobiography that such freedom of movement for the roofers actually existed and that he himself visited the Sonderkommando area to talk to the members of the Sonderkommando.[20] According to documents in Auschwitz, Szmulewski was also a *Blockschreiber* – a ›barracks clerk‹ – and therefore one of the more privileged prisoners.[21] Both positions, together with his network of fellow re-

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16   Shneiderman: »Photographs from the Auschwitz Hell« (footnote 13), p. 6.

17   See ibid.

18   See Szmulweski: *Zikhroynes fun viderstand in Oyshvits-Birkenau* (footnote 12), pp. 52ff.; Jury Suhl: »Underground Assignment in Auschwitz«, in: id. (ed.): *They Fought Back*, New York: Crown Publisher 1967, pp. 189-195, see p. 190; Shneiderman: »Photos from the Auschwitz Hell« (footnote 13), p. 7; Szmulewski: Testimony (footnote 15).

19   See Suhl: »Underground Assignment« (footnote 18), p. 190; Shneiderman: »Photographs from the Auschwitz Hell« (footnote 13), p. 7; Szmulewski: Testimony (footnote 15).

20   See Mordechai Chiechanower: *Der Dachdecker von Auschwitz*, Berlin: Metropol Verlag 2007, p. 163.

21   See Irena Strzelecka: »Männerlager in Birkenau (BIId)«, in: *Hefte von Auschwitz 22* (2002), pp. 149-341, see p. 306.

sistance fighters from his time in the Spanish Civil War, might have enabled Szmulewski to move between the two camps, Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II Birkenau. In both the interview he gave Suhl in 1960 and the 1965 article by Shneiderman, which contains a third person narration by Erich Kulka, it is stated that the camera was found in the *Effektenlager* – the ›Kanada ware-houses‹ – by members of the underground movement. Shneiderman even stated that the camera was a Leica with a telephoto lens.[22] According to Suhl, the camera had been smuggled into the Sonderkommando inside a kettle full of liquid coffee substitute with a fake bottom.[23] In Shneiderman's version it »was concealed inside a clay drain pipe [hidden amongst] other roofing materials«.[24] In all versions, including Szmulewski's statement at the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial, he claimed to have photographed through a widened button-hole. In Suhl's version, it says that he photographed from the roof. Shneider-man, however, writes that Szmulewski photographed through the aforemen-tioned hole in the roof.[25] In his statement for the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial, Szmulewski stated that only two of the photographs turned out good enough to be used; this refers to reproductions he was shown in Jan Sehn's publication from 1957.[26] In his article, Suhl declared that Szmulewski had shot three good photographs, making it very likely that Suhl himself changed the statements according to his knowledge from 1967 of three existing photographs.

In Shneiderman's version, the camera simply stayed in the crematorium, while in Suhl's version it was buried. The latter was confirmed in 1985 by the testimony of Sonderkommando prisoner Alter Fajnzylberg, who claimed to have buried it himself. The film was then smuggled out of the Sonderkom-mando. Also, according to Suhl, it was wrapped in a piece of rag and put into tar. Shneiderman wrote that it was put in the pants of a resistance fighter who carried it around for five days before giving it to Cyrankiewicz. All ver-

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22 See Shneiderman: »Photographs from the Auschwitz Hell« (footnote 13), p. 7; Suhl: »Un-derground Assignment« (footnote 18), p. 190.

23 See Suhl: »Underground Assignment« (footnote 18), p. 191.

24 Shneiderman: »Photographs from the Auschwitz Hell« (footnote 13), p. 7.

25 See Suhl: »Underground Assignment« (footnote 18), p. 192; Shneiderman: »Photographs from the Auschwitz Hell« (footnote 13), p. 7; Szmulewski: Testimony (footnote 15).

26 See Szmulewski: Testimony (footnote 15).

sions end with Cyrankiewicz receiving the roll of film, writing a letter, and smuggling the film out of the camp to be developed in Kraków.[27]

This narrative of Szmulewski's heroic picture-taking was widespread in early publications after the Second World War.[28] The Polish judge Jan Sehn, for example, included the story in his book that he based on the evidence he gathered in preparation of the Höss trial, *Concentration Camp Oświęcim-Brzezinka*.[29] Ota Kraus' and Erich Kulka's book *Tovarna na Smrt (The Death Factory)* used the narrative as well, starting with the fourth edition in 1956, which is not surprising, since Kulka had been the one telling Shneiderman this version of Szmulewski's story.[30]

In 1961, during preparations for the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt, Dawid Szmulewski stated that he had indeed taken the pictures,[31] but he didn't go on to elaborate on the events. During the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial in 1964, in response to questioning, Alfred Wóycicki said that he had been able to clandestinely develop the film that held pictures taken by Szmulewski and showed the burning of bodies in Birkenau.[32] While Wóycicki was asked to identify photographs showing the ramp in Auschwitz Birkenau – which I suggest might have been part of the *Auschwitz-Album* or the *Lily-Jacob-Album*[33]

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27 See Shneiderman: »Photographs from the Auschwitz Hell« (footnote 13), p. 7.

28 See Andreas Kilian: »Zur Autorenschaft der Sonderkommando-Fotografien«, in: *Lagergemeinschaft Auschwitz – Freundeskreis der Auschwitzer – Mitteilungsblatt* 35 (2016), https://lagergemeinschaft-auschwitz.de/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/MB_2016_01_neu_klein.pdf [accessed on 26.07.2023], pp. 9-19, see p. 11.

29 Główna Komisja Badania Zbrodni Hitlerowskich w Polsce (ed.): *Obóz koncentracyjny Oświęcim-Brzezinka: na podstawie dokumentów i źródeł/oprac. Jan Sehn*, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Prawnicze 1956; English edition: Jan Sehn: *Concentration Camp Oświęcim-Brzezinka*, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Prawnicze 1957.

30 See Ota Kraus/Erich Schön: *Továrna na smrt*, Prague: Čin 1946/1956; English edition: Ota Kraus/Erich Schön: *The Death Factory*, transl. by Stephen Jolly, Oxford: Pergamon Press 1966. The English edition names Szmulewski as the photographer.

31 See APMO, Oświadczenia tom 152, Nr inw./Nr ośw. 178547/3473, pp. 225-228, Copy of Szmulewski's testimony, February 26, 1962.

32 See the court hearing of the witness Alfred Wóycicki: Landgericht Frankfurt a.M.: *50. Verhandlungstag, 29.5.1964, Vernehmung des Zeugen Alfred Woycicki*, p. 27, https://www.auschwitz-prozess.de/resources/transcripts/pdf/Woycicki-Alfred.pdf [accessed on 12.09.2023)]

33 For further information on both the *Lily-Jacob-* and the *Auschwitz-Album*, see Tal Bruttmann/Stefan Hördler/Christoph Kreutzmüller: *Die fotografische Inszenierung des Verbrechens. Ein Album aus Auschwitz*, Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung 2020.

–, the Sonderkommando photographs were not shown to him. Wóycicki nevertheless mentions Szmulewski's photographs and Szmulewski himself is asked to identify them.[34] This suggests that twenty years after the Holocaust and hundreds of kilometres from Auschwitz, the German judicial system needed the photographs to be authenticated by a witness.

In the 1970s, as Andreas Kilian observed, the narrative began to shift: Szmulewski was no longer stated to be the author of the clandestinely taken photographs from inside Auschwitz-Birkenau. Instead, Kilian pointed out that Szmulewski had become politically unacceptabledue to a scandal and was forced out of Poland during the anti-Semitic sanctions in 1968.[35] Kazimierz Smoleń, the director of the Auschwitz Museum, stated in his 1961 book on Auschwitz that the photographs were taken by »anonymous members of the resistance movement«.[36] The reason why the Auschwitz director broke with Szmulewski's narrative was most likely that, in 1960, the museum staff was shown a different version of the photographs that held new information about the circumstances of the picture-taking.

Władysław Pytlik, former head of a local Polish resistance movement based in Brzezinka and Kraków named PWOK,[37] came forward and showed his own copies of the clandestinely taken photographs (Fig. 1). His copies of the Sonderkommando photographs clearly showed that two of the photos were taken from inside a building through a door, depicting the burning of bodies by the Sonderkommando prisoners. The photograph that showed naked female prisoners walking through the woods was just a fraction of a larger image, which showed more woods and sky. A fourth photograph showed no actual scenery but only treetops and a piece of sky. As it turns out, Pytlik's photographs were the uncropped versions of the previously published photographs. Pytlik's version also showed signs of reoccurring reproduction.

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34 See Szmulewski: Testimony (footnote 15).

35 See Kilian: »Zur Autorenschaft der Sonderkommando-Fotografien« (footnote 28), p. 14.

36 Kazimierz Smoleń: *Auschwitz 1940-1945*, Oświęcim: Wydawnictwo państwowego Muzeum 1961.

37 PWOK (Pomocy dla więźniom obozów koncentracyjnych) can be translated to ›help for the prisoners in the concentration camps‹. The organisation was not, as stated in the previously mentioned article, an international organisation, but a locally based one that stood in close contact with the Polish government in exile in London. For further information, see for example Henryk Świebocki: »Die lagernahe Widerstandsbewegung«, in: *Hefte von Auschwitz 19* (1995), pp. 5-187, see pp. 155ff.
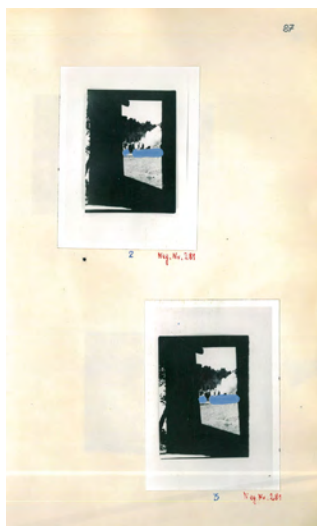
The edges of the photographs showed that these photographs were actually images that had been photographed on a dark surface. A closer look at the edges revealed that this process of copying the images by photographing them had occurred over and over again.

Pytlik allowed the museum's staff in Auschwitz to copy the photographs but kept his ›originals‹. To reproduce the photographs, the staff took pictures of Pytlik's paper copies on a white surface, thus again reducing both the quality and the size of the depicted scenery, making them unfeasible for publication or exhibition.

Fig. 1: Scan of Pytlik's photographs, reproduced by the staff of the Auschwitz Museum in 1960 and edited by the author due to ethical reasons. (Scan: APMO).[38]

Pytlik's paper copies are interesting for numerous reasons. Most importantly, they show that two of the photographs – those which show the burning of the naked bodies – were taken from the inside of a building, contradicting the narrative that claimed Szmulewski was photographing from[39] or through[40] the roof of crematorium V. Furthermore, Pytlik's version, as well

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38 The two photographs have a size of approximately 13x18cm and are glued to a white Din A4 paper sheet. In dealing with photographs of atrocity and their display, I am constantly confronted with the question of how and if I want to display or even reproduce the atrocity within these photographs. While I agree with Georges Didi-Huberman (Georges Didi-Huberman: *Bilder trotz allem*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 2007) in acknowledging both the singularity of the series as well as its importance as photographic evidence of the Holocaust, I decided to show the content of the photographs only when it strengthens my argumentation. In this case, the relevant information of the archival material is to show the practice of reproduction and its consequences for displaying and publishing the photographs. For an unaltered version of the photographs, see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Sonderkommando_photographs [accessed on 15.12.2023].

39 See Hermann Langbein: *Menschen in Auschwitz*, Wien: Europaverlag 1995, p. 380. Langbein states that an unknown prisoner took the photographs from the roof of a crematorium.

40 See Shneiderman: »Photographs from the Auschwitz Hell« (footnote 13), p. 7.

as the archival reproductions, shows how photographs were handled in resistance movements at the time. That is, the paper copies were photographed so that they could be smuggled in the form of film. That way, the risk of being caught with incriminating material was reduced.[41]

In 1985, after the death of her husband in 1984, Pytlik's widow, Danuta Pytlik, donated the paper copies of the photographs to the museum.[42] Having these ›originals‹ in the museum's possession marked the beginning of a new era of displaying and publishing the Sonderkommando photographs, whereby the cropped versions began to slowly disappear from publications and exhibitions.

Defusing/Deescalating Frictions – A Praxeological Approach

While the appearance of the complete images through Pytlik's paper copies challenged the Szmulewski narrative, questions about the circumstances surrounding the photographs remained. If Szmulewski didn't know the position of the photographer, what part – if any – of his story is true? To unearth more information on these questions of how the pictures were taken, I took a closer look at the information about the camera itself.

On 4 September 1944, a *gryps*[43] – a letter that was clandestinely written in the Auschwitz concentration camp – was smuggled out. It was signed by »Stałko« – the combined codename of Józef Cyrankiewicz (1911-1989), who was later the prime minister of Poland, and Stanisław Kłodziński (1918-1990). The gryps stated that a group of prisoners was able to take photographs within Auschwitz-Birkenau and even described the Sonderkommando photographs to a certain extent. Both historians and members of the resistance movement agree that this gryps was the one that was smuggled out of Auschwitz alongside the Sonderkommando photographs.[44] The fact that

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41 See Janina Struk: *Photographing the Holocaust. Interpretations of the Evidence*, London/New York: I.B. Tauris 2004, pp. 51ff.

42 See APMO, Fotografie 181 SYG F Stanisława Iwaszko: Zespół: Albumy fotograficzne, tom 181, p. 2.

43 The word *gryps* doesn't have an English translation, the German word for it however is ›Kassiber‹. The word *gryps* refers to a letter that is clandestinely written in a prison or a camp and smuggled to reach its destination either within or outside of the prison or camp.

44 See for example Didi-Huberman: *Bilder trotz allem* (footnote 38), p. 32.

the letter contained information about what the photographs might depict, without mentioning too much detail, suggests that the undeveloped film had been smuggled out of the camp and the actual photographs had not been known to the underground movement within the camp.

In addition to the content of the photographs and the context of the picture-taking, the gryps also held information about the film, which allowed me to look for the type of camera that could have been used to take the Sonderkommando photographs. In the letter, the writers asked the resistance outside the camp for a certain type of film with a very specific negative format:

> 2. Urgent: As soon as possible, send two iron rolls of film for a photo camera 6x9. It is possible to take pictures. […] Send the roll as soon as possible! Send these enclosed pictures to Tell [codename of Teresa Lasocka] immediately. – The enlarged picture can – we believe – be forwarded.[45]

Using this information about the camera used to shoot the Sonderkommando photographs and the fact that it was operated with a roll film with the negative format of 6x9 cm, I started researching historical cameras of the time.[46] 120-roll film is a film with the width of approximately six centimetres and, according to my findings, there were two types of cameras that used that film at the time: the box camera and the folding camera. The 120 film thus could be used for different formats of negatives, ranging from 4x6 and 6x6 to 6x9, but also 6x17 as well as the even wider landscape/panorama format of 6x24 centimetres.[47] Instead of fixing an image on a glass plate, the small roll of film – a thin layer of film glued onto a layer of paper[48] – was put into one end of the camera and spread across the inner back side of the camera, so that the exposed film was spooled onto another role on the other side of the camera. Thus, a camera that would use a 6x9 negative would have a frame that would be even slightly bigger.

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45 APMO, Ruch Oporu – II Syg D-RO. The English translation is my own.

46 I would like to thank photo historian and curator Christoph Kreutzmüller for the idea and encouragement to look for the camera in order to handle it and get a better understanding of the circumstances, thus giving me the initial idea that turned into my praxeological approach towards the Sonderkommando Photographs.

47 See Paul Lowe: *Die Geschichte der Fotografie. Von der Camera obscura bis Instagram*, München/London/New York: Prestel 2021, p. 110.

48 See ibid.

The 6x9 centimetre format that was mentioned in the gryps was used by certain models of both folding cameras and box cameras.[49] The more common of the two camera types was the box camera, and the first box cameras were built in America by Kodak in 1888, in order to introduce elastic film to a society that was used to photography on glass plates.[50]

The concept was simple, making the camera easy to handle for amateurs and children. It also made the camera relatively cheap, so that members of the general public – no matter how young or old – could use it successfully. The box cameras were even advertised as *Volkskameras* ›people's cameras‹ and their handling described as ›child's play‹ or *kinderleicht*.[51] Between 1930 and 1944, approximately 19 brands produced 56 models that used 120-roll film with the 6x9 negative format. The price ranged between four[52] and 15 Reichsmark.[53] Thus, as a result of its easy handling and affordable price, the box camera became the most common camera model used in the German Reich. Because of both the format of the 120-roll film and the required focal length, box cameras using the 6x9 centimetre negative format have a similar size.

The second type of camera that used a roll film with a negative of 6x9 centimetres at that time was the folding camera. Other than the box camera, with which you could only choose between normal and longer exposure times, folding cameras like the Agfa Billy-Record models that were produced from the 1930s on had three parameters that could be altered: exposure time and the width and distance of the lens (focal length). Of course, these models

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49 For my research on historical cameras I used internet-based museum archives, such as the archive of the German Camera Museum (https://kameramuseum.de/a-z/), Lippisches Kameramuseum (www.lippisches-kameramuseum.de/).

50 See Hans-Dieter Götz: *Box-Cameras Made in Germany. Wie die Deutschen Fotografieren lernten*, Gilching: Verlag für Foto, Film und Video 2002, p. 8.

51 See Heinz F. W. Mänz: *Kinderleicht geht's mit der Agfa-Box*, Frankfurt Main: Umschau-Verlag 1951.

52 The price battle on box cameras started with a PR stunt by the German camera company *Agfa* in 1932. When Agfa developed their own 120 film, they had to find a way to sell the film. Agfa advertised that they would give a box camera – as a ›prize‹ – to each person who gave them four Reichsmark coins whose individual letter engravings together spelled out the name of the company: »A – G – F – A«. In the end, there was a long waiting period for the very cheaply produced cardboard *Preisbox*. When the success of the campaign became obvious, other companies followed the example in the same year. For further reading, see Götz: *Box-Cameras Made in Germany* (footnote 50), p. 20-24.

53 For further reading on prices of different box camera models, see ibid.

were more complex and therefore more difficult to handle. The higher quality was also reflected in the price. For example, the Agfa Billy Record model 6.3 (manufactured sometime between 1933 and 1949) cost between 35 and 39 Reichsmark. It is safe to say that due to their higher cost, these cameras were not as widespread as the box cameras and that fewer of them would be likely to end up in the *Effektenlager* in Auschwitz, where the personal effects of the prisoners were collected. Thus, the possibility of finding a box camera was higher than that of finding a folding camera.

In the journal article *Photographs from the Auschwitz Hell*, Shneiderman stated that Erich Kulka – Auschwitz survivor, friend of Szmulewski's and author of the book *The Death Factory* – specifically told him that Szmulewski had taken the photographs with a Leica camera »with a telescopic lens«.[54] Alter Fajnzylberg,[55] a member of the Sonderkommando, also referred to the camera as a Leica model. Leica, as a company, never produced a camera that used a roll film with a negative format of 6x9 centimetres.[56] Telephoto lenses were rare at the time and didn't operate with cameras that used the negative format given in the gryps.

Knowing this about the camera types, I experimented with a few historical cameras myself in order to try to unearth the ›tacit knowledge‹ of how the Sonderkommando photographs might have been taken. In doing so, I faced some challenges:

Both camera types, the box camera (Fig. 2 & 3) as well as the folding camera (Fig. 4 & 5), have viewfinders that use mirrors, which means that the photographer has to hold the camera approximately in front of their stomach to be able to see the scene through the viewfinder. In addition, what they see through the viewfinder is mirror-inverted, making it even harder to aim. I knew that the actual picture-taking with these historical cameras was even more difficult in the past. Today's role films are much more sensitive than the role film available in the 1930s and 1940s. Yet those films were still fast enough to allow for handheld photography, eventhough due to relatively low shutter speeds, the photographer still needed to stand and hold the camera still. The Agfa Billy-Record 7.7 (Fig. 4 & 5), for example, was able to shoot at

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54 Shneiderman: »Photographs from the Auschwitz Hell« (footnote 13), p. 7.

55 He also uses the spelling »Feinsilber«.

56 During my research, a staff member of the Leica archive assured me, in an email, that Leica never produced a camera using a 120-roll film; see Email from personal archive of Ramona Bechauf, 04.05.2022, unpublished document.

1/25th, 1/50th and 1/100th of a second. Box cameras of the time (Fig. 2 & 3) had a shutter speed ranging from 1/25th of a second to 1/40th of a second. I was advised by someone to hold my breath while aiming and pressing the release button in order to keep the camera still. With some models, like the Agfa Box 44 (the *Preisbox*), the shutter speed was even trickier for inexperienced photographers, since one can easily mistake the switch to change the shutter speed from short term to long term - meaning manual exposure. Using the latter, might lead to exposing the film longer than needed.[57]

To take another picture one must spool the film and check a little red window in the back of the camera for the next number to appear. The number indicates which photograph is being taken. If the number indicates 5, it's the fifth photograph in the roll. The photographer has to know that on a 120-roll film they can take eight pictures in the format of 6x9 centimetres. I also found that checking said number in the red window is even more complicated in very bright or very dark surroundings.

Fig. 2 & 3: Agfa Box 44 Preisbox, measuring 11x9x14 cm (Photo: Ramona Bechauf).

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57 For an impression of how the box camera (Fig. 2 & 3) works and the film is loaded, see https://www.youtube.com/shorts/XNDEVzuBm4k [accessed on 22.05.2023]. As a reference on how the folding camera (Fig. 4 & 5) was meant to work, see the advertisement from the 1930s: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6AoKb8Jc2M [accessed on 22.05.2023].

Fig. 4 & 5: Agfa Billy-Record 7,7, measuring 8x16x13 cm (Photo: Ramona Bechauf).

Handling both cameras myself, I found that it is also impossible to conceal the camera and operate it at the same time. Even if someone was able to operate it with just one hand – which I tried but didn't achieve – I argue that it is not possible to conceal it at the same time.

Furthermore, given the size of the camera, along with the difficulties and the amount of time it takes to aim at a subject and especially to spool the film and check the tiny red window in order to take a second picture it is highly unlikely, if not impossible, that the picture-taking could have been achieved single-handedly. The series itself, with the two sets of two photographs that follow each other, suggests that the pictures were taken right after another.[58]

What soon becomes obvious is that it would have been extremely difficult for the lenses of either camera type to have been poked through an enlarged button hold. Given the size of the cameras, it would have been equally challenging to conceal them underneath a jacket while photographing.

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58 Scholars agree that the photographs were taken in a short period of time; see for example Didi-Huberman: *Bilder trotz allem* (footnote 38), p. 27ff.

Conclusion

In view of the abovementioned complications associated with using historical cameras, it is likely that hiding a camera from the SS men – both on the ground as well as in the watch towers – would have been difficult for a single person. Having used the historical cameras myself, I find that Alter Fajnzylberg's statement seems more plausible: As a surviving member of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando, he claimed that the process of the picture-taking was in fact a collective venture, and therefore a group effort. In an interview, he told the staff of the Auschwitz Museum that a Greek Jew named Alex pushed the release button, but that an entire group of Sonderkommando members actually helped so that Alex was able to take the pictures. He also stated that the group chose Alex to be the photographer because he was the only one of them who knew how to operate a camera.[59]

This praxeological approach helps to substantiate my hypothesis that the Szmulewski narrative is most likely false. Handling the historical cameras reveals that the act of picture-taking was likely a collective effort. Therefore, the narrative surrounding Dawid Szmulewski appears puzzling. While Judge Jan Sehn was not interested in the photographer of the images he used as evidence, the German judiciary was very interested in the question of their authorship. I would argue that in 1940s Poland there was no need to prove the Nazi crimes committed in the German extermination camps in that country. However, the German trials of the mid-1960s relied on witness testimonies regarding the authenticity of the photographs due to the fact that the Holocaust was historically, figuratively and geographically separated from this trial. Szmulewski, as stated above, knew enough about the circumstances of the photographs so that his story – that is, the narrative that revolved around him taking the photographs – was credible at a time when only the cropped versions were known. His role as a political figure, as the head of security for the Polish prime minister, who happened to be the former leader of one of the resistance movements that had smuggled the photographs out of the camp, made him a credible witness.

As I show here, the Sonderkommando photographs contain imbedded knowledge, first in their different versions and second in the practice of picture-taking itself. Through a praxeological approach that involved find-

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59 See APMO, 168048/2617 Tom 114, Alter Fajnzylberg: Oświeadczenia, pp. 56–59.

ing the historical cameras and then operating them myself, I was able to reveal ›tacit knowledge‹ about the circumstances of the photographs. I believe that this method allows us to shift towards a multi-perspective narrative on agency and collaboration between different resistance groups within the Auschwitz concentration camp. Consequently, I suggest employing the praxeological approach demonstrated above when dealing with historical photographs, at least whenever possible.