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A Filmmaker in the Holocaust Archives: Photography and Narrative in Peter Thompson's UNIVERSAL HOTEL

Archival photographs occupy a special place in films about the Holocaust, whether they serve to provide graphic evidence and illustration of Jewish suffering and Nazi atrocity in innumerable documentaries or the look of the past in fiction films' dramatic re-creations of ghettos and camps. In both cases the referential power of photography, or its distillation in a muted or black-and-white aesthetic, serves to authenticate not only what viewers see on screen but the accompanying stories these films tell. Like captions, these stories tell viewers what the authenticating images show by emplotting them in film narratives, whether these narratives are conveyed by the voiceover in a documentary or the unfolding action in a docudrama.

In *On Photography* Susan Sontag notes the difficulty of fixing narratives to photographs, or embedding photographs in narratives, in any lasting way: "A photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading (or matching to other photographs)" (71). The narrative most commonly affixed to photographs is the caption, which greatly shapes how an image will be construed—at least for a time. "Captions do tend to override the evidence of our eyes; but no caption can permanently restrict or secure a picture's meaning," writes Sontag. "The caption is the missing voice, and it is expected to speak for truth. But even an entirely accurate caption is

only one interpretation, necessarily a limiting one, of the photograph to which it is attached. And the caption-glove slips on and off so easily" (108-9). The notable exception, for Sontag, are films in which photographs are "transcribed" and "the order and the exact time for looking at each photograph are imposed" on the viewer (5). In such films the relation between caption and image may be recursive: the narrative accounts for the photograph's meaning and the photograph furnishes evidence supporting the narrative.

This is the case not only when a Holocaust film's moving images reproduce or simulate Nazi-era photographs, but also when these photographs appear in films as what they are: still images printed on paper that age, becoming worn and discolored, and may, in time, be misplaced and rediscovered. Consider, for example, the film *Music Box* (1989) in which Ann, a lawyer played by Jessica Lange, defends her aged father against accusations that during the war he brutalized and murdered Jews as the commander of a death squad in Hungary. In the film's climactic scene Ann, after having assured herself of her father's innocence, chances upon a series of wartime photographs hidden in an antique music box that show her father in uniform, posing among soldiers and Jewish victims. One image shows him pulling at the slip worn by a young woman whose hand is raised to hide her face from the camera. Viewers may be reminded of an earlier courtroom scene in which an older woman testifies to having been raped repeatedly by the commander and his soldiers when she was sixteen. She recalls being photographed by her tormentors.

The creased and yellowed pictures dispensed by the music box coincide with and verify the narratives of the surviving victims who have testified against Ann's father in court, forcing upon her the undeniable truth of her father's horrific crimes. Of course, these photographs, like the Holocaust survivors portrayed by actors, are only simulations; yet, I would argue, they so

evoke the evidentiary truth of photographs that they somehow feel truer, more real than the Hollywood drama in which they appear. Like the iconic photograph of Jewish children, women, and men captured by German soldiers in the Warsaw ghetto that Liv Ullmann's character anxiously peers at in Bergman's *Persona* (1966), they seem to have entered the film by way of the archive.

The photographic referent, in the words of Roland Barthes, is "not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph" (76). It is precisely this presumption, that the photograph confirms the past reality of whatever thing or event it shows, that accounts for its authority. James E. Young notes that archival photographs have been included in Holocaust survivor memoirs "to authenticate and to increase the[ir] authority" (60). While he acknowledges the authority granted to the survivor as "one who was there, who is empirically—not imaginatively—linked" to the Holocaust (56), a survivor's *narrative* has a more tenuous connection to the past it recounts. Young writes that "the photograph persuades the viewer of its testimonial and factual authority in ways that are unavailable to narrative" since, "as a seeming trace or fragment of its referent that appeals to the eye for its proof, the photograph is able to invoke the authority of its empirical link to events" (57).

Neither survivor memoirs nor filmed and videotaped survivor testimonies enable viewers to see (rather than imagine) the past experiences and events being recounted. Claude Lanzmann's documentary film *Shoah* (1985), which eschews the use of archival photographs, employs three means to make the surviving witness's "empirical link to events" more visible to the eye: it elicits from survivors tearful expressions that appear as traces of those traumatizing events; it returns the witness to site of those events; or it uses footage filmed at those sites to illustrate the

witness's voiceover narration. More commonly, documentary films augment the "testimonial and factual authority" of witness narratives by supplementing talking head shots with archival images that may or may not relate directly to the events being recounted. Fiction films appeal to the eye in a way documentarians have largely eschewed: they visually re-create past events.[1] The success with which the black-and-white cinematography of *Schindler's List* (1993) mimicked the authority of the photograph led some critics to claim the film "makes a false claim to authenticity" (Horowitz 122), and Lanzmann to accuse director Steven Spielberg of "fabricating archives" (14). One can take these points while noting that fabrication occurs as well when material from actual archives is used to craft narratives.

Fabricating in the sense of constructing a story (not concocting a lie) is necessary when dealing with photographs because these images do not explain themselves. "Whether or not a photograph is captioned, instinctively we want to *see* more," writes Janina Struk in *Photographing the Holocaust*. "The captured moment intrigues us and disappoints us. What happened before or after the photograph was taken? We cannot know" (212). On this point Sontag writes, "Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy. … Strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph. … Only that which narrates can make us understand" (23). This point is both illustrated and obscured by the film *Music Box*, for although the photographs Ann discovers seem to reveal the true identity and history of the father, it is actually the narrative testimonies of the survivors that do so by explaining what it is the photographs show. Had Ann not already heard their narratives, her discovery of the photographs would have invited much deduction, speculation, and fantasy, to be sure, but would not have marked a moment of anguished understanding. Still, given the photographs' dramatic function in the film, the film's

viewers are unlikely to reflect on how the photographs do not explain the past so much as enable them, like Ann, to choose between the prosecution's and defense's competing narratives. Viewers are thus left to imagine that narrative truth adheres in the photographic image.

This essay examines a film in which the relation between photography and narrative truth is considerably more vexed: *Universal Hotel* (1986) by independent Chicago filmmaker Peter Thompson. Lying outside regular channels of film distribution and familiar film genres, *Universal Hotel* is little-known and does not appear in scholarly works on films about the Holocaust (e.g., Insdorf, Kerner). This essay seeks to remedy this situation by examining *Universal Hotel* as a film that takes the employment and emplotment of archival photographs as its very subject. Just over twenty-minutes in length, this work is an exceptional example of what Phillip Lopate has called *the essay-film*. Films belonging to this "cinematic genre that barely exists," writes Lopate, are distinguished not by their treatment of images but by their "words, in the form of a text whether spoken, subtitled, or intertitled"—words that represent a single voice, express a "strong, personal point of view," and attempt "to work out some reasoned line of discourse on a problem" (244-46). The problem Thompson's voiceover narration probes is the difficulty of bearing witness to the Holocaust through photographs.

Universal Hotel presents not the product but the *process* of using photographs to construct a narrative about this past. Over the course of the film Thompson performs seven narratives through the onscreen presentation of one or more photographs, each narrative iteration an attempt to realize more fully both the past recorded by the photographer and the story the filmmaker wishes to tell about it. This process begins with a single photograph that leads the filmmaker to visit several archives and to speculate and fantasize in ways that raise a number of questions. What can we know of the Holocaust through archival photographs and their

incorporation in narrative film? How do narratives adhere or fail to adhere to such images? How might the desire for certain narratives determine what is seen? How is the desire to witness the suffering of others to be evaluated? In raising such questions, *Universal Hotel* encourages those seeking knowledge of the past through photographic images to view them and their own efforts with a critical eye—an eye that, turned back on Thompson's film, may see presumptions and investments that appear to lie in the filmmaker's own blind spots.

The originary photograph: The first and second narrative iterations

Universal Hotel begins with Thompson telephoning European archives in search of photographs of and information on the cold water freezing experiments conducted on concentration camp prisoners by Doctor Sigmund Rascher in 1942. He makes inquiries in Italian and French before telling a Herr Neustadt, in English, "I need information on testpersons who were revived by the women from Ravensbrück." Next he tells a Frau Distel that he will be going to archives in Brussels, Amsterdam, Paris, and Koblenz before travelling to Dachua. When Thompson's voiceover narration begins in earnest, addressing the viewer, we are given the backstory, an account of why the filmmaker visits these archives, why he searches for this information, these photographs. "1980. I open a book and see this photograph," he says, this backstory also serving as a caption for the still photograph that appears on screen against a black background (fig. 1).

Fig. 1

With the moving image given over to the still photograph, Thompson says:

> It was taken in Germany in 1942. It records the freezing of a prisoner at Dachau. The prisoner is identified as "Testperson." The doctors sitting to either side are identified as Erich Holzlöhner and Sigmund Rascher. The purpose of the experiment is to find the best method to rewarm German pilots after they crash into arctic seas. The doctors have already tested rewarming methods ranging from boiling water to short waves. The doctors now test women as rewarming agents. They call this method "rewarming with animal heat." The book states that in one case during the rewarmings, a woman revived a testperson and the two had intercourse at the test site.[2]

What Thompson sees and reads in the book he opens in 1980 will lead him to acquire more photographs of the Dachau freezing experiments.

Here as throughout the film Thompson's voiceover makes for what film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum calls a "flat, uninflected delivery." Differing with critic Fed Camper's view that Thompson's narration is "so mechanical that it implies no degree of emoting could capture SS-

perpetrated horrors," Rosenbaum proposes that Thompson is "suppressing overt emotion to make room for other kinds of emotional expressiveness, such as rhythm and the meaning of words." (38). A less generous interpretation might relate the film's voiceover to Sontag's claim that "what seeing through photographs really invites is an acquisitive relation to the world that nourishes aesthetic awareness and promotes emotional detachment" (111). But I would note that Thompson's narration leaves viewers to generate their own responses, unaided by the moralizing voiceover present in many documentaries or the dramatic musical score at work in both documentaries and fiction films. Indeed, rather than condemn the distancing and dehumanizing language used by the doctors to carry out and document their experiments on human victims, Thompson adopts their pseudo-scientific terminology, referring to "the Testperson" and "rewarmings" throughout the film—one might say to ironic effect, though this will depend on the response of viewers.

Thompson suggests that his film originates in the moment he opened a book and saw the photograph of the Nazi doctors and their test subject. But if the subject of his archival research is any indication, it is not this originary photograph that inspired him so much as the written narrative accompanying it in the book—specifically, that part of the narrative relating to an event not shown in the photograph. Thompson retells it as follows: "The book states that in one case during the rewarmings, a woman revived a testperson and the two had intercourse at the test site." *Universal Hotel* may be understood as the product of Thompson's effort to see what the image of Rascher and Holzlöhner looking over the prisoner-test subject does not allow him to witness: namely, the "one case" in which sexual intercourse occurred between prisoners forced to participate in the experiments.

In stating that the doctors "have *already* tested rewarming methods ranging from boiling water to short waves" and "*now* test women as rewarming agents," Thompson locates the photographed moment or photographic referent at a point in time when the doctors are using women to raise the body temperatures of test subjects suffering from hypothermia (as opposed to prior moments when other methods were tested). Whereas the act of taking the photograph is described in past tense ("It was taken in Germany in 1942"), the doctors' actions are rendered in present perfect and simple present tense—the "now" in which women are used to rewarm the testperson and during which the photograph is/was taken. The photograph in the book, however, "records the freezing of a prisoner" and not the testing of women as rewarming agents, much less the reviving of a prisoner by a woman who then has intercourse with him. Wanting photographs that attest to this "one case," Thompson travels to archives in search of "information on testpersons who were revived by the women from Ravensbrück."

What he finds, instead, in archives in Brussels, Amsterdam, and Paris, are four more photographs of the test subject—that is, assuming, as Thompson does, that the prisoner in these images is the same prisoner photographed with Holzlöhner and Rascher. (There is a resemblance, but given the difficulty of making out the Testperson's face in that photograph, one cannot be sure.) None of the images indicate which rewarming method was being tested at the time it was taken. Taken together, says Thompson, the photographs "form this sequence: The Testperson stands before the test site. He enters the water. He floats. He floats under the surveillance of doctors." In this new iteration, the original photograph is preceded by the four newly discovered images, and no mention is made of women being used as rewarming agents. The account of what transpired at Dachau is narrated in the perpetual present tense of the still image, as is the account of the filmmaker's archival research ("1981. I find four photographs of the Testperson.").

The film reflects the temporality not of history but of fantasy and textuality. In reality, Thompson found four photographs in the European archives he visited over three decades ago, while in the film his textual stand-in (present only in voiceover) finds them presently. So, too, events set at Dachau in 1942 recur each time the film's viewer joins Thompson in re-creating them through narrated sequences of photographs.

Looking closely: The third and fourth narrative iterations

After stating that in 1982 he finds several more photographs of the Testperson in the archive at Dachau, Thompson performs a third narrative iteration of what the sequence of photographs, now numbering twelve, show: "The Testperson changes into a flight uniform. He stands before the test site. He enters the water. He floats. He floats under the surveillance of doctors." This is followed by an account of two errors Thompson discovers he has made:

> Then I learn something new from an archive in Chicago: that Doctor Holzlöhner left the rewarming experiments four months before the rewarmings with animal heat began. His presence in this photograph means that it was taken at an earlier time and should not be grouped with the other eleven.
>
> Then I see something I've overlooked: The Testperson is already wet. So here he's not entering the water, he has left it. And having left it, he stands. Nowhere have I read that a testperson ever left the water fully conscious. So I begin again, and look closely.

The photograph that Thompson saw in a book in 1980, and which his film locates at its origin, is now set apart from the other archival images. The sole or concluding image in the first three narrative iterations, it no longer appears in the film once Thompson finds that it does not belong to the "now" in which women are tested as "rewarming agents."

Given Thompson's attentiveness to noting and correcting errors, viewers may not observe problematic aspects of his narrative that the filmmaker himself appears to overlook, sharing those presumptions that shape what is seen and not seen in the photographs. Most notably, nothing indicates that *any* of the twelve photographs were taken at the time "rewarming with animal heat" was being tested, rather than during an earlier or later period, just as nothing indicates that the prisoner shown in these images is the Testperson who had intercourse with the woman who revived him. In fact, postwar testimony indicating that 360 to 400 experiments were conducted on 280 to 300 victims at Dachau makes this statistically unlikely (Berger 1436).[3] Nor does the photograph of the prisoner standing in a wet flight suit (fig. 2) prove, as Thompson intimates, that he left the tank of ice water fully conscious after prolonged immersion, in a remarkable show of endurance. Indeed, that the photograph was staged to document the wet flight suit seems a more likely explanation.

Fig. 2

Thompson preferences his fourth narrative iteration of the photographs with the words "I begin again and look closely." What does looking closely involve? For one thing, it involves observing photographic details, as when Thompson notes, "The Testperson stands in a corner. One foot is bare. He wears a flight jacket, flight pants, and one flight boot." For another, it involves noting what is *not* shown in the photographs but culled from research, such as that the bins are thirteen feet square and six feet high, the ice water is five feet deep, and that wires used for monitoring body temperature extend from the Testperson to a "surveillance table." In addition to these photographic and historical details, Thompson adds fictional ones, stating that "Doctor Rascher and an orderly hold a ladder" as the Testperson climbs from the bins, after which "Doctor Rascher holds the wires at the Testperson's mouth and looks to the surveillance table." Lastly, looking closely involves telling the previously untold story of the Testperson who left the water fully conscious.

The fifth iteration of the photographic sequence suggests it is not enough to look closely at the photographs; one must peer beyond them, into the darkness that lies outside the image. Narrative strategies are introduced that seek to move beyond the photographs to render the time and place in which they are taken. This iteration introduces the figure of the photographer and, for the first time, makes the taking of photographs part of the narrative: "[The Testperson] faces the photographer. … He is ordered 'turn left.' Now he stands, his back to the photographer. … He is pushed into the water. … The photographer moves to the right to record the angle of the body floating on the surface of the water." In previous iterations the duration of each photograph is determined by its illustrative function, the transition of one to the next coordinated to the unfolding narrative, whereas in this recitation each photograph appears only for a second or two, separated from the next by a black screen designating spans of time that cannot be shown

because they were not photographed. With the addition of sound effects, including howling wind, the splash of water, footsteps, dog barking, a whistle, and, most notably, the camera's shutter mechanism, Thompson facilitates the illusion of immediacy in an effort to transcend the fixed past-ness of the still images and re-create the photographed event.

The second test: The sixth and seventh narrative iterations

The sixth iteration introduces a new character: a prisoner from the Ravensbrück women's concentration camp who is sent by train to serve in the experiments. The narrative transition used to introduce her turns on the theme of *chosenness*: the Testperson "was chosen by chance," whereas she "is chosen for a reason: her profession has been demonstrated"—she is a prostitute. Thompson times the woman prisoner's arrival at Dachau by stating that for seven months testpersons immersed in ice water have lost consciousness "between 53 and 100 minutes," but now "this prisoner stands at the end of his test."[4] Because this short spoken narrative does not correspond to what appears in the photographs, these images are now presented as a sequence of close-ups, one enlarged detail dissolving into another. At this point the photographs no longer determine the course of Thompson's narrative; it is informed, instead, by what Thompson read in the book featuring the photograph of Rascher and Holzlöhner with their test subject.

The stories of the two prisoners are joined in the seventh and final narrative iteration, and in this way: after remarking that the Testperson "can still climb a ladder" and stand before a doctor "after suffering from deep cold," Thompson states, "The test site and the prisoner's uniform are prepared for a second test. The surveillance table is again monitored." The invention of a *second* test immediately following the test recounted in previous narrations of the photographs allows the filmmaker to connect the incident in which a testperson was

photographed with the incident in which “a woman revived a testperson and the two had intercourse at the test site.” In retrospect, I see that Thompson was already preparing for this moment in his fifth narrative iteration, for there, after stating that the photographer moves to the right to record the prisoner floating in the water, he says, “The first test ends.”

In the second test, the Testperson does not climb out of the water and stand before the photographer or Doctor Rascher, but, like the other test subjects, loses consciousness within 53 to 100 minutes of entering the freezing water. The narrative continues: “Doctor Rascher leans over the bins. Now he gives the order. A rope is lowered from the ceiling and the Testperson is raised from the water. Doctor Rascher now sits at the surveillance table and lights a cigarette. The artist who sketched the end of the second test is identified in the Dachau archive by the last name of Tauber.” Having exhausted his supply of archival photographs in illustrating the first test, and having gone on to narrate events not suggested by those photographs, the filmmaker must find or make new images to accompany his spoken narrative. This he does. The images take the form of film footage of ice water and two drawings, the first depicting the prisoner in the water and the second showing him raised above it by a rope or cable (fig. 3).

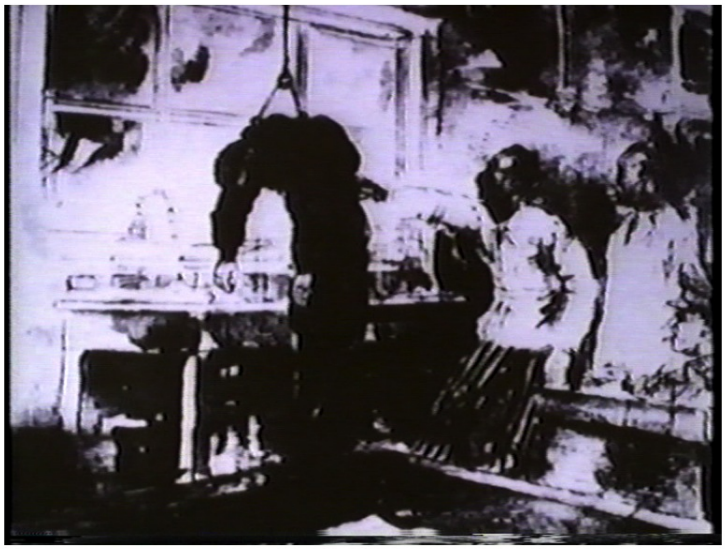

Fig. 3

As one drawing dissolves into the other, the narrator says "the Testperson is raised from the water" and splashing is heard. The confluence of sound and image create the illusion of an animated moment. In referring to "[t]he artist who sketched the end of the second test," Thompson locates the artist (as he has the photographer) at the test site on the remarkable day in which the Testperson left the water fully conscious, necessitating a second test which would also end remarkably. Narrating what he sees in the moment captured by the artist's second sketch, Thompson states, "Doctor Rascher now sits at the surveillance table and lights a cigarette." But is that Rascher in military uniform, or is he the figure in a white lab coat standing next to the prisoner-functionary who reaches for the unconscious test subject?

While lacking the authenticity and verisimilitude accorded photographs, the sketches depict moments more dramatic than those recorded in the posed photographs. Indeed, in their surfeit of detail, somewhat haphazard cropping of the image, and freezing of scenes mid-action, these handmade images appear "photographic" in a way those photographs do not. As if recognizing that their sudden, unexpected appearance might disrupt the narrative, Thompson interrupts the story to provide an explanation: the images are sketches made by someone named Tauber (a prisoner?); found in the Dachau archives, they have the status of documentary evidence. The moving images of ice water do not have this status. Created by the filmmaker, these beautiful lit, richly tonal black-and-white images mark the explicit intrusion of artistry (fig. 4). They also mark a docudrama-like move toward cinematic reenactment, but one undercut by the way in which the close-up, fixed-frame images of light playing on water appear more abstract than illustrative.

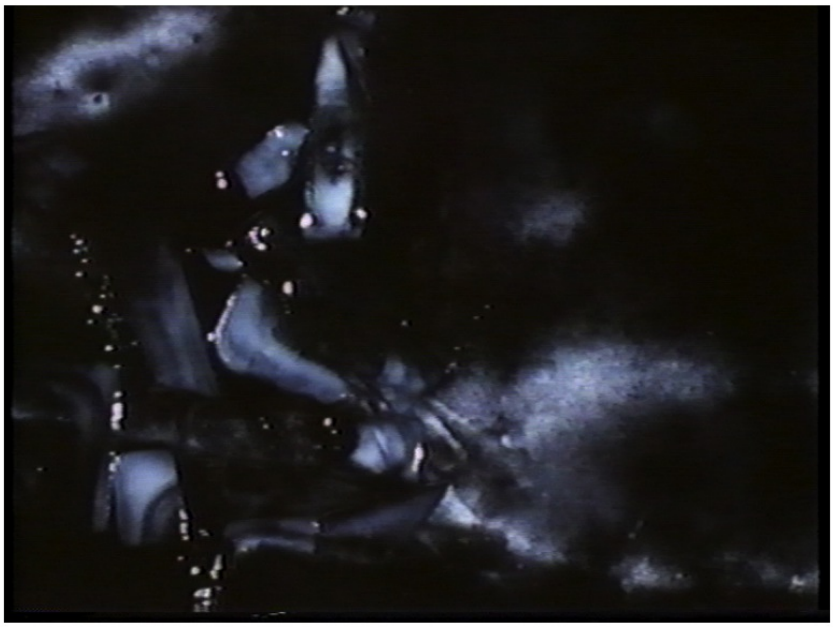

Fig. 4

Over darkly shimmering images of ice water the narrator says:

> The Testperson is retrieved from the bins unconscious, and the testpersons are placed together on a platform, under bright lights. She revives him. In the midst of the revival they make the gesture of intercourse.
>
> In the test report addressed to the Chief of the Secret State Police, Doctor Rascher will write that: animal heat plus intercourse is as effective a rewarming agent as boiling water. After the test, Doctor Rascher leaves Dachau and drives home to his family in Munich.

With this, the conclusion of his last and longest narrative iteration, Thompson joins the one case in which a prisoner-test subject left the water fully conscious with the one case in which a prisoner-test subject had intercourse with the woman who revived him after he lost consciousness in the water. In performing this narrative, Thompson uses archival photographs and other images to re-create, as it were, an event based no more—and perhaps less—in history than in speculation and fantasy.

The increasingly aesthetic use of photographs shown in extreme close-up, the incorporation of non-photographic and non-archival images, and the utilization of sound effects may be taken to acknowledge the limited ability of archival photographs to illustrate, authenticate, and bring immediacy to the narratives about the Holocaust filmmakers and film viewers want to tell, be told, and believe. Sontag contends that the original uses to which photographs are put are inevitably "modified, eventually supplanted by subsequent uses—most notably, by the discourse of art into which any photograph may be absorbed" (106). In its use and re-use of the Dachau photographs, *Universal Hotel* portrays the discourse of art as an intermeshing of history, memory, and imagination.

My dear Reich Leader: An alternative narrative iteration

A contrasting narrative about the testing of women as "rewarming agents" at Dachau can be constructed by turning from the photographs the filmmaker gathered from various archives to another archival source: the transcript of the Doctor's Trial held in Nuremberg, Germany, from December 1946 to August 1947.[5] This first volume of *Trials of War Criminals before the Nuernberg Military Tribunals under Control Council Law No. 10* contains briefs, documents, and testimony on the cold water freezing experiments, including reports and letters sent between Rascher and Heinrich Himmler, *Reichsführer* of the SS and chief overseer of the extermination of European Jewry.

"My dear Reich Leader," writes Rascher in a letter to Himmler dated September 10, 1942, "May I submit to you the first intermediary report about the freezing experiments?" (219). The enclosed report "on intense chilling experiments in the Dachau camp" details the tests: experimental subjects were placed in water varying from 2.5 to 12 ˚C, dressed in flight uniforms,

aviator's helmets, and life jackets, with electrical measurements of body temperature taken from the stomach and rectum. Finding that body temperature continued to drop rapidly after subjects were removed from the ice water, and that when it reached 28 ˚C "the experimental subjects died invariably," the experimenters concluded that rapid rewarming methods are preferable to slow ones. "I think for this reason," writes Rascher, "we can dispense with the attempt to save intensely chilled subjects by means of animal heat. Rewarming by animal warmth—animal bodies or women's bodies—would be too slow" (220).

At the Doctor's Trial, Hans Wolfgang Romberg, a physician from the German Experimental Institute of Aviation, would testify that at Dachau he heard Himmler tell Rascher "that a fisherwoman could well take her half-frozen husband into her bed and revive him in that manner. Everyone said that animal warmth had a different effect than artificial warmth" (qtd. in Mackowski 94).[6] Himmler's particular interest in this rewarming method is also indicated by the letter he sent Rascher in response to the report, in which he writes: "Despite everything, I would so arrange the experiments that all possibilities, prompt warming, medicine, body warming, will be executed …" (221).

In a letter to Rudolf Brandt, Himmler's personal aide, dated October 3, 1942, Rascher reports that "the experiments have been concluded, with the exception of those on warming with body heat," and that only today did he receive the Reich Leader's letter, which was delayed on account of "incomplete address." Clearly, Rascher had not planned on conducting additional cold water freezing experiments, but upon receiving the letter he acted at once, requesting "that four gypsy women be procured at once from another camp" (222). The summary of Rascher's findings on "warming with body heat" would not be written, however, until over four months later. Before that Himmler received a report dated October 10, 1942, and signed by Doctors

Holzlöhner, Rascher, and Finke. Expanding on the earlier intermediary report, it concludes: "The most effective therapeutic measure is rapid and intensive heat treatment, best applied by immersion in a hot bath" (242).

Other methods tested include warming by means of heat lamp, heated sleeping bag, vigorous body massage, wrapping in blankets, short wave therapy of the heart, oxygen therapy, cardiac drugs, and alcohol. After establishing that the best results were attained by placing "severely cooled" subjects "in a hot bath as soon as possible after the removal of the wet articles of clothing" (234), the doctors acknowledge that "in the practice of sea rescue service it will not be possible to carry out this method, since the necessary means are not available in aircraft and boats" (235), but do not identify best methods in the absence of a hot bath. Having tested both clothed and naked prisoners, they determine, not surprisingly, that "special protective clothing" appreciably extends "the survival time after immersion in cold water" (242).

"Dear Rascher!" writes Himmler in a letter dated October 24, 1942, "I have read your report regarding cooling experiments on humans with great interest." After proposing that heat packets, which contain a substance that emits heat when mixed with water, are "the best for the warming of those who were stranded at sea," he writes: "I am very curious as to the experiments with body warmth. I personally take it that these experiments will probably bring the best and lasting results. Naturally, I could be mistaken. Keep me informed on future findings" (244).

In his testimony at the Nuremberg Doctors' Trial , Rascher's former assistant, Walter Neff, states that Drs. Holzlöhner and Finke discontinued the experiments at the end of October 1942, "giving the reason that they had accomplished their purpose and that it was useless to carry out further experiments of that kind" (261). Holzlöhner and Finke must have thought that the experiments using women to rewarm test subjects were of no scientific value. Neff testifies that

when an unsupervised Rascher took over the experiments a number of prisoner-test subjects were left in the wooden basin of ice water until they died, including two naked Russian officers who were confined in the water together for "at least five hours until death occurred"; previously, prisoners died only after being removed from the water when rewarming efforts failed (261-62).

In a memorandum dated November 14, 1942, Rascher voices objection to one of the four prisoners sent to him from the brothel at Ravensbrück. He is troubled that she is not a gypsy but "shows unobjectionably Nordic racial characteristics: blond hair, blue eyes, corresponding head and body structure, 21¾ years of age." He recounts telling her that "it was a great shame to volunteer as a prostitute" and her reply that prisoners were told volunteers would be released from Ravensbrück in half a year, and that conditions in the brothel were preferable to those in the camp. The memorandum concludes: "It hurts my racial feelings to expose to racially inferior concentration camp elements a girl as a prostitute who has the appearance of a pure Nordic and who could perhaps by assignment of proper work be put on the right road. Therefore, I refused to use this girl for my experimental purposes ..." (245).

Rascher's summary report to Himmler on "the rewarming of intensely chilled human beings by animal warmth," marked "Secret," is dated February 12, 1943. It reads:

> The experimental subjects were removed from the water when their rectal temperature reached 30 ˚C. At this time the experimental subjects had all lost consciousness. In eight cases the experimental subjects were then placed between two naked women in a spacious bed. The women were supposed to nestle as closely as possible to the chilled person. Then all three persons were covered with blankets. …
>
> Once the subjects regained consciousness they did not lose it again, but very quickly grasped the situation and snuggled up to the naked female bodies. The rise of body

> temperature then occurred at about the same speed as in experimental subjects who had been rewarmed by packing in blankets. Exceptions were four experimental subjects who, at body temperatures between 30 ˚C and 32 ˚C, performed the act of sexual intercourse. In these experimental subjects the temperature rose very rapidly after sexual intercourse, which could be compared with the speedy rise in temperature in a hot bath. (250-51)

In another set of experiments, Rascher goes on to write, the unconscious subjects were rewarmed by a single woman, with better results: in all but one case which resulted in death, body temperature rose more quickly and subjects rapidly regaining consciousness. Rascher surmises that "in warming by one woman only, personal inhibitions are removed, and the woman nestles up to the chilled individual much more intimately."

Still, Rascher pronounces "rewarming with animal heat" too slow a method to prove practical—for really it is not nestling and snuggling but *sexual intercourse* that produces the necessary results. "Only such experimental subjects whose physical condition permitted sexual intercourse rewarmed themselves remarkably quickly and showed an equally strikingly rapid return to complete physical well-being," he reports, without indicating how many subjects "rewarmed themselves" in this way. He concludes that resuscitation by animal warmth can only be recommended when other methods are unavailable, or when the intensely chilled human beings are "specially tender," as in the case of "small children, who are best rewarmed by the body of their mothers" (251). In ending his report with this curious example so evocative of sexual taboo, Rascher gestures toward the social inhibitions that impede him from explicitly advocating sexual intercourse as a method for rewarming German pilots recovered from the North Sea.

The one case: Revisiting the seventh narrative iteration

Was sexual intercourse during the freezing experiments consensual or forced upon women prisoners, initiated by male or female prisoners or instigated by Rascher? How interested in sex could these men suffering from hypothermia and women enslaved as prostitutes have been? The narrative I have constructed from archival materials relating to the Nuremberg Doctors' Trial provides no more indication of what any prisoner-test subject was thinking and feeling than do the narratives in *Universal Hotel*. It does, however, draw attention to choices Thompson has made in telling of the "one case during the rewarmings" when "a woman revived a testperson and the two had intercourse at the test site." Most notably, it indicates—if Rascher's report is to be believed—that what appears in *Universal Hotel* as a *singular* episode occurred numerous times during the cold water experiments, to the point that Rascher could measure and compare the body temperatures of test subjects who did and did not engage in sexual intercourse. According to Rascher's report, of the eight subjects "placed between two naked women in a spacious bed," half engaged in sexual intercourse. His observation that the women who "warmed" unconscious test subjects individually, rather than in pairs, were less inhibited and nestled "much more intimately" suggests that the incidence of intercourse was even greater in this set of experiments. Rather than an exceptional occurrence, sexual intercourse between the male and female prisoners forced to participate in the "animal warmth" experiments appears in Rascher's report as a routine sign of a test subject's "return to complete physical well-being."

Just as Thompson's narrative combines the story of the Testperson who left the water fully conscious with that of the Testperson who had intercourse at the test site, so it combines various incidents of sexual intercourse between prisoners during the Dachua freezing experiments into "one case." Rather than addressing the peculiar *normalization* of sexual

intercourse in the freezing experiments, as indicated by the degree to which sex acts were anticipated, monitored, and measured, Thompson's narrative portrays the act of intercourse as a shocking anomaly, albeit one that Rascher contains in his report by writing that "animal heat plus intercourse is as effective a rewarming agent as boiling water." This is not quite what appears in the actual report, and not only because Thompson speaks of boiling water whereas Rascher writes of a hot bath.[7] And yet, these few words nicely encapsulate the *subtext* of that report—i.e., that copulation is a most effective rewarming method.

Thompson's narrative not only condenses Rascher's summary report on two sets of experiments into a few words, but also condenses the summary report into a "test report" on a single rewarming experiment. Likewise, it condenses the three prisoners sent to Dachau from the Ravensbrück brothel into a single woman, and the many prisoners immersed in the freezing water into the single Testperson. Thompson crafts his narrative in much the same way that writers of creative nonfiction might "condense time, make omissions, recreate … dialogue, and make composite characters" (Perl and Schwartz 164). Fiction film narratives are likewise crafted in this way; in *Schindler's List*, for example, two central figures, Itzhak Stern and Helen Hirsch, are composite characters, and scenes depicting the liquidation of the Krakow ghetto and the creation of the titular list radically condense events (Weissman 157, 159). More important still, the narrative iterations in *Universal Hotel* reflect the logic of the photograph, which depicts not representative or recurring moments but what was before the lens at a specific instant, a "captured moment." Just as the photograph presents the singularity of each recorded moment, so the stories Thompson uses them to tell presume the singular quality of the persons and events in those stories: there is but one Testperson, one woman from Ravensbrück, and one case of intercourse at the test site.

Why should the filmmaker be invested in telling this particular story? Why should the very method of rewarming that so preoccupied Himmler be of particular interest to Thompson and to viewers of his film? While the sexual content suggests a voyeuristic or prurient interest, Thompson's description of the sexual act ("In the midst of the revival they make the gesture of intercourse") is decidedly nongraphic, inexplicit, anticlimactic. The narrative climaxes, instead, by evoking the *banality of evil* famously ascribed by Hannah Arendt to Adolf Eichmann, both by citing the bureaucratic language of Rascher's report and by concluding on a note that locates Rascher in the banal world of the everyday: "After the test, Doctor Rascher leaves Dachau and drives home to his family in Munich." And yet, if witness testimony is any indication, Rascher was a sadistic killer and his home life was anything but banal. Indeed, he and his wife were arrested when it was discovered that Frau Rascher had faked her pregnancies and their three children had been purchased or abducted. Frau Rascher was forty-eight at the time of her first fake pregnancy and on her fourth when the ruse was exposed. For their crimes, Doctor and Frau Rascher would be imprisoned and executed (Berger 1439).[8]

The moment of sexual intercourse between prisoners at Dachau proves anticlimactic in the seventh narrative iteration not only due to the vague language with which the narrator gestures to it, but also because the act remains unseen: the filmmaker has found nothing in the archives to render it visible. Toward the end of *Universal Hotel* Thompson states: "Bunker Five, Dachau. The tests took place here forty years ago. The test site has no drama. Just a concrete foundation. Rocks. Grass. A wall. And the traffic between Dachau and Munich." The image accompanying these words shows the concrete foundation where the bunker once stood; shot from ground level, the image is nearly abstract, made legible only by the appearance of trees, traffic, and people crossing in the distance, across the top of the frame (fig. 5). Where there is nothing to see of the

past there is no drama.

Fig. 5

A strange dream: A fantasy metanarrative

The condensing of time, persons, and events in Thompson's narrative iterations reflects not only the logic of photography but also what Freud describes as the work of condensation in dreams. For instance, much as writers and filmmakers create composite characters, so dreams often include "collective figures" who merge "the actual features of two or more people into a single dream-image" (Freud 400). Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that Thompson's engagement with the Dachau photographs should result in an explicit dream narrative. Between his performances of the film's first and second narrative iterations, he tells the following story: "1980. I have a strange dream. Between a fortress and a cathedral is the Universal Hotel. From my hotel window I can see the cathedral's on fire. Outside the hotel, time moves quickly. Inside is the test site where time has stopped. The Testperson stands behind a closed door. We speak through it. I wake and write down what I remember of our conversation." The film returns to his dream after

the seventh and final narrative iteration. Presumably following the script of what he wrote down, Thompson performs both speaking roles, playing himself and the Testperson in his dream, while black-and-white moving images of ice water again appear onscreen.

The conversation begins with Thompson saying "Open it," to which the Testperson replies: "If you force it, I'll go behind another door, in another room." The Testperson is unwilling to be seen and declines to give his name. He claims that "talking about the water isn't possible," both for those like himself who were there and for those like Thompson who were not. Their conversation concludes:

Me: I'll be your witness.

Him: Don't dare talk to me about that. I had enough of that.

Me: I want to talk with you.

Him: You might be talking with yourself. I might already have walked away.

Me: Go ahead, walk. I might hear your footsteps.

The notion that *to listen to the witness is to become a witness*, and that to attain an adequately informed and ethical relation to the Holocaust one must become such a witness, is central to much discourse on the Holocaust (Weissman 30-31; Wieviorka 133-36). Now, when nearly 52,000 witness testimonies on the Holocaust have been collected in a digital archive for educational purposes, Thompson's dream conversation with the Testperson is all more notable in speaking to all that *cannot* be witnessed.[9]

As a ghostly figure, a victim who most likely perished in the Holocaust, the Testperson may be taken to represent what Primo Levi has called "the true witnesses," those who "have not returned or have returned mute," and whose testimonies—unlike those of the survivors who comprise an "anomalous minority," even when they number in the tens of thousands—we cannot

witness (*Drowned* 83-84). The Testperson's objection to "talking about the water" suggests that not all brutalized and humiliated victims of Nazi persecution might wish to have their traumatic experiences revisited, documented, and witnessed by others. I recall the photograph in *Music Box* of the woman hiding her face from the camera's view; even though a staged simulation, it serves as a reminder that the perpetrators authored a great many archival images of the victims, including those of the Testperson, and constituted their intended audience.

In Thompson's dream, the Testperson who floated under the surveillance of doctors and posed for the photographer now stands unseen behind a door. What is to be made of Thompson's unyielding determination to be his witness? The filmmaker's insistence and goading of the Testperson ("Go ahead, walk") suggests that the desire to be an eyewitness to another's traumatic history is ethically complicated, that bearing witness may be a selfish rather than selfless act. The Testperson's remark that he "might already have walked away," that Thompson might be talking with himself, is particularly interesting for being true on two levels: in both the dream and his recounting of it, Thompson *does* talk with himself, the Testperson being a figment of his imagination. Taken to its limit, the Testperson's remark suggests that in looking at archival photographs, video testimonies, or cinematic re-creations, we are witnesses not to past events but to our own shadows playing on the wall of Plato's cave.

Thompson's dream encounter with the Testperson resonates with a real-life encounter the filmmaker had with a Holocaust survivor in Guatemala in 1979, a year before he first saw a photograph of the Testperson and had a strange dream about him. Thompson tells of this encounter in his film *Universal Citizen* (1987), which may be viewed as a companion piece to *Universal Hotel*. The description he provides of this larger-than-life character, a smuggler who may also be a pimp, strongly evokes the Testperson: "He is a Jew born in Libya and schooled in

six countries. He was an inmate at Dachau. It was freezing there. There he dreamed of hot baths and swore he would live in the tropics if he survived. Now he floats in Guatemala every afternoon. And every evening he and a different woman drive into the jungle." The confluence of narrative details and the dream-condensation of time and space (the test site being inside the Universal Hotel, an actual hotel in Guatemala City) suggest a shared identify between this survivor and the Testperson. It is tempting to "rescue" the Testperson by imagining that he survived Dachau and is the survivor Thompson meets in Guatemala, that the prisoner who was immersed in ice water in Bunker Five now floats everyday in tropical waters.

But is it tempting to imagine that the Testperson who had sexual intercourse with a woman at the test site now drives into the jungle every evening with a different woman? Thompson names one of these woman: she is Raven, a prostitute who sees clients on the sunroof of the man's house. The doubling of the Dachau prisoner is completed by his pairing with a prostitute in both films; and in both films, I now see, sexual intercourse is taken to be a life-affirming, revitalizing act. The male victim of Nazism who asserts his survival through intercourse with women is an identifiable, if less noted, trope in Holocaust discourse; I think, for instance, of Noah, "the lover of all women" in Primo Levi's memoir *The Reawakening*. Following the liberation of Auschwitz, writes Levi, this former inmate "wandered around the [main camp's] feminine dormitories like an oriental prince, dressed in an arabesque many-coloured coat, full of patches and braid," in search of sex partners: "The deluge was over; in the black sky of Auschwitz, Noah saw a rainbow shine out, and the world was his, to repopulate" (31). In *Universal Hotel* the first test ends with the Testperson standing, the second with him copulating—both acts expressions of the victim's virility, his defiant lust for life. In *Universal Citizen* the survivor's relations with women similarly denotes his vitality.

The survivor in *Universal Citizen* is also like the Testperson in his refusal to bear witness and to be witnessed. Thompson imagines him not only giving his testimony, but doing so in a highly performative manner for the camera. "I'm staying at the Universal Hotel, and begin to think of him as a Universal Citizen," he says. "And then think of filming him on his sunroof, with him changing languages with each turn, and telling about his life in the country of the language he's speaking." The Universal Citizen refuses to take direction or tell his story on film. He agrees only to be filmed from afar when he is floating in an inner tube on the lake and "can't really be seen." The Testperson had no choice but to perform for the photographer and doctors at Dachau; but in the dream he, like the Universal Citizen, can refuse the filmmaker: "I had enough of that."

Universal Hotel ends with a curious coda: "1982. While walking to an archive in Amsterdam I hear pulsing sounds and follow them. By chance they come from a memorial to the women of Ravensbrück. Above the inscription is a defacement: Stradzinsky. That week, as I walked to other archives, I noticed Stradzinsky written on other walls." The accompanying film images show the memorial, followed by a close-up and zoom shots of the graffitied name. Next an older man is shown gesturing to the graffiti on a storefront where "Stradzinsky" is twice scrawled. Thompson says: "This man asked me what I was doing. 'Filming names,' I said. He said, 'I've painted this wall three times to take away the names. After each time the names come back. Look, even here. The names come back even here. They come at night when I'm asleep.'" The film then ends with a series of close-up, solarized images of the Testperson's face that morph, darken, and fade to black.

Stradzinsky is a metaphor, but for what? Recalling the Testperson of Thompson's dream, we might assume that "the names [that] come back" are those of the dead who compel us to remember the past, as Thompson is compelled to know the story of the Testperson. And yet, it is precisely the name of the Testperson that does not come back, will not be told, and remains unknown. The name "Stradzinsky," moreover, belongs not to the dead but to the living, and not to the victims of Nazi genocide but to one who would inscribe himself in their commemorative space. Meeting the gaze of the Testperson's spectral face at the film's conclusion, one may wonder whether it is the dead who haunt the living or, rather, the living who haunt the dead.

One name, two drawings, eleven photographs: A narrative deconstruction

In his discussion of the essay-film, Lopate writes that the essay will often follow "a helically descending path, working through preliminary supposition to reach a more difficult core of honesty" (244). If the series of narrative iterations in *Universal Hotel* set down such a path, the sequence near the end of the film showing Bunker Five, Dachau, forty years after the freezing experiments were conducted there marks the point at which this core is reached. Over the barren image of the concrete foundation, Thompson states:

> What I found in seven archives is one name, two drawings and eleven photographs. The name is the equivalent of a number, the two drawings could document the end of any test, and the eleven photographs emphasize a uniform: how it fastens and how it sags when wet. The making of uniforms was the duty of the Ministry of Textiles. The photographer made the photographs for their designers. I make statements about the photographs that cannot be proven. I speak with uncertainty.

Had the sequence of archival photographs appeared onscreen once more in conjunction with these words, we could speak of an eighth narrative iteration. What Thompson does instead is reflect back on the narrative he has constructed through those iterations, reducing it to its constituent parts and acknowledging imaginative leaps taken.

I am reminded of Sontag's remark that as the "missing voice" of the photograph, the caption is "expected to speak for truth," but will fail because "the caption-glove slips on and off so easily" and because whatever truth it speaks will always be partial and limiting (108-9). Thompson would provide the missing voice for the archival photographs he has found—indeed, he would *be* that missing voice; but having presented viewers with a sequence of narrative performances as if slipping on and off a series of caption-gloves, he concludes that he speaks not "for truth" but "with uncertainty." He may know through research for whom and why the photographs were taken, but not the lived reality that was "before the lens" when they were taken.

In *Music Box*, where photographs illustrate the precise events recounted by surviving witnesses, narratives and photographs about the Holocaust are mutually reinforcing: the narratives explain the photographs and the photographs authenticate the narratives. In *Universal Hotel*, by contrast, neither narratives nor photographs prove stable, as is generally the case outside works of fiction. In concluding that his statements made about the photographs cannot be proven, Thompson acknowledges the limits of his efforts to re-create a past event through still photographs and narrative film. *Universal Hotel* speaks to the limits of such efforts, which is not to say that its viewers do not learn something about the cold water freezing experiments conducted at Dachau, the treatment of prisoners as test subjects, and the mentality of Nazi doctors. What is learned, however, is grounded not in the evidentiary truth of photographic images, but in how powerfully these images invite narrative elaboration in lieu of providing

explanation. That photographs are far less capable of authenticating narratives than of generating them is the most important lesson to be learned from Thompson's short film about the Holocaust.

The same footage which opens *Universal Hotel* concludes *Universal Citizen*: a woman wearing a long skirt and carrying a bag is shown walking away from the camera, veering off to the right and out of the frame. In *Universal Hotel* Thompson is heard calling archives while this footage appears, whereas in *Universal Citizen* he provides the following account of it: "In 1981, after trying to film a man and a woman I couldn't find, Mary and I walked through a plaza in another country. I bet her that she couldn't walk to the white fountain with her eyes shut. 'Oh, that's simple,' she said. 'It's right in front of me.'" I recall the fifth narrative iteration of the Dachau photographs, in which the screen is black except at those fleeting moments when a photograph appears on screen, framed by the sounds of the camera's cocking and film advance mechanisms. We can look closely at archival photographs, but in seeking the past they record we step into the darkness that lies outside the image, like Mary walking with eyes closed toward a fountain she will not reach, like Peter Thompson talking to the Testperson who might already have walked away. *Universal Hotel* is a meditation on what we do in the dark as we seek, through photographic images and narrative means, to know a past that lies behind a closed door.

Endnotes

1. That said, the use of re-creations or reenactments dates back to the earliest documentary films and has become an increasingly common practice as documentaries have become a more popular form of entertainment. The documentary film series *Auschwitz: Inside the Nazi State* (2005), for instance, makes extensive use of dramatic re-creations. For a brief discussion of the ethics of reenactment in documentary film, see Aufderheide 22-25.

2. While Holzlöhner may be identified as "Erich" in the book of which Thompson speaks, the doctor who oversaw the Dachau experiments (and committed suicide in 1945) was Ernst Holzlöhner, a professor of physiology at the Medical School of Kiel University. He supervised Doctors Rascher and Erich Finke. "Erich Holzlöhner" conflates the names of the two doctors who worked with Rascher before they left him to conduct the "rewarming with animal heat" experiments on his own (Eckart and Vondra 158, 165).
3. These numbers are provided by Walter Neff and repeated by the Prosecution at the Nuremburg Doctors' Trial (*Trials* 200, 261). Neff was a prisoner at Dachau before being released on condition that he continue to serve as Doctor Rascher's assistant.
4. Thompson states in the film that "the tests have continued between since July. It is now January, 1942." He appears to misspeak (saying 1942 instead of 1943) since it has been determined, based on archival documents and witness testimony, that the cold water experiments were conducted from August 1942 to May 1943.
5. The Doctors' Trial (officially *United States of America v. Karl Brandt, et al.*) was the first of twelve war crime trials conducted by U. S. authorities in Nuremberg following the Trial of the Major War Criminals conducted by the Allied forces in 1945-46.
6. Romberg's recollection is not included in the published volume on the Doctor's Trial; Mackowski quotes from the unabridged version available on microfilm at the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland. Mackowski reports that much "material relating to the aviation-medicine researchers who were acquitted was removed in the editing process" of the published volume (261). Romberg was among those acquitted.

7. Here it is interesting to note the testimony, in English translation, of Anton Pacholegg, who as a prisoner served the doctors conducting experiments at Dachau as a clerk. At the Doctors' Trial he stated, "Another experiment conducted with these half-frozen, unconscious people was to take a man and throw him in boiling water of varying temperatures and take readings on his physical reactions from extreme cold to extreme heat. The victims came out looking like lobsters. Some lived but most of them died" ("Translation" 6). This use of boiling water does not suggest its effectiveness as a rewarming agent.
8. Berger cites as his source the testimony of Karl Wolff, former General of the Waffen-SS, who escaped prosecution at Nuremberg by testifying against other Nazis.
9. Steven Spielberg established the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation in 1994 to amass testimony from witnesses of the Holocaust. In 2006 its collection of nearly 52,000 video testimonies was given to the University of Southern California in Los Angeles and the foundation was renamed the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education ("About").

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