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Prison Area, Independence Valley

Rob Kroes

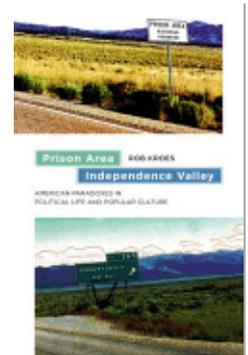
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AMERICAN RESPONSES TO THE HOLOCAUST:
ATROCITY PHOTOGRAPHS AS NOMADIC OBJECTS

THIS IS A tale of three photographs. Or more precisely, a tale of their afterlife as nomadic objects. What they have in common is that each relates to the Holocaust. The first photograph that we shall be looking at more closely below forms part of the body of photographs taken at the time that the Allied forces reached the Nazi concentration camps. They document the atrocity of what had taken place in those camps in faithful execution of Nazi policies of racial extermination. Photo journals like *Life* published many of the atrocity photographs, turning stunned audiences in the United States into secondary, or vicarious, witnesses of the inconceivable evil of Nazism. The other two were taken by the perpetrators or at least were commissioned by them. They belong to the genre of trophies to be shown as proof of the “good” work done for the Nazi cause.

The three photographs that will occupy us here have one further element in common. Diverse as their origins may be, as well as the history of their public exposure—the trajectory, in other words, of their photographic afterlife—they now share a common status as iconic images. They find general recognition; people remember having seen them before. But if they have become icons, the question arises: icons of what? If they have come to represent something more abstract and general, such as the Holocaust, or the Shoah, what, in their elevation to this status,

have they lost in terms of the specific historical moment that they illustrate and capture? A further pressing question presents itself: what happened on the way from moment of origin to ultimate emblem during an afterlife that can truly be seen as that of a nomadic object, available to anyone interested in using and re-using it, without coordination, counsel, or guidance? What rival narratives and readings attached themselves to the images? How do these compare in terms of their truthfulness? Whose truths do they speak of? And perhaps most important, how do differences in the reading of these and similar photographs relate to differences in the context and setting of reception? Does it make a difference when these photographs originating in Europe and documenting European atrocities circulate in settings half a world away, in an America that had been spared the dilemma of being on the side of Nazism or at the receiving end of its evil schemes?

Photo 1—George Rodger

This photograph was taken near concentration camp Bergen Belsen by British photojournalist George Rodger, on assignment for *Life* magazine, shortly after the camp had been liberated. He took the photograph on April 20, 1945, as one of a total of thirty-four taken at Bergen. It was first published in *Life* on May 7, 1945, the day Germany capitulated and World War II officially came to its end. The photograph introduced a cover story on “The German People.” It carried the caption that the photographer had given it: “A small boy strolls down a road lined with dead bodies near camp at Belsen.” On the page facing the photograph with the small boy the meaning of Bergen Belsen and another Nazi concentration camp, Buchenwald, gets more extensive visual treatment, with photographs of dying men and women, of starving people packed in triple-decker beds, and of emaciated bodies of prisoners. The image with the little boy—the only one given a full page by the editors—opened the photo essay with the title “Atrocities: Capture of the German Concentration



Young boy walks down dirt road, lined with the corpses of people who died at Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. *George Rodger, photographer. GettyImages.*

Camps Piles up Evidence of Barbarism that Reaches the Low Point of Human Degradation” (shortened in the table of contents to “German Atrocities”). Thus it came to form part of the harrowing photojournalism that surrounded the liberation of concentration camps more broadly, exposing the American public to a veritable flood of atrocity images. Yet *Life*’s photographic documentation was double-edged. Its cover story on “The German People” also showed German children, thus setting a context for divergent readings of the photograph of the little boy. Relatively well-dressed, not emaciated, averting his gaze—or so

it may have seemed¹—from the rows of dead bodies, could he be a German boy, a typical representative of the ordinary, average Germans, an uncaring witness to the gruesome results of a reign of terror? For indeed, such was the gist of much photojournalism at the time, in compilations by Margaret Bourke-White and Lee Miller, among others, making the point that “Germans Are Like This,” the title to Lee Miller’s June 1945 reportage for *Vogue*, conflating Nazis and Germans into one, larger anti-German picture. Rodger’s photograph could thus be seen as a specimen of the larger category of “images of witnessing,” a separate genre of atrocity representation. Witnessing itself was depicted from various angles and perspectives, with the press initially featuring photos of official delegations, of members of Congress, of American editors, of General Eisenhower and other officers examining corpses at a concentration camp site near Ohrdruf. German nationals were also frequently depicted, German perpetrators as well as civilians. These latter, too, were photographed in various encounters with the atrocities: reburying the bodies of Nazi victims, looking at cremation ovens, or being forced to gaze at stacks of corpses. In her analysis of this particular category of atrocity photographs Barbie Zelizer makes the point that most shots of German civilians seemed to pronounce a confusion, shock, or bewilderment that complicated the act of bearing witness, as when German children were portrayed in a refusal to bear witness. She goes on to say: “One shot showed a small boy looking straight at the camera and away from the bodies that took up the majority of photographic space, his glance communicating an act of witnessing that was in essence not-witnessing; in another photo a boy walked down a road lined with dead bodies in Belsen, his head too averted—again, a refusal to bear witness.”² She does not show the latter photograph, nor does she refer explicitly to its maker. Yet her description of it uncannily fits Rodger’s photograph, which occupies us here. Together with many other photographs of the camps, particularly of Germans as bewildered or unwilling witnesses, Rodger’s image could thus

be incorporated as a contribution to an indictment of Germans, illustrating the point made above of all Germans being cast as equally callous and indifferent. Photography could become a form of accusation, and one trajectory in the afterlife of Rodger's photograph was in continuing connection to this accusatory reading. The photograph became an icon and was republished many times. A widely discussed recent history of the postwar period, Tony Judt's *Postwar*, opens its first picture insert with Rodger's photograph, accompanied by the following heading:

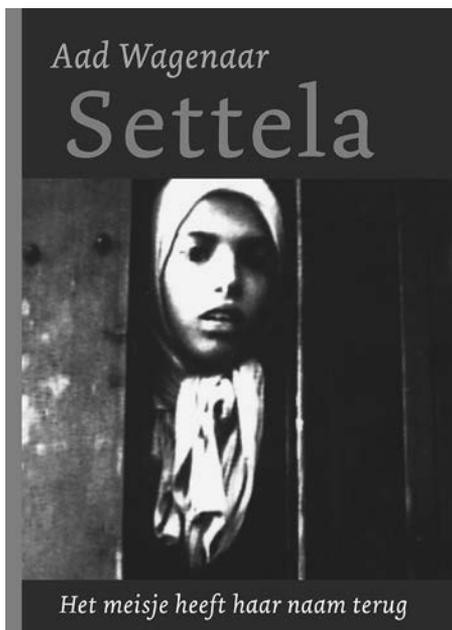
Shortly after Germany's defeat in 1945, a child walks past the corpses of hundreds of former inmates of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, laid out along a country road. Like most Germans in the post-war years, he averts his gaze.

This rather didactically guiding caption of the image appeared as late as 2005, a full sixty years after its taking. To this day similar captions accompany the photograph as it is accessible on various websites, including Getty Images (the heir to the copyright of *Life* magazine).

There is, however, a radically different way to read the photograph, which points to an afterlife going all the way back to its first publication in *Life*. As Werner Sollors tells the story, an uncle of the boy, who was living in New York, recognized his nephew in the photograph: Sieg Maandag, a Jewish boy from Amsterdam deported with his parents and younger sister via the Dutch transit camp of Westerbork to Bergen-Belsen. Yet it has taken years of research for this submerged afterlife of the picture to become public and restore the identity of the boy as a survivor, a victim of atrocity, not a typical representative of the Germans seen as bearing collective guilt or even as a nation of "willing executioners."³

Photo II

What we see here is a still from a film shot at Westerbork in 1944 by an inmate of the camp, a German Jewish cinematographer, at



Book cover,
documentary about
Settela. *By permission of
author Aad Wagenaar
and publisher Hans van
Maar, Just Publishers.*

the behest of the German camp commander, SS Obersturmführer Albert Konrad Gemmeker. The film was meant to document the impeccable way he ran the camp with a view, one assumes, to impressing his superiors. The film was intended as a proud trophy in testimony to the good work he had done for the cause of National Socialism. Yet—and this may have been a brief moment of rebellion on the part of the film maker—alongside views of well-organized camp life, there is a seven-second glimpse of a girl looking out from a boxcar before the sliding door shuts her in on the way to extermination. Thus a haunting image was produced that came to represent the fate of so many deportees from the Netherlands, most of them Jews. In its afterlife it was used time and again, traveling across the world in documentary films about National Socialism and its concentration camps, films like French director Alain Resnais's *Nuit et Brouillard* (Night and Fog), premiered at the Cannes film festival in 1956.

In his 1965 classic study of the extermination of the Dutch

Jewish population, Dutch historian Jacob Presser, a Jew himself, refers to the film and to this fragment in particular. He wonders how it could have escaped SS commander Gemmeker that he had produced a powerful indictment of his doings. In fact, during his trial after the war the film fragment would be used against him. Presser goes on to say: "Whoever has seen the little girl, the helpless Jewish child, in terror before the doors slide shut, casting a last glance from the cattle car that is to take her toward an unknown destiny, will ask him- or herself the same question."

This reading of the photograph as an image of a young Jewish deportee has persisted to the present day. For example, in a program on Dutch television reconstructing the family history of Dutch Jewish novelist Leon de Winter (aired on February 20, 2011), the story of his parents' deportation from Westerbork is illustrated by this seven-second visual fragment, as a ready shorthand reference to the larger drama of Jewish deportation. Yet ever since the mid-1990s the true identity of the girl had been established through the tenacious research done by Dutch journalist Aad Wagenaar. In spite of many dead ends, unrelenting in his mission to establish the identity of the girl that he too, initially, had assumed to be Jewish, led him to the conclusion that here we had not a Jewish girl, but a Gypsy (or Roma) girl, representing a group in Dutch society that was as relentlessly persecuted as the Jews. As the subtitle to his book has it: "The girl has her name back," Settela. In fact, more than a name, a group identity. Thus, in the construction of the memory of the Holocaust, the Dutch Jews might have lost one icon, the forgotten group of Roma had gained one. It instilled among the larger public an awareness that not all trains leaving from Westerbork were deporting Jews toward their final destination, but that in fact one train might have been hiding another, as the sign at French railroad crossings keeps reminding us.

This larger view of what cargoes trains were carrying as they trundled through Nazi-occupied Europe forms a larger haunt-



One train hiding another. *Photograph by the author.*

ing memory image that for instance inspired American composer Steve Reich’s masterpiece *Different Trains*. This composition stems from Reich’s adult reflection that had he been a child in Europe in the 1940s, his fate might have been different: “As a Jew, I would have had to ride on very different trains.”⁴ Wagenaar’s memory work was taken up by renowned Dutch documentary film maker Cherry Duyns, and given wider circulation via television.⁵ Yet, as in the case of George Rodger’s photograph, conflicting readings continue to exist side by side.

Photo III

Compared with the analysis of the two preceding photographs, our discussion of the third photograph will be more extensive. The image of “A child at gunpoint,” as the photograph is often



Photo from the Stroop Report, *The Warsaw Ghetto Is No More*.

referred to, is another iconic emblem of the Holocaust. Like Settela, the Gypsy girl, this boy's photographic image originated in the Nazi urge to document their doings; it had been a trophy photograph before it became an iconic image of Nazi evil. Like Settela's picture it set out on its worldwide circulation as a symbol of Nazi atrocity through Resnais's 1956 film. And like so many other nomadic photographs this photograph was taken out of context, losing its historical specificity. In fact the boy himself, in this recycling of his image, lost his identity. Again, it was for meticulous historical research decades later to reconstruct the precise historical moment captured in this photograph. As the research has shown, the afterlife of this particular photograph is particularly rich in resonance, accruing layer upon layer of meaning and significance at the various stations of its afterlife, an afterlife that more clearly than in the case of our previous two photographs proceeded on both sides of the Atlantic, moving back and forth and never out of public sight or reference for long.

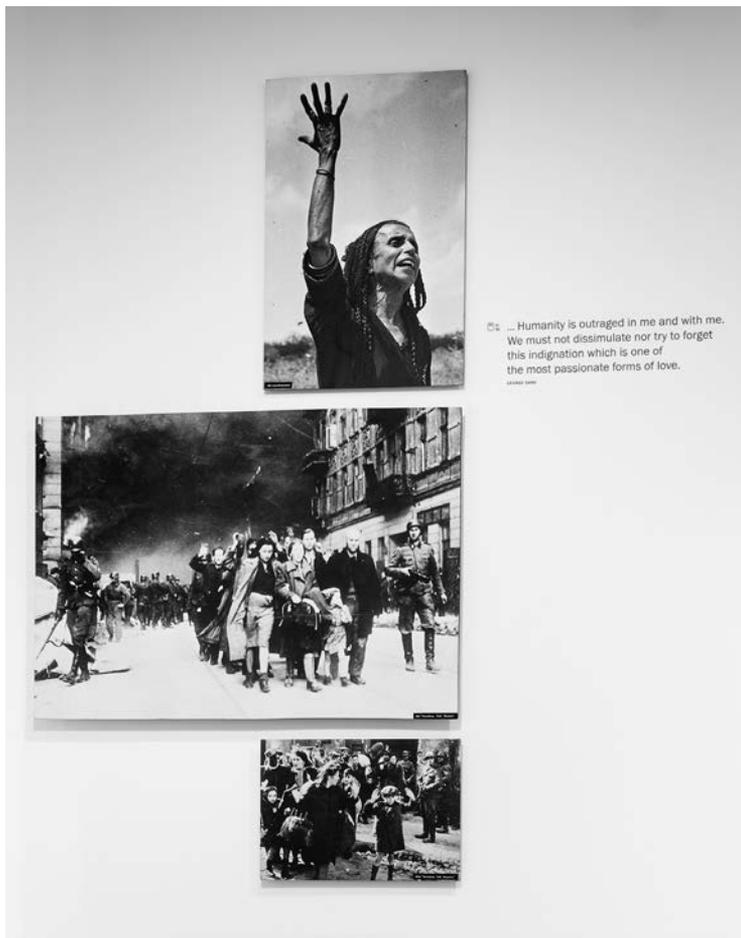
In terms of its historical origin, what we have here is another instance of the use of photography to produce trophies to be sent to Nazi superiors as proof of work done to perfection. The photograph we see here was one of a series shot at the time of the final destruction of the Warsaw ghetto in the face of an uprising of the remaining Jewish population. The photographs formed part of a report prepared by the man in charge of the operation, SS General Jürgen Stroop. His leather-bound report bore the proud title: “Es gibt kein Jüdisches Wohnbezirk mehr in Warschau” (There Is No More Jewish Quarter in Warsaw). One copy, captured by American troops, was used at the Nurnberg trial as evidence of Nazi crimes. It was not until much later that the photograph of “The Child at Gunpoint,” as it came to be titled, began its afterlife in various croppings, as an icon of Jewish resistance and heroism first, as an emblem of victimhood inflicted on innocent children later. The face of the child in the picture, with its bewildered expression, his hands raised, eventually found its recurrent use as a mnemonic device to call forth the larger image of the Holocaust in general.

Two historians in particular have taken it upon themselves to trace the afterlife of the photo and connect it back to the moment when it originated: Richard Raskin, in his book *A Child at Gunpoint: A Case Study in the Life of a Photo*, and Frédéric Rousseau, in his *L'enfant juif de Varsovie: Histoire d'une photographie*. The latter in particular has carefully reconstructed the Warsaw ghetto setting and the set of photographs included in the Stroop report. Both books offer a rich survey of what can happen to a photograph once it is put in the service of the larger mission of visualizing the Holocaust, of literally giving a face to it.⁶

Yet neither of them mentions a moment in the mass circulation and recycling of this particular image in the United States. Well before the large-scale recontextualization of the image took off in the 1960s and 1970s, the image had already been recombined with two others, one from the Stroop archive, the other taken in Israel in 1951, jointly displayed on a separate panel in

the section on “Man’s Inhumanity to Man,” for the famous 1955 exhibition of *The Family of Man*. Produced by Edward Steichen for the Museum of Modern Art in New York, then bought by USIA and sent touring the world as part of its Cold War cultural diplomacy efforts, the show was seen by millions. However, given the central message of the show, that all of mankind was one in the face of a new Holocaust, a nuclear one this time, the reference to the recent history of atrocity in Europe was missed by most viewers and reviewers, as later research has been able to confirm.⁷

Only much later, in the mid-1990s, long after the show had stopped touring, was it given a second lease of life. It was restored, reassembled, and put on permanent display in Luxembourg, birthplace of Edward Steichen. The occasion made for a revisit of the show’s inherent meanings and possible readings and a repositioning of its place as a crucial public event in a world that had emerged from World War II only to enter the apocalyptic stage of the Cold War. New critical writing served to put the show in this new historical perspective.⁸ Furthermore, at the official opening of the show in its new home, a symposium brought together an international group of historians with a view to a critical revisit of the *Family of Man* in historical perspective. Until that moment, all that had been available to the larger public to remind them of the show had been its catalog, which remarkably has never been out of print since the mid-1950s. Yet as an archive to sustain people’s memories of the show the catalog poses major difficulties. For one thing, there are important differences between the arrangement of photographs in the catalog and their order of display in the show. Crucially, for instance, the only full-color transparency—of a nuclear mushroom forming—was not in the catalog, although it was the show’s single-image carrier of its message of nuclear annihilation threatening all of mankind. As for the show’s reference to the Nazi holocaust, the catalog contains some Warsaw ghetto images but does not reproduce the compelling order in which Steichen had put them



Family of Man Exhibition, Installation Shot, Clervaux, Luxembourg.
 By permission of Centre National de l'Audiovisuel, Clervaux. © CAN/
 Romain, 2013.

together on one of the show's separate panels. The photograph of the boy with his hands raised is not in the catalog, nor did the photograph of the Israeli woman have the same position as on the panel in the show.

That may have been why the renewed confrontation with the

order of the photographs as originally intended by Steichen, and made possible by the show's reconstitution in Luxembourg, may have come as a shock. Rather than as a mere cultural relic, or a posthumous tribute to Steichen as its *auctor intellectualis*, eliciting nostalgia for its remembered meanings, the show proved it could go on and stimulate new readings. A notable collection of essays resulting from the Luxembourg symposium revisits the show in an acknowledgment of its continuing power to speak to current concerns and anxieties.⁹ In one essay, Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff engages the exhibit in terms not of its Cold War relevance but of what it has to say about the European trauma of the Holocaust, or the Shoah as she prefers to call it. When she reencountered the exhibit at Clervaux, Luxembourg, one picture with which she was familiar because of her earlier work on photography by the Nazi henchmen "took her breath away."¹⁰

Two photographs from the Strop report on the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto—of groups of Jews marched off at gunpoint from the burning ghetto, one showing the little boy—were presented in such a way as to conceal and at the same time highlight the absence of the Shoah as the invisible center of the exhibition. In the two years of preparation for the original 1955 exhibit, Steichen must have gone over many of the concentration camp pictures that had circulated widely a mere eight years before. The photographs of Buchenwald, Dachau, and Bergen-Belsen were in the archives from which a majority of the material in the exhibition was taken. Yet, rather than include any of Lee Miller's photographs of heaps of corpses in Dachau, he selected Miller's moving image of a child and a cat as part of the closing section of the exhibition on children. Only one panel, in the section captioned "Man's Inhumanity to Man," may have served to trigger the visual archive of the unconscious in the minds of the show's visitors. Two photographs on that panel show men, women, and children being led at gunpoint out of the burning Warsaw ghetto on their way to the assembly point, the ominous

Umschlagplatz, before being herded by the Germans to their deaths in the Treblinka extermination camp. One of the two photographs, a little less prominently displayed than the other, shows the little boy, in its original full-frame version. A third photograph, at the right-hand top of the panel, was taken in Israel in 1951. It shows a black-haired woman in dark clothing, her emaciated arm raised aloft in a monumental gesture, the fingers eloquently splayed, in a spiritual cry of outrage. The configuration of photographs on the panel is meant to convey the impression that this woman is not only bewailing the suffering in the Warsaw ghetto but is triumphing over it. Centrally placed on the panel is a text quoted from George Sand: "Humanity is outraged in me and with me. We must not dissimulate nor try to forget this indignation which is one of the most passionate forms of love." Text and photographs together indicate that the image of the woman is an allegory of the state of Israel, a state whose origins lay in the suffering of innocent victims and which was retrospectively invested with the spirit and dignity of the founding sacrificial victims. Thus recontextualizing the images, Steichen imbues them with new meaning, connecting past trauma with future hopes. He did this at the same time that the young state of Israel was struggling to establish a meaningful connection between its national existence and the immediately preceding European history of the Holocaust. Steichen, though, may have had fewer qualms and anxieties about the imagery of Jewish victimhood than the Israeli authorities in their reading of the Holocaust. Particularly in the return to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, Israel may initially have been more anxious—may indeed have felt a greater existential need—to see the image of heroic resistance, of Jewish combativity, in it than that of victimhood and surrender.¹¹

Thus the *Family of Man* deals with the Shoah only through subtle recontextualization. Yet there are ways in which we can see Steichen's entire project as addressing issues of race and genocide. If, from one perspective, the exhibition can be considered the qualitative pinnacle of a stylistic genre known as human-

interest photography, Steichen at the same time deconstructs the genre. As a genre, it had discovered the particular and the non-representative, the anecdotal. Steichen, though, chose to bend it toward his neohumanist purposes. He rhythmically punctuated the sequences of images of everyday life with archaic natural images of biblical force, obliterating the sensitivity to the “human interest” in the photographs. Thus, to quote Schmidt-Linsenhoff again: “This systematic inversion from the particular to the universal, from profane to sacred, from visual serendipity to divine plan for creation, clearly points to the horror unleashed by the ‘senseless destruction of life for its own sake,’ a horror which the exhibition addresses without showing the ‘horrific images.’”¹² Steichen’s entire vision can then be understood as one frantic attempt to send out a message of “Never Again.” In the process the little, defenseless, boy in the picture unwittingly serves this larger purpose. If he raises his hands in surrender, we may see the gesture duplicated by the Israeli woman, not in defeat, but in victory. Steichen’s gesture, in turn, can then be seen as an early instance of lifting the boy from his hopeless setting to the status of a messenger of hope.

Yet, in retrospect, when the *Family of Man* opened in New York in 1955, it may have been too early for the public to take in this more complex reading of Steichen’s narrative. In spite of the exposure to atrocity photographs through mass circulation magazines like *Life* in the immediate postwar years, Americans may not have been sufficiently educated or sophisticated in reading Holocaust photographs, nor did they have the grasp of constructed meanings as these accrued later to these images, turning them into iconic representations. Steichen in fact made a remarkable authorial statement at the time by incorporating for public display atrocity photographs that had disappeared from mass public circulation in the United States and in Europe. Yet the true import of his vision has escaped many who have taken up the vexing question of the alleged public silence, on both sides of the Atlantic, on the traumatic recent history of the Shoah.¹³

Walking by Steichen's panels in the 1950s, people must have missed the triggering moments that later publics would unflinchingly pick up. For one thing, the little boy's image in one of the two Warsaw Ghetto photographs had not yet acquired its iconic status. It would not have leapt at the viewer with the force it would gain later. Nor was Steichen out to educate the public and provide them with historical background. He wished the photographs in his assemblage to speak for themselves, weaving their voices together to tell stories as he envisaged them, irrespective of authorial intent of their makers. In the end, though, as the afterlife of *The Family of Man* may illustrate, not even Steichen's editorial command proved final and definitive. In its reception by viewers over the years, visiting and critically revisiting the show, the readings it was given proved unstable, inviting ever new narratives. If anything, the show had become as much a nomadic object as the many photographs that it brought together.

If, according to one such critical revisit on the occasion of the show's reopening in Luxembourg, we may now connect our contemporary recognition of the iconic "Child at Gunpoint" with the emblematic picture of the Israeli woman, it is only because in the meantime the Warsaw Ghetto child has undergone a long process of iconic construction. His image, in its afterlife as a nomadic object, continues to lend itself to the construction of narratives more instantly recognizable than at the time of Steichen's initial combination of photographic images. If it was Steichen's point at the time to construct a narrative connecting the Warsaw Ghetto images to the birth of Israel, we now see daring further steps along those lines.

In a work called "The Legacy of Abused Children from Poland to Palestine," Anglo-Israeli artist Alan Schechner, working and teaching in the United States, explores connections between the Holocaust and the Intifada. A born provocateur, he rubs many people the wrong way through his artistic interventions in history and memory.¹⁴ Aware of the explosive potential of any connection made between the plight of European Jews at the

time of the Holocaust and that of Palestinians under Israeli occupation, the artist pointedly focuses attention on the suffering of children rather than on supposed parallels between the SS and Israeli soldiers. He imaginatively, and provocatively, combines a cropped version of the Warsaw boy, showing the boy with hands raised and the SS officer pointing his gun at him, with a Reuters photograph of a Palestinian child being led away by a group of Israeli soldiers, so terrified that he has wet his pants. In Schechner's project first the Warsaw boy is shown on screen. The camera zooms in on the right hand of the little boy, which has been digitally manipulated in such a way that he seems to be holding a photograph in that hand, the photograph of the Palestinian boy, being hauled off by Israeli soldiers. He too holds an image in his hand, that of the Jewish boy in the Warsaw Ghetto. Schechner thus presents the two children as calling out to the viewer that each of them protests against the suffering inflicted on the other, creating a bond of empathy across time, across history.¹⁵

This most clearly highlights what I intend the metaphor of nomadic images to mean. If Steichen saw fit to use individual photographs irrespective of authorial intent, rearranging and re-contextualizing them as he pleased, Schechner through digital manipulation takes this process a few radical steps further. He takes what he sees as free-ranging, roving images, instantly and widely recognized, and does intrusive surgery on them. He thus takes away whatever autonomy they had as individual images, representing moments in history that had occurred before the eye of a camera, in order to produce virtual realities. Nomadic images never resist, never protest, even when put in the service of eliciting protest and anger among the viewers. The manipulation of images, which has occurred since the beginning of photography, has reached an unprecedented stage of manipulating the viewers. Nomadic images are like so many Lego pieces that can be endlessly put together to form ever new constructions—of reality, of meaning.

But how about the authenticity and veracity of photographic

images? If artists should feel free to do with photographic images as they please, who should feel responsible for preserving photographs in their status as historical documents? Raising the question is answering it. It is for historians always to see it as their assigned task and duty to retrace the trajectory of nomadic images and take them back to the moment in time when what these images show in fact happened before the camera's eye. Nor should historians stop there. First on their agenda is to tell the story not only of what happened, but why it happened and under what precise circumstances. Thus they will add a resonance to photographic images that, if anything, will only add to the accrued meanings of their nomadic afterlife. Secondly, they should feel free to move on from there and not stop at the point where the afterlife of images begins; after all, this is the point at which histories open up of contested readings worthy of the art and craft of historians. They should do this with their eyes open to settings and contexts for reception and for the ironies of historical memory. If the subject is the remembrance of the Holocaust, the obvious question to raise is how differently people live with its memory in settings far removed from the countries and cultures where it took place. There is a strong and vivid memory culture concerning the Holocaust in the United States, and historians have been engaged in trying to grasp what was behind the ebbs and flows in America's memory of the Holocaust. Visual sources have crucially informed this history, even if it is a matter, paradoxically, of roving images that in the manner of true nomads know no bounds and have a history of circulating on both sides of the Atlantic.