



Decoding Images*

Most images from the Holocaust will have been taken by the perpetrator. We must critically evaluate this evidence as much as we do written or oral material. I am extremely cautious in my use of photographs because:

- They are framed by the perpetrator, shaping the context of "a second in time"
- They reinforce "Jew as victim" and perpetrator as "victor"
- They allow our students to look with a voyeurism that reinforces their relative safety

To evaluate a photograph, have students:

- Ask: "Who took the photograph and why?"
- Expand the photograph (add color, sound, smell, and expand the frame)
- Turn it around – rather than "look at," have the students "look out" from it (at the perpetrators?)
- Describe the silence. What is missing in the reality being framed? Have students write about what they "see" or "hear" outside the margins of the framed image.

Discussion:

How can Holocaust and related images be used responsibly?

1. How have Holocaust images been used/misused in representing the Holocaust and events surrounding it? Do we unwittingly use photographs that strengthen the view of the perpetrators and marginalize the victims?
2. Has the repeated publication and showing of Holocaust images desensitized us to the horrors that these photographs represent?
3. What limits, if any, should be set for the use of Holocaust images?
4. Does the recirculation of certain Holocaust images diminish their value for teaching?
5. Ethically, should we show images of Holocaust survivors or victims without their consent (knowing that for the most part, we can never receive it)? Is this yet another victimization of those who have already been victimized?
6. Can and should Holocaust photographs be viewed as silent testimony? Is this a dangerous move that can lead to misrepresentation?
7. What, in your opinion, are responsible ways of using these photographs for documenting and representing crimes? How great is the danger of misinterpretation without proper commentary?
8. If you have ever used photographs in teaching the Holocaust, how did your students respond, and was it what you expected? How do you know?
9. Does teaching with photographs differ pedagogically from teaching using documents and, if so, how?
10. Are we interpreting the photographs responsibly and properly? What happens if we are not, even accidentally?

Other:

11. Are there proper and improper uses of images in students' artistic projects?

* Adapted from Susan Crane, University of Arizona.