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Revisiting and Reconsidering Disbound Photograph Albums

THE ALBUMS

At the end of 2003, The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM, or “the museum”) received a donation of four photograph albums that had been removed from the private residence of Heinrich Himmler, the leader of the *Schutzstaffel* (better known as the SS) and the second most powerful man in the Third Reich. Himmler was a very capable administrator who consolidated all police forces in Germany into a state entity with himself at the head. He centralized and expanded the concentration camp system, and led the development of the state apparatus for mass killing of Jews, Roma and Sinti, and Slavs, as well as political enemies and the disabled.

The albums had been in the Himmler family residence in Gmund am Tegernsee, in Bavaria, located about 40 mi. (67 km) from Munich, and about 17 mi. (27.5 km) from the border with Austria. Many documents and personal effects were taken from the residence by U.S. Army Intelligence in the spring of 1945, while Himmler was in the war and after Himmler’s wife and daughter had fled the family home and gone into hiding in Austria. These four albums were not registered officially as evidence with the other materials taken from the home, so a U.S. Army Intelligence officer was able to keep them as souvenirs and bring them home with him to the United States. Upon the death of the Army officer, the albums were bequeathed to his friend, who sold them to a collector, who wanted to sell them to a museum but was unsuccessful in finding a buyer. The collector eventually sold them to his lawyer, James Blevins, who donated the albums to USHMM and to whom the gift is credited. USHMM’s counsel, however, did extensive legal research before accepting the albums to ensure that the donor was a rightful owner who could make such a donation, and that no other government entity or person, such as a surviving family member, had a superior claim to them.

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The albums contain photographs spanning the years 1911 to 1945, which are both personal family snapshots and photographs taken by professional photographers following Himmler. All of the photographs in all of the albums are black and white. Two of the albums are attributed to Gudrun Himmler, Heinrich Himmler’s daughter (b. 1929) and cover the years 1937 to 1945, approximately ages 8 to 15 for Gudrun. The two albums have covers that would likely have been chosen by or for a little girl, one with a wooden applique of a shepherdess and the other with voids in the shape of small dogs, possibly schnauzers, indicating that there may have been appliques there that have since been lost. These two albums were tied with cords. Most of the photographs are attached with corners and have captions in Kurrent-style script, a type of handwriting taught in German schools at the time of Gudrun’s childhood. Photographs that show her in them have “i.” or “m.” (for “ich” or “mich/mir”) in the captions.

A third album, with a blue cover, also bound with a cord, contains press and other professional photographs, and only a few possibly personal photographs. There are no captions, making it difficult to attribute, although one of the album’s intermediate custodians attributed it to Himmler himself, even writing an inscription to that effect (in English) on the interleaving of the first page. The handwriting on the backs of some of the photographs could possibly be that of Himmler. The fourth album has a sewn binding and is attributed to Margarete Himmler, Heinrich’s wife and Gudrun’s mother.

There was great excitement about the albums when they arrived at USHMM. Photographs in the albums placed Himmler in various locations around the Eastern Front of the war at the time of major actions, corroborative evidence previously unavailable to Holocaust scholars. The images in the albums, along with photographers’ credit stamps and notations on the versos of the photographs, correspond with dates and places in wartime appointment diaries belonging to Himmler that had recently been made public by the Moscow Special Archive, as well as other documentary sources, and in many cases show people named in the diaries. Of particular interest were images showing Himmler interacting with command staff at Hegewald bei Zhitomir, the headquarters compound of the SS for the Eastern Front, located in

Ukraine, in the years 1941 to 1942. From here Himmler gave the orders to liquidate ghettos in Poland and Ukraine and began the implementation of *Lebensraum*, a massive program to eject the indigenous Slavic peoples of the region and to repopulate it with ethnic Germans, as well as a mass kidnapping scheme to take Slavic children of “Nordic” appearance from their families and “Germanize” them. The photographs show that Himmler and other high-level officials were nearby during recorded massacres and not simply supervising from Berlin (note 1).

Not only did the albums show Himmler “at work” at various locations during the Nazi rise to power and the war but also they also gave a view into the personal life of a well-known perpetrator and his family members. By design, very little of USHMM’s collection reflects the experience of perpetrators, and the museum generally refuses offers of mass-produced Nazi paraphernalia. USHMM has in a few instances accepted materials relating to the experience of individuals who may have been sympathetic to or even joined the Nazi cause, to further understanding of how individuals may have been attracted to Nazi messaging, and to contrast their experiences with those of victims and survivors. This collection, showing a perpetrator in action and at home, is highly unusual among USHMM’s holdings.

The two albums attributed to Gudrun Himmler contain mostly family photographs, showing herself and various family members, her aunt, mother, and cousins, and the family home in Gmund. Most of the photographs in the album with the schnauzers on the cover are personal photographs, whereas the majority of the photos in the album with the shepherdess cover are by professional photographers, including some attached to units of the SS, whose stamps are on the backs of the photographs.

It appears that extra copies of professional photographs that included Gudrun or her father were given to Gudrun for her albums, sometimes with notes on the back from her father addressed to “Püppi,” her childhood nickname that translates roughly to “Dolly,” and often signed “Pappi,” her name for him. Almost from the time of Gudrun’s birth until the time of his death, Himmler spent most of his time away from home, either in Berlin or traveling around the country, and becoming an increasingly well-known public figure. He became estranged from Gudrun’s mother but frequently telephoned Gudrun and many times sent for her to visit him. They were close, but it appears that a good deal of their time together was observed by the photographers following him. Gudrun frequently copied from these verso notations for her captions on the pages of the albums.

IMAGING

The museum was very eager to make the images available to researchers and the public. USHMM’s historians and

photograph archivists made initial selections of images to copy and release as soon as possible, choosing the images they determined would be of immediate interest to Holocaust scholars. Plans were made to then image the albums comprehensively, page by page and image by image, and, whenever possible, to capture the versos of photographs. Individual images were to be photographed with medium format 120 black-and-white film, as well as making a 4 × 5 in. color photographic transparency of each album page and each photograph, and the back of each loose photograph, and then the negatives or transparencies would be digitized. These digital images could be made individually searchable and would be readily available for research or reproduction. There was also an outline for web pages that would show each album as if the viewer were able to turn the pages, seeing pages side by side like an opening of a volume, and allowing the user to click on individual photographs to see enlargements and the verso. Although commonplace now, in 2004, implementing these features in a website would have been a complex and time-consuming undertaking.

To do this kind of photography, it was argued that the pages needed to be perfectly flat against the deck of the copy stand, with the camera lens facing straight down, and that the best way to facilitate this would be to take apart the three albums that were bound with cord. This is not an unusual approach to imaging photograph albums, since having the individual pages lying flat on the copy stand minimizes glare from the glossy surfaces of the photographs, and facilitates further flattening with glass or Plexiglas if the photos are not in plane. Disbinding for photography is still the norm at some institutions, and it is also often done with scrapbooks with heavy or bulky attachments, or brittle pages, that make turning pages risky. Photographing disbound individual pages eliminates problems of distortion from the curve of the page coming out from the gutter, and of having to repeatedly adjust the camera height and angle, or the volume, while progressing through the text block.

It was also argued that the images would become more accessible for exhibit if the albums were disbound, since individual pages could be exhibited, or loaned for exhibit, without putting an entire album at risk, or making the rest of an album unavailable by showing only one opening.

If these albums were being considered for initial digitization today, with contemporary equipment, and with the familiarity with digitized collections expected of researchers now, we might not see a need to disbind them. In 2004, copyshooting to film was the best way to make a photographic print when a negative was unavailable, or to produce a new film copy negative, because film still gave better resolution than the image sensors of digital cameras of the time. Digital camera sensor resolution has, in many respects, caught up to film, or even exceeds it, so the image capture today would be direct to digital. As one of USHMM’s imaging experts

explains: “The old method of making color transparencies and then digitizing them adds extra steps where color information might actually be lost, and introduces noise from the film’s grain, leading to a less accurate digital version. Today we not only have better equipment and measuring tools for capturing and displaying colors accurately, we also have Federal Agencies Digital Guidelines Initiative (FADGI),” which is a nationally recognized set of best practices for achieving the best possible digital image quality for cultural heritage materials (note 2). With today’s equipment, the camera height and angle can be adjusted while previewing the image on a monitor rather than by looking through the camera viewfinder, giving the imager a better impression of what the final image will look like on screen. The imager may choose to progress through a volume capturing recto sides of pages first, followed by the verso sides, and then integrating the images in viewing order, which is more challenging to do with roll film than with digital files.

Viewers of photograph albums and scrapbooks online do not necessarily need to see pages side by side, presented like the opening of a volume, to understand the sequence—although this presentation, if not the actual opening showing both pages, is often desired. If a bound album is too large for a full opening to fit in the frame, a left-side page image can be shown followed by a right-side page image. With single-page captures, the means of restraint is on the side not pictured, which might be a weight or a special mount or even the imager’s hand, if the album is bound tight, or has a cord that cannot be manipulated to open fully. The interleaving is moved from side to side, so it is not seen except along the gutter edge of each page image. In this type of presentation, however, an album that is still bound can look very much like a disbound album.

TREATMENT

It was decided that, to facilitate film photography, the three albums bound with cord would be disbound, with the cover and cord of each one stored in a box with its pages. Each album was documented by Conservation as a bound volume, with both written and photographic documentation. Color slides (35 mm) were taken of the front and back of each album with detail shots of the tying and the head or tail. The disbinding was considered a minor enough treatment that checklist treatment proposal and report forms—on paper—were used.

Many of the photographs were loose, having been mounted into the albums with photo corners most often constructed of white paper and clear plastic, or of black paper with slits, which had failed due to age, or possibly due to removing and replacing photographs in them over the years. Photographs that were loose were removed, and the openings in which they were found were recorded. The locations of photographs that were still attached to the pages, having at least one

corner of the photograph in a photo corner or having been adhered directly to the page, were recorded. One help in this process was that the pages had been numbered in each album, likely by one of the intermediate owners rather than by one of the family, since the ink appears to be that of a blue ballpoint pen. It was agreed that the numbering most likely did reflect the original page order, although it did give pause to reflect that the albums likely had been disbound and retied before, and that the numbering was a sign of that intent.

After removing the cords from the albums, several images were copied from each of the albums and from among the loose photographs that accompanied them, 100 in all, using medium format 120 black-and-white film. The albums were then returned to Conservation for treatment, and the images were soon made available on the museum’s collections website.

In addition to the disbinding, conservation treatment also included light surface cleaning of each page with a soft brush, removal of stray marks and grime with a white vinyl eraser, and a few minor mends around the edges of pages, as well as reattaching loose photographs to album pages in preparation for comprehensive imaging. The treating conservator worked with two of the museum’s historians to determine the proper locations for the loose photographs, matching people and places to captions or to other images showing the same locations, or taken near the same date as other images, as well as matching the size and shape of loose photos to broken and empty photo corners. There were also many somewhat arbitrary placements of loose photos, based on where an image fit intellectually in a sequence where there was a gap rather than on physical evidence like corners on the page matching up in size to the photograph. All of the placements were recorded, although as the number of photos on each page rather than the images—a temporary measure, since the pages were to be photographed with the photographs in place in the next phase.

There were no pages that showed damage indicating that an adhered photograph had been torn out, in any of the three disbound albums. Many of the photographs, both loose and associated with broken corners, had black paper remnants on the verso where they had been torn from other pages, or had tabs from a tab-and-slot attachment system, although there were only a few slots on the pages. There were also instances where a page had clearly been reused, with corners arranged for photos of a different size in addition to those for the photographs currently attached. The conservator and historians concluded that probably each compiler had changed his or her mind a few times when composing the albums, taking some photos out of albums and putting them in others, possibly rearranging without immediately securing all four corners. There are also gummed linen reinforcing circles around the string holes of several pages, which indicates that the albums received heavy use at some point. These may have

been placed by one of the family, or by one of the subsequent owners, but the album would have to have been unstrung to place them.

It was decided that the method of attachment for the photographs would be Japanese tissue T-hinges adhered with wheat starch paste. This method was chosen so that the backs of the photos would remain easily accessible but, unlike paper corners, would not be visible on the front of the photos. The hinges could also easily be removed if a single photograph were to be selected for exhibit or loan. Two T-hinges were used for each loose photograph, and for each photograph that was held in by only one corner, the photo was taken out of the corner and secured with two T-hinges. Each page was housed individually in a clear polyester sleeve sealed along only one side to accommodate easy removal, if needed, since glassine interleaving was still attached to many of the pages, and each sleeved page was placed inside an acid-free lignin-free 10-point folder. Each reformatted album was housed in a drop-sided album box, with folders containing the covers and cords following the series of foldered pages. Loose photographs for which a location could not be determined were grouped together by theme by the historians, and these were stored with the album that was designated last in the series, which was the album with the dog shapes on the cover (the so-called “puppy-dog” album).

REEVALUATION

These albums are now in line for digital imaging as part of the USHMM’s program for digitizing archival collections. They can certainly be imaged in their disbound state, just as it was planned in the mid-2000s, but the COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity to consider these albums again and to investigate the possibility of reassembling them, particularly since imaging intact albums is now routine in the USHMM’s imaging program. It had become clear that there was little interest in the photographs or the albums for exhibition, and in fact, the disbound albums were passed over for a 2013 exhibit. The exhibit was on the role of collaborators and bystanders, including family members, in abetting the perpetrators of the Holocaust, and the exhibit’s curator was interested in Gudrun’s portrayal of her own life and her depiction of her father through her albums. The curator saw photograph albums as signifiers of domestic life that exhibit viewers could recognize from their own lives, and needed an artifact that visually registered as an album to support that vision. The album with the sewn binding that was still in volume format (the album attributed to Margarete Himmler) was chosen instead. With the selection of individual photographs available online, the albums were requested only a couple of times for research in the intervening years. For many reasons, the full plan for comprehensive imaging and online presentation of the albums outlined in 2004—which

disbinding the albums was ostensibly meant to facilitate—was not realized.

The treatment in the 2000s took place in two phases: first the disbinding and the placement of the loose photographs, and then the sleeving and foldering of the individual pages after their return from imaging. The first phase was documented with paper and slides that were stored onsite in the lab and were inaccessible while the museum’s buildings were closed to staff in 2020–2021. Only the narrative treatment documentation for the second phase was available remotely in electronic format. Neither the condition of the string holes of the pages nor the covers was noted in the documentation of the second phase, giving the impression that they must be in good condition. Based on this limited information and the memory of the treating conservator, an investigation into the possibility of reconstructing the albums was proposed.

The conservator reached out to longtime colleagues over e-mail to ask them about their recollections of these albums and how they came to USHMM, and the original imaging project. Over the course of a couple of brief, half-day visits to the lab over the winter, the conservator was able to revisit these albums, to read and copy the treatment documentation, including slides, and take some new photographs. In the course of researching the history of the albums for this article, a vague association often spoken of among USHMM staff about these albums over the intervening years—something not mentioned in the readily available collection documentation and thought to be a misinterpretation of the custodial history—was confirmed: the albums had once been stored in the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. A curator brought forth from her own files regarding the acquisition of the albums a colleague’s contemporaneous memo describing an interview with the collector who was the second-to-last private owner of the albums. He was a federal employee based in Oklahoma City, and he kept the albums in a fireproof cabinet in his office in the Murrah Building. The albums were in the building on April 19, 1995, the day that domestic terrorists carried out a bombing that destroyed the building and killed 168 people. The bombing happened in the morning while the collector was still on his way to work. The cabinet, and the albums, were recovered some time later from the remains of the building. The collector and his lawyer, by then a co-owner of the albums, moved the albums to a safe deposit box at a bank and the collector redoubled his efforts to find an appropriate buyer for the collection (note 3).

The documentation from the 2000s barely discussed the covers of the albums, since they were seen as far less important than the photographs, and because, once dissociated, they became almost extraneous, no longer needed to be viewed or handled to see the photographs. The covers received only minimal treatment, surface cleaning and consolidation of lifting paper around the edges. The more recent review of

the album covers showed them to be in much worse condition than remembered or that could be interpreted from the available documentation. The covers of the three cord-bound albums showed water damage as well, having abraded and split cloth on the spines and scratches and gouges on the cover boards. The collector who had the albums in the Murrah Building referred to damage to the spines and loosened photographs, and implied that those effects were due to the building collapse and recovery effort.

The album with the dog shapes has a significant loss to the covering paper on the front, although the cover itself, a single sheet of thick paperboard curved around the text block, is largely intact. The loss is about 10 × 15 cm and exposes the padding material inside, which is loose sheets of soft tissue, like a rough facial tissue. The loss does not have any impact structurally, but it is not purely a cosmetic issue either because the tissue is not adhered to the board and flops around where it is exposed, and could easily get torn in handling. The loss would need to be filled if the cover were to go back into service as a functioning book cover at any level of use. The abraded cloth and the tide lines are essentially cosmetic damage, but if this damage were to be deemed significant to the history of the album as an artifact of the Oklahoma City bombing, it would impact our decision making on whether and how we would treat it.

The other two album covers—the blue and the shepherdess albums—have cloth spines, and these have splits in the cloth and the inside paper lining along the joints. The boards of the album with the shepherdess on the cover are constructed of two thin boards joined by a strip of folded cloth tape along the spine side. The cover paper, a thin paper printed with a plain weave textile pattern, holds the two boards together. The cover paper is split all the way around, and the boards move freely, with the cloth tape acting like a hinge. It also has extensive tide line staining, as well as dye staining from the cord and rust stains from the eyelets. The boards and the spine would need to be repaired to make this cover structurally sound and functional as a cover. In all three cases, it is difficult to attribute specific damage to the covers to particular events, such as the removal from the family home, or the building collapse, as opposed to repeated transit and poor storage and handling across decades.

The cords of all three albums are frayed and would likely need to be replaced rather than reused if rebinding were considered. The tassels of the cord from the shepherdess album are matted with material that appears to have come from the exposed stuffing of the padded front cover of the puppy-dog album. Each original cord shows the memory of its tying pattern, which can be replicated with replacement cord. Several of the patterned glassine interleaving sheets are missing as well and could be replaced with new glassine or other interleaving material.

In addition to the issues with the cords, interleaving, and covers, and the amount of new material required, the previous

treatment of pages gives pause to question the practicality of rebinding. The T-hinges make the photographs easy to flip over to read the backs, but they would make turning the pages difficult to do safely if they were gathered in a volume, even with glassine interleaving. Retaining ready access to the backs of any photos reattached in the 2004 treatment would likely be a requirement of any future treatment. Suggestions for keeping photographs from swinging when turning pages include adding either a folded retaining tab or new folding corners to the bottom edge of each photograph, or replacing all the hinges with four corners on each photo. Both options would be problematic, however, because they would be visible on the fronts of the photographs, and new corners would have to be applied on top of old corners.

Another option that was suggested is tab-and-slot mounts, where a paper tab is adhered to the back of the photo that slots into a strip of paper mounted on the page. Although tabs were found on the backs of some photos, and a few slots elsewhere, none were found in use in the albums. Paper tabs and slots are heavier than tissue, and would be less easily reversible, but would make temporary removal of individual photographs for imaging or exhibition easier. This option was rejected due to the extensive notations found on the versos of the photographs that might be obscured by adhering a new tab.

Changing or even just adjusting the attachment method across three albums would be a large undertaking, and the previous treatment may simply have gone too far in the reformatting direction for it to be practical to reverse. However, even if it is impractical, and difficult to justify, it would not be impossible to re-format the pages, repair the covers, replace the cords, and rebind any of these three albums if it were decided sometime in the future that there were compelling and approved reasons mandating their reassembly.

It is interesting to note that a review of the treatment documentation from the 2000s indicates that there was no intention then of rebinding the albums. An option for rebinding was given on each album's treatment proposal, but reformatting as single leaves in folders was chosen. It could simply have been the condition of the covers that drove that decision, or it could have been a calculation that the albums had passed through too many hands and there were too many loose photographs to truly know what the original order of the pages and photographs had been, and a decision not to further fix possible errors in place by rebinding.

CONCLUSION

What is expected to happen now is that imaging of the albums will proceed, with the three disbound albums remaining in their current format. New treatment at this time would only address replacing cut, torn, or failed T-hinges found in the recent predigitization review of the albums. Discussion of whether to reassemble the albums can wait for further

examination, and can even wait for further advances in technology and technique in both imaging and conservation treatment. Digitization of the albums under USHMM's current archival digitization program guidelines will be comprehensive and analogous to the present format, capturing each page of each album in order, along with individual captures of each photograph and the caption below it, and when accessible, the back of each photograph, similar to what was originally planned in 2004.

With comprehensive imaging, researchers will finally be able to see all of the photographs in the collection and consider them individually along with their verso information, but the story told in the arrangement and descriptions of the photographs the family placed in their albums does not need the covers attached to read it. Images of the cover can be placed at the beginning and end of each album's sequence of page images in one of the online viewing options. The pages will appear in order as they are numbered, and the photographs are, for the most part and to the best of our knowledge, in their intended places. The conservator, historians, and photo archivists worked to preserve the order as it was perceived at the time, but perhaps the ability to isolate images and reorder them digitally will show where mistakes were made that could then be corrected. The initial digitization effort brought one story to the forefront, that of Heinrich Himmler, the perpetrator, but overshadowed Margarete and Gudrun Himmler's authorship of their own stories of their lives and their relationship with him as husband, father, and public figure, as told through their albums. Allowing viewers to see the albums in their entirety, digitally, brings each album back into focus as the narrative of a single creator, despite the many sources used in its creation, but the digital format allows us to deconstruct the albums intellectually and examine each source individually.

Roughly 20 years ago, around the time of the albums' donation, research and exhibition focusing on the perpetrators and the bystanders of the Holocaust was in its infancy. The decision to focus only on images of Himmler for the website and not to present the full context of the family albums stems from both the curatorial history of the USHMM and the historiography of Holocaust research. Interest and research into the actions and motivations of perpetrators later expanded into exploration of the roles of bystanders and supporters, including families, such that the exhibit curator who reviewed the albums a few years after the reformatting was less interested in the perpetrator than in his family who supported him, validating, although not reinvigorating, the plan to image the albums in their entirety.

By concentrating initial digitization and access efforts on images of Himmler during the years of the Nazi regime and the war, and de-emphasizing the personal and familial, the argument could be made that scholarly interest in specific images from the albums outweighed any personal property rights, and that USHMM was the proper custodian of the

albums and their images. Gudrun Himmler was still living when the albums were acquired by USHMM, and there was concern that she would make a claim for them. Although she had not been old enough to have joined the Nazi party herself as a voter—she was 15 at the war's end—she was fully indoctrinated in Nazi beliefs and remained sympathetic to the Nazi cause for the rest of her life. She was associated with *Stille Hilfe*, or "Silent Help," an organization that supported former Nazis by helping them emigrate, or restart their careers, or caring for them in old age. Although she kept a low profile, she was known to have spoken to sympathizer groups, and to have spoken about wanting to do research in the United States, to find the records that, as she said, would clear her father's name, and to write a biography that would rehabilitate his image. No challenge was made to USHMM's ownership, and Gudrun Himmler Burwitz died in 2018, at the age of 89, without ever visiting the United States.

Physical reconstruction of the albums attributed to Gudrun and the third album runs the risk of rebuilding a shrine to a perpetrator. Gudrun may have simply been documenting her childhood, at a time while she was arguably herself an innocent, but her idolization of her father and her privilege as the daughter of a high-ranking Nazi is evident throughout. Although the juxtaposition of Gudrun's sheltered naivety with her father's calculated cruelty is intriguing, it could be difficult to justify the time and resources for the treatment of this collection when we have so many other compelling stories to tell.

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NOTES

1. Wendy Lower, email message to Sharon Muller et al., August 22, 2003, forwarded to Judith Cohen, and forwarded by Judith Cohen to the author, May 19, 2021.
2. Justin Donaldson, review comment to the author, May 5, 2021.
3. Sharon Muller, *Report on Meeting with Dale Edwards Re: Acquisition of Himmler Photo Albums*, internal memorandum, September 2, 2003.

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FURTHER READING

Reverso Context (<https://context.reverso.net/translation/german-english/>): Online German-English contextual dictionary.