
How to (Not) Witness a Genocide. Maurice Rossel in Theresienstadt

In April 1944, reconnaissance planes of the Allies took aerial photographs of the IG Farben factory at Monowitz: The premises should be evaluated as potential target in a bombing campaign against Germany's war industry. It was not until 1978—and, as the filmmaker Harun Farocki has pointed out¹, after the airing of the TV show *Holocaust*—that two CIA photo-analysts reexamined the historical material and discovered that the images showed also the nearby compound of Auschwitz-Birkenau, including the gas chambers and the main structure of the Auschwitz complex. Posing the question, why the analysts in 1944 did not identify the camps as such, Farocki writes:

«What distinguishes Auschwitz from other places cannot be immediately observed from these images. We only recognise in these images what others have already testified to, eyewitnesses who were physically present at the site. Once again, there is an interplay between image and text in the writing of history: texts that should make images accessible, and images that should make texts imaginable.»²

Even after the first press coverage of the mass murder—based on the report of two escapees from the camp—in June 1944, the public reaction was restrained. *News that soon disappeared into oblivion*, as Farocki describes the seemingly indifferent response³. *We need images*, so he concludes, to conceive something as inconceivable as a genocide: *The Allies photographed and filmed the camps, the survivors, and the traces that pointed to the millions murdered. It was above all the images of piles of shoes, glasses, false teeth, the mountains of shorn hair that have made such a profound impression. Perhaps we need images, so that something that is hardly imaginable can register: photographic images as the impressions of the actual at a distance.*⁴ There is, however, another unsettling question to ask: Why did the Allies, having learnt about the extermination facilities, did not intervene,

¹Farocki 2004: 195

²Farocki 2004: 196

³Farocki 2004: 198

⁴Farocki 2004: 198

either by bombing the gas chambers or by destroying the railways leading to the camps:

«In fact, had the gas chambers and crematoria been destroyed in 1944, the Nazis could no longer have rebuilt them. The military and political leaders of England and the US refused, however, to attack the access routes to the camps or the extermination installations themselves. They let the pleas, suggestions, petitions, and demands circulate for a long time internally, and then justified their refusal with the argument that they could not afford to divert their forces. The conclusion was that the only way to help the Jews would be a military victory over Germany.»⁵

The analysts did not see the camps because they a) lacked the necessary information from the ground to recognize the true function of the structures, and b) had no orders to look for anything else than the factory premises as possible bombing target. The indifference of the Allied after the reports about the ongoing mass extermination suggest something else: Maybe they did not realize the appalling magnitude of the event because they did never fully engage with the suffering of the Jews (and Roma) in German-occupied Europe? Would a thorough investigation of the deportations and the concentration camps—well-known facts since the early 1940s—maybe even have lead to an earlier discovery of the gas chambers, given that rumors about death camps had been already afloat?

Which brings me to Maurice Rossel and his visits to Auschwitz and Theresienstadt. Rossel, a Swiss physician, inspected the ghetto/concentration camp of Theresienstadt in June 1944 as delegate of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), following an official invitation of the German government. The Germans intended to counter reports about abhorrent condition in the camps - and succeeded: Ahead of Rossel's visit thousands of prisoners were deported to Auschwitz (to hide the usual overcrowding), the ghetto was cleaned up, and the prisoners had to learn scripted replies to the presumptive questions of the delegate.⁶ Rossel issued a very favorable report, praising the exemplary treatment of the detainees, thus providing a most welcome testimonial for the Nazi propaganda. Following to Theresienstadt, he made a flying visit to Auschwitz. Contrary to Theresienstadt,

⁵Farocki 2004: 200; one example is the infamous letter of U.S. Assistant Secretary of War John McCloy, here in full length: <https://perspectives.ushmm.org/item/assistant-secretary-of-war-john-mccloy-to-war-refugee-board-director-john-pehle/collection/us-government-rescue-efforts>

⁶See Palmieri 2021; Schiff 2012 writes about the visit in her memoir as survivor of Theresienstadt; Steinacher 2017 discusses antisemitic biases as possible motives for the ICRC's overall friendly stance on Nazi Germany

the Auschwitz camp was not prepared for the visitor. However, although Rossel admitted years after the war to have witnessed the emaciated look of the inmates, he or the ICRC did not raise public alarm, thus missing a possible opportunity to at least slow down the mass murder.

It would go well beyond the scope of this post to include an adequate discussion of his case, but I will at least refer to Claude Lanzmann's interview with Rossel in 1979.⁷ The interview demonstrates how Rossel was anxious to avoid to notice, to see, to witness. In one of the most appalling passages of the interview, he is blaming the victims for playing their part in the Theresienstadt propaganda act. In Auschwitz, he insists first, there was *No information that is valuable*⁸. Lanzmann repeatedly pushes back with follow-up questions, causing Rossel eventually to remember, still reluctantly though: *These people were slim, like... there is no need to say it, is there?* And finally, after further inquiries by the interviewer: *You know, you would have this even more... when, as you enter, you cross lines of prisoners, in groups of 30 or 40, skinny...skeletons. [...] They were really walking skeletons, because they had not been fed.* Rossel's conclusion is also quite telling: He had forgotten the events, he tells Lanzmann, because that is the sane way to deal with such things:

«And today you reread to me the report that I wrote at that time about Theresienstadt. I remember writing it, but of this thing, this visit which you brought back to my memory. But I have to say that... a normal brain... for me, I live without these memories. [...] I have them, I think... because one has to live in a sane fashion, to live ones small life, ones daily and mediocre life. Well, it is erased. Fortunately for me.»⁹

What Rossel is describing in these lines, can only be characterized as some sort of *self-lobotomy*. And to be clear: Rossel's failure to see what was really going on in the camps, was, if nothing else, rooted in his own antisemitism. Even in the 1979 interview with Lanzmann, he repeats antisemitic tropes: Rossel: *I still believe that these were Jewish notables, rich enough to pay for surviving there.* – Lanzmann: *They... were exterminated before your visit, and they were exterminated afterwards.*¹⁰ Rossel never came to terms with his personal bias and his

⁷The extended version was released 1997 as *Un vivant qui passe* (*A Visitor from the Living*, online: <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn1004374>); Lanzmann incorporated a short version of the interview in his *Shoah*-project, see <https://perspectives.ushmm.org/item/shoah-outtake-with-maurice-rossel>

⁸I am quoting in the following after Lotti Eichorn's transcript & translation for the USHMM: https://collections.ushmm.org/film_findingaids/RG-60.5019_01_tr1_en.pdf

⁹M. Rossel 1979 (Eichorn transcript)

¹⁰M. Rossel 1979 (Eichorn transcript)

share of the responsibility (and, by extension, the responsibility of the Red Cross). Instead, the refusal to acknowledge the suffering in Theresienstadt facilitated Nazi Germany's cover-up for the ongoing genocide.

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