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GORAN BERTOK

0 COMMENTS

Survivors – Portraits of Terrifying Memories

It was in 2009 when newspapers published an article about the last British World War I (WW I) veteran who died at the age of 111. I felt in that moment that a piece of history was gone forever; a living piece of history disappeared forever and WW I will thereafter never again be so painfully real. Without the people who fought on the frontline, WW I will feel like just a remote historical event.

There is a big difference between “knowing” something and “feeling” something; the difference between speaking personally with somebody who was part of those events; with somebody who was a participant – and not just to read about them in history books. Maybe this was one of the reasons I started to think about a project like ‘Survivors’, about a photographic cycle having subjects who experienced the internment in the concentration camps and survived.



Mara Miklavčič – interned in the concentration camp Ravensbrück

I started the series at the end of 2012 and worked on it intensively through 2013 and 2014. This is nearly seventy years after the end of World War II (and the liberation of last Nazi concentration camps). Before starting taking portraits of ex-inmates the question was: What remnants of such a terrifying experience can be seen on the faces of old men and women after so many decades? How can you show the remains of memories or memories themselves? I deliberately decided not to use any kind of marks or objects directly associated with concentration camps, for example, numbers tattooed on hands of some ex-inmates, their KZ numbers from their clothes, documents etc. I was strictly interested in their faces, their presence, and some dull, tedious facts, like which concentration camp or camps they were interned in. As to say: *That’s me, I was there, I saw things, I am here, sixty, seventy years later. There is no need to talk a lot. I thought this would be enough. I was just*

wondering how to exactly do this.



*Elka Šali – interned in concentration camps Ravensbrück, Sachsenhausen and
Sachsenhausen–Oranienburg*

In these photos, you see old people. Some have their eyes closed. Usually, we close our eyes when we are trying really hard to remember something. Or we close our eyes when we sleep. And when we die. I had all three possibilities in mind when I started to shoot these photos. Meeting these people in the studio meant meeting them for the first time. Maybe it was easier to work with them not knowing them personally, not knowing anything about them. The only contact point was the fact that they had all been prisoners in the concentration camps.

We all know what the concentration camps were, but we cannot relate because we do not share a comparable experience. I didn't lose any relative in the concentration camps. I am somebody who is looking from the outside. In a sense, I am the inquisitive person I don't want to be. Years ago, I was shooting a cycle of photos in Slovene prisons; I never asked a prisoner why he is serving his penalty. I deeply believe there are things you have to deserve – you must earn them somehow.<



*Frančiška Deisinger – interned in concentration camps Ravensbrück and
Ravensbrück–Grüneberg*

Sometimes the work felt like some kind of torture. I wanted them to remember, to go back in time, without speaking at all. I was working with strong light (flash), that I directed in the face and eyes of the survivor in a big, empty, dark space and sometimes I felt like I was recreating the conditions of interrogations. Some of the portrayed survivors had undergone interrogation in their past. I felt a bit strange.

I see the topic of concentration camps (portraits of survivors) somehow related to my

photographic work. From my first steps into photography I was interested in the human body; the human body and violence, pain and pleasure; in the human body in its extreme conditions. I possess my body, I can modify it, I can hurt it – but on the other hand I depend on it and I belong to it. Until the end, because I will die when my body dies. The fact that I can not completely and absolutely control my body used to make me angry.

I see my work very narrowly oriented but on the other hand very intimate, very personally involving.

I see Survivors as a story about the human body and nature and not just as a story about remote history. In 1989, I was serving my military service in Yugoslav National Army. One month of my service, divided among barracks, military drill and some days spent in mental hospital and prison, was enough time to experience the strange group dynamic which seems to allow good conditions for all kinds of violence, sadism and other usually dormant instincts. Two years later, in 1991, the civil war started in (ex) Yugoslavia. Soon concentration camps appeared – it was like the story, the history repeating itself. As some instincts are just asleep, waiting for their time, waiting for suitable conditions to rise again.

Why am I dealing with topics like these? Because I am simply interested in them, these things simply interest and attract me very much – deeply, intimately, personally. These things irritate me, wake me up, make me alive. These things are ugly, dark, but true.



Dr. Jože Hlebanja – interned in the concentration camp Mauthausen

It was a sunny day, years ago, in the month of May when I visited the concentration camp in Mauthausen. Sun, green grass, the nearby hills with farms – I could feel the farmers and the cows on the other side of the valley – idyllic picture, atmosphere, just like it was sixty, seventy years ago, I imagined. Behind my back, there was the

wall of the concentration camp and the camp itself, with huts, crematorium and even sheds for prostitutes. Somehow it felt unreal.

I remember driving in Dachau – I was visiting the concentration camp – and passing by the sign for McDonald’s restaurant – Dachau McDonalds. In that moment, the combination of junk food and the name which is so often associated with a concentration camp seemed so meaningless and grotesque. Life is banal. Time is passing. It’s just a question of business. We must eat.

In his fiction, *The Eating of Gods*, placed in the WW II Ustasha concentration camp Jasenovac in Croatia, Goran Čučković wrote:

“To live and to eat he must kill, no matter where, no matter when, no matter whom. The Bloody victim is always howling with terror and pain, no matter whether human or pig. What is the difference after all ?!”

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GORAN BERTOK

There are not many artists in the world that are so consistent in investigating the unpleasant topic of death as Goran Bertok. 1963 – Born in Koper, Slovenija 1989 – graduated in Journalism at the Faculty of Sociology, Political Sciences and Journalism in Ljubljana.