

Out & About with Rachel Morin

"The Last Album: Eyes from the Ashes of Auschwitz-Birkenau"

Text and photos by Rachel Morin



Ann Weiss, celebrated author of the critically acclaimed "The Last Album: Eyes from the Ashes of Auschwitz-Birkenau," spoke recently at the Edmund S. Muskie Archives at Bates College.

When I heard Ann Weiss—the discoverer of over 2,000 rare, personal photographs from the lives of Jewish victims before Auschwitz—would be speaking at the Edmund S. Muskie Archives at Bates

College, I knew I would be there. And the opportunity to meet Ann Weiss and hear her speak on her critically acclaimed book, "The Last Album: Eyes from the Ashes of Auschwitz-Birkenau," was special.



Noel C. March and wife Laurie of Bangor with Ann Weiss, noted lecturer on Holocaust victims and survivors. The Marches may have been the furthest to travel to hear the author. He is the U.S. Marshal in the District of Maine. In talking with March, he had fond memories of Lewiston Mayor Laurent Gilbert, former U.S. Marshal, and Auburn Mayor-Elect Jonathan LaBonté.

A large audience quickly filled the seats and waited expectantly. Michael Pasek, Bates College senior and co-president of the Jewish Student Organization Hillel, spoke briefly. Roland Davis, Bates College director of the office of intercultural education, introduced the author with her impressive resume.

Ann Weiss, the daughter of parents who were sur-

vivors of Auschwitz, began her presentation by telling us about her trip to Eastern Europe in 1986, still under Communist control, and how she accidentally stumbled upon the collection of photos.

On a travel tour of Auschwitz, she became separated from her group. By then, Auschwitz had closed for the day, and she was alone. She became frantic



Edith Pagelston of Falmouth, an Auschwitz survivor, attended with her daughter, Ruth Finegold of Yarmouth.

and began to run from building to building, trying to find her group and looking for anyone who could help.

Then she saw an Auschwitz employee beckoning her to follow him. He led

her to a locked room, which turned out to be an archive of over 2,000 photographs of victims of the death camps. Saved and stored at great risk, these were ordinary photos of



Rachel Morin and Ann Weiss. (Roland Davis Photo)



Joel Goodman and Bertha Bodenheimer of Auburn had a special interest in bearing Ann Weiss.



Crigen Richards and Donna Albert of Auburn were among the early arrivals.



Roland Davis, Bates College director of the office of intercultural education, introduced the author.



Michael Pasek, Bates College senior and co-president of the Jewish Student Organization Hillel.

Jewish families, babies, children at play, groups of teenagers, people at work, at school, at home on vacation; normal people leading normal lives.

The photographs and reminiscences gathered here offered an intimate and compelling story of who they were and what was important to them. These photos were of the victims and

their life before Auschwitz.

These were the precious photos that the families could not leave behind when thousands of Jews were rounded up and placed on transports to Auschwitz. They thought they were going to labor camps, not death camps, so they took their family photos and memories of a former vibrant life with them. Millions of these photos were

brought with Jews on transports to the death camps.

The author related how pictures were normally destroyed along with the victims. The Nazis not only wanted the Jews exterminated, they wanted all tangible evidence and memories destroyed. They had a special crematorium for the pictures, letters and other memorabilia to be burned. Somehow, on one of the last transports to Poland, these photos escaped the flames; they are the only photos known to survive.

"Once you see something, you cannot un-see it," Weiss told us. She didn't know it then, but these photos were to change her life. The photos were seared in her memory; the photos never left her; and the photos became the inspiration for her book, "The Last Album: Eyes from the Ashes of Auschwitz-Birkenau."

Weiss showed us copies of the photos on the overhead screen. What struck us were the compelling, dark eyes looking at the camera directly, laughing eyes, happy eyes in a former lifetime—an ordinary family life before the Nazi takeover. These photos were not the images we remember seeing, the imbedded images in our minds of gaunt, starving Holocaust victims. Somehow these photos of a normal life are more poignant as we realize what became of the people in them.

The author told of her many return trips to Poland, the on-going negotiations with the Communist government for permission to copy the



Dr. Mitchell Ross of Greene and Ann Weiss had stories to share.

photos and then the painstaking research of the photos. She wanted to learn as much as she could about the identity of everyone in the photos and the stories behind them. Her journey has taken over 20 years with meticulous research and interviewing survivors. It continues today, as she is still researching the identities and the stories. Weiss

returns frequently to Europe bringing photos to remaining family members. When she meets with the surviving families, they relate how their relative died. Weiss always asks not how they died, but how did their loved one live? This unleashes the happy and beloved memories of their relatives.

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Elaine Makas, Androscoggin County Commissioner, and the author.

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"And even when no survivor remains to tell the story, it is the photos themselves, and the eyes, that reveal their own powerful testimony," Weiss says. She speaks of these families and victims in a warm, compassionate and personal way: she knows them intimately from her research and travels to meet the survivors.

"Each time a discovery is made, I feel as if, in a sense, a life has been reclaimed," she said. "Although I know it is not like restoring the dead to the living, I do know that each identification is important. The Nazis wanted their victims to be dehumanized; dead and dehumanized. They took away their names, replacing them with numbers. They destroyed their personal photos so that we could not see their faces. Not only did the Nazis destroy their lives, but they even tried to destroy the memory of their lives. With these photos, they can be remembered as people, not bodies, and in this sense, they live."

The photographs are the basis for touring exhibitions and a 1988 documentary film, "Eyes from the Ashes." The images have been displayed around the world. "The Last Album" is a tribute to life as it existed in Europe before the Holocaust.

Weiss is a principal interviewer, researcher and analyst for the University of Pennsylvania's "Transcending Trauma: Psychological

Mechanisms of Survival" project, which has interviewed Holocaust survivors in the most detailed interview protocol to date.

She serves on the editorial board of the "Studies in the Shoah" series of history books and has served as a trained interviewer for the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Project, founded by Steven Spielberg. She is the founder and director of the Eyes from the Ashes Foundation, an educational organization. Learn more at <http://thelastalbum.org>.