Experience Turned into Drawing? On the Motif of Closeness in Ágnes Lukács’ Series of Lithographs

SOURCE DESCRIPTION

The 1946 portfolio of lithographs by Hungarian-Jewish artist Ágnes Lukács titled “Auschwitz Női Tábor” (The Auschwitz Women’s Camp) includes an image of a group of women standing closely together, holding each other as if to warm or comfort one another. Those at the outside of the group try to get as close as possible to the others. The title, “Összebújva” (Close Together), listed on a sheet enclosed in the edition, further reinforces the drawing’s message. The drawing is part of a series of 24 lithographs. In this series Lukács repeatedly makes use of the group motif and of specific details in order to intensify her visual narratives of forced labor, selection, hunger, violence, and death. Both her preliminary sketches made in the fall of 1945 and the stones she used to draw on are lost.

Although Lukács included this drawing in her series of images from Auschwitz, reproductions of it are often used to visualize the history of female prisoners in the satellite camps of the Neuengamme concentration camp near Hamburg. For both educators and visitors at the Neuengamme memorial, this image serves as a source for talking and learning about the conditions of imprisonment and survival experienced by female camp inmates, but it also addresses questions of solidarity and friendship under violent conditions.

Biographical sketch

Ágnes Lukács, an artist whose work has been honored with several awards, grew up in an acculturated Jewish family in Budapest. During the Second World War she studied at the academy of visual arts in Budapest, graduating with a diploma in spring 1944. She was arrested shortly afterwards and, following imprisonment at various places, she was deported to the concentration and death camp Auschwitz-Birkenau, where she arrived on July 9, 1944. In mid-December 1944 she was transferred to the Reichenbach satellite camp of the Groß-Rosen concentration camp and after its closure on February 18, 1945, she was among the group of female prisoners who were transferred to the women's satellite camp Porta Westfalica-Hausberge of the Neuengamme concentration camp. Following an odyssey through a number of Neuengamme’s satellite camps which lasted several weeks, Lukács, then 24 years old, and the other women arrived at the women's satellite camp Salzwedel (Altmark) in early April 1945. On April 14, 1945, the camp was liberated by U.S. troops. About three months later Ágnes Lukács returned to Budapest, where she reunited with her parents who had also survived. She joined the Communist Party the same year and became active in the teachers' union. According to her she had previously been in contact with the workers'
movement before her arrest. At the suggestion of the socialist-Zionist Ichud party, Lukács published some of her drawings with the party's own press shortly after her return to Budapest, adding titles and commentary. With her choice of publisher she clearly declared herself part of the early efforts made by Jewish organizations to come to terms with the Holocaust, even though she never considered herself a Zionist, as she stated retrospectively.

Seven years later – not least as a result of anti-Zionist sentiment and politics in Hungary at the time – Lukács was first transferred from the teachers' union to the art school's administrative department and eventually – three years later – to a high school, where she continued to work as an art teacher and later as principal until her retirement in 1977. At the same time she continued to paint and draw until the 2000s. Her works were shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions. Today some of her works are housed in Hungary's Jewish Museum and Archive in the city of Budapest, where Lukács spent the final years of her life in seclusion.

Inspiration and Imagery

Series of drawings or narrative image series were a medium frequently chosen by artists who were victims of Nazi persecution and concentration camp survivors, as it allowed for nuanced depictions making references to details and individual experience. Shortly after the war had ended, survivors began publishing their image series as books or portfolios with support from various organizations while exhibitions were fairly rare at this point. Ágnes Lukács in her work makes reference to the social-realist art of the prewar period. One of its proponents, graphic artist and sculptor Käthe Kollwitz, published a series of woodcuts titled “Krieg” (War), which included a print titled “Die Mütter” (The Mothers) from 1921 / 22 (plate 6 in the series).

In the composition of her drawing “Összebújva” Lukács adopted the motif of women closely holding and supporting each other, which Kollwitz understood as an expression of pacifism, yet Lukács did not explicitly depict any children. Only the figure on the right side of the image with her slightly protruding belly, which she covers with her clasped hands, can be read as a pregnant woman.

In depicting her subjects with shaved heads Lukács refers to the loss of femininity many female concentration camp survivors emphasized, a violent act of de-individualization that both female and male prisoners were subjected to not only immediately after their deportation to a camp. At the same time she individualizes the women's smocks with dots, stripes, and small patterns, and with just a few simple lines she gives all of the uniform, shaved heads different facial features, thus highlighting the individuality of each woman. Some of the women are shown wearing oversized lace-up shoes or wooden clogs that emphasize their thin legs. The barbed wire sketched in the background, which art historian Ziva Amishai-Maisels has categorized as a “primary Holocaust symbol,” points to the pictorial context: the camp. Yet this drawing is also about solidarity and coming together as a group. Lukács continued to repeat and vary the motif of women embracing each other and standing close to one another in her later works, thus sharing her perspective on themes such as mutual support in the camps, the experience of violence, and the struggle for self-assertion and individuality.
Images of women and concentration camp historiography

One interpretation of Lukács’ drawing that seems to suggest itself is that of a visual narrative of an explicitly female experience or of the forming of so-called substitute or camp families, which is often described as a specifically female survival strategy. In interviews and conversation Lukács frequently spoke about the friendship and closeness she had experienced in the camp. Yet she always specifically referred to individual fellow prisoners with whom she had been friends or who had supported one another while she did not mention a specific group of women who had supported each other. Recent scholarship on concentration camps and the Holocaust has pointed out that it is necessary to take a close look at the different camps and their respective structural conditions as well as the subjective experiences resulting from them in order to explain the circumstances and possibilities of social relations and group solidarity. These differed from camp to camp, both in men’s and women’s camps.

Studying portrait drawings from Auschwitz and the Theresienstadt ghetto, art historian Pnina Rosenberg has found that female inmates in particular often chose a strategy of “beautifying” their subjects in their drawings to set a contrast to the everyday violence and threat to their lives. Meanwhile, only few drawings from the camps survive which depict the motif of heads being shaved or of heads after they have been shaved. Such motifs are more likely to be found – in different variations – in the artistic images both female and male survivors created immediately after the end of the war, for example in the drawings and print series by Violette Lecoq, France Audoul or Hans-Peter Sørensen, former prisoners of the Ravensbrück and Neuengamme concentration camps. This observation shows that it is necessary to consider the visual testimony, the conditions of their creation and their contexts in a differentiated manner in order to do justice to these images with regard to their aesthetics, materiality, and the social practices connected with them. This is also true for Ágnes Lukács’ works.

Like other artists and graphic artists, after she was liberated she sought to find an – individual – mode of expression, employing traditional motifs and developing new symbolic imagery. Her drawing “Összebújva” illustrates this in an impressive manner. Yet it is only in the context of the entire series that the complexity of the narratives and the nuances of Lukács’ perspective on her experience in the camp reveal themselves.

Select Bibliography

Katrin Hoffmann-Curtius, Bilder zum Judenmord. Eine kommentierte Sichtung der Malerei und Zeichenkunst in Deutschland von 1945 bis zum Auschwitz-Prozess, Marburg 2014.

Selected English Titles

Ziva Amishai-Maisels, Depiction and Interpretation. The influence of the Holocaust on the Visual Arts,
About the Author

Christiane Heß studied history and art history at the Universities of Hamburg and Salamanca/Spain. She is currently working as a research assistant at the Ravensbrück Memorial Center/ Brandenburg Memorial Foundation. She completed her dissertation on drawings from Nazi concentration camps at the University of Bielefeld in 2017.

Recommended Citation and License Statement


This text is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution - Non commercial - No Derivatives 4.0 International License. As long as the work is unedited and you give appropriate credit according to the Recommended Citation, you may reuse and redistribute the material in any medium or format for non-commercial purposes.