Experiencing Loss: The Significance of Photography in the Formation of Memory. An Introduction to the Life and Work of Lisel Haas (1898-1989)

Amy Shulman, University of Birmingham

Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida, Reflections on Photography* explores the theory of memory in relation to the medium of photography. Here, Part Two of this book will inform a discussion of Lisel Haas's (1898-1989) life and work [1]. This article will explore photography and memory, focusing on how photography has been used in the representation of historical events, specifically the Holocaust and the Second World War. It aims to call attention to the work of the German-Jewish photographer Lisel Haas, whose work has not been the topic of any publication thus far, by exploring the ways in which she used photography to go some way in bridging the gap between her life in Germany and Britain. [2] I will argue that through the medium of photography she has attempted to create a 'universal language' for both personal and collective memories.[3]

The article aims to address the importance of the function of photographs within a socio-historical framework, utilising psychoanalytical readings in order to begin to understand them as sites for the formation of memories and the healing of wounds. Thus, this work seeks to emphasise the significance of photographs in art history and the role that they assume in blurring the boundaries between art, history, and society. Although Haas's work does not depict the Holocaust explicitly, this article has been informed by work completed on the Holocaust, memory and photography. It examines the problematic nature of photographs as objects in their own right as well as vehicles of memory. This research offers a starting point for the understanding of the complexities of the life of a German-Jew in the 1930s, resulting in émigré status.

In his seminal book, *Camera Lucida*, Barthes notes that 'the Photograph [is] never, in essence, a memory', that it 'actually blocks memory' and 'quickly becomes a counter-memory'. [4] Barthes has adopted a phenomenology of memory to explore the essence of photography, after discovering a photograph of his mother shortly after her death. Susan Sontag has noted that 'in choosing to write about photography, Barthes takes the occasion to adopt the warmest kind of realism: photographs fascinate because of what they are about. And they may awaken a desire for a further divestment of the self.'[5] After his mother's death, Barthes found himself sorting through a number of photographs of her. He wanted to 'find' the woman he had known, not just a fragment of her. [6] Barthes explains that he wanted to find the truth. He found this in what he calls *The Winter Garden Photograph*. This picture, as described by Barthes, is of his mother aged five, standing with her seven year old brother in a glass conservatory - or winter garden. [7] Barthes would not reproduce it, claiming the photograph only existed for him. For others, 'it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the "ordinary" […] at most it would interest your *studium* […] but in it, for you, no wound.' [8]

Barthes, then, argues that for those unconnected to the person in the photograph, it would merely be a visual record, at most an interesting object. But for Barthes, the image of his mother in *The Winter Garden Photograph* wounded him in a similar way to the wound caused by her death. In looking at this photograph of his mother as a child, Barthes is confronted by a girl he did/could not know. It is probable that Barthes's memories of his mother informed his recognition of this little girl as his mother. He even admits here that 'for once, photography gave me a sentiment as certain as remembrance.'[9] This admittance reveals some inconsistencies in Barthes's discussion but also one of the most important aspects of memory. Margaret Olin in her essay, 'Touching Photographs: Roland Barthes's "Mistaken Identity"', addresses this with an example of one of the James van der Zee photographs Barthes discusses in *Camera Lucida*. Olin asserts that this example of Barthes's mistaken identity (he confuses a string of pearls for a gold chain) 'illuminates an important aspect of memory: the deception at its heart, its ability to embroider and change, to be displaced, when it is "working on" one, like the details in a Freudian dream interpretation.' [10] This aspect of memory, the mistaken identity to which Olin refers, suggests that in the act of remembering, the 'truth' can be forgotten. The displacement that occurs is borne out of the individual's need to seek self-identification within the photograph.[11]

This aspect of memory is one which Barthes does not appear to explicitly recognise in his writing. A photograph does in fact have the ability to evoke memories, both personal and collective, the former only if the spectators have a relationship in some way with the depicted. In the way that *The Winter Garden Photograph* was very much a personal photograph for Barthes and conjured up many painful emotions and memories for him, of a time before his mother's death and after, Haas's photographs provide a record of her life in Germany before the Second World War. Thus, for Haas, wounded by the loss of her homeland, they may have provoked memories in a similar way to that described by Barthes.

In recent years, there has been a growing debate surrounding memory and photography in relation to the Holocaust. The use of photography as documentary for, and thus evidence of, the Holocaust is problematic. Andrea Liss has established that 'the cruel paradox of the Holocaust-related photographs' is that they 'are situated precisely in the demand that they perform as history lessons […] and provide sites for mourning.' [12] The very incomprehensibility of the Holocaust means that such photographs are not only documentary but 'disturb the present moment and the contemporary landscape with troubling or nostalgic memories and with forgotten, or all too vividly remembered, histories.' [13]

Lisel Haas was born in Mönchengladbach, Germany in 1898 to Jewish parents. Haas worked as a portrait photographer in Germany but also as a photojournalist, primarily for the Catholic magazine, *Weltwarte*, and as an official theatre photographer. She was listed in the Gladbach address book as 'Portrait-Photographer Kaiserstrasse 49'. [14] In 1938, Haas was issued with a decree from the Gladbach Police Authority, dated 18 October, stipulating that she must display a notice in the window of her photographic studio stating that it was a 'Jewish business' with threat of punishment.[15] Following this threat and the devastating attacks on Jewish homes and businesses during the anti-Jewish pogrom, *Kristallnacht* (9-10 November 1938), which made many Jews aware of the seriousness of their situation, Haas abandoned her photographic studio business in November 1938, and she and her father left Germany arriving in Birmingham (UK) in December 1938.

Haas was permitted to work with the Birmingham Repertory Theatre as one of their official photo call photographers soon after she arrived in Britain, in 1940. After the Second World War, she was also able to set up her own photographic studio at her home in Moseley (Grove Avenue, Moseley, Birmingham). The atrocities of the Holocaust had torn apart Haas's life. For the purpose of this article, her life can be viewed as having two parts: what came before and what came after the Second World War. Although Haas may have wished to forget that her life had been torn apart, or to recreate in Britain the life she lead in Germany, it is impossible to refuse what we see when confronted by a photograph. But I would argue that Haas used photography as a medium to overcome the gap between image and memory and to go some way in bridging the gap between her life in Germany, 'before', and her life in Britain, 'after'. Nancy Wood, in the introduction to *Vectors of Memory, Legacies of Trauma in Postwar Europe*, uses the observations of Maurice Halbwachs, the first theorist to develop notions of a collective memory, to insist 'on viewing memory […] not as a repository of images […] but as the selective reconstruction and appropriation of aspects of the past that respond to the needs of the present.'[16] It can be asserted then, that Haas reconstructed and appropriated her use of photography in Germany - her past - to respond to her needs in the present - Britain. Photography, for Haas, provided a means for uniting a torn Europe.

Two photographs of the same subject matter, that of a mother with her children, are taken as examples of Haas's work executed in Germany and Britain respectively (Figs. 1 and 2). The differences between German and British society are made clear in the presentation of this theme. Interestingly, the subjects of the German photograph appear more relaxed and natural in their pose before the camera, whereas the British family are dressed in their best clothes, typical of studio photography, with the children on their best behaviour. Family photography as such, however, is usually taken for documentary reasons and becomes memorabilia. Through the medium of photography, Haas attempted to create a 'universal language' through which we are able to remember events and personal memories. She believed that 'life' provided the link between her and her sitters, and gave the pictures their force and effect.[17] For Haas, photography was charged by life and by living. Judy Weiser has noted that a photograph is 'a very thin piece of paper that we perceive three-dimensionally, as if alive, and as if existing right now.'[18] In this sense, a photograph is a powerful tool in evoking memories of the past. Weiser continues, 'it is natural that people respond to these visual artifacts as if they were full of life […]. Every snapshot has stories to tell, secrets to share, and memories to bring forth.' [19] The implication that a photograph, or what is shown in a photograph, is living, is in contrast to Barthes's further investigation into the essence of a photograph.

Barthes's exploration of photography and memory continues with a discussion of the mortality of memory. He asserts that 'with the photograph, we enter into *flat death*.' [20] Barthes notes that the only thought he can have is 'that at the end of the first death, my own death is inscribed.' [21] The photograph as Flat Death is a concept which is acknowledged by Annette Kuhn and Kirsten Emiko McAllister.[22] They state that 'the photograph confronts us with the fleeting nature of our world and reminds us of our mortality.'[23] The passing of time is now the new *punctum*, according to Barthes. [^23] Barthes asserted that 'the photograph tells […] death in the future.'[24] This is a reminder that both the subject of the photograph and the photograph itself are fragile. The photograph as object has 'commonly […] the fate of paper (perishable), but even if it is attached to more lasting supports, it is still mortal.' 25

The crucial point that Barthes makes about Flat Death is that,

> Earlier societies managed so that memory, the substitute for life, was eternal and that at least the thing which spoke Death should itself be immortal: this was the Monument.

But by making the (mortal) Photograph into the general and somehow natural witness of "what has been," modern society has renounced the Monument. 26 Thus, Barthes argues, photography is viewed by modern society as memory, resulting in the mortality of memory.

Although the links between photography and the mortality of memory have been acknowledged by historians such as Kuhn and McAllister, the importance of a photograph in the revival of memory, and thus the significance of visual records in documenting personal histories, can be seen in Marianne Hirsch's and Leo Spitzer's essay, '"There Was Never a Camp Here", Searching for Vapniarka'. This essay maps out the journey the two authors made with David Kessler to find the original site of the Vapniarka concentration camp. 27 There was no record that the camp had ever existed, except that Hirsch and Spitzer had in their possession a photocopy of a photograph of a cardboard model of the camp made by a survivor, as well as a photocopy of an original map of the area. When the group arrived in the modern-day town of Vapniarka, Ukraine, they were told by all those they approached that there had never been a camp in Vapniarka. 28 Whether these people had consciously erased this part of history from their memories or whether, as time passed, it was forgotten, is an issue that remains unanswered. But if the photocopy of the cardboard model and map had not come into the possession of the group - in other words, if there were not a visual record documenting that this camp had ever existed - its existence could be, and would have been, denied. Thus the visual records here become the only existing source of a denied reality.

The poignancy of this story, and its relation to Haas's photographs, is that it demonstrates that even with a visual record - in her case, a photograph - places and memories can be forgotten and erased. Photographs can be preserved in archives or museums, or passed down through generations of family members. It is through the medium of photography, and the generosity of Haas's niece, Dorothy Williams, that Haas has been identified as an important figure in the understanding of the life of an émigré photographer. Without these visual records, memories of her life and work would remain unknown, ending with Dorothy's personal memories. The preservation of Haas's photographs from both Germany and Britain allows for an exploration of how Haas used photography to overcome her own losses, suffered under the regime of the National Socialists.

Liss has noted that 'photographs maintain a closer relation to the real, and as such, become uneasy icons.' 29 A photograph of a father with his son (Fig. 3) is inscribed as *Vater und Sohn* (on its back). Although the exact date of Haas's photograph is unknown, it would appear to date from the 1930s. 30 The gentleness of the loving embrace between father and son is haunting. At a time when their surroundings in

Germany were becoming more unstable, this photograph of a father and son celebrates parenthood. This photograph erases the realities of a Germany controlled by the National Socialists, representing it as a country in which everyday life goes on in peace. Barbie Zelizer has called attention to the fact that not enough is known about how images help record events, and about whether and in which ways images function as better vehicles of proof than words, or whether word or image takes precedent in situations of conflict between what the words tell us and the picture shows us. 31 Here, Haas's photograph reveals the complexities of that time. According to Zelizer, 'the photos' broad resonance suggests that images have enigmatic boundaries which connect events in unpredictable ways.' 32 Haas's photographs offer an insight into the complexities of a German-Jewish émigré and her attempts to heal wounds.

The attempt to heal wounds is something which has been explored by others in relation to the testimony of refugees and survivors of the Holocaust. The incomprehensibility of the Holocaust has meant that many refugees' and survivors' stories have not been heard. Pictures of the past, as demonstrated by Haas's photographs, reveal a complexity that is only now beginning to be understood. In what is termed 'bearing witness' survivors, refugees and child survivors have been interviewed in order to tell their story. Dori Laub explained the story of one survivor he had interviewed,

> Hers was a life in which the new family she created […], had to give continuance and meaning, perhaps provide healing and restitution, to the so suddenly and brutally broken family of her childhood […] In her present life, she relentlessly holds on to, and searches, for what is familiar to her from her past, with only a dim awareness of what she is doing. 33

The need to hold on to aspects of the past and create a familiarity in new surroundings is something which Haas was able to do through the medium of photography. Photography remained a constant in her broken life, and the nature of her photographs provided a familial sense of home, albeit a surrogate one. It is for this reason - that Haas's home no longer existed - that I believe Haas constructed her own sense of community and family through setting up a photographic studio at her own home in Moseley. Haas established her studio with her German (non-Jewish) partner, Grete Bermbach. Her portrait photographs from Britain are primarily of white, middle-class families and women. These clients became her friends, and provided her with a family-type structure. Even though her father, brother and partner were also living in Birmingham, to be forced out of your true home to a place where you are considered an outsider, is always a traumatic and painful transition. In addition to the replacement of her family through the sitters of her photographs, I would also argue that the taking of photographs of family members demonstrates the attempt to establish a surrogate, mediated family for her lost, extended family.

I have been told that Haas returned only once to Germany, to collect some of her possessions which had been kept by a non-Jewish German woman during the war. 34 There, she witnessed the consequences of the Holocaust in her home town of Mönchengladbach, waiting for her to return to a place that she could no longer call home. Years later, Haas's niece made a journey with her husband to

Mönchengladbach in search of the family home. The house now had a new name and number, and all traces of its past had been eradicated. 35 As Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* remarks,

> Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place - the picture of it - stays, and not just in my rememory […] The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there - you who never was there - if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. 36

Barthes's *Camera Lucida* challenges our conception of memory. He pushes the boundaries of photography by acknowledging the paradoxical nature of photography and memory. However, in asserting that photography cannot, in essence, be memory, Barthes emphasises the photograph as object. Although the photograph as object is mortal, the photograph as memory is not. The act of looking at a photograph frees us from the mortal nature of the photograph itself, and allows photography to be used as a means to attempt to heal wounds and commemorate the painful past. The inconsistencies in Barthes's text may be a result of the grief he felt after the death of his mother, but they also reveal the limitations of *Camera Lucida*.37 Barthes had not considered the importance of the photograph to a person, in reviving their memories in order to tell their story or indeed to commemorate their broken past. Those who have worked on the relationship between the Holocaust, photography and memory have gone some way to reconcile survivors and refugees with their past by using the power of memory and visual record. It has been asserted in this essay that Haas used photography to go some way to restore the tears in her life and create some stability. Through her photographs, Haas's own memory lives on for future generations to further understand the life of émigrés who suffered under the regime of the National Socialists.

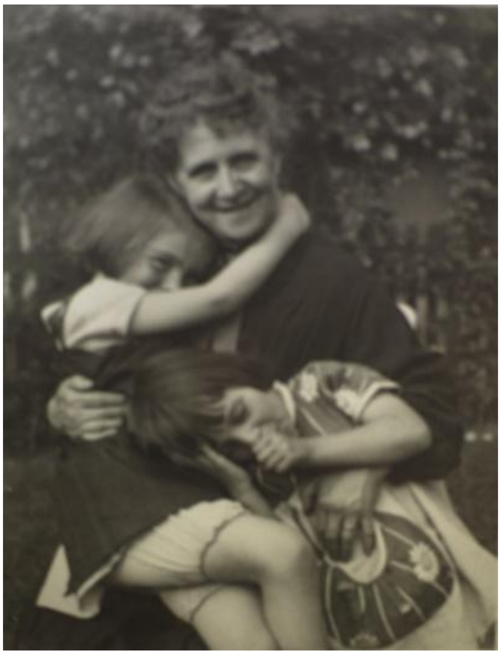

Figure 1: Lisel Haas, *Zum Muttertag (On Mother's Day)*, date unknown (c.1930s, Germany), (MS 2202 Box 15, Birmingham City Archives)

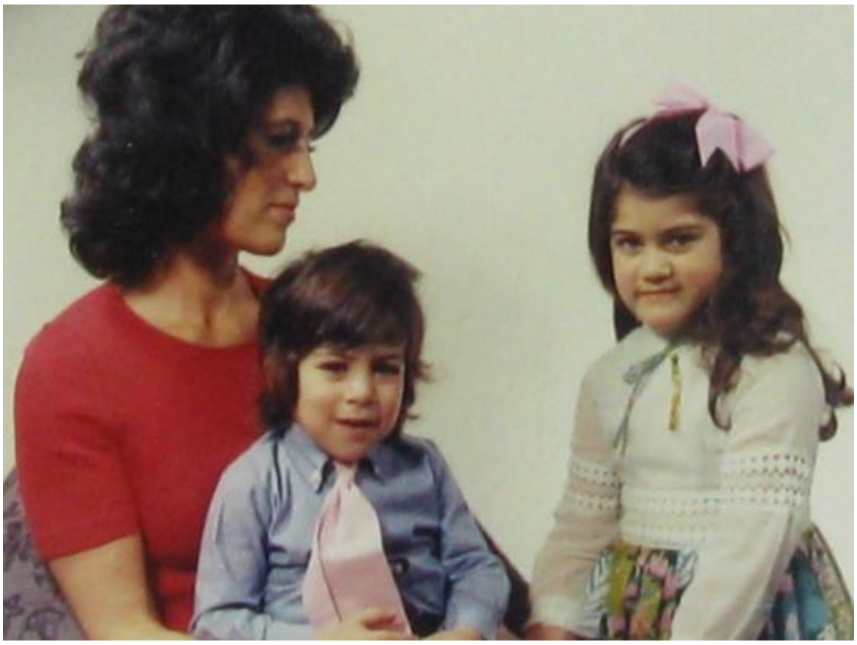

Figure 2: Lisel Haas, *Martin and Andrea Fisher, Solihull*, 1972 (Britain), (MS 2202 Box 2 Colour Prints 62-73, Birmingham City Archives)

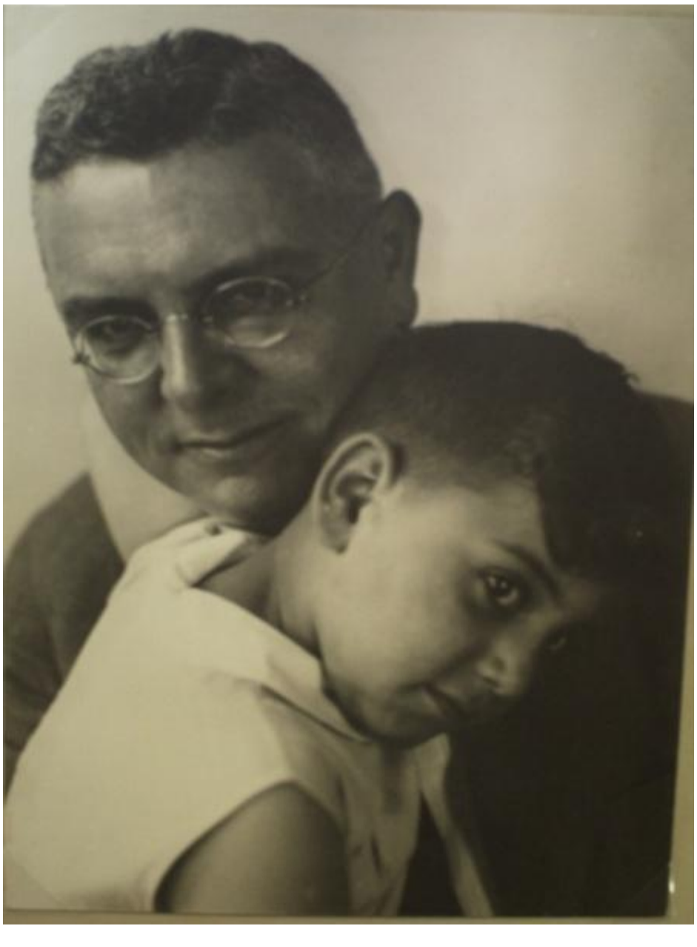

Figure 3: Lisel Haas, *Vater und Sohn (Father and Son)*, date unknown (c.1930s Germany), (MS 2202 Box 15, Birmingham City Archives)

1. This essay is based on a paper given at the Graduate Centre for Europe (GCfE) Annual Conference, *Europe: A Continent of Paradoxes?*, 16-18 April 2009. The paper, *Lisel Haas: Photography and Memory*, discussed the photographs of the German-Jewish émigré, Lisel Haas, in relation to memory and Holocaust Studies, with an introduction to Roland Barthes's exploration of memory and photography in *Camera Lucida*, *Reflections on Photography* (trans. Richard Howard 1981, Reading: Vintage, 2000). The paper and essay form part of a wider research M.Phil project on the importance of memory in the life and work of Lisel Haas.

2. Lisel Haas' papers are held at Birmingham City Archives, Central Library, Birmingham.

3. Lisel Haas referred to photography as a 'universal language' in a talk given to a Jewish women's group in Birmingham, Birmingham City Archives, date unknown.

4. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida, Reflections on Photography¬*, trans. Richard Howard 1981 (Reading: Vintage 2000), p. 91.

5. Susan Sontag (ed.), 'Introduction' in *A Roland Barthes Reader* (London: Vintage, 1993), p. xxxv.

6. Ibid, p. 70.

7. Ibid, p. 67.

8. Ibid, p. 73.

9. Ibid, p. 70.

10. Margaret Olin, 'Touching Photographs: Roland Barthes's "Mistaken Identity"', *Representations*, No. 80 (Autumn 2002), 99-118, (p. 107).

11. Ibid, pp. 107-108.

12. Andrea Liss, *Trespassing through Shadows, Memory, Photography and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota University Press,1998), p. xiii.

13. Annette Kuhn and Kirsten Emiko McAllister (eds.), *Locating Memory, Photographic Acts* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2006), p. 1.

14. Gunter Erkens, *Juden in Mönchengladbach. Band 2,* (Mönchengladbach: Stadt Mönchengladbach, 1989), p. 449.

15. The meticulousness of these stipulations can be seen fully in ibid, p. 449.

16. Nancy Wood, _Vectors of Memory, Legacies of Trauma in Postwar Europe _(Oxford and New York: Berg, 1999), p. 2.

17. Lisel Haas, ibid, date unknown.

18. Judy Weiser, *PhotoTherapy Techniques, Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums* , (San Francisco: JosseyBass 1993), p. 4.

19. Ibid.

20. Barthes, p. 92.

21. Barthes, p. 93.

22. This reference can be found in the introduction to Kuhn and McAllister, p. 13.

23. Ibid.

24. Barthes, p. 96.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. This essay was published in Kuhn and McAllister (eds.), pp. 135-153. David Kessler is the son of Dr Arthur Kessler, a survivor of the Vapniarka camp.

28. Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, '"There Was Never a Camp Here," Searching for Vapniarka' in Kuhn and McAllister, pp. 135-153

29. Liss, p. xviii.

30. The hair styles of both, and the spectacles of the father are reminiscent of the 1930s.

31. Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget, Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye*(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 2.

32. Ibid.

33. Dori Laub, 'An Event Without A Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival', in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony, Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History,* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 78.

34. Interview with Dorothy Williams, 05/11/2008.

35. Interview with D.W, 25/06/2009.

36. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* , New York, 1987, quoted in Hirsch and Spitzer, p. 145.

37. Such theories have been addressed to an extent by Olin in her essay on Barthes’s ‘mistaken identity’.

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