



Nazi officers and female auxiliaries (Helferinnen) pose on a wooden bridge in Solahütte. The man on the right carries an accordion. Karl Hoecker is pictured in the center. The original caption reads "rain coming from a bright sky" (figuratively "something unexpected"). USHMM #34858.

# Blueberries, Accordions, and Auschwitz

The evil of thoughtlessness

*Jennifer L. Geddes*

YOU WOULD THINK it was a series of photos from summer camp. The smiling faces look across a rustic wooden bridge towards the camera, react in mock surprise as the rain begins to fall, and finally run giddily towards the camera. One of them carries an accordion rather than the typical camp-song guitar, but the mood is one most of us remember fondly from summers gone by. They are obviously having a good time.

Only after a first glance, do you notice that the campers depicted are not teenagers in swimsuits, but adults in SS uniforms. The setting, it turns out, is not a summer camp but Solahütte, a retreat center for SS personnel near the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp complex in Poland. Trips to Solahütte were given to concentration camp employees as a reward for jobs well done.

Last year an American soldier anonymously donated a photo album he had found in an empty Frankfurt apartment after World War II to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. It depicts several such “summer camp” scenes, as well as photos of official ceremonies and prominent Nazi leaders such as Rudolf Hoess and Richard Baer, both commandants of Auschwitz, and the infamous Josef Mengele, who conducted brutal medical experiments on camp inmates. Less well known is the photo album’s original owner, Karl Hoecker, who was Baer’s adjutant, or chief assistant, at Auschwitz. The Hoecker album, containing 116 small photos, can be seen at the museum’s online exhibit and is accompanied by a useful history of the album that was consulted for this essay: <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/ssalbum/>.

There are relatively few other photos taken of Auschwitz during the time it was in operation. One significant additional collection is the Auschwitz album, which is now in Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial museum in Jerusalem. It was donated by a former camp prisoner, Lilly Jacob, who found it in the Dora-Mittelbau camp hospital in Germany while recovering from typhus after the war. The Auschwitz album shows the arrival of men, women, and children from Hungary, including a photo of Jacob’s two young brothers, who were gassed upon arrival at the camp. The Hoecker album’s photos of the camp and of the life of the SS personnel, thus, constitute a significant addition to the historical record, but they also raise some very important questions for us.

What are we to make of these photos? They were taken at a time when Auschwitz was working over capacity, gassing to death children and their mothers, elderly people, and anyone deemed unfit for heavy labor or medical experiments. How do we process what we see? The Solahütte photos were taken only 30 kilometers from the killing center, where over 430,000 Hungarian Jews were transported and then divided into those who would be immediately killed and those who would be worked to death. What might we learn from them today?

Contrasting the photos of the laughing, frolicking SS personnel with the photos of those who were sent to the gas chambers or to the work camps offers a terrifying illustration of “the banality of evil.” This is the often misunderstood (and maligned)

...those who do evil do not usually look like monsters, madmen, or sadists. They usually look just like you and me...

phrase used by Hannah Arendt to describe the fact that those who do evil do not usually look like monsters, madmen, or sadists. They usually look just like you and me, and often enjoy simple pleasures that we also enjoy, including good company, good food (such as fresh blueberries, as depicted in one series of photos), and festive gatherings (the album contains photos of Hoecker lighting a Christmas tree).

Arendt used the phrase “the banality of evil” to describe something that struck her when she went to Jerusalem for the *New Yorker* to cover the 1963 trial of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi leader in charge of organizing the transports of Jews to the camps. She expected Eichmann to be a calculating monster, but encountered a fool. She wondered how someone who spoke in clichés, contradicted himself, showed a surprising inability to see anything from anyone else’s perspective, and narrated his story to a Jewish police guard as if it were a hard luck story for which he expected to receive sympathy, could be responsible for such evil. There was, she stated in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, a “dilemma between the unspeakable horror of the deeds and the undeniable ludicrousness of the man who perpetrated them.”



Members of the SS Helferinnen (female auxiliaries) and SS officer Karl Hoecker sit on a fence railing in Solahütte eating bowls of blueberries. In the background is a man playing the accordion. The original caption reads "Blaubeeren" (there are blueberries here). USHMM #34767a.



Members of the SS Helferinnen (female auxiliaries) and SS officer Karl Hoecker invert their empty bowls to show they have eaten all their blueberries. The original caption reads "Blaubeeren" (there are blueberries here). USHMM #34769.

It is important to note that Arendt used the word “banality” to describe not the deeds—for what could be less “banal” than the brutal murders the Nazis committed—but rather the evil-doer himself. Eichmann was no evil genius, no sadistic monster—he was a thoughtless bureaucrat who was responsible for evil deeds beyond our imagining. It was this thoughtlessness, this lack of reflection about what he had done, that was so hard to grasp. Arendt came to the striking conclusion that thoughtlessness—that is, the failure to think reflectively about the world around us, our actions, and their possible consequences—can be a moral failing of the highest order.

According to Arendt, Eichmann was responsible for organizing the transportation of millions of Jewish men, women, and children to their deaths not because he hated Jews or had an evil essence. Rather, he was responsible for these evils because he never reflected on the moral character of his actions. We don’t usually consider thinking or reflection to be moral activities that we may be blameworthy for failing to do. Arendt, however, writes, “That such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man—that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem...the strange interdependence of thoughtlessness and evil.”

In looking at the Hoecker album today, we are given a chilling vision of this “strange interdependence of thoughtlessness and evil,” of the ways in which these SS personnel refused to think about what they were doing, failed to be reflective about the evil in which they were thoroughly engaged, and were able to enjoy a good time together with bowls of fresh blueberries and accordion music, even as they took part in mass murder. Their example should give us pause, especially when we consider Arendt’s claim that thoughtlessness can be more destructive than all our evil instincts taken together.

Most of us are far removed from the evil perpetrated by the Nazis. However, moral failings, including acts that are cruel and harmful to others, come in many forms, most quite ordinary and everyday. The SS personnel were people like us: they were not born evil—no one is—but they were also not born immune from the capacity to commit evil. They became people who were responsible for evil through their habits of action and, as Arendt points out, their habits of thought (or, rather,

Arendt came to the striking conclusion that thoughtlessness—that is, the failure to think reflectively about the world around us, our actions, and their possible consequences—can be a moral failing of the highest order.

thoughtlessness). These habits shaped their decisions to participate in a system of mass murder. Their example, their failure to reflect carefully on their actions and the consequences of those actions for others, calls us to pay attention and think deeply about what we do, why we do it, and what effect our actions may have on those around us. ■

Images contained in this essay are courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). The views or opinions expressed in this essay, and the context in which the images are used, do not necessarily reflect the views or policy of, nor imply approval or endorsement by, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.



SS officer Karl Hoecker lights a candle on a Christmas tree. USHMM #34598.