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Symbol, Testimony, Evidence: Representations of Majdanek in the 1944–45 Work of Zinovy Tolkachev

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Abstract

In July of 1944, the Red Army liberated the Majdanek concentration camp. Among the soldiers at Majdanek was Zinovy Tolkachev (1903–1977), an artist of Jewish-Ukrainian descent who was trained in Moscow and taught at the Fine Arts Academy in Kiev. In the month following the camp's liberation, Tolkachev made a series of drawings based on his own eyewitness experiences and on the testimonies of camp survivors. This article takes up the task of reconstructing the exhibitions of Zinovy Tolkachev's drawings, which have not yet received scholarly attention. It also provides an overview of the shows' reception. The article offers a critical analysis of Tolkachev's work based on reciprocal relations between the categories: document, evidence, and artwork. The text considers how and why Tolkachev's drawings were positioned at an interface between these categories and traces a tension in the drawings between representational forms that evoke universal themes, and those that express a specifically Jewish experience of the Holocaust.

The question of how to represent concentration camps and Nazi war crimes was an essential theme for visual culture and art of the late 1940s, both in Poland and throughout Europe. While the end of the war and the years that followed were profoundly shaped by the uncovering of concentration camps, it was also a moment of reckoning during which the status of images was fundamentally redefined. This was particularly true of photography and film—mediums used as documentation and evidence in the Nuremberg trials and other tribunals after 1945.¹ However, images produced after the camps were liberated were more than mere documentation, for their function was to attest to crimes while engaging the viewer's emotions. Often they were co-opted to serve specific political agendas during the reorganization of world powers that followed World War II. In the West, film and photographs of Ally-liberated camps were the subject of exhaustive interpretation and discussion, and even appeared in public exhibitions.² Images of camps liberated by the Red Army were a very different story, and their postwar circulation has yet to receive its due

attention in scholarship. This article will discuss drawings made by Zinovy Tolkachev (1903–1977) in the immediate wake of the liberation of the Majdanek concentration camp. I will also discuss traveling exhibitions of this work from 1945.

The Red Army entered the Majdanek camp on July 23 of 1944 to find approximately 1,500 prisoners, most of whom were Soviet prisoners of war. Within a matter of weeks, the Polish-Soviet Commission on German Crimes was established. On August 19, the Commission addressed the Polish Committee of National Liberation with a formal proposal to use the camp terrain, which had been devastated in the intervening month, to establish a museum on site.³ At the same time, journalists and Russian photographers flocked to the camp. For Western Allies and Russians alike, the phrase “German crimes” was loaded with problematic connotations from the war, during which it had been overused in propaganda. The phrase was also associated with the major fiasco of the Leipzig War Crimes Trials of 1921.⁴ Because of these earlier trials, toward the end of World War II there was tremendous pressure to adequately document the Nazis’ war crimes so that their perpetrators could later be sentenced in court, and to make these events known to a global public.

Russian writer Konstantin Simonov was one of the first to write about the Majdanek camp. His coverage was published on August 10 of 1944 in the newspaper “Krasnaia Zvezda” and was later broadcast as a radio program.⁵ The report was promptly translated into Polish, English and French and published in 1944 in the form of a book that also included photographs of the camp.⁶

Simonov’s report is riddled with historical inconsistencies, such as grossly inflated figures for those murdered at Majdanek and undue emphasis on the Nazis’ political motives. This interpretation of events was in line with current tendencies in Soviet propaganda, and detracted from the racial and ethnic basis of the crimes. The result was the erasure of Jewish victimhood, as Jews make only cameo appearances in the text.⁷ Simonov informs his readers that the majority of those who perished at the camp were Poles, with Russians and Ukrainians forming the next largest groups. Yet elsewhere in the text, he speaks of “an equal number of Jews from all corners of Europe imprisoned at the camp and murdered by the Germans.”⁸

Scholars have shown that despite these intermittent factual falsehoods, the writer’s language, and particularly his use of metaphor and narrative structure, decisively influenced later literary efforts to represent the camps. Fashioning his language after Ilya Ehrenburg, Simonov calls Majdanek a “death factory,” thus drawing attention to the industrialized nature of this particular genocide. This phrase would become a staple in the lexicon of the Holocaust, functioning as a near-synonym for the camps.⁹ Simonov’s text gives much attention to the camp’s topography and architecture, describing certain elements with suggestive intensity: barbed wire, gas chambers and heaps of shoes taken from prisoners. These objects become silent witnesses—metonyms for the crimes

committed at the camp. They would circulate as tropes and symbols in the literature and visual art, emerging over time to represent the camps. They also figured prominently in films like *Majdanek–Cmentarzysko Europy* [Majdanek—Cemetery of Europe].

Despite Simonov's efforts to describe the various commissions overseeing the camp operations, his real focus is the unprecedented severity of the crimes, which cannot be met with mere indifference: "What I am about to describe is too incredible, too terrifying for human faculties to grasp. Without question, this terrible affair will remain a pressing subject for lawyers, politicians, historians and doctors for a long while yet. (...) At the moment, I do not yet have all the facts and figures (...). But he who has seen such things cannot stay quiet, cannot wait. I must speak of this now, today, of the very first signs of these crimes to come to light, of all that I have heard these past few days, and of all that I have seen with my own eyes."¹⁰ The primacy of eyewitness experience over words will also be a key recurring motif in the reportage of later years.

The Polish publication of Simonov's report is predated by a short article by Jerzy Putrament that appeared in an issue of *Rzeczpospolita* from August 3, 1944.¹¹ Like Simonov, Putrament applies the metaphor "death factory" to Majdanek. Despite the article's brevity compared to Simonov's text, it deploys similar strategies for describing the camp, focusing on architecture as lasting criminal evidence. Putrament's laconic or even forensic tone for describing his observations can be seen as a form of capitulation in the face of the catastrophe's scale, which exceeds the limits of empathy and expression: "Maybe someone can describe the feelings evoked by this scene. But human sensitivity has its limits: one can react to terror only if it stays under a certain threshold. Once it spills over, it ceases to evoke anger, fear, or despair."¹²

Putrament does not object to these events in political terms (as Simonov did) or even ethical ones. Rather, he describes the crimes metaphysically as manifestations of evil or even a Mephistophelean and inherently German "demonic" nature.¹³ Perhaps as a result, the text pays scarce attention to the victims. Jewish prisoners receive only passing mention, and no context is offered to explain their presence in the camp.¹⁴

Since Soviet reporting about Majdanek was distrusted by the Allied powers, a group of international journalists was invited to join a visit to the camp in August and September of 1944.¹⁵ While some newspapers refrained from publishing the findings, the press that did result from the visit adhered, as Barbie Zelizer has argued, to conventions that influenced later reportage on the liberated camps¹⁶ One distinctive feature tied to the pervasive distrust toward press about the camps was a marked emphasis on the personal experience of being on site. A *New York Times* reporter remarked: "I have just seen the most terrible place on the face of the earth—the German concentration camp at Maidanek (...). This is a place that must be seen to be believed. (...) After

inspection of Maidanek, I am now prepared to believe any story of German atrocities, no matter how savage, cruel and depraved.”¹⁷ The same reporter declared: “This is Maidanek as I saw it.”¹⁸ Like Simonov and Putrament, he wrote at length of the camp’s topography and the scale of the terrain enclosed by barbed wire, using barracks, gas chambers, crematoria, storehouses full of shoes, and the ashes of murdered prisoners as focal points.

Considering the diverse origins of their authors, the texts discussed here converge on a surprising number of points. They share at least three elements in common: distrust in language as an adequate means of expression, a related imperative for eyewitness testimony,¹⁹ and the marginalization of Jewish victims at the service of a universalized discourse of multicultural victimhood or a preferential nationalist narrative of Polish suffering. These features are clearly constitutive for visual representations of Majdanek and have exerted remarkable influence on the collective imaginary of the camp. Perhaps due to the widely shared sentiment that words fall short in the face of these events, images became remarkably important.

Photographs of the camp were circulated in the press and accompanied Simonov’s text in a book edition published in 1944 by Yevgeny Kriger.²⁰ Some photographs were strictly documentarian and featured objects that also loomed large in the textual narration: barbed wire, Zyklon B canisters, stacked paperwork, and photographs of corpses. As David Shneer has written, the photographs were rendered in a forensic style with the primary function to objectively document the traces of a crime.²¹ A second category of photographs consists of images depicting social relations at the camp: soldiers, members of the war crime commission, and local residents, all of whom interact with material traces of the crimes. These images capture moments such as soldiers standing among victims’ shoes, groups of men and women examining the crematoria furnaces, civilians looking at corpses reduced to ashes, German soldiers forced to watch exhumations, and their confrontations with local Polish civilians.²² The dominant theme here cannot satisfactorily be described as evidence. What comes to the foreground is the emergence of a new perspective—the perspective of those who did not experience the camp in action but witnessed these terrible events after the fact.²³ Even so, these photographs, like the texts described above, refrain from explicitly referring to the Holocaust. Shneer has pointed out that most of the Soviet photographers documenting Majdanek were Jewish. He attributes the conspicuous avoidance of the Holocaust to mounting anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, and to a prevailing ideal of universalism, according to which Nazi crimes were simply crimes against humanity.²⁴

These issues all come to the fore in Aleksander Ford’s film *Majdanek—Cmentarzysko Europy* [Majdanek—Cemetery of Europe]: one of the first visual representations of a death camp that, as Stuart Liebman has written, laid a specific groundwork for filming the camps.²⁵ Ford’s film

borrowed and reworked some of the representational techniques used by writers and photographers, gravitating toward similar visual emblems like barbed wire and heaps of victims' shoes. Some frames even reproduce existing photographs.²⁶ It is crucial, however, to acknowledge the film's pronounced political overtones and nationalist message. The opening scenes recount the liberation of Lublin, depicting the local population elatedly welcoming the Red Army. The following sequences turn to the Nazis' deeds, starting with the massacre of prisoners at the Lublin Castle, which occurred just before the Red Army reached the city limits. From there, the film moves on to the Majdanek camp itself. The events at the castle and camp are co-opted into a narrative of liberation intended to legitimate the Polish Committee of National Liberation's actions. Significantly, the films' narration outdoes earlier texts in its portrayal of Majdanek as a site of Polish martyrology. In consequence it detracts attention from Jewish victims who in fact constituted the majority of those murdered. In a sequence of testimonies by camp survivors, a young man tells of losing his entire family. He is introduced as "Dutch," and his Jewishness goes unmentioned.²⁷ Scholars have noted that the film's omission of Jewish experience was a product of its propaganda function, for its target audience was Polish, and its task was to legitimate the new communist regime. It was therefore essential that viewers be able to identify with the victims, and, even more importantly, with the gratitude they felt toward their liberators.²⁸ The film's concluding scene drives this message home: it depicts the Catholic burial of exhumed victims. In the background the Red Army choir can be heard singing one of the most popular Polish national and patriotic songs, *Rota* [The Oath].

As Jeremy Hicks has shown in his research, films and photographs of Majdanek should be set apart from later images of liberated camps in Western Europe, for the former are less reliant on shock value. American photographers took great interest in the physical harm done to camp prisoners, their cameras hovering on survivors in extreme states of famish or pain. They sought to agitate the viewer by showing deformed and damaged bodies. Their Soviet counterparts took a different approach, portraying survivors in a manner that avoided disturbing imagery and was therefore more accessible to viewers' empathic identification.²⁹ This representational strategy did not efface the individual subject. To the contrary, it humanized the former prisoners. On the other hand, it reinforced an impression of universalism premised on the implicit erasure of Jewish experience, which was subordinated to an ideological message that legitimated (at least in the case of Majdanek) the new communist order in Poland. This paradoxically humanist and universalist narrative of Nazi atrocities served the nationalistic expropriation of camp discourse. Hicks calls this process the "Sovietization of the Holocaust." Speaking specifically of film, he defines it thus: "Sovietizing the Holocaust meant editing images of Jews to appeal as widely as possible to the Soviet population, whose feared and presumed anti-Semitism might otherwise cause this call for vengeance to founder."³⁰

The popular, mediated memory of the camp was not solely the product of reportage, photography and film. Art has played a decisive (if forgotten) role as well. Of particular interest is the Ukrainian-Jewish artist Zinovy Tolkachev and his traveling exhibitions in 1945. By the outbreak of World War II, Tolkachev, born in 1903, was already an experienced artist.³¹ During the Russian Civil War, he joined the Komsomol and studied painting in Moscow before returning to Kiev to teach at the Fine Arts Academy. When the Soviet Union declared war against the Third Reich, Tolkachev enlisted in the army and joined the 1st Ukrainian Front stationed in Lublin in 1944. It was there, upon the liberation of the Majdanek camp, that he made a cycle of work named for the camp.³² This was not the artist's first attempt to depict wartime themes, for already in 1943, he had painted the series *Okupanci* [Occupants], which portrays the plight of Soviet civilians in German-occupied territories. Later on, when members of the Polish-Soviet Commission saw Tolkachev's work, they quickly undertook to exhibit it during the trials of the Majdanek personnel. The trials ran from November 27 to December 2 of 1944 in the Lublin courts. Documentation of the camp by Soviet photographers was exhibited in the same halls several days later.³³

Tolkachev's exhibition, titled *Majdanek w sztuce* [Majdanek in Art], was hosted at the Lublin Municipal Museum from November 6 to December 2. It was the first exhibition organized by the Majdanek State Museum and, surely, the first attempt to show an artistic response to the camp.³⁴ On November 27, while the show was on display, Ford's film *Majdanek–Cmentarzysko Europy* had its premier.³⁵ These many events were all intertwined. Together, they reconfigured the orbits of politics, aesthetics and memory, effacing the boundaries between otherwise stable categories of evidence, testimony and the work of art.

Majdanek w sztuce consisted of thirty-two pieces.³⁶ In their basic premise, the works starkly contrasted with the representational strategies described above, be those literary, cinematic, or photographic. Journalism, photographs and films generally worked with material evidence and discrete objects such as paperwork or shoes, both of which functioned dually as evidence and *pars pro toto* metonyms for the tragedy and associated crimes. Tolkachev's work indirectly alludes to this camp iconography but nonetheless constructs a new image that reaches far beyond what the artist himself witnessed. Presumably he drew also from what he was able to imagine after speaking with survivors, and by consulting the findings of the local commission. His drawings divulge things he could not have witnessed firsthand, such as scenes that clearly predate the camp's liberation.

The drawings of the camp architecture seem to adhere the most faithfully to the earlier conventions. *Zima* [Winter], for instance, is a bleak portrait of the oppressive structures and ambient gloom prevailing over the camp: barracks, watchtowers and fences are all obscured under

dense snowbanks. In the lower left corner, a dead man lies amidst the snowdrifts, his footprints still visible in the snow. The work's composition is constructed around a tension between the dread evoked by the monotonous architecture and death, which appears, incongruently, as both singular and incidental. The uniqueness and invisibility of death stand in stark contrast with the rows of camp barracks extending into the horizon. While *Zima* shares certain visual tropes with Tolkachev's later works made at the Auschwitz concentration camp, which was liberated in the winter of 1945, the drawing of Majdanek is a product of the artist's imagination, for this camp was liberated in the summer. A similar ambiguity haunts the work *Dymią piece* [Smoking Furnaces], which depicts the crematorium chimneys and barbed wire fences made iconic by photography and film. Unlike their photographic counterparts, however, the chimneys in Tolkachev's drawing emit smoke. The whole drawing is rendered in a vivid color scheme of red and black that intensifies the work's dramatic tone.



Zinovy Tolkachev, "Zima" [Winter], from reproductions of the series Majdanek, 26 x 36 cm., print on paper, 1945, Żydowski Instytut Historyczny im. Emanuela Ringelbluma w Warszawie [The Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw].

Several of Tolkachev's drawings depict scenes from daily life at the camp. In *Apel* [Roll-Call], prisoners line up in a row. At their feet lie dead bodies. Facing the prisoners is a group of Nazi soldiers in uniform. Significantly, the Nazis stand in shadow, which leaves their faces obscured and indistinct from one another. The prisoners' faces, on the other hand, are rendered clearly and with idiosyncratic features. Not unlike *Dymią piece*, *Apel* has a monochromatic color scheme limited to various shades of blue.

Tolkachev's drawings, more so than other images of the camp, make space for the experiences of Jewish prisoners. The drawing *Krępiecki las* [Krępiec Forest] alludes to mass killings in Krępiec, where approximately 2,500 Jews from the Majdan Tatarski ghetto were shot in 1942.³⁷ The drawing captures the moment just before the execution: a terrified woman embraces several children, the youngest of whom is an infant tucked into her arm. She faces two soldiers, one of

whom aims his Karabiner at her body. A second allusion to the mass killing of Jews can be found in *3-ego listopada 1943* [November 3, 1943]. The work's title coincides with the date of the German campaign *Aktion Erntefest*, which was part of Operation Reinhard (*Einsatz Reinhard*)—a plan to murder the full Jewish population residing in the so-called Generalgouvernement. November 3 is a day marked by profound tragedy, for over 1,800 Jews were killed at Majdanek concurrently with executions at other sites.³⁸ Tolkachev's drawing features a maturing girl and a boy some years younger. The girl wears a handkerchief to cover her head, while the boy wears a striped camp uniform. The children stand amidst corpses. Only fragmented body parts are visible on the ground, while the camp looms large in the background. From survivors' testimonies, we know that indeed, a group of women and men survived this execution and were then forced to sort the victims' clothing and burn their bodies.³⁹ Perhaps the children depicted here were among those whose lives were spared. On the other hand, could it be that the artist, as he did in *Krępiecki las*, is capturing the moment preceding their death? This element of ambiguity contrasts with the literality of Tolkachev's other work, such as his drawings of the murder of Majdanek prisoners in gas chambers.



Zinovy Tolkachev, "3-ego listopada 1943" [November 3, 1943], from reproductions of the series Majdanek, 26 x 36 cm., print on paper, 1945, Żydowski Instytut Historyczny im. Emanuela Ringelbluma w Warszawie [The Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw].

Accounts of the mass shooting in the Krępiec forest and of Operation Reinhard, of which the 1943

executions were a part, did not appear in the newspaper reportage of those early postwar years. We should remember that the press had a tendency to downplay the genocide of the Jewish people. Which begs the question: to what extent were Tolkachev's references to actual events legible to contemporary viewers? The fact that the depicted subjects were Jewish is established mainly by the drawings' titles and context, rather than the images themselves. The only drawing to include an explicitly Jewish visual motif is called *Taleskoten*. In it we see a torn tallis caught on Majdanek's barbed wire, where it waves in the wind like a flag. This motif would later become iconic in art about the Holocaust (as in the work of Jonasz Stern). Because of these developments, when we study the drawing in hindsight, its uniqueness may elude us, for it only becomes apparent when we revisit the discourse of its moment and the contemporaneous erasure of the Holocaust. After Majdanek was liberated, storage facilities were discovered in Lublin that held the possessions of victims of Operation Reinhard. Among the items were prayer shawls (tallisim).⁴⁰ Yet these were not the images that dominated public discourse: the master metonym was piles of shoes, which connoted no particular nationality and only indicated, if anything, victims' gender and age. For later images of the Holocaust, as found in work by Stern and others, the tallis had a symbolic function, while for Tolkachev its purpose was twofold: it was a metaphor, but also a concrete material remainder of the victims.



Zinovy Tolkachev, "Taleskoten", from reproductions of the series Majdanek, 26 × 36 cm., print on paper, 1945, Żydowski Instytut Historyczny im. Emanuela Ringelbluma w Warszawie [The Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw].

We might say, then, that Tolkachev's drawings are suspended between the specific historical events evoked by their titles, and visual conventions that are ahistorical and outside of time, leaving intact the message of a universal tragedy. This representational style is taken to its logical conclusion in a later series from 1945 titled *Chrystus na Majdanku* [Christ at Majdanek].⁴¹ The painting *Ecce Homo* shows Jesus dressed in the signature striped uniform of the camps. Various symbols mark his chest: the yellow Star of David with the label "Jude," which the Jewish inhabitants of occupied lands were forced to wear. We also see the letter "P," which was used to

identify Polish prisoners. Finally, we see the red triangle that designated political prisoners. Surrounding Jesus is a gang of jeering Nazis. The composition calls to mind the iconographic motif of the mocking of Christ.

That Tolkachev's universalism preempted the "Sovietization of the Holocaust" and the wrongful appropriation of these events is evident from a poster promoting the artist's exhibition in Lublin in 1944. The poster is a reproduction of his drawing *Bezimienny* [Nameless], featuring a prisoner dressed in camp stripes. On his chest are an identification number and a clearly drawn triangle with the letter "P." The drawing can be read in the context of other works from the *Majdanek* cycle such as *Napiętnowany* [The Branded], which offers a rear view of a prisoner with a shaved head and jacket embroidered with the large letters KL (for Konzentrationslager). Both works portray the objectification of camp prisoners and the dehumanizing act of replacing someone's name with a number or symbol. Nevertheless, the protagonist of *Bezimienny* is clearly among Majdanek's Polish prisoners. This detail allowed the work to be smoothly assimilated into a nationalist discourse that asserted Poles as the camps' primary victims.

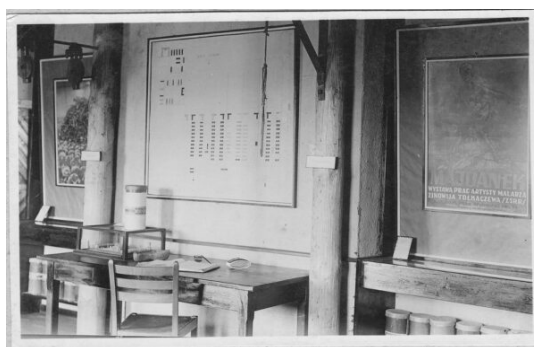
This attitude rings out further still in the exhibition catalog, which announces the newly founded museum's mission to memorialize the "martyrology of the Polish people and other nations of Europe."⁴² The exhibition itself is assigned the task of commemorating a "human tragedy." To justify the show's existence, the catalog invokes the inadequacy of words: "All the Science Commissions' statements on the history of this atrocious crime site and on the vast numbers of people murdered at Majdanek cannot possibly capture the torment that mankind experienced on these grounds. (...) The experiences and feelings of the artist Zinovy Tolkachev, transfixed in his art, shed a harsh light on this immense and unprecedented tragedy to which nearly all the nations of Europe were subjected. The exhibition (...) is proof that horrible images still linger in the artist's eyes and are delivered to us in perfect form."⁴³ The catalog text manages to omit the fact that Tolkachev was depicting events he did not see firsthand. To the contrary, the artist is made out to be an eyewitness.

Tolkachev's show and the Majdanek photographs both garnered enormous interest, drawing audiences of 7,000 and 2,500, respectively.⁴⁴ This may be why, in 1945, a second traveling exhibition called *Majdanek* was organized as a follow-up to Tolkachev's show. *Majdanek* consisted of photographs and drawings made by Tolkachev at Majdanek and Auschwitz along with several objects from the camps.⁴⁵ The show toured through Rzeszow, Cracow, Katowice, Lodz and Warsaw,⁴⁶ and there were plans to take it abroad.⁴⁷ These shows were organized at the same time as the Majdanek State Museum's inaugural permanent exhibition which opened on September 2 of 1945 in Barrack 62, and included several motifs culled from the traveling show,

work by Tolkachev, and a map of Europe that appeared in the Cracow show, as I will discuss below.⁴⁸



Portion of the first permanent exhibition of the Majdanek State Museum, Barrack 62, 1945, Muzeum Państwowe na Majdanku [The Archive of Majdanek State Museum].



Portion of the first permanent exhibition of the Majdanek State Museum, Barrack 62, 1945, Muzeum Państwowe na Majdanku [The Archive of Majdanek State Museum].

The traveling shows were announced by detailed news articles often filled with intense and brutal information about the treatment of Majdanek prisoners. The camp itself, in keeping with the convention of the times, would be referred to as the “death factory” or “hangman’s scaffold.”⁴⁹ Majdanek was listed alongside Auschwitz and Dachau as an exemplar of German genocidal politics. In Cracow, the show received an extensive review in *Dziennik Polski* [The Polish Daily], where it was called “an exposition of crime and harm.”⁵⁰ Even the show’s institutional setting—the National Museum—has patriotic weight, for the critic deliberately points out that the museum’s collection includes Jan Matejko’s canonical painting *Hołd Pruski* [Prussian Homage]. The show’s opening was attended by the Mayor of Cracow, Alfred Jan Fiderkiewicz, and the Chair of the Polish Artists’ Union, Czesław Rzepiński. The latter formally greeted Tolkachev—an implicit nod to Polish-Soviet collaboration in the cultural sphere.

The first exhibition hall featured a large map of Europe that was, rather poignantly, encircled by barbed wire. In the area corresponding to Majdanek, the flags of 28 nations were pinned in the map. The included nations were those whose citizens had been murdered at the camp. Crucially,

the Polish flag was larger than the others (“the largest banner was of red and white, for Poland had suffered the most casualties”). Just beneath the map was an urn holding ashes of Majdanek victims.⁵¹ The exhibition also featured found objects from the camp, such as victims’ shoes, Zyklon B canisters, prisoners’ personal documents and photographs of the sites where prisoners were murdered along with others depicting the trial of the Majdanek personnel.

Two exhibition halls were devoted to Tolkachev’s work. The following artists are also named on the exhibition roster: Janusz Maria Brzeski, Zygmunt Strychalski and Kazimierz Podsadecki.⁵² The show was accompanied by a film about Majdanek (most likely Ford’s *Majdanek–Cmentarzysko Europy*). According to the review, the film was “filled with images of Warsaw and war reportage from Operation Kutuzov in 1943.”⁵³ The critic had high praise for Tolkachev’s work: “Tolkachev’s images are harrowing. They state plainly that which cannot be expressed in words and effectively convey the true abyss of terror that is this camp of destruction. Some works evoke the terrible paintings of Goya or Rops. This is clearly the work of a great talent, but also the fruit of a man’s effort to penetrate, with his artistic soul, to the depths of this unfathomable crime, and feel the torment of the millions who perished at Majdanek.”⁵⁴

A similar interpretation that also situates the artist as intermediary between victims and the public can be found in the introduction to the Cracow show’s catalog: “In making work about Majdanek, this artist has, with full empathy, taken upon himself the tragedy of those tormented and murdered at the camp. In his visionary images, he captures life and death at Majdanek. Tolkachev approached these matters psychologically. He therefore forces the onlooker to reflect: what thoughts could be occupying the mind of one who gazed out over the camp’s barbed wire perimeter and knew there was no exit? While the artist avoids scenes of outright gore, he still manages to touch a nerve by showing how Germans and fascism shattered immemorial human laws.”⁵⁵ As demonstrated here, Tolkachev’s work was interpreted as a kind of mediated testimony derived from the artist’s empathetic countenance. This testimony, unlike photographs or collected objects, was seen to be directly and intimately wedded to the prisoners’ experience, which increased the impression that the tragedy was universal. The artist’s positionality, his capacity to “empathize” with the fates of others, and his focused attention on actual events (like the murder of Jewish people during Operation Reinhard) are never questioned. Tolkachev’s drawings have multiple functions as emotive works of art that are nonetheless valued for their documentarian authenticity, which associates them just as closely with testimonies and criminal evidence.

The show was displayed in a similar framework when it traveled to Warsaw, where it was housed in the headquarters of the National Development Bank in 1945. While this edition of the show did not have its own catalog, a close look at its local reception can be found by consulting radio

reportage. According to one reporter, the Warsaw show entailed a comparable selection of objects and photographs. Piotr Sobolewski of the Majdanek State Museum was among those to report on the show. He described Tolkachev as an artist “capable of profound empathy for those imprisoned in concentration camps.” He attributed great significance to the Warsaw setting and symbolically aligned and even conflated the city with the camp: “alongside the Majdanek crematorium we see our Warsaw as one vast crematorium.”⁵⁶

The discourse that emerged around the traveling Majdanek exhibition demonstrates that combinations of different media and means of expression created a space prone to semantic displacements that blurred the distinction between evidence, metaphor, information, art and testimony. In this space, material evidence had a dual function as a metonym of atrocity. A map’s function to provide information fell secondary to its symbolic power to superimpose Majdanek over the ruins of Warsaw. In this context, Tolkachev’s work, despite being an expression of mediated, “prosthetic memory,”⁵⁷ was assigned the status of eyewitness testimony. In this constructed environment, the viewer was free to take on multiple roles: witness, observer, and finally, victim. The gaps between these discrete categories had been subordinated to a nationalist and martyrological memory paradigm. All this suggests that the question of how to mediate the history of the Holocaust and concentration camps, which remains crucial for the “postmemory” discourse emerging today,⁵⁸ was equally urgent in the early postwar years.

Translated by Eliza Rose

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3. Janina Kiełboń and Edward Blawejder, eds., *Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku w latach 1944–1947: wybór dokumentów* [The Majdanek State Museum, 1944-1947: Select Documentation] (Lublin: Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku, 2004), 5, 6. ↵
4. David Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 140–141; Christian Delage, *Caught on Camera*, 48; Paweł Machcewicz, “Droga do Norymbergi. Geneza sądowych rozliczeń ze zbrodniami III Rzeszy” [The Road to Nuremberg: A Genealogy of Court Rulings over the Crimes of the Third Reich], *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość*, no. 1 (2015): 81–83. ↵
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6. Konstanty Simonow, *Obóz zagłady* [The Extermination Camp] (Moscow: Wydawnictwo Ludowego Komisarjatu Obrony, 1944). ↵
7. Hicks, 251. ↵
8. Simonow, 6. ↵
9. Simonow, 17; Hicks, 251. ↵
10. Simonov, 1. ↵
11. Jerzy Putrament, “Fabryka śmierci w Majdanku” [Majdanek: Death Factory], *Rzeczpospolita*, August 5, 1944, 3. ↵
12. Putrament, 3. ↵
13. “Legends speak of a devil who plots to rob humans of their souls so he can later claim them for Hell.” Putrament, 3. ↵
14. See: Agnieszka Haska, “Dowody i zeznania. Świadczenia o Zagładzie w pierwszych latach powojennych” [Evidence and Statements: Holocaust Testimonies from the Early Postwar Years], *Teksty Drugie*, no. 3 (2018): 362–365. ↵
15. Zelizer, 51–52. ↵
16. Zelizer, 53. ↵
17. W. H. Lawrence, “Nazi Mass Killing Laid Bare in Camp: Victims Put at 1,500,000 in Huge Death Factory of Gas Chambers and Crematories,” *New York Times*, August 30, 1944, 1, 9. ↵
18. Lawrence, 9. ↵
19. Zelizer has argued that attempts to referentially describe Majdanek in writing must then be supplemented by images. See: Zelizer, 56. ↵
20. Yevgeny Kriger, *Niemiecka fabryka śmierci w Lublinie* [German Death Factory in Lublin] (Moscow: Wydawnictwo Literatury w Językach Obcych, 1944). The book contains

- a translation of an article that had been published in *Izwiestija*. ↵
21. Shneer, 152–164. ↵
 22. Shneer, 161–162. ↵
 23. Shneer, 100–108. ↵
 24. Shneer, 168–170. ↵
 25. Stuart Liebman, “Documenting the Liberation of the Camps: The Case of Aleksander’s Ford *Vernichtungslager Majdanek – Cmentarzysko Europy* (1944),” in *Lessons and Legacies. VII: The Holocaust in International Perspective*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 334–335. ↵
 26. Liebman, 337. ↵
 27. Liebman, 339–340. ↵
 28. Liebman, 340–341; Jeremy Hicks, *First Films of the Holocaust* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 166–170. For more on nationalist strategies intended to legitimate the communist regime in Poland, see: Marcin Zaremba, *Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm. Nacjonalistyczna legitymizacja władzy komunistycznej w Polsce* [Communism, Legitimation, Nationalism: Nationalist Legitimation of the Communist Regime in Poland] (Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, Wydawnictwo TRIO, 2005). ↵
 29. Hicks, 166–168. ↵
 30. Hicks, 12–13. ↵
 31. This summary of the artist’s biography draws from the book: *Private Tolkatchev at the Gates of Hell: Majdanek and Auschwitz Liberated: Testimony of an Artist*, ed. Yehudit Shendar (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2005), 9–11. ↵
 32. See: *Majdanek: wystawa prac artysty-malarza Zinowija Tołkaczewa* [Majdanek: An Exhibition of the Work of Zinovy Tolkachev] (Lublin: Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku, 1944). ↵
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 35. Hicks, *First Films of the Holocaust*, 157. ↵
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 37. See: Kuwałek Robert, “Zbrodnie w Lesie Krępieckim w świetle zeznań świadków” [Witness Statements Shed New Light on the Krępiec Forest Crimes], *Zeszyty Majdanka*, no. 21 (2001): 282–306. ↵
 38. Marta Grudzińska and Marta Kubiszyn, “‘To was tutaj tak strasznie biją? [...] Nie, nas nie. Tylko Żydów.’ Żydzi w obozie na Majdanku w świetle relacji polskich więźniów” [‘It’s You They Beat So Brutally Here? [...] No, Not Us. Only the Jews.’: Jews at Majdanek in the Eyes

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40. Kielboń and Blawejder, 20. ↵
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49. Sch., “Okropną prawdę o Majdanku ukaże wkrótce specjalna wystawa w Krakowie” [The Terrible Truth about Majdanek: Soon to be Revealed at a Special Exhibition in Kraków], *Dziennik Polski*, ↵
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51. Sch., “Okropną prawdę o Majdanku...,” 3; Banach, 279. ↵
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57. Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004): 25–49. ↩
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