Faces, places, heirs. The “memorial archeology” of photographer Tomasz Kizny

Portfolio

Visages, lieux, héritiers. « L'archéologie mémorielle » du photographe

Tomasz Kizny

Luba Jurgenson

Translator: Jennie Malcolm

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/3195>

DOI: 10.4000/temoigner.3195

ISSN: 2506-6390

This article is a translation of:

Visages, lieux, héritiers. « L'archéologie mémorielle » du photographe Tomasz Kizny - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/3189> [fr]

Publisher:

Éditions du Centre d'études et de documentation Mémoire d'Auschwitz, Éditions Kimé

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 October 2015

Number of pages: 20-33

ISSN: 2031-4183

Electronic reference

Luba Jurgenson, "Faces, places, heirs. The “memorial archeology” of photographer Tomasz Kizny”, *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire* [Online], 121 | 2015, Online since 01 October 2016, connection on 04 February 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/3195> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/temoigner.3195>

FACES, PLACES, HEIRS

THE “MEMORIAL ARCHOLOGY” OF PHOTOGRAPHER TOMASZ KIZNY

LThe work of memorial archeology conducted by the photographer Tomasz Kizny (*Gulag*, Firefly Books, 2004; *The Great Terror in the USSR from 1937 to 1938*, Lausanne: Noir sur Blanc, 2013) is presented in three aspects: faces, places, heirs. Faces of the condemned captured by the photographic services of the Muscovite prisons of the NKVD a few days or even hours before execution ; killing or

mass burial sites spread across the territories of the former USSR; and descendants of victims or memory protagonists who discovered mass graves sites.

The anthropometric mug shots, expanded and reworked to remove wear marks that might distract the viewer and impede a genuine encounter, were initially intended to verify the identity of the condemned before execution. They now resemble death masks removed from living persons. The photographer intends not only to snatch from oblivion a few dozen victims whose eyes “speak” on behalf of hundreds of thousands of ghosts stuck in archival limbo, but also to provide a “social collective portrait”, showing that repression affected all sections of the population without exception.

Rethinking the Great Terror through images leads us to the massacre and burial sites that Kizny has been visiting for over twenty years. Covered by industrial areas or landfills, under the tarmac of cities or the waters of dams (unless they are lost in the wilderness), these burial sites are far from all being officially commemorated. Some of these

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places have even been symbolic of other events, such as the Bykivnia mass grave that has been wrongly assigned to Nazi violence until 1989. Two thirds of the mass graves are unknown and many sites devoid of any commemoration activity. Kizny chose these landscapes of absence to be the subject of a work of documentation, turning the image of memorial void into a type of visual archive. After the exhumation of the remains and their funeral with a religious or military ceremony, sometimes the landscape of obliteration turns into a place of pilgrimage. The image of the forest near Voronezh depicts such funerals consisting of Orthodox rites performed in the presence of relatives of the victims, representatives of the Memorial Association (www.memo.ru, English version on www.memo.ru/eng/) and local authorities. Red coffins filled with bones that bear a striking resemblance to tree branches present

a disturbing image of the body returning to a nature that seems to have taken up the task to uncover the violence it has witnessed.

These graves were often found during construction works. Now marked by memorial signs, crosses, photographs and pieces of embroidery, burial sites are becoming spaces of contemplation for descendants. They had been uncertain of the fate of their missing for several decades, until they were able to consult judicial records in the 1990s. However, they had to await the memorialization of the necropoles to know where their loved ones remained. A lot passed away – and will pass away – without having had access to these details. ■

Luba Jurgenson

(Translation: Jennie Malcolm)

◆ Alexei
Grigorievich
Zheltikov.
47 years old,
Russian, locksmith
in the Moscow
Underground
workshops.
Arrested
8 July 1937.
Accused of
belonging to
a counter-
revolutionary
terrorist group.
Condemned
to death
31 October 1937.
Executed the
following day.

◆ Raisa
Samouilovna
Bochlen.
20 years old,
Jewish, typist
for the Northern
Sea route
Administration.
Arrested 23
September 1937.
Accused of spying
for Japan.
Condemned
to death
29 October 1937.
Executed 3
November 1937.

◆ Vasily
Semyonovich
Kurenkov.
51 years old,
Russian, unskilled
farm worker.
Arrested 10 August
1937.
Accused of anti-
Soviet propaganda.
Condemned
to death
19 August 1937.
Shot
21 August 1937.

◆ Dorotea Wilhelmovna Friedlender. 44 years old, Jewish, member of the German Communist party, teacher in an accounting and economics college. Arrested 3 December 1937. Accused of belonging to a counter-revolutionary organization. Condemned to death 25 April 1938. Executed the same day.

◆ Hermann
Karlovič Borosch
21 years old,
German, machine
operator.
Arrested
6 October 1937.
Accused of
belonging to a
Fascist spy ring.
Condemned
to death 30
November 1937.
Executed
8 December 1937.
This photograph
was taken 3 days
before his death.

◆ Kiev region. A forest near the ancient village of Bykovnia where the bodies of between 30,000 and 100,000 victims remain. Discovered by the Nazis in 1941, this mass grave was after the war made a heritage site of a massacre perpetrated by the Germans. A monument to victims “tortured by the Fascist occupier” was inaugurated in 1988 during the Perestroika. During the 1960s, dissident artists tried to reveal that they had been victims of the NKVD (*Narodnyy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del* – The People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs), sometimes risking their lives. The Soviet authorities officially recognized the massacre in 1989. Embroidered shawls are knotted around trees as “memorial signs” and are elements of traditional Ukrainian rites.

◆ Tomsk – Nikolay Kalmykov's estate located on the slope of the Kashtak ravine near the former NKVD prison. In 1990 a human skeleton was discovered in the yard of this house. The hands had been tied with barbed wire and a bullet had pierced the skull. On several occasions human remains had previously been found on the site during gardening works. The ravine, the prison built in 1871 and barracks which once served as execution venues, have now been destroyed and replaced by a four-storey building (in the background). Up to 10,000 estimated victims.

◆ Voronezh – A wood in the northeast suburbs in the Dubovka district, near an old NKVD prison where executions occurred. Approximately 8000 victims. The remains of those shot were exhumed in 2008.

◆ Tyumen – Warehouses of the Zodchie repair and construction shops located in the western suburb of the city on the site of the former Zatyumenskoye cemetery. The NKVD buried those shot between 1937 and 1938. 2194 known victims.

♦ “I feel great gratitude because I know now where my father rests. Is it possible not to know where your family is buried? I knew all the other places; I knew where my grandparents, my mother, my brother and my sister were buried, and now I know where my father is. My soul is now at peace. They are waiting for me.”

Born in 1928, retired school teacher Elizaveta Petrovna Shatalova is the daughter of Piotr Pavlovich Pestrakov, a carpenter shot on 17 December 1937 aged 41. Seventy years later, during the exhumation in the Dubrovka woods in 2007, a document in Ivan Dukhovskiy's name was found in a leather wallet. This helped to establish the identity of 47 other victims, including Piotr Pestrakov. Elizaveta Shatalova went to her father's execution site and participated in the solemn burial of the remains of those victims exhumed at Dubrovka in 2008. She was 81 years old.

◆ “They came at 4 in the morning. They knocked. They made us get up and held us against the wall. Suddenly, one of them punched my father in the face. He must have had something in his glove because my father was bleeding and he spat out his broken teeth.”

Natalya Georgiyevna Rybina (Mikhaleva), a retired shop manager born in 1924, and Dmitry Georgiyevich Mikhalev, a retired radio engineer born in 1929. Their father Georgy Romanovich Mikhalev fled the countryside for the city to avoid being deported as a kulak. He worked for construction companies in Voronezh and was shot on 17 December 1937, aged 52.

♦ “A person should not disappear without a trace. He should have a grave. This is what distinguishes people from butterflies. Butterflies have short lives and no memories; people live for a long time and must remember. Memory makes the person a human being. People are people, not merely a population.”

Yuri Alekseyevich Dmitriyev, born in 1956. Member of the ‘Memorial’ organization of Karelia (1990-1997) and the Republican Commission for the Restitution of Rights of the Rehabilitated Victims of Political Repression. Founder of the academy of legal and social protection. He participated in the exhumation of Sulazh-Gora (1989-1992) in Petrozavodsk and Sandarmokh (1997) and led the exhumation work at Krasny Bor (1997-1998). He discovered the large graveyard of prisoners from Gulag camps along the Baltic canal and the White Sea ‘Badgers Mount’ (2003); mass graves on the Solovki Islands (2006); a cemetery near Kem on the White Sea coast (2007), and other burial sites. It was on his initiative that memorial plaques have been installed in these places.