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Hans Citroen, Barbara Starzyńska. *Auschwitz-Oświęcim: The Hidden City in the East.* Utrecht: Post Editions, 2011. Illustrations, maps. 416 pp. $59.95 (paper), ISBN 978-946083050-1.

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Where Is Auschwitz? Or, People Live There?

Auschwitz-Oświęcim is unsettling. Visiting the site of the death factories, the mass murder and exploitation of men and women from all over Nazi-occupied Europe, and the symbolic center of the breakdown of all norms in a Polish town is a deeply disturbing experience. Reading the book of the same title unhinges crucial assumptions, especially about the separation and distinction between the German-named camp and the Polish-named town. Reconsidering the history and memory of both places and their inseparability is the major accomplishment of an unwieldy book that poses many demands on the reader, both in regard to the physical act of reading it and the intellectual effort to make sense of it.

Originally published in Dutch also in 2011, *Auschwitz-Oświęcim* traces a literal and figurative journey of the photographer Hans Citroen to Auschwitz, the place where his grandfather was imprisoned during the Nazi regime. Together with his partner, Barbara Starzyńska, Citroen unearths the history of the concentration camp and its connection with, and embeddedness in, the local history and economy of the town Oświęcim. The camp and the town were separate entities, Starzyńska had learned when growing up in the town: "Auschwitz is the camp and Oświęcim is the city" (p. 24). Their joint travels through local and regional archives and site surveys challenge this mantra, leading Starzyńska to become increasingly skeptical about the local historiography that, no surprise, aims to keep the history of extermination and exploitation at a distance.

The pair's research and ruminations, begun in the early 1990s, are recalled in a combination of written text and visual images, resulting in a book that is to be read in two directions. Short vignettes or minutes of conversations between Citroen and Starzyńska, or with archivists or museum staff produce a textual narrative of 145 pages, structured in three parts: "On Holiday to Auschwitz," "Judenrampe," and "The Town and the Factories." The narrative is accompanied by 72 pages of historical photography, drawings, and maps retrieved from various archives that trace the building of the camp and the I. G. Farben factory as well as the Nazi plans to rebuild the town. In reverse direction, the book begins with 191 pages of color photographs, taken by Citroen between 2004 and 2009, in and around the memorial sites Auschwitz and Auschwitz-Birkenau and the town Oświęcim and its environs, depicting the material traces of the history described in the opposite part of the book. The idea of the book is interesting in its attempt to elicit labor and movement while reading it; the reader follows the journey of the authors who also had to constantly shift their point of view. Numbers in the margins of the text indicate which image the reader is to view alongside the text, requiring a frequent listing back and forth and flipping over of the book. Poor binding lessens this experience; the material implementation falls short of the ambitious approach–my copy came partially loose as I was reading the book for this review.

The unusual form of presentation reflects the unorthodox approach of the authors to the subject matter. Nonacademic and associative in style, the language casual as if in a conversation with the reader, the book troubles the academic historian who is used to proper citations, deliberately structured chapters, and clearly stated research questions and developed arguments. *Auschwitz-Oświęcim* follows the journey of a survivor's grandson, set out to identify where his grandfather was exploited and humiliated; an old man who once told Citroen that the Auschwitz he had portrayed in a drawing was "too small" (p. 11). The endeavor to capture the magnitude of the grandfather's experience evolves into a deep investigation of the history of the extermination camp and its representation by the museum site. Citroen's astonishment, frustration, and indignation at the insufficient attention, by both the museum and the

local population, to the camp's impact on where local residents grow vegetables, buy medicine, and go to work everyday, comes out clearly and lends the book a genuinely personal dimension. There is no clear location of the grandfather's suffering, and nobody cares about it anyway. For the academic, this account translates into an investigation of the spatial dimensions of the Nazi genocide, and of remembering and commemorating histories of violence, modernization, and antisemitism.

Questions of the spatiality and environmental dimensions of the Nazi genocide have recently gained momentum, giving rise to new approaches and interdisciplinary collaborations, such as the *Geographies of the Holocaust* project uniting historians, geographers, and historical geographers (http://www.ushmm.org/maps/projects/holocaust-geographies/). Central questions for such inquiries address the impact of Nazi policies on the natural and built environment; the extent to which these policies were determined by environmental and spatial factors; or the effects that physical distance or proximity had on social relationships between perpetrators, bystanders, victims, and witnesses, among others. Uncovering and interpreting the physical traces, or their invisibility, of the genocide requires a visual rapprochement to the historical site. Without the physical presence at the site of the atrocities, histories of forgetting and remembering, and therefore histories of violence, remain unnoticed. Photography here takes on an important task, as it allows a representation of these potential lacunae. Henning Langenheim demonstrated this impressively with his photographs of killing sites in the formerly Nazi-occupied Soviet territories; images of beaches and forests in Latvia or Estonia would reveal nothing of the mass shootings that took place there if we did not know about them and passed on this knowledge.[1] Citroen's work provides important impulses for such probing; his "snapshots" of rails cutting through local fields, camp poles scattered around town, and former homes of Nazi functionaries mark the impossibility of distinguishing museum from town. More generally, the book suggests a landscape thoroughly infused with a history of violence and thus challenges notions of "museum" and "memorial site"– where do they start, where do they end?

Auschwitz-Oświęcim is thus a book about memory, about how people deal with the past, and whether it is possible to forget. Specifically, it explores how the residents of Oświęcim deal with a past of violence and destruction that is and that is not their own. This exploration is personified by the relationship between Citroen and Starzyńska who accompanies his travels and also serves as his interlocutor, both as herself and as a personification of the local population and its relationship with the Nazi past. Without Citroen's probing questions, the book suggests, Starzyńska would have never confronted herself with the history of the camp; the Nazi occupation; and the implication of, and even benefits for, local residents because of it. If the conversations between the two happened as they are represented, they testify to a complication of this (real and symbolic) relationship. At times Citroen patronizes Starzyńska, producing situations that resemble how many Poles perceived the post-1989 efforts of Western scholars and activists to teach them how to remember World War II, pushing them to confront issues of collaboration and the lasting impact of antisemitism in Polish society. These efforts are important, yet if confrontation remains one-sided, conflict is inevitable. Had Citroen complemented his critique of Polish ignorance and indifference with, if limited, consideration of how the Netherlands (and alongside any other, Western European country) is also a landscape altered by the Nazi occupation, one would be less inclined to emphasize the power relationship and self-righteousness apparent in the man's approach to the history of Auschwitz. Sure, there are fewer killing fields in the Western parts of the continent, but deportations and denunciations happened everywhere, yet the sites of resulting violence remain often unmarked there as well. To fulfill the demands, Citroen articulates implicitly that to mark all sites that are in some or the other way tarnished by having been part of the Nazi forced labor system, the camp economy, or commanders' residences would produce a landscape "completely filled with signs," as the museum director pointed out (p. 47). The question of course here is, would this be desirable?

Auschwitz had more than forty sub-camps, each again divided into smaller compounds and work sites. "Silesia was a patchwork of fenced areas," an archivist is quoted (p. 105). Were we to be consistent, the whole of Silesia would be a marked place, and the whole of Poland, Eastern Europe, and formerly Nazi-occupied Europe. This is surely not a feasible approach, yet it indicates what the book articulates by way of example: Europe is a landscape of memory. Some areas more so than others, but eventually, one would need to consider all space as mnemonic, not only of the Nazi genocide, but of other histories of violence too. There is nothing wrong in considering that possibility and in showing how space is historical and is historically meaningful, but such considerations can also become problematic. If everything is implicated and no distinctions can be made, the field is leveled into being meaningless. Although Cit-

roen does not argue for this indistinct perspective, caution is required. The visitor's infinite attention to material traces of the camp in the town of Oświęcim–camp poles reused to fence in businesses or people's yards, barracks used as garages–is considered an offense by locals. Both Starzyńska and other interlocutors point out to Citroen that he needs to be more considerate of postwar deprivation and lack of resources that left little choice for people to rebuild their homes. These are moments when more commentary and analysis by the author would have been desirable. As is, the reader is left hanging between two forms of indignation that appear to be irreconcilable.

Citroen's indignation has a specific anchor that drives much of his and Starzyńska's research and is discussed in the second part of the narrative. Following the rails that are half-visible, leading away from the entrance to the museum complex Auschwitz-Birkenau, Citroen crosses roads, fields, and private land, taking pictures along the way. The puzzlement about these rails' purpose results in archival research and detailed comparisons of aerial photographs, construction plans, and witness statements, uncovering, eventually, the location of the Judenrampe–the train platform where prisoners arrived until 1943 and were selected. The ramp is located outside of the museum and is not within the memorial site Birkenau that acquired iconic status in films, photos, narratives, and popular imaginations of the camp as a whole. A new memorial site, dedicated in 2006, is to commemorate the actual place of the Judenrampe where thousands of people were divided into the living and the dead. Citroen establishes that this location is not the correct location either. According to his evidence, the actual place of arrival and selection is forty meters to the left of the new memorial site, located where currently a number of train tracks run. At the end of the text section on the Judenrampe, he acknowledges that there is no certainty to the location. Rather than reading this as a failure, we may take this as an indication that postwar lives constantly shape and reshape memorial landscapes, making it difficult if not impossible to uncover accurate information and to mark it in accessible ways. The impossibility of a clear conclusion is also hampered by the fact that even German documents do not provide certainty about what has been built, what was planned to be built and never completed, or what was planned but never started–a complexity that is the subject of the third section of the narrative.

"The Town and the Factories" accounts for the deep spatial, economic, and personal connections between the town and the camp. These connections are produced by the fact that Auschwitz-Oświęcim was the site of destruction and death and, at the same time, of colonization, production, and modernization. Chosen by the I. G. Farben company as an ideal site for a large production facility, Nazi planners saw it as an excellent opportunity to create a space where laborers lived close to work sites, optimizing the flow of resources–in other words, to make the East productive. Forced labor camps were explicitly included in these plans, as were sport facilities and pharmacies. Citroen includes a number of maps that testify to the extent to which architects and urban planners adopted and developed Nazi racial ideology, assigning distinct parts of the European populace specific ranks within the labor force and spaces of residence or imprisonment. Oświęcim is thus a prime example for how Europe was to be colonized and reordered, both spatially and socially. Again, comparing plans with actual buildings, Citroen identifies the places of the town that are relatable to the history of the Nazi occupation, most of them products of forced labor. Tracing the inconsistencies between plans and actual structures, the narratives gets confusing toward the end, perhaps a reflection of the exhaustion Citroen and Starzyńska must have experienced. Concretely, these inconsistencies highlight the history of the camp complex as a site always in the making and under construction, a process recently described in an essay by Paul B. Jaskot, Chester Harvey, and Anne Kelly Knowles.[2] The I. G. Farben facility continued to operate after the war, providing jobs and important income for the region. Most of the facilities had been built by forced laborers, a history that has largely been unacknowledged locally. The demolition of the carbide tower, painfully described in Primo Levi's works, was destroyed to make space for new buildings in 2006. With it, not only a truly European structure, "built by Europeans from all corners," prisoners, was leveled, but also a historic symbol, a mnemonic site that provides important distinction for commemoration (p. 140).

Understanding Auschwitz and Oświęcim through multiple site visits and involved research, articulated in a textual narrative and images, highlights layers of experience that historical scholarship can hardly grasp and represent adequately. The book is a forceful reminder of the difficulty to live with a violent past in the present and the ethical, unanswerable dilemmas emerging from it. A more careful editing of the translation would have been welcome, the language is often awkward and inconsistent, alternating between colloquial phrases and academic prose, and Dutch phrases and spellings slip in. In a different reading, this bumpiness reflects an experience of disidentification and disorientation shared by camp prisoners and their relatives, and by those who come af-

ter to remember, commemorate, and study. Auschwitz-Oświęcim is the site of a deeply European, and unsettling experience, forcing us to understand a different time, place, and culture.

Auschwitz-Oświęcim is also the site of a work of mourning, for Citroen's grandfather, who could not identify the place of his suffering, and for Starzyńska, Citroen's partner who died in 2010. Her conclusion of the shared effort was that it is impossible to distinguish Auschwitz from Oświęcim. The question thus remains: Where is Auschwitz?

Notes

[1]. Henning Langenheim, *Mordfelder: Orte der Vernichtung im Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion / Polia smerti: mesta unichtozhenia liudei v voine protiv Sovetskogo Soiuza*, ed. Deutsch-Russisches Museum Berlin-Karlshorst (Berlin: Elefanten Press, 1999).

[2]. Paul B. Jaskot, Chester Harvey, and Anne Kelly Knowles, "Auschwitz: Visualizing the Archive," in *Geographies of the Holocaust*, ed. Anne Kelly Knowles, Tim Cole, and Alberto Giordano (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming).

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