

Wes Cowan: Our first story focuses on how a photographer in World War II may have used this camera to escape the Holocaust. It's October 1939. After a ferocious assault, Hitler's forces conquer Poland. Bent on cleansing the country of undesirables and freeing up land for their master race, Nazi troops install a police state ruled by violence and fear. But along with their guns, the soldiers bring with them a new weapon: the camera. Like no other regime before them, the Nazis exploit the power of the image. Their cameras are a key front-line weapon, portraying the German military as invincible. Photos also fuel their racist agenda. Feeding on stereotypes, the Nazis dehumanize Jews and other minorities, portraying them as different and fundamentally dangerous. Incredibly, some of the photographers working under the Nazis were themselves Jewish. More than 60-years later, a woman in Boynton Beach, Florida, has a camera and a family story that may be a part of this astonishing chapter of World War II.

Sandra Gasson: When my uncle Adolf came to this country, he brought the camera and it may have been instrumental in saving his life.

Wes : I'm Wes Cowan, and I'm meeting up with Sandy Gasson to find out more about her uncle and how he survived the German occupation.

Sandra: This camera belonged to Adolf Fingrut, my mother's oldest brother, who remained in Poland till 1961 and then came with his wife to this country, and along with him came his camera.

Wes: Wow, so he was a Holocaust survivor. How did -- how did he make it?

Sandra: Well, one story from my mother was the fact that his wife, who was gentile, saved him. Another one was that he was in the town of Zawiercie, where he was born, and he was commandeered by the Germans to do photography for them.

Wes: Sandra says her uncle never learned English, and she doesn't know the full story of how he survived the Holocaust.

Sandra: We, the next generation, are very much interested in knowing what happened with this camera, with him during the war years. These are personal photos that he brought with him when he came to the United States. This is a picture of him as a young man, his wife, Michelle.

Wes: Wow, she's gorgeous, isn't she?

Sandra: Absolutely beautiful. We really feel that he remained in Poland because of her.

Wes: Okay, and then there are more photos here? Let's see here. This one has come sort of an address stamped on the back, and it's something about a photographer: "A. Fingrut, Rembertow," which I think much be another town, maybe. That's some great information. It's obviously the address of a studio. Well, listen, I think it's a great story. I'm anxious to get started.

Wes: Adolf Fingrut was a studio photographer, but this is not a typical studio camera. It's a field camera that's probably from around the turn of the century. It just doesn't make sense that someone would be using this in the 1940s. Adolf Fingrut was a Jewish photographer. The Nazis killed an estimated 3 million Jews in Poland, and photography was a major tool in their propaganda campaign. Fingrut's family thinks he may have been commandeered to take pictures for the Nazis. And here's this picture of the photographer in a uniform, and there's a date in the right-hand corner that says 1941. That's two years into the Nazi occupation. I wonder what he was doing. I know that during the Holocaust, people who survived had to make a lot of difficult choices. This story really makes me nervous. I have no idea what I'm going to find. I'm heading to the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York. They have 22 million archival sources, including thousands of photographs of Poland during the war. I'm looking for any photos taken by Adolf Fingrut as well as any wartime photos from Rembertow, the town where his studio was, or Zawiercie, where his family thinks he may have been taking photos for the Nazis....Oh, thanks very much....Well, no mention of Fingrut or Rembertow, but I did find a great group of photographs from Zawiercie. Unfortunately, there's no credit. These showed Jews being publicly humiliated and rounded up for deportation. I wonder if Adolf could have taken these. I've asked Janina Struk to meet me here at the Institute. She wrote a book called "Photographing the Holocaust." What I'd like to know is could these photographs have been taken by

a Jewish photographer?

Janina Struk: No, this picture would have been taken by a German soldier.

Wes: Janina says that both Jews and Poles were forbidden to own cameras except for officially sanctioned work. This kind of street action was largely captured by German soldiers.

Janina: There were many pictures of humiliations, particularly that show the cutting of the side locks and beards of Jews.

Wes: Janina tells me the German soldiers also took photos of much worse. There were so many images of atrocities circulating that the Nazis actually had to ban their soldiers from taking photos of their crimes. Committing mass executions was fine, but documenting them was not. Were there actually Jewish photographers who were taking pictures during the Holocaust?

Janina: Well, there were Jewish photographers taking pictures in the ghettos, and they were taking photographs of the Judenrat.

Wes: She says the Judenrat was the Jewish council enforcing German orders in the ghettos. Here, in overcrowded corridors, the Nazis isolated the Jews, deprived them of food, and put them to work.

Janina: This album, for example, was made in the photographic department at Wuge. I mean, this page is extraordinary. It shows these supposedly happy children playing. Of course, the reality of the ghetto wouldn't have been like this for people.

Wes: And it's basically a propaganda piece then.

Janina: Well, they would have been made either to curry favor with the Jewish authorities, or they would have perhaps been made to show the Nazis to show how efficiently the ghetto was being run.

Wes: The photographers who took these pictures for these sorts of albums, would they have been considered collaborators?

Janina: Everyone had to survive. People were put to work in the ghetto. There was really very little choice. There would have been some inhabitants of the ghetto who were opposed to this kind of propaganda, but it's hard for us to imagine just how extraordinary life would have been in the ghetto for the majority or the inhabitants.

Wes: Janina tells me that a few brave souls broke the law and risked their lives to document what was really happening. Clandestine photographs were taken and hidden. Discovered only after the war, they serve as important evidence of Nazi crimes. I wonder if Adolf contributed to these efforts. He had a studio before the war. Would it have been possible for a Jewish photographer to continue their studio work throughout the war?

Janina: It might have been possible. They would have served the Judenrat, their official photographs. They would have perhaps made identity photographs for Nazis and German soldiers.

Wes: In all the research that you've done, have you heard of a photographer named Adolf Fingrut?

Janina: No, unfortunately I haven't, no, but there was very little recorded about photographers.

Wes: I found this organization in Warsaw called the Jewish Historical Institute. Founded just after the War, they immediately started collecting the history of the devastated Jewish communities of Poland. I'm going to send an e-mail to them seeing if they have any information about Adolf Fingrut. I'm also hoping that the studio address on the back of this photo can lead me somewhere. I'm contacting a researcher in Poland to check it out. In the meantime, I'm heading to the Spira collection in New York, where I'm meeting with Michael Pritchard, an expert in European cameras for Christie's. Michael, I look at this camera and I say, "this camera is from probably around the turn of the century. It's not from the 1940s." Do

you know, how old is it?

Michael Pritchard: There's a number of clues on the camera. The bellows, those to me suggest the camera was made about 1910 or 1920, and if we look at the joints on the camera just along the top here at the corners we see that they're machine-made, and that would really date the camera to about 1900 onwards.

Wes: Why would my photographer be using this sort of an outdated camera in the 1940s?

Michael: Well, photographers tend to be a fairly conservative breed, and a lot of photographers will buy a camera, and they will carry on using it until it either wears out or they lose it or it breaks.

Wes: That wasn't the case for the Nazis, however. Michael says they used the latest in camera technology, the light-weight, portable, and super-fast Leica.

Michael: It really was the Rolls Royce, if you like, of the camera world. What we have here, though, is a 1945 Leica. It's engraved on the back here "Luftwaffen-Eigentum." so it was the property of the Luftwaffe.

Wes: It wasn't just the German air force that used the camera. Michael tells me that the Leica company supplied tens of thousands of cameras directly to the Nazi party.

Michael: It was used, for example, by Leni Riefenstahl in the 1936 German Olympics, and she took some absolutely classic photographs there, but they were also used for propaganda by the German Nazi party.

Wes: Michael says that it's highly unlikely that Adolf Fingrut would have been using his camera in the field for official propaganda.

Michael: In fact, he's marked up the ground glass here with a number of his formats. So I think that gives us a very good clue that he was using this to take portraits with it.

Wes: It's possible that Adolf was taking pictures for the Germans, but if he was using his camera, it was most likely in his studio.

Wes: Here's an e-mail from my Polish researcher: "As I have promised, I'm writing to give you more details about people I've spoken with in Rembertow." He actually found Adolf's studio. Not only that, but there were people in Rembertow who remembered Adolf and his wife, including a man who says his mother hid Adolf in her cellar. This is critical information. If Adolf was hiding, then it doesn't sound as if he was working for the Germans. Now, he also says that he ran into a man that says that Adolf left Rembertow in 1942 with some sort of forged documents and that he moved to another town, where he was so well-camouflaged, he was actually taking pictures of German soldiers. What does it mean that he was somehow camouflaged? I wonder what my other contact in Warsaw has uncovered. I picked up a package at my office that was sent to me by the Jewish Historical Institute. Here's a registration card from 1946. He's registering as a Holocaust survivor. What's this? This is some sort of a hand-written letter from Adolf Fingrut in Rembertow. The letter is in Polish, so I'm meeting with Professor Nahama Tec, a scholar of the Holocaust and herself a survivor. She knows what it was like to live in Poland under the Nazis using a false identity. Does the document say anything about what Adolf was doing during the war?

Nahama Tec: Yes, "during the German occupation as a Jew, I lived in the Rembertow ghetto until the moment of its liquidation."

Wes: Nahama explains that by 1940, Adolf would have been forced into the ghetto in Rembertow with the rest of Jews from the region, but on the day that the Nazis were deporting everyone to the camps, Adolf escaped in the predawn hours of August 20, 1942. But how did he survive as a fugitive in an occupied country? Nahama says Adolf's wife may have been the key to his survival.

Nahama: He says his wife, who was a Christian, made for him special papers which identified him as a Pole.

Wes: Now, wasn't that incredibly dangerous for her to be supplying Adolf with these forged papers?

Nahama: She was risking a great deal, not only of her life but her family would be, also, probably, executed and maybe the neighborhood. It was up to the Germans, and they were very capricious.

Wes: Does Adolf say anything in the letter about him being a photographer?

Nahama: Also through the help of his wife and her cousin, he received a job in a photographic studio in Opolu.

Wes: Adolf somehow traveled through occupied Poland to assume his new identity in a town 100 miles from Rembertow. So he was a photographer during the war.

Nahama: Yes.

Wes: With forged papers in a town where no one knew him, Adolf was pretending to be a Christian and working in a photo studio controlled by the Nazis.

Nahama: But I see something in this questionnaire.

Wes: What Nahama told me next helped me better understand how Adolf Fingrut managed to survive for two long years without being discovered. I'm heading back to meet Sandy to tell her what I know.

Wes: Sandy, for me personally, this was a great story.

Sandra: I'm so happy to hear that.

Wes: You know, it's the story of survival in the face of adversity, and it's the story of human triumph. I tell Sandy that I was not able to determine whether Adolf Fingrut used his camera to take photos of the Nazis during the war, but it did, in a way, help him survive. I first show her the photos of her uncle's studio and tell her about the people who remember Adolf. And then I show her the testimonies written in her uncle's own hand. And you know what this is?

Sandra: His story?

Wes: It's basically his –

Sandra: His biography!

Wes: It was his wife's courage and Adolph's knowledge of photography that saved his life.

Nahama: He was working in a studio, photographic studio, but it also says the kind of work he did was retouching photos.

Wes: A retoucher -- that's someone who retouches negatives, probably colors -- hand-colors photographs.

Nahama: It was an ideal job, really, for somebody that wanted to pass as a Christian. You have very little contact with the clients, with the customers, and you just do -- it's between you and photos, so to speak.

Wes: Your uncle Adolf as a retoucher was in this studio every day for two years where Nazis were coming in getting their pictures taken. How do you think he felt?

Sandra: I can't -- it's unimaginable.



*Episode 7, 2006: Survivor Camera,  
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Wes: I tell Sandy that I think her uncle's camera represents a vanished world, a world almost entirely destroyed by the Nazis' campaign to impose their monstrous vision of perfection. Adolf Fingrut survived the Holocaust with the help of his wife and others who refused to let the Nazis succeed.

Sandra: This is only one of many, many other stories, but for us as his nieces, it has great meaning.

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