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Photographic memories: Millersville University remembers Holocaust

ENELLY BETANCOURT Staff Writer Apr 7, 2011



David Shneer makes a point Thursday during an interview at Millersville University. (Dan Marschka / Staff)
Dan Marschka

While visiting Moscow's Union of Art Photographers, David Shneer noticed that the walls were adorned with some of the best examples of Soviet war photography.

"I couldn't help but notice that the photographers' names were undeniably Jewish," said Shneer.

It was at that moment that the idea for his latest book, "Through Soviet Jewish Eyes," was born.

Shneer is a professor of history at the University of Colorado. He was one of several guest speakers at the 31st Annual Conference on the Holocaust and Genocide held at Millersville University.

The three-day conference, which runs through Friday, brought together attendees and speakers from a wide range of ethnic and religious backgrounds.

It focused on memories of the Holocaust provided by survivors, witnesses and perpetrators in different countries and at different times, and the importance of those memories for the reconstruction and examination of the past.

Although Shneer's work concentrates on modern Jewish society and culture, he said he believes the Holocaust becomes much more meaningful when it is embedded in the course of history.

"In the Soviet Union, for example, there were no concentration camps, so their story is about empty landscapes. How do we make memorial sites off of that, when there are no survivors?" Shneer said.

Drawing from the information he presents in his book, Shneer spoke Thursday about how some of the Jewish photographers, empowered by the Soviet state to photograph the war and the Holocaust, sometimes captured the atrocities of the genocide in very graphic ways.

"I kept asking myself why were the early producers of visual culture Jewish, and what do visuals tell us that the texts do not," Shneer said.

For more than six decades, scholars of the Holocaust have studied the extermination of six million European Jews during World War II from different points of view, but rarely from a photographic perspective.

Shneer said he uncovered never-before-published photographs from the photographers' families, collectors and private archives.

The group, Shneer said, visually told the story of a war that targeted all of them as Soviet citizens and as members of the "Jewish race."

How was the content of their photographs affected by their background?

They used their cameras to build up and support the state power, but were able to see what others in the mainstream could not.

Photography, Shneer said, was an art that was self-taught. There were no academies and the photographers he examined had started from the very basics.

"One of those guys used his grandmother's glasses as a lens for his handmade camera," he said.

By his own description, the photographers created the visual record of the building of socialism and then documented and bore witness to its violent destruction.

"They didn't even have the same education as anyone in this room," he told the audience.

"Yet they became the best documentors of revolution."

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