

IMAGES OF WAR: LOSS OF INNOCENCE

Kristine Fagerman

(1) During the Second World War, hundreds of thousands of photographs taken in Europe and Asia attempted to represent some of the feelings arising from the war. One such picture, a black and white photo of a young girl in a Polish ghetto, movingly portrays some of the true emotions and experiences of war.

(2) Imagine the eyes of a frightened child, full of weariness and despair, and you see the eyes of this child, eyes so large that they seem to consume her face. These eyes convey an inescapable feeling of guilt and compel a desire to comfort and protect her. After her eyes, you next notice her mouth, parted, almost expressionless yet suggesting the doll-like image of an innocent child. Finally you notice her disheveled hair, in disarray, as if she has just awakened from a nap.

(3) Your eyes search the rest of the picture. The little girl is sitting deep in clothing or bedding; directly behind her is a wall covered in flowered paper. Perhaps she is sitting on a bed with a headboard to one side. Your first overview of the picture raises questions in your mind: Where is she? Why is she alone? Where are her parents?

(4) As you focus more closely on the girl's surroundings, you are drawn first to the lighter, then the darker portions of the bedding on which she is resting. The billowy bedding, strewn in wrinkled heaps, encircles her torso, burying all but an arm, her shoulders and face. Above the bedding and to one side lurks a dark rectangular object which casts a shadow behind her. This dark shadow, along with the ample bedding, combine to form an enclosure around the girl. She appears small and overpowered.

(5) Above the rectangular object is a white wall which contrasts with the darker shades at the bottom of the photo, releasing the girl from the confinement of the bedding and shadows. The wall is decorated with a flowered wallpaper signifying, like the heavily brocaded bedding, a more prosperous time. The flowers are small and contained in a vase with a few strands of greenery, light colored, accented by a gray cloud floating around them. Although the cloud is gray, it is not depressing, since with its light, puffy appearance it suggests a dreamy sensation. In a diagonal pattern across the wall, the picture of the cloud, this time without the vase, is repeated. The flowers, clouds and light-colored

wall collectively give a peaceful appearance.

(6) After these discoveries about the child's surroundings, we focus again on her. Her face picks up the lighter, peaceful shades while contrasting them with the darker more confining shades. Her eyes, eyebrows, hair and open mouth are the same shade as her short sleeved dress, the dark shadows and bedding. Her face, the same pale shade as the wall and the flowers behind her, expresses the confusion of the opposing places. Such a contrast of tones parallels her sad history: she was happy at one time, but now in this darker time she is only frightened, confused and hungering for compassion and love.

(7) Just as the shades tell us she is lost, so does her position in the picture. She looks as though she were drowning in the bedding and shadows. Overpowered and helpless, she has no control over this world; her only escape is sleep. Directly above the child is the pattern of the clouds and vase, embodying a peace and comfort she will never know. Against the peaceful wall, she appears a tossed and forgotten child, for whom no one has time. Not only has she lost security and direction, the world as she had known it has been stolen from her.

(8) This powerful photograph makes clear that because of war, this child is lost and helpless. Most people in countries not directly involved don't see the effect that war has on others. They believe war has a purpose--the protection of one's country, morals, freedom and identity. However, through the eyes of one small girl, the photographer changes this general consensus, showing the human suffering and loss of identity caused by war. How can any reason for war justify the look on this girl's face and her eventual fate? In a sense the picture is romantic, because, looking hard into the child's eyes, we see the total futility in war. Logic and reason might find a purpose for war, but the introspection we gain by looking at this child must alter our most righteous reasons for going to war.

(9) To look at the desolate expression on her face is to see the face and eyes of experience. In her short life she has seen more pain than most adults have, and these years of premature experience have made her expression that of an elderly person. In most children's faces we see laughter or temporary unhappiness; but here, all we see is terror. And, seeing her terror, we begin to understand our own guilt for the war that has taken away her childhood. The eyes tell us she can't take any more of the horror; she is worn out. She is not starving for food as much as she is starving for direction and comfort. War has estranged her from her childhood and forced her into an adult world full of fear for each day.

(10) This sense of being lost expresses the feeling of those actually involved in war. They have seen so much terror that it separates them from others, like us, who can only imagine the experience. I know that for me it is difficult to imagine war realistically; yet, seeing the terror and confusion of this child, I believe I can begin to understand. She is alone, and she will always be alone. She is lost, suffering the pain and displacement of war. She will never again have what the war has taken away.