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From the exhibition Faith—Trust—Secrecy: Religion Through the Lenses of the Secret Police, Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives Gallery, 28th February – 5th April 2020. Photo credit: Andrea Benyi / Vera and Donald Blinken. Open Society Archives.

Methodological Notes on Visual Ethics: "Choosing Not to Reveal"

Kinga Povedák
Hungarian Academy of Sciences, MTA-SZTE "Convivence" Religious Pluralism Research Group, Hungary
povedakkinga@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I present my ethical dilemma concerning a secret police case rich in surveillance images that I encountered during the course of my research in the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security (ÁBTL). After reading the operative file of a religious community under surveillance during the 1980s, I decided to approach the group, discuss the images and texts I had found about them, and involve them in the research process. However, the group expressed their explicit intention not to engage in the research process. Even though the guidelines and legal framework regarding the publishing of secret police archival materials would allow me to publish the images and the content of the ÁBTL dossier, I decided to respect the religious community's intention and their refusal to collaborate. I therefore discuss issues of different ethical standards and accountability in the light of my "failed" ethnographic attempt and reflect on the ethical responsibility of the researcher. I present how the visual images of this particular case file were eventually included in an exhibition in what I see as an ethically appropriate solution to articulate issues of distrust in researchers as a legacy of surveillance and past secret police atrocities.

KEYWORDS

Secret police photography; ethical concerns; the "unwelcome researcher;" trust; lingering distrust; ethical concerns.

Introduction

In this short methodological essay, I present an ethical dilemma I faced concerning the research and exhibition of a photo-rich secret police file that I encountered during the course of my research in the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security (ÁBTL). The case, and the attendant visual ethical questions, emerged whilst presenting my findings to other members of the research team and while thinking to make public my research findings through website entries or publications. Later, these dilemmas were integrated into the curation of the exhibition *Faith – Trust – Secrecy: Religions Through the Lenses of the Secret Police*[1] at Galeria Centralis, Blinken Open Society Archives, Budapest as part of the Hidden Galleries project.

The methodological and ethical concerns associated with the problematic legacy of totalitarianism and its secret police have been much discussed. However, only recently has attention turned towards the significance of the material and visual dimensions of communist-era files (see Vatulescu 2010; Luhrmann 2015; Kapaló 2019). As Kapaló suggests, the secret police archives contain a rich repository of confiscated items that can be viewed as a "hidden gallery" (2019: 88).

A number of visual ethical complexities emerge when the researcher recognizes and focuses on the visual materials, particularly those portraying religious communities,

which include images shot through the "secret police lens," as well as photographs confiscated from persecuted communities to be used as incriminating evidence against them. In the example discussed below, the publication and exhibition of photographs of persecuted religious communities gave rise to further ethical concerns that feed into larger discussions and critical discourses on photographic representations of atrocities, persecution, and suffering. This short essay showcases a few of the multiple paradoxes surrounding the visual representation of vulnerable communities that were targeted by the totalitarian state.

The Hidden Galleries project

The central concern of the European Research Council funded Hidden Galleries project[2] was to explore the creativity of religious groups under totalitarian rule through the holdings of the secret police archives in four countries: Hungary, Romania, Ukraine, and the Republic of Moldova. The project viewed "the archive as a 'hidden gallery' [...] shifting our gaze to the confiscated images and the creative products of communities and agents" (Kapaló 2019: 88). The research project consisted of two phases, in the first archival research phase, we visited the respective secret police archives and collected and consulted files on minority religious groups. In the second phase, we approached communities whose materials appeared in the archives with the aim of conducting ethnographic work with them. During the course of the ethnographic phase of the research, we contacted several religious communities to discuss their presence in the secret police archives and the images and texts we found there. By bringing the photographs from secret police archives back to the communities, through interviews and photo elicitation, we gathered alternative narratives of the period and of their experiences from the communities. The project was concerned to work with photographic images as a way of moving beyond "old," univocal narratives in order to de-center the "archives" by facilitating communities retelling their own experiences.

Throughout the research process we discovered the extent to which these photographs and the narratives of the communities can contribute to our understanding of unknown aspects of underground religious culture. As I argue elsewhere, these images are valuable snapshots for the scholar of religion, portraying and documenting the unexplored religious life and the hidden forms of religious practice during communism, albeit often from the perspective of the regime (Povedák forthcoming).

Naturally, we were concerned to address ethical issues throughout the research process. Ethnographic research of religious worlds, religious lives, and communities is methodologically challenging in many ways. However, our research was further complicated by the fact that we encountered persecuted groups who were left vulnerable or even traumatized by totalitarian encounters and atrocities.

Photographic images of a secretive religious community

In 2017 during my research at ÁBTL, I encountered[3] a rich collection of photographs sitting in an operative file from the 1980s. The file immediately caught my attention due to the wealth of both confiscated and surveillance photographs included in it. From the thorough police and interrogation reports, as well as the visual images that complemented the textual materials, an image of an underground, fundamentalist

Christian community emerged. The authorities began surveillance of what it was at that time, the early 1980s, considered an "illegal" religious group; through the photographs, the informer's reports, and the interrogation scripts included in the file, the underground rituals and prayer practices of the community began to take shape in front of my eyes. Many photographs show the everyday underground rituals and the religious materiality of community members and leaders. These photographs enable us to see and to understand how escaping into nature became an alternative "underground" safe space for this particular community operating without a legal license from the State Office for Church Affairs. Even though legal religious entities were only routinely checked by 1980s Hungarian authorities, this particular group held their prayer groups and rituals in the safety of nature. Ultimately, the gaze of the secret police found the community as it is documented by the surveillance photographs inserted in the operative file.

As explained above, one of the methodological innovations of the Hidden Galleries project was to work with the photographs and creative practices of religious communities, hence my fascination with this particular secret police file. The holdings of ÁBTL, for historical reasons, are not as rich a repository of confiscated religious art as others (such as the Romanian, Ukrainian, and Moldovan archives I had the opportunity to view in the course of the project). The visual materials relating to so-called "home-grown," local or vernacular religious communities are scarce, so I was rather excited to approach this community, with its abundance of visual materials, targeted by the state in the 1980s with the hope of addressing questions relating to the lived experience and lived religion of the time.

It was not only the documentary value of the photographs and snapshots of the everyday life of the religious community that made this secret police file especially interesting. The file also represented a great example of how the photographs—either confiscated or taken during surveillance operations—were used by the secret police with the intention of operationalizing the community's destruction. From this file we also gain an insight into how photographs were used to materialize connections between people, the informer and the faithful, the informer and the agent, the photographer and the targets.

The "unwelcome ethnographer"

After consulting the file discussed above, I immediately attempted to approach the community. However, it was not an easy task to find contact information since the community had no Internet or social media presence at all. I only had the names of the community's leaders who had been interrogated by the secret police. After finally finding a way to the community, in 2017 I had an extensive telephone conversation with the pastor, seeking permission to approach the community in order to discuss their presence in the secret police archives and the images and texts we found there. In the phone conversation the pastor explicitly expressed that he would like to refrain from all communications with me. To my great disappointment, the leader of the community openly and clearly expressed that I was not welcome at their rituals and gatherings; furthermore, he did not intend to discuss anything with me. I had become an "unwelcome ethnographer" as the pastor, the strategic gatekeeper controlled my access and made a decision on behalf of the community without consulting with them. As I had no other way into the community, the harsh gatekeeper and his personal decision turned my point of entry into a barrier.

Given my enthusiasm for the visual and

documentary richness of the file, I was devastated by the pastor's decision. This refusal led me to search further avenues, and consequently I began interviewing ex-members. The interviews with ex-members eventually opened up a new understanding of the community for me. However, I must underline the problematical ethics of this phase in my research; knowing that I had no consent from the pastor of the community, I did not feel that it would be ethical to use any of those interviews.

Ex-member testimonies as anti-religious propaganda method were often used by the secret police and "testimonials from former believers thus became a defining feature of the post-Stalin press' treatment of religion" (Baran 2011: 164). Eileen Barker (1984) was one of the first scholars to use ex-member interviews in her pioneering monograph on the Unification Church complementing participant observation and interviews of "cult" members. While more and more scholars studying New Religious Movements use ex-member interviews, it has become a methodological challenge, and the social-scientific use of ex-member interviews has been widely debated. While some scholars value ex-member narratives due to the information they can provide and argue that ex-members have both an insider and outsider perspective, others remain critical and emphasize the invalid and biased representations of communities only studied through ex-member interviews and testimonies. I agree with the critiques that a research based exclusively on ex-member interviews would have resulted in biased and invalid results, therefore I ruled out this option.

Nonetheless, the conversations with ex-members helped me to understand that the community continued to operate somewhat underground even today, remaining quite secretive in its ways and not open to collaboration with researchers who approached them, as I had done. The secrecy of the community and the lack of trust towards me as a researcher did not give me the possibility to enter the "field." I was what Gallo (2011) called an "unwelcome ethnographer." Without trust, I had no bridge into the community. As trust is an essential part of the ethnographic research, without trust it all fails. My failed fieldwork experience and my never before experienced research position as an "unwelcome ethnographer" provoked very interesting discussions in the Hidden Galleries team, and this particular case also contributed to the decision to foreground the concept of *trust* in our Budapest exhibition, which addressed the intersection of *faith*, *trust*, and *secrecy* during communism. The religious group, following their underground secretive religious practices and their traumatic experiences of surveillance and interrogations in the 1980s, we presumed had lost trust in institutions, authorities, and in society in general, while their secretive practices continued to constitute a coping mechanism for their profound distrust.

The ethical dilemma

This fieldwork failure and my experience as an "unwelcome ethnographer," however, helped me to consider the ethical dimension of the project as crucial to the research as a whole. The Hidden Galleries project, as already discussed, was especially concerned with the ethical questions that arise from working with communities with a legacy of repression and surveillance. However, at this point, I found myself in my own ethical dilemma regarding how to proceed in my research with this particular community without compromising the community and the goals of the project. What would be the implications of pursuing the research based solely on the written archival sources, in the absence of an encounter with the community, after being rigidly rejected and unwelcome?

Should I respect their intention and abandon the research process?

From a legal perspective, in accordance with Hungarian legislation (the provisions of Act CXII of 2011, Act III of 2003, and Act LXVI of 1995), the publication of written and photographic documents found in the archives is the responsibility of the researcher, and the communities' permission is not required. Under the regulations for researchers, I had the option to publish an article based on the archival sources found in the secret police archives without the permission of the community or engaging them in any way. I had all the permissions from the Historical Archives of the Hungarian Secret Police, as all rights are vested upon the researcher.

On the other hand, from an anthropologist's perspective, disclosing historical documents at any cost is not an option. In anthropological research "do no harm" is one of the basic principles of research methodology. Ethnographic research begins with oral or written consent; consequently, trust is at the heart of the research process. Throughout the research process researchers are attentive to the interests of the researched community, and ethnography is by its nature a collaborative process working from the presumption that the research parties trust one another. I therefore came to the conclusion that it would be unethical to continue with any further research or to disclose the photographic or textual materials under any circumstances as I was aware of the community's unwillingness to collaborate in the research process. Even though the guidelines and legal framework regarding the publishing of secret police archival materials would have permitted the use of images of this community without their consent, I decided that the most appropriate ethical response would be to respect their intention that these images remain unpublished and not researched.

Trust/ distrust

The ethical complexities of my failed research helped the Hidden Galleries team to think about how and why certain religious communities did not want to cooperate and collaborate with the project. These discussions shifted our attention towards reflecting on issues of trust and distrust, and this case in particular became a catalyst for our thinking. When the team embarked on exhibiting our research findings, the inclusion of "trust and distrust in the researcher" became a crucial point to be articulated, and trust became an organizing concept within the curatorial process. Making sense of a "failed ethnographic encounter," therefore, also yielded significant research results. Similarly to the ways in which anthropologists have questioned and called attention to "archival silences," the reason behind why certain communities firmly rejected ethnographic inquiry can lead us to important insights and revelations.

With this in mind, this experience also encouraged the team to question why certain communities had the opposite response and felt the need to cooperate with us in the Hidden Galleries research project. With other communities we managed to build a trusting relationship and deep collaboration. As mutual trust between the researcher and the researched community is at the heart of the ethnographic process, it is particularly important to reflect on this "failed" ethnographic attempt as an indication of the lingering distrust in institutions, authorities, and researchers in general as one of possible legacies of repression and surveillance in the twentieth century.

Recognizing the affective nature of both trust and distrust (Jones 1996: 7) helped us to explain the lingering impact that persecution might have had on these communities.[4] As Jones (1996) discusses, trust and distrust are very important emotional factors. On the one hand, trusting someone means to

have an attitude of optimism about her goodwill, whilst on the other hand, distrust contains pessimism about the goodwill and competence of another (Jones 1996: 7). In her recent article, Jones also talks about the "affective looping" of trust and distrust. Both trust and distrust as affective phenomena are prone to looping that makes them self-perpetuating:

> Affective looping occurs when a prior emotional state provides grounds for its own continuance, or when it provides grounds for another different but allied emotional state which in turn provides grounds for the original emotional state, which further reinforces the allied emotional state, and so on, in a self-supporting loop, a loop that tends to not only sustain but also to magnify both emotional states. It can be hard to break such loops [...] (Jones 2019: 956).

Thus the "affective looping" of distrust, and the possible magnifying effect of this emotional state which led to the lingering distrust, is one of the ways to explain this community's attitude towards me as a researcher and the institutions of the state and society at large.

Exhibiting a "failed" ethnographic attempt or rather the "lingering distrust" in society

Exhibiting this lingering distrust in institutions and authorities as one of the legacies of repression and surveillance in the twentieth century required a critical sensibility on the part of the curators and the project team. How is it possible to exhibit or tell a story, central to which is the visual record created by the secret police, whilst maintaining the full anonymity of the community?

The decision of the curators of the *Faith – Trust – Secrecy* exhibition and the Hidden Galleries team was to use an image from the file as a device. Even though the surveillance image we selected contained no recognizable faces or locations, we decided to make a replica, a drawing instead of the original surveillance image in order to generate an image that was at a further remove from the file that gave birth to it.[5] This solution allowed us to represent the community without revealing their identity and to take one further step representationally away from the file and targeted community. Using the replica enabled us to reverse the phenomenological proximity created by the indexicality of photographs through their "unmatched ability to conjure up a tangible presence of past moments and people" (Sarkisova and Shevchenko 2014: 170) and their "unique capacity to, phenomenologically speaking, put us in a proximity of what they are photographs of" (Pettersson 2011: 185).

In this image we see a man sitting on a chair and preparing his rod to fish. In the background, the group of people targeted by the secret police are gathered in what seems to be a circle. The people are distant, but this image functions rather as a contextualization of the surveillance scene. The drawing loses the qualities of the initial picture. There the person sitting was dressed in a white shirt. The surveillance note in the file presents all the utensils that security officers took with them when the surveillance took place.

This piece was chosen as the Epilogue to the exhibition in Budapest and was dedicated to addressing the complexities of research ethics and trust as a reflexive process but also as an invitation to the audience of the exhibition to think about questions of trust, distrust, and research ethics. In the context of the exhibition, we hoped to encourage the viewer to reflect on the role of researchers and the potential for research on secret police operations to unwittingly replicate the attitude of the totalitarian regime. In order to escape the intrusion of the secret police and call for a critical sensibility



Figure 1. Drawing from the Hidden Galleries exhibition *Faith – Trust – Secrecy* at Galeria Centralis, Blinken Open Society Archives, Budapest. Photo credit: Dániel Kophelyi.

when dealing with secret police visuals, we addressed the following questions in the Epilogue of the exhibition:

> What is the difference between the researcher and the secret agent? What happens if a community that has refused to work with a researcher, nevertheless has their secret police file published by others? Are those who were targeted by the secret police aware that upon their request their names and documents can be classified? How can we show how intrusive the presence of the secret police was in people's lives, without replicating the same intrusiveness?[6]

The comparison between the work of secret police informers and that of the anthropologist is not new. Katherine Verdery talks about "police ethnographies" (2014) referring to secret police reports and comparing the work of anthropologists to that of secret police informers. Florin Poenaru, however, extends this comparison further in his argument that the Romanian Securitate constructed a form of anthropological knowledge for the benefit of the socialist state (2017: 108, 112). He draws an analogy between the toolkit, the "research plan" that guides their inquiry, the laborious work of gathering fieldwork materials, but also the similarities between the substance of how both "anthropology and the Securitate share at the level of producing knowledge in their focus on social relations, social interactions, and social networks" (Poenaru 2017: 113).

Nevertheless, our work with persecuted, and therefore potentially more vulnerable, communities cannot replicate the "police gaze"—or the very same methods that were used on them during communism. Even though the images of the community under discussion in the essay do not portray visually atrocities of a physical or violent type, the display of the images connected to this case without consent would have

reenacted and regenerated the persecution suffered by this group. Susan Crane in her ethical, critical-historical essay focusing on Holocaust atrocity photographs argues for the "repatriation" and removal of Holocaust images, offering an alternative solution, a radical alternative: "choosing not to look" (2008: 310). In our case the visual ethical paradox was resolved by "choosing not to reveal."



NOTES

1. The exhibition was one of the key outputs of the ERC Hidden Galleries project. The exhibition was curated by Gabriela Nicolescu and co-curated by James Kapaló. The online version of the exhibition can be viewed here: https://faithtrustsecrecy.osaarchivum.org/?lang=en.

2. *Creative Agency and Religious Minorities: "Hidden Galleries" in the Secret Police Archives in Central and Eastern Europe* received funding from the European Research Council (no. 677355).

3. I am grateful to Rolf Müller for calling my attention to this file and for his help throughout the research process.

4. We are grateful to philosopher Katherine Furman who helped us navigate the unknown terrain of the philosophy of trust and introduced us to the work of Karen Jones.

5. The Hidden Galleries team is grateful to Dániel Kophelyi, the designer of the *Faith – Trust – Secrecy* exhibition for producing the replica.

6. https://faithtrustsecrecy.osaarchivum.org/epilogue-on-trust?lang=en

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