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Portable Material Culture and Death Factory Auschwitz

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Like any other factory, the death factory of Auschwitz consumed primary materials and produced secondary products. Unique to Auschwitz, though, is that the primary material consumed was human life; not just the life of the breathing human body, but also the material possessions associated with that life. The detritus of this most efficient genocide – clothing, jewellery, food, corpses – was appropriated and put to new uses by the SS and the prisoners. Others have recognised the various postwar material cultural outcomes of the camp: the writing, the film, the theatre, the art, the tourism. This article, however, demonstrates that the material culture of Auschwitz is not a phenomenon exclusive to the postwar era. It focuses on the fact that inside the camp during the war, despite the landscape of death and deprivation, intimate interaction between humans and material culture continued.

Keywords

Auschwitz, concentration camp, Holocaust, material culture, *Sonderkommando*

Introduction

The elimination of the body by murder and its secret burial always leaves its trace, if only in the gap left by its absence, an absence as physical as any presence.

(Buchli and Lucas 2001: 122)

Archaeology and war have an enduring and ambiguous relationship—both create in the very act of destroying.

(Saunders 2002a: 101)

The complex relationships and associations of the material culture of 20th century war are often characterised by seemingly endless ironies which loop back upon themselves and open up previously unrecognised areas for investigation.

(Saunders 2002b: 178)

About 50 kilometres west of Kraków in southern Poland lies the unfortunate town of Oświęcim. Though the town has a complicated and tumultuous history going back as far as the 13th century – an acclaimed book has dealt with this *longue durée* story (van Pelt and Dwork 1996) – awareness of the town by the outside world is due to a series of events set in motion only in the first half of the 20th century. Oświęcim is the Polish spelling of Auschwitz: the Germanisation was most recently applied after Hitler's Nazis swept eastward through Poland in late 1939. Often described as a wholly unremarkable place, the stigmatised town itself draws little attention from the thousands of tour buses that pass through each year. The object of attention, indeed the central object of attention of the entire region, is of course *Konzentrationslager Auschwitz* – Auschwitz

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concentration camp. The remains of the camp are well-known even to those who have never set foot in it: the mocking *Arbeit Macht Frei* (Work Brings Freedom) wrought iron gate, the dead-end train tracks, the piles of shoes, the barbed wire fences (Fig. 1), the plain wooden block houses (Fig. 2). These images are among the most recognisable in photographic history. The creation of concentration camp Auschwitz altered forever the status of the previously inconspicuous name of Oświęcim. That some 800 years of ordinary history have been overshadowed by the short period of the Nazis' appropriation of the town testifies to the fact of powerful and far-reaching repercussions of that time and place (van Pelt and Dwork 1996: 18).



Figure 1. Auschwitz electrified barbed wire fence (Author, 2002).

Significant historical events are embodied by, and impact on, the material culture of their own era as well as the material culture of later eras. The relatively short period of life and death in and of concentration camp Auschwitz is no exception. A scholarly book on the long-term history of the town and the camp, an image of a pile of shoes widely reproduced, and the existence of sustained academic discussion are all evidence of the continuing influence of wartime Auschwitz. While perhaps not using the distinctively archaeological trope of material culture, many others (from diverse academic fields) have dealt with just that in their writings on Auschwitz. Scholars, journalists and others have produced an imposing corpus of work examining various material outcomes of the camp: film, television, and radio, museums and memorials, painting and sculpture, and tourism. Each distinct approach contributes not only to the *discussion* of the materiality of the camp, but in creating published materials, also adds real things to the tangible legacy of that place.

Dealing with the relationship between the camp and its material culture is challenging. Historians, artists, cultural critics, and others continuously grapple with (and in so doing perpetuate) the material cultural legacy of the camp. But none has so far focused on the role of material goods inside Auschwitz when it was *in use* during the war. In this article I come to terms with the materiality of Nazi-era Auschwitz. Drawing on testimonies and other documentary sources I show that inside the camp during the war, despite the landscape of death and deprivation, a complex interaction with material culture persisted.



Figure 2. Auschwitz-II Birkenau wooden block house (Author, 2002).

Material Culture and Auschwitz

Concentration camp Auschwitz was the product of a technologically advanced, fundamentally modern society rich in material goods. It was a society not unlike our own. Nevertheless, the utter incomprehensibility of Auschwitz has led some to believe it to be a historic anomaly, a terrible aberration from the upward progress of modern society (Bauman 1989: 6-12). Typically we imagine the perpetrators of Auschwitz to be very different from ourselves: surely Auschwitz was only possible because of a deviant group of evil people. However, scholarship has established not only the fact that “ordinary men” can exhibit genocidal behaviour (Browning 1998), but also that far from being an *aberration* from the progress of modernity, the Holocaust might even be an entirely *logical facet* of modernity. In the words of Bauman (1989: 7):

We suspect (even if we refuse to admit it) that the Holocaust could merely have uncovered another face of the same modern society whose other, more familiar face, we so admire. And that the two faces are perfectly comfortably attached to the same body. What we perhaps fear most, is that each of the two faces can no more exist without the other than can the two sides of a coin.

If we are to continue our attempts to understand Auschwitz, then there must be an elemental recognition that the past actors of the camp, be they guards, prisoners, civilians, or others, are not intrinsically different from us. As Agamben (2002: 13) suggests, “many testimonies – both of executioners and victims – come from ordinary people, the ‘obscure’ people who clearly comprised the great majority of camp inhabitants”. The stories of Auschwitz are stories of ordinary people put into extraordinary situations. Accepting this fact will go a long way toward the historical archaeologist’s goal of trying to think of the lived past as those who were there thought of it and experienced it.

Schiffer (1999: 2-3) states that “human life consists of ceaseless and varied interactions among people and myriad kinds of things”, and that “never during a person’s lifetime are they not being intimate with artifacts” (*italics removed*). While perhaps counter-intuitive, these statements remain truthful even for those incarcerated inside wartime concentration camp Auschwitz. For most inmates, material possessions were certainly severely limited. However, even the least fortunate of the camp possessed and interacted with objects daily, though perhaps minimally. Others, those highest in the socio-economic hierarchy that dominated prisoners’ lives, had more possessions – including luxurious goods – in the camp than in their previous lives (see Sofsky 1999).

Though including the words Auschwitz and superabundance in the same sentence seems incongruous, this article also details what can only be described as the surreal story of Auschwitz’s *Kanada* warehouses, the area of the camp used to sort the belongings of those recently gassed. Like any other factory, the death factory of Auschwitz consumed primary materials and produced secondary products. Unique to Auschwitz, though, is that the primary material consumed was human life; not just the life of the breathing human body, but also the material possessions associated with that life.

The particularities of Auschwitz bred a system of inequality – an odd dichotomy of simultaneous scarcity and plenty. While most prisoners had only a few meagre possessions, some lived in relative luxury. While most block houses were barren except for bunks and a small wood stove, others were, quite literally, filled to the ceilings with material goods.

The average prisoner in Auschwitz did not own much. However, each prisoner did possess a few items crucial to survival. So critical was this small kit that those who did not acquire the elements soon after arrival and those who lost them or had them stolen usually perished. Shortly after entering the camp each prisoner was stripped naked and shaved. As survivor Victor Frankl (1969: 13) states, at this point “all we possessed, literally, was our naked existence”. Owning nothing, no corporeal thing other than their

bodies, the new prisoners would now begin a process of acquisition. The SS issued each prisoner a filthy, tattered, zebra-striped costume, a “uniform of rags” (Frankl 1969: 19). The prisoners’ new clothing, though pathetic and demeaning, nevertheless offered a basic level of protection from something much more dangerous, the “extremity” of nakedness (Des Pres 1976: 7). As survivor Primo Levi (1988: 113) suggests: “Clothes, even the foul clothes distributed, even the crude clogs with their wooden soles, are a tenuous but indispensable defense”. They were thrown into a hell on earth but they had at least received a chance at life, and in the coming hours and days, the prisoners were forced to learn quickly what other crucial acquisitions were necessary.

The high status of the prisoner’s bowl and spoon demonstrates the primacy of material objects in the camps. Without a bowl, a prisoner had no way to receive his daily ration. Although sometimes the inmates used their caps instead of bowls, this system had obvious problems when it came to the distribution of soup, the standard daily fare (Kraus and Kulka 1966: 33). A bowl was a “precious receptacle” (Levi 1988: 112). A spoon was also a critical piece of hardware, for: “Without a spoon, the daily soup could not be consumed in any other way than by lapping it up, as dogs do”; it was only “after many days of apprenticeship [that] one discovered that there were spoons in the camp but that one had to buy them on the black market with soup or bread” (Levi 1988: 114). When one inmate’s father realised he was being sent to the crematorium, he gave his son his “inheritance”: a knife and a spoon (Wiesel 1982: 71). It is one more absurdity of the concentration camps that when Auschwitz was liberated, tens of thousands of plastic, aluminium, steel, and silver spoons were found in storage (Levi 1988: 114).

The bowl and the spoon were critical first acquisitions but all prisoners were wise to make further use of exchange on the camp black market. Ubiquitous in the camps, the black market provided other aids in the struggle for survival. Shoes were of much consequence in the camp, for: “Death begins with the shoes; for most of us, they show themselves to be instruments of torture, which after a few hours of marching cause painful sores which, become infected” (Levi 1986: 21-22). The prisoner with a bad pair of shoes “arrives last everywhere, and everywhere he receives blows” (Levi 1986: 22). Infected feet, and the beating that came to whoever was the slowest marcher, was certainly enough to kill.

Policies of extreme physical and psychological torture and an indecipherable web of conflicting regulations dominated the prisoners’ daily lives. For instance, the regulations generally forbade a prisoner any food aside from his official daily ration, but the caloric value of that ration was so low that he would starve on it alone. Prisoners had to have greased boots, but grease was rarely distributed. A prisoner was forced to work on his knees all day, yet if he had a hole in his trousers at an inspection, he might be shot. Trousers one size too large could be a death sentence: if he had oversize trousers the prisoner had to use his hands to hold them up, but how could he work with a single hand? The problems were many and complicated.

De Cunzo (2006: 167) states insightfully that: “Material culture is used to accomplish and thwart institutional goals”. In the inmate’s struggle against the SS captors, everything had value. A scrap of paper, cloth, metal, wire, or string, if not of immediate use to the owner, was useful to another, and hence held trade value. Levi (1986: 21-23) states that:

We have learnt that everything is useful: the wire to tie up our shoes, the rags to wrap around our feet, waste paper to (illegally) pad out our jacket against the cold ... I have already learnt not to let myself be robbed, and in fact if I find a spoon lying around, a piece of string, a button which I can acquire without danger of punishment, I pocket them and consider them mine by full right.

The prisoners became “expert scavengers, forever on the lookout for anything at all” to use for themselves, or “with which to transact ‘business’” (Des Pres 1976: 114).

An anecdote from Buchenwald camp demonstrates how the resourcefulness of the prisoners sometimes allowed them privileges denied even to free Germans. Some of the Reich’s millions of confiscated books found their way into the camp as toilet paper. Survivor Eugen Kogon (1998: 140) details how the prisoners retrieved what was of value: “It was even possible to conduct salvage right there in the privies, though the collector had to provide an immediate substitute, to quell any incipient revolt from his fellows. This was not easy, for paper was extremely scarce.” Once the precious books were saved from their unmentionable fate: “What an experience it was to sit quietly ... delving into the pages of Plato’s *Dialogues*, Galsworthy’s *Swan Song*, or the works of Heine, Klabund, Mehring!”

An intimate relationship existed between the prisoners and their possessions. Every inmate motivated to survive scavenged, traded and stole. But the most industrious put any special skills to use and actually produced saleable goods. From the literary record we know that many in the camp “were made to exercise their own trade”, such as “tailors, cobblers, carpenters, blacksmiths, [and] bricklayers” (Levi 1988: 122). Whenever and wherever possible, these Auschwitz artisans used scavenged and stolen materials to fashion useful tools and other goods both to use for themselves and to sell on the camp black market. Material evidence of artisanal activity from a comparable context has been found at Buchenwald camp by archaeologist Ronald Hirte. Of his assemblage of several thousand artefacts:

The majority of them were made or improvised by the inmates themselves from scraps of various materials ... they include makeshift toiletries and medical articles, cutlery and dishes often bearing initials, inmate numbers and engravings, factory and identification tags, jewellery, game pieces and religious objects.

(Hirte n.d.)

There are also parallels with other historical moments: De Cunzio (2006: 175) writes of American Civil War prisoners who “crafted commodities and gifts”, and Saunders (2004: 14) mentions WWI civilian internees and the “objects they made” – part of a wider phenomenon of conflict-associated objects known as Trench Art .

The Ramp

The common experience of life in the camp was one of hunger, filth, and extreme material scarcity. The vast majority of prisoners, aided by their few but crucial personal possessions, expended every modicum of energy in the search for food. These inmates relied on both the severely inadequate official ration and any other foodstuffs they could get their hands on. While most spaces in the camp were spaces of scarcity, it is not accurate to describe the camp on the whole, as a space of scarcity. In fact, for certain prisoners the camp experience was not one of scarcity of material goods at all, but rather one of superabundance. These were the prisoners who worked with the daily arrival of new people and their possessions. One such worker stated: “I found that the longer I survived, the nearer I drew to the hard core who had learned not only to live, but to prosper” (Vrba 1997: 133). While only a select few prisoners dealt firsthand with the mountains of goods repossessed from incoming victims, through an efficient and complex network of graft and trading, the commodities quickly spread through the whole camp.

At one time the rails at the most infamous train station in the world came to a stop in front of an expansive wooden disembarkation platform, just inside the barbed wire of the Auschwitz sub-camp, Birkenau. Known as the *Judenrampe* or simply the ramp, it was here that the incoming victims and future prisoners left the trains and entered the camp. The arriving cattle cars were overflowing with people inhumanly crammed, both living and dead, and all of their transportable worldly possessions: “Everything that had been their past and was to start their future” (Borowski 1976: 37). They had stuffed their suitcases, filled their pockets, and stitched into their clothes material goods, including emotionally important mementoes and items thought to be useful in their unknown future. In the words of Primo Levi (1986: 9): “The climax came suddenly. The door opened with a crash, and the dark echoed with outlandish orders in that curt, barbaric barking of Germans in command which seems to give vent to a millennial anger. A vast platform appeared before us, lit up by reflectors”.

A special group of experienced prisoners was assigned to empty out the wagons, separate the women from the children, the fit from the weak, and each of these from their packages, bags, and suitcases (Borowski 1976: 37-42). Once the human cargo was out of the way, the ramp workers began the work of clearing the cars of the detritus inside. They climbed in the wagons and emptied out the luggage. The cars, ramp, and ground were in complete disarray, swelling with piles of goods of every kind:

The heaps grow. Suitcases, bundles, blankets, coats, handbags that open as they fall, spilling coins, gold, watches; mountains of bread pile up at the exits, heaps of marmalade, jams, masses of meat, sausages; sugar spills on

the gravel ... suits, shirts, books drop out on the ground ... I pick up a small, heavy package. I unwrap it – gold, about two handfuls, bracelets, rings, brooches, diamonds ... ‘Gib Hier,’ an S.S. man says calmly, holding up his briefcase already full of gold and colourful foreign currency.
(Borowski 1976: 38-42)

The ramp *Kommando* worked swiftly to unload the belongings left in the train, but worked just as hard watching for opportunities to eat and smuggle. The SS allowed them to eat as much as they wanted; however, they were forbidden to keep anything of value to the Reich. One SS man warned: “Whoever takes gold, or anything else besides food, will be shot for stealing Reich property ... *Verstanden?*” (Borowski 1976: 36-37).

Despite the harshest penalties, the workers concealed food and articles of every kind in their clothing: the men, “weighed down under a load of bread, marmalade and sugar, and smelling of perfume and fresh linen, line up to go” (Borowski 1976: 49). The men of the ramp became expert smugglers and traders, and they lived in relative luxury. Frankl (1969: 8), a new arrival, noticed their healthy demeanour:

The sight of the red cheeks and round faces of those prisoners was a great encouragement. Little did we know then that they formed a specially chosen elite, who for years had been the receiving squad for new transports as they rolled into the station day after day.

Smuggling from the ramp had immediate effects on the whole camp, for the ramp men stole more than they could eat themselves: “For several days the entire camp will live off this transport. For several days the entire camp will talk “Sosnowiec-Będzin... a good, rich, transport” (Borowski 1976: 49).

The *Kanadakommando*

Assignment to the ramps meant a sure supply of food and trade goods. But the apex of superabundance in the camp was certainly among the *Kanadakommando*, the work crew assigned to sorting through the loot first collected by the ramp workers. The group worked in a special area of Birkenau, a fenced-off row of blocks next to the crematoria: “Thirty barracks, filled to the rafters with possessions taken from the victims who had been gassed” (Sofsky 1999: 51). Anyone who worked there could steal food and trade goods that gave them a significant advantage in the struggle for life. Officially called the *Effektenkammer*, the prisoners renamed the area *Kanada*, as it “represented life, luxury, and salvation; it was a Garden of Eden in Hell” (Abella and Troper 2000: xxi) (Fig. 3). Survivor Rudolph Vrba (1997: 127) states that it was “where hundreds of prisoners worked frantically to sort, segregate and classify the clothes and the food and the valuables of those whose bodies were still burning, whose ashes would soon be used as fertiliser”.

The workers’ task was to organise the possessions of those recently murdered in the gas chambers. Separating valuables, such as gold and jewels, from the everyday items,

such as clothes and cooking utensils, the former went to the *Reichsbank* in Berlin and the latter were sold to German civilians. But before loading the shipments the prisoners and the SS alike stole prodigious amounts of food, valuables, and everyday items for personal use and trade. The phenomenon reminds us “that goods have both a use and an exchange value that extends well beyond the first cycle” (Gregson and Crewe 2003: 2). Indeed, “an immense amount of property was stolen by members of the SS and by the



Figure 3. *Kanada* today (Author, 2002)

police, and also by prisoners, civilian employees and railway personnel” (Höss 1959: 194). The endless stream of arriving suitcases was a constant reminder of what was occurring very nearby.

The *Sonderkommando*

The modern industrial methods employed to process the belongings of those gassed mimicked the industrial methods employed in the processing of the human bodies themselves. The assembly line of *Kanada* sorters worked in tandem with a second group of prisoner workers just metres away in the crematorium complex, who laboured daily facilitating the most efficient genocidal process in history. It was here that originated that persistent stench of burning corpses that hung over the camp and its environs (see Classen et al. 1994: 172-175). These crematorium workers dealt directly with intimate “material cultures of death” (Hallam and Hockey 2001: 9) – what was left after the disembarkation process – clothing, jewellery and other small possessions, and the body itself. For the first time in history, the killing of humans occurred on such a scale that bureaucrats and engineers had to be employed just to deal with the corpses.

Sonderkommando, or special commando, is the euphemism the SS used to denote the squad of mostly Jewish concentration camp prisoners whose job it was to operate the crematoria, most famously at Auschwitz-II Birkenau but also at the other extermination camps (Greif 2005; Levi 1988: 50). These men were assigned with ushering the victims underground, forcing them to disrobe and enter the gas chambers and finally clearing and disposing of the bodies. After searching the corpses for hidden valuables, the workers burned them in the crematoria and buried the ashes. The SS even had a second name for these men; they were designated *Geheimnisträger*, the bearers of secrets. Since these workers were privy to the details of National Socialism's biggest secret, an assignment on the squad was tantamount to a death sentence. At Auschwitz, about a dozen squads followed one after the other, each operating only for a few months: "As its initiation, the next squad burnt the corpses of its predecessors" (Levi 1988: 50).

The early units were nothing like the highly efficient groups that developed later on. They were much less organised. The early *Sonderkommando* was not even one cohesive group of prisoners. Instead, there were numerous *Kommandos*, all with different names and functions. There were the corpse-haulers, the stokers, the pit-diggers, and others; the process slowly became more and more efficient, culminating in the expert system during the busiest periods of mass killing (Greif 2005). At its most efficient stage, the death process was similar to the process of a factory assembly-line, with its success dependant on a highly organised division of labour. At periods of peak processing, the *Sonderkommando* worked in shifts, and the crematoria fires burned 24 hours a day.

The *Sonderkommando* laboured at the crematoria, and like the SS before them, those working the crematoria used deception to ensure the unhampered flow of humans. Rudolf Höss (1959: 148), the unapologetic *Kommandant* of Auschwitz, tells us that: "It was most important that the whole business of arriving and undressing should take place in an atmosphere of the greatest possible calm". Standing in the anteroom to the gas chamber, the *Sonderkommando* men avoided eye contact, but in reassuring tones repeated "*Bitte, ziehen Sie sich doch aus!* (Please be so kind as to undress!)" (Greif 2005: 12). To avoid chaotic scenes, and to avoid the wrath of the SS, the weary and stuporous workers did not warn the victims of their impending doom. Borowski (1976: 37) emphatically states that: "It is the camp law: people going to their death must be deceived to the very end. This is the only permissible form of charity". The *Sonderkommando* prisoners, like so many German bureaucrats, had become "cogs in the mass-murder machine" (Arendt 1994: 128). They had entered Levi's "Grey Zone": that shadowy place "where the oppressed becomes oppressor and the executioner in turn appears as victim" (Agamben 2002: 21 after Levi).

The highly organised industrial labour of the *Sonderkommando* consumed the material of human life and by its consumption produced other materials and products. The clothes and other possessions, once stripped from the corpses, were sent to *Kanada* for recycling and reuse. The corpses themselves were searched for hidden valuables. Benjamin Jacobs (1995: 147), a dentist at Auschwitz, remembers entering the killing

centre to pull gold teeth from the dead. It is also documented that the SS shaved the hair from the bodies and added this to their stock of war materials, hair being useful to make coarse fabrics and mattress stuffing (Agamben 2002: 25). As Schofield et al. (2002: 1) remind us, the corpses of war (even those stripped and ravaged by genocide – in this case even reduced to dust) are themselves a form of “*matériel* culture”.

Conclusions

Schofield et al. (2002: 2) suggest that “the twentieth century has typically been described by historians and social commentators as one defined by warfare and unrest, by human suffering and atrocity”. At no time or place in the 20th century is this more true than at Auschwitz. The concentration camps of the Third Reich have engendered some of the most difficult debates in the study of history and human nature. Widely studied across the academic disciplines, Auschwitz, to borrow a phrase of Buchli and Lucas (2001: 9), is: “Caught in the double hermeneutic whereby we cannot study without changing the object of our study”. The continuing creation of new material culture of Auschwitz – over 60 years after the end of the Nazi era – inevitably influences consecutive generations of academics and laypeople. While acknowledging the role of this proliferation of post-war writing, film, theatre, and art, I here argue for the primacy of materiality in the daily life of the camp during the war. Despite the most extreme conditions, interaction between humans and material goods continued, and indeed thrived. In certain situations, even, material goods were found in abundance unknown to most in their prewar lives.

Buchli and Lucas (2001: 5) state that “material culture is not passive and reflective but can act back upon us in unexpected ways”. Similarly, Fletcher (2002: 304) states that “the material possesses inertia, allowing it to continue its impact long after the actions have passed into memory or been forgotten”; recall here the humble, yet emotive, everyday objects recently brought to the surface at Buchenwald. At the site of Auschwitz today, in a brick barrack one can see piles of shoes and bundles of human hair behind glass, and the steps of the ruined crematoria at Birkenau have even become “foci of gift giving” (Hallam and Hockey 2001: 149); here we find carefully placed candles, pebbles and other small offerings of remembrance (Fig. 4). This transition between wartime and present day material culture would be an interesting area for further study.

If “oppressor and oppressed were entangled in webs spun through texts and objects” (Moreland 2001: 97), then the theory and methods of historical archaeology, a discipline devoted to the interaction of these two manifestations of material culture, offer one way forward in the pursuit of better understanding of concentration camp Auschwitz. This article has dealt with the material culture of Auschwitz on a theoretical level, drawing largely from the documentary record. However, with the end of oral history and of firsthand experience we are entering a new era of research, one led by the particular inquisitive strengths and attitudes of historical archaeology. Fletcher’s (2002: 306) notion of the 20th century’s “collision between materiality and the social world” is epitomised by the industrial death perfected at the Nazi concentration camps. With the beginning of the end of the era of living survivors of the Auschwitz of 1939–1945, we are on the “the cusp upon which history becomes archaeology”: we are enter-

ing the realm “of the object and its materiality, a world of multi-dimensional and multi-vocal meanings” (Saunders 2004: 5). It is suggested here that the continued usefulness of probing the Holocaust will be ensured by a shift away from the purely documentary, towards a new engagement with the materiality of the camps.



Figure 4. Candles on the steps of the crematoria (Author, 2002).

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