

OLENA MARTYNCHUK

Faculty of Anthropology and Cultural Studies, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland

A REFLECTION ON VERNACULAR PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE EXPERIENCE OF UKRAINIAN WAR MIGRANTS IN POLAND

July 2022. The Poznań-Przemyśl train on my way to Ukraine. A woman and her son sat next to me. It was easy to recognise where they were coming from and where they were going. Suddenly, the woman struck up a conversation with me. It seemed to be typical small-talk (which I am not a lover of, despite my anthropological interests) with neighbours in a compartment. However, after a few minutes the woman was showing me personal photographs from the gallery of her smartphone. In a few photos, she told me about her destroyed house in a town in southern Ukraine, about her relatives scattered around the world, and about her husband, whom she was going to visit in Ukraine. In that moment, looking at these pictures was unexpected and confusing for me, but I wanted to learn more about her intention to share the experience of war through this medium with a stranger.

Photography has become such a banal social practice that we often do not even realise how much we depend on it. In everyday life, photographs accompany people and interact with them in various ways. In this essay, I will try to reflect on the meaning of vernacular photographs in the context of forced migration caused by the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

In line with the posthumanism perspective and the anthropology of things, photographs, both in their material and digital forms, are actors in the social system. Photos can generate strong emotions and change a person's mood or behaviour. Various “registers” of photos (e.g., a passport photo, a wedding portrait on the wall, or a photo on a phone's lock screen) have become commonplace. We interact with photos in different ways: apart from taking them, we view them, store them, send them, buy them, collect them, exchange them, give them as gifts, edit them, delete them, and destroy them. A photo may be considered by many people as an “information source” or just a “visual record,” ignoring the potential of being imbued with agency.

In 2022 I started a pilot anthropological project, with which I am engaged not only as a researcher, but also as a Ukrainian. The main research questions focus on the potential of vernacular photography in the context of forced migration and how photographs, together with other objects, are part of the experience of forced

migration caused by the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. I have conducted ethnographic (unstructured) interviews with Ukrainian women of different ages (20 – 60), who have found shelter in Poznań. In the interviews, research participants emphasised that photographs were among the necessary personal items to locate and bring while under evacuation to a safe place in Ukraine or abroad. First of all, the photos that were close by, “in plain sight”, were put in the emergency suitcases (so-called “bug-out bags”). The extreme conditions created a need to be resolute and fast, so often a few photos quickly taken from the table became almost the only material fragments of the “pre-war” reality. In this context, photographs acquired the meaning of a memory object (Edwards & Hart 2011, p. 333) that documented a period of “normal life”. This type of photograph earns the status of a relic to be passed down to the next generation.

In the everyday life of migrants, photography also plays the role of a mediator in communication with relatives, friends at a distance, and even the deceased. This is due to the association of photography with the image of a person. The perception of the photographic image as a substitute for the person “captured” is an attempt to revive or recreate the human figure to some extent, to establish contact with him or her, to feel that other’s presence. In this context, a photo can serve not only as a manifestation of the living person, but also a symbolic continuation of a private space that was damaged or destroyed as a result of military actions. The photo preserves the image of a well-known and safe place in a before-time, which is so needed in the context of a permanent sense of precarity, a lack of stable accommodation or social life. At the same time, the sentimental component of photographs can have a negative impact on the owner: it can provoke difficult memories, emotions, and lead to re-traumatisation.

Photographs, just like migrants, travel across the borders (Fedyuk 2012, p. 283). Taken out of their original context, photographs receive a “new life”, travel with other objects with which they have not been in contact before, “settle” in the space of temporary homes, and become a mediator in communication with close people. As Susan Sontag has noted, a photograph changes depending on the context in which it is viewed (2017, p. 116). For example, an album of family photos that was rarely viewed before the full-scale invasion can, in the context of forced migration, preserve identity and collective memory. Some of the Ukrainian migrants did not expect to leave their homeland for a long time, so they decided not to take such things as photos with them. Only from a distance did they realise the symbolic value of photos and the risk of losing them forever.

The existence of photographs in extreme conditions is not accidental. Along with other personal items, photographs become witnesses to the criminal acts of Russian imperialism. Furthermore, photography has the status of a mediator between a past and a future life. Being close to their owners, photographs give a sense of connection to a place, family, and society and help preserve identity.

These are only some of the possible roles for photographs in the search for a safe place and ways of adapting to new cultural contexts. Without warning, photographs

have taken on the role of non-human partners that accompany their owners, fostering a strong emotional connection with family, home and homeland. Where human life ends, however, the lives of photographs often end too. In this case, photographs are lost in the ruins of cities and broken human lives. Some of these photographs may exist only in the memory of a person. Conversely, sometimes a photograph is all that remains of a person.

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Author's address:

Olena Martynchuk

Faculty of Anthropology and Cultural Studies,

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland

Email: olena.martynchuk@amu.edu.pl

ORCID: 0000-0002-9264-2996