

Der Kalte Blick (The Cold Eye)

Welcome speech by Dr Katrin Vohland, Director, Natural History Museum Vienna

Dr Riedle,

Prof Monika Grütters,

Mr Andreas Geisel,

Prof Andrzej Przyłębski

ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to take this opportunity to welcome you to the opening of *The Cold Eye*. I'm Dr Katrin Vohland, and I've been the director of the Natural History Museum of Vienna since 1st June. The museum has a long imperial tradition. It was founded by the Habsburgs some 200 years ago as a way of demonstrating the dynasty's wealth. Its modern management at the time meant it was the first museum in Europe fully committed to the Theory of Evolution. Starting with the mineralogical and meteorite collection, it retraces the origins of the universe and earth. It presents the evolution of life forms – jellyfish, crustaceans and mammals in all their diversity. It also covers human evolution, both physical and cultural. While early history is still housed at the museum, more recent artefacts are now part of the Weltmuseum ethnographical museum. So-called "physical anthropology" is another topic of the establishment's research. And it was in this collection that Dr Margit Berner discovered a cardboard box containing the now well-known photos of the Jewish families.

Various aspects come together here – the ambition of the young researchers Dr Dora Maria Kahlich and Dr Elfriede Fliethmann, the methods (questionable by today's standards) of linking physiognomic characteristics with supposedly "typical" behaviours, and the awareness of the imminent deportation and ultimately murder of the people examined.

What moral and ethical standards need to be applied in research? This is a question that cannot provide new or conclusive answers, as moral standards change over time. From a present-day perspective, one feels an overwhelming sense of horror when reading the correspondence exchanged between the participating researchers. Viennese anthropologist and supervisor of Elfriede Fliethmann, Dr Anton Plügel, wrote the following in 1941: "We don't know what measures have been planned regarding resettling the Jewish population over the coming months; in some cases, long waits may result in us losing precious material. In particular, our material could end up being ripped out of a natural family context and habitual environment." Did the researchers have no scruples at all? Did they see the situation as inalterable, and the idea of stopping the murder machine as being beyond their scientific task at hand? Or did they not care, because Jews were considered more as objects than people? People as "material" for research.

The morphometric capturing of faces and other physical features, particularly on the skull, is still used as a method in physical anthropology – except that, today, modern multivariate methods and even artificial intelligence are used to read biological information. It is clear that closely related people or people living in isolation are more similar, and not just within their own family, in mountain villages or through visible features like the Habsburg lip. But using external features to infer membership of certain ethnic groups or attribute intellectual or character traits is racism. As Georg Lilienthal worked out, for example, the focus in Tarnów was on proving mental inferiority through physical features. Elfriede Fliethmann wrote the following in her preliminary report: "Strong business acumen and acquisitiveness, and a lack of scruples in many areas, are traits particularly

attributed to the Near Eastern race. [...]. It is now possible that, despite the intense mixing of races in recent centuries, the selective breeding that appears to be shifting mentally in a Near Eastern direction has also resulted in a physical selection in this same direction. After all, one cannot deny a certain connection between certain basic mental and physical functions, perhaps also a greater affinity between individual mental and physical features.” In other words, the work served to specifically reinforce her deadly prejudices in a quasi-scientific manner.

Racism is characterised by a sense of actively drawing a line between “us” and “the other”. And not a single country on earth appears to be immune to it. Apart from that, the idea of race is refuted by science: The genetic variability within ethnic groups is greater than between them.

It is thanks to Dr Berner that the people of Tarnów and their story, their families and their individuality have come into focus. Through years of arduous legwork, she was able to locate some of the families. For many, it was the first time they had seen any photos of their family members; for some, these were the only photos they had. The results of this work can be seen not only in this exhibition, but have also been published in the comprehensive book entitled *Letzte Bilder. Die „rassenkundliche“ Untersuchung jüdischer Familien im Ghetto Tarnów 1942* (‘Final pictures. The 1942 “Race Study” of Jewish Families in the Tarnów Ghetto). Some of our museum staff helped them in the process, including Mr Wolfgang Reichmann for image handling, and Prof Sabine Eggers on the scientific side of things.

The exhibition is not only a means of remembering the victims of the Nazi regime; it is also a call to the scientific community to take up position and identify subliminal prejudices. Anthropology in particular, as a controversial field of research open to many perspectives, treads a fine line between scientific precision of measurement data and humanities-based interpretation, above a chasm of prejudices and non-reflective experiences.

I don’t believe it is useful for us to elevate ourselves morally above scientists. I expect our descendants in a 100 years’ time will be asking why we allowed the Mediterranean to become a gravesite for so many refugees – in this case predominantly of Muslim faith. Let’s use this exhibition as an opportunity to remember the victims and guard against the mechanisms in society, but also in science, that stop us from seeing ourselves as a global community of people needing to tackle the challenges of our time.