

About working with images

A conversation about Willy Römer's picture archive with Ines Schaber and Stefanie Ketzscher,

Ines: Stefanie Ketzscher, I'd like to talk with you about the work of press photographer Willy Römer and the archives that house or housed his work. I'm interested in how the different archives have changed our interpretation and understanding of the images they hold.

You studied photography at the HGB in Leipzig, left for West Berlin in the mid-1980s where you met Diethart Kerbs, the founder of the Agentur für Bilder zur Zeitgeschichte (Agency for Images of Contemporary History). You then worked for the agency from the end of the 1980s until its ending in 2009. After that, it was handed over to the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation for which you oversaw the digitization of the images. We met briefly once in 2004, when I was doing a work called *culture is our business*. The work is based on a photograph Willy Römer took in Berlin's press district during the revolutionary struggles in 1919. In the early 2000s, the Agentur für Bilder zur Zeitgeschichte was in a very challenging situation, I think, because other archives and image collections had started to digitize their collections. The agency couldn't do that; it didn't have the resources. People started to do research online and so, in my opinion, the agency faced a challenge.

Today I'd like you to tell us about the various archives that housed Willy Römer's images. So, the Photothek, Römer's own picture agency, the Agentur für Bilder zur Zeitgeschichte, Diethart Kerbs's photo agency, and the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, the public institution that houses the pictures today. I'd like you to explain what each archive is and how they merged. And I'd like to focus on the following questions: What happens when images are transferred from one archive to another? How does the pictures' interpretation change in the process and how different is the accessibility to the different archives?

Photothek

So, my first question to you would be: Who was Willy Römer and what did his archive consist of?

Stefanie: Willy Römer was a photographer who was born in 1887 and died in Berlin in 1979. He came from a family of tradespeople and, after leaving school, began an apprenticeship at the Berlin Illustrationsgesellschaft (Berlin Illustration Society). There he learned press work, which was just up and coming at the time, from the ground up. The first picture agencies existed at that time. Willy Römer was employed by one of them, Carl Delius, and worked for them in Paris for three years, as well. He was a soldier in World War I and when he returned in November 1918, he immediately started taking pictures in Berlin. He always had his 13×18 cm plate camera with him. During that time, he took over a picture agency, the Photothek company at Belle-Alliance Strasse 82 – today's Mehringdamm 58. Römer also took over the agency's entire portfolio, so he was able to continue working immediately. We can say that this was the beginning of his archive.

I: Would you make the connection to press work through the subjects he photographed, or are there also subjects that you could say were specific to Römer and not necessarily press photographs?

S: Both. Römer was very interested in the politics of the day and that was the basis for selling pictures to the national and international press. He read newspapers extensively every morning, probably also with colleagues. In good times, he employed up to four photographers who worked under the Photothek name. They tried to keep up with the daily politics. There is no proof of this, but based on the existing photographs, we can see that Römer had his own main themes and that he also took photographs on his own behalf. He not only took individual pictures, but also series of pictures. This is something that a press photographer would never do. With Willy Römer, there are often long picture series, sometimes even up to ten or twelve shots. The plate camera is difficult to handle and the plates themselves were heavy and costly. There is, for example, a series on the demolition of the Krögel, or one on harbor life, series on children in the street. He didn't worry about that: I only have three plates left or something. I think that when the subjects were right, he simply took pictures. He had an extremely fine sense and quick access to people and to what was happening on the street. The people he portrayed are trustful in the photos, alive, not posed. The plates were not very sensitive to light. So we really have to

see it with great respect what he nevertheless managed to achieve in terms of subjects.



I: Römer photographed with a plate camera and not with roll film, which already existed at that time but was not yet used professionally, right?

S: Right. Roll film was not yet professionally usable at that time. It was bulky material, highly flammable and dangerous, and it curled in the camera. As a result, the negatives were often not usable at all. After 1945, Römer documented destroyed Berlin with his plate camera – that is, with glass plates. That somehow seems to have been the safest medium for him.

I: The Photothek belonged to Römer together with Walter Bernstein, who was more concerned with administrative matters. Since he was Jewish, they were forced to stop their work in 1933.

S: The Photothek was shut down very quickly. The Nazis marched in front of the house and refused to allow him to enter. They had to close overnight. Römer relocated the archive. He and his family also had to move out of Belle-Alliance-Strasse; they could no longer afford their bel étage apartment. He tried to get employment with other photographers, but in 1940 or '41 he was drafted into the Wehrmacht. They had to downsize a lot and kept the archive more or less in the basement. During the war, the neighboring house was bombed and there was some breakage of the glass plates. But most of them were spared.

I: Could we say that the large part of Römer's work was photographed between 1900 and 1933?

S: Yes, that was the focus.

I: What is the scope of the archive?

S: Diethart Kerbs assumed that the archive comprised approximately 50,000 glass plates and the corresponding original prints. An original print is a contact copy, not an enlargement. You can see on the old prints exactly what is on the negative. It wasn't until after the war that Römer created files with main topics of the material that he thought he

could offer to various newspapers. And then he worked with cropped images.

I: Can you explain how a press photographer worked back then? A glass plate itself is very unwieldy.

S: The photographers usually had young errand boys with them, who were given the exposed glass plates on the spot and had to run to the agency with them. There, the plates were immediately developed and the contact copies were made so that the photos could be taken to the newspaper agencies on the same day so that they could print very up-to-date images. Since the postcard format was very popular in those days, the original photos were also often made into postcards and sold immediately. It was a tough business, there was a lot of competition. The faster the messengers were, the faster the agency could try to sell the photos. We have a photo where you can see Willy Römer with a heavy tripod on his shoulder and his coat pockets hanging down. He probably had glass plates in them.



I: In addition to the day-to-day business, an agency archive was then successively created in which the images were organized differently, right?

S: That was later. The heart of the collection is a large card index cabinet. In it, the original copies are arranged in card index boxes. Unfortunately, there is no record of how Römer ran the archive. Based on my years of working with the archive, I've seen that there is a sequential numbering system. But I never found a photo using the consecutive numbers. The plates were also immediately given a number. The negative number was noted on them in ink, which I think was already sequential, but also irritating because you can't infer the year from the number. So, it's a mystery how Willy Römer compiled the archive.

I: There's no consecutive numbering of the archive from 1905 on?

S: The numbers are sequential, but they may have been rearranged at some point. At least the negative numbers noted on the glass plate match the negative numbers on the original contact copies. Then, using that, if you have the original print, you can find the negative.

I: That means we can't see today which picture he took before another?

S: No, I always thought if the negative is available now, maybe I'll find another negative from that time in this box, but that was rarely possible.

I: Does that mean that Römer mainly worked with the numbers at that time or was there a second category, like a title or something similar?

S: No, Römer pre-sorted the photos in this so-called card index according to certain keywords. But we don't know when they were sorted.

I: Could it be that he did this after the war?

S: I don't think so. I think the ominous wooden cabinet is older.

I: Do I understand correctly that there was a day-to-day business in the Photothek in which the photographs were given numbers, and later the thematic indexing was done? Is that correct?

S: I'd assume so.

I: What keywords did he work with?

S: He had favorite topics. For example, sports with subcategories like tennis, car racing and cycling. There are very many race car drivers he portrayed individually or tennis players. There are many photographs of public institutions. There are beautiful series of the post office, of the police or of the telecommunications office. And there is a large body of portraits, for example, he made a large series of former members of the Reichstag. He then arranged these people according to the first letter of the family name. He also took photographs in Germany, probably for postcard publishers. The pictures about business life are very beautiful. He also had a great penchant for innovations, for example, he photographed the first automat café in Berlin. When neon signs came along, he photographed Berlin at night. And what he loved were the children. He observed and photographed them on the street. There was really nothing that didn't interest him. You can see in the archive what he also did on his own initiative. For example, the many wonderful photos about the trades. There's a large series of apprentices at work.

Christmas was a big theme or the big series about Gdansk before its destruction.

I: I'd like to ask a question that I already discussed with Diethart Kerbs in 2004. We find and understand images – also in archives – through the context, or the labeling around them. In your archive, the revolutionary image was quite clearly labeled and historically contextualized. Kerbs's principal work always also involved conveying the images in their context in history. In other archives, it's different. At Corbis, for example, the commercial image archive where I also found the image, the content was incorrectly described. It says that the picture shows government troops. Was there a text layer in the Willy Römer archive that helps you understand what you're looking at?

S: Yes, that's the great value of Römer's archive: that he usually labeled all the pictures very well using typed paper strips on the back. To ensure that the press received the proper information he did this very succinctly, usually with a date, but often, unfortunately, only with a year. The texts were duplicated on carbon paper so that the duplicates could also be labeled with them later. I believe Römer sometimes took notes when he took the pictures. He left a large archive of newspaper clippings in labeled envelopes from which he took or rewrote longer passages to fit the photo. As a result, there's sometimes a whole story from which one learns much more. Römer was very keen to expand and pass on his knowledge.

Agentur für Bilder zur Zeitgeschichte

I: Willy Römer died in 1979 and his widow wanted to sell the archive.

S: Yes. She didn't even care who bought it, but no one wanted it. In 1981, she placed a newspaper ad in the trade journal *Der Journalist*: "Important picture archive for sale. Over 60,000 photos, 7,000 portraits of German history from 1906 to 1936." Mr. Kerbs read the advertisement. He contacted her because he was already very interested in historical reappraisal in relation to photography at that time and he tried to help her place the archive in a state museum. But there was no interest at all. Mrs. Römer wanted to part with the archive. And so Mr.



Kerbs bought the material from her in 1981 and put it in a room in his apartment. This became the Römer-room. There were meters of high iron shelves with the glass plates and the heart of the archive: the card index cabinet with the original photos. There were also countless boxes with other remnants of the archive. Among them were also more recent prints in photo paper boxes, arranged by subject and with these carbon duplicate labels.

I: Diethart Kerbs was neither an archivist nor a photographer. He was a professor of art education at the UDK in Berlin.

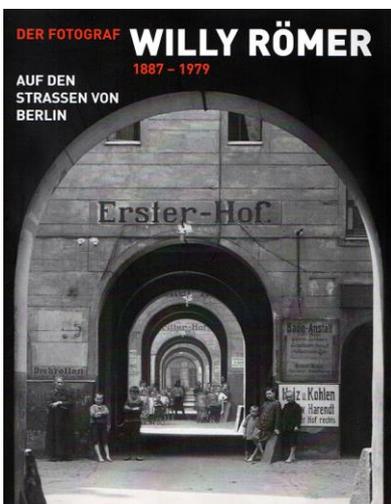
S: Mr. Kerbs was above all also a collector! Later, he considered himself a photo historian. He was very knowledgeable about history. He immediately recognized the value of the Römer archive. Because of the labels, he could see that there was a whole lot of German history stored there. He spent every free minute in the Römer Room looking at the pictures.

I: Actually, at the beginning, he was new to this field but he made the archive his passion. It was the source material for many books he published.

S: Yes, and that's how we met. He was looking for a photographer to collaborate with on the *Revolution and Photography* exhibition, which took place in 1988. People were lined up all the way to the street to see this exhibition with the old small pictures. That surprised us a lot at the time. There were also negotiations with the East Berlin Senate to make a traveling exhibition, which was then shown in the Marstall. But because of the fall of the wall, the exhibition got no response at all.

I: In 2004 and 2005, the Deutsches Historisches Museum organized a Willy Römer exhibition. Kerbs also published a series of booklets – the *Photothek Hefte* – in which many of Römer's photographs are reproduced.

S: He edited the latter together with Dirk Nissen who had a publishing house in Kreuzberg at the time and agreed that the booklets should be kept simple and sold cheaply so that they would be generally accessible and widely distributed.



I: The booklets partly use Willy Römer's categories as titles, right? There are *Hurdy Gurdies in Berlin*, *Children on the Street*, *Wandering Trades*, *January Uprising*, *From Horses to Cars*.



S: Römer created folders with various topics after the war. And these were also the basis for the Photothek booklets.

I: When I met Kerbs in 2004, I noticed that he hardly let anyone into the Römer-room.

S: He would have been overwhelmed if he had made it accessible. But he also didn't want the picture archive to be private property, he wanted it to be placed with state institutions and made accessible to the public. That's why he founded this picture agency as part of the formation of the association. Based on the photo booklets, the photos could then be found and lent to publications. Also, because of the *Photography and Revolution* exhibition, it became known that there was a picture archive with valuable documents of the era.

I: Could we say that Willi Römer had a commercial press agency and Kerbs a kind of archive of left-wing Berlin history?

S: Mr. Kerbs didn't alter the archive. He himself was particularly interested in certain topics. After all, he was also connected with the history workshops.

I: Could we say that Römer took pictures to sell as a press photographer, but he had no control over the narrative in which the pictures then appeared? With him, it was mostly about individual images. Kerbs's interest, on the other hand, went beyond the individual image. He took control of the images on many levels. On the one hand, of course, because he was interested in the historical moment; on the other hand, because he didn't make an image available to everyone. The function of the archive changed. One could say, exaggeratedly, that he transformed a press photo archive into a picture archive of left-wing history.

S: I'm not so sure about that. I would be cautious claiming it was a left-wing archive. Römer himself sympathized with the revolutionaries, that's apparent. He didn't photograph the other soldiers that way. That

changed with the Kapp putsch. He also photographed the government soldiers and showed how they influenced the streets in Berlin.

I: It seems that Kerbs devoted himself to the themes in the Römer archive that he was particularly interested in. On the one hand, there was the everyday life on the streets, which was also a big theme in the history workshops back in the 1980s. And secondly, there was the history of the revolution. These two fields of interest generated a certain idea of the archive, which – because you couldn't visit the archive at all – didn't really correspond to what we can see today now that larger parts of it can be viewed.

S: Römer's work was commercial. Mr. Kerbs's agency was non-profit.

I: Kerbs's interest was historical, intellectual or cultural, but not commercial. That changes the relationship to the material, I think. Did he change the archive itself? Did Kerbs add anything to Römer's organization and concepts?

S: The overriding principle was not to change anything and it was a great mark of confidence that I was allowed into the room to process orders, to look at the photos, to get an overview. The boxes and the cartons all had to stay there exactly as he had put it. Later, during the move to the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, great care was taken on the part of the picture archive and the management to ensure that everything was sorted back into the same order as it had been. That way, nothing was lost.

Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation

I: Kerbs made a point from the very beginning that the Römer archive belonged in a public institution. He explained to me in 2004 that Germany didn't have a picture archive and that this, in contrast to other countries, meant there was a large gap in historiography. He pointed out the gap that exists or existed in Berlin, and indeed in Germany, in terms of a "photographic memory" and he was able to illustrate the problem well through the Willy Römer archive. So how did he finally get the archive placed in a public institution?

S: I think the opening of the Pei Building at the Deutsches Historisches Museum was decisive. In cooperation with Dieter Vorsteher, the head of the picture archive at that time, the museum gave the ABZ association the opportunity to hold an exhibition there. It became a very large and important exhibition from October 2004 to February 2005. We filled two floors in the Pei Building with small old photos. And Mr. Kerbs found a wonderful supporter in Mr. Frenz from the Prussian Cultural Heritage picture archive. The Römer archive was then purchased by the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation and incorporated into the Art Library. Today, the archive is located in the Photography Museum on Jebenstrasse.

I: Kerbs passed away in 2013.

S: Yes, he was still able to regulate the transition according to his wishes. He was very happy that he was able to hand it over with such peace of mind and that everything remained the way he wanted it for the time being. As of 2010, I had a contract with the Prussian Cultural Heritage picture archive for the acquisition of the image holdings. The question was how to deal with such a large collection. The starting point was the Photothek booklets and the *Revolution and Photography* catalog. These were the main objects that had already been published. I started with the Revolution photographs, which were half a file box full of originals. I entered them individually into a database. I noted a database number using the archiving system of the museum association, the ID number, the old contact copy on the back, searched for the negatives belonging to it, and these were scanned. Today, you can find a picture immediately via the ID number. At the same time, I entered Willy Römer's original title of the picture. I used everything that was written on the back of the picture. Then, I keyworded what was visible. I also did research, especially with the names as Römer had often made spelling mistakes. If there were recognizable errors, I corrected them. Otherwise, everything that was available in Willy Römer's texts was incorporated into the digital archive.

I: Are the numbers the administrative specifications of the system into which the images were entered? And did Römer's terminology and categories remain in the keyword system?

S: Römer's themes in the folders and his categories in the archive cabinet no longer exist as such. His terms are now part of the keywords. The point was that you can find the corresponding pictures or negatives in the archive via the ID number. Basically, I dismantled the archive boxes, not all of them; the cabinet is still full. I placed the scanned images in individual pockets in accordance with the archive. These pockets were then labeled with the sequential ID number and the negative number. This way, we can now work with the archive.

I: Could we say that there are two systems now? The analog system, from which you start, and the digital, which now has a new life? I was surprised when I looked at the images already digitized on the foundation's website. Kerbs didn't allow me into the archive room. I mainly talked to him about the images, but I couldn't grasp or understand the size of the archive. Digitizing – you've digitized about 10,000 images now – creates a whole different idea of the archive and I can see a lot more images. That amount is also overwhelming. On the one hand, it's impressive to see all that Römer photographed. On the other hand, this "many" is also very disorganized. It always has this "so there's all that." With Kerbs, on the other hand, the searching worked more through scarcity. He asked what I was looking for, and then he looked at what he found or what he could think of. Then he'd come back with a picture or maybe two. Before that, we had talked about it over tea and cookies for hours without me seeing anything. The Foundation's digital archive, which is accessible, offers a more comprehensive picture of what Römer did. You have to pick and choose for yourself. This is a completely different form of accessibility to the archive, which for me also creates a different understanding of the images. How did this transition feel to you? You were the one who moderated it. That's a very big responsibility.

S: It was a great responsibility that I enjoyed immensely. I learned a lot from the old photos. It was exciting and I spent a lot of time looking at the photos in the file boxes without yet recording them. That allowed me to remember and later put together wonderful series.

As long as the archive was with Mr. Kerbs, I only looked for the original prints and then the glass plates. The glass plates were in the original glass plate boxes, there were about ten plates in each box. It's

exciting every time you open a box like that. When I was digitizing, I had a big light table where I could lay out the glass plates and look at them. That's how I found other wonderful subjects that I'd had no idea existed.

I: Often when collections are digitized there's an effort to digitize everything and make it accessible. You didn't do it that way. You worked for over five years to digitize about 10,000 photographs. 40,000 more were not digitized. How did you make your selection?

S: That's how it turned out. As I already mentioned, we had decided to digitize what had already been published and by planned illustrated books on certain topics. Photos of the city's history were always interesting, political events, etc. Römer also photographed many museum pieces, some of which were destroyed in the war, and I selected people portrayed whose lives were destroyed by National Socialism; in doing so, I may have saved many from total oblivion. In principle, I was free to decide on the selection.

Pictures in archives

I: Could we say that the Photothek was an agency for press photography that responded to everyday events to sell images, that Kerbs's Agentur für Bilder zur Zeitgeschichte was very limited as an agency, but was left-wing historiography and that today the archive is administered by the state, which aims to make the images accessible? Or how would you describe what happened to the archive?

S: It's also always about its further use. It's also always a question of how the images are used. The archive in itself is neutral. More or less.

I: More or less...

(Both laugh)

S: But, no. It always depends on the context.

I: Could we say that the foundation and the archive that houses the pictures today do not exercise any control over their use, but that they

also have no specific mission for the pictures? Kerbs, after all, had very specific ideas about the pictures.

S: A certain control is already exercised by the archive during the ordering process or the paid provision, but the offer has no specific mission.

I: For me, Kerb's question about a national image archive was always interesting. The related question, of course, is what that should or could be in the first place. Who collects what and why? What is a picture memory? And what could or should a "national image archive" be? For me, this question also arises in relation to the organization of archives, and especially, of course, to the contextualization and accessibility of images. So, in conclusion, I'd like to ask you what this translation from one archive to another means and what you think about this new, big opening of the archive.

S: I really don't know. The nice thing is that the inventory of pictures has ended up in a museum. Diethart Kerbs was very afraid that the archive would simply be dissolved and the pictures would become a commodity. Historical photos in particular have a market value now; it's no longer a question of what the photo itself means and what stories it can tell, but rather that it represents a collector's value as a unique specimen. Mr. Kerbs was panic-stricken that individual photos would be marketed and disappear.

I: In other words, he attached great importance to keeping the Römer collection together.

S: ...and that it would be preserved. Especially after the fall of the wall, many picture archives were dissolved. Even today, we have the problem of where photographers can house their picture archives. This is an unsolved problem because no one wants to be bothered with it. These archives may not need as much space today, but no one wants to make space available at all. Preservation always means an investment. You have to take care of the material. Digital photography cancels out a lot of these requirements in my eyes, because it is available very quickly and then immediately forgotten. The storage media are not secure in

that sense either. Perhaps we need to realize more that an analog image collection has value.

I: Working with images is always also working on their designation, naming and description. In the Agentur für Bilder zur Zeitgeschichte this aspect, as an element to understand photography, was taken very seriously. This work exists in very few archives. It is hardly affordable, which is why your work is so valuable. So much work and time may need to be spent to understand the images, transfer them and keyword them. One of the big challenges for finding images in the digital space is that we have to search for them exclusively through language. If that language doesn't exist in the form of search terms or keywords, or if we don't understand the logic, it becomes difficult to find them at all. What you called a glut of images could then become just noise.

S: That's one of the challenges with digitization, but it also allows for great diversity.

I: Stefanie Ketzscher, thank you very much for the informative interview.

S: Thank you, too.