

# WHY THIS PICTURE? ABOUT TAKING PHOTOGRAPHS IN PRISONS

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*the portuguese prison photo project – Montagem da exposição. Peter Schulthess (e) D. Fink (d). Fotografia Luis Barbosa 27.8.2017.*



In this contribution I want to give an input about prisons and photography. I ask myself: Why this picture? I present my work method, the procedures involved to gain access to prisons and the process of the final selection, by the photographer and the other stakeholders, of the photographs shown. That brings me to the final question on how and to which degree a selection of pictures shown in an exhibition can be representative of the whole prison system of a country, in this particular case Portugal.

## 1. THE CONTEXT

My contribution is about *the portuguese prison photo project* which was shown at the Centro Português de Fotografia (CPF) in autumn 2017, an exhibition initiated by Daniel Fink, lecturer at the University of Lausanne and Lucerne. The interesting thing is that the CPF is located in the former prison of the old town of Porto, in function from around 1770 until 1974. Despite a renovation of the inside and, to a certain degree, on the façade of the building in order to accommodate the CPF, the edifice as a whole, with its thick walls and solid bar doors, its floors and windows, is still imposing and makes a strong impression on every visitor who has some sensitivity about the idea of imprisonment. An exhibition of photography of prisons, shown in a former prison building now housing a center for photography was a very tempting proposal.



The Centro Português de Fotografia (CPF), housed in the former prison of Porto, built on the border of the old town of Porto. Until 1974, it was a court house and a detention facility. The massive, impressive building accommodated in 2017 the first exhibition of “the portuguese prison photo project” (PPPP) with the prison photographs of Luis Barbosa and Peter Schulthess (see: [prisonphotoproject.international](http://prisonphotoproject.international)). On the front of the building, the banners with the logos of the CPF and the PPPP. The photography on the banner is from Luis Barbosa. *Foto: Peter Schulthess, 2017*

I contributed to this exhibition with the photographs taken in four prisons, with the elaboration of its design, from the logos and the choice of the frames, to the documentation and the selection of my photographs, and finally with the planning of the construction of the exhibition.

By profession, I am an architectural photographer. In this capacity, I had fifteen years ago a first encounter with a prison from the inside. Some years later I decided to publish a book about Swiss prisons. In 2005 I began with the research and had a first contact with Daniel Fink who at that time headed the department of crime and criminal justice statistics at the Swiss Federal Statistical Office.

The book was published in 2006 and was the beginning of my career as a photographer of prisons and correctional facilities and also as an author and publisher on that subject.

## **2. ABOUT DIFFERENT REPRESENTATIONS OF A PRISON**

But to return to my title: *Why this picture? About taking photographs in prisons.*

First let me play with numbers and let me find an answer to the question, what quantity of pictures could be considered as representative. It is a philosophical and a theoretical question: what is the number of different views inside the current number of 49 Portuguese prisons right now? 18'000. We have more or less two totally different points of view inside a detention facility: the perspective of the prisoners and the perspective of the staff.

At present, in 2017, Portugal has close to 14'000 prisoners divided in two groups (the sentenced and the pre-trial detainees), who have most probably different views of a prison. And about 4000 views of the staff, divided in two groups: from the total number of the members of the guards (Guarda Prisional), one third is in service and two third are off-duty. Each of these 18'000 persons in the 49 prisons of Portugal have their own perspective and their own picture of their living and working environment: the prison.

The big question: how can a photographer reduce these 18'000 possible views to an exhibition with just some 65 of his own pictures, to which I should add the 40 photographs of Luis Barbosa, in total 105 pictures – which was the final number of photographs shown in the exhibition? To which degree can these pictures be representative?

## **3. SELECTING PRISONS**

As it was impossible to take pictures of all 49 prisons, because it would have

overstretched our capacities, a selection of prisons to be made. Thanks to the knowledge and competence of Professor Maria José Mouthinho Santos from the University of Porto, we drew a list of 12 representative prisons. Representative meant a selection of prisons:

- from the north, which would also be found in the south,
- from the smallest to the biggest,
- from the oldest to the newest,
- including some special facilities for juveniles and women.

It was a wish list.

The next step was to get access to these prisons. With the support of the University of Porto, namely Professor Cândido da Agra, some reference letters, samples of the past my work, credentials for Luis Barbosa, and a large portion of hope, we received a few months later the good news, maybe with a negative side: Yes, we can have access, but only to 6 prisons. Our 12 prisons melted to a half.

Later, like a sweet dessert, we received the permission to take pictures in the, historically speaking, most representative prison, which was also the most overcrowded, the prison of Lisbon. It was at the same time a very photogenic prison. Prisoners on their side will link this building with very difficult, even inhumane living conditions.

The reduction from 49 to 7 prisons meant we had access to a seventh of all penal establishments. But these seven represented close to a quarter of all detention places in Portugal, and this was quite a satisfactory number.

#### **4. TAKING PICTURES AND SELECTING THEM**

But the most radical limitation to the number of pictures laid in front of us. First there was the time to shoot the pictures. When I take pictures in prisons, I follow my concept. It is a plan which helps me to structure the shootings and helps the prison staff to organise the tour.

I divide my photo scenes into six parts, going from the outside to the inside of a prison:

- A) General view outside the prison and the main entrance («public view»), general view from the inside of the wall/fence, view from a watchtower, watchtower, security check inside the main entrance.

- B) Living, cell house(s): each kind of cells (single cell, double cell, five bed cell, isolation cell); section and cells for high security, warden office, section for disciplinary sanctions; exercise yard and cells.
- C) Leisure/recreation area: dining room, sports area, playing field, fitness room, education room, classroom, room for mass, library, kiosk.
- D) Work: kitchen, laundry, industry and workshops.
- E) Visit section: visiting rooms (several types).
- F) Health services: infirmary, surgery, x-ray room.
- X) Special photographs: staff, director.



Taking pictures from a watchtower next to a loaded machine gun is a very special moment as in Switzerland there are no watchtowers and no machine guns on the surrounding walls of prisons. *Foto: Gilda Santos, 4.11.2016.*

The most important part: the living spaces of the prisoners. It looks easy but in fact there is a long way to go to do the photos at the best moments. So, there is never enough time to make pictures of all those on my list, especially in large prisons.

Another important issue should be mentioned: as detainees have the right to a protection of their identity, it has become impossible to take pictures of them as photographers did in Switzerland in the past. I very seldom photograph detainees, be they in pre-trial detention or convicted, except in a few cases when they are far away or sometimes from the back. With regard to staff, I ask them for their permission to photograph them in their working environment. Many accept, but many also refuse, maybe to preserve their anonymity or because they cannot fully identify with their work.

At the end of my visits to the four prisons, I selected 709 pictures, about half of the number I had taken. On his side, Luis Barbosa selected a sample of pictures he wanted to show. These pictures were then sent to the Directorate General for Rehabilitation and Prison Services (DGRSP) in Lisbon for the final publishing permission procedure. The procedure consisted in a quick visual check of all the pictures, in the presence of the photographers. As a result, only a small number – 33 pictures – could not be published.

The hardest step was then to reduce this first selection to the 66 most impressive, but in my view, still typical pictures, to separate them into 4 print-sizes and arrange them in groups or series on the different walls at my disposal in the impressively large rooms of the Centro Português de Fotografia. I separated my pictures into two groups: the “storytelling pictures” and the “gallery pictures”.



An example of “storytelling pictures”. They show the subject of family visits under different aspects in three prisons. Photo: Peter Schulthess, 2017

With the instructive “storytelling pictures” I want to show facts of the prison system or of prison life, as they may be different in different prisons. They need some accompanying text to be understood.

“Gallery pictures” work with a visual impact: the “woah” pictures, the eye-catcher images, especially when they are printed on a large format and – for additional impact – grouped respectively hanged in series of similar pictures.



Example of photographs in sequence (in German: Bildstrecke) of “gallery pictures”. All three pictures show the same object from three different perspectives. The sequence reinforces the impression. Photo: Peter Schulthess, 2017

## 5. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

The exhibition showed, distributed over three rooms, a total of 105 photographs taken by Luis Barbosa and myself, working with different techniques and artistic expression, both aiming at visualizing the subject from our separate points of view. The photographs of current prisons were supplemented with historical pictures of penitentiaries and living conditions in detention, selected, after a long process, by professor Maria José Moutinho Santos, the historian of the very prison in which the exhibition was held.

Held at the Centro Português de Fotografia in Porto, the exhibition lasted from 9 September until 3 December 2017 and attracted over 30'000 visitors. Due to its success, a new exhibition is planned in Lisbon, to be held in spring and summer 2019 at the Museu do Aljube – Resistência et Liberdade, in one of the most important former political prisons of Portugal. Due to the limited space available, the exhibition will be based largely on TV-shows and Powerpoint presentations.