

Jumping to Uncertainty: A Conversation with Tobi Dahmen

Daniel Stein, Centre for Pictorial Holocaust Narratives

Tobi Dahmen was the third speaker in our short summer reading series, which launched the Center for Pictorial Holocaust Narratives, founded in April 2026 as a collaboration of the University of Siegen and TU Braunschweig. The first reading was by Veronika Wiggert and Marie Geissler, the second one by Jacob Jacobson and Shirley Waisman.

The poster features a light beige background. At the top left, the text "Online Reading & in Conversation with..." is written in a large, bold, red font. To the right of this text is a barcode with the text "CENTRE FOR PICTORIAL HOLOCAUST NARRATIVES" underneath it. Below the main title, there are three images: a black and white photograph of Tobi Dahmen, a book cover for "Picturing the Unimaginable" by Ten Comic Authors, and a comic book page titled "Motherly love" by Tobi Dahmen, featuring a character named Simon Gronowski. Below these images, the text "Tobi Dahmen" is written. At the bottom, a dark grey banner contains the date "15 JULY 2026", the time "18:00-19:00 (CET)", the text "THIS TALK IS IN ENGLISH", and a QR code with the text "SCAN NOW TO REGISTER" and an arrow pointing to it. Below the banner, a small line of text states: "This online event has been organised by the newly founded research Centre for Pictorial Holocaust Narratives, a collaboration of the University of Siegen & the TU Braunschweig."

**Poster designed by Tatia Gruenbaum; photograph of Tobi Dahmen by Gunter
Glücklich, Hamburg, www.guntergluecklich.com**

Tobi's reading took place via Zoom on 14 July 2026. Tobi read his comic "Motherly Love" about Jewish Simon Gronowski, born 1931 in Ukkel, Belgium, who survived the Holocaust and learned to play the piano to commemorate his loved ones who did not survive – his mother and his sister were killed in Auschwitz, his father died of a broken heart shortly after the war when he heard the news. The story is part of the anthology *Picturing the Unimaginable: Ten Comic Authors/Ten Stories about the Holocaust and Other Nazi Crimes*, initiated by the WWII historian Kees Ribbens (NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies) and published 2024 with Scratch.

Tobi is known as the author of *Columbusstraße: Eine Familiengeschichte 1935-1945* (Carlsen, 2024), a graphic narrative that draws on firsthand accounts from his family and presents a chronicle of Germany's wartime years. Through the lens of his family history, the book offers a powerful reflection on Germany's past and explores questions of political and personal responsibility. His most recent publication is *Al-Fazia' – Das Grauen: Überleben in Syriens Gefängnissen*, edited by Ugur Ümit Üngör and Charlotte

Schallié (Carlsen, 2026), which emerged from the close collaboration between Tobi and Akram Al Saud, who was imprisoned and tortured in Syria and eventually fled to the Netherlands. The following conversation is an edited and slightly revised version of the Q&A that followed Tobi's reading of "Motherly Love." I thank the additional respondents for their questions and their permission to include them in this interview.

Daniel Stein: Tobi, can you give us some context for "Motherly Love" and the book project of which it is a part?

Tobi Dahmen: *Picturing the Unimaginable* was a collaboration of 10 artists from Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium, and it was in commission and cooperation with three memorial places, Camp Westerbork in the Netherlands, Kazerne Dossin in Mechelen, Belgium, and the former concentration camp Neuengamme near Hamburg in Germany. This was a very challenging project, trying to tell different stories all connected to the Holocaust and Nazi crimes. The question we asked ourselves was: How do we manage to portray the different aspects of the Holocaust but also make it work as one book? That's always a challenge with an anthology, but I think it came out very nicely, apart from the horrible content. I'm very, very proud to be part of this book. It's available in four languages.

"Motherly Love" is the story of Simon Gronowski, Holocaust survivor. He was on a particular train to Auschwitz, called *Transport XX*, which was one of the very few transports that were obstructed and put to a halt by a resistance group. More than 230 people were able to flee from the train. Simon is the only one from his family who survived the Holocaust.

Daniel Stein: What kind of historical material about Simon did you have access to, and how much were you involved with the selection of the story? Did you choose Simon?

Tobi Dahmen: We all went to Camp Westerbork to meet, and we stayed there for a couple of days. We looked at the exhibition and the former campsite. But the historians who took part in the project also presented certain case studies to us. My story was presented by Anne-Sophie van Vyve from Kazerne Dossin. I was immediately struck by it. I was, at this moment, already busy with working on my graphic novel *Columbusstraße*, and I realized that Simon was almost the same age as my father when the events happened. I realized, here are two young boys who only live because of the care of their parents, but both young sons have totally different chances in life. Totally different starting points. I couldn't get my head around it, so I was very drawn to the story. Simon Gronowski discovered a favor for jazz music and became a jazz pianist, and that's a connection with my father as well. He didn't play, but he loved jazz all his life, so these were the things that drew me to this story.

Daniel Stein: Does such a personal connection help you deal with difficult historical issues?

Tobi Dahmen: It gets your mind running, and it creates an emotional bond, I think. You can place yourself in the situation better, in a way. My thought was to portray the story from Simon's eyes, being overwhelmed with the whole situation constantly, not knowing what's going on. And the second idea was to draw the whole story with the focus on the

hands. I wanted to draw this story a little bit differently than how I usually try things out. When I had this idea, I tried to describe it to the other people in the project, and there were some doubts about it. As you can imagine, it might be very boring if you only see hands, but I found this a very important viewpoint because history is made up of very small actions. We see the big picture, but the big picture is also made up of very little actions going this way or that way: closing the door of a wagon or typing the lists of the people on the transport, but also the gesture of a mother, a loving mother. Through this gesture, she saves the life of her son. I wanted to bring this into the story.

Daniel Stein: And in the end, when Simon plays piano, of course, he uses his hands.

Tobi Dahmen: Yeah, exactly, yeah.

Daniel Stein: It's an amazing way to provide closure to a story where there is no real closure.

Tobi Dahmen: Yeah, yeah.

Daniel Stein: You didn't have much space to tell the story. How did you condense what was obviously a much longer and more complex story into just a few pages? I mean, there's a whole life that could be told.

Tobi Dahmen: Of course, I could have described everything that happened in Kazerne Dossin as well. I guess the people of Kazerne Dossin would have liked that as well because that's the core of their memorial work. But I did a few short stories before I started these big books, and I realized that a short story has to be on point. You cut away everything that's not important, and I thought the best way to do it is to get right into the ... "action" may be the wrong word for this, but get right into the situation. You might feel a little bit of the overwhelming situation, just as Simon feels, you know? Everything's new, so for the reader, it's new as well. The strong thing about comics is that you always have to imagine the rest of the picture and what's happening between the pictures. This draws you right into the story. And by starting with various small steps, someone drawing something on a car and closing the door – it's very clear what's happening. We don't know exactly what's going on, but the following pictures make sense, and then we get a little bit of an explanation about what is going on. Simon says we are going east, so within the context of the book, people realize what's going on.

Daniel Stein: And trains are a very big part of the imaginary of the Holocaust, right? But this train ride ends differently, not for his mother and sister, but for him? There's a chance to tell a story about escaping the train and living a life afterwards.

Tobi Dahmen: Yes, and it's very special because it's only this particular time that so many people escaped. It's a story about Simon, but we also hear about brave people who made this possible. There was resistance.

Daniel Stein: Can you talk about style and constructing the architecture of the pages and the panels? You talked about the focus on the hands already, but maybe you can talk a little bit about the creative process?

Tobi Dahmen: I always try to put something in the end that makes you want to turn the page. We see that on the right side, people are fleeing from the wagon, so that's a moment of tension. This is something that I try to keep in mind. But with this story, I knew I had to be very strict in my layout because otherwise I wouldn't be able to get across as much as I wanted to. I needed to use every space that I had. On the other hand, since it's a child speaking, I didn't want to use overly long sentences, you know what I mean? It had to be very direct. This layout of small frames also alludes to the organization of the Holocaust, in a way. It's not that I always think about all these things when I'm creating a comic, but looking at this right now, I realize there's also a moment when I break up this whole layout, and the moment that Simon is saved when he jumps from the train. The whole page is white, and he's jumping to uncertainty, but he is also free from this structure, from this deadly structure, this system. We'll get back to it right away, because he's being hunted. But from that moment on, there's a little bit of change in the layout. The dark forest, for example, and later we switch to the days of now. These things are not always happening very consciously, but I try to put the layout in the service of the story. There are comic artists who experiment with each new page with a new design. I like that as well, as a reader, but for me, it would distract me. I want to focus on the picture and the text, so the reader gets really sucked into the story, doesn't get too distracted. He doesn't need to find his way with every new page, you know?



**Jumping to uncertainty: Scene from
Tobi Dahmen, "Motherly Love" (Scratch Books, 2024)**

Daniel Stein: The scene where Simon jumps outside of the train is shown from the mother's perspective, right? It's the last moment she sees her son. To me, that's a very touching moment. Because we share her view as she is saving her son's life, aware that it is very unlikely that she will ever see him again.

Tobi Dahmen: Exactly. I am a parent myself, and when I was thinking about this, I couldn't... Of course, you do everything for your child, but this is the most you can do to protect the child. But realizing she must have realized at this moment, this is the only chance. I'm taking this chance, she must have thought. But how hurtful this must have been. I can't imagine.

Daniel Stein: This is picturing the unimaginable, right? That's the title of the book. In a way, it's one of those scenes.

Tobi Dahmen: Yeah, yeah.

Tatia Gruenbaum: I have read this story a number of times, but looking at the pages now again, it's incredible because I see new things. I saw it in a different way today, on the slides. So, I was wondering about your positioning of text. I'm asking this because of the illustration with the birthday cake. Do you position the text strategically? That was my question.

Tobi Dahmen: Um, because we don't see the face of the mother, or...

Tatia Gruenbaum: Yes, and is it about hiding?

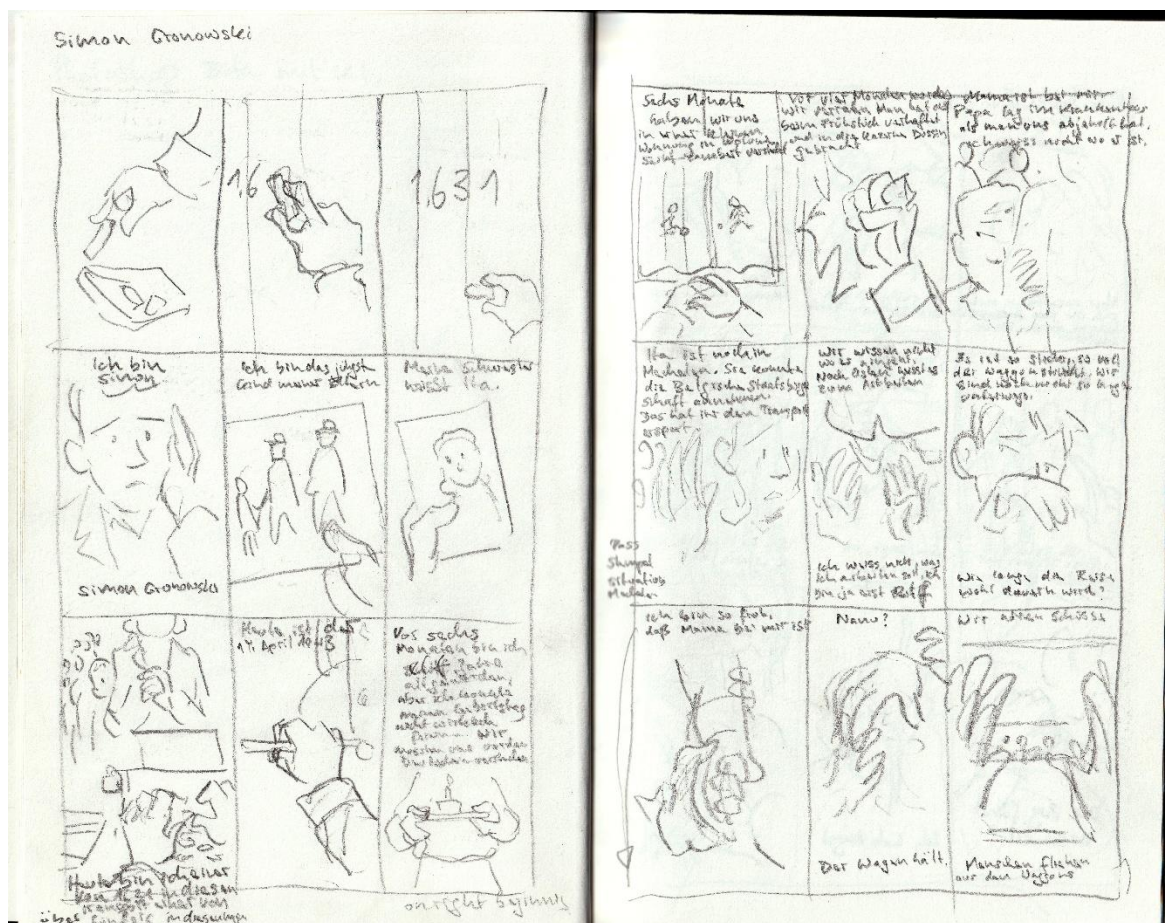
Tobi Dahmen: The perspective is a little bit more distanced than in other pictures. I wanted to focus, to make clear that the concept is consistent, that we are focusing on the hands again – the hands holding the birthday cake, giving a present. And on the other side of the page, we have a similar layout where you don't see the face of the mother either. But her hands are pleading. The perspective's quite similar.

Kees Ribbens: Thanks a lot for presenting this, Tobi. It really makes a very different impression hearing you read the story aloud than reading it myself on paper. And once again, I was very impressed. You did mention that there were some doubts initially from the editorial side for your focus on those hands. I mean, in as far as having any doubts, I'm sure they do no longer exist. I think it's very successful because one of the things that the hands also do is that they not only show, let's say, the very personal and individual level: Everyone has hands, we see hands of different people, we see not only hands of Simon and his parents, or at least his mother and his sister. We also see the hands of the perpetrators, though not very often. It's clear where the emphasis is, but they are integrated in the story as well. And by doing so, what you are doing more or less implicitly is that you very much clarify the whole concept of agency. It's not like it's being thrown in your face, it's done in a very subtle way. The more often you read the story, the more often you hear the story being read, the more aware you become of it and the more I become impressed with the power of this narrative. And yes, those very same hands, at least the drawing of those hands very much draws you into the story, draws you into the narrative,

and it's very much focused on a limited number of people. I had the impression that you were almost apologizing a bit for not showing more of the story of Kazerne Dossin, but I think you are showing the story of Kazerne Dossin because the Holocaust in Belgium connects people who are living at home peacefully, then drawn into the Kazerne, and then sent eastwards. You integrate all these elements. From a perspective of branding, let's say, the Kazerne Dossin or maybe the Memorial Center at Westerbork, yes, it might have been nicer or more interesting if the comics in this anthology had focused specifically on what happened there. But this is very much about the Holocaust and about other Nazi crimes, and they were, as we know, spread all over Europe. I don't think there should be a reason for any modesty in that regard.

Tobi Dahmen: Thank you. Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

Daniel Stein: The focus on the hands also makes sense because drawing comics is very much working with your hands, right? There are whole theories in comic studies that say comics have a certain way of appealing to people because they are not filtered through a camera or some kind of apparatus or machine. The agency that Kees is talking about is also the agency of the artist, where every line of a face, every hand is drawn by hand. I therefore wanted to ask you: Do you sketch or draw on paper? Do you use digital tools at some point? Can you talk about the technical aspect of drawing?



Storyboard page from Tobi Dahmen, “Motherly Love” (Scratch Books, 2024)

Tobi Dahmen: This storyboard page is a sketch that I do in my sketchbook when I try to focus on the story and to make it work in my head. But next step is that I take a picture of it and put in text to see how much room I need for that. The next step would be that I start these very rough sketches to draw them better. Because the hands are so very important, I took also some pictures together with my wife and my daughter to get positions right and gestures right. It was also kind of emotional to do it. When your personal family is involved, to re-act this in a way, it helped me to get it right. When you don't use faces, you can't express a lot, but when you're drawing hands, the hands really have to be very accurate because everybody knows when a hand's not drawn right, so.

Daniel Stein: I remember Art Spiegelman talking about the fact that by using his mice masks in *Maus*, he didn't have to invent faces. The mice masks allowed him to show historical people without pretending to know what they all looked like. Your focus on the hands seems to accomplish something similar.

Tobi Dahmen: It's creating a space for imagination as well because we see only a little bit of the panel, of the frame. The rest of it has to be imagined, but people also imagine emotions, sound, smell – everything. That's one more power of comics. I heard this in a live reading. There was this young guy and he said, "You read a part that was happening in winter in the Soviet Union." And he said, "this is all black and white, but I see color, I hear the wind howl." I don't know why this is so strong with comics, but it seems to work like that. For people with a bit of an imagination, of course.

Carmen Becker: Music became so important in Simon's life, as we can also see on the photograph you have here. Did that shape the way you thought about the emotional rhythm of your story and how you told the story?

Tobi Dahmen: I realized that music was a comfort for Simon. He learned to play piano because he admired his sister, who had been playing piano. I think it was a wish to get this joy back into his life that he felt when he was listening to his sister and his mother. Of course, it is terribly sad, but it's this comforting thing that helped him a great part, I'm sure. He comes across as a very, very positive person. And he lost everything. He only had the music and memories of the good times with the family. It was quite clear to me that I would end with the music. The connection that piano music is done by hands helped a lot.

Inbal Leitner: Thank you for this story. As you say, there is a lot of imagination involved here, in activating the readers, who need to imagine and to complete the rest of the panel. There are also gaps in history that they need to complete. I have two questions about that. One is: There are quite a few places in the story where the gestures of the hands suggest something bigger and very familiar to knowledgeable readers, for example the hand at the entrance to the concentration camp pointing to the right. My question is, did you consider readers who do not have historical background knowledge about the Holocaust, and what they will gather from the story, whether they will be able to complete the story in their mind? The second question is, being part of an anthology, I'm interested to know if there were any connections formed between stories that help build/complete the bigger picture for young readers.

Tobi Dahmen: To answer the second question first: I think that the stories are very, very different, but some of them describe the scale of it as well. Some stories show the situations in Camp Westerbork, for example, but there's also a story that is the most horrible to read as it is about the language and the organization of the perpetrators, how they were dealing with trucks where people were gassed in. We have all these different perspectives and the scale of it. With Simon's story, I wanted to tell the story of one person, so you can imagine the scale of it. About the first question: Of course, not everyone might understand this particular gesture as people being sent to death at the ramp in Auschwitz. But that's extra information. People who know would be able to read it, but the information that his mother was killed is in the text. It works on two layers. The fate of Simon's family is clear in that way. But I wanted to put some extra in. I wanted to portray two things at the same time. How little a life meant to the perpetrators. This one gesture would mean life or death. And how easily it was done. That's also something I can't imagine. How do you decide over life? But they did, and I wanted to show the cruelty of it. The thumb pointing to the one side and the next one is the hand of a guard or of someone putting the chemicals into the gas chambers. That's also a little gesture killing many. That's part of the whole story that one little gesture saved one life, but one gesture killed many. Putting these things next to each other was part of telling the story.

Daniel Stein: Was there talk beforehand at whom this anthology would be aimed? Did you have a specific age group in mind?

Tobi Dahmen: Our main goal was that the memorial places could use the book in their work, but also in their shops, so that people can take something to get them thinking when they go home. I can read my story in schools, but there are others, such as the story that I just mentioned, that might be very, very tough on some people. It's been quite a few years, maybe Kees can answer this. I don't know if there was really a target group or something like that.

Kees Ribbens: It wasn't very explicitly specified. We were mostly thinking about young people in general, but also people more familiar with comic books and graphic novels. In our mind, it was mainly about teenagers from, let's say, 15 years onwards. I think the cover illustration already gives a kind of indication. It's a very dark image that is definitely not supposed to appeal to children of, let's say, 10, 11, 12 years, but I think it will appeal to people that are 16, 17, or 18 years old. I'm looking at Tatia, who can of course tell you much more about the educational framework that was developed later on. But it was when the graphic novel had already come into existence that the more profound reflection on how to present this educationally at and at whom should it be targeted came alive much more than in the initial stages of the project. We did not give strict orders or instructions in that regard to the artists involved in the project.

Tatia Gruenbaum: This book underpins an end-of-course project that has the same title as the book and is intended for lower secondary classes, so under 15, mainly with the 12 to 14 year-olds. For this age group we've only got two chapters that we would say fit for them. Students in Braunschweig and also in the Netherlands agree, when they joined the course, that these are the ones that that would work. Tobi's story is one of those that you could read with an audience which is below 15, and there's another one or two that would

work. Was it clear, Tobi, that this would be the final chapter of the book? How did it become the last one?

Tobi Dahmen: That was up to Erik de Graaf, who designed the whole book and the exhibition.

Tatia Gruenbaum: I find it just an excellent final chapter.

Tobi Dahmen: It builds a bridge to the now and here.

Tatia Gruenbaum: He also survives. When our students in Braunschweig started reading up on Simon, they said, “Oh, he's alive!” That was really meaningful for them.

Tobi Dahmen: Yeah, to me, too. Very important. I have to mention one more thing. This story is so impressive that there were other artworks about it as well. There was a children's book about it (*Simon, le petit évadé: L'enfant du 20e convoi*), but there's also an opera called *The Push* by Howard Moody. He also published his story from his view (*L'enfant du 20e convoi vers Auschwitz: Sauver les enfants*). That was also an argument for drawing it differently, focusing on the hands, because I knew there were already other stories of it, so I wanted to do something else. I haven't met Monsieur Gronowski, unfortunately, but I know he was very pleased with it. We had conversation via email, and I sent him the pages and asked him what he thought about it, and he really liked the art style, so that was very nice to hear.

Daniel Stein: Thank you, Tobi, for your thoughts and explanations.

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