Claudia Benthien

SAVED SKIN

"Asked for a typical movement, he burst into his unmistakable laughter." Tom Fecht writes this in his biographical note on Henri Gourarier, formerly Heinz Leibowitcz, the Auschwitz survivor whom he portrayed so powerfully in seven photographic studies in March 1999 in Paris. Bursting into laughter as a personal, unmistakable signature, but also, if you take what is said at face value, as a means employed throughout a lifetime to escape from imprisonment. A burst in the literal sense. Just as you can also burst into tears – for example when you look at this picture.

By contrast, there is no hint or sign of such an outburst on the photograph. It shows pure introspection. With his eyes closed, the old man is standing with folded arms and hunched shoulders amid the darkness surrounding him. The fact that the crooked posture is not a momentary, self-appointed pose but is due to a persistent lifelong back injury caused by the beatings and tortures inflicted by the Nazis is something that you need to know to be able to see this in the picture. The man's face contrasts with this posture because it looks very relaxed but somehow theatrical at the same time. He has a gentle smile, almost a little mischievous. It seems like he is thinking about something particularly delightful in his life or about a person whom he loves. His smile may be a memory, of sensual enjoyment or a delightful encounter, or even anticipation, a longing fascination with an experience yet to befall him. Only when you look at the face a little longer does this also appear in the smile.

The man, who is photographed as half a figure, is naked – as naked as the day he was born. But this is not quite correct. His veil of skin, which has aged over the years, that "baggage of life" as Robert Musil once described it, has a tattoo on it. It is the prisoner number 161397, which scars his left forearm in neat figures. It is waiting to be seen in the partial shadow of the picture. The artist has directed the lighting to make sure that the number can only just be made out: it is presently absent. The concentration camp number on the skin signifies the personal story of the victim, which is the same one shared by countless others.

The picture has such a strong impact and the man portrayed is so at peace with himself that it is unsettling: it is astounding and startling to realize that he appears to feel very much at home in this very skin of his. It makes me ashamed to put this idea into words. What am I presuming to do? I am inevitably getting very close – too close – to the human being in the picture about whom I know virtually nothing. I am compelled to bother him in a downright indecent way. Is each time you look at the picture the equivalent of the crossing of the border which the criminals undertook? Is it invested in the nakedness of the photograph? Or does the picture not give him back an intactness which he in effect cannot have as a human being who has been maltreated? He has been able to save it, this skin. And yet he has not ended up with a skin completely intact because it is no longer all his own and will never be so again. A patch has been occupied and inscribed.
It is well known that the numbering of prisoners at concentration camps was a symbolic form of humiliation which was accompanied by the seizure of all personal belongings – including clothes. In a degrading procedure, in a harrowing ritual, every Jewish prisoner

was turned from a person into a number. The human skin was thus made the symbolic equivalent of an animal hide, and the act of tattooing was equivalent to labeling individual animals within a herd. An appropriation of the human flesh by reducing the human being to just that.

Having a number inscribed into your own skin means having a new, collective identity violently forced upon you, an identity that you will never be able to get rid of ever again. The skin is not a cloak. You would have to cut into your own flesh with excruciating pain to rid yourself of the numbers. And even then the skin would be scathed at that spot and the scar would continue to symbolize the emblematic place of stigmatization. You can simply cover up the number on the skin – with clothing or with a gesticulation of the arms. And yet the man in the portrait does not do even that. He even holds the numbered arm in front of the other. However, in the crook of the arm, just in view before you lose sight of the rest of the arm, a second identifying feature flashes to light. It is a gold wedding ring. Worn on the same arm as the tattoo, the ring raises an eloquent protest against the appropriation of the skin. The man entered into this union for life after his liberation. The forced collectiveness was opposed by a gold wedding ring. Worn on the same arm as the tattoo, the ring raises an eloquent protest against the appropriation of the skin. The man entered into this union for life after his liberation. The forced collectiveness was opposed by a loving alliance formed on a unique basis. The naked man wears both symbols together, they have become part of his physical shell. The symbols communicate with one another – as light and shadow keys which are exposed through the medium of photography and tell of the most intense love and the most extreme hatred.

When asked about the key reason for his survival, Gourarier had said, "I always knew I was loved." It is this knowledge which still carries this picture even more than 60 years after the Holocaust, and which represents its disturbed nature and provocation. It shows a belief that is so deep that the man does not even need to look back to portray it. It remains his secret.

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NOTE

Heinz Leibowitcz was born in Berlin on December 20, 1928; his father was a precision mechanic from Poznan in Poland. Following the November pogroms of 1938, the family fled across the Polish border close to Katowice. In June 1942, the family was interned in the ghetto of Przemysl and then deported in 1943, arriving at Auschwitz concentration camp on November 5. Heinz Leibowitcz, prisoner number 161397, was the only member of the family to survive Auschwitz, the death march to Buchenwald concentration camp and finally the disbandment of the camp by the SS in April 1945. After spending four years in Israel, he returned to Paris in 1949 and adopted his present-day French name of Henri Gourarier; this is a phonetic transcription of his Polish birth name Son of the Lion.

I met Henri Gourarier in 1999 when he was actively involved together with his wife in the library of the newly opened Jewish Museum in Paris. In initial, tentative portrait sessions, he expressed his wish to visit Germany, in particular Berlin, once more. Weeks passed before I summoned up enough courage to openly declare my wish as well: Would he be prepared to undress and appear naked in front of my camera just as he was back on that

November night in 1943 after arriving on the dark ramp at Auschwitz? - When asked about the key reason for his survival, he revealed his secret to me: "I always knew I was loved." Asked for a typical movement, he burst into his unmistakable laughter.

The portrait is based on a chance discovery in a battered book which was found in 1989 at a cost of 50 Cents in a clearance sale at a second-hand bookstore in Berlin: Diary of a Seducer by Søren Kierkegaard. A concentration camp prisoner gave him the number 2117, and from May 14, 1942 his condition was painstakingly monitored on the last page, the final time on March 6, 1944. Three of the pages in the book with the signature VI A 648 have passages which have had film carelessly placed over them; if you shine a light behind them, you can clearly make out a dark stamp reading Prisoner Library of Buchenwald Concentration Camp. This heralded the start of my search for a saved skin, antithesis to a past which had been covered up by a myopic hand.

Tom Fecht

The memoiries of Hanoch Gourarier have been published as Descelle mes lèvres (Le préau des collines, Paris 2006).