

1945



Foto in Kurt Zentner (Hg.): Aufstieg aus dem Nichts. Deutschland von 1945 bis 1953. Eine Soziographie in 2 Bdn. Köln/Berlin (1954).

Looking for Stories

By Robert Levine

Our lives are full of stories.

There are the stories we are told at childhood to pass on the rules and regulations, fears and prejudices, uncertainties and doubts of our parents, community and society. There are the stories we tell each other to forge the bonds between us, to make ourselves appear to be more important or humble, and to make ourselves feel better, feel less alone during times of trouble and doubt. Then there are the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of the world, to explore our feelings and thoughts, to construct meaning, to find a steady point amid the whirlwind and confusion that characterizes most of our minds.

Then there are the things we tell stories about. Stories about our world, ourselves, events that came before us, and what may come after.

This is a story about a picture, about a photograph that I first saw in a book over fifteen years ago. The photograph, one of two on a single page, is of a man walking past a vast field of rubble and burnt out buildings.

The man in the photograph is in the foreground, slightly left of center, the top of his head coming to the middle, approximately level to the top of the pile of rubble behind him. His gait appears to be steady, slow and deliberate, as he walks by, strolls by. Tall and lean wearing a tunic, loose fitting pants and a jacket.

Though the photograph is in black and white his clothes appear to be dark in color, perhaps dark green, brown or dark gray. Bald from the forehead to the crown of the head, long gray hair flows from the back and sides. His beard is long and gray as well. The only visible hand (the right hand) is partially in his right jacket pocket. He is carrying a sack, its strap crossing his chest from left to right. His left leg is straight, the right leg bending as he prepares to take his next step.

At first it appears as if his presence is the only sign of visible life in the photo, until closer examination shows that there is another figure as well. This figure, standing at the foot of the pile of rubble to the right of the walking figures' head, is dressed in a black coat or cloak with a white collar. Though it is hard to make out any specific details, the figure appears to be that of a woman. The pile of rubble is over twice her height.

Not only have we not noticed her, but neither does the walking figure. Nor does he seem to notice the burnt out buildings right behind him, to the left and to the right, their windows blown out, the roofs of some of them caved in. Neither does he seem to notice that someone is taking his picture as he continues following through on whatever task he has chosen for that day. Given the surroundings, given the destruction, the very act of surviving seems task enough.

The city he is walking through is Munich in 1945. And when I first saw this photograph I couldn't help but wonder if he was walking by in indifference to or in defiance of the destruction that surrounded him. But to know that you first need to know about the man, who he was, what he did. Before we get to that, let's take the time to look at another photograph.

I have long believed that nothing exists on its own, that no one exists on their own. And stories need contexts, stories need reference points. That is where they get their meaning, that is where they get their strength.

To begin to provide context, because each story has to go beyond description, let's return to the book where I first saw this photograph, to the very same page where it appeared and to the photograph beneath it. That photograph shows a group of people engaging in a rite, a ritual where they appear to be dancing around in a grove of trees. This ritual in which so many people are partaking was inspired by that lone man walking past the ruins of Munich over fifty years ago. The second photo is placed in 1978, more than thirty years later. Twenty years after that lone man died.

That lone man was Arthur "Gusto" Graser, one of the major figures of the counter culture in Europe in the early twentieth century, and his story is well told in the book in which both of these photographs appear (*Mountain of Truth* by Martin Green). Though he was an important representative of this early flowering of the protest against modern industrial civilization, his story is not a well-known one.

Gusto Graser was never the leader of any group or social movement, nor did he publish any great works of political theory or literature. This is why he may have been forgotten, and this is exactly why he should be remembered, why this story, Gusto's story, the story in the photographs, is important for me to tell.

Stories provide lessons, examples. When I look at these photographs, the story I find is a story of hope, a story of possibilities. The story of how one man engaging the world provided, and provides, an example for others to find their own ways to become so engaged.

This is a story of both indifference and defiance.

Indifference to the social mores, the everyday political concerns, and those day-to-day things in all our lives that make us all fearful and complacent.

Defiance against corrupt and destructive political authority.

Gusto lived as an outsider, as a deviant in a time and place when deviance could lead to one's imprisonment or death. The story we can tell through the photograph, through the photographs, is one of someone who stood outside of society to show that there were other ways, other options. It is one of the stories that we can tell ourselves, that we need to tell ourselves, as we look for our own ways to be engaged in the world.

We are always looking for stories, the stories we want, the stories we need.

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