The Cold Storage Club

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Only amateurs collect books in order to read them. The professionals wrap their investments in archival plastic and put them away in the safe. Idea: a syndicate of pros, old friends and rivals, buy a defunct meat-processing plant and use its refrigeration rooms to store their books. Reconstruct the minutes of the Cold Storage Club (2005).

On 10 May 1933, the day of the book-burning in Berlin, it poured with rain. It is tempting to read this chance event as divine disapproval, but worse conflagrations have passed without the heavens shedding a tear. In any event, the wood that stood ready to fuel the fire on Opernplatz was damp and had to be doused with petrol before it would catch.

The condemned books were brought to the Square in a pompous Nazi procession. It included a brass band and mounted policemen, torch-bearing students in Sturmabteilung uniform, and three trucks loaded with books purged from libraries and other institutions. When they reached the Square, the marchers tossed their torches on to the pyre, symbolically merging and intensifying the purifying flames of their judgement. To start the proceedings, selected books representing the various categories of literature deemed alien or against the German spirit were introduced by name over a PA system before being consigned to the flames. Then the crowd joined in, passing the rest of the books along a human chain from the trucks, or lobbing them into the bonfire from a distance. Bonfire: bone fire. For the burning of heretics. Goebbels made a speech in which he railed against the erroneous and the subhuman. The proceedings were broadcast on the radio.

When the spectacle was over, the flames were doused by the fire brigade. Some quick-witted wheeler-dealers raked a few charred books out of the ashes and in the following days sold them on the streets as souvenirs.[1]

Micha Ullman's memorial to the book-burning on Bebelplatz, as Opernplatz is now known, is called *Bibliothek*. It is a subterranean room that you can look into through a glazed hatch in the cobbles. The room is cold and white, and lined with empty shelves. You cannot see the whole of it through the hatch, and moving around from one vantage point to another, as many people feel compelled to do, merely brings more white shelving into view. At least this confirms an obvious fact: there are no books.

Look up from the edge of this dead space and you will see the façade of the law library at Humboldt University, and through its tall, arched windows, shelves filled with books of every size and colour. That human clutter, no less than the empty shelves, lets you feel the heat of the fire on your face. You scarcely need the quotation from Heine on the plaque nearby to remind you that where they burn books, in the end they burn people.

Bibliothek is luminous on a winter's night. I was drawn to it by a column of light rising from the ground. Dirty snow on the edge of the hatch, tramped into

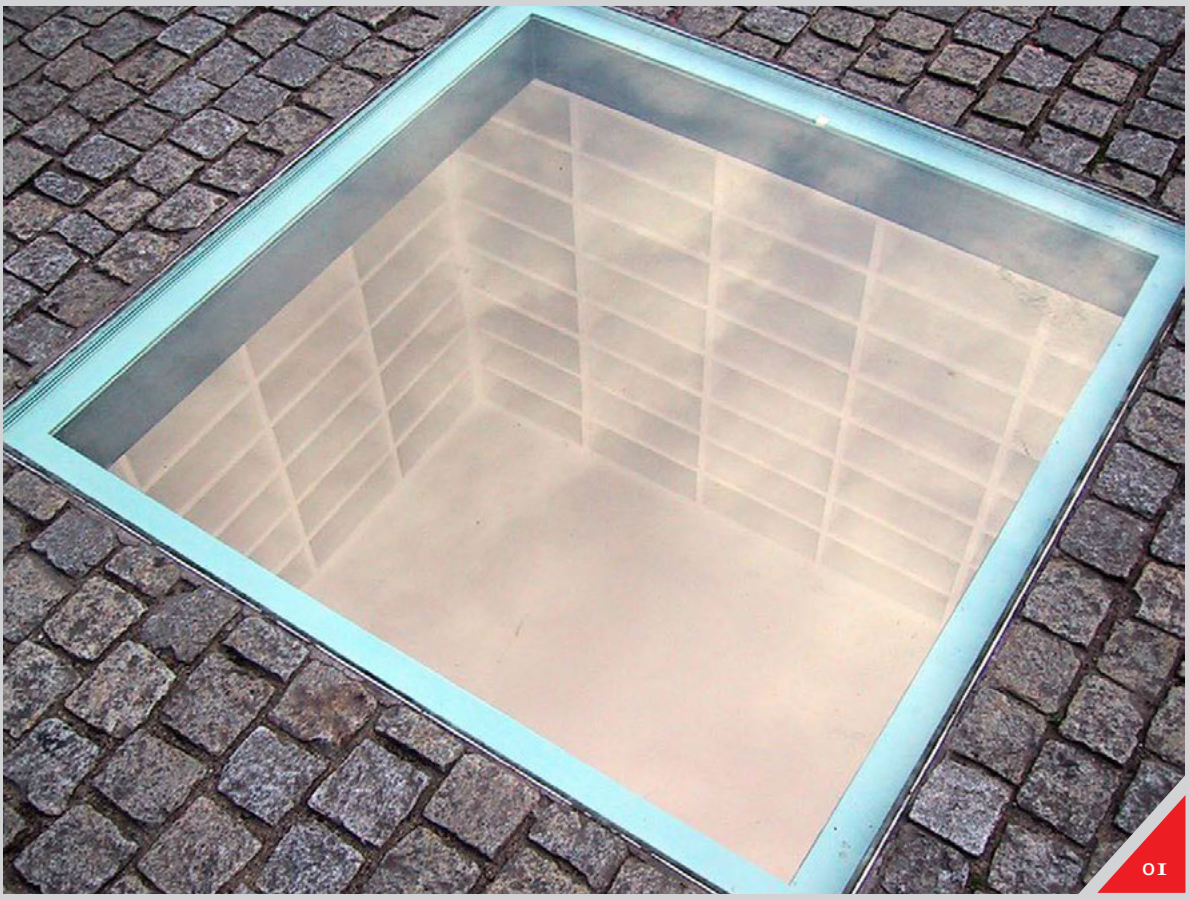

Figure 1: Micha Ullman's *Bibliothek* , 1995. Image from www.foradomapa.com.br

icy typography by the soles of boots and trainers, made the white room underground seem even colder. While I stood there shivering, two women approached, a local acting as a tour guide and her visitor from out of town (or so I gathered). They peered down into the void.

> 'There's nothing there,' said the visitor.
> 'It's a monument,' her friend explained.
> 'It cost 500 000 Deutschmarks?'
> 'Yes.'
> 'For nothing?'
> 'The shelves are empty,' the guide said impatiently, 'use your imagination!'
> There is room for 20 000 books, as many as the Nazis reduced to ashes.

I retreated to a coffee shop on Unter den Linden to warm my feet and look at my guidebook. I learned that more than 300 authors were blacklisted by the Nazis – Jews, socialists, pacifists, troublesome journalists, freethinking scientists. Some of the prohibitions were picky: for instance, in the case of Erich Kästner, *Emil und die Detektive* was expressly excluded. I had read this charming book in my German class at school; what came back to me now was the fact that its boy hero had painted a moustache on a statue.

Nearly a hundred book-burnings took place across Germany in 1933.

There were other sights to see, but *Bibliothek* gaped in my memory: I could not go home without seeing it again. I returned to the Square. Although it had begun to snow, the hatch was clear. Perhaps the heat from

the lights had melted the snow or a previous visitor had wiped it away.

Once again, as I looked down at the empty shelves, I heard company approaching, a dozen sightseers stubbornly following their itinerary despite the bitter weather. Spaniards, I thought, or Spanish-speakers anyway, talking in loud, musical voices and jostling one another as they made their way over the slippery cobbles. The leader pretended that he was going to stand on the hatch – which he might have done quite safely – and then leapt over it like a mischievous schoolboy. His charges gathered around the square of light.

> 'What is it? What is it?'
> 'Is it a crypt?' This from a woman in a coat with a fur-lined hood that made me think of a capuchin monkey.
> 'Ah!' they exclaimed together. 'It's a tomb! A tomb!'
> And while the guide was still explaining, they began drifting away towards the opera house, satisfied that the mystery had been resolved.

Ullman is an artist of the absent. His public sculptures – monuments is too grand a term – tend to be small, unobtrusive things, sometimes underfoot, often overlookable. His memorial to Graf von Stauffenberg, the man who led the failed plot to assassinate Hitler in July 1944, is on a street corner in the middle of Stuttgart. It is no more than a little well carved into a flagstone, a hollow the size of a cup that is sometimes full of water, and many people step over it every day. A few strides away, a plaque bearing Von Stauffenberg's name is attached to the wall of a building above the water mains and manholes, near a blue city signpost that says Wasser Nr 3065.

One afternoon, I was loitering on the corner, trying to understand why I found this small thing so compelling. The hollow was brimming with water and a shark's fin of green bottle-glass glinted in the bottom. A man stopped to read the plaque. Afterwards, he turned and gazed at the chestnut avenue on Schlossplatz. Then he gave a scarcely perceptible shrug, a movement of the mind rather than the shoulders, and walked off along Stauffenbergstrasse.

Notebook, Jun. 2007

I took the idea for 'The Cold Storage Club', the one about the bibliophiles who buy a disused meat factory, from a story told to me in confidence by a friend who loves books. Do I have the right to use it? Whenever I try to gather my thoughts about this, they go off at a tangent. How much resistance does the path of least resistance offer?

And how can absence be represented without lapsing into banality? Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin seeks to embody absence (a paradoxical task) in the empty spaces of the 'Holocaust Tower' and the 'Memory Void'. When I visited the museum, the former was truly empty, while the latter housed Menashe Kadishman's installation *Shalechet* (Fallen Leaves), an immense drift of iron disks shaped like screaming faces. Some schoolchildren, relishing the invitation to walk on the leaves, stomped up and down and made an infernal racket, which suited this elaborate building better than reverent silence. The museum requires an apparatus of architectural models and floorplans to explain its workings. Consult the plan showing how the 'Axis of Holocaust' intersects with the 'Axis of Exile' and you will find a red dot: YOU ARE HERE.

Near the Memory Void, I found Ullman's minimalist works on paper Stuhl I–IV. The images were barely there on the surface: four shadowy impressions of chairs, absences registered by scatterings of red-brown

sand, as if someone had carried the solid objects from a room that had not been dusted for years. This ghostly furniture made me homesick.

Not all of Ullman's small memorials are sombre. When he was commissioned to make a public sculpture in Bad Oeynhausen, a spa town on the Weser renowned for its healing waters, he made a spoon and set it into a paving stone. Those of us who have read *Life and Times of Michael K* know that a great deal of faith may be placed in the bowl of a spoon. But the town's citizens were not all convinced: they mounted a campaign to have *Löffel* replaced with something more conspicuous and dignified. Enter the Friends of the Spoon – Die Freunde des Löffels – who sold soup to raise money for the sculpture's preservation.

Ullman spoke about *Löffel* in a lecture he gave on his work. What I remember most from his talk, aside from the spoon, is how often he used the word 'vielleicht'. Perhaps.

In April 1999, a NATO jet fired a rocket into a convoy of Albanian refugees near the village of Meja and killed 60 civilians. At first, NATO tried to shift the blame to the Serbs, but after a few days they admitted responsibility. One of their jet pilots, ordered to fly at high altitude to avoid enemy fire, had mistakenly identified the convoy as a military one and attacked it. A fortnight later, Serb militias would massacre more than 300 people in Meja.

Goran Tomasević's photograph of the shattered convoy was published in the *Independent* on 15 April. It was in colour and covered nearly half the front page.

A red tractor and flatbed trailer slant across the background. The tractor looks well used, its tyres are worn; the trailer is piled with goods under tarpaulins, blankets, perhaps a mattress. A twisted piece of metal is

Figure 2: Photograph by Goran Tomasević, 1999.
©Goran Tomasevic and REUTERS

lodged behind the steering wheel and buckled over the engine cowling. The silence in the picture comes from that stalled engine. Life has stopped dead here. Nothing will ever go forward again.

On the road, in front of the tractor, lie two bloodied bodies. I think they are both women, although blood and printer's ink have blurred their features. One of them wears a red shawl sodden with gore and her left arm is twisted across her body. The face of the other is a smear of blood. Her mouth is open and her eyes are closed. All around them: stones. Near the rear wheel of the tractor: a shoe. There is always an empty shoe in a scene like this. (If hats are an index of character, shoes are emblems of circumstance.)

The living creature in the photograph is a boy, an 'ethnic Albanian boy' according to the caption. He takes up the foreground, with the sole of his dusty shoe touching the frame at the bottom, the top of his blond head nearly touching the frame at the top, and his body dividing the photo in two. He is wearing creased brown pants and a green sweater with long sleeves. He comes from a poor home; the bottoms of the pants are rolled three or four times, the cuffs of the sweater cover his hands.

In his right hand he is holding a black object. At first, I thought it might be a Bible with a bookmark dangling from it, but perhaps it is a leather pouch with a zipper tab, something like a shaving kit. What would a child want with a shaving kit? Perhaps it belonged to his father. He has something in his raised left hand too, a white plastic bag from a supermarket, nearly transparent. He grips the bag in the middle and the tattered loops of the handles flop down. Is it food? The dark stains on his fingers and the plastic may be blood or only ink.

The collar of the boy's sweater is pulled to one side and his skinny neck sticks out of it naked and exposed. He looks to the right, in the same direction as the round headlight of the tractor, the way the convoy was going. I wonder what he sees there in the future. He is flinching, fending something off with his left arm, holding out the packet as if he does not want it to touch his body. There are lines around his mouth and under his eyes that do not belong on the face of a child. His boyish blond fringe has become an anachronism.

When I bought this newspaper at the foreign press stand in Stuttgart's Hauptbahnhof, I noticed that some of the other papers carried enlargements of the bodies and other aspects of the photo. Those details would answer some of my questions about these people. But would it bring them any closer to me?

The report accompanying the picture says: 'The Reuters photographer filmed blood-stained bodies lying on a road near abandoned tractors. Pillows and blankets were scattered around as well as human remains.' I understand why people fleeing their homes reach for blankets and pillows. But they have no need for them now, laid out on the front page of my newspaper with their heads on the stony ground.

Figure 3: Bruno Wank, *Arguments*, 1995. Image courtesy of Stadtarchiv München.

After Hitler came to power in 1933, he established a memorial in Munich to the casualties of the failed Beer Hall Putsch. The site chosen was the Feldherrnhalle on Odeonsplatz, where some of the plotters had been shot dead by police ten years earlier. This arched gallery, modelled on the Loggia dei Lanzi which adjoins the Uffizi in Florence, was built in the 1840s by Ludwig I to honour the Bavarian Army. Hitler had the loggia tricked out with Nazi paraphernalia, including an altar-like memorial tablet surmounted by a swastika and eagle, rows of flags and wreaths, and a huge torch. A

permanent guard of honour was mounted there and all who passed it were required to give the Nazi salute. A photograph from the period shows twenty or thirty citizens in hats and coats, dutifully saluting as they pass soldiers with shouldered rifles. Who knows what was in their heads, whether they were proud or ashamed or simply glad not to be arrested.

One way of avoiding the obligatory salute was to nip down Viscardigasse, which runs behind the Feldherrnhalle. The alley acquired the nickname Drückebergergasse – 'Shirkers' Alley' – which it retains today.[2] In 1995, Bruno Wank made an artwork in Viscardigasse in memory of those who shirked their duties to the Nazi state. It is called *Arguments*. He removed some of the cobbles and replaced them with bronze casts, tracing a tapering line along the alley, a path with a lazy swerve in it like an elongated 'S', never more than three or four cobblestones wide. This hint of divergence from the high road commemorates the small, oblique acts of resistance to power that people make in their everyday lives.

When I went down Viscardigasse on the advice of my friend Dominik, who is a neighbour of Bruno's, when I turned into Shirkers' Alley with the weight of my own history as a white South African on my shoulders, I found nothing to show the presence of an artwork. In relation to this work, Thomas Köllhofer writes, you are not a viewer but a pedestrian.[3] As you pass down the alley, the bronze cobbles, buffed by thousands of footsteps like your own, exert a subtle force on your movement. You feel yourself tugged to one side, as if a ghost has taken your elbow and is steering you off course. Suddenly you are walking on the bias, whether you know it or not, remembering through the soles of your shoes.

This text is extracted from Vladislavić, I. 2011. *The loss library and other unfinished stories*. Cape Town: Umuzi & Calcutta: Seagull Books.

Notes

1 This passage draws on a richly detailed article by Werner Tress in *Der Tagesspiegel* marking the 75th anniversary of the book-burning.

2 Köllhofer, T (ed). 2005. *Bruno Wank*. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz:172.

3 Köllhofer (2005:174).