



Mikael Levin: *Buchenwald*, 1995, from "War Story"; at ICP. (Review on p. 132.)

Mikael Levin at the International Center of Photography

In 1944 and '45, the American war correspondent Meyer Levin followed the final stages of the fighting in Europe; in his reports he paid special attention to the fate of Jewish communities in Belgium, France, Holland and Germany, filing some of the first eyewitness accounts of the Nazi extermination camps. Fifty years later (and more than a decade after Levin's death), his son Mikael Levin retraced the route taken by his father. He began at Drancy, the site of a former deportation center on the outskirts of Paris, and continued through Buchenwald, Dachau and Terezin, photographing along the way the specific locales described in his father's dispatches and later autobiographical writings. The result, as shown in the exhibition "War Story" at ICP, is an unusual collaboration that pairs the father's vivid wartime narratives, displayed as text panels, with the son's laconic and largely unpeopled black-and-white images of presentday Europe.

The cities described by Meyer Levin as rubble have long since been rebuilt and are today seen to bustle with life; onetime battlefields have reverted to forest or vanished beneath superhigh-

ways. But in his son's photographs the events of 50 years ago are still legible. Mikael Levin is essentially an intimist with a keen eye for historical traces. Amid the new buildings that have risen on the site of the former Jewish quarter in Frankfurt, for example, we can make out a poster, savagely torn, that demands a memorial to the city's deported Jewish children. At Dachau we glimpse, quietly disappearing beneath grass and leaves, the last remnants of the railway tracks over which prisoners packed into boxcars once rolled to their deaths. Levin seems to ask: Should time be allowed to cover the scars of the past? Is there a way to memorialize the Holocaust without perpetuating the traumatic legacy which has been handed down to the descendants of victims and survivors?

These are hardly abstract questions. One critic complained that this exhibition "suppressed" details of the war's impact on Meyer Levin, a gifted novelist who became self-destructively obsessed with the idea of dramatizing the diary of Anne Frank. His melancholy story (recounted, in any event, in the catalogue) suggests some of the hazards that Mikael Levin elected to face in following, literally, in his father's footsteps. To his credit, Mikael Levin's project aims at much more than the playing out of a family drama. In his precise attentiveness to European social landscape of the 1990s, he touches on the countless ways that individual lives remain tangled in history's web. —Christopher Phillips

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