GOTTFRIED HELNWEIN

Disasters of War 36, 2014
Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 67 1/4 X 46 3/4 in

COURTESY MODERNISM GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO

VITO VICTOR

Escape from Occupied France

The recollections of a child refuge in World War II

A rented flat in Paris, June 1940. A woman is alone with her toddler. His grandmother, who had always taken care of him, has been herded into an internment camp. His father too: removed by the French authorities. The woman has no experience in managing the three-year-old, who is far too vigorous.

She is ignoring him. She's nailed herself by sheer will power to the kitchenette's table and is punishing the Remington. Her clamped jaw quivers with anger. Sweat pastes her thin dress to her pale skin while her fingers hammer out language. Her thighs rattle the metal folding chair, keeping the beat. At every pause her belligerent gaze challenges the insipid words of supplication addressed to one more government agency.

She swivels to appraise the milk she is heating for her child on the gas stovetop. Its surface bulges with a ring of tiny bubbles. The boy watches, anticipating sugared warmth, untouched by his mother's worries. He runs to a window, excited by a rumble of houses collapsing on a nearby street. An impact shudders the frame of the building. Rivers of dust trickle down its walls.

"They hit us," the woman shouts as she jumps to her feet. "The Wehrmacht is here." Grasping her son by the arm, she pulls him to her slender body. "Oh, Vito! Vito!" The high pitch of her voice scares him. She is holding him now, squeezing too hard, and he tries to wriggle out of her shaking hands.

"I want Nona!" he cries. It is a cry for his missing grandmother.

* * *

There is no telephone in this rental for transients. Newspaper delivery was discontinued to prevent panic and possible rioting. The only rumors that have reached the woman since the German breakthrough were shouted through her closed door after a rattle of a Socialist's boots up the stairwell. Does she know that the government has already fled the city, all the while assuring the citizens that Paris would be defended? Whatever she knows or believes, whether the time is right or wrong, she has decided. Once again, she is abandoning what is so sacred to her: the world of print. *We dismantled another apartment, left all the books and manuscripts behind, and just ran.*

She does not take a moment to zipper the suitcase; it swings in her left hand and will begin to spill. Hoisting her son wrapped in a towel she runs with arms full down flight after flight of stairs. She has left his milk charring over the hissing gas. The waste of the costly nutrition, the risk of an explosion will obsess her for days. With too much to handle, she finds a worry of manageable size. *I wasted the milk. I left the gas on. I am to blame.*

This mother and son will never cling to each other as hard again. They are now part of the exodus from Paris, the largest mass movement of European refugees since the Middle Ages.

* * *

My mother appears frail and elegant in sepia photographs. Her myth of a German childhood, published in 1935 for properly gullible younger readers, celebrated her own mother and father as working-class saints, living only for each other and for their lucky daughter. The idyllic picture is ominous in hindsight, evoking stifling small-town propriety.

Burdened with such standards, Maria resolved, early on, to be perfect. Her grades would always be the best in the class; that she would always be the prettiest girl, as well as the most virtuous, was not open to question. Yet at sixteen she would dismay her parents by writing for a newspaper edited by a seductive married man twice her age. My biological father, a charming, chubby Jew, would

move her into his household and eventually run off with her to Berlin, abandoning his wife and two young sons. A homewrecker, this perfect mother of mine, whom I worshipped, in my innocence, as a holy figure, but whose self-accusations—"I am a terrible person"—confused me deeply for years.

In Berlin, Hertha Maria Gleitsmann turned into the popular novelist Maria Gleit. As a secretary for a major Socialist paper she was one of the new population of young unmarried women working in city offices. The 1920s revolution in gender roles was just beginning, and my mother invented young heroines to inspire others who had to assert themselves, as she did, in a patriarchal workplace. Her fictional feminists are resolute, sexually alluring, and professionally dynamic. They use their femininity as well as their fierce intelligence to strike new kinds of deals with the men they depend upon.

Reading these stirring antiquated texts today, I am struck by the inadequate males available to mother's working girls, who seem to encounter only two types: the aggressive sexual predator and the warmhearted but timid soul. The man who could take care of a woman was unreliable, cold, and vain; the man upon whose loyalty she could rely typically needed to be mothered himself. But Walther Victor, her seducer, eluded her fictional stereotypes; in him an attractive sensual warmth coexisted with an insatiable need for validation.

Behind this charismatic philandering male, her father, Albert Gleitsmann, floats in the haze of memory, for he died very young. A factory worker and union organizer, he was my mother's mentor and guide. She idolized him as gentle and wise. I will never know just what this grandfather of mine did to finally disappoint his daughter. Her view of men seems to have been sullied beyond repair by some unforgivable transgression that toppled him from his pedestal. She was already menopausal when she shredded an old photograph of that fallen saint in front of her psychiatrist in a rage that must have been smoldering for decades.

After Albert's sudden and early death, my grandmother's "nerves" declined rapidly, and Maria resolved never to leave her. My father had to comply, and when life became unhealthy for Social Democrats in Berlin, Walther took my mother and grandmother with him and fled to Switzerland, where I was born. My elders would be a tight trio from 1928 to 1947, my grandmother keeping house for her daughter and grumbling about my father. She was my Nona: a simple old woman who became my one indispensable parent.

* * *

The building next door had been hit; the Nazi plane was no longer in sight. Frau Victor and her squalling child were the first on the street; behind them other tenants came tumbling out, including Monsieur Jacques, the manager, who had wanted to get rid of her, not because she was German, but because she and her supposed husband were "artists." But now he was waving her away from his walls, red faced and yelling about a house collapse. Some neighbors had been injured just yesterday! *Allez, allez loin d'ici!* Run, like everyone else! But she hadn't closed the suitcase properly and it was beginning to drop underwear and socks, and now a bottle of scent had fallen out and oh god, broken, oh god dammit to hell, on the pavement.

Run! Above, five of Göring's Stukas swept low across the arrondissement in V formation. *We are here. We see.* Gone, they left a loud silence. She knelt on the pavement and tried closing her eyes.

The vapor for ballroom and boudoir stung through her nose and into her brain, and she heard that mirthless laughter ricochet within the walls of her skull, since she hadn't turned the flame off under the boy's milk, so if the house didn't collapse it would probably burn down, and now the expensive perfume wasted too, why had she splurged on it? Idiot! Without even a decent outfit to wear to hook some man who knew what was what in this world … in which she was totally and completely alone! She was laughing wildly now, and she knew it was the terror, the nerves again, and she had to bear down so that she would not go mad.

She put me down—*there, stand up straight, don't move*—wrestled with the wretched zipper, and then took the suitcase in one arm and the child in the other and staggered toward the corner. Her sight wavered through heat ripples. Instead of the boulevard, an ocean liner looked to be floating from right to left across her field of vision. Its deck was a conveyer, dragging vehicles, goods, and people like a felled forest to some inevitable fate. As she approached, struggling to keep the boy aloft, she could hear its hum becoming louder and saw that the "ship" was merely the avenue itself, slowed to a crawl by its own traffic. The garble of sound separated itself into cries, piteous soliloquies and shouted complaints, punctuated by bells, honked horns, and wailing sirens. She could pick out German, Polish, Romanian, even Russian, but to her surprise, most of the language was French.

Not only the political émigrés were in flight; the Parisians were abandoning their own city! It had come to this! For a decade now, this bulwark of liberty had swollen with immigrants from eastern and central Europe, a refuge for Jews, Socialists, Democrats, humanists, "decadent" artists, disrespectful writers, gypsies, homosexuals, the eccentrics, the handicapped, the abnormally gifted, all who could not be fit into a cleansed Third Reich. "Once we get to Paris, we will be safe," my father had repeated, and my mother had believed. "No Nazi will ever be allowed to get here. Unthinkable."

The unthinkable was in front of her. Hitler had accomplished in one month what the kaiser failed to do in four years of the Great War. The City of Light was cramping in a fear that would leave it as dry as a squeezed orange. Paris would welcome the führer as Moscow had welcomed Napoleon in 1812: with empty streets.

Husbands pushed bicycles on which piles of packing cases had been tied. Mothers pushed prams holding two or even three children. Pedestrians were being shoved about like debris by horses and motorized vehicles. To salvage some precious items from their wrecked lives they had grabbed anything that could roll: a wheelchair held a tea service, a bookcase was balanced on a tricycle, a gardening cart was piled with tuxedos. An old man wheezed along pushing his father in a wheelbarrow: a sight Maria never forgot. She would also remember the luxurious limousines, complete with liveried chauffeur, stalled behind the peasants' horse-drawn carts packed with furniture and trailed by emaciated cows and goats.

Most disturbing were the family sedans with groaning springs and sagging tires, bursting with children and luggage and most often with mattresses strapped on top. Lorries belched in their constipation, their drivers either apoplectic or morbidly resigned. Some were crammed with fugitives and continued to open their doors—impossible!—to pack in more. Others, RESERVED FOR GOVERNMENT OFFICERS, were empty and locked, provoking the indignant howls of families straggling along on foot, overloaded by burdens as bizarre and touching as those cages of warbling canaries or, in front of her now, a girl crying softly, hobbling underneath a cello twice her size.

I want to visualize a slender mother, tragic and beautiful, though her sharp nose and chin were surely eroded by malnutrition, her dark eyes haunted and cavernous. Her feet are planted firmly around the suitcase that holds cosmetics, notebooks, foreign-language dictionaries rather than groceries and drinking water. She is standing at that apocalyptic corner watching Western Civilization unravel when the child nags her, for the seventeenth time, with the same question.

"Where are we going?"

She rolls her eyes and turns her face to the heavens.

"*Wohin gehen wir denn, Mutti?*"

"*Wohin gehen wir denn?*"

Her mind slams shut. The child is a dead weight, whining in rebellion, pushing against her sweaty side, and she clamps her hand across his mouth. He wriggles, gagged, helpless. Suddenly, he makes a fist…

"Vito! YOU HIT YOUR MOTHER! Let me tell you, you must never, I mean never…"

Angrily she sets him on his feet, grabs her suitcase, and joins the parade at the side of another woman to whom she vents loudly enough for the perpetrator to hear.

"I am having such problems with the child, he has hit me, *he actually finds it possible to hit his mother.*"

His thumb is in his mouth, prepared to sulk, but as she walks away he loses her in the mob and no thumb is enough, and he panics and catches sight of her and holds up his moist hand despairingly.

She looks severely at the offering and does not accept it.

* * *

Maria Gleit had wanted a girl and knew for sure that she would have one. She planned to name the blessed arrival "Vita," for "life." A daughter would give her a reason to keep on going, to survive, to escape this murderous continent. Mother and father—two authors, after all—both had the dramatist's flair.

Maria tended to use motherhood as heavy literary artillery. She published *Du Hast Kein Bett, Mein Kind*, her only political novel, in Switzerland in 1937, the year of my birth. Maria, Walther, and Klara had taken refuge there

in 1935, after Hitler had poisoned Berlin for them. My parents scraped a living by writing for Socialist newspapers all over Europe. Now their Swiss visas were expiring again, each time more difficult to extend; all the neighboring countries had denied their applications for asylum; the horizons were closing in, darkening with the expected war.

In the first scene of *You Have No Bed, My Child* a pregnant woman is watching her sleeping husband twist and moan, trapped in the jaws of his fatherland's agony. In spite of the power that is trying to gag him, the man opens his mouth wider and wider. Then he breaks through, bawling forth his rage and his terror.

The book ends by flashing back to that scream. Now, however, in the temporary safety of neutral Switzerland, the woman has given birth. In the face of violence and desecration, motherhood has triumphed over the rampages of death. The climax boils up in an ecstasy of purple prose. In the last scene the husband, no longer a warrior, is hammering and sawing, making a bed for the newborn.

The book was written in the teeth of fear. My mother did not dare mention Germany at all, instead inventing a generic European nation controlled by unspecified sadists. Students of "exile studies" today find the book self-indulgent, with its icy villains, saintly heroes, and overheated mysticism. But in its day it had a small cult following; no doubt the gloom of some literate fugitives was dispelled by its fire. Young women did not often go public against this regime, and no leftist told my mother that her shouts on behalf of the world's victimized children were melodramatic and overdone.

* * *

I was not a girl. My mother was disappointed upon seeing a penis. "Vita" was downgraded to "Vito." Why did they not have me circumcised? I asked her that later, in the Bronx, when a Jewish boy criticized my "funny-looking wee-wee marker" and I noted his own stripped down model.

My mother blushed. "If we got separated," she began, and fumbled for a moment. "It would prove, you see, that you could not be Jewish."

* * *

I was a year old when mother was summoned to the German Consulate in Lugano. The consul had been informed by the Gestapo that she was living with a Socialist, a notorious Jew whose writings had been banned. Her own work was being investigated; if she did not separate herself from this man, she could never return to Germany, and all her relatives there would be under suspicion as well. The consul seemed genuinely concerned for her welfare, but Maria refused to compromise. Her moral certainty rings out in the affidavit describing their interview, and I recognize the mother I admired as a small boy. *I am sorry, but I cannot discuss that with you.*

She was so shy that she tended to be stiffly correct; but she was always capable of terminating a conversation with the cold snap of a moral absolute. There were certain things she did not allow anyone to question.

She would pay for her intransigence within a few weeks. The German consulate put pressure on the Swiss, who used the pretext that newspaper work by refugees competed unfairly with their own native writers. If our family did not leave the country immediately, we would be taken into custody and delivered to Nazi officials at the border. That would be a death sentence; the Germans had already burned Walther's books, and my parents were on a list of the regime's enemies.

* * *

For most of my life I did not bother myself with the details of the flight in which my mother and I joined the masses oozing out of Paris and fleeing toward the south. "Exodus" may be a misnomer: Jews were a minority among the more than eight million confused and fearful humans clogging the roads and railway lines during the summer of 1940. My parents got separated in the process. It was a single sentence, which I had always overlooked in my mother's letter, that finally sent me to the history books. *My mother was dragged to Gurs, my husband to another internment camp.*

Camps? In France, the home of *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*?

As I learned so late: it was not a proud hour for the country to which hundreds of thousands of refugees from eastern Europe had fled. It would have been difficult to find a more vehemently anti-Nazi population, yet to the French government, now at war with Hitler, the refugees were enemy aliens. With the military paralyzed by defeatism, the one firm decision was to incarcerate all able-bodied Germans found in the country.

There were no facilities ready for tens of thousands of new prisoners, but the policy was executed enthusiastically, perhaps to convince French voters that their dithering government was doing something. The United States, in its internment of Japanese residents, would make a similar shameful decision after Pearl Harbor. Old photographs of Gurs look as drab and deadly as those of Manzanar: a warren of wooden barracks erected hastily on a dusty plain.

It was this French policy, rather than German military advances, that led to the breakup of families like ours, whose members had to straggle separately toward some possible asylum across a landscape already ravaged by combat. My mother had been spared only because she claimed to be "nursing a baby." In the weeks before her own flight, there were proclamations by radio and by poster. Enemy residents were ordered to check in at the Vélodrome d'Hiver to be processed for internment. There were serious penalties for not showing up at the stadium at the designated time. My parents, though ardent Socialists, were never outlaws. Their innate tendency was to obey the rules. So I imagine that Maria escorted first her husband, then her mother to the collection point after debating the alternatives, round and round, for days.

We simply must do it.
But when will we see each other again?

* * *

Soon after our arrival in Paris, then, Maria had become a single parent. She would not even know the whereabouts of her husband and mother during that hectic summer of 1940 in which Belgium and Holland were overrun, the French army collapsed, and Hitler strutted into Paris. She had no way of knowing whether she would ever see them again, whether they were alive, whether she herself would be alive tomorrow.

As they started their exodus, however, it was she who had walked away—to teach her son a lesson—and as he plodded miserably at her side, trying to glue himself to her without being allowed physical contact, she felt the canyon inside herself, the fear of what she might do. In this convulsive emptying out of Paris, parents were herding their offspring along, terrified of losing a child; there was a yelling of names, frantic signaling, and compulsory linking of hands as mothers behaved as true mothers do, even those just roused from a sickbed, or drunk, or feebleminded. What if *she* had managed to lose her one boy only because he had gotten on her nerves?

* * *

Three quarters of a century ago the Reaper, grimacing among the witless masses oozing out of Paris, must have waved his scythe gaily at the two of us, Maria and Vito, a disastrously odd couple. Look at her: Miss Perfect from the provinces, who had always been backed by a benevolent mother and the guidance of a patriarch. Suddenly she is a worn, haggard orphan with huge accusing eyes. The poor woman is encumbered with a boy she had neither fed nor weaned herself, who'd adored his inaccessible mother but was already suspicious of her changing weathers.

Consumed with what she'd decided was her sacred mission, she clamped my hand inexorably in her own, tugged and cajoled, pushed me in a pram she had "liberated," Socialist style, from a bourgeois porch, dragged me impatiently, and, when all else failed, carried me in her thin arms, which became iron until they shook and failed.

We headed, with everyone else, toward the Unoccupied Territory. To locate Walther and Nona; to reunite with them; to obtain a visa to a neutral country; to get on the mythical ship that would take us there: every unlikelihood multiplied the odds. Did the two of us have any chance at all? What were the facts?

The most common goal for those hoping to leave the continent, the port of Marseille, was 775 kilometers from Paris. It took many of the travelers months to get there. Traffic on the main roads moved only for minutes at a time that summer, with stoppages for hours and sometimes for days; refugees often had to backtrack long distances, and few of them managed to advance more than five kilometers per day.

Overcrowding was not the only reason for the snail's pace. Many civilian fugitives started out on motor vehicles or horse-driven carriages; but axles broke by the thousands due to overloading, the horses collapsed from overwork and starvation, and gasoline quickly became unavailable except to military personnel. Soon the roadsides were

clogged with wrecked or abandoned vehicles and dying horses. Bicycles fared better, but most political refugees ended up as pedestrians, often walking only at night for safety and dreaming of some angelic rescue.

The final touch was provided by Göring's air force, which distinguished itself by bombing and machine-gunning the gridlocked highways and whatever railroad lines were still operational. In the long run Hitler intended to treat the French leniently; they were Aryans, after all, and he wanted to soften the West by demonstrating German veneration for "culture." But as long as French surrender was uncertain, the proper tactic was to paralyze their transport facilities; and the bored Nazi pilots deserved some amusement as well. The roads, bloated with wrecks and litter, became soaked with blood and tears.

I have found no statistics as to the number of civilians killed or injured in these air raids upon the exodus. The exuberant gunners were usually content to scare the crowds and see them scatter; the "final solution" had not yet been devised, and there are no reports of systematic massacres. It's likely that broken minds were more numerous than bullet wounds. The typical "displaced person" was undernourished, long sleepless, and mentally disoriented by the time the Luftwaffe struck; additional terror sometimes triggered catatonic stupor, sometimes episodes of manic raving. There are no reliable figures on suicide, either, but well-known intellects, like Walter Benjamin, did choose that final asylum. Arthur Koestler attempted it also. Stefan Zweig succumbed. News of their demise infected other Socialists.

Maybe I saved my mother from such a temptation during our flight. I was, after all, the symbolic mission entrusted to her. But my presence may also have had a practical use. A forlorn young woman, however romantic in her desolation, might have elicited little more than a tired shrug from a truck driver or the commander of military convoy. Add a three-year-old boy, perhaps held up to view, and human decency, or an ancient respect for maternity, might have taken hold. The most disciplined driver might have found himself skidding to a halt before even thinking *we cannot let her walk, look, the little one, she can hardly…*

* * *

Scarcity showed the failed nation its bizarre new faces: a grocery store emptied by the troops of everything except the costliest cans of caviar; a hundred cars lined up at a gas pump that could dispense only two liters to each; no vacancies at any hotel; and the floors of every lobby paved with bodies groaning in ten languages. Money was always an advantage, and though my mother had very little, she often got handouts from those who recognized her as an author sympathetic to "the movement."

Most paralyzing was the scarcity of accurate information, the commodity that no money could buy. The radio, that era's oracle, was the mouthpiece of politicians and could not be believed; Maria could not find out how the war was really going, nor where her husband and mother were, nor whether the Spaniards were letting refugees across the border, nor whether ships were still crossing the Atlantic. The crowds were rife with every rumor—a main road blocked by a Gestapo checkpoint, a town bombed by the Luftwaffe, an empty passenger train headed for Marseille that would take everyone for free but that never moved from its siding. Was it true that the trains were already under Nazi control?

Which way to turn? Every fork in the road was a new, fateful decision. Each of the fleeing millions was apt to babble of "facts" heard elsewhere and believed. Yet besides the usual fools there were knowledgeable, vigorous minds; the underground had its own intelligence. But whom to believe? Whom to follow? To make one's way in the buzzing net one had to ask, listen, assess the informant's competence, vigorously inquire, quickly act. For a person like my mother, to take such constant initiatives meant overcoming her own timidity … a hundred times a day. It was a stunning feat.

* * *

I can still hear her murmur to me, confessing, confiding, almost beseeching. I still hear that querulous voice rise and fall, muffled by years in my own flesh, for later, safe in America, she would sit at my bedside when I was four or five and complain gently and incessantly, perhaps of the misdeeds of my father, or of the indignities of poverty, using me as a receptacle for her thoughts, as any of us can use a domestic animal as an ear. Not expecting the creature to respond, we feel, or imagine, its sympathy.

GOTTFRIED HELNWEIN

Disasters of War 35, 2014
Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 78 3/4 x 126 1/2 in

COURTESY MODERNISM GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO

Too early, in those years, she began spinning the myth that would be fatal later on: that our bond was unique, that we were "the same kind of being," that I was the only one who could truly understand her, and, consequently, that I was responsible.

It must have begun in the exodus. Stuck as she was with me, in our immense and perpetual emergency, whom else could she relax with?

* * *

The fate of the interned "enemy aliens" was indeed questionable. France's collapse on the battlefield left the administrators of the camps in a quandary. The prison guards, many of them disabled veterans or retired policemen, tended to throw away their uniforms and run rather than face the dreaded *Boche*. The camp commandants often felt a moral obligation to protect prisoners whose only crime had been to beg France for asylum. But in the economic disaster of a lost war, these foreigners were not a priority. Most of the camps simply dissolved in the chaos of the unexpected defeat. The French officers became refugees themselves … and left the gates open.

The most vigorous inmates, like my father in La Braconne, just walked away. Others, too weak or too law-abiding to move, hung on in the disease-ridden facilities, sometimes without food or water, until they died or were hauled out by squads of rescuers, often Communist cadres. I do not know how my grandmother was able to leave the huge and dismal camp for females at Gurs. I know that I hurt my mother's feelings by whining incessantly for my old companion, Nona, Nona…

* * *

Somehow Walther Victor and his three dependents managed to reunite in Marseille, to make their way from there to Lisbon and then be transported to the United States as members of a select group of intellectuals aboard the TSS *Nea Hellas*. It was Walther who performed most of the heroics in this phase of our journey, but my mind fixes always on my flight from Paris with my mother.

By the age of seven our physical intimacy was over; we could no longer lovingly touch. In my mother's version, she'd condescended to my fierce (and to her, somewhat ridiculous) desire to be manly. I remember how she would mock my alleged aversion to maternal caresses. I no longer can say which of us needed to wriggle out of the other's humid clasp, once we had reached the United States. But despite our later troubles, when I rewind my brain's hard drive past the files that hold the first data, I can see no evil in her. *In the beginning was love*. Particularly during that flight, I must have been held constantly—body to body—to the source of my life. Mother had been supremely available, and in some place and time during the exodus, on some seedy hotel floor, or on the ground in some rain-soaked wood, there must have been at least one hour when the two of us surrendered to one another. When we simply melted together.

I have held on to that bliss.

Born in Switzerland of German parents fleeing the Nazis, **Vito Victor** grew up in the Bronx, New York and attended Reed College in Oregon. As German remained his first language, he went on to publish in literary journals on German topics, among them Beethoven, Thomas Mann and Rainer Maria Rilke.

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Murmur of the Innocents 23, 2011
Oil & Acrylic on Canvas, 71 X 109 in

COURTESY MODERNISM GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO