



An incredible life is not always a happy one. The photographer Otmar Thormann tells me he had to confront decades of his memories to understand decades of his own work. 'For years, I was running from the place I came from,' he says. 'But life wanted me to return and manage whatever it was I was trying to escape. I finally made the decision to stop running.'

Thormann was born in 1944 in Graz, Austria. As he describes it, the war may have ended by the time he could speak, but the fighting between his parents was growing more heated. In 1948, they divorced and Thormann moved in with his grandparents. Every day, his grandfather told him stories from the Eastern Front, where he had fought in World War I and survived a bullet to the head. 'Sometimes I was allowed to poke my finger through the bullet hole,' he tells me.

Thormann thinks that had his grandfather ever picked up a camera, his photographs would have been like those of Czech photographer Josef Sudek. Thormann owns several photographs by Sudek, who famously lost an arm in World War I. Thormann shows us those photographs, framed and hanging on the walls of his sunny flat in Kungsholmen, and speaks of them in the sincere tones of someone who wants to explain the unexplainable. 'What you feel in Sudek's photographs is that there is ca-

tastrophe behind him and peace in front of him. I felt that same thing about my grandfather, holding his hand and hearing him talk.'

Thormann speaks at length about the cinema in his small town as he was growing up. The NON-STOP, it was called, featured films from around the world, including those of Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin and Laurel & Hardy. 'This was my window out of this little town,' Thormann says, growing increasingly more animated as we talk. 'I thought: "Oh my God, look at the world! I was ten, 12 years old, and I already knew I had to leave home.'

Looking back, Thormann understands that he was fascinated by film because each still represented something that was at once reality and complete fabrication. 'Not everything I saw was the real world, of course. It was actually a set built in a studio.' This is a complexity especially visible in films from the '50s and the '60s, he says. 'Back then, I didn't understand exactly what this quality was, but I knew I wanted to have it in my photographs. At 14, I already knew I wanted to be a photographer.'

When he tried to get an apprenticeship with a photographer in Graz, however, he was told that 'there aren't enough people getting married' to warrant training him. Eventually he found work as a chef aboard the Swedish ship MS Kungsholm and, by age 21, had fulfilled at least one boyhood dream: to travel the world.



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'I met some of the world's richest people on that ship and saw some of the world's poorest on the harbours,' says Thormann. 'I arrived with one bag in Sweden a year later, and knew: "That wasn't it." There's more I have to do in life.' In 1968, he enrolled at Stockholm's Fotografiska Skola (school of photography) and shortly thereafter was asked by seminal photographer Walter Hirsch to work as his assistant. He and Hirsch shared a studio for 15 years, and Thormann has lived in Stockholm ever since.

Most of Thormann's photographs are, in fact, shot in Stockholm, but the associations within them are those he still carries from Graz. When there is no actual human present in his work, there might be the suggestion of a human figure, even if it is only a stocking filled with salt – slumped, slouching or otherwise assuming a posture of rest or defeat. There might be shadows of people in Thormann's photographs, or the shadows of an event that made those people leave by way of seemingly abandoned, dirty shoes. There might be meat and vegetables, suggestions of limbs, wounds, the human body broken and dissected. 'The photograph is a witness to what I have seen but could not photograph as a boy,' says Thormann. 'I am only a midwife: I deliver a photograph that comes to me.'

The photographer tells me about his mother's second husband, whom Thormann, as a boy, called Onkel Willi. Onkel Willi loved to cook. He would make Sunday dinner in his underpants and a T-shirt, allowing the scarred stump that remained of his right leg to rest on a crutch. It was amputated without a doctor in the last days of World War II, and he didn't much care for his prosthetic. He stored it below the bed Thormann slept on when visiting.

I stop Thormann there. I ask: Do you think you stayed in Stockholm to escape your memories, or to see them more clearly, once removed?

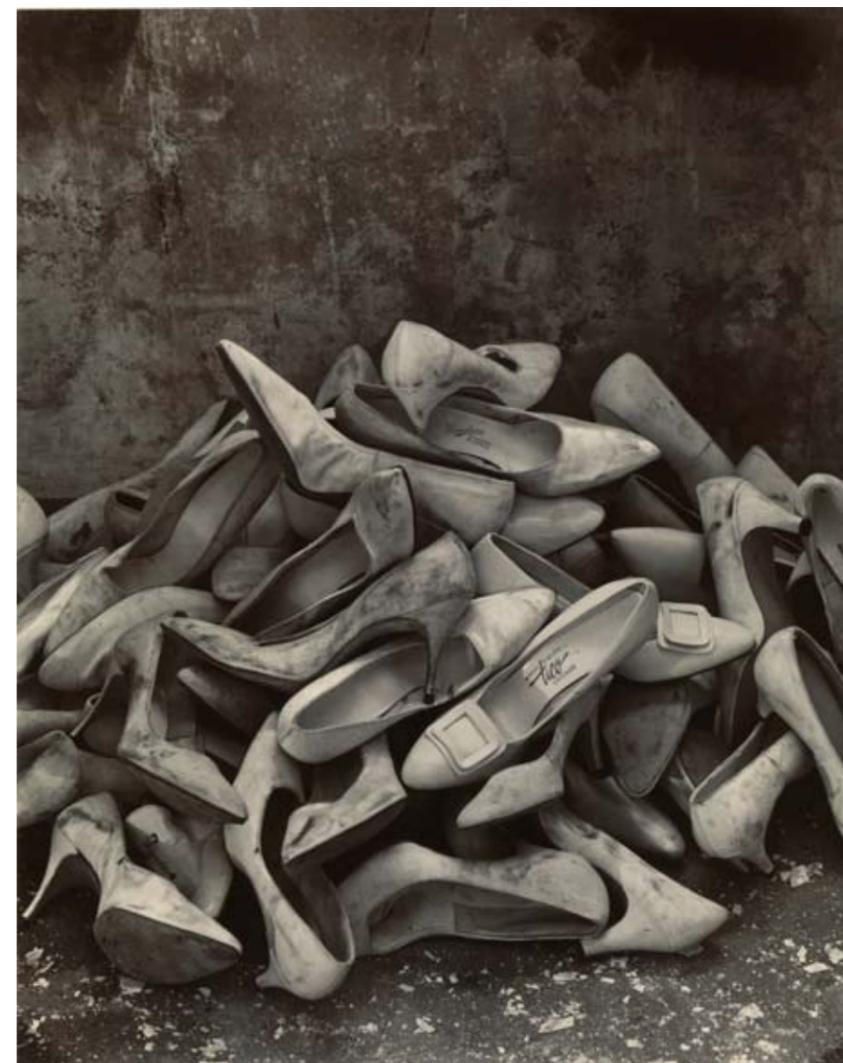
'I always say, "If a Swede is not friendly; anyhow he is not unfriendly," That's why I stayed in Stockholm. I like the atmosphere here between people. But I didn't discover the memories or motifs within my photos until much later. I was drawn to take those photos through passion and intuition. Once you explain the illusion, it's like explaining to a child that there is no Father Christmas.'

What do you mean?

'I mean, the moment I understood why I was taking my photographs was the moment I stopped taking them. I cannot take them anymore. It's not possible.'

I'm sorry to hear that.

'Why? I finally have the courage to be still,' he tells me. 'I don't want anything more, because I think I already have everything. Believe me, this is a feeling of liberation.'



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