

# We Are ID8470

## Tal Adler

*Future work will have to focus on the investigation of further biographies so that numbers can be turned back into people.*

–Sabine Hildebrandt, ‘The Women on Stieve’s List’<sup>1</sup>

### Meeting Spirits

From the first time I was introduced to the story of the so-called Gall skull in 2019, even before I visited them at the anatomical collection of the Charité, many of their spirits – those human stories, past lives somehow related to the bare cranial bones – were already with me.<sup>2</sup>

During the ten years prior to that, I was immersed in the field of human remains that linger in collections all around the world. My first direct encounter with such a collection (in Vienna, in 2009) was extreme: I came face-to-face with a collection of bones of more than forty thousand people, whose histories were often tragic and violent; I stood shocked in front of a thirty-metre-long cabinet that displayed a few thousand of

[1] Sabine Hildebrandt, ‘The Women on Stieve’s List: Victims of National Socialism Whose Bodies Were Used for Anatomical Research’, *Clinical Anatomy* 26, no. 3 (2013): 3. Hildebrandt refers to a quote by Timothy Snyder: ‘It is for us scholars, to seek these numbers and put them into perspective. It is for us humanists to turn the numbers back into people’. Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 408.

[2] This chapter discusses my work with spirit narratives, which was one element of the project *Who is ID8470?*. For a better understanding of the project and its broader context, see my chapter ‘Who is ID8470?’ in this volume. On using the singular pronoun *they* to write about the so-called Gall skull from the anatomical collection of the Charité, see ‘Who is ID8470?’ in this volume.

these skulls, only a fraction of the entire collection.<sup>3</sup> The impact of the encounter prompted me to engage with the collection, research it, try to comprehend it. In the process, I learned about the histories and motivations – especially those that rose within the contexts of European science between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries – that led to the rampant collecting of skulls and other human remains.<sup>4</sup> I gradually encountered more collections around the world, some of which I have visited and in which I have spoken to, held interviews with, or conducted research with their staff. Directly and indirectly, I was exposed to stories from dozens of collections, altogether containing hundreds of thousands of human remains. Through the histories of early anatomy and medical research, phrenology, racial theories, anthropology, archaeology, world expeditions, exhibitions, colonialism, world wars, the Holocaust and other genocides, criminology, forensics, and genetic research – the ways in which human remains were obtained, as well as the historical periods and social, political and geographical contexts, varied greatly. So diverse and numerous were the spirit narratives I came across through my encounters with their remains in the collections, through reading and talking about them, through finding them in historical photographs, or through watching films about their lives. So many lives.

But in 2019, in contrast to my previous encounters in and with collections of human remains, I was introduced to *just* one skull. Until then, one of my main motivations, as well as challenges, was to highlight the individual story – hidden, erased by the way human remains were amassed and kept as objects. However, when I was finally introduced to a single skull, to an individual, so many stories – so many spirits – emerged. The spirit narratives appeared gradually, in the process of writing them down. They surfaced mostly when I drifted between states of deep contemplation and unintentional daydreaming, likely summoned in the spaces between implicit memories, associative thinking, instinct, imagination,

[3] For more information on the *Dead Images* project and the skulls at the Natural History Museum Vienna, see Tal Adler, Linda Fibiger, John Harries, Joan Smith, Anna Szöke, and Maria Teschler-Nicola, 'Dead Images: Facing the History, Ethics and Politics of European Skull Collections', in *Contentious Heritage and the Arts: A Critical Companion*, ed. Marion Ham and Klaus Schönberger (Klagenfurt: Wieser, 2021), 63–68; Tal Adler, Linda Fibiger, John Harries, Joan Smith, and Anna Szöke, 'Exposure: The Ethics of Making, Sharing and Displaying Photographs of Human Remains', *Human Remains and Violence* 4, no. 1 (2018): 3–24.

[4] See for example Wulf D. Hund, ed., *Entfremdete Körper. Rassismus als Leichenschändung* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009); Margit Berner, Anette Hoffmann, and Britta Lange, *Sensible Sammlungen. Aus dem anthropologischen Depot* (Hamburg: PHILO Fine Arts, 2011); Holger Stoecker, Thomas Schnalke, and Andreas Winkelmann, eds., *Sammeln, Erforschen, Zurückgeben? Menschliche Gebeine aus der Kolonialzeit in akademischen und musealen Sammlungen* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2013); Frances Larson, *Severed: A History of Heads Lost and Heads Found* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2014); Samuel J. Redman, *Bone Rooms. From Scientific Racism to Human Prehistory in Museums* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Ann Fabian, *The Skull Collectors: Race, Science, and America's Unburied Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).



Skull mounts at the anatomical collection of the Centre for Anatomy at the Charité, Berlin, 2020. Film still from the *Who is ID8470?* video. © Tal Adler

and a metaphysical connection that is hard to capture in words. Unlike scenes in ghost or haunting movies, where apparitions or voices manifest in direct relation to specific physical objects and places, the narratives I received required no ghost-hunting tools, mystical rituals, or proximity to human remains. Instead, they surfaced organically, in a state of reflection hovering between reverie and intention.<sup>5</sup>

Why did multiple spirits appear around a single skull? Because

the identity of this person was unknown? Because no one seemed to be interested in this person's identity until then? Perhaps, also, because this skull was not alone in this collection: next to them, mounted behind vitrine doors, hundreds of human remains are still kept and displayed – the remains of other people with different stories. Maybe they, too, wanted to tell their stories. Maybe, after decades and sometimes centuries in the same collection, spirits – stories – get mixed up, confused, fused.

### Possible Biographies

The multiple stories that emerged around the skull from the anatomical collection of the Charité spanned centuries, places, and sexes. As voices reached out to me from beyond life, from beyond my mortal understanding of reality, I, as the medium capturing their stories, felt obliged to accept them all equally. To me, the different biographies narrated by the multiple spirits did not contradict one another; they did not compete for reasonableness or call for a hierarchy of plausibility (as a more conventional approach to provenance might stipulate).<sup>6</sup> Having researched many similar collections and histories and having learned about so many similar narratives, I knew that the stories that emerged around the skull at the Charité were all possible. By listening to their stories, and later echoing them through the *Who is ID8470?* video, I wanted to acknowledge and assert their truthfulness.

[5] I am grateful to my late aunt Hannah, who was a medium for spirits and, though she passed before I was born, may have helped me connect to the spirits of the skull from the Charité. This work is dedicated to her.

[6] See the introduction to this volume for a discussion of different approaches to narratives and speculation within artistic and scientific provenance research. See also Larissa Förster's chapter in this volume for her definition of 'tentative object biographies'.

Of the many spirits I encountered while working on the *Who is ID8470?* project, only a few eventually appear in the seventeen-minute video, one of the outcomes of this project.<sup>7</sup> In this video, four of the spirits narrate fragments of their stories, while the others make fewer, yet poignant statements. At the end of the video, they all recite a poem together, or a sort of manifesto. The brevity of the spirits' appearances, their laconic statements, and their apparent struggle with remembering their names produced enigmatic accounts, which entailed fundamental questions: Who were they? When and where did they live? How did they die? And why did their skull end up in the anatomical collection of the Charité? Trying to answer these questions, I researched every hint left in their short testimonies. Although I managed to reveal many of the contexts around their stories and the possible circumstances of their lives and deaths, in most cases I did not find their personal identities.

Laying out the results of my research in this chapter without being able to name the spirits presented me with a challenge. For a project whose main goal was to 'turn numbers back into people', describing these spirits' moving stories without giving them a name might seem contradictory. At the same time, however, it was precisely this acute absence (and the painful way that the spirits seem to struggle without a name in the video) that resonated with the essential question in the project's title – Who is this person? By making this uncomfortable contradiction visible, the nameless spirits embody the main concern of this project: the objectification that is inherent in collections of human remains.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike in the video, where the spirits speak directly to us in the first person, this text requires referring to each spirit in the third person. To create a more individual reference than simply 'the spirit', I used the information I found about them in my research and named them here as *the performer*, *the prisoner*, *the maid*, and *the architect*, leaving open the inner contradiction between the desire to re-humanize them and the decision to highlight their missing names.

[7] The main reason for not including all the spirit narratives in the video was limitations on its length. I selected only a few stories, on the basis of their relevance to visitors to the Humboldt Lab and their ability to exemplify the range and variety of anatomical body acquisition. See the video here: 'Who is ID8470?', posted March 1, 2024, by Artistic Provenance Research, YouTube, 17 : 51, <https://youtu.be/QBu56hd8Cy0?si=tsZ2wyTvxjku2pBP>.

[8] This is especially apparent in anatomical collections in which the removal of the name and identities of the person dissected is part of the practice's core traditions. See the discussion of this topic with Thomas Schnalke and Andreas Winkelmann in the 'Who is ID8470?' video, at 1 : 33–2 : 13.



*The performer's spirit, played by Deborah Cohen. Film still from the *Who is ID8470?* video.*  
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### **The Performer**

*Coming here was my biggest mistake. I didn't know I would never go back home.*

*They put us in the exhibition *Cairo in Berlin*. We were hundreds of people, but only twenty were actually from Egypt. People paid to look at us, to look at our clothes, to hear our songs.*

*Before leaving for our next show in Paris, I got very ill. They took me to their hospital. They measured me and photographed me from every angle.*

*After I died, they opened me up and looked inside.*

*They still keep my head there.*

In her disturbing account, this spirit – *the performer* – refers to an exhibition she calls *Cairo in Berlin*. I found many historical records referring to an exhibition called *Cairo*, which was set up as one of the main attractions of the famous Industrial Exhibition of Berlin (der Berliner Gewerbe-Ausstellung) that took place in Treptower Park between May and October 1896.<sup>9</sup> Designed and constructed as a much bigger event

[9] *Offizieller Haupt-Katalog der Berliner Gewerbe-Ausstellung 1896* (Berlin: Rudolf Mosse, 1896); Karl Krug, *Offizieller Führer Durch Die Special-Abteilung Kairo Der Berliner Gewerbe-Ausstellung 1896* (Berlin: Kleinen Journals, 1896). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.



Aerial view of the exhibition grounds in Treptower Park. Illustration from the *Offizieller Haupt-Katalog der Berliner Gewerbe-Ausstellung 1896*. Zentral- und Landesbibliothek Berlin (public domain).

than a national trade fair, the Industrial Exhibition of Berlin 1896 was inspired by – and arguably in competition with – the grand world’s fairs of the time, such as the 1889 Paris Exposition.<sup>10</sup> Taking note from these world’s fairs, the Industrial Exhibition of Berlin of 1896 also included the first *German Colonial Exhibition* (Deutsche Kolonial-Ausstellung), which was funded by the foreign ministry, and in which 106 people from the newly established German colonies in Africa were exhibited and were enlisted to perform for the fair’s visitors.<sup>11</sup> The *Cairo* exhibition, in which *the performer* probably participated, was not part of the *German Colonial Exhibition*, however.<sup>12</sup> Designated as a special exhibition and funded privately, *Cairo* was one of the fair’s central attractions, drawing in probably more than two million visitors, including several visits by the Prussian Kaiser himself.<sup>13</sup> Representing a mixture of Cairo’s historical and contemporary sites, the exhibition included detailed reconstructions of streets, shops, restaurants, mosques, and a harem, but it also extended its offerings beyond the representation of the city, with highlights such as a peasant village and a thirty-eight-metre-high model of Giza’s great pyramid (referred to in the exhibition as ‘Cheop’s pyramid’), in which visitors could observe two mummies and climb up with an electric lift to the top of the pyramid to enjoy the view.<sup>14</sup>

[10] Because of the objection of Kaiser Wilhelm II to an international world’s fair taking place in Berlin, the Industrial Exhibition of Berlin, which was as significant and grand as other international world’s fairs of that time and included the first ‘German Colonial Exhibition’, was dubbed the ‘impeded world show’ (‘die verhinderte Weltausstellung’). See Horst Kleinert, *Mit der Tram in die Kolonien des Kaisers. Die Gewerbe- und Kolonialausstellung von 1896 in Berlin* (Lüneburg: Thurm, 2019), 19–22; Alexander C. T. Geppert, ‘Weltstadt für einen Sommer: Die Berliner Gewerbeausstellung 1896 im europäischen Kontext’, *Mitteilungen des Vereins für die Geschichte Berlins* 103, no. 1 (2007): 434–48.

[11] Anne Dreesbach, *Gezähmte Wilde. Die Zurschaustellung ‘exotischer Menschen’ in Deutschland 1870–1940* (Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus, 2005), 245–79; Gustav Meinecke, ed., *Deutschland und seine Kolonien im Jahre 1896. Amtlicher Bericht über die erste Deutsche Kolonial-Ausstellung* (Berlin: Reimer, 1897).

[12] For more on the *Cairo* exhibition and the differences and relationship between this exhibition and the neighbouring colonial exhibition, see Aischa Ahmed, *Arabische Präsenzen in Deutschland um 1900. Biografische Interventionen in die deutsche Geschichte* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2020), 160–73.

[13] Ines Roman, ‘Exotische Welten – Die Inszenierung Ägyptens in der Sonderausstellung “Kairo” der Berliner Gewerbe-Ausstellung von 1896’ (master’s thesis, Universität Münster, 2010), 43–44, 46.

[14] Geppert, ‘Weltstadt für einen Sommer’, 441.



Illustration on the cover of the *Offizieller Führer durch die Special-Abteilung Kairo der Berliner Gewerbe-Ausstellung 1896*. Zentral- und Landesbibliothek Berlin (public domain).

In her spirit narrative, *the performer* mentioned that only a few of the exhibition's participants 'were actually from Egypt'. Although I did not find biographies of *Cairo's* participants, it seems that there was an effort to represent a variety of Egypt's population by recruiting 'Bedouins, Arab merchants and craftsmen, peasants, Copts, Sudanese, Abyssinians and Nubians' for the show.<sup>15</sup> Judging by the language and dialect she used to communicate with me, I think that *the performer* might have been an Israelite Samaritan woman. How she got to participate in *Cairo* is unclear, especially as the Israelite Samaritan community in those days was extremely small and under threat of assimilation and extinction.<sup>16</sup> However, since the exhibition included a 'Palestinian collection', it could be that *the performer* was somehow connected to that part, offering the unique position of someone who is fluent in both Arabic and (Samaritan) Hebrew, and who is a member of a community that traces its origins to the biblical kingdom of Israel, maintaining a continuous existence on that land (mainly in Shechem/Nablus) even after the destruction of their kingdom (in 722

BCE). The official guide to the *Cairo* exhibition mentions the sale of wines from Palestine in this section of the exhibition, and although it does not mention a Jewish connection, newspaper reports from that time do refer to the sale of 'products of Jewish villages in Palestine', so it could have been that the organizers needed a local representative (such as *the performer*) who was unaffected by Islam's disapproval of wine.<sup>17</sup>

It is no surprise that *the performer* became seriously ill towards the end of the exhibition, just like many other performers in so-called human shows across Europe who might have been more susceptible to the local pathogens and not accustomed to the European weather, especially since they had to perform in supposedly traditional outfits that were often

[15] Roman, 'Exotische Welten', 43.

[16] Reinhard Pummer, *The Samaritans: A Profile* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2016), 155–70; Sean Ireton, 'The Samaritans: Strategies for Survival of an Ethno-Religious Minority in the Twenty First Century' (master's thesis, University of Kent at Canterbury, 2003).

[17] Quoted in Ines Roman, 'Exotische Welten', 58; for the original source, see *Vossische Zeitung*, no. 409, morning edition, September 1, 1896.



'Arabic Café'. Illustration from the booklet *Ansichten von Kairo in der Berliner Gewerbeausstellung 1896*. Zentral- und Landesbibliothek Berlin (public domain).

unsuitable for that climate.<sup>18</sup> Being taken to hospital was probably the first time she was allowed to leave the area of the exhibition – all participants of *Cairo* were forbidden to leave the exhibition's grounds without supervision.<sup>19</sup> When the show was over, they were escorted by the police directly to the trains that took them outside of Germany and to the port in Trieste on their way back home.<sup>20</sup>

*The performer's* account of being measured and photographed by the physicians at the hospital

was common practice. European and American anthropologists took great interest in the human shows of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which provided them with an opportunity to conduct research on these shows' participants conveniently and in proximity to their research institutions, without the need for complicated, expensive, and dangerous expeditions outside Europe.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the participants of the *German Colonial Exhibition* that took place close to the *Cairo* exhibition were researched by the renowned anthropologist Felix von Luschan, who visited and measured them at the exhibition in 1896. Von Luschan published a comprehensive essay about his research, accompanied by the photographs and detailed measurements of the participants, in the official report of the colonial exhibition.<sup>22</sup>

*The performer* said that after her death, she was dissected and that her 'head remained there'. This, too, is unfortunately not unusual for this period – bodies of many of the human shows' participants who died in Europe and the United States were exploited in that way, and

[18] See, for example, the story of the eight Labrador Inuit who were recruited in 1880 to be exhibited in zoos in Germany and France, where they all died of smallpox: France Rivet, *In the Footsteps of Abraham Ulrikab: The Events of 1880–1881* (Gatineau: Polar Horizons, 2014), Kindle, loc. 2052–2708 of 5271.

[19] Roman, 'Exotische Welten', 45.

[20] Quoted in Ines Roman, 'Exotische Welten', 45; for the original source, see *Berliner Morgen-Zeitung*, no. 252, General-Anzeiger, October 25, 1896, and no. 253, October 27, 1896.

[21] Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, Gilles Boëtsch, Éric Deroo, and Sandrine Lemaire, 'Human Zoos: The Greatest Exotic Shows in the West', in *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Colonial Empires*, ed. Blanchard et al., trans. Teresa Bridgeman (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 1–51.

[22] Felix von Luschan, 'Völkerkunde', in *Deutschland und seine Kolonien*, 203–69.





*The prisoner's spirit*, played by Hannah Hurtzig. Film still from the *Who is ID8470?* video.  
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### The Prisoner

*A day before my execution, the guards announced a visit from a doctor – ‘a university professor’. I got excited, as I thought he could help, but when I saw him, I knew I was wrong. There was no empathy in his gaze. He asked me about my menstruation and if I was afraid of dying. His eyes cut through my flesh. It was worse than anything the guards did to me.*

As much as it was disturbing to hear this spirit's – *the prisoner's* – laconic, yet poignant vignette of what might have been her last conversation before her death, it was heartbreaking and infuriating to learn more about the possible contexts of this scene. The few hints in her description refer to a gruesome chapter in the history of science, in which scientists willingly collaborated with, supported, and benefitted from corrupt and murderous power. Researching the connections between the anatomical collection of the Charité (in which the skull is kept), executed women, and the academic interest at the time in menstruation and fear of death, I came across the well-documented story of anatomist Hermann Stieve (1886–1952), who was director of the Anatomical Institute of Berlin University (precursor of today's anatomical institute at the Charité) from 1935 until his death in 1952.<sup>25</sup>

[25] From the many publications on Stieve, I mainly used the following: Susanne Zimmermann, “... er lebt weiter in seinen Arbeiten, die als unverrückbare Steine in das Gebäude der Wissenschaft eingefügt sind”: Zum Umgang