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Death in the Family

Daniel Mendelsohn's The Lost represents one man's search to find the truth about himself, his family and the Holocaust.

GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS SHARE

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In 2003 philosopher Peter Singer wrote *Pushing Time Away*, a biography of his grandfather David Oppenheim, a Viennese Jew killed in the Holocaust. In a devastating critique published later that year in *The New York Review of Books*, Daniel Mendelsohn argued that Singer had managed to write a book about the Holocaust devoid of emotional content. Oppenheim's story in and of itself was obviously tragic, but, according to Mendelsohn, Singer had done his best to insure that neither he nor his readers would feel very deeply about it. Keen on fending off the sentimentalism that attaches to so much Holocaust literature, Singer evinced "a tendency to miss emotional clues and rich details of lived life that, in another's hands, would have made this biography searing rather than merely affecting."

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Shortly before that review appeared, Mendelsohn, a professor of the humanities at Bard and a frequent contributor to *The New York Review of Books*, had traveled to Sydney to interview a group of Holocaust survivors (whom he, after his grandfather's Yiddish inflection, thinks of as "surwivors") for his own rather similar book, *The Lost*. Now that it has appeared, it's clear why Mendelsohn's disappointment with Singer's book seemed so personal. Mendelsohn and Singer share a set of premises. The Holocaust, both men believe, has become caked in cheap sentiment, pressed into the service of an easy sadness that makes the tragedy feel stripmined to Mendelsohn's generation—those whose grandparents saw the insides of the camps—and even more so to the next. Holocaust writing can veer close, they think, to the tawdry and exploitative. The Swiss impostor Binjamin Wilkomirski, for one, played the trump card of Holocaust authenticity with his 1995 memoir *Fragments*, about life in a concentration camp he had never been in; the enormous success (and adaptation into film) of Jonathan Safran Foer's first novel, *Everything Is Illuminated*, owed not a little to its schmaltzy treatment of the Holocaust.

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There was thus the whiff of a secret boast ("in another's hands") to Mendelsohn's point about Singer. That boast has now been amply justified. Mendelsohn's engagement with these concerns—his honest critical appraisal of his own motivations for and misgivings about writing a charming, elegant, suspenseful book about such grave matters—has made for a work that is not "merely affecting," indeed not only "searing," but extraordinary.

The Lost is both a book about the Holocaust and a book about how to go about telling the stories of the Holocaust—and by extension, a book about what it means to lay claim to a story that is not your own. A "fable about the eternal conflict between what happened and the *story* of what happened," it details the moral crimes of the Nazis as it describes the ethical misdemeanors we may commit in writing about their victims. Mendelsohn interweaves his own narrative with extended discussions of the first three portions of Genesis; these sections not only add a biblical echo to his travels but show Mendelsohn working within an ancient Talmudic tradition characterized by competing interpretations. The biblical readings alternate texts by late-medieval French rabbi Rashi with those of a modern commentator, though Mendelsohn frequently disagrees with these authorities. All three write with great self-assuredness, even as they acknowledge that no one gets to have the final say. All interpretations inevitably will be revised by later generations. *The Lost*, too, is a story that is necessarily incomplete.

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Mendelsohn's object is to uncover the history of his great-uncle Shmiel Jäger, who perished in the camps along with his wife, Ester, and their four daughters. ("Murdered," the verb of choice in Germany's culture of public remembrance, might seem a more appropriate term, but Mendelsohn, a classicist by training, prefers the Latinate word "perish," with its connotations of "passing through.") For 300 years the Jägers had lived in the Galician village of Bolechow, which saw more than its share of geopolitical vertigo: First it

was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then Poland, Germany, Russia and now Ukraine. (The Ukrainians spell it "Bolekhiv," but Mendelsohn prefers the Old Country spelling.) Shmiel's younger brother was Mendelsohn's beloved grandfather. Shmiel's siblings made it out before the war, but Shmiel stayed behind: He'd already immigrated to New York once, before World War I, but had returned home. A wealthy and poised figure, he preferred the prestige he enjoyed in his village.

From the time Mendelsohn was a child, his mere presence was enough to make some of his older relatives cry and lapse into murmured Yiddish. He looked, they would tell him, just like Uncle Shmiel, who had been "*killed by the Nazis*." As Mendelsohn grew older and his genealogical interest became obsessive, the story of Uncle Shmiel and his family—or lack thereof—troubled him. He had always heard whispered rumors of further details: They hid in a castle; they fought with the partisans in the forest. When his grandfather, suffering from cancer and survivor's guilt, killed himself in 1980, Mendelsohn found a cache of letters he'd carried around with him in a faded ostrich-skin wallet. They were Uncle Shmiel's desperate pleas to his American family for money or connections, anything that might help his family escape from Poland. Mendelsohn began to sense, and to long for, a story more rounded than "*killed by the Nazis*." As Mendelsohn puts it: "Killed by the Nazis—yes, but by whom, exactly?"

His search began five years ago with a family trip—a cliché, he calls it—to the "ancestral shtetl," Auschwitz, and other Holocaust sites. "It had been," he writes, "to rescue my relatives from generalities, symbols, abbreviations, to restore to them their particularity and distinctiveness, that I had come on this strange and arduous trip." He had come, he avows with a mixture of pride and shame, "to learn about only six of six million."

The clues he gleaned from this first trip to Bolechow (he returned twice) led him to survivor channels in Israel, and then on to Australia. After an unexpected phone call from an adolescent suitor of Shmiel's daughter Ruchele, Mendelsohn headed to Sydney with his brother Matt, a photographer, to interview the handful of Bolechowers there. Interviews revealed that a few other former neighbors of Uncle Shmiel were still alive. Of 6,000 Jews in Bolechow before the war, forty-eight had survived the Nazis (they hid in cellars; they fled on foot to Uzbekistan), and by the time Mendelsohn tracked them down only twelve remained, scattered in Stockholm, Minsk, Beer Sheva, Haifa, Copenhagen. (Eight of those twelve, an appended memorial notice observes, died before the completion of this book.)

The Lost is part detective story and part wild-goose chase, with Mendelsohn traveling across the world to meet with a cast of vividly drawn nonagenarian Polish Jews. They flirt with him, chide him, pinch his cheeks and feed him (constantly). And they tell him whatever they remember about the Jägers—not only how they died, but how they lived. Shmiel, we learn, was tall, a little deaf and a shrewd businessman who owned two trucks. The four daughters were by turns independent, coquettish, studious.

Though we know, of course, that in the end Shmiel and his family were killed by the Nazis, we who are inured to the Holocaust on its usual scale find that this difference in order of magnitude provides for real suspense: Mendelsohn announces early that he did arrive at some ultimate answers, but he reserves such satisfactions for the very end. And at that end, when after many false starts and misapprehensions we learn what happened to the Jägers, or at least what probably happened to them, we discover that Mendelsohn's relentless travels and his diligent research mattered less than dumb luck:

The bizarre coincidence that of all the stories of *people who were hidden*, this man, whom we'd almost missed that day, whom we would never have...asked the right question if Froma hadn't once again pushed, demanded one more look, this man knew only one story of Jews who'd been hidden, which turned out to

be the one story I was interested in, the story I'd spent the past four years tracking down and piecing together.

It is entirely fitting that his story's resolution is a matter not of effort but of coincidence, for the Jägers' story—like so many—is full of such contingencies: Why couldn't Uncle Shmiel have just stayed in New York? Why was his own grandfather lucky enough to make it out before the war? Rather than attempt to answer these questions by theorizing about the workings of history, Mendelsohn stays close to the pain he experiences when he finally uncovers his uncle's story. "Something snapped in me at that moment," he writes. "I simply sank down and squatted there in the dust of the street and started to cry."

Ours is the era of the twenty-four-hour History Channel Brownshirt parade, *Schindler's List* and "March of the Living" tourism. These representations are so clichéd that some people feel justified in ignoring them. Suspecting—rightly, I think—that this procession of images desensitizes us to the actual horror, they turn away. Meanwhile, claims about the Holocaust's unrepresentability, made by Theodor Adorno, Claude Lanzmann and others, have congealed into dogma as well. Beyond cliché, however, such claims are pompous: Adorno's pronouncement that poetry after Auschwitz is barbarism, for example, implies that his authority should pre-empt any further conversation on the matter.

The Lost aims to awaken individual-scale anguish about the Holocaust, but these precedents make Mendelsohn profoundly ambivalent at the prospect of his book's success. If he does not achieve some catharsis, he believes, he fails as a storyteller; if he provides false consolation, he does not do justice to the victims. The result would be, as the critic J. Hoberman wrote of *Schindler's List*, "a feel-good story about the ultimate feed-bad experience."

What Mendelsohn wants to create is a story "good enough to be true, to repeat." His hope is that he can emotionally reconnect readers to the Holocaust on the narrowest possible terms, by emphasizing, as a novelist might, not an incomprehensible enormity but a series of individual rescues and betrayals. Such a story would end with "something memorable, a punch line or a tragedy that you'd always remember." That "or," however, hides an "and": Mendelsohn's punch line *is* a tragedy.

The subtext of *The Lost*—and what places Mendelsohn in the company of the most perceptive chroniclers of the Holocaust—is his anxiety about this conflict. His resolution is to keep his story as open and sprawling as he can without sacrificing narrative dash. So the story is rife with what-ifs, apologies, renunciations; they are tactics Mendelsohn learned from his grandfather, who told stories "in vast circling loops, so that each incident, each character...has its own mini-history, a story within a story." In this way, "the story of why his beautiful sister had been forced to marry her ugly, hunchbacked cousin began, necessarily from my grandfather's point of view, with the story of how his father had died suddenly one morning in the spa at Jaremcze." The basic shapes of this kind of story—which Mendelsohn traces to both Hellenist and Hebraist sources—are the coil and the tendril. Each story opens onto another, yet the impulse behind these digressions isn't merely evasive (although there is naturally some evasion; these things are not so easy to talk about) but generous. *The Lost* calls to mind a typesetter's drawer full of parentheses: a deposit of endings and beginnings.

Mendelsohn's stories feature a wealth of such contradictory detail: Frydka Jäger was either pregnant or she wasn't; Shmiel's brother Itzhak fled to Palestine either because his wife was a fervent Zionist or because he was scandalized by a clandestine non-Kosher-meat operation. Mendelsohn offers more dots than he could possibly connect; he has provided enough material for more than just one version of events. The tale he tells might at any moment be interrupted by the voice of a clamoring cousin. Interviews with

survivors, travelogue portions and Mendelsohn's own reflections are interwoven; many sections end with ellipsis points, threads to be taken up again later.

Another set of detours is provided by the photographs taken by Mendelsohn's brother Matt, which are interspersed throughout the text. Daniel takes care to point out that these images are not just ancillary to his narrative but represent Matt's own understanding of their family story. At times, Daniel openly wonders about the framing decisions his brother makes: Why shoot two members of the Australian cohort in the knee-high Bondi Beach surf? But he doesn't even try to answer. He avoids "the temptation to ventriloquize"—the temptation to play all parts as the storyteller—and allows these images to pass without comment.

Mendelsohn manages, after much cajoling, to get an interview with the winsomely recalcitrant Meg Grossbard, a friend of Shmiel's daughter Frydka. But, he writes, "she knew that the minute she allowed me to start telling her stories, they would become my stories." And so she insisted their whole conversation be off the record (Mendelsohn wryly assures us it was remarkable). Thus one of the most resonant scenes in the journey is simply left out. All he shares with us is a description of the traditional Bolechower kasha and pirogies she made for him. He listened, he writes, "in silence, the way I used to listen." Mendelsohn's silence is reverent; through it, he concedes that there are stories that are simply not ours to retell. This concession resurfaces at the end of the book in a moving passage, when he at last discovers Shmiel's fate:

For a long time I had thirsted after *specifics*, after *details*, had pushed the people I'd gone all over the world to talk to to remember more, to think harder, to give me the concrete thing that would make the story come alive. But that, I now saw, was the problem. I had wanted the details and the specifics for the *story*, and had not—as how could I not, I who never knew them, who had never had anything *but* stories?—really understood until now what it meant to be a *detail*, a specific.... I was reminded the more forcefully that they had been specific people with specific deaths, and those lives and deaths belonged to them, not me, no matter how gripping the story that may be told about them.

The subtlest tactic in Mendelsohn's struggle with himself, his struggle against the impulse to possess too exclusively this story, is his use of sentimentality. While Singer's fear of sentimentality led him into an aloof pose, Mendelsohn confronts sentiment by admitting its power. Sentiment may be unimaginative or unearned emotion, but Mendelsohn sees it as usefully well trodden—ritualized emotion. Singer's book suffers from emotional vacancy, but Mendelsohn's is almost overemotional. It is wholly consumed with feeling: for the distant relatives he never knew, for the grandparents he did know, for the siblings with whom he's sparred. Alongside his discovery of Uncle Shmiel's fate, he writes, "I found something else, too: a brother whom I'd never really known before, a deep-feeling and soft-hearted man, an artist who says little and sees much...a man whose arm I broke once because, at least in part, he had a name of which I was jealous."

Because *The Lost* is not just about the Holocaust but about his own family and his own emotional journey, Mendelsohn expresses guilt that he may be vandalizing the Holocaust to learn more about himself. (His last book, *The Elusive Embrace*, used his own homosexuality and his love of the classics to help him solve some riddles of his identity.) Yet Mendelsohn's search for his family story is in fact a way to communicate the pathos of the Holocaust, not an expropriation of it. His sentimentality welcomes us into the private life of a single family devastated by the Holocaust, permitting us to identify with it and thereby gain emotional access to a tragedy that is at once inescapable and elusive. He writes that there are two reasons to visit Auschwitz. The first is for the sheer evidence. "The second is sentimental. For the other reason you to go Auschwitz is the reason you to go a cemetery, which is something that Auschwitz also happens to be: to acknowledge the claims of the dead." N

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Gideon Lewis-Kraus

Gideon Lewis-Kraus is the author of *A Sense of Direction* and the Kindle single *No Exit*. He is a fellow at New America.

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