



Retrieving His Dead: The Holocaust Up Close

The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million, by Daniel Mendelsohn. HarperCollins, 512 pages, \$27.95.

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As a child growing up in a white-bread enclave of Westchester County, I devised a secret algorithm for deciding whom to befriend, based on a single stark question: If the Nazis come, would she hide me and my family? It was, of course, the overheard snatches of family history—the stories from my maternal Hungarian side, affluent and cosmopolitan, and the paternal Polish side, rabbinic and otherworldly—that suggested to me, even before I'd started school, that this was a reasonable criterion for someone like me in choosing her friends: Will you save us? Will you betray us? Who can I count on if the Nazis come to White Plains?

Daniel Mendelsohn's extraordinary *The Lost* brought my childhood conviviality test vividly back to me, as well as the haze of confused quasi-knowledge that surrounded it. Like many of us (his memoir made me wonder how many), Mr. Mendelsohn reveals himself, cultural critic and public intellectual though he may be, as not completely contemporary. A large portion of his edgily attentive psyche is haunted by nightmare events that transpired long before his birth, so that his memory struggles to impossibly reverse itself, to gather up the details of seemingly irrecoverable lives and tragic ends.

What distinguishes Mr. Mendelsohn from the rest of us semi-haunted quasi-contemporaries is that he actually undertook the task of relentlessly tracking down those lost lives and deaths: his family's own six among the six million. He succeeds in carving out the shape of individuals from the block of marmoreal martyrdom we call the Holocaust. He traveled the world, interviewing very old people and—through the combination of the research skills of a classicist and the sheer luck that often dictated who among the hunted succeeded in eluding the hunters—recovers the members of his family from that jumble of indistinguishable corpses.

The resulting book is a memoir, but it's also something more. It accomplishes what many of us would do if we had both the skill and obsession required to recover our own nameless lost. When Mr. Mendelsohn succeeds in his unspeakably sad and yet also triumphant and therefore joyful project of recovery, it feels to me like a success for all of us—by which I mean the kind of people whose psyches were partly formed by overhearing such stories as would make a child wonder who among her friends would hide her.

In his earlier memoir, *The Elusive Embrace* (1999), Mr. Mendelsohn described himself as a hybrid character, symbolically suspended between two geographical locales: a suburb of New Jersey, where he was helping to raise the young child of a friend, and the corner of Manhattan, 23rd and Eighth, dubbed “The Intersection of Desire” by Chelsea’s gay habitués. In *The Lost*, he gives us another geographical location laying claim to him, one more distant from the Intersection of Desire than even suburban New Jersey. The name of this place is Bolechow, as the Jews who had once lived there called it, though now, *Judenrein*, it’s called exclusively by its Ukrainian name, Bolekhiv.

His mother’s family—his grandiloquent grandfather, whose author-adored presence is prominent in both of Mr. Mendelsohn’s memoirs, as well as his grandfather’s family—had come from this little corner of the former Pale of Settlement, and Mr. Mendelsohn’s project of recovery takes him back to Bolekhiv often enough so that it begins to feel almost familiar. His project also takes him to Israel, Australia, Sweden and Denmark, interviewing former “Bolechowens,” constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing the narratives of the six he’s seeking.

It takes an obsession to undertake Mr. Mendelsohn’s task, and perhaps the scene with which he begins his book goes as far as it’s possible to go to explain the origins of his: “Some time ago, when I was six or seven or eight years old, it would occasionally happen that I’d walk into a room and certain people would begin to cry.” The tears of these elderly Jews were caused by the young Daniel’s reputed resemblance to his grandfather’s oldest brother, Samuel Jäger—Shmiel in Yiddish. Shmiel had reversed the trajectory of most immigrants, going back to the old country, to Bolechow, the town in which the Jägers had lived for “as long as there had been a Bolechow,” because Shmiel, a “kingly” sort of a man, a man with the family flair for self-dramatization (a necessity, too, for a memoirist) wanted to be “a big fish in a little pond.” And so it was that Shmiel and his wife Ester and their four daughters, Lorka, Frydka, Ruchele and Bronia, were murdered by the Nazis.

Their four *beautiful* daughters, I should add, since the overheated family romance insisted that they were beautiful, even though their names weren’t known until Mr. Mendelsohn began his quest. One of the rewards of this book, which is illustrated by photographs (some taken by the author’s brother, Matt Mendelsohn, who accompanied him on a good part of this odyssey), is watching the author being overtaken by the seriousness of his story, so that the sense with which he’d started—that his six, being his, would turn out to be more fabulous than the other 5,999,994—is subtly discarded for something far more humane and universal. “The real story was that they’d been ordinary, and had lived, and then died, like so many others.”

The rhapsodizing about the death of young beauty and about the beauty of young death that had sounded a repetitive theme in *The Elusive Embrace* is here silenced by the awful nature of the truths uncovered. The aestheticization of death is obscene in the face of genocide. There is no beauty to be found in the degradations to which these Nazi-slain were subjected, no aesthetics in these lives reduced to the sheer animal instincts for elemental survival: hiding in haystacks, in holes dug with fingers in the earth. Though I'm not certain the author would agree, it seemed to me that the story he works toward in *The Lost* gradually renders him less a Hellenist, enthralled to an image of heroic, beautiful death, and more Hebraic, cherishing life for life's sake and seeing death as defilement.

One can, of course, imagine the effect on an imaginative boy of being linked in the tears of his relatives to his murdered great-uncle. The epitaph to the book is the poignant response of Virgil's Aeneas, the young Trojan prince who is one of the few survivors of the destruction of Troy, when, wandering far from the city, he visits a temple and sees a mural depicting the Trojan War. What is material for Carthaginian decorative art is the stuff of tragedy for the Trojan Aeneas, a deep truth that Virgil gives utterance to in the immortal line *Sunt lacrimae rerum*, which the author translates as "There are tears in things."

There is a brief, lovely passage in which Mr. Mendelsohn links the story of Aeneas to his own quest in *The Lost*, and this linking reminded me, too, of the use that Louis Begley made of the Aeneas myth in his celebrated first novel, *Wartime Lies*. As it happens, Louis Begley plays a part in Mr. Mendelsohn's book, but mostly for being the son of the indomitable "Mrs. Begley," with whom the author, in the service of his recovery project, comes to share a quirkily loving relationship. Mrs. Begley had come from Stryj, a town neighboring Bolechow, and she helps the author to grasp her lost world. She accuses him—both dismissively and indulgently, he says—of being a "sentimental person." She was—she died in 2004—the very opposite of a sentimental person. The survivors' "amazing stories" elicit her leveling response: "If you didn't have an amazing story, you didn't survive," she tells the author coldly.

Though Mr. Mendelsohn does occasionally avail himself of his Greek scholarship in this book, it's the first few chapters of the Hebrew Bible around which he creates the book's structure. He only utilizes the sections that go up to the chapter called *Vayeira*—literally, "He will appear"—since, as Mr. Mendelsohn frankly confesses, that's as far as he got in his "Jewish homeschooling program." But despite the seeming haphazardness of the framing device, leaving off where Mr. Mendelsohn tired of his Bible study, it works—at least for the most part. Perhaps this is because the nature of *The Lost*'s story, of those who survived and how they did and those who didn't and how they didn't, is one that highlights the sheer contingencies upon which everything depends. The mirroring tale of Mr. Mendelsohn's quest to track down his lost is also replete with coincidence and accident.

The Biblical artifice is meant, of course, to place his family's story in the context of one of the most significant family narratives that mankind has ever told itself. In this case, the tone of fraught significance is earned, finally carrying the tale of one man—obsessed in his particular

way with his own life and family—beyond the bounds of the memoir.

I finished *The Lost* late at night, after returning from an end-of-summer dinner party given by some Truro neighbors. It's a measure of the degree to which I was affected by Daniel Mendelsohn's stunning achievement that I woke up the next morning with a single question condensing itself out of the haze of my dreams.

Would those charming people hide me and my loved ones if ever the Nazis came to Cape Cod?

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