

How to Think about Difficult Things: Daniel Mendelsohn's *The Lost**

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IN HIS REVIEW of *The Lost* in *The New York Review of Books*, the poet Charles Simic promised that the book would be a “most gripping” read.¹ He meant that it reads like a highbrow detective story, recounting Daniel Mendelsohn’s search for the truth about the fate of six of his relatives who perished in the Holocaust. Bit by bit, with the most dramatic discoveries coming at the end, Mendelsohn works towards unraveling “the solution to the mystery of their disappearance.” I too became caught up in that narrative. But this is not what pushed me to the edge of my seat and made me read the book in just a few gulps. No, a parallel narrative did that. This other narrative was foreshadowed earlier, but it formally opened on page 100:

The Germans were bad, my grandfather used to tell me, describing—from what authority, from what sources, from what hearsay I do not and cannot know—what happened to Bolechow’s Jews during World War II. *The Poles were worse. But the Ukrainians were worst of all.* A month before I went to Ukraine, ...I stood in the stifling lobby of the Ukrainian consulate on East Forty-ninth Street in New York, waiting for a visa, and as I stood there I would look around at the people standing next to me, who were all talking animatedly and often exasperatedly in Ukrainian to each other, yelling at the solitary officer behind the bulletproof glass, and the line *the Ukrainians were the worst* would go through my head, over and over, acquiring its own kind of rhythm.

At this point in Mendelsohn’s story we already know that he has received a great deal of help in his researches from a young Ukrainian named Alex Dunai, who

* Mendelsohn, Daniel. *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million*. Photographs by Matt Mendelsohn. New York: HarperCollins, 2006. All in-text references are to this edition.

sent him over a hundred photocopied documents on his family history (64). We also know that the grandfather who told Mendelsohn that the Ukrainians were the worst had left Bolekhiv for America in 1920 and claimed not to know much about what happened to Mendelsohn's ill-fated family members.

Not long afterward, Mendelsohn traveled to Ukraine with his siblings, including his brother Matt, whose eloquent photographs are scattered throughout the book. Arriving in Bolekhiv with Dunai, he listens as Dunai speaks to a local in the Ukrainian language: "And while he went on and on in Ukrainian all I could hear was the phrase *the Ukrainians were the worst*" (116). Yet, invited into the home of Dunai's interlocutor, whose name is Nina, he wonders about what his grandfather had said. Dunai had made a positive impression on the Mendelsohn family, all of whom were "taken with his warmth and natural expansiveness." While Nina fed them and treated them to Soviet champagne and Nescafé, her husband played tunes on the piano in their honor, including "Havah Nagilah" and "Yesterday." As Nina "fluttered and hustled away, my brothers and sister and I gave one another sidelong glances, and it was clear we were all thinking the same thing: *some Ukrainians aren't so bad* (118).

I was now drawn in deeply. I wanted to see what, in the end, Mendelsohn would learn about how Ukrainians behaved during the Holocaust and how he would judge them. I felt implicated in this issue, both as a historian who has worked on this same theme and as a Ukrainian. As a historian, I knew what to expect as the result of his research on Ukrainian behavior. As a Ukrainian, I hoped that nonetheless he would not condemn us all. As I proceeded through the book, I saw that Mendelsohn's interest in these problems seemed to match my own in intensity.

Mendelsohn boned up on Ukrainian and Holocaust history,² and one can sense that he is more aware than many other authors of the nuances of the situations he describes. Some aspects of everyday post-Soviet life catch him off guard, of course—like the elevated status of Nescafé³ or the existence of Soviet champagne.⁴ But he is a quick study and not easily stuck in prejudice. Early in the book, he seems to be rejecting Ukrainian Lviv: "I still can't help thinking of [this city] as Lwów, and even sometimes Lemberg, but never L'viv" (114). As his narrative progresses, however, he opens up to the modern Ukrainian city. He is sitting there with his friend, the classicist Froma Zeitlin, who had been his professor at Princeton. Their talk turns to

the remarkable richness of that city's prewar culture, in which Jews and Poles and Austrians and Ukrainians had coexisted, in which Ukrainian priests would lunch regularly at a certain famous gefilte fish restaurant cheek by jowl with Polish bureaucrats and Jewish merchants. Now it's completely *homogenous*, Froma said, rather forlornly, perhaps even with a tinge of disapproval, as she looked at the slender and quite pretty blond Ukrainian women walking up the avenue, past Beaux-Arts and Secession

buildings that had been built, a hundred years earlier, by Austrians. I looked at her and said, mischievously, I know, it's like having a country only of Jews. She gave me a look and I took another swallow of my Ukrainian beer, which was called L'VIVSKAYA (340).

Still later, he visits the old hangout of the mathematicians of the famous Lwów School, the Scottish Café. He reflects: "Anyway, I've been to the Scottish Café in L'viv. It is, you could say, the same, but different; which is also one way of describing L'viv today, which, with its renovations and new construction and rising tourism, may be said to be old and new at the same time, to be *rising out of its ashes*, at least in certain respects, at least in cases when there are ashes still left to rise out of" (460).

Trained as a classicist, Mendelsohn intersperses his narrative with reflections on the Book of Genesis. These slow down the pace of his tale, which can make the reader impatient, but the slower pace encourages reflective reading. The passages of Genesis are carefully chosen to fit the theme of each chapter. When he begins to discuss the Jewish-Ukrainian relationship, he reflects in parallel on the Cain and Abel story. He also recalls conflicts with his own brothers. For he sees the Ukrainians and Jews as brothers, "siblings...who grew up in close quarters and know one another too well, some forced to work the land, the others, seemingly luckier, more blessed, able to wander here and there with their (seemingly) ever-increasing wealth" (109). He is struck by the tragic configuration of their relationship:

the Jews, nationless, politically vulnerable, dependent on the Polish aristocrats who owned these towns, and for whom so many of the Jews inevitably worked as stewards and moneylenders, for their security; and the Ukrainians, who for the most part were workers of the land, who occupied the lowest rung of the economic totem pole, a people whose history, ironically, in so many ways was like a mirror image, or perhaps a negative image, of that of the Jews: a people without a nation-state, vulnerable, oppressed by cruel masters of one description or another—Polish counts, Soviet commissars. It was because of this strangely precise mirroring, in fact, that in the middle of the twentieth century, it evolved, with the precise, terrible logic of a Greek tragedy, that whatever was good for one of these two groups, who lived side by side for centuries in these tiny towns, was bad for the other. When, in 1939, the Germans ceded the eastern portion of Poland (which they had just conquered) to the Soviet Union as part of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Jews of the region rejoiced, knowing they had been delivered from the Germans; but the Ukrainians, a fiercely nationalistic and proud people, suffered under the Soviets, who then as always were determined to stamp out Ukrainian independence—and

Ukrainians....So the miraculous good luck of the Jews of eastern Poland in 1939 was a disaster for the Ukrainians of eastern Poland. Conversely, when Hitler betrayed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact two years later and invaded the very portion of eastern Poland that he'd given to Stalin, it was, of course, a disaster for the Jews but a blessing for the Ukrainians, who rejoiced when the Nazis arrived, having been freed from their Soviet oppressors. It is remarkable to think that two groups inhabiting such close quarters for so many years could be so different, suffer and exult over such different, indeed opposite, reversals of fortune. (120)

The proximity, the intimacy, he states, may help to explain the great violence that broke out during the war. "There is an assumption," he writes, "rather generic and perhaps optimistic, that it is harder to kill those to whom you are close than it would be to kill total strangers. But I am not so sure" (130). He thinks of Bosnia in this connection. He is aware, too, that most murders involve intimates rather than strangers. Again and again Mendelsohn returns to the observation that all parties agree they got along very well before the war (e.g., 255–56, 500).

The Ukrainians whom Mendelsohn met all expressed sympathy for the Jews' suffering during the Holocaust and said that Ukrainians had wanted to help them.⁵ Mendelsohn was made uncertain by these declarations. Here is an account of his meeting with Pyotr, an old Ukrainian in Bolekhiv:

He, too, immediately recognized the family name, and he told us things, too. That anyone who tried to help the Jews would be shot, for instance, which of course we knew—Nina had told us, and Maria had, too, and Nina had made sure to remind Olga as well, apparently, as we began talking to her.... What Pyotr told us was that when, as a worker at the lumber mill, he tried to use some Jews to fill a workers' quota, the Germans had threatened him. *Do you really need Jews?* he remembered them saying. *Do you really want trouble?* And as he said this I was torn between wanting to believe him, wanting to believe that the openness and friendliness that every Ukrainian we'd met on this trip had shown us, knowing that we were Jews, knowing what we were looking for, would have been shown in the past as well; and trying to be dispassionate—trying to remember, as these two and everyone else said how much the Ukrainians had tried, or at least wanted, to help the Jews, even as we sat across from these people, as we'd sat across from others who'd welcomed us so generously, even lavishly into their houses, as we'd sat across from Maria and Nina, that nobody has ever told a story without having some kind of agenda. (128–29)

Later a Jewish survivor from Bolekhiv told the Mendelsohns "not to believe Pyotr, who may have convinced himself...that he'd tried to help the Jews, but it

was very unlikely, and told us not to bother trying to erect a memorial to the dead in the mass grave, because the stones would be vandalized and the construction materials stolen, and asked us, too, whether we'd noticed that there is no reference to the town's Jews in the little museum in Bolechow" (145).⁶

Mendelsohn's book mentions other instances of rescue and attempted rescue by Ukrainians. There was a rumor, never nailed down in the course of Mendelsohn's investigation, that the Babij brothers, Ukrainians, organized a partisan unit that accepted Jews (148). A Bolekhiv survivor whom Mendelsohn tracked down in Australia was aided by a Ukrainian peasant to escape just before the liquidations began (175). A neighbor of this same survivor had escaped liquidation because a Ukrainian woman persuaded the Germans to release her (207). Another survivor had been called Klara back in Bolekhiv, but she now used the name Anna "to honor the Ukrainian priest who'd saved her life by giving her false baptismal papers" (295).⁷ She and her family later lived in a bunker specially built for them under his barn by a man who was "half-Polish, half-Ukrainian" (366, 377) A Ukrainian trucker who used to work for the family members Mendelsohn was researching created a hiding place in his truck's fuel tank; he used it to smuggle Jews to safety (470). An old man in Bolekhiv told Mendelsohn this story: "A Ukrainian named Medvid—it means 'bear'—had hidden a Jewish family. They were discovered, and the Nazis came and killed not only this man, Medvid, and his entire family, hanged them all, including small children, but they also killed everyone in the whole area whose name was Medvid" (466).

There were those, however, who refused to rescue. Mendelsohn quotes a deposition written in 1946 by a survivor named Matylda Gelernter. During the unbelievably brutal second *Aktion* in Bolekhiv, she, her two-year-old child, and her father "ran to the house of a Ukrainian we knew who had said at one time that he would let us in. But he didn't let us in" (227). Mendelsohn's research led him to numerous instances of Ukrainian indifference to or collaboration in the murder of the Jews.

Some Ukrainians looked on with curiosity at the sadistic fun that the Nazis were having with Jews trapped inside the Dom Katolicki clubhouse. According to a survivor, "there was a big crowd of Ukrainians hanging around outside the building, craning for a look inside" (207).⁸ Some went further and helped the Germans to identify Jews (198). Others used the Nazi occupation to engage in violent pogroms and robbery (195–97, 209). The Ukrainian police, who assisted the Germans in ghetto clearances and executions, are frequently mentioned by Mendelsohn's informants, often simply under the name "the Ukrainians" (e.g., 227–28).

The most difficult thing for me to read was the above-mentioned deposition of Matylda Gelernter. I will quote the fragments I found most disturbing:

The Germans and Ukrainians preyed especially on the children. They

took the children by their legs and bashed their heads on the edge of the sidewalks, whilst they laughed and tried to kill them with one blow. Others threw children from the heights of the first floor, so a child fell on the brick pavement until it was just pulp. The Gestapo men bragged that they killed 600 children and the Ukrainian Matowiecki (from Rozdoly near Żydaczowy) proudly guessed that he had killed 96 Jews himself, mostly children....

A terrible episode happened with Mrs. Grynberg. The Ukrainians and Germans, who had broken into her house, found her giving birth. The weeping and entreaties of bystanders didn't help and she was taken from her home in a nightshirt and dragged into the square in front of the town hall. There, when the birth pangs started, she was dragged onto a dumpster in the yard of the town hall with a crowd of Ukrainians present, who cracked jokes and jeered and watched the pain of childbirth and she gave birth to a child. The child was immediately torn from her arms along with its umbilical cord and thrown—it was trampled by the crowd and she was stood on her feet as blood poured out of her with bleeding bits hanging and she stood that way for a few hours by the wall of the town hall, afterwards she went with all the others to the train station where they loaded her into a carriage in a train to Bełzec. (227–28)

How does one account for such a blood orgy? And what does one think of creatures capable of such behavior?

Mendelsohn recoils from a direct explanation, but I will risk a few thoughts about it. There are some ideas within the text itself. I did not quote the passage, but Gelernter says that at one point the Gestapo men and Ukrainians rested from their hellish labors to drink cherry brandy that they found in a basement. And we know from other Holocaust research that liquor often fuelled large-scale slaughters.⁹ Then, in the passages quoted there is a distinction made by the writer between the “crowd of Ukrainians” who joked, jeered, and trampled a newborn baby and “bystanders” who wept and entreated the policemen to leave Mrs. Grynberg alone. In the overwhelming horror of the depiction, this nuance can easily escape the reader’s attention: some people acted one way, others another way.

In early September 1942 some people had license to do anything they wanted with other people. And what Gelernter described is what they chose to do. I have said elsewhere, but it bears repeating: “In normal historical situations, active sadists would be marginalized as criminal elements and latent ones would not become active....But during the Nazi occupation of Ukraine, criminality moved from the margins of society to its center, and individuals with an inclination to rob, extort and kill were not lost in the larger crowd of humanity, but rather stepped to the fore.”¹⁰

Atrocities such as those related by Gelernter were all too common during the

Second World War; they were committed by men of other nationalities as well, not just by Ukrainians. And such atrocities have not been limited to Europe, nor to the 1940s. But, the larger context must not be allowed to swallow up the historical specificity of what some Ukrainians did in Bolekhiv and other small towns in Western Ukraine during the Holocaust.

Mendelsohn reflects on these issues as well. For him, the entry point into the problem is the contrast between the Ukrainians he meets and those he learns about, also a certain contradiction in the survivors' collective memory, a contradiction in their accounts between the behavior of a group called "the Ukrainians" and individual Ukrainians, who did not fit into that group portrait. What he has to say is, I believe, important.

To begin with, he is usually careful to register distinctions, using that important word "some," as in "the Ukrainians...freed at last from the Poles and Jews who, some of them had always felt, had overshadowed them" (137). He noticed that most of the survivors he interviewed were not very careful at all. Most harbored a strongly negative attitude towards Ukrainians in general:¹¹ "This unwillingness to believe anything good of Ukrainians struck me as irrational...since every survivor I talked to had been saved by a Ukrainian. I did not say this to them at the time, but it seemed to me that Jews more than others should be wary of condemning entire populations out of hand" (456).

The difference in his and their attitudes, he feels, is that "they, not I, had witnessed a sheer, almost animal savagery so ferocious that, as has been recorded, there were times when the Nazis themselves had to restrain the Ukrainians. They had seen this, and I had not seen, would never see, anything like it. Still..." (456). "Still." Mendelsohn can say "still," because his eyes have not been wounded by such sights as the survivors saw. "It is difficult for me," he writes,

to believe that Ukrainian atrocities against Jews in 1942 are any more a natural expression of the essential Ukrainian character than, say, Serbian atrocities against Bosnian Muslims in 1992 are a natural expression of some essential Serbian characteristic. So I am, perhaps naively, unwilling to condemn "Ukrainians" in general, although I know that many Ukrainians committed atrocities. (454)

Reflecting on the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis, and particularly on Abraham's concern that God might be punishing some innocents along with the evildoers, Mendelsohn asks, "As long as there is one good inhabitant of the country of the wicked, can we say that the entire nation is guilty?" (469).

Further on, close to the end of his book, Mendelsohn grows more insistent on individual rather than collective responsibility. From Zeitlin helped him to see "that the Holocaust is so big, the scale of it is so gigantic, so enormous, that it becomes easy to think of it as something mechanical. Anonymous. But everything

that happened, happened because someone made a decision. To pull a trigger, to flip a switch, to close a cattle car door, to hide, to betray” (479). The tale of the sacrifice of Abraham, Abraham’s readiness to obey God’s command and kill his own son Isaac, causes Mendelsohn to think that whatever the Sodomites did, it was “a lot less awful” than what God asked Abraham to do. This tale in Genesis provokes this final, summarizing insight from Mendelsohn:

It paints what I have finally come to see as an extremely accurate picture of the way that people behave in unimaginably extreme conditions. Which is to say, a picture of a blur, an image of something that remains, in the end, totally unknowable and completely mysterious: that some people simply choose to do evil and some choose to do good, even when, in both cases, they know that their choices will require dreadful sacrifices (493).

I am not so sure that all collective responsibility can be dissolved. If one allows national pride, then there has to be room also for national shame. There were Ukrainian organizations and movements in the 1940s that bear some responsibility for what happened to the Jews in all the Bolekhivs of Galicia. But Mendelsohn is absolutely right to reject the view that the entire nation is guilty, that the violence against the Jews flowed from the essential nature of Ukrainians. He is also correct to write, often with pathos, about the Soviet crimes against Ukrainians, particularly the famine of 1932–33 (455–56, 460, 474–75, 486); it is important to abandon the dichotomy whereby to speak of communist evils is to relativize Nazi evils and vice versa. Yet, he comes dangerously close to accepting the instrumentalized version of the famine narrative promoted by the Galician diaspora and nationalists in Ukraine.¹² I also think that he is optimistic to want to believe that anti-Semitism is no longer a force in contemporary Ukraine (455). If only.¹³

Although I have these points of less than full agreement, I owe a great deal to Mendelsohn’s book. It helps me to think out how to live with a difficult national past. The key is to make differentiations, always to think using the words “some” and “still.”

NOTES

1. Charles Simic, “Back to the Beginning,” *New York Review of Books* 53, no. 15 (5 October 2006).
2. He mentions by name (p. 111) Karel Berkhoff’s *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).
3. At Nina’s: “Then she made each of us a cup of Nescafé, which was clearly considered something of a treat. ‘It is a big honor,’ Alex told us, giving us a warning look. Matt,

- sitting next to me, muttered that he didn't like Nescafé. Andrew and I gritted our teeth and said, simultaneously, "Drink the fucking coffee, Matt" (118).
4. A Bolekhiv survivor whom Mendelsohn interviewed had worked in a Soviet champagne factory in Tashkent for almost a year during the war. "*A Soviet champagne factory in Tashkent?*" Matt and I both exclaimed at the same time, laughing. Well, why not? We had drunk Soviet champagne in Nina's cramped living room...and had been incredulous that there was even such a thing as Soviet champagne" (425).
 5. Shimon Redlich worked on an oral history project that was more scholarly, but related to Mendelsohn's. He interviewed Poles, Ukrainians, and surviving Jews from Berezhany. "Almost all Ukrainian narrators claimed that the Ukrainian population was friendly and compassionate toward their fellow Jews." "There is a significant discrepancy between what actually happened and the prevailing opinions among Ukrainians from Brzezany and the nearby villages concerning Ukrainians' assistance to the Jews." Shimon Redlich, *Together and Apart in Brzezany: Poles, Jews, and Ukrainians, 1919–1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 133, 130.
 6. On the absence of commemoration of the Jews in Western Ukraine today, see Omer Bartov, *ERASED: Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present-Day Ukraine* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).
 7. Later he is called a Polish priest (390).
 8. In the crowd was a boy whom Mendelsohn later interviewed (207, 471). The Israeli historian and Holocaust survivor Shimon Redlich told me he was horrified by this curiosity of the bystanders. The murder of my father, he said, was a spectacle to them; some even watched the mass execution in Berezhany with binoculars. In his book, he relates the case of Aleksandr Pankiv, who was mistaken for a Jew at the age of nine and almost shot by the Germans. "A few weeks later, during another roundup, Aleksandr, with other boys, Poles and Ukrainians, ran to the Storozysko hill to watch the executions. When I asked him how he could watch it such a short time after he was almost shot himself, Pankiv casually remarked 'It was interesting.'" "For him, too, as for other Poles and Ukrainians in Brzezany, the Okopisko executions were a spectacle and a show." Redlich, *Together and Apart*, 121–22, 133.
 9. I think of the massacre at Łomazy famously described by Christopher Browning: "The Hiwis, often with bottle in hand, as well as Gnade and the SS officer, became increasingly drunk. 'While First Lieutenant Gnade shot with his pistol from the dirt wall, whereby he was in constant danger of falling into the grave, the SD [sic] officer climbed into the grave just like the Hiwis and shot from there, because he was so drunk he could no longer stand on the wall.' ...The number of shooters steadily diminished as one by one the Hiwis fell into a drunken stupor." Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 83.
 10. John-Paul Himka, "Ukrainian Collaboration in the Extermination of the Jews during the Second World War: Sorting Out the Long-Term and Conjunctural Factors," in *The Fate of the European Jews, 1939–1945: Continuity or Contingency*, ed. Jonathan

- Frankel, *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 13 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 172.
11. Redlich received the impressions of a survivor who went back to Brzezany for a visit in 1998. “As for my feelings about Ukrainians, I feel strangely distant from them, so I hardly feel anything. I automatically distrust and dislike the older ones.” As for the younger ones, Mike dryly commented, ‘I never discussed Jewish issues with them, except once, in Brzezany, when a 21-year-old reporter asked me why I was there. I simply told her, ‘So I would never have to come back again.’ Then I just walked away, because I felt that to discuss the Shoah with them would be useless and degrading to the people who were killed.’” Another survivor, who was hidden by several Polish families, told Redlich: “I hate all Polacks.” Redlich explained these attitudes thus: “The few Jewish survivors and those Brzezany Jews who emigrated before the war whose families were murdered remained permanently scarred by the trauma of the Holocaust. Many would harbor accusatory feelings not only toward the German perpetrators but also toward their neighbors, the Ukrainians and the Poles.” Redlich, *Together and Apart*, 135.
 12. See Johan Dietsch, *Making Sense of Suffering: Holodomor and Holocaust in Ukrainian Historical Culture* (Lund: Department of History, Lund University, 2006). I have analyzed the instrumentalization of the famine in the diaspora in several articles: “A Central European Diaspora under the Shadow of World War II: The Galician Ukrainians in North America,” *Austrian History Yearbook* 37 (2006): 17–31; “War Criminality: A Blank Spot in the Collective Memory of the Ukrainian Diaspora,” in “War Crimes,” ed. Srdja Pavlovic, special issue of *Spaces of Identity* 5, no. 1 (April 2005), accessed 8 August 2013, <https://pi.library.yorku.ca/ojs/index.php/soi/article/view/7999/7147>; and “Victim Cinema: Between Hitler and Stalin; Ukraine in World War II—The Untold Story,” in *A Laboratory of Transnational History*, ed. Georgiy Kasianov and Philipp Ther (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009), 211–24.
 13. See Per Anders Rudling, “Organized Anti-Semitism in Contemporary Ukraine: Structure, Influence and Ideology,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 48, no. 1–2 (March–June 2006): 81–118.