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**Rescued from oblivion—the search for one of six
in Daniel Mendelsohn’s *The Lost*. Bronia as a tragic character**

Laurence Benarroche

Tragedy pervades Daniel Mendelsohn’s *The Lost*, not least because it has to do with the Holocaust. In the common language, a tragedy is an event causing great suffering, destruction and distress such as a serious accident, a crime or a natural catastrophe. The Holocaust definitely qualifies as a human tragedy since it consisted in the Nazis’ deliberate endeavour to achieve the systematic destruction of one particular portion of the human kind by means of industrial methods, thus going against the idea of relentless human progress that had prevailed in the Western world since the Enlightenment period. Thus, the Holocaust is a tragedy, not only because of what happened to the victims but also for the loss of confidence in humanity it has entailed. In *The Lost*, the tragedy of the Holocaust is exemplified in the personal story that Mendelsohn undertakes to relate: that of six members of his family who were murdered between 1941 and 1943 and almost disappeared from the family memory because so little was known about their exact fate. The story concerns Shmiel (one brother of the author’s maternal grandfather’s), his wife Ester and their four daughters, Lorka, Frydka, Ruchele and Bronia, all “killed by the Nazis.”¹

The Lost is not a work of fiction and neither is it an autobiographical account of Holocaust events: it is “a nonfiction account of [Mendelsohn’s] attempts to glean information about relatives who were murdered during the Holocaust.”² However, it bears a number of characteristics that cause the reader to get involved in the narrative, establishing strong links with the multiple stories told by the author, as well as with their protagonists. These stories end up forming the virtually complete picture of a tragically lost world, one portion of the Polish *Yiddishland*³ and its civilization. Indeed, throughout the narrative, the empathic reader

is tempted to identify with the author-narrator or occasionally develop a fond feeling towards one of the various witnesses or family members who are recurrently evoked and sometimes come to acquire the status of real characters. One of these characters is Bronia, the youngest daughter of the family. In *The Lost*, which teems with many different life stories, Bronia's is told from very limited material—a single photograph and very few and incomplete (sometimes wrong) testimonies—and yet, she remains on the reader's mind. How can we account for such prominence given to a seemingly unimportant character whom most witnesses barely remember? And how does the author achieve this in his narrative? Bronia might have been made vividly present precisely *because* she was nearly forgotten by most of the survivors, and furthermore, as a character, she concentrates many aspects of the Holocaust tragedy which the reader is brought to reflect upon.

A tragic fate

According to Aristotle's definition, tragedy should create such emotions as pity and fear in the audience. The goal of Greek tragedies was *catharsis*, the purification of these emotions, and the release of emotional tension was supposed to occur after an overwhelming experience meant to restore or refresh the mind. Obviously, only the first part of the definition may here apply: the Holocaust undoubtedly caused great suffering, destruction and distress and has aroused pity and fear in those who have heard or read about these events, but if the experience of reading such accounts does appear overwhelming, the reader will never reach a state of *catharsis* in which his spirit would be restored or refreshed. Instead, most recent third-generation narratives tend to unsettle the reader and often deliberately place him in a position of doubt, reflection and questioning. Thus, the reader approaches the author's experience of "post-memory"⁴. The notion, derived from a term coined by the American critic Marianne Hirsch, refers to the traumas transmitted from one generation to the next which often involve

being haunted by events one has not personally lived through. Post-memory is made of events, endured by previous generations, whose memory was passed down to the present generation and, according to the same process, the readers receive the traumatic knowledge the authors have inherited. In *The Lost*, Daniel Mendelsohn is particularly taken by the story (or absence of story) of Shmiel's youngest daughter, Bronia, and after his reading is over, the reader may also find himself haunted by the little girl's character. Since she was only a child when she died, Bronia's fate is obviously closely linked to that of her parents and particularly her father who bears many features of the tragic hero in Mendelsohn's narrative. Indeed, according to the Aristotelian definition, he is a literary character who makes a lapse in judgment that inevitably leads to his downfall or destruction and indeed, Shmiel's story might be viewed in the light of these characteristics. Firstly, the tragic hero's flaw or error of judgment (*hamartia*) is illustrated by Shmiel's idea that he would be better off in his Ukrainian hometown, Bolechow, than in the United States, which apparently led to his decision to return to Europe in 1914. Secondly, a reversal of fortune (*peripeteia*) occurs because of the hero's judgment error and this could correspond to the period when the Nazis came to power and started to conquer eastern Europe. Thirdly comes the recognition that this reversal was sadly brought about by the hero's own actions (*anagnorisis*): for if Shmiel obviously bears no responsibility in the Nazis' rise to power, he nonetheless *could* have stayed in America. The hero's excessive pride (*hubris*) also appears in Shmiel's vanity which the narrator insists upon: "I can see him. [...] There he is, tall [...], prosperous, a tiny bit self-important, perhaps, moving in no great hurry since he wants to stop and greet everyone with that slightly lordly manner so many in his family have, [...]. His vanity is secretly flattered: after all, he is the one who chose to stay in this town, when he could easily have gone elsewhere, precisely because he wanted to be a *macher*, a big fish in a small pond."⁵ Indeed, in this description, it is clearly his vanity that makes Shmiel prefer to become an important

person in a remote place, “a big fish in a small pond”, rather than remain a nobody in America. Moreover, there is some tragic irony in the fact that, until the late 1930’s, Shmiel was probably quite certain of having made the right decision, as Mendelsohn points out: “a person who likely thought, until the very end, that returning to Bolechow from New York was the best decision he’d ever made.”⁶ Finally, in a tragedy, the character's fate should be greater than deserved and Shmiel’s story illustrates this aspect too, for no human being deserves to have his whole family destroyed and to end his life confined like an animal in the box-like basement of a house before being denounced, arrested and shot on the spot in the backyard of this house.

Therefore, Shmiel is depicted as a tragic character and so is Bronia: first, because of her fate—the way her life was brutally interrupted—and because very little remains known about her; secondly, because in Mendelsohn’s narrative, she appears both as a victim of the Holocaust *and* as the collateral victim of her father’s *hubris*, his vanity. Thanks to his obstinacy in collecting information about her, and also by encouraging the reader to feel empathy, the author actually rescues Bronia from oblivion. A single picture left of her appears four times in the book and only a few passages deal with her. And yet, the reader gradually becomes acquainted with Bronia and, through these scraps of knowledge about her life, associated with the huge blanks, the lack of information emphasized by the author, he eventually forms, “in [his] mind’s eye”⁷, the incomplete picture of this mysterious little victim. Bronia, as an ordinary and almost forgotten little girl, epitomises the tragedy of the Holocaust. The author carefully stages her appearance which causes the reader’s tears and arouses his pity and fright, as in a classical tragedy. Eventually, she emerges as a prominent figure whose life is extended through the author’s and the reader’s combined imaginations.

Almost forgotten

Bronia could easily elude the reader's attention if the author wasn't careful to avoid neglecting this mysterious child despite the small amount of information he collects about her. She was very young when she died—"just a baby"⁸ in the words of Meg Grossbard, a witness interviewed in Australia—which explains the lack of clear memories kept of her. Indeed, at the end of Mendelsohn's narrative's latest version, the fact is definitely established that Bronia had been born in 1929 and was not quite thirteen when she was killed during the roundup of the second *Aktion* in Bolechow: "when she died in this fashion, she was either thirteen years old, or just about to be thirteen years old."⁹ Indeed, she was still a child and the emotion conveyed to the reader by the witnesses who evoke her is always related to her sweetness and childishness. Meg's face brightens when she utters the little girl's name: "At the opposite end of the table, Meg Grossbard suddenly sat up. And Bronia! She said. Yes! She smiled."¹⁰ Remembering Bronia apparently arouses tender feelings among the survivors and Jack Greene is the one who best remembers the little girl: "I remember Bronia, Jack told me, at the end of his much longer narrative about Ruchele. She was a little kid, I would see her in the street and I would say, 'Hallo Bronia!'"¹¹ The author's comments on Jack's words reveal his eagerness to linger on every single detail so as to interpret and analyse it:

The way he said *hallo* instead of *hello* moved me; there was something so cheerful and everyday about it, something a little bit dated. The word itself—although it is, of course, just an English translation of whatever Jack had once said to Bronia in Polish, decades ago—was like an emissary from a lost moment in history. I smiled.

Jack smiled, too. She was four years younger, she was Bob's age. She was ten when the war broke out. [...] She would be playing in the backyard, I'd stay by the fence and say 'Hallo Bronia.' She was a sweet girl, still very childlike. You could see her mind was still on playing, on games.¹²

The scene is made quite warm and vivid in the mind of the reader who can picture the little girl and form a mental image of the facts and circumstances: Jack, the teenager, stopping by and cheerfully greeting his girlfriend's little sister playing in the backyard of the family house. Earlier in the narrative, the author had reported about a letter sent by Shmiel to the author's grandfather, in which she was mentioned as "Little Bronia [who] is still in school."¹³ she is the little one, the small child her father is obviously very fond of, and she is also the youngest daughter no one has to worry about, precisely because she's still under her parents' responsibility. Indeed, in Mendelsohn's narrative, Bronia epitomises everything a child stands for. First, her physical beauty is mentioned: she is described as a pretty girl even before we can find confirmation by seeing the photograph ourselves. Then, the quality of openness to loving and to being loved is alluded to: Jack's testimony conveys the image of a cheerful and trusting child who communicates easily. Playfulness is also emphasized both by Jack and the narrator: "a child with her mind very much on playing."¹⁴ Lastly, Bronia illustrates the innocence of children, this quality that is lost to adults and that can be described as a sort of ignorance: the inability to imagine that death will come and the belief in the myth of the infinite power and goodness of the parents. Moreover, the tragic aspect of a child being murdered is emphasized by the narrator who explains the reason for the lack of information: if hardly any memory remains of Bronia it is because she was too young to be allowed to survive as she could have been of no use in a labour camp. Therefore, like all the children belonging to her age group, she was eliminated, deliberately and purposefully: "Precious little of the youngest of Shmiel's daughters [...] remains in the world now. The problem, in a way, was that she was too young: only ten when the war broke out, not quite thirteen when the second Aktion ended her life, she was too young to be a candidate for forced labor [...]."¹⁵ As it often happens in *The Lost*, the knowledge that the reader comes to acquire is facilitated by the author's comments: the paradox is that Bronia was too young to be allowed to survive and

this fact—like many others related to the Holocaust—goes against usual assumptions.

Usually, during wars or conflicts, the priority is to spare or rescue children whereas here, it is the opposite: Bronia was among the first people to be murdered precisely *because* she was a child. As such, she could not be used as workforce and, because a child represents the future, she was not entitled to live since all Jewish life was to be obliterated according to Nazi plans. Therefore, Bronia epitomises the tragedy of the Holocaust and the author invites us readers to reflect upon this very fact: “We should all pause to wonder what the extinction of the life of a small child might look or sound like.”¹⁶ Eventually, another specific aspect of the Holocaust as a genocide, besides the deliberate murder of children, is the lack of knowledge survivors have of the exact fate of the victims. The traces of the crime were carefully erased by the perpetrators, and silence itself *is* a tragedy: it caused the trauma to be passed on from the victims’ generation to the next; it has to do with the unspeakable; and it prevents from knowing and coming to terms with the past, forming an empty space that remains to be filled.

The tragedy about Bronia is that she has almost been forgotten and some survivors don’t even remember about her existence: many witnesses interviewed by the narrator think that Shmiel only had three daughters. In Australia, one of the survivors insists until Mendelsohn eventually brings proof of his mistake: “Boris looked surprised. He had *three* girls, he said. I just remember *three* girls. [...] I don’t think there were four. I don’t think so. I just remember three of them, he insisted. I am positive he had just three daughters.”¹⁷ Later, in Israel, the narrator meets Anna Heller Stern, another woman survivor from Bolechow, who also thinks that Ruchele was the youngest daughter:

Bronia? I said again. But Anna shook her head and said, *Ruchele var di kleynste*.

Ruchele? I asked, startled. Anna nodded emphatically, but I didn’t pursue it.

Which is why, when she went on to tell me that *di kleynste*, the smallest one, was a very solid girl, very sensitive, very delicate, that she belonged to a group of children

who were all of them very polite and very gentle—a description, I knew, that fit well with Jack’s description of Ruchele—I couldn’t be sure if I’d ever learn anything about Bronia.¹⁸

Malcia Reinharz makes the same mistake as Anna and is also totally self-confident that her memories are not deceiving her: “I know only that the oldest was Lorka and the younger was Frydka.”¹⁹ Even Meg Grossbard, during a one-to-one conversation with the author, finds herself unable to evoke any specific detail, much to the author’s dismay: “when I talked to her in private, a few days later, she was frustrated that she couldn’t really remember anything about Bronia—not even having stopped to say hello to her in the streets.”²⁰ Meg is aware that she can’t summon any image of Bronia and she dwells tentatively on this gap in her memories:

The youngest one I can’t recall, Meg said slowly, as she sat in her brother-in-law’s living room. Bronia. I was digging in my memory, trying, but I can’t ... Lorka I saw, because I saw her growing up together, and Ruchele was around the house. But Bronia I just can’t—there are no recollections, I can’t tell you why. She was just a baby. She paused for a second. When you went to the house she’d be there, when you showed me the photo I knew it was her. But I just can’t ... Her voice trailed off.²¹

It hurts Meg to realize that she cannot remember more about Bronia than her mere presence in the house: she was just the little sister no friend was particularly interested in when they went over to visit Frydka because she was just a child then, and teenagers are usually not very much interested in children. The sense of loss that is conveyed to the reader through Meg’s emotion is combined with a measure of guilty feeling since Meg has survived but is unable to perform her duty as a survivor that is to remember and evoke the victims.

In the end, we learn almost nothing about Bronia’s short life. Traces were deliberately erased and to gain clear knowledge of the exact fate of individuals is virtually impossible. Her

death is related to the tragedy of silence which surrounds the Holocaust: very few accounts, very few testimonies could be collected. Bronia is a typical example of what has been named “the memory shot through with holes”²² by French writer Henri Raczymow who coined the phrase as he wrote about the trauma caused by the murder of European Jews. Therefore, in his endeavour to rescue Bronia from oblivion and in order to compensate for the lack of knowledge about her, Mendelsohn carefully stages and dramatizes her appearance in his narrative.

As a tragic character, Bronia first appears as the side victim of her father’s vanity in so far as she could have been raised in America if only Shmiel hadn’t decided to return to Poland. Furthermore, this decision might have been guided by the dissent between Shmiel and the author’s grandfather, so that Bronia can also be considered as a collateral victim of the feud that went on between the two brothers: “the sibling tensions that may well have resulted in Shmiel’s decision to leave New York [...] and return to Bolechow.”²³ Mendelsohn suggests that the repeated requests for financial assistance were not heard and that his grandfather failed to respond to Shmiel’s increasingly pressing calls in the late 1930’s. He finds out that the tone of his great-uncle’s letters gets ever more desperate until Shmiel begs his brother to rescue him from “the hell” he is living in, impulsively using the Yiddish word as a sign of panic: “Do what you can to get me out of this *Gehenim!*”²⁴ Finally, we are made to perceive the grandfather’s guilty feeling—yet another tragic element—by learning that he carried these letters for the rest of his life in a wallet he kept in his left breast pocket against his heart. The feud itself, implicitly compared to the story of Cain and Abel, reinforces the tragic dimension of the narrative. Bronia, as a small child, depended on her parents’ decisions and choices, and this close link between her own fate and her parents’ destiny is most visible in the photograph where she is standing between them.

The single photograph

Only one photograph remains of Bronia and it is repeated four times but the author chooses not to unveil it immediately: its subjects are first concealed to the reader. Their appearance is delayed so that the reader is placed in the same position as the author once was: he has to wait for these relatives' lives to be gradually disclosed to him thanks to the survivors' testimonies. The reader's interest is aroused because on the first appearance of the picture, only the names of the subjects are written on the back; at this point, we haven't seen their faces yet. The author deliberately delays the moment when he will actually show us the faces of the dead. Indeed, from the very beginning, the author wants us readers to be patient and he teaches us to examine things thoroughly. He suggests that we should pay particular attention to pictures in general and to this one in particular. He guides us and helps us to decipher and interpret the information here provided; and he encourages us to consider that there might be some sort of exceptional quality about the subjects of this photograph: "The names are underscored in a blue felt-tip pen, the kind my grandfather preferred, in his old age, to write letters with. [...] This underscoring interests me. Why, I now wonder, did he feel it necessary to underline their names, which clearly he knew? Was it something he did for himself, as he sat in the nights of his old age, who knows when and for how long, contemplating these photos; or was it something he meant us to see?"²⁵ In this passage, the narrator suggests that his grandfather had developed a special attachment to this photograph and questions arise about his motivation for underscoring the names. The sentence "this underscoring interests me" is a way for the narrator to draw the reader's attention to this detail and to adopt the same questioning: why did the grandfather underline these names? what did he mean *us* (author and reader) to *see* (or to realize)? With the explanation of the German words, *Zur Erinnerung*, meaning "in remembrance of", Mendelsohn suggests that Shmiel may have intended to deliver a message to his American family. Then, there *are* traces left behind

by the author's grandfather for his grandson to elucidate, and there are traces left behind by Shmiel with the pictures he sent to his American relatives: Shmiel seems to be insisting on remembrance, and in hindsight, we have the feeling that he already had an inkling, by that time, that he and his family were going to disappear. This way of insisting on memory and remembrance, even though it obviously pertains to Jewish culture at large, may convey a sense of impending doom to the reader, which also belongs to the realm of tragedy.

Then, the picture of Bronia and her parents appears many pages further on (page 184), and it is described or referred to by the author at various stages of his narrative, notably in this passage: "So that was Bronia. In that one clear picture I have of her, from 1939, when she was most likely ten years old, she is wearing a dark-colored pinafore, low white socks, and Mary Janes. She is smiling. Her parents, who unlike her would have been reading the newspapers, aren't."²⁶ The tragedy of silence can literally be read in the picture itself: this little girl, who epitomises innocence and helplessness, hasn't been told about what was going on because she could never have understood such things. The reader realises that this single picture left of Bronia was taken as she was unwittingly marching towards her death, which is all the more heart-rending as she appears totally carefree, the epitome of innocence, the exact opposite of evil: her expression of smiling confidence sharply contrasts with that of her parents who look much sterner. The whole scene in which she appears protected by her mother and father is suffused with tragic irony: between those two sturdy parental figures it seems that no harm or evil can ever reach her although the reader knows how helpless Shmiel and Ester were. Here again, by having him notice the different face expressions, the author is coaxing the reader into feeling regret and sorrow the way he himself probably experienced these feelings when he first peered into the picture. Bronia looks both fragile and promising in this picture—and her existence itself turned out to be frail and ephemeral—and her fragility arouses the reader's pity. Finally, the third appearance of the photograph is an enlarged version of this photograph

focusing on Bronia (which appears page 297) as if the narrative were gradually narrowing from a broad picture of the *Yiddishland* down to a family of six and finally, to this single member of Shmiel's family. The focus has closed in on Bronia, the ordinary little girl: the photograph is repeated several times and, like other recurring photographs such as Frydka's, it comes to acquire a haunting quality. For not only is this picture repeated at various stages of the narrative but whenever it appears, it can be related to various portions of Mendelsohn's photo-text.²⁷

A system of echoes and correspondence

Photographs do not appear randomly in *The Lost*: they either illustrate or are explained by the text. Sometimes, they are used to trigger remembrance and the author notably describes the effect Bronia's photograph has on the elderly survivors he meets in Australia: "At Jack Greene's, the picture of Shmiel, Ester and Bronia started to loosen tongues and the conversation about my lost great-uncle and his family became suddenly boisterous and somewhat disorderly."²⁸ The visual reappearance of the past seems to unlock their memory and help them to speak at last although at that point, the reader is not yet allowed into the confidence. The actual description of the same photograph made by the author (page 234) can be read sixty pages after the picture was first shown (page 184) and the gap which exists between photo and text is one of the tricks that forces the reader to pay attention to the images, stop and go backwards instead of going on with linear reading. Moreover, when the picture is shown, it is indirectly captioned by the sentence that reads below which is uttered by Meg Grossbard: "She perished, but her album survived."²⁹ Originally, this sentence, which concludes an account delivered by Meg, was not meant to concern Bronia but Pepci Diamant, a friend of Meg's, whose photographs were saved—unlike their owner—and kept by Meg. However, because of the immediate (and purposeful) proximity between picture and caption,

the reader is here tempted to relate the former to Bronia's story, thus transforming the author's sentence into another one of his own making: "she perished but her *photo* survived", the pronoun "she" then referring to Bronia instead of Pepci. Another example of correspondence between photo and text is the sentence which reads just below a picture of Ruchele: "The murder of innocent children is a notorious problem that arises in the text of parashat Noach."³⁰ Again, although this sentence is initially meant to comment upon the case of Ruchele, the third daughter who died at age 16, it may also apply to Bronia. This sentence is taken from one of the biblical comments which the author occasionally uses as counterpoints to his narrative, explaining or illustrating certain facts and including them in some broader universal context. In this passage, the author mentions "God's disgusted awareness that 'the wickedness of man was great upon earth', a realization that leads him to 'regret' having made humankind to begin with"³¹, and it is no chance that this passage should come immediately after the account of Ruchele's death although it also reminds us of Bronia.

Thus, the appearance of this photograph is carefully prepared and staged by the author and its effect is thereby reinforced. Just before the appearance of the picture of Bronia and her parents, the reader has found a long development about the significance of pictures as being the subject of *The Aeneid*: "[...] the way in which an image that is, essentially, entertainment for one person can unexpectedly be profoundly emotional, even traumatic for another—is the subject of one of the most famous passages in all of classical literature."³² The narrator then goes on with a sentence about the power of the image on our emotions: "What Aeneas says, as he looks at the worst moment of his life [the destruction of his city] decorating the wall of a shrine in a city of people who do not know him and had no part in the war that destroyed his family and his city, is this: *sunt lacrimae rerum*, 'There are tears in things'."³³ This passage is meant to warn the reader about the various reactions he may experience when observing a photograph, depending on his relationship to the subject and also on "the unbridgeable

distances created by time.”³⁴ However, even if this photograph may have different meanings for different people, it *does* cause tears: “There are tears in things; but we all cry for different reasons.”³⁵ The reader’s tears are prompted by the survivors’ *and* the narrator’s combined emotions; Bronia’s story is indeed tragic and the way it is told in *The Lost* corresponds to the author’s view of tragedy previously expressed in *The Elusive Embrace*: “Tragedy loves extremity. It celebrates the vertiginous beauty of total destruction. [...] its tension derives from something much more complex [than the clash between Right and Wrong] which is the conflict between two Rights.”³⁶ “Out of self-annihilation, out of failure and lack and destruction, tragedy builds the beautiful monument that is itself. [...] You can’t make a tragedy out of survival”³⁷ Like the spectator of a classical tragedy, the reader of *The Lost* actually experiences pity and fear, or even fright, and these feelings are emphasized by the way the author carefully positions the various elements of his narrative. Another example of this device is the passage in the Postscript where Bronia’s death is definitely certified: “we know that Bronia was killed during the roundup; a roundup famous for its brutal killings of children.”³⁸ Here, the careful reader still has in mind the traumatic passage in which the second *Aktion* was described, in the deposition of a woman named Matylda Gelertner which the author has directly transcribed: “The Germans and the Ukrainians preyed especially on the children.”³⁹ The rest of the passage is literally unbearable and is vividly remembered by the reader nearing the end of the book, with the oblique allusion to the assumption that Bronia may well have shared the children’s brutal fate described in Matylda’s testimony.

Then, somewhat paradoxically, the text seems to be protecting Bronia, waiting until the very end to point at a potentially horrendous death but not stating it clearly, trying to preserve the image of the sweet, smiling and ordinary little girl. Thus, it achieves what Bronia’s parents were denied the opportunity to do and in the end, the author and his text are mainly celebrating her memory.

***Tikkun Olam*—Repairing the past**

If coming to terms with the past is so difficult, if reaching some sort of closure is hardly possible, then at least, one can try to live with the past and tame the trauma that has been passed down to the present. Through the act of remembrance, witnesses try to repair the past and readers may have such characters as Bronia go on living in their imagination. Although very little information is collected about her, the little girl's presence is made extremely powerful. She could have been outshined by her sisters but her character definitely stays with the reader. The passages devoted to Bronia are both scarce *and* noticeable so that she comes to acquire a prominent position in a subdued way, and this paradox is achieved by the author's relentless search for anecdotes about her and by the special position he confers to her. Indeed, she is the only one of the four daughters whose name is known from the very beginning and she is there all along. Her name is also the last one of the family to be mentioned by the narrator. Even before the author actually embarks on his quest, the narrator explains that very little was known about Shmiel and his family, not even the names of the daughters, except for one of them:

Shmiel, then; and *Ester* and *Schneelicht*. But of the four beautiful daughters, my grandfather [...] never uttered a single name. Until [he] died, we knew the name of only one of the girls, and that was because Shmiel himself had written it on the back of one of those photos [...]. On the back of a snapshot of himself and his stout wife and a little girl in a dark dress, my grandfather's brother had written a short inscription in German, *Zur Erinnerung*; then the date, 25/7 1939; and then the names *Sam*, *Ester*, *Bronia*, and so we knew that this daughter's name was Bronia.⁴⁰

Bronia is first introduced to the reader as the "little girl in a dark dress", long before the names of her sisters get to be known, and long before her own image actually appears. She is mentioned a couple of times by a small number of witnesses and although they often hardly

remember her, their memories are given much prominence by being repeated by the narrator or evoked whenever he meets other survivors, so that a single story can be echoed several times. For example, Jack Greene's and Meg Grossbard's testimonies are reported several times by the narrator who uses their words to characterize Bronia at the very end: "a child, still busy with her toys."⁴¹ He seems to enjoy conjuring up their memories because they are so scarce: "Perhaps it was this childish sweetness that had made Meg, on the day all the Bolechowers had met, smile at the mere mention of Bronia's name, when I had handed around the picture of her, a pretty girl standing between her parents, that day. And Bronia! She had said, her face brightening for a moment."⁴² Indeed, the narrator seems to refuse to give up trying to collect information about Bronia and he confesses his disappointment at Meg's memories lacking "the telling detail, the vivid anecdote."⁴³ When he first meets Anna Heller Stern in Israel, he is elated because her memories of Shmiel's family seem so vivid that he trusts he will get detailed information about the younger sister at last: "*Bronia*, I prodded. I was excited at the thought that finally someone might be able to tell us something about Bronia."⁴⁴ But again, he is disappointed and, in spite of his doggedness, it seems that Bronia is obstinately eluding him.

However, at the end of the book, it is Bronia and not any of her elder sisters who is last mentioned: indeed, she reappears in the Postscript written in February 2007, after an official document was passed on to the author by the Yad Vashem⁴⁵ Archive's director. This document confirms the circumstances of her death and enables Mendelsohn to write some sort of conclusion to her story at last:

And so, [...] I now have this concrete fact to add to the small mound of facts I assembled: that Bronia, about whom all that anyone remembered was that she was still a child, still busy with her toys, was rounded up and shot to death during the dreadful first days of the Second Aktion in Bolechov; and that when she died in this fashion,

she was either thirteen years old, or just about to be thirteen years old. [...] we know that Bronia was killed during the roundup [...].”⁴⁶

Eventually, the very last glimpse readers catch of her we owe to the author’s sister, Jennifer Mendelsohn, who pays a tribute to Bronia in a web page entitled “No One Left to Remember Her”:

Bronia was the youngest of Shmiel’s four daughters and was only 12 or 13 when she died during a roundup at the Bolechow town hall on September 3, 1942. We know, sadly, that she died alone, without her sisters or parents.

Bronia’s older sisters’ stories are told quite vividly in the book, and there are survivors still living who actually knew them well and remember them. We chose to honor Bronia precisely because so little was known about her. Her older sisters’ friends remembered only that she was a sweet, dreamy, polite little girl still young enough to be preoccupied with her toys.⁴⁷

Thus, Bronia is made present throughout the book, and even *beyond* the book, and because very few specifics could be gathered about her, the author has decided to use his imagination in order to complete his tribute to the little girl. By writing imaginary accounts of what happened to her, Mendelsohn tries to fill in the blanks of her story and invites the reader to pursue this process of reconstruction, or construction rather. Bronia’s life is somewhat expanded by the passage devoted to the imaginary account of her last hours in a gas chamber, at a point in his quest when he believes that Shmiel, Ester and Bronia perished in Belzec. His imagining is so well-documented that it sounds plausible—the author often refers to official testimonies recorded at Yad Vashem—and his account thus escapes the sentimental aspect that has frequently been criticized about fictional accounts of Holocaust events. Moreover, in his imaginings, the author asks many questions and insists that he does not really know but is simply *trying* to picture events as they might have happened: “beaten? grabbed? knocked

about with the rifle butts that had knocked against the door? Impossible to know.”⁴⁸ He often cautiously starts his sentences with the adverb “maybe” and also invents alternatives to the first idea that had formed in his mind so as not to appear too assertive: “Or maybe Ester [...]”⁴⁹ Moreover, he is careful not to let himself be carried away in story-telling (the way his grand-father would tell his stories) and he tries to draw a truthful picture of the events as they may have occurred. Yet, he constantly reminds the reader of the limits of what can be imagined and understood, sometimes bluntly, as illustrated by the conclusion of this passage:

[...] this account, together with the account of ‘Stern’ [another witness] as relayed by Matylida Gelertner, suggests why whatever we see in museums, the artifacts and the evidence, can give us only the dimmest comprehension of what the event itself was like; why we must be careful when we try to envision ‘what it was like.’ It is possible today, for instance, to walk around inside a vintage cattle car in a museum, but it is perhaps important to recall, in the age of ‘reality’ entertainments, that simply being in that enclosed, boxlike space—an unpleasant experience, as I well know, for some people—is not the same as being in that space after you’ve had to smother your toddler to death and to drink your own urine in desperation, experiences that the visitors to such exhibits are unlikely to have recently undergone.⁵⁰

These imaginings give the author the opportunity to prolong the lives of his relatives as if he were reluctant to let them down and stop writing about them. And the reader is encouraged to imagine scenes such as Bronia playing hopscotch or cuddling her dolls, to imagine what is not said about her, plausible what-if situations since, after all, she had a whole life ahead of her. This imaginative reading the reader is encouraged to carry out can be related to the Jewish notion of *Tikkun Olam* which refers to any human activity that will not only fix damage but also improve the world as a whole. The reader’s action could then consist in imagining the little girl’s life, comparing her with Anne Frank, thinking about her games or her relationships

with her sisters, daydreaming about her in order to perpetuate her memory. During his quest, every time he meets new witnesses, the narrator desperately tries to enquire about the smallest detail he can glean about Bronia and every time he fails, it is us readers who eventually feel the pangs of disappointment. Through the example of Bronia, we can feel the author's urge to know more about his dead relatives but there is also our mirrored eagerness to learn about their fate. For once we have entered such a story, it is difficult to accept the absence of closure.

And yet, this is precisely what happens in *The Lost*, as with many Holocaust stories told by third-generation writers: their authors teach the reader to accept the incomplete knowledge that has been acquired and also to accept that, in the end, there should be more questions than answers. In *The Lost*, the narrator recurrently acknowledges the impossibility to learn further details about what the victims—or even the survivors—actually experienced and he encourages the reader to adopt the same attitude, that is to admit, quite humbly and respectfully, that we should be content with the narratives that are delivered to us. To try and go beyond would probably be inappropriate or even obscene. In his narrative, through his many digressions and multi-layered stories, Mendelsohn teaches us readers how to perpetuate the characters' lives through the imagination, and this act of imagining could be seen as *Tikkun Olam*. However, the reader is left with a vague uneasy feeling of frustration and grief that can never be entirely alleviated: the state of shock and fright stay with him long after his reading is over, and trying to fill in the blanks of Bronia's short existence has become his job.

Conclusion: rescued from oblivion

Thus, Bronia appears as a tragic character because her story is prone to arouse all the emotions usually caused by the murder of a child. She is the innocent and helpless victim of a terrifying and implacable killing machinery that also attempted to erase the traces of its own

crimes. For victims of the Holocaust, there was no period of formal mourning and actually no mourning at all. The exact precise circumstances of Bronia's death were not known until a few years ago. Unexpectedly, this little victim, an ordinary child threatened to fall into oblivion, has become a main character thanks to Mendelsohn's doggedness and relentless search for details about her life, memories that could restore her short existence, at least in the reader's imagination. By doing so, and by encouraging the reader to feel concerned with her fate, the author actually rescues Bronia from oblivion, faithful to Elie Wiesel's warning that "to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time."⁵¹ Indeed, "there are tears in things," not least because Bronia is more than a character in a *memoir*: she once was a real person whose life was brutally and tragically shortened for irrational reasons that had nothing to do with the war and in the end, Bronia has become every reader's lost little cousin.

NOTES

¹ Daniel Mendelsohn, *The Lost. A Search for Six of Six Million* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 7.

² Henry Ace Knight, "An Interview with Daniel Mendelsohn," *Asymptote* (January 2019).

³ The term *Yiddishland* is a neologism denoting after the fact a country that never existed as such and which might be described, rather, as a linguistic and cultural space, vast territories of Central and Eastern Europe where the Yiddish language was used between the Middle Ages and WWII.

⁴ Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29:1 (Spring 2008).

"Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right."

⁵ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 230.

⁶ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 231.

⁷ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 230.

⁸ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 234.

⁹ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 509.

¹⁰ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 189.

¹¹ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 233.

¹² Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 233.

¹³ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 61.

¹⁴ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 233.

¹⁵ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 233-234.

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- ¹⁶ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 215.
- ¹⁷ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 189.
- ¹⁸ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 297.
- ¹⁹ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 320.
- ²⁰ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 233.
- ²¹ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 233-234.
- ²² Henri Raczymow, "Memory Shot Through With Holes," trans. Alan Astro (Yale French Studies 85, 1994).
- ²³ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 225.
- ²⁴ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 24.
- ²⁵ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 23.
- ²⁶ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 234.
- ²⁷ Photo-textuality is the combination of written text and photography in a relationship of reciprocity and complementarity: because a photo-text involves two different perceptual modes it produces a hybrid form of reading.
- ²⁸ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 185-186.
- ²⁹ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 184.
- ³⁰ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 213.
- ³¹ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 213-214.
- ³² Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 182.
- ³³ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 183.
- ³⁴ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 183.
- ³⁵ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 183.
- ³⁶ Daniel Mendelsohn, *The Elusive Embrace*, (Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 157.
- ³⁷ Mendelsohn, *The Elusive Embrace*, 159.
- ³⁸ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 510.
- ³⁹ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 227.
- ⁴⁰ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 23.
- ⁴¹ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 510.
- ⁴² Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 233.
- ⁴³ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 232.
- ⁴⁴ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 297.
- ⁴⁵ Meaning "a monument and a name", the World Holocaust Remembrance Center opened in 1953 in Jerusalem.
- ⁴⁶ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 509-510.
- ⁴⁷ Jennifer Mendelsohn, "No One Left to Remember Her," (*Medium*, Jan. 28, 2015), <https://medium.com/@CleverTitleTK/no-one-left-to-remember-her-140d715e1b07>.
- ⁴⁸ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 234.
- ⁴⁹ Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 234.
- ⁵⁰ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Stella Rodway (New York: Hill & Wang, 1960).