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Linda Zisquit

An Interview with Daniel Mendelsohn

It was writer Daniel Mendelsohn's review of the film *The Hours* a number of years ago in *The New York Review of Books* that first awakened me to his critic's eye, his human voice, his uncanny sense of the writer's sensibility. It wasn't only a film critique, but rather a comprehensive look at the women in the film and behind it, both Mrs. Dalloway and Virginia Woolf. At the time I was traveling to the U.S. alone, and in that review I found my companion. At a favorite Buffalo bookstore I then discovered *The Elusive Embrace* (Knopf, 1999), Mendelsohn's deeply fascinating, inspiring examination of "the riddle of identity." So moved by his incisive, insightful writing, I sent him a note of admiration. Coincidence brought us together through Froma Zeitlin, a professor at Princeton, whom I met through our mutual friend Sidra Ezrahi. Froma accompanied Daniel through Eastern Europe as he gathered material for *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* (HarperCollins, 2006), his highly acclaimed story about his search for what happened to his relatives who perished in

the Holocaust. An astute classicist, critic, and memoirist, Mendelsohn has frequently written about bodies—his grandfather's, his mother's, his father's, his lovers', his old relatives' in Miami, his beloved survivors'—and he generously agreed to this exclusive interview for Maggid's "Jewish Bodies" issue.

The Lost has recently entered its fourth printing in Hebrew.

Linda Zisquit

LINDA ZISQUIT: *The Lost: a Search for Six of the Six Million* is an extraordinary book, extraordinarily well-received. Did you expect it to receive such a rave response? How do you feel now that you see how deeply people are moved by what you have done?

DANIEL MENDELSOHN: I don't think any serious writer writes with an eye to the response his work will be getting. I think you just write what is urgent within you—the writing, for me at least, is always a kind of talking to myself, a working out of something that's preoccupying me; and for that reason it's sometimes weird to be reminded that other people end up reading it, too. I honestly didn't think much about the reaction to *The Lost*, because the research and preparation and travel and then the writing of the book were so consuming, I was sort of out of the world for about five years. When I turned the book in, in September 2005, and started getting these very, very emotional, strong reactions from people at HarperCollins—not just my editor but the sales people, the marketing people, publicists—and then from some others we were showing the manuscript to, we started to realize that this was a book that people were going to connect to in a very powerful way. And although I'd emphasize again that I wrote this book for me, as a way of working out a lifelong obsession, it would be disingenuous to say that I haven't been fantastically moved by people's reaction, and by the amazing reviews. It's all been really wonderful and not a little overwhelming.

LZ: You are a classicist, attracted to ancient texts. Yet in *The Lost* you set out on what seems an almost impossible search for signs of how

your relatives had lived in order to pull them out of "History" and give them back their names—a very Jewish quest for continuity. Did you see this as a diversion from your scholarship as a classicist, as a move from Hellenism to the Hebraic, as Rebecca Goldstein noted?

DM: Well, as a Classicist and a scholar of Greek and Latin civilization I hardly think of the quest for continuity—cultural, historical, whatever—as a peculiarly "Jewish" thing: It's central to all major civilizations (not least, ancient Egyptian civilization, which could boast a greater continuity—and a greater investment in the notion of continuity—than perhaps any other civilization). One thinks, too, of the glorious civilization of Byzantium, which among European civilizations boasts the greatest continuous cultural continuum. So I hardly think that my desire to bridge some gaps in my family's very short history constitutes a break from my life as a Classicist; if anything, I think that the preoccupation that you get in *The Lost* with ancient texts is, if anything, a continuation of my lifelong interest in deriving meaning in the present from texts of the ancient past.

That said, there is something interesting about Rebecca's observation that the progress from my first book, *The Elusive Embrace*, to *The Lost* represents a kind of shift from the Greeks to the Hebrews. It's not simply that the former is organized, structurally and thematically, around passages from Greek and Roman texts, whereas the latter, as you know, organizes its search for the truth about the Holocaust in one small town around a series of readings from the Hebrew Bible. I think that, perhaps inevitably, *The Lost* takes you into deeper and murkier moral waters than *The Elusive Embrace* does; and of course it tackles vaster themes—history, guilt, memory, the Holocaust itself, to some extent, and so forth. And perhaps there's something in Rebecca's assertion that my progress as a writer from the Hellenes, with their obsession with "beautiful death" (a theme much played upon in *The Elusive Embrace*), to the Hebrews, with their emphasis above all on the dignity of life, marks a certain positive evolution. Then again, I wouldn't want to get into the inane game of cultural competition. The Greeks, among many other advantages, had much nicer and more amusing gods.

LZ: In your previous book *The Elusive Embrace* you describe many bodies. In particular, your debonair grandfather's well-dressed body; your father's sweaty functional body; and your own fit, well-taken-care-of body. There's a lovely moment after you have been involved for a time with childcare and home responsibilities that you see yourself in the mirror and realize that your body resembles your father's. Did you see a transformation from the Greek ideal to the Jewish man? What is the Greek attitude toward the body? How is it different from the Jewish?

DM: Actually, I didn't see a transformation from the Greek body to the Jewish body; I just saw my own body changing over time—I saw myself, as many people invariably do, somehow being transformed from the body of my early youth, which felt very much my own, something I was preoccupied with and exploring all the time, to a body that recognizably belonged to other men in my family: that is, my father's. It was a shocking moment, which so many people have—the moment when you start to resemble your own parents in middle age.

I don't know enough about Jewish bodies (apart from my own) to comment on the differences between Greek and Jewish bodies—although of course we know that the Greeks placed a high premium on physical beauty and corporeal excellence, and were unashamed of nakedness. But this preoccupation with bodies, I think it's necessary to say, was far different from the vacuous preoccupation with "fitness" that marks our own culture today, which is narcissistic and more than a little silly (as if one weren't, in the end, going to die if only one did the right number of reps at the gym). The Greeks prized excellence in all things human (hence their mania for competition); physical excellence was merely one expression of the yearning for the sublime. It wasn't about "feeling good about yourself"; it was about being good.

LZ: *The Elusive Embrace* is an extraordinary meditation on desire and identity. It explores the duality of a life that moves between a gay community and a home with a woman and two sons. *The Lost* also takes you into another world, the world of Holocaust survivors,

old Jewish people who become truly beloved, and even to the State of Israel, where you resisted going as a younger man. Do you think you are able to interpret different worlds with sensitivity because you live in more than one?

DM: Well, I never really thought of the world of old Jewish people—even old Jewish people from a culture quite different from the one I grew up in—as being foreign in any way, since I grew up with old Jewish people, have always felt a deep connection to them, and have never thought of their world(s) as alien. So perhaps what sensitivity to such people may be found in my book is merely a reflection of a deep affective connection, rather than some kind of anthropological talent that derives from the fact that I described myself, in *The Elusive Embrace*, as living "in two places." (Surely every writer feels himself to be an outsider in his own world; the double-vision that results is, no doubt, the source of the creative person's special vision.) In fact the only place that I did feel "anthropological," during my years of traveling around the world for this book, was in Israel. I certainly felt I had less in common with most Israelis—particularly younger Israelis—than I did with any of the Europeans, or even the Australians, I encountered. I remember flying one time from Vienna, a city I love, to Tel Aviv, and getting off the plane and thinking, "Where am I??" So perhaps it was in Israel that I needed my anthropological skills the most; during my first visit it felt like a totally foreign place. But then, I guess we're back to the fact that I'm much more a Classicist than a Hebraist.

LZ: From an early age you knew of one set of relatives who perished in the Holocaust. You became the family historian who pored over old photographs and created a family tree. Did you avoid the Holocaust at first? Is the Holocaust and Holocaust literature something that has interested you outside the family story? Did you regard *The Lost* in any way as a moral responsibility?

DM: I never consciously "avoided" the Holocaust, because, like many people who grew up in the shadow of the Holocaust—even

as obliquely as I did—I sort of dealt with it early on: you knew what it was about, you heard the stories from living people (rather than documentaries and Steven Spielberg), and that was that. And no, I've never been interested in the Holocaust as a subject in and of itself, and I have certainly never been interested in Holocaust literature in and of itself, either: I'm just interested in literature.

As for my having written *The Lost* as some kind of "moral responsibility," absolutely not. I wrote it because I am my family's historian, and for a long time I'd wanted to know, exactly, what had happened to my Uncle Shmiel. And so I set out to find that story, and when I found it, I wrote it. I suspect that (apart from philosophical tracts) writing that comes from impulses other than the impulse to tell a good story is not the kind of writing I'd want to read.

LZ: You refer to several writers in the book. Proust echoes in the opening paragraph. Sebald comes to mind with the uncaptioned photographs scattered throughout the book. And the expansive storytelling is reminiscent of Isaac Bashevis Singer. Are these three of the writers who accompany you on this journey?

DM: Proust accompanies me everywhere; he is, along with Cavafy, the author who inhabits my mind the most. Of course I thought about him a great deal as I wrote this book, because when you're a late-20th century writer writing about memory and the past, Proust is the person you think of. The person I think of, at any rate. And of course there are many self-conscious echoes of Proust running throughout my book, echoes intended to make you think about Proust, too. Indeed, I suppose I tried to work into my book a kind of conversation between Proust and the second of the authors you mention, W.G. Sebald, two great authors preoccupied with what preoccupies me, too: Memory, the past, the nature of narrative itself as it moves between the remembered past and the real past. As you know, Proust's vision of memory is, essentially, a comic one: The past is recuperable, finally, through these small accidental "trigger" moments (like the eating of the madeleine) that suddenly import the past into the present. Whereas Sebald's works—with those uncaptioned, anxiety-

producing photographs running throughout them—suggest a tragic vision of memory and its relation to history and the past: You always sense, when reading Sebald, that you're surrounded by fragments of evidence that will never be able to be assembled. So my own book, which of course also tries to wrestle with memory and history and narrative, very self-consciously places itself—by strongly alluding to both these crucial authors—somewhere in the middle, maybe. As I think I say somewhere in Part IV, in the section called "A False Ending," you can get a lot back from the Past, as Proust does; but there's also a lot of tragic framents you'll never be able to identify, too.

As for Singer, I've really not read a great deal of Singer—a number of stories, but not a lot. So he hasn't really influenced me in the slightest.

LZ: You use the Jewish texts, it seems, not only to frame your memoir, your unfolding suspense-filled story, but also to create echoes of what the Jews were experiencing in Europe, and what your grandfather may have felt living in America at that time. Do Jewish texts continue to be a source of insight for you?

DM: I used the texts because they suggested interesting thematic parallels to the stories I was narrating—the story of my search for the truth of what happened to my great-uncle and his family, and the story-within-a-story of what, in fact, I learned had happened to them. Not the least of these suggestive parallels, which some astute readers have cottoned on to, is the fact that the first several parashot of the Hebrew Bible are filled with wholesale slaughters and exterminations and annihilations—a not very pleasant ingredient of the narrative mix, to be sure, despite the efforts of millennia of commentators to explain them away. I, at any rate, continue to be bothered by this recurrent theme of the Hebrew Bible, and I continue to worry, as I worried in my exegeses of these texts in *The Lost*, that lots of innocents keep getting slaughtered—in the Flood, in Sodom and Gomorrah, and so forth. Anyway, these and many other parallels—about creativity in Bereishit, about narrative, about wandering in Lech Lecha, about the impulse, exemplified by Lot's (heroic, I always think) wife in Vayeira,

to look back, to cling to the past that creates our identities—seemed to me to be suggestive for the purposes of making my book into the richest narrative of which I was capable. But the book is finished, and no, I haven't looked at those texts since. Greek tragedy is what continues to be a source of insight for me.

LZ: Your maternal grandfather, Abraham Jaeger, figures prominently in both *The Elusive Embrace* and *The Lost.* You describe him as a storyteller from Poland, a speaker of many languages, a fine dresser, and a religious man. You write that you were deeply affected by his stories, and attracted by his fastidiousness and worldliness. Did his religious observance in any way influence you or your family?

DM: My grandfather was a storyteller from Austria, not Poland; he would have bristled at being described as Polish, having been born a subject of (and having remained loyal to the memory of) the Habsburg Emperor Franz Josef. Bolechow, his town, became part of Poland after the first World War, by which point my grandfather was getting ready to leave forever. He was indeed a Central European Jew of the old school; cosmopolitan, multilingual, fastidious, chauvinistic. He was also very religious, which to my mind, as I grew up, seemed to be the antithesis of all his other qualities. Since I grew up in a completely secular household—my father is a scientist and a total atheist and abhors religious observance of any kind—I guess I'd only say that my grandfather's religiousness only exacerbated my father's secularism. (The two, as I hardly need say, did not get along—and not only about religion.) I suppose that as I grew up, my grandfather's religious observance just seemed to me to be another aspect of his exotic Europeanness—it was something that, like his accent, like the foods he insisted my mother cook for him when he visited each year—was part of the baggage he brought with him from Galicia. I remember watching him daven every morning with total fascination; and I liked it, because it made him seem more interesting to me.

LZ: Has writing *The Lost* changed your sense of Jewish identity?

DM: Well, since I never had much of a sense of Jewish identity to begin with (apart from the strong identity of being descended from European Jews, which was a cultural rather than a religious thing), I can't say it changed very much during the writing of my book. I mean, obviously as one travels as a Jew through the mass graves of Europe, one's Jewishness feels more—I don't know how to describe it, more concentrated, perhaps. But my reaction to my research and travel was not, "Oh, now I'm going to be a better Jew," or "I'm more Jewish than I was before." Certainly writing *The Lost* did not make me more religious—something people always asked me when I was doing my book tour, which I found odd. I can't think of an event better designed to make a person irreligious than the Holocaust.

LZ: On your first trip to Bolechow, did you imagine that you would ultimately discover the fate of your relatives? Did you realize what an enormous undertaking this would be, taking you to many faraway places and bringing you back to the small Polish village?

DM: I had no idea—not a clue—where this project would end up taking me, when we made our first trip back in August of 2001. I thought we'd go to Ukraine, and talk to some old Ukrainians, and that would be that. In my wildest dreams I never thought I'd be going to Australia, Scandinavia, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Austria, the Czech Republic, Israel, let alone Bolechow again for that last, amazing, revelatory trip—I hadn't even the faintest premonition of where it would all take me. The way the search kept spiraling outward, the way each conversation revealed the existence of yet one more survivor I had to talk to, was in its way pretty thrilling—people always say to me, "It feels like a detective story!" and I always reply, "That's because it was a detective story"—the increasingly intense excitement of "the search" was something I was feeling myself as I traveled and wrote, which is why I suppose it feels like that to read it. It's not as if I had to sit down and think, "Hmm, how am I going to make this into a gripping detective story?" I was living that every day for four years.

LZ: The survivors tell stories about how chance determined their fate. Chance and fate also play a large part, it seems, in your own miraculous series of discoveries that make *The Lost* so riveting—though we know from the start what happens. Is it curiosity that kept you going? Persistence? Luck? Froma called you "incurious." Were you driven, certain there was more to uncover?

DM: I am weirdly incurious, I suppose—remember, I'm not only a writer, I'm a professional critic, and I have very strong tastes and very strong notions of what interests me, and it takes a lot to jar me out of my sense of what's for me and what's not: I think that's what Froma means when she exasperatedly says, "You're so incurious!" I can be very passive, particularly when traveling—I loathe, loathe sightseeing and would far sooner lounge around the hotel eating room service meals and watching cable TV, most of the time. I live mostly in my own head, you have to remember.

For that reason, undoubtedly, I was a particularly ripe subject for "change," for "accident" and "coincidence" to happen to. Of course I was "driven," on the one hand: driven to find out the story I was hunting down, to seek out every witness, every survivor, and so forth—which I did. But as you know from reading the book, the most spectacular discoveries occurred almost in spite of my drive, my activity. I'd be in Ukraine or Israel or wherever, meandering around thinking I knew what I was doing, hoping maybe to talk to someone or to find someone who might know something: and then—BOOM! I'd have one of these remarkable coincidental encounters that you read about in the book, encounters that turned into remarkable revelations—like that last day in Bolechow when, out of the blue, we ran into someone who knew where Uncle Shmiel had been hidden during the war.

This tension between our active insertion into the world and the way we're passively the objects of pure chance becomes one of the great themes of the book, because this of course is how history happens to people: Partly out of our thrusting ourselves into thing, out of our will, our subjective involvement in things; and then also because of random chance, accident, and so forth. And naturally,

when you're telling a story like the one I was telling, those forces become matters of life or death. Look—it's the end of my own story, right? If some Bolechower hadn't happened to see Ciszko Szmanski walking every night with a package of food down the street to a certain teacher's house—if he hadn't figured out that this food was for some hidden Jews—my relatives would still be alive today. So the leitmotif of chance, accident, coincidental meetings, etc., that runs through the narrative of my search in the present is there not only because it happened, and because it's remarkable—it reminds us that these chance interventions in history were a major element in the story of who lived and who died.

LZ: You write that snapshots, letters, even words underlined in your grandfather's handwriting on the back of a photograph were essential elements in your search. When you read a letter you feel "implicated." What does that mean? Are these in fact the documents which propelled you on the journey?

DM: The search certainly begins with our little family archive—old photographs, letters, postcards, just enough to have piqued a young boy's curiosity. I'm a scholar, and a researcher, and also as it happens a collector of various things—Venetian glass, certain kinds of furniture, 1940s electric clocks, books in editions once owned by Cavafy, all kinds of nutty things—and so I'm what they call a "totalist": someone who abhors a vacuum, so to speak. I like the complete picture, like to have it all. I'm telling you this because it's the essential fact of my personality that differentiates me from perhaps some other person with a vague Holocaust story in his family's past—a person who may have wondered "whatever happened to Uncle So-and-So," but who didn't, in the end, spend five years and consuming effort to find the story. All I can say is this: that from my earliest childhood I felt connected to this story, and couldn't stand the idea that there was this lacuna (to use the classical philologist's word) in our family story. I guess another way of saying this is that it wasn't the documents that we had that propelled me into this project; it was the thought of all that we didn't have that offended me, that made me want to retrieve

something from the abyss, to "fill in the blanks." In that very idiosyncratic way, I felt "implicated" in this project from the very beginning.

LZ: There is an international Bolechow center in Israel in the home of one of the survivors whom you interviewed, and you have relatives in Israel, the children and grandchildren of one of your grandfather's brothers. Have you stayed in touch with them? Will you come back to Israel when the book is out in Hebrew translation?

DM: I certainly stay in touch with my Bolechowers and their families—not only in Israel but all over the world, which has been a wonderful fringe benefit of writing the book. Particularly the Israelis, as it happens. In fact I stay in touch with them more than I do with my Israeli relatives, whom I like very much (although most of them seem to be 18 and I don't even know what to say to American 18-year-olds), and with whom I exchange very occasional emails. Here again, the deepest connection is Bolechow, more even than with family: I feel connected to my Israeli survivor friends and their families in Kfar Saba and Beer Sheva inasmuch as we have a certain obsession in common. When I've been in Israel, it's been to talk about Poland, basically.

That's surely why Israel itself is a place I don't feel I've really penetrated yet. So yes, I hope to come back when *The Lost* is published in Hebrew—particularly if my publisher springs for the plane ticket.

DANIEL MENDELSOHN'S The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million *(2006) has been awarded the National Book Critics' Circle Award, the National Jewish Book Award, the Salon Book Award, and the American Library Association Medal for Outstanding Contribution to Jewish Literature. A frequent contributor to the* The New York Review of Books, *Mendelsohn is also the author of* The Elusive Embrace: Desire and the Riddle of Identity *(1999) and* Gender and the City in Euripedes' Political Plays *(2002). Currently the Charles Ranlett Flint Professor of Humanities at Bard College, he divides his time among homes in New York City, New Jersey and the Hudson Valley.*

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