

Arnost Lustig

## Images of our departed

Our beloved departed have no graves. Their sole resting place is our memory, the thoughts of those who have survived, now scattered to the winds. It is they who occupy our minds, whom we see in our dreams and in our nightmares.

And this, too, is what we see in the photographs taken by one of us, Yuri Dojc, who left Slovakia, going as far as he could, all the way to Canada and returned only recently to capture the faces of those who survived and what remains of -- or at least the traces of -- what once had been.

There is not much left, only an echo that gradually fades away. Like wrinkles in a face furrowed by distress, anxiety and suffering.

Every wrinkle and every crease in this face speaks of struggle with unspeakable injustice. Each wrinkle encapsulates the fate of one of those of us who have returned, because someone else was killed in their stead, and who, in spite of themselves, must speak of the unspeakable.

Have you ever seen an old prayer book that has survived a deluge and whose pages were later, in better times, bleached by the sun? Have you ever tried to decipher Hebrew or Latin prayers whose black ink has been parched by the heat of passing years hiding the secrets of destruction after the war?

Have you seen broken, tumble down gravestones at Jewish cemeteries leaning towards the setting or rising sun? And have you seen the gaping holes left by gravestones usurped by the greedy, the thoughtless and the insensitive, who do not understand the meaning of words such as respect, piety and consideration for the dead?

Have you seen synagogues in ruins, holy places turned into warehouses for rubbish, debris, the sadness of past beauty and grace? Overgrown by grass and weeds and covered with the fuzz of rotting dust?

Slovakia is a beautiful land and some of its inhabitants, those who embody the country's soul, have reached the highest ideals to which man can aspire. Yet, as everywhere else, you will also find greedy people here who, in the case of the Jewish cemeteries, do not hesitate to - literally - walk over dead bodies. It is a long journey from insensitivity to even greater ruthlessness. The images in the photographs are oppressive.

What are those who survived the mass murder of World War II ashamed of? How many of them are there? Where are they?

Statistics tell us that between six and seven million Jews perished in World War II, including those regarded as Jews by the Nazis and their perverted racist ideology. No one has counted those who survived because they live in all corners of the globe as well as in the places of their birth.

And barely anyone understands what they have been through, perhaps because there are things and events and experiences that cannot be communicated.

And even their photographs, captured through a maestro's lens, can communicate only a fraction of the whole. But in this fraction is embodied everything. We have to rely on the power of our imagination to fill in the blanks.

We can only imagine what secrets lie hidden in the faces of every single one of them, of these men and women, once children and youngsters, now approaching the gates on the far side, bearing the marks in their advanced years of wrinkles, grey hair and illness of old age, their expressions those of people already in the know.

And thus the ruins of Jewish cemeteries and the portraits of a handful of those who survived have turned into resting places reminding us of those who died, known and unknown, of our fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers, who perished as innocents.

© Arnost Lustig

Prague 2008