

Azar Nafisi

All That Remains

“The dead speak to us, and through us. They can come back as fact, or they can come back as fiction. The trick, I think, is to face them, to channel their force, to write through and with one’s grief. To lend them your pen so that you can let go of their pain.”

Website Omid, Boroumand Foundation for promotion of Democracy in Iran.

I have returned time and again to Yuri Dojc’s photographs of holocaust survivors, ruins of schools and synagogues and books that were abandoned when one day in October 1943, their occupants were interrupted in the middle of their everyday routines and taken to concentration camps—the most moving evidence of their existence are the books and notebooks they left behind. The Roman poet Virgil had said that “Objects have tears in them.” It seems to me that these books survived for over six decades so that we will not forget the tears.

My first response to these photographs was a sense of immense tenderness, like the desire to gather them into my arms, the way we feel about children, beloved pets, very old people, creatures whose silent gaze draws us in, whose intense fragility is their only weapon and protection against life’s cruelties. This combination of frailty and perseverance made me want to protect them and in a strange way to be protected by them.

Books in these photographs are not mere objects, they are possessed by spirits exorcized through Yuri Dojc’s magical eye: as they disintegrate into dust, the camera illuminates how that moment of disintegration is also a moment of immense energy and movement, one last and glorious statement of defiance, resisting both death and oblivion. They are alive, appearing in so many forms, as if they have now taken on the shapes of feelings and emotions of those who owned them, becoming conclusive evidence of their existence. They are dancing dervishes, black holes, musical notes, slabs of light, the falling time. It is their presence as books that articulates the vanished lives of their owners. Now that they no more present life through words, they reveal it by taking on the different forms of life, reminding us how at the very moment of death there can be that irrefutable confirmation of life, the refusal to merely submit to death and forgetfulness. This miraculous transformation has taken place because of Yuris’s art, his alternative eye, his passion that will now bring to us

those forgotten lives, reminding us that metamorphoses is at the heart of life and of art.

I believe that Yuri Dojc was guided by the spirits of the victims when he started his search for his family's lost past, he was chosen as their messenger, their ambassador. How else can one explain the amazing coincidence, when among hundreds of decaying books, his friend and colleague, Katya, discovers the one belonging to Yuri's grandfather, a tailor named Yakub? It is good that the past is so stubborn, that it refuses to go away, that there are so many ghosts intruding upon our lives, making us pause, demanding attention as well as justice. These ghosts like poets and artists are wanderers, defying boundaries, roaming the globe, claiming the whole world as their home, making sure that the truth will be revealed. And truth knows no boundaries of time and place and is always a call to action, because once we know what has happened we become implicated and responsible, no more able to plead ignorance.

How do we avenge the injustices committed against those who have been denied the right to defend themselves? Politics alone, even in a democracy, cannot be and has not been the sole defender of justice. We cannot only bury the dead but also need talk to them, communicate with them, learning not just about who they were, but also who we are, and what we as human beings are capable of, in the worst and best sense of the term. It is in this manner that we empathize with those whose lives were interrupted on that far away and yet not so distant day in October 1943. Safeguarding their memory is in itself a form of justice, not only against the brutality of man, but also against the cruelty of time, a reminder of what Tesvan Todorov had said so eloquently about the victims of concentration camps and Gulags: "Only total oblivion demands total despair." What happened in that small town in Slovakia now belongs to us all, part of our universal memory.

It is fitting that books in these photographs become living metaphors of human courage and resilience in the face of the worst acts of brutality and violence. They are reminders that ideas and imagination, those aspects of our humanness that rely on curiosity and empathy are the most powerful weapons even against crimes as savage and incomprehensible as the Holocaust. But we must also remember that we do not only fight brutality at moments of war and against totalitarian societies, we must in the freest and most democratic nations be also conscious that each one of us is capable of the best and the worst, and that freedom must always at times of peace or war be fought for, and that prejudice in times of peace leads to the brutality in times of war. With the great American writer Saul Bellow we also must ask the question: those who survived the ordeal of Holocaust, how will they survive the ordeal

of freedom? For freedom can be as evasive as happiness itself, and like happiness it is never wholly achieved, but constantly pursued. As Bellow reminds us, in a democratic society what threatens us is our “sleeping consciousness” and “atrophy of feeling.” In democratic societies the danger comes from indifference, from complacency and conformism. These books and the photographs that have now made them immortal represent the resilience of the human spirit, awakening our “sleeping consciousness,” making us restless, question both the world and ourselves: How did this happen? And what can do to prevent it from happening ever again? Could Holocaust have happened if the world had not remained silent for so long? We need to ask these questions, especially now, in times of serious and dangerous crisis, not just an economic but a crisis of vision and of the spirit. This a good time to remember, Ray Bradbury, the author of *Fahrenheit 451*, when he said, “You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them.”_ Indifference can result one day in burning the books and the human beings they represent.

I believe the spirits that guided Yuri Dojc wanted the world to know not just what had happened, the unspeakable, intolerable atrocities and carnage, but to understand that what we call resilience of the human spirit is not a mere fable. As in all great art, Yuri Dojc's photographs, mourn the tragedy of those lost lives, but celebrate them as well, and in doing so they like the poet Dylan Thomas, affirm that “Death shall have no dominion.”

The German thinker, Adorno had asked: Can there be art after Auschwitz? These photographs in their anguished beauty, assert that there will always be art after Auschwitz, because there will always be life, and that art is ultimately on the side of life. I believe this is the message the spirits guiding Yuri wanted us to know. Consider this: Yuri who did not photoshop the photos nor knew Hebrew, in one photograph he had randomly moved the only visible text on the ruined leaves of a page from a shelf outside into the light: the text said “Hanishar”—“the remains.”

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