Unspeakable

Our twins are now aged five, and have just started at school. The massacre of schoolchildren at Beslan in southern Russia, coming just a week before, unnerved us. We have tried to protect our children from hearing too much about these deaths, and so we have taken care to listen to the news out of their hearing. It is not the first time we have had to think carefully about delaying their exposure to such knowledge. It was only recently that our son went up to the old family photos on the wall of my study and asked me who the people in them were. ‘My mummy’s family, and my daddy’s family’, I replied. ‘Are they all dead?’ he asked me. ‘Yes’, I said. ‘Are the little ones dead too?’ he inquired, looking at the children in some of the photos. ‘Yes’ I answered, ‘but not until they were older’. I was lying, and before too long I shall have to tell him so, and explain why.

Few of the children in those photos, with the exception of my own parents, grew to be much older than they are in these pictures. Along with almost everyone else shown there, they were murdered. The framed photos—of family members on the beach, and in the woods near their home—are my feeble, understated memorial to eighteen relatives I never knew. I do not know the exact dates and places of death for all of them. However, thanks to the researches of the Prague Jewish community, the work of historians and the meticulousness of Nazi filing systems, I do know more or less exactly what happened to most of them, including two of the children.

On 4 September 1942, Dagmar and Sonja Lion, aged fourteen and eleven, were ordered to leave their comfortable middle-class home in the small Bohemian town of Dobris, together with their mother Anna, their father Vitezslav, two of their aunts and their grandmother Jetta. Once they and their relations left Dobris, they probably travelled at first in relative comfort on the Czech railways. Their destination was the former imperial barracks at Terezin, which had been turned by the Nazis into an internment camp. The family had lived in Bohemia for many hundreds of years. Jetta’s maiden name, Porges, hints at their probable origin from Spain in the fifteenth century. By the twentieth century, they were prosperous people, in the timber and leather trades. Various family members had travelled to Paris, Switzerland and Venice. They had business connections as far away as Cardiff. One of the photos shows them all at a family picnic in the woods, finely dressed. The sun is shining through the leaves and they all beam confidently at the camera.

After they arrived in Terezin, Dagmar and Sonja only stayed there for four days. Then, on 8 September, they were put onto another train, with their parents but this time without their other relations. They almost certainly travelled in animal wagons, and without food and water. They were taken on a journey that may have lasted several days, over many hundreds of miles, and that took them out of Czechoslovakia, across the whole of Poland and into what was by now the Nazi-occupied part of the Soviet Union. Unknown to them, they were going to another camp near Minsk that existed for no other purpose than killing: Maly Trostenets. Some of them may have died on the journey, of thirst or exhaustion. Immediately on arrival here, those who may have survived would have been ordered into the backs of vans, as if going on another stage of their journey.

In fact, the vans did not have any destination. The exhaust pipes had been adapted so that they led not into the open air of the forest but back into the rear part of the van where the children and their parents stood. In the next few minutes they were choked to death with carbon monoxide. Still within the forest, the van doors were open and their bodies were thrown into open graves: fourteen-year-old Dagmar, eleven-year-old Sonja, and their parents. It was relatively early on in the Nazi’s industrialized killing programme, and the use of prussic acid pellets, which could asphyxiate 2000 people at a time within a purpose-built underground chamber, next to a battery of cremation furnaces,
had not yet become established. By the time it had, the Nazis were able to kill at times up to 20,000 people, including at least 5000 children, each day. By the end of the war, they had deported and murdered over a million children and babies from across the continent of Europe: from Norway in the north to Crete in the south, and from France in the west to Ukraine in the east.

I was born several years after these events, and after the acts that killed so many of the people in these photos. I do not know who the individual perpetrators were, and in any event most of them will presumably be dead themselves. It is sixty years later, and my own life has been settled, and untouched by violence of any kind. Yet my own parents’ lives were torn apart by the loss of almost all of their families, and many people who knew them would say that they never fully recovered, carrying some of the effects of these horrors to their own deaths. For myself, as with so many of the next generation, I sometimes feel my own identity to be influenced by the turmoil and sense of foreboding that must have been transmitted to me by my parents, in spite of their best efforts.

I want my son and my daughter to know of these events and to honour the memory of Dagmar, Sonja and so many of their other murdered forebears, and to understand the reality and power of evil. I also want to protect them from unwarranted suspicion of their fellow humans, and from an obsession with the relatively remote past. I want them to acknowledge what has happened to their own family, but also to be aware of the suffering that so many others like the people of Beslan have had to bear since then. I do not have any clear idea of the best way to approach these dilemmas. Perhaps I never shall. But for the present I think I was right to lie to my son. In the normal course of events, little ones do not die.

John Launer