*I am writing this piece about a child sorting the belongings of murdered prisoners in a concentration camp during the Second World War.  I am hoping to convey the atmosphere of despair and loneliness that would have been felt in a place like this, through the eyes of a small girl incarcerated in the camp, and being forced to sort through the possessions of executed prisoners.  There will be two main parts to my piece.  The girl’s part will be written in a childish, naive style, only alluding to executions and various atrocities that occur around her as she sorts through shoes.  The girl is unaware of what is happening around her or where her parents are.  I will also go into the stories of the people behind the shoes she is sorting, and this will be styled in a stark, realistic manner, to contrast with the girl’s naivety and innocence.*

***Shoes - “In a Foreign Setting”***

**Spencer Deaton, 2016**

That day, it wasn’t glasses, wallets or waistcoats, but shoes.  A mountain of them stood beside the little girl, as well as beside every other child crammed into the hot, dark, airless room; all waiting to be sorted.  Along the opposite wall were crates, each containing odd shoes of different types.  Crates for men’s shoes, women’s shoes, left shoes and right shoes, working shoes and walking shoes, cheap shoes and ornate, leather dress shoes.  Each shoe had its place, and that was her job.  She had to find homes for all the shoes she was given.  Glancing over at the crates, then down to her pile, she wondered where they all came from.  Never did the little girl so much as imagine that there were this many shoes in the entire world, yet here they were, crammed into this one, little room, all waiting to be given new homes.

Crouching, the child picked up a worn, dirty, left-foot canvas work shoe, caked with a layer of dried earth along one side. She stared at it, wondering, fascinated.  The girl examined the dirty article closely, as a jeweler might examine a precious stone.  Clods of dry earth fell off as the girl turned the shoe over in her hands, whereupon they fell to the floor and shattered.  She gazed at the shoe a while, pondering.  Where did it come from?  Had it once belonged to someone?

*Swing,* thud*… Swing,* thud*…  Again, the man lifted the worn hoe and brought it down upon the damp sod.  Pausing to rest a moment while he leant on the haft, he looked back down the row of winter turnips he had been planting that morning.  It had been a hot, dry summer.  The leaden, brooding sky was providing the first rain they had had in a month, and the baked, stubbled ground was being revitalised by the gentle drizzle.  The man drew a deep breath, savouring the refreshingly cool, damp air.  Through the open window of the little farmhouse he could hear his wife and their guests preparing dinner, as well as the occasional squeal coming from the children as they played together.  He loved it all; the gentle lowing of his half-dozen cattle in the back paddock, the muted clucking of the chickens from inside their coop, the twitter of birds from the nearby, yellowing birch forest.  September was drawing to a close, and he needed to get the field planted so that the turnips could establish themselves before the snows of winter came.  It was an onerous job, cutting through the tough thatch of this year’s barley crop to reach the rich soil below, yet he relished the challenge of providing for his family, and all the chores that went along with that task.  However, it wasn’t just his family he was going to be providing for over the next few months.  Hefting the hoe again he set to work, finishing the row by the time his wife called him for dinner.*

*The chilly well water ran in rivulets down his back, shocking his system and making him gasp.  Again, he splashed his face and neck whilst scrubbing the grime from his skin with a stiff brush.  Once finished, he emptied the rest of the bucket over his head and donned a clean shirt.  Mounting the doorstep in the worsening rain, he paused for a moment, listening.  Through the sharp rattle of drops on the tin roof of the chicken coop, a low rumble made itself heard, the sound of an diesel engine.  Distant, yet definitely approaching.  From the midst of the distant forest a dim glow appeared, orange amongst the trunks. Flickering and dancing as the rumble grew louder; it eventually resolved itself into a pair of bright headlights as a large, canvas-walled lorry came roaring up the track.  The man swore, called through the front door a terse warning to his wife and their guests and ordered that his children were to go to bed before he slammed the door shut, and went to stand in the muddy little courtyard to wait for the lorry.  Behind him, three shadowy figures leapt from the kitchen window, flitted across the paddock and vaulted the fence before vanishing inside the barn…*

*The squeal of wet brakes.  The low rumble of an idling engine.  The dull crash of a dropped tailgate.  From the inky blackness of the lorry poured a half dozen stony-faced soldiers, each carrying a wicked machine gun.  Two of them grabbed the man, forcing him face down into the mud and pressing a muzzle to the back to his neck.  Among the soldiers now fanning out across the courtyard was a trenchcoat-clad officer, smoking a cigarette.*

*“Wo sind die jüdischen?”*, *he asked of the man pressed into the ground.*

*“Ja mówię tylko po Polsku!”, he replied.*

*“*Wo sind die jüdischen ratten!*”*

*“Nie mogę zrozumieć, co mówisz!”*

*Despite the mud obscuring his vision and the forest of boots surrounding his face, the man lying in the muck could see the dimly silhouetted barn and, as if bloodhounds on the trail of a fox, the three soldiers striding purposefully towards it.  Pausing at the entrance, they glanced at one another before they vanished into the old building’s shadowy depths.  The man now saw nothing but the boots of his captors, heard nothing save the pounding of blood in his ears, and felt only the cold mud seeping into his clothes, the knee in the small of his back, and the hard barrel of the machine gun, resting on the top of his spine…*

*Nothing stirred or made a sound; it seemed that to do so would be to break some unwritten vow of silence.  From the old barn there was nothing, nothing other than quiet and blackness…  Then there was a sudden exclamation of surprise.  There was shouting.  Then screaming.  Then shooting.  The barn’s windows, doors and fissures, right down to the smallest crack all flared up, as if the structure were a lantern, suddenly and momentarily lit.  The man in the mud howled with anguish as the firing ceased, and the barn was again dark, although its bright silhouette still flashed across the insides of his closed eyes…*

*Two of the soldiers guarding him left the sobbing man in the mud, and went to help the ones in the barn.  Together, they removed the three figures and carried them to the lorry.  As they were loaded inside, something fell off one of the bodies, landing unnoticed in a puddle.  The soldier pinning the forlorn man into the muddy ground stood, and all the men got back in their truck.*

*The clunk of the closing tailgate.  The hiss of brakes.  The deep thrum of the engine.  Strafing the trees with the harsh headlight glare, the lorry wheeled around and roared back down the path again, leaving nothing but a weeping man and a right-footed, canvas shoe; lying together in the muck.*

The girl was brought out of her reverie by the sharp rap of a cane across the small of her back.

“Hurry up! Work!’, shouted the stern supervisor, but the girl was already gone.  Scurrying across the room, she quickly put the muddy canvas shoe in the right bin before hurrying back and retrieving another.  Once the supervisor had moved on, she slowed and allowed herself to look more closely at the shoes she was handling again.  The next one she picked up was amazing.  It was a lovely, high heeled shoe made of soft, red leather, unlike anything she had ever felt before, so wonderfully smooth and plush…

*“Hurry up!*  *Move!* Move!”*.  The door to their little shared room was kicked open and in strode a group of soldiers, grabbing and pulling, shoving them roughly toward the door.  They had only time to grab a couple of their possessions before the little family living in the room was forced into the hallway to join the already growing throng, moving slowly towards the stairs.  Soldiers shouted.  Men and women cried out.  Children wailed.  The tinny voices emanating from megaphones in the street below echoed up the nearby concrete stairwells.  Flowing toward the stairs were people in their hundreds; trickling tributaries consisting of families, couples and individuals, all coming from the various wings of the building joined the main in the main stream in the hallway which, in turn, flowed down the stairwell.  The stream of people, upon leaving the grim, square building and flowing onto the streets of the clearing ghetto, joined other streams from other buildings nearby.  A great, wide river of humanity, winding it’s way onwards down the dismal thoroughfare of the Polish ghetto..*

*The family moved onwards, following the crowd.  Within a few minutes a cloud of steam hoved into view over the fearful mass, and eventually a pair of large, black locomotives, each sitting in front of a dozen cattle-cars on either side of a grim, cement platform.  Panic.  It rippled through the crowd like a squall of wind through a wheat field.   Yet more uniform-clad soldiers materialised, entering the mass and grabbing men and women at random, shoving them into the boxcars of separate trains.  Screams rent the air as lovers, parents and children and husbands and wives were torn from one another’s arms.  Every so often a spate of gunshots rang out, silencing those resisting too much about the division of their families.  Some bolted, but they were stopped by a volley of fire before they made the end of the platform.  The little family stood frozen, not knowing what to do, awaiting their turn…*

*Arms grabbed the man from behind, forcing his together; immobilising him.  The same happened to his wife and daughter in front of him.  Flailing in protest, they were dragged to either side of the platform and tossed roughly into different trains.  Eventually, there was no one left on the platform, aside from the few dozen soldiers, heaving the heavy doors to the cars shut.  Whistling once and belching a cloud of steam the locomotives fired, moving off in opposite directions.  The soldiers left too; it wasn’t their job to clean the mess left on the concrete.  They departed the platform in a joking, laughing mass, relishing the grisly task they had left for the team of Jewish workers who would eventually come and clean up.*

*Those who had resisted lay peacefully on the cement; insensible, oblivious. The few possessions they had managed to collect before the purge of the ghetto lay scattered about where they had fallen.  Nothing stirred on the platform.  One woman in particular, no older than 20, had fallen beside the figure of a young man.  Left leg crumpled beneath her, the right outstretched. On her visible foot, camouflaged against the hundreds of drying, bloody footprints spread about from the expanding pools of deepest vermillion was a shoe, a shoe of soft, red suede.*

Standing of the tips of her toes to reach over the high wooden rim, the girl dropped the pretty red shoe into “*Kleid der Frauen Schuh*”, and returned to the heap.  Lifting a small, wooden clog, crossing to the “*Kinder unisex*” receptacle, plopping it over the side.  She was becoming used to the job; the shoes no longer held the same fascination over the girl as they had done before.  This was her job now, and she was getting good at it.  Somehow, the dark, warm room didn’t feel as unfriendly as it had done in the past.  She still didn’t know where her parents were, but they had never left her alone for this long before, and therefore were bound to be back soon.  She was settling into the rhythm of the job: pick up a shoe, walk to the crates, put the shoe in the correct crate, come back, and repeat.  The monotony of the task allowed her mind to wander.  A black, leather sandal, another little clog, a small brown slipper…

*In a moment, their lives were torn from them.  Their home invaded and their shop sacked, they were ordered to move on with the rest of the Jews of the town.  Gathering what few valuables they could carry, the little girl and her family hurried out onto the street to join the others, all similarly burdened with the most valuable of their worldly possessions.  They were marched for miles through the winter slush by their tormentors who were astride motorcycles, sitting in sidecars or on foot behind them.  Guided to a station, onto a platform and into boxcars, as flock of bemused sheep in a stockyard.*

*Throughout the long, juddering journey the girl lay on the floor, wrapped in her father’s thick coat to protect her from the swirling tendrils of December air coming from between the roughly hewn floorboards of the car.  She felt safe inside the warm garment.  Sheltered from the world, head resting on the soft, worn leather of his beige snowboots as the train rattled onwards through the wintery Bavarian countryside.*

*Slowing, screeching, stopping.  The doors opened and the family was disgorged roughly from the train and onto a dark platform, funneled through a set of high gates and into a large, squat grey building.  Stripped of their clothes, roughly shaved of all hair and pushed through a large, cold, shower room. Afterwards, each person was given a faded grey pair of pants and a shirt to wear.*

*Life in the camp was hard.  Each day the family was parted and the little girl’s parents left to go to work.  Each day, the girl herself was sent to sort piles of strange objects, in the company of the other children of the camp.  The first day she was told to sort shirts.  Heaps of them, smelly and grimy, lying in a small dark room, ready for sorting.  The day after that one was coats.  Then a day of small pocket litter; wallets, coins and glasses.  Throughout the weeks the girl’s curiosity grew about her situation.  She wondered where she was, where her home was and when she would return to it.  She wondered where all these things had come from, if they had once belonged to anybody, and how they came to be in front of her.*

*As the weeks passed, the little family fell into a rhythm.  Woken up before the sun rose, saying goodbye to her parents as they left to work, and then she herself going with the other children to sort some new pile of strange things.  Yet even when they had been parted for the entire day, her parents would never tell her what* they *had been doing.*

*But as the last of the spring blooms fell from the blossom trees visible through the tall wire fence, everything changed.   The little girl, returning home to the barracks one night, found her parents were not there. Nor the next night.  She was worried.  Where had they gone?  There was nothing to do but continue as she had been, sorting whatever things she was placed in front of…*

…over the edge and into the bin.  Pick up, identify type, determine gender, cross the floor, select bin, put the shoe into the bin.  Repeat.  Pick up… *“Where are my parents?”*... Identify type, determine gender… *“Are they even here anymore?”*... across the floor… *“Have they gone home without me?”*... Identify bin, place the shoe into the bin.  Cross back to the pile.  Pick up, identify type, determine gender, cross the floor, select bin, put the shoe into the bin… *“No, they would never do that.  They haven’t ever left me for this long before.  They’ve got to be back tonight.  They’re* going *to be back tonight!”*... A black sandal, a tan dress shoe, a large clog.  Pick up, find the bin, place inside.  A dirty, black workman’s boot, a petite, high heeled slipper...

A worn, beige leather snow boot.