

– Preface –

In the immediate aftermath of the 13 November, 2015 terrorist attacks on Paris, I sat down, totally devastated, to write this book. I wrote as if driven, day and night for six weeks. I was obsessed with gathering information. I devoured the news on the radio, internet and every newspaper I could find.

I heard about the attacks around 9.30 p.m. as three men in a black Seat Leon were driving through the 10th and 11th arrondissements shooting people out celebrating the start of the weekend on café and restaurant terraces on this unseasonably warm Friday evening in November. I was in a restaurant on the opposite bank of the Seine, listening to the waiter give the specials of the day, when I got a call from my son. He shouted that ‘they were driving around shooting at people.’ I believed him with no hesitation. In retrospect I am amazed at how unsurprised I was. Since the attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* and Hyper Casher in January 2015 we had all been half expecting a second attack. I realised instantly that he was talking about terrorist attackers. I asked him where he was and whether he was safe and told him not to go out of the house and to put the radio on. I had lived in Israel for five years and in a split second resorted to the old me, living in

a country plagued with terrorism and able to react instantaneously. In Paris too it turned out that the radio and social media were the most efficient ways of keeping people in touch and getting information. That same night Facebook set up a page where you could post that you or someone else was safe. And the Twitter account #rechercheparis posted hundreds of photos of missing people, always with the same appeal: If you have seen this person please post. They were often holiday snaps or selfies of happy young people.

The restaurant had a plate glass façade. It would have been all too easy to shoot us. ‘We’re sitting ducks,’ I told my companion. We abandoned our meal. As we were paying, people’s smartphones started pinging with the first news, something bad was going down. As yet we had no idea just how bad. I spent that night like many others in Paris. I tried to find out if all my family and friends were safe, absorbing all the information coming from the media on a minute-by-minute basis. On the television, local residents said they had seen tanks, streets cordoned off, soldiers. A radio reporter told of seeing bodies lying in the streets and talked of a hostage situation. We couldn’t grasp how many terrorists there actually were: so many attacks were happening at the same time in different places.

President Hollande came on television to announce a state of emergency and that the borders were closed. In the early hours of the morning AFP gave out some figures for the evening and night: more than a hundred

people had died and many had been injured in the series of attacks on football fans, on concert-goers, and on customers in cafés and restaurants. Later, the death toll of the Bataclan attacks rose to 130, and the injured to 352. The perpetrators were followers of the so-called Islamic state. Hollande said the attacks had been planned from outside but carried out with help from within. We were all too familiar with the profile of these self-proclaimed holy warriors. It was the same as with the *Charlie Hebdo* and Hyper Casher attackers.

The media soon told us what the police had discovered. They had identified young French and Belgians, aged between twenty and thirty-one, of migrant backgrounds, who had grown up in the suburbs of Paris and Brussels, scraping by with odd jobs, or unemployed. Losers, petty criminals, dropouts, sociopaths. Several had turned their backs on their families. Three of them had gone to Syria in late 2013 and spent months in that country riven with civil war. More than one commentator declared the arrival in Europe of the Syrian generation of terrorism.

We have often been told in recent times that there is no border fence high enough or security measure tough enough to be able to prevent terrorism completely. We're going to have to learn to live with the threat of Islamic violence.

But can you ever learn to live with terrorism? What happens when a café, a concert hall, a train, a shopping mall, a church, a street, a Christmas market, a school —

basically when anywhere we go during the day can be turned into a crime scene at any moment? Of course you can *live* with terrorism. But terrorism is not an inconvenience you just learn to deal with. Terrorist attacks deprive us of our fundamental certainties. Terrorism makes us doubt everything and everyone.

In the days following the attacks many people expressed their outrage and sympathy with the victims by lighting candles, laying flowers, praying, singing, and posting their solidarity with the victims on Twitter or Facebook. Politicians honoured the victims with a minute's silence and called for an unrelenting fight against terrorism.

#prayforparis was followed by #jesuisbruxelles, #prayforistanbul, #jesuisnice, #prayforgermany, for Orlando, for Ansbach, Würzburg, Berlin. People were dying from terrorist attacks in Lahore, Kabul, Kazakhstan, Parachinar, Damascus, al-Arish, Baghdad, Tel Aviv, Maiduguri, Kandahar, Mombasa. Even if we weren't directly affected, we were all aware, if only at the margins of our consciousness, of the images of destruction on the other side of the world.

In her essay 'Observing the Suffering of Others', Susan Sontag explains why sympathy is an unstable emotion. When it cannot be transformed into action, then it withers. She writes that once you get the feeling there's nothing you can do, you become bored.

I don't think I was alone in feeling overwhelmed by all the images of violence, and, saddened, I reacted

by withdrawing. The news didn't cause me to think or reflect, but rather to seek solace in my own private world. I wasn't bored by the news, but I did start to push it away, well aware that our democracies were endangered not only by terrorism but also by our failure to come up with clear plausible arguments to counter the voices of populism.

Unsurprisingly, on the day following the attacks, the extreme-right Front National sounded off against the European Union and foreigners, and called for the borders to be closed, and for a referendum on the death penalty. It was this narrative which sought to exclude entire ethnic groups that brought the Front National unprecedented success in the regional elections.

Right-wing populists are not only gaining ground in France. In Holland, Germany and Denmark we see the same phenomenon. How easy life would be if we could stop terrorism by closing the borders. Yet the perpetrators of the 13 November attacks were not foreigners but young people from within our midst. It was French people killing their fellow French. The question was, how was this possible? How could someone who had grown up with one of the most modern welfare states – with accident insurance, old age pensions, sickness benefits, vocational assistance, child, parent and housing benefits, job security, minimum wage and parental leave – come to hate his fellow citizens so much that he would don a suicide vest.

Indeed, what could incite a young man to yearn