



Valesca Baert-Knoll  
Marion Eichelsdörfer  
Elisabeth Migge  
Christin Zühlke  
Reinhold Boschki

# Witnesses of the Witness

New Perspectives on Elie Wiesel's Work  
and Message

ELIE-WIESEL-RESEARCH-SERIES  
VOLUME 1

TÜBINGEN  
UNIVERSITY  
PRESS 

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New Perspectives on Elie Wiesel's Work  
and Message

ELIE WIESEL RESEARCH SERIES  
VOLUME 1

ED. BY THE  
ELIE WIESEL RESEARCH CENTER  
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Valesca Baert-Knoll  
Marion Eichelsdörfer  
Elisabeth Migge  
Christin Zühlke &  
Reinhold Boschki (Eds.)

with the collaboration of Moritz Sacherer

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## INTRODUCTION

### TO THE *ELIE WIESEL RESEARCH SERIES (EWRS)* AND TO THE FIRST VOLUME »WITNESSES OF THE WITNESS. NEW PERSPECTIVES ON ELIE WIESEL'S WORK AND MESSAGE«

Research activities on the complete works of Elie Wiesel have become more pluralistic and interdisciplinary in recent years.<sup>1</sup> It is particularly pleasing that the field has attracted young scholarship: emerging academics are delving into the multifaceted work of the Auschwitz survivor and formulating fresh insights that confront contemporary difficulties, the current level of discourse in their various fields, evolving social circumstances, and, importantly, the global political landscape. The *Elie Wiesel Research Series (EWRS)* aims to be a forum that provides a platform for various disciplines, ranging from Jewish studies, literary studies, theology and philosophy including ethical and socio-political subjects, to explore and discuss Elie Wiesel's *oeuvre* in new ways. The work will be explored in terms of its genesis and from historical, religious and social perspectives. The most important questions arising from current discourses about the memory of the Holocaust, multidirectional memory, questions of gender and diversity, forms of contemporary antisemitism, racism and the struggle for human rights and democracy will also be discussed.

Unfortunately, the immense diversity of Wiesel's work is hardly known beyond the Elie Wiesel research community. Wiesel's important testimony to the Holocaust, *Night* (1958), which forms the beginning and the inner core of his *oeuvre*, is the Auschwitz survivor's best-known book. However, even the original Yiddish version, which Wiesel wrote for Jewish readers from a Jewish perspective, ... *un di velt hot geshvign* (1956), is completely unknown to most people, especially as this book is only available in Yiddish. Elie Wiesel's extensive body of work, which includes defining autobiographies, biblical and Talmudic literature, Hasidic writings, multiple novels and plays and innumerable

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1 Research overviews with the most important academic literature and the relevant bibliographies can be found in the individual contributions of this volume and in the complete bibliography at the end of this book.

essays, is only accessed by a limited number of researchers. At most, these works are mentioned or referenced in small portions, and sometimes they are not discussed publicly at all. Moreover, they are seldom the focus of comprehensive scholarly investigation.

The primary objective of the *Elie Wiesel Research Series* is to address and eliminate the existing deficiency in research about this subject. In addition to the scholarly annotated edition of the *Complete Edition of Elie Wiesel's Work (EWW)*, it aims to give scholars the opportunity to familiarize themselves with and understand individual parts of Wiesel's work, as well as the broader context of his publications, and to discuss them in academic settings.

In doing so, we also want to encourage colleagues to critically discuss individual issues in Wiesel's work. Thus, some of the contributions in this first volume certainly encourage critical reflection on and discussion of the topics that arise in connection with Wiesel's writings in a scholarly manner and in open academic discourse. The discourse about the interpretation of the complete works must not be standardized by a few stakeholders; there must be no authority of interpretation—as defined by Michel Foucault—that restricts knowledge and academic discourse.

The contributions in this volume are of a heterogeneous nature. It was our firm intention to include a wide range of perspectives in this volume in order to shed light on Elie Wiesel's work from the perspective of the various disciplines and experiences. For this reason, strictly scientific and essay-like contributions are presented side by side. The authors are responsible for the content of their respective contributions, which do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editors. In particular, the second last contribution in this volume («A Statement») is written from very personal experiences, but we felt due to the clear message it was valuable to include it here.

It should also be noted that the articles were written several years ago. More recent developments—such as the terrible attack by Hamas against Israel on October 7, 2023 and the antisemitism that has been clearly visible worldwide since that date—could not be taken into account in this anthology. Some con-

tributions have already been published in abridged or modified form in German.<sup>2</sup> The present volume is intended as a contribution for discussion.

In light of this, we encourage scholars worldwide to re-read Wiesel's *oeuvre* and consider it from novel perspectives of their own experiences and research objectives. Elie Wiesel was firmly convinced that »The writer's purpose should not be to please, but to unsettle, and I might even say, to unsettle him- and herself.«<sup>3</sup> We would like to add: ... to challenge us all to preserve and renew the memory of Auschwitz and all that this name stands for, for the present and the future.

We would like to thank our colleagues Thomas Buchschuster, Lea Deschler, Vanesa Gasparevic, Jessica Oppelzc, and especially Moritz Sacherer for their work on the footnotes, bibliography, proofreading and formatting.

The editors of the first volume of the *Elie Wiesel Research Series*

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2 Valesca Baert-Knoll et al., eds. Zeitschrift für christlich-jüdische Begegnung im Kontext, no. 2/3 (2022).

3 Elie Wiesel, »Beyond Silence,« in *Contemporary Authors: Autobiography Series*, ed. Gale Research Company (Detroit: Book Tower, 1986), vol. 4, 361.



I  
THE COMPLETE EDITION AND ITS COMPONENTS



# 1. THE PROJECT OF A COMPLETE EDITION OF THE WORKS OF ELIE WIESEL (EWW)

VALESCA BAERT-KNOLL, REINHOLD BOSCHKI, CARINA BRANKOVIĆ,  
JEAN EHRET, MARION EICHELSDÖRFER, JULIEN JEUSETTE,  
DANIEL KROCHMALNIK, ELISABETH MIGGE, CHRISTIN ZÜHLKE

## 1.1. INTRODUCTION

»If in my lifetime I was to write only one book, this would be the one. Just as the past lingers in the present, all my writings after *Night*, including those that deal with biblical, Talmudic, or Hasidic themes, profoundly bear its stamp, and cannot be understood if one has not read this very first of my works.«<sup>1</sup>

These sentences from Elie Wiesel's introduction to the new edition of the book *Night* published in French in 2007 stand paradigmatically for his literary program, according to which his experiences and memories of the deportation and time in Auschwitz represent the center of all that the author has written in the following decades. This extensive and broad body of work can be described as post-Holocaust literature because it is not Holocaust literature in the strict sense of the term (with the exception of his first book, the autobiographical testimony about the period of deportation and the death camps). The books that followed *Night* encompass various genres: articles, essays, novels, novellas, dialogues, dramas, cantatas, translations, reportages, travelogues, portraits, legends, parables, poems, memoirs, interviews, speeches, book reviews, theater reviews, biblical commentaries as well as theological and (religious) philosophical tracts, to name a few.

Nevertheless, his life's work with more than 50 published books does not disintegrate into separate parts but, as a whole, serves as a mirror to the events

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1 Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), vii.

of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and their reception history (›*Wirkungsgeschichte*‹). The same incidents, places, figures, motifs, questions, symbols, paradoxes and ambivalences appear in ever new constellations and variations—they form a comprehensive context which crosses genre boundaries. Wiesel suggests the existence of an overall plan for his body of work when he speaks of entirety of his narrative work revolving like concentric circles around the center of his camp-life testimony, *Night*.<sup>2</sup> At the center lies the Auschwitz extermination camp with its murderous IG Farben construction sites in Auschwitz II (Monowitz) and its extermination sites in Auschwitz III.<sup>3</sup>

These concentric circles refer to the Nazi term »concentration camp,« with Wiesel quoting David Rousset's book *L'univers concentrationnaire* in numerous places.<sup>4</sup> However, while Rousset means an inward concentration of the barbed-wire universe from which there is no escape and whose innermost center is death, Wiesel's body of work is the concentric circle around the memory of Auschwitz opened outward—›concentrifugal,‹ so to speak—and directed toward the present and future. It is not death that forms the center of Wiesel's writings, but the antipode of death, the unconditional longing for life to which Jewish tradition bears witness, and the struggle to affirm it.

The longing for life characterizes the figures in Wiesel's novels and dramas, who are often Holocaust survivors, their descendants, or survivors of other pogroms attempting to reconnect with life through their memories, even if they often fail to do so. This longing also influences all of Wiesel's biblical, Talmudic and Hasidic writings, since the core of Jewish tradition in Wiesel's presentation is always the immeasurable value of life, the life of an individual person or the

2 Robert McAfee Brown, *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 53.

3 For Birkenau: Bernd C. Wagner, *IG Auschwitz: Zwangsarbeit und Vernichtung von Häftlingen des Lagers Monowitz 1941–1945* (München: Beck, 2000), 180–185.

4 David Rousset, *L'Univers concentrationnaire* (Paris: Éditions du Pavois, 1946); Wiesel cites the work in, among other places, Elie Wiesel, *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, ed. Irving Abrahamson (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), vol. I, 185; Elie Wiesel, »Jenseits des Schweigens,« in *Das Gegenteil von Gleichgültigkeit ist Erinnerung: Versuche zu Elie Wiesel*, ed. Dagmar Mensink and Reinhold Boschki (Mainz: Grünewald, 1995), 12.

survival of the Jewish community as well as of all mankind. The numerous articles and essays on the great ethical and humanitarian challenges of the present, on which the human rights activist and later Nobel Peace Prize winner Wiesel takes a stand, attest to this in particular.

It is necessary to have the complete works before one's eyes in an annotated and structured complete edition, to be able to understand the individual writings of Wiesel in the larger context of his work and contemporary history. The edition of Wiesel's works (EWW—*Elie Wiesel Werke* or *Works of Elie Wiesel*) will include all of Wiesel's published books in an annotated German translation. The Wiesel Archive in Boston still holds numerous unpublished manuscripts, preliminary versions or revised versions of lectures, book contributions and essays. It is considered a central source for Wiesel research, since the author taught at Boston University for more than 30 years. However, the EWW refers to the publications and occasionally draws on materials from the archive without systematically processing it. Wiesel's diverse writings can be classified into four bodies of work that mutually influence, contain cross-references, and make each other accessible.<sup>5</sup> These are the autobiographical, the literary, the biblical, Talmudic, Hasidic and Midrashic, and the essayistic writings. As a print version, this comprehensive edition is expected to entail 24 volumes; a digital version is being planned.

The following remarks indicate their central aspects. Beginning with the testimony *Night* and our new German translation *Die Nacht*, they then justify the publication of the new edition of the works from various perspectives, before outlining the challenges for the edition of the four parts and enumerating their respective works.

## 1.2. STARTING POINT: THE EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT *NIGHT*

There was extensive work on the book *Night*, the genesis of which needs to be reappraised at the beginning of the edition of the complete works. Here, the

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5 See the presentation of the individual parts below as well as the work overview at the end of this article.

translator shares in the challenge of verbalization of an experience that ultimately cannot be fully captured in language. For Wiesel, any linguistic version of what happened in Auschwitz remains insufficient, incomplete and fragmentary. To put into words what can never be put into words in this way, to represent what cannot be represented, to remain silent and at the same time to have to communicate<sup>6</sup>—all this corresponds with a fundamental ambivalence in the survivor's work that cannot be resolved. It has its origin in the inner turmoil that the witness feels when he wants to write down his experiences, because they know that those who did not experience »it« will never be able to comprehend what happened in that place of annihilation of people and destruction of humanity. And yet, the witness remains convinced of the urgency of the tradition.

To remain silent would be to encourage forgetting; to speak, however, would be to expose oneself to the danger of trivializing the events and not finding words for what really happened. Elie Wiesel, who had narrowly escaped death, immediately after liberation felt the need to recount everything that had happened to him—to his family, the Jewish community from which he came and all the other victims. Already during the final days he spent in the liberated Buchenwald camp, he began to write his initial notes about his memories, as he shares at the end of ... *un die velt hot geshvign*, the original Yiddish version of the book *Night*.<sup>7</sup> The ambivalence of silence and speech pervades all his subsequent work.<sup>8</sup>

Another challenge in translating and commenting on the book *Die Nacht*

6 See, among others, Elie Wiesel, »Why I Write,« in *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences* (New York: Summit Books, 1990), 13–21.

7 Eliezer Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, ed. Mark Turkov and Abraham Mitlberg, *Dos Poylishe Yidntum 117* (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-Farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine, 1956), 245.

8 Among others: Elie Wiesel, *Silence et mémoire d'hommes* (Paris: Seuil, 1989); Elie Wiesel, *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, ed. Irving Abrahamson, 3 vols (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985); Jorge Semprun and Elie Wiesel, *Schweigen ist unmöglich* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1997). Secondary literature includes: Reinhold Boschki, »Schweigen und schreien zugleich,« *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* 16 (2001): 109–132; Simon P. Sibelman, *Silence in the Novels of Elie Wiesel* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995); André Neher, *L'exil de la parole: Du silence biblique au silence d'Auschwitz* (Paris: Seuil, 1970).

was the accuracy of the translation into German. This had several aspects: On the one hand, it was necessary to take into account the Jewish life in the work, which has been given too little consideration in a large number of translations into a wide variety of languages, including the first translation into German.<sup>9</sup> This applies to the Jewish naming of holidays: Passover must not be translated with the Christian term of »Easter« and Yom Kippur must not be translated as »The Day of Atonement«. This also applies to the synagogue servant, who was also called »sexton« in a Christianized form, although he is the shammes of the congregation. Prayers, blessings and prayer scenarios which are often only addressed indirectly, also needed Judaistic correction.

The translation available so far has been criticized especially from a historiographical point of view, since French terms were simply transferred into German without knowledge of the historical facts and the so-called »camp language«. <sup>10</sup> This results in the inadequate designation of localities and of persons with certain functions. »Blockchef« or »Blockwart« are used in the first translation for the »Blockälteste« and the cynical writing above the camp gate of Auschwitz »Arbeit macht frei« (Work makes you free) reads incorrectly »Arbeit ist Freiheit« (Work is freedom).

In numerous places the former translator has smoothed out the style characteristic of Wiesel's report, which was characterized by short sentences, half-sentences or staccato single words separated by periods, likely in the interest of making it more »literary« and thus depriving it of an important medium of its communication. The new translation does justice to the original style.

A scholarly edition of *Die Nacht* cannot avoid including in its work the aforementioned original version of the camp report written by Wiesel in Yiddish. Yiddish is Wiesel's mother tongue (his *mame-loshn*). He wrote his early articles as a journalist and columnist for Hebrew and Yiddish newspapers in Europe, Israel and the United States. In his declaration of love for the Yiddish language, he emphasizes that Yiddish is his original language, his childhood language, and

9 Elie Wiesel, *Die Nacht zu begraben, Elischa (Trilogie: Nacht, Morgengrauen, Tag)* (Esslingen: Bechtle, 1962).

10 Werner Renz, »Elie Wiesel neu übersetzen,« *Newsletter zur Geschichte und Wirkung des Holocaust* 33 (2008): 84.

the source of his language as a writer: »I know that had I not written my first account in Yiddish, I would have written no others.«<sup>11</sup> And: »Without Yiddish the literature of the Holocaust would have no soul.«<sup>12</sup>

In the context of the edition of his full body of work, Wiesel's Yiddish very first account, ... *un die velt hot geshvign*, is translated into German for the first time.<sup>13</sup> This text proved to be a crucial source for the translation of *Die Nacht*, allowing the translators to understand, analyze and translate more precisely hidden references, especially those stemming from the religious and cultural tradition of Hasidism, which were only hinted at in French. The French version was compared with the Yiddish version sentence by sentence. Working with the Yiddish text proved to be an essential factor in re-judaizing the text and in understanding the world of *Die Nacht*. For example, the term »shtibl« was added to reference the Hasidic house of prayer where Wiesel spent a considerable part of his childhood, since it already appears in the English translation *Night* by Marion Wiesel, Wiesel's wife, for the new edition published in 2006.<sup>14</sup> The »shtibl« (»parlor«) was the place of prayer, study and fellowship in Eastern European Judaism—and it still is in Hasidic communities, e.g. in the USA and Israel.

The camp language terms that Wiesel used in the Yiddish text, but which were adapted to a completely different linguistic area in the French version, could be defined more precisely with the help of the original Yiddish text and finally translated correctly. Equally helpful was an early Hebrew manuscript that Wiesel had prepared, but which was left as a fragment when he decided to write the first report in Yiddish.<sup>15</sup> This Hebrew manuscript was found only a few years ago in the Elie Wiesel Archives at Boston University.

11 Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Schocken Books 1995), 292; cf. on Yiddish literature and culture, *ibid.*, 163–164, 292–293 and 342–343.

12 *Ibid.*, 292.

13 See the contribution by Marion Eichelsdörfer in this volume.

14 Wiesel, *Night*, 3.

15 Wiesel, *All Rivers*, 319 (some passages in the original French version on that point are missing in the English translation by Marion Wiesel).

*Night* (in German already published in a paperback edition as *Die Nacht*, a new translation by the Elie Wiesel Research Center) can be considered the prelude and the cornerstone of the new edition of Wiesel's works, since the edition is accompanied for the first time by editorial and biographical notes, a detailed glossary, a map of the paths from deportation to liberation and other references. Along with the new German translation of ... *un die velt hot geshvign*, *Die Nacht* will form the first volume of the complete edition of Wiesel's works, which, like all subsequent volumes, will include important commentaries.

### 1.3. JUSTIFICATIONS FOR A COMPLETE EDITION

Numerous works by Elie Wiesel are available in German translations, but most of them are long out of print. Others need to be translated first. This edition of Wiesel's complete works is not only an imperative of »monument preservation« as befits a great witness of the twentieth century, but a hermeneutic imperative of interpreting his works. Wiesel's books were usually perceived—even in the French or English-speaking world—as individual works, not as parts of an organic whole, which, however, they were for the author. Only the overall context of autobiographical, literary, biblical-Talmudic-Hasidic-Midrash as well as essayistic writings with the internal implicit and explicit references opens up the work in all its breadth, density and depth—giving the individual books their rightful place within the whole.

With the help of the complete body of work, motifs that are present in all parts of the work can be properly interpreted, since some of them appear in variants or in very different meanings.<sup>16</sup> The *leitmotif* of memory, for example, is at the core of all autobiographical writings. It also appears as the characters' recollections of their time of suffering, a memory with which they sometimes cope better, sometimes poorly. In the Jewish writings, memory is primarily tied to the remembrance and commemoration of God, as well as a reminder of Judaism's religious tradition. In the essays, memory functions as the central

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16 Cf. Reinhold Boschki, *Der Schrei: Gott und Mensch im Werk von Elie Wiesel*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Mainz: Grünewald, 1995).

ethical force that helps people build a more humane present and future out of the memory of the past.

Furthermore, the temporal-biographical development of theological, anthropological and ethical motifs can be perceived and analyzed in the overall context of the work. Thus, the motifs of silence, friendship, indifference, the lamenting of God, the rediscovery of the vanished Hasidic world and many more undergo an eminent development and sometimes a profound change in Wiesel's writings.

In addition, the first edition of Elie Wiesel's works will be published in Germany, with the first translation of his Yiddish survival account ... *un die velt hot geshvign* alongside a new translation of *Die Nacht*. This strongly signals the evolving need for remembrance and is based on the following scholarly reasons:

- a) For the anamnestic rescue of the »world that is no more« (Israel J. Singer), to which numerous academic institutions and research projects in Germany are dedicated, Wiesel's memories are a valuable source. Sighet remains a point of orientation on Wiesel's map of the world as a globetrotter, where he records his life as itineraries: »From Sighet to Paris,« »from Sighet to New York,« »from Sighet to Jerusalem,« »from Sighet to the White House« and »from Sighet to Oslo.« For Wiesel, however, the town of Sighet is not a point of departure left behind, as in the Yiddish success story; his »small town somewhere in Transylvania, at the foot of the Carpathians« accompanies him everywhere as an internal environment, even to the White House, where he declaimed in Yiddish<sup>17</sup> and to the University of Oslo, where he sang the confession of faith (*Glaubensbekenntnis*) and martyr song »Ani Maamin« before his Nobel acceptance speech<sup>18</sup> or to the German Bundestag, where he recited a Yiddish poem.<sup>19</sup> Through Wiesel, Sighet has become like many other

17 Elie Wiesel, *And the Sea Is Never Full: Memoirs, 1969–*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Schocken Books, 1999), 213.

18 *Ibid.*, (chapter »From Sighet to Oslo«), 272.

19 Elie Wiesel, *Den Frieden feiern: Ausgewählte Essays* (Freiburg: Herder, 1991), 43; Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences* (New York: Summit Books,

Eastern European place names—Belz, Lubavitch, Brisk—a designation of uprooted Jewish piety milieus and learning styles. Wiesel, however, does not write nostalgic »village stories.« The views of his »shtot«, his *shkhite-shtot* (*City of Slaughter*, Ch. N. Bialik) are scorched: there is no way back behind his original itinerary »from Sighet to Auschwitz.« Compared to Sighet as a place of memory, the real Sighet appears as a void and a wound.<sup>20</sup> What remains are inner views of an Eastern Jewish »shtot« on paper<sup>21</sup>—which are an important source for understanding Eastern European Jewry.

- b) The search for the lost place, the re-memory, becomes a reoccurring theme and an issue in Elie Wiesel's memoirs themselves. Nevertheless, he emphasizes the duty to resist »mnemoclasm« or »mnemocide«<sup>22</sup>, perhaps the most telling real symbols of which are the eternal pyres in the cremation ovens of Birkenau containing the personal papers and religious objects of the murdered.<sup>23</sup> He also, however, recognizes the impossibility of memory after the Holocaust. Memory is the survivor's highest duty to the dead, but how does one commemorate the unthinkable? How does one say the unspeakable? How does one describe the indescribable? Wiesel was a pioneer and godfather of Holocaust literature,<sup>24</sup> but at the same time he was its harshest critic.<sup>25</sup> He spoke out particularly against the affirmative sensemaking of

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1990), 191.

20 Wiesel, *And the Sea*, 407–410.

21 See Elie Wiesel, »Le monde disparu du Shtetl,« in *Et où va-tu? Textes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004), 139–156.

22 Jan Assmann, »Mnemoklasmus: Über Destruktivität und Identität in den monotheistischen Religionen,« *Psyche* 63, no. 9/10 (2009): 853.

23 Eric Friedler, Barbara Siebert and Andreas Kilian, *Zeugen aus der Todeszone: Das jüdische Sonderkommando in Auschwitz* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2002), 206.

24 Cf. Alan Rosen, »Elie Wiesel,« in *Holocaust Literature. An Encyclopedia of Writers and Their Work*, ed. Lillian S. Kremer, 2 vols. (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), 1315–1325; Anat Feinberg, »Das Unbeschreibliche beschreiben. Literarische Annäherungen an den Holocaust,« in *Kultur allein ist nicht genug: Das Werk von Elie Wiesel—Herausforderung für Religion und Gesellschaft*, ed. Reinhold Boschki and Dagmar Mensink, *Religion in Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 10 (Münster: LIT Verlag, 1998), 47–57.

25 Elie Wiesel, *Signes d'exode. Essais, histoires, dialogues* (Paris: Grasset, 1985), 20–22.

the senseless (as in the camp accounts of Viktor Frankel and Bruno Bettelheim) and protested strongly against trivialization.<sup>26</sup> In Germany, where Holocaust remembrance is part of the country's *raison d'être* despite the persistence of struggles, since its founding, to find the appropriate way to commemorate it, a work that deals with the aporias of Holocaust remembrance like hardly any other is an important resource for reflection that needs to be fully translated and made accessible academically.

- c) Elie Wiesel also stands in a specifically biblical and Jewish tradition of remembrance.<sup>27</sup> Certainly, Wiesel's descriptions of the struggle for existence in the concentration camp are no less realistic than those of his agnostic fellow-sufferers in Auschwitz III: Primo Levi and Jean Améry. But unlike his fellow prisoners, he does not view this experience as a refutation of the Jewish religion,<sup>28</sup> but as a religious challenge. He reacted to his experience with a religious rebellion rooted in biblical and Jewish tradition, which takes up the lament of Job and radicalizes it in the face of Auschwitz (e.g., his cantata »Ani Maamin«).<sup>29</sup> In the past few years, the perspective of the victims has become a central focus in Holocaust research, among others in Saul Friedländer's monumental synthesis *The Third Reich and the Jews* (1998–2006). Thus, an edition of the works of Wiesel is needed alongside the works of Levi, Janusz Korczak, Améry and others.
- d) Wiesel's account of survival, however, wants to be more than just a personal recollection; it sees itself as a metaphysical reckoning that questions God

26 On the film »Holocaust« (1979): Elie Wiesel, »The Trivialization of the Holocaust: Half Fact and Half Fiction,« in *Im Kreuzfeuer: Der Fernsehfilm Holocaust: Eine Nation ist betroffen*, ed. Peter Märtelheimer and Ivo Frenzel (Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 1979), 25–30; on the Holocaust Memorial Museum: Wiesel, *And the Sea*, 209–250.

27 Christoph Münz, *Der Welt ein Gedächtnis geben: Geschichtstheologisches Denken im Judentum nach Auschwitz*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1996); Sidra Ezrahi, »The Holocaust Writer and the Lamentation Tradition,« in *Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel*, ed. Alvin H. Rosenfeld and Irving Greenberg (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 133–149.

28 Primo Levi, *Ist das ein Mensch?* [1958] (München: Beck, 1991), 156; see also: Primo Levi, *Die Untergegangenen und die Geretteten* (München: Beck, 1986).

29 Elie Wiesel, *Ani Maamin: A Song Lost and Found Again* (New York: Random House, 1973).

and the world. In his later literary works, Wiesel repeatedly revisits the old theodicy process, obstinately returning the question, »And where is God in all this?«<sup>30</sup> Wiesel's challenge has become the challenge of Jewish and Christian theology after Auschwitz. Just as Voltaire's »Poème sur le Désastre de Lisbonne« represented a theological dividing line in its time, so does Wiesel's *Night/Die Nacht* in our time. In the German-speaking world, the Catholic theologian Johann Baptist Metz and the Protestant theologian Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, for example, have written about this issue. For academic theology, therefore, an Elie Wiesel edition that follows usual scholarly standards is an urgent desideratum.

- e) What is true for systematic theology is even more true for the pedagogy of religion and history: for Wiesel, Auschwitz is the negative ideal type of the »kingdom of night«, which was by no means over on January 27, 1945 (the day of the liberation of the Auschwitz camp) or on May 8, 1945 (the day Germany surrendered to the Allied forces). Since then, there have been numerous genocides and to this day there are forced labor camps in Russia, North Korea, China and many other autocratic regimes. The Jewish fate obliges, as Wiesel said in his Nobel speech, to humanitarian commitment everywhere in the world: if God and the world were silent about Auschwitz, Wiesel does not want to be silent about similar violence and calls on today's humanity to never again be indifferent to the fate of the persecuted. With all his moral authority, he took a stand in word and deed on all the great humanitarian catastrophes of the last century, emphasizing particularly the fate of children. For him, the transformation of suffering into humanitarian action is the crux of »Holocaust Education«.<sup>31</sup> In this sense, he sees himself first and foremost as an educator, and his work is indeed a great ethical resource for education and teaching. It is therefore important that (univer-

30 Elie Wiesel, *The Trial of God* (New York: Random House, 1979), 13; Cf. also: Elie Wiesel, *Open Heart* (New York: Schocken Books, 2012), 65.

31 Reinhold Boschki, »Teaching through Words, Teaching through Silence: Education after (and about) Auschwitz,« in *Elie Wiesel: Jewish, Literary, and Moral Perspectives*, ed. Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 243–254.

sity) teachers and students in this country have access to the works of Elie Wiesel in a complete edition.

- f) Wiesel's work, however, is by no means limited to Holocaust literature. The twentieth century has been called the »Jewish Century« (Martin Gilbert, Yuri Slezkine), and Wiesel is one of its most important witnesses. In his journalistic and essayistic work he commented on all the turning points and crises of this Jewish century: the »fall of the shtetl« (Y. Bauer), the Holocaust, the Odyssey of the Exodus in 1947, the founding of the State of Israel, the Eichmann trial, the Six-Day War, the opening of the Iron Curtain and the exodus of Soviet Jews, the Bitburg affair, the monument disputes, as well as the literary, cinematic, artistic, philosophical and theological discussions of these events. The persistence of Wiesel's distinctive and tireless Jewish voice vouches for the continuity of Jewish existence across the chasms of the anti-Jewish century. As the acknowledged voice and conscience of his generation, he has been instrumental in shaping Jewish identity in the aftermath of the Holocaust. The *EWV* records and makes accessible a decisive source for the self-understanding of contemporary Judaism. In this context, Wiesel's »Gegenwartsarbeit« proves to be a self-commentary on his literary work, which articulates his ever-renewing reflections on pre-modern and modern Jewish existence.
- g) The heart of this work of the century is captured through the religious writings of Wiesel. Along with André Neher, Emmanuel Lévinas and R. Leon Ashkenasi, he is one of the exponents of the *renouveau juif* in France after the Holocaust.<sup>32</sup> This return to the sources took place as an actualization of ... and was diametrically opposed to the historicism of the science of Judaism and Jewish Studies. The interest was not primarily philological or antiquarian; the question was rather what lessons the tradition holds for our time, marked by the Holocaust. A Talmudic dispute over messianic expectation was made transparent as a current and eternal conflict of ideas in

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32 Daniel Krochmalnik, »Judentum und Martyrium,« *Edith Stein Yearbook* 3 (1997): 50–63.

the »Lectures Talmudiques« of Lévinas, who had the same Talmudic teacher as Wiesel (Monsieur Chouchani).<sup>33</sup> Wiesel was responsible for Hasidism in this *renouveau juif*. Just as Martin Buber brought the Hasidic legends to the assimilated German-speaking Jewry in a life-philosophical way in the first half of the century, so did Wiesel, who saw himself as a Hasid, bring them to assimilated French and American Jews in the second half of the century in an existentialist way. Wiesel thus became a kind of »Rebbe« of the Jewish revivalism of the 1970s and 80s.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, Wiesel also wrote a series of biblical, rabbinic, and Hasidic portraits called »Célébrations«,<sup>35</sup> which begins with Adam and Eve and, in the manner of the rabbinic midrash and the *Ma'asse*, reconsiders the whole of sacred history for the time after Auschwitz: »C'est un tournant à partir duquel il faut tout réévaluer, tout repenser.«<sup>36</sup> An excellent example of his hermeneutics of Jewish sources is Wiesel's portrait sketch of *Rashi* (French version 2008).<sup>37</sup> As one of the most influential reinterpretations of Judaism in our time, Wiesel's work deserves similar attention in German as, for example, the works of other great Jewish revivalists, such as Buber and Lévinas.

The German complete edition of Wiesel's works should also give new impetus to the international research of Wiesel's work.

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33 Cf. Emmanuel Lévinas, »Un Langage qui nous est familier,« in *Les cahiers de la nuit surveillée*, ed. J. Rolland (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1984), 325–328.

34 Joseph A. Kanofski, »Elie Wiesel als Rebbe des zeitgenössischen amerikanischen Judentums,« in *Kultur allein ist nicht genug: Das Werk von Elie Wiesel—Herausforderungen für Religion und Gesellschaft*, ed. Reinhold Boschki and Dagmar Mensink, *Religion in Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 10 (Münster: LIT Verlag, 1998), 333–346; Martha Hauptman, »Mehr als ein Mentor: Elie Wiesel an der Boston University,« in *ibid.*, 347–360.

35 See work overview at the end of this chapter.

36 Elie Wiesel and Michaël de Saint-Cheron, *Le Mal et l'Exil: Dix ans après* (Montrouge: Nouvelle Cité, 1999), 121.

37 Elie Wiesel, *Rashi: A Portrait* (New York: Schocken Books 2009).

## 1.4. THE FOUR PARTS OF THE WORK

Wiesel's work forms a whole that opens up his life and thoughts in four approaches. They will be briefly outlined in the following.<sup>38</sup>

### 1.4.1. AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS

As explained above, the survival report *Die Nacht (La Nuit, 1958)*, together with the Yiddish text ... *un die velt hot geshvign* (1956), published two years earlier, form the cornerstone and core of the rest of his work. In the 1990s, Wiesel published his memoirs in two volumes:

- *Tous les fleuves vont à la mer ... (All Rivers Run to the Sea ...)*, 1994
- ... *Et la mer n'est pas remplie (... And the Sea Is Never Full)*, 1996

They include important self-interpretations, backgrounds and contextualizations of his work, but above all they contain countless accounts of encounters that became important, sometimes even formative, for Wiesel's biography. Finally, in 2011, after a serious heart operation, he wrote the small book *Cœur ouvert (Open Heart)*, which is a mixture of personal, family and biographical reflections as well as retrospective interpretations of the major motifs of his entire *oeuvre*. This short book was to remain his last work published during his lifetime.

His journalistic and literary work, as well as his great humanitarian commitment around the world was particularly shaped by Wiesel's memories of his childhood in his native Sighet and its abrupt end due to the time spent in the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Wiesel's autobiographical texts are a crucial source for preserving the memory of the world of diverse and traditional Eastern European Jewry destroyed by the Shoah. His hometown of Sighet remained a focus point for him. Carrying his Sighet in his heart, it accompanied him on his life's journey through Europe, Israel and to the USA.

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<sup>38</sup> For the following: See works overview at the end of this chapter.

All of Wiesel's autobiographical writings that follow *Night/Die Nacht* are shaped by the experiences of his early childhood and youth and complement his testimonial account. They also illuminate important background to Wiesel's intellectual career, which is reflected in his texts. These and other short biographical texts are newly edited in the *EWW*, contextualized in linguistic, politico-historical and Judaistic terms and supplemented by academic commentaries.

#### 1.4.2. NOVELS AND DRAMAS

The literary *oeuvre* of Wiesel spans half a century: from *L'Aube*, published by Seuil in 1961 (Engl. *Dawn*), to *Otage*, published by Grasset in 2010 (*Hostage*), the author had written seventeen novels and two plays. In addition, there is the cantata »Ani Maamin: Un chant perdu et retrouvé« and a long poem »Histoire d'un Niggoun« (»Tale of a Niggoun«, i.e., a hummed melody).<sup>39</sup>

Most of these texts have been translated into several languages by now, and some of them have been awarded prestigious prizes: the Prix Rivarol for *La Ville de la Chance* (1962) (Engl. *The Town Beyond the Wall*), the Prix Médicis for *Le Mendiant de Jérusalem* (1968) (Engl. *The Beggar of Jerusalem*), and the Grand Prix du roman de la Ville de Paris for *Le Cinquième Fils* (1983) (Engl. *The Fifth Son*). Nevertheless, the novels and dramas have hardly been recognized in France and Germany<sup>40</sup> due to the context of the work and the author:

The work must be located on the one hand, in the literary history of the twentieth century, especially camp literature, and on the other hand, in the Jewish narrative tradition. Wiesel himself refers to authors who influenced him during his time in Paris: in addition to Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, these include representatives of the *Renouveau catholique* such as François Mauriac and Georges Bernanos, but also André Malraux, Paul Valéry, Roger Mar-

39 Originally published in French: Elie Wiesel, »Histoire d'un Niggoun,« in *Silence et mémoire d'hommes* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), 72–108; engl. edition: Elie Wiesel, *The Tale of a Niggoun*, ed. Elisha Wiesel (New York: Schocken Books, 2020).

40 Cf. Michaël de Saint-Cheron, prologue to *Dialogues avec Élie Wiesel (1982–2012)*, ed. Michaël de Saint-Cheron (Paris: Parole & Silence, 2021).

tin du Gard and Ignazio Silone.<sup>41</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky is another important reference,<sup>42</sup> »and of course Kafka.«<sup>43</sup> In addition, Wiesel discovered Yiddish literature in this period: he names Izhak Leibush Peretz, Sholem Aleichem and Mendele Moykher-Sforim along with several others.<sup>44</sup>

However, it is not only the Yiddish and religious (e.g., *Tanakh*, *Talmud* and *Midrash*) sources that make Wiesel a Jewish author; he repeatedly refers to himself as a »narrator«<sup>45</sup> and thus joins the narrative tradition of *Hasidism*.<sup>46</sup> This applies not only to his novels and dramas, but equally to his autobiographical, religious and essayistic writings. Anyone who wants to perceive, understand and communicate Wiesel's literary work in its specificity cannot avoid dealing with this narrative tradition as well as with Wiesel's own style or the word choices of his writing. A literary research question that encompasses both literary history and different methods of textual analysis must permeate the study of all parts of the work. It is more required when studying the novels, dramas and other literary writings, insofar as here the question of the place and function of fiction in relation to testimony becomes more prominent. It flows into other disciplines, since the literary work has not only ethical but also philosophical-theological functions. What are these texts capable of that other writings are not? Or what do they do differently—and yet the same?

Wiesel's novels and dramas raise these questions; they reveal a special way in which Wiesel interlinks fiction and »spirituality« in the sense of a personal religiosity that is both lived and needs to be awakened in the individual. They contain elements of a »theory of literary theology« that need to be elaborated and incorporated into the understanding of the work.

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41 Wiesel, *All Rivers*, 189.

42 See, for example, the quotation at the very beginning of his novel: Elie Wiesel, *The Town Beyond the Wall* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982): »I have a plan—to go mad.« Dostoyevski.

43 Wiesel, *All Rivers*, 189.

44 *Ibid.*, 111, 163.

45 Elie Wiesel, *Un Juif aujourd'hui: récits, essais, dialogues* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), 25.

46 Rosemary Horowitz, ed., *Elie Wiesel and the Art of Storytelling* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2006).

For example, one can point to a number of recurring themes: Jewish culture and religion and its (fateful) role in the lives of the victims, memory and haunting (with an often fantastic dimension); the past of the concentration camp as an obstacle to present life; the motif of being locked up and imprisoned; the question of testimony, responsibility and judgment; the figure of the Jewish pioneer; the place of God after Auschwitz; the question of how it was possible that hardly anyone did anything about Auschwitz, guilt and innocence, etc.

The coherence of the work, which explores the same motifs over and over again—without ever lapsing into mere repetition—is explained in part by the fact that, as mentioned, it emanates from one and the same source: *La Nuit* (1956). This autobiographical text is both the cornerstone and the energetic heart of Wiesel's fictional work.

Wiesel understands narrative and writing as a way of acting. The literary analysis of the novels, dramas and other literary writings particularly emphasizes those elements that not only concern the intellect, but contribute to the fact that the human being as a whole is addressed. Such an approach, which allows the reader to experience something in which experience and meaning are in tension, is important for the ability of Wiesel's work to fulfill its pedagogical potential, especially in a time of a resurgent antisemitism. It does not limit itself to the historical as the past, but makes it present, i.e., rising again as an ethical-philosophical-theological inquiry into the self-understanding and existential decisions of other generations

#### 1.4.3. THE BIBLICAL, TALMUDIC AND HASIDIC SCRIPTURES

Elie Wiesel divides his Jewish works *stricto sensu* into three parts: Retellings of first, biblical, second, rabbinic, and third, Hasidic stories. He calls these retellings *Célébrations*, according to the volume published by Seuil in 1994, which includes Wiesel's *Célébration Biblique* (1975), the *Célébration Talmudique* (1991) and *Célébration Hassidique* I and II (1972 u. 1981). A »Célébration« usually consists of a series of single, double or group portraits of biblical heroines and heroes, rabbinical or Hasidic masters.

Wiesel published during his lifetime seven such »portrait galleries« with

subtitles such as »*Biblical, Talmudic, and Hassidic Portraits and Legends*« and over 90 portraits. Such a celebration, however, is not for a strictly philological audience as it falls short of historical-critical standards. One is more likely to think of these panegyric doxo or hagiographies in terms of vinous traditional narrative rituals. This does not mean that Wiesel's *Célébrations* are not based on reliable source knowledge. After all, Elie Wiesel not only possessed an extensive traditional knowledge of biblical, rabbinic, and Hasidic literature. He »studied,« as he indicates in a prefatory note to the *Célébration talmudique*, regularly with masters of historical criticism such as Saul Liebermann and David Weiss-Halivni, and was himself a professor of Jewish Studies from 1972, first at the City University of New York and from 1978 on at Boston University.

He wrote his *Célébrations* within this academic framework and for his teaching activities. In any case, one must distinguish his *Célébrations*, which certainly also claim historical truth and work with maps and chronological tables, from decidedly legendary material that he published with illustrations by Mark Podwal, such as: *The Golem. The Story of a Legend* (1983), *The Six Days of Destruction: Meditations toward Hope* (1988), *King Solomon and his Magic Ring* (1999), *The Tale of a Niggun* (1978/2020). It is therefore possible and preferable to provide his portraits with a scholarly source reference and to reference Wiesel's treatment of the sources, as has already been done on a trial basis in the volume *Rashi. A Portrait* (2008).

The commentary, however, must delve deeper, because the term »retelling« in no way does justice to the portraitist's ambition. Wiesel did not see himself as an anthologist of edifying and entertaining *Mayse books*. Rather, he sought to draw out a sharp psychological profile, a historical problem, or a religious program from the scattered narratives about a proto- or archfather, a rabbi, or a rebbe. In this sense, the portrayed persons are general specimen and his headings are accordingly: »Rabbi Akiva ben Joseph or the Love of the Absolute«, »Elisha ben Abuja. Rebel or Heretic«. One could also say that his portrait gallery attempts a typology and topology of Judaism, a stringing together of beings and concepts whose sum exhaustively describes the phenomenon.

Thus, for example, the nine portraits in the book about the Hasidic masters

*Célébration Hassidique II* (1981) each stand for a particular aspect of Hasidic spirituality, which together are supposed to cover the entire spectrum of Hasidic attitudes: »Rabbi Pinhas de Koretz ou la Sagesse Hassidique,« »Rabbi Aharon von Karlin ou la Ferveur Hassidique,« »Rabbi Wolfe de Zbarazh ou l'humilité Hassidique« and so on. That his portraits never become inanimate allegories is because the re-teller, as a novelist and reporter, has a fine sense of religious scandal and spices it up with piquant details. A more detailed characterization of Elie Wiesel as a *narrator* is reserved for a supplementary study.

Elie Wiesel's vision of Judaism was shaped by his French apprenticeship years. He received his decisive philosophical and literary impressions in post-war France, and French remained his poetic language throughout his life. In the *Renouveau Juif* after the *Libération*, a kind of division of labor existed: Léon Askénazi was responsible for the *Pensée Juive*, André Neher for the *Leçon Biblique*, Emmanuel Lévinas for the *Lecture Talmudique*, and Elie Wiesel for the *Légende Hassidique*. The master thinkers of the *Renouveau Juif* knew each other and shared essential premises. They were all survivors of what was called in their circle even then »Shoa,« a term which, in contrast to »Churban,« expresses an irreparable destruction. During this »zero hour,« and partly even during the German occupation and extermination, they began the spiritual reconstruction of Jewish life. In doing so, they stood not only before the ash heaps of European Jewry, but also before the ruins of Western civilizations with their broken promises of progress, emancipation and assimilation.

After this catastrophe, a complete revision of these writers' Jewish as well as their European identity was due. There was no longer any question of treating Jewish thought as a footnote to Greek, Arab or German thought, as had been the general practice in academia before; for them, Jewish thought and the Jewish destiny ennobled by martyrdom was a message of universal significance. Léon Askénazi once put it this way, »D'emblée, la ›pensée juive‹ se formulait comme universelle à sa manière.« In place of liberal apologetics, which proved utterly ineffective during the years of persecution, there was to be a proud self-assertion and a reversal of the burden of proof. »C'est un renversement radical de cette attitude que nous avons connu. Subitement nos livres devenaient de

grands livres. C'était la pensée dite universelle qui, à son tour, devait être évaluée aux critères de la conscience juive.<sup>47</sup>

In 2022, Sandrine Szwarc revived this intellectual milieu in her book *Fascinant Chouchani*,<sup>48</sup> named after the Talmud teacher of Lévinas and Wiesel. Carina Branković also researches the general philosophical and literary influences on the young Elie Wiesel in post-war France at the Elie Wiesel Research Center's Potsdam Branch. This background provided the mature and late Wiesel with the intellectual claim to design his portraits, which he then expanded across all three fields: the biblical, Talmudic and Hasidic. Since the three parts of Elie Wiesel's Jewish work are assigned to three particular disciplines in Jewish Studies, the volume is edited by appropriately designated experts.

#### 1.4.4. THE ESSAYISTIC WRITINGS

The various collections of essays in Elie Wiesel's *oeuvre* are just as extensive as the novels. These are thematically and stylistically highly diverse collections of articles, written speeches and lectures, short narratives, stories, memoirs, fictional dialogues, as well as ethical and religious philosophical treatises. Thematically, Wiesel's complete works and lifelong commitment to memory, humanity, human rights, and against war, hatred and antisemitism are reflected in the published volumes of essays.

The essay corpus begins with the important volume *Legends of Our Time*, which already appeared in French in 1966 as *Le Chant des Morts (Song of the Dead)*. This first collection of essays is dedicated to the central point of Wiesel's work—memory. The volume begins programmatically with an account of his father's death in the Buchenwald concentration camp and ends with a forceful »plea for the dead« that removes the memory of the dead from any dominant grasp: »So learn to be silent« is the admonition to posterity.

In the same year, the equally programmatic volume *The Jews of Silence*

47 Jacob Gordin, *Écrits: Le renouveau de la pensée juive en France* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), 15.

48 Sandrine Szwarc, *Fascinant Chouchani* (Paris: Hermann Éditeurs, 2022).

was published in French (*Les Juifs du Silence*). It contains essays, travelogues, and thoughts on the fate of Jews in the USSR at the time, who were suffering the aftermath of antisemitic Stalinism. Their human rights—and with them the rights of all the oppressed in the Soviet regime—are publicly claimed by Wiesel. Here are the origins of Wiesel's wider struggle for human dignity and against injustice around the world. He is concerned with giving a voice to those who have no voice or whose voice and dignity are brutally suppressed.

In the volumes *Entre deux soleils* (Engl: *One Generation After*) and *Un Juif aujourd'hui* (*A Jew Today*), the author takes up essential questions of Jewish existence in his time. The essays were often inspired by concrete encounters. The two previously untranslated essay volumes *Paroles d'étranger* (1982) and *Signes d'exode* (1985) carry the additions »essays, stories and dialogues« in their subtitles. They each contain autobiographical memories (e.g., »The death of my mother« or »Memories of Passover«). Fictional or fictional dialogues are one of the characteristic stylistic devices Wiesel develops in these volumes (e.g., conversations of a child with his grandfather or with a stranger, the conversation between an old person and death). Here, we can see the connection to »literary writing« (as style and fiction) that de facto permeates the entire body of work. Themes such as the Cambodian war, the nuclear threat, the oppression and extermination of indigenous peoples in Latin America, hunger and war, become dominant in his essays alongside religious themes such as »belief or non-belief,« the possibility and impossibility of prayer after Auschwitz, or anthropological themes such as »the praise of friendship.«

The monumental collection of three volumes *Against Silence*, subtitled *The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, edited by Irving Abrahamson in 1985, contains speeches, articles, essays, interview excerpts, open letters, reviews and stories by Wiesel that cover the entire range of topics in his work. They deal with remembrance of the Holocaust, Jewish identity, human rights, his commitment to the United States Holocaust Memorial, as well as thoughts on Jerusalem, friendship, education, his self-image as a writer and his relationship to the country and state of Israel.

Other collections of essays Wiesel published include travelogues, for exam-

ple, about his visit to Germany, his speeches at the Nobel Prize ceremony in Oslo and in the German *Bundestag* in Berlin, essays against apartheid, indifference and about the longing for peace.

This resulted in two noteworthy volumes that mark the culmination of Wiesel's essay collections published during his lifetime: *Where do you come from?* (*D'où viens-tu?*, Paris 2001) and *Where are you going?* (*Et où vas-tu?*, Paris 2004). At the very beginning both volumes refer to the famous motto of Aka-via, the son of Mahalalel: »Contemplate three things, and you will not come to the hands of sin: Know from where you came, and to where you are going, and before whom you will ultimately give judgment and accounting.« (Pirkei Avot 3,1)

## 1.5. EDITORIAL PROGRAM

The editors have made a fundamental decision to keep the publication of Elie Wiesel's works manageable: only the works published by Elie Wiesel himself during his lifetime will be newly edited and annotated. The omitted works should at least be mentioned here.

First, the inedita, which, according to the Elie Wiesel Archive in Boston, are stored in about 400 archive boxes and amount to about one million writings and documents (if these are gradually digitized at Boston University, they can be linked to the *EWV* digital edition in Germany later on). This archive and the Wiesel family's private holdings also include numerous diaries belonging to Wiesel. Second, Wiesel's extensive correspondence spanning seven decades. Third, the journalistic publications in Yiddish and in the Israeli press, which are only included in the essayistic work if they were of general interest beyond daily or cultural-political reporting. The same is true for the fourth set of omitted works, Wiesel's extensive number of speeches, excluding the Nobel Prize speeches printed separately and other important speeches, some of which are documented in the volumes of essays Wiesel published. Fifth, the numerous interview volumes by and with Elie Wiesel, including testimonies of great contemporary significance, such as Wiesel's interview volume with French President François Mitterrand, *Mémoire à deux voix*, Paris 1995, or with Spanish

writer Jorge Semprún.<sup>49</sup> They can be translated and edited at a later date, for example in a fifth works section on Wiesel's public work, and also linked to the digital edition. Sixth, the *EWW* can only link the numerous film and audio documents to the digital version at a later date.

However, all the above-mentioned sources, insofar as they are accessible, are consulted for scholarly use in the writing of these volumes. Along with the extensive secondary literature on Wiesel's work,<sup>50</sup> they are important for the commentary on and editorial classification of Wiesel's writings. The commentary is conducted in the manner described below:

- Introductory notes to the respective work.
- Editorial notes (including genesis, versions, biographical, historical, literary and religious context).
- Further explanatory notes such as endnotes.
- Bibliography.
- Glossary.
- Abbreviation register.
- Index of persons, subject index (places and topics) and index of passages.

All commentaries together, however, should remain manageable and comprise only about ten percent of the text in each of the edited volumes. The focus is on the author's texts, which speak for themselves. At the end of the edition, there will be a supplementary volume that includes the complete glossary, complete bibliography and complete indexes.

## 1.6. MORE ELIE WIESEL RESEARCH

The edition of *Elie Wiesel's Works (EWW)* in German is embedded in the larger context of Elie Wiesel research worldwide. The *EWW* is being produced at the

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49 Semprun and Wiesel, *Schweigen ist unmöglich*.

50 See an initial compilation of the complete bibliography on Elie Wiesel on the homepage of the Elie Wiesel Research Center ([www.uni-tuebingen.de/forschungsstelle-elie-wiesel](http://www.uni-tuebingen.de/forschungsstelle-elie-wiesel)). This bibliography is continuously supplemented and updated.

Elie Wiesel Research Center, which is located at three academic hubs (University of Tübingen, University of Potsdam and Luxembourg School of Religion & Society) and is internationally connected. Intensive contacts with important scholars in North America and Israel have existed for years, and further contacts with researchers in the Anglo-Saxon and French-speaking regions are currently being established. International conferences, workshops, lectures, and research trips are among the central tools for integrating scholars conducting scholarly research and commentary on the complete works of Wiesel or in relevant, related disciplines.

This effort is documented not least by the present volume, which represents the start of an international scholarly book series and is an expression of a multi-perspective, interdisciplinary approach to the analysis and deeper understanding of the most diverse parts of Wiesel's work.

As always in the study of great works, the editors of *EWV*, after years of research, have come to the realization that we are only at the beginning of the process of researching Elie Wiesel's complete work.

## 1.7. APPENDIX: TABLE OF ALL FOUR WORK PARTS

### I. AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS

- ... UN DI VELT HOT GESHVIGN, Buenos Aires 1956; German trans. Marion Eichelsdörfer (will be published in *EWV*).
- LA NUIT, Paris 1958, 2007; new German translation by the Elie Wiesel Research Center: *Die Nacht*, Freiburg 2022; Engl. *Night*. New York 2006; trans. Marion Wiesel.
- TOUS LES FLEUVES VONT À LA MER: MÉMOIRES, Paris 1994; German: *Alle Flüsse fließen ins Meer: Autobiographie*, Hamburg 1995 (trans. Holger Fock); Engl. *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs*, New York 1995 (trans. Marion Wiesel).
- ... ET LA MER N'EST PAS REMPLIE: MÉMOIRES, Paris 1996; German: *... und das Meer wird nicht voll: Autobiographie*, Hamburg 1997 (trans. Holger Fock, Brigitte Große and Sabine Müller); Engl.: *And the Sea is Never Full: Memoirs, 1969–*, New York 1999 (trans. Marion Wiesel).

- AU-DELÀ DU SILENCE, in *Silence et mémoire d'hommes*, Paris 1989, 7–31; German: Jenseits des Schweigens, in *Das Gegenteil von Gleichgültigkeit ist Erinnerung: Versuche zu Elie Wiesel*, ed. Dagmar Mensink and Reinhold Boschki, Mainz 1995, 9–37.
- CŒUR OUVERT, Paris 2011; German: *Mit offenem Herzen*, Freiburg 2012 (trans. Sigrid Irmia); Engl.: *Open Heart*, New York 2012 (trans. Marion Wiesel).

## II. NOVELS AND DRAMAS

- L'AUBE, Paris 1960; German: *Morgengrauen*, in: *Die Nacht zu begraben, Elisha (Trilogie: Nacht, Morgengrauen, Tag)*, München and Esslingen 1962, 155–262 (trans. Curt Meyer-Clason); Engl.: *Dawn*, New York 1961 (trans. Frances Frenaye).
- LE JOUR, Paris 1961; German: *Tag*, in: *Die Nacht zu begraben, Elisha (Trilogie: Nacht, Morgengrauen, Tag)*, München and Esslingen 1962, 263–400 (trans. Curt Meyer-Clason); Engl.: *The Accident*, New York 1962 (trans. Anne Borchardt).
- LA VILLE DE LA CHANCE, Paris 1962; German: *Gezeiten des Schweigens*, München and Esslingen 1963 (trans. Curt Meyer-Clason); Engl.: *The Town Beyond the Wall*, New York 1964 (trans. Stephen Becker).
- LES PORTES DE LA FORÊT, Paris 1964; German: *Die Pforten des Waldes*, München and Esslingen 1966 (trans. Curt Meyer-Clason); Engl.: *The Gates of the Forest*, New York 1966 (trans. Frances Frenaye).
- LE MENDIANT DE JÉRUSALEM, Paris 1968; German: *Der Bettler von Jerusalem*, München and Esslingen 1970 (trans. Christian Sturm); Engl.: *A Beggar in Jerusalem*, New York 1970 (trans. Lily Edelman and Elie Wiesel).
- A BLACK CANOPY, A BLACK SKY, (1968), in *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, ed. Irving Abrahamson, New York 1985, vol. III, 19–28.
- ZALMEN OU LA FOLIE DE DIEU, Paris 1968; German: *Salmen oder Der Wahnsinn Gottes*, München and Esslingen 1971 (trans. Christian Sturm), Engl.: *Zalmen, or the Madness of God*, New York 1974 (trans. Nathan Edelman).

- ANI MAAMIN, A SONG LOST AND FOUND AGAIN, Text: Elie Wiesel, music: Darius Milhaud, world premiere 1974; German: Ani Maamin. Ein verlorener und wiedergefundener Gesang, in: *Jude heute: Erzählungen, Essays, Dialoge*, Wien 1987, 217–265 (trans. Hilde Linnert).
- LE PROCÈS DE SHAMGOROD, Paris 1978; German: *Der Prozess von Shamgorod*, Freiburg 1987 (trans. Alexander de Montléart); Engl.: *The Trial of God*, New York 1979 (trans. Marion Wiesel).
- LE SERMENT DE KOLVILLÁG, Paris 1973; German: *Der Schwur von Kolvillág*, Wien 1976 (trans. Margarete Venjakob); Engl.: *The Oath*, New York 1973 (trans. Marion Wiesel).
- LE TESTAMENT D'UN POÈTE JUIF ASSASSINÉ, Paris 1980; German: *Das Testament eines ermordeten jüdischen Dichters*, Freiburg 1991 (trans. Hanns Bückner); Engl.: *The Testament*, New York 1981 (trans. Marion Wiesel).
- LE CINQUIÈME FILS, Paris 1983; German: *Der fünfte Sohn*, Freiburg 1985 (trans. Hanns Bückner); Engl.: *The fifth Son*, New York 1985 (trans. Marion Wiesel).
- LE CRÉPUSCULE, AU LOIN, Paris 1987; German: *Abenddämmerung in der Ferne*, Freiburg 1988 (trans. Hanns Bückner); Engl.: *Twilight*, New York 1988 (trans. Marion Wiesel).
- L'OUBLIÉ, Paris 1989; German: *Der Vergessene*, Freiburg 1990 (trans. Hanns Bückner); Engl.: *The Forgotten*, New York 1992 (trans. Stephen Becker).
- LES JUGES, Paris 1999; German: *Die Richter*, Bergisch-Gladbach 2001 (trans. Christiane Landgrebe); Engl.: *The Judges*, New York 2002 (trans. Geoffrey Strachan).
- LE TEMPS DES DÉRACINÉS, Paris 2003; Engl.: *The Time of the Uprooted*, New York 2005 (trans. David Habgood).
- UN DÉSIR FOU DE DANSER, Paris 2008; Engl.: *A Mad Desire to Dance*, New York 2009 (trans. Catherine Temerson).
- LE CAS SONDERBERG, Paris 2008; *The Sonderberg Case*, New York 2010 (trans. Catherine Temerson).
- OTAGE, Paris 2010; Engl.: *Hostage*, New York 2012 (trans. Catherine Temerson).

## III. BIBLICAL TALMUDIC HASIDIC WRITINGS

- CÉLÉBRATION HASSIDIQUE, Paris 1972; German: *Chassidische Feier. Geschichten und Legenden*, Freiburg 1988; Engl.: *Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters*, New York 1972 (trans. Marion Wiesel).
- CÉLÉBRATION BIBLIQUE. PORTRAITS ET LÉGENDES, Paris 1975; German: *Adam oder das Geheimnis des Anfangs. Brüderliche Urgestalten*, Freiburg 1980 (trans. Hanns Bücker); Engl.: *Messenger of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends*, New York 1976 (trans. Marion Wiesel).
- FOUR HASIDIC MASTERS AND THEIR STRUGGLE AGAINST MELANCHOLY, Notre Dame 1978; German: *Was die Tore des Himmels öffnet. Geschichten chassidischer Meister*, Freiburg 1981 (trans. Elisabeth Hank).
- CÉLÉBRATION HASSIDIQUE II, CONTRE LA MÉLANCOLIE, Paris 1981; German: *Geschichten gegen die Melancholie. Die Weisheit der chassidischen Meister*, Freiburg 1984 (trans. Hans Bücker).
- FIVE BIBLICAL PORTRAITS, Notre Dame 1981; German: *Von Gott gepackt. Prophetische Gestalten*, Freiburg 1983 (trans. Ursula Schottelius).
- THE GOLEM: THE STORY OF A LEGEND, New York 1983; German: *Das Geheimnis des Golem*, Freiburg 1985 (trans. Ursula Schottelius).
- CÉLÉBRATION TALMUDIQUE. PORTRAITS ET LÉGENDES, Paris 1991; German: *Die Weisheit des Talmud. Geschichten und Porträts*, Freiburg 1992 (trans. Hanns Bücker).
- SAGES AND DREAMERS: BIBLICAL, TALMUDIC AND HASIDIC PORTRAITS AND LEGENDS, New York 1991; German: *Noah oder Ein neuer Anfang* (First part of Sages and Dreamers), Freiburg 1994 (trans. Reinhold Boschki).
- LE ROI SALOMON ET SA BAGUE MAGIQUE, Paris 2000; Engl.: *King Solomon and His Magic Ring*, New York 1999.
- RASHI—ÉBAUCHE DE PORTRAIT, Paris 2008; German: *Raschi. Ein Portrait*, Freiburg 2014 (translated from the French and annotated by Daniel Krochmalnik); Engl.: *Rashi: A Portrait*, New York 2009 (trans. Catherine Temerson).

## IV. ESSAYISTIC WRITINGS

- LE CHANT DES MORTS, Paris 1966; German: *Gesang der Toten*, München und Esslingen 1968 (trans. Christian Sturm); Engl.: *Legends of our Time*, New York 1968.
- LE JUIFS DU SILENCE, 1966; German: *Die Juden in der UdSSR*, München and Esslingen 1967 (trans. Christian Sturm); Engl.: *The Jews of Silence: A Personal Report on Soviet Jewry*, New York 1968 (trans. Neal Kozodoy).
- ENTRE DEUX SOLEILS, Paris 1970; Engl.: *One Generation After*, New York 1970 (trans. Lily Edelman and Elie Wiesel).
- UN JUIF AUJORD'HUI, Paris 1977; German: *Jude heute*, Wien 1987 (trans. Hilde Linnert); Engl.: *A Jew Today* (expanded edition) New York 1978 (trans. Marion Wiesel).
- PAROLES D'ETRANGER, Paris 1982.
- SIGNES D'EXODE, Paris 1985.
- AGAINST SILENCE: THE VOICE AND VISION OF ELIE WIESEL, ed. Irving Abrahamson, 3 vols., New York 1985.
- SILENCE ET MÉMOIRE D'HOMMES, Paris 1989.
- FROM THE KINGDOM OF MEMORY: REMINISCENCES, New York 1990.
- DEN FRIEDEN FEIERN. AUSGEWÄHLTE ESSAYS, Freiburg 1991 (trans. Reinhold Boschki).
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- AFTER THE DARKNESS: REFLECTIONS ON THE HOLOCAUST, New York 2002 (trans. Benjamin Moser).
- D'OÙ VIENS-TU? TEXTES, Paris 2001.
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## 2. LIFE STORY AS A QUESTION. ELIE WIESEL'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS ARE QUESTIONING RECONSTRUCTIONS

VALESCA BAERT-KNOLL, MARION EICHELSDÖRFER, REINHOLD BOSCHKI

### 2.1. INTRODUCTION

»This open-heart introspection would not be complete if I did not ask a last question: Have I changed?«<sup>1</sup> Elie Wiesel's last book published during his lifetime, *Open Heart*, ends with this question in the last chapter. The answer is—typically for Wiesel—an ambivalent yes and no at the same time. His life-threatening heart disease and the dangerous medical intervention changed him. And yet, he remained the same, as his entire existence throughout his life has meant one task: »to carry the past into the present.«<sup>2</sup> He remained forever the messenger of the dead, the extinguished, the disappeared. Until his last breath, his purpose in life remained being a witness.<sup>3</sup> One year after the publication of the original French edition of *Cœur ouvert* (2011), he wrote a short »postscript« for the English edition, which ends with a question in the last sentence: »My life? I go on breathing from minute to minute, from prayer to prayer.«<sup>4</sup>

This focus on questions is characteristic of all of Wiesel's writing: his religious writings, novels and dramas, in which the characters continually ask questions; and his essays, in which he poses questions about the present, politics, and human indifference. Yet, questions are also a stylistic device, an internal structure and—as we will argue—the overall intention of his autobiographical writings. Wiesel's writings do not simply inform the readers about the camp

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1 Elie Wiesel, *Open Heart*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Schocken Books, 2012), 74.

2 Ibid., 75.

3 According to the inscription on the gravestone at his final resting place (Sharon Gardens Cemetery, New York).

4 Wiesel, *Open Heart*, 79.

experiences and the further course of the survivors' life, but challenge readers and ask them probing questions—not to put them off with answers, but to disturb and unsettle them through the questioning narration, interpretation and construction of the readers' own life story: »The writer's purpose should not be to please, but to unsettle, and I might even say to unsettle himself.«<sup>5</sup> One is tempted to add: ... to question the readers and oneself.

In the following article, we will outline some of the traces of these questions and questioning attitudes that emerge from the constructions of his life story.

## 2.2. AUTOBIOGRAPHIES BACKWARDS: WITH AN *OPEN HEART* AS A HERMENEUTIC KEY

What one writes towards the end of one's life reveals the interpretation that one gives or wants to give to one's own life experiences. In this respect, the small booklet *Open Heart* can be seen as a retrospective key to the interpretation of Wiesel's life story from his own perspective, perhaps even—we would argue—a hermeneutic key to the interpretation of Wiesel's texts as a whole.<sup>6</sup> This key is by no means the only approach to understanding Wiesel's complex work, but it is a possible and revealing one alongside other perspectives that can be utilized for the writings of the Auschwitz survivor, such as the historical, the socio-political, the literary contextual (in the context of post-Holocaust literature, but also of French-language literature of the post-war period), the Judaic perspective, and so on. All of these approaches to understanding are equally necessary; they complement or open up each other.

As mentioned, the approach chosen here focuses on the countless questions

5 Elie Wiesel, »Beyond Silence,« in *Contemporary Authors: Autobiography Series*, ed. Gale Research Company (Detroit: Book Tower, 1986), vol. 4, 361.

6 We are well aware of the problematic nature of talking about »hermeneutics«, but we are currently seeing clear signs of a »revival of hermeneutics« in the humanities, e.g: Markus Gabriel et al., *Auf dem Weg zu einer Neuen Aufklärung—Ein Plädoyer für zukunftsorientierte Geisteswissenschaften* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2022), 32–34. For a discussion of the revitalization of hermeneutic questions in literary studies, see: Hartmut Bleumer et al., »Hermeneutik und Germanistik,« *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 51 (2021): 565–567.

that Wiesel articulates in his autobiographical writings. In *Open Heart*, faced with the possibility of not surviving his serious heart operation, Wiesel asks himself the question: »Am I afraid to die? In the past, whenever I thought of death, I was not frightened. Hadn't I lived with death, even *in* death? Why should I be afraid now?«<sup>7</sup> Wiesel was overly confronted with death during his time in the death camps; he saw too many people die, even his own father. He witnessed how his mother and his little sister went to their deaths. In view of the death of others, the question of his own death is put into perspective. And yet, like any sensible person, he clings to life because, as he writes, he still has so many projects, so many challenges he wants to face, so many prayers he still wants to say, so many courses he still wants to teach.<sup>8</sup> Looking at his two grandchildren, he asks himself: »Am I ready to lose their love?«<sup>9</sup> The question that opens up for the reader, is: »Is one ever ready?«<sup>10</sup> Because at the end of his life, the survivor can never be satisfied with what he achieved. Wiesel's fight—against hatred, against contempt, against the banalization and trivialization of Auschwitz, against indifference and for a real remembrance that respects the dead, helps to shape the present and the future—this fight is never over, it must be waged again and again. In the end, the feeling of having achieved too little creeps in: »I have initiated many actions, in countless locations, with many companions. And fought so many battles. Was it all in vain?«<sup>11</sup>

Wiesel's autobiographies are characterized by self-doubt and doubting questions about his path in life and his efforts in the fight for human dignity and against indifference. Should we not despair of humanity because of the cruelty and evil that human beings are capable of realizing? »Was it yesterday—or long ago—that we learned how human beings have been able to attain perfection in cruelty? That for the killers, the torturers, it is human to act inhumanly?

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7 Wiesel, *Open Heart*, 22.

8 *Ibid.*, 23.

9 *Ibid.*, 24.

10 *Ibid.*, 37.

11 *Ibid.*, 51.

Should we therefore turn away from humanity?<sup>12</sup> Here, too, the question is both self-reflexive and addressed to the reader. At the same time, Wiesel leaves no doubt that the question can only be answered by a defiant »nevertheless« that calls for a continued fight against inhumanity and for human dignity:

»There it is: I still believe in man in spite of man. [...] As a Jew, I believe in the coming of the Messiah. But of course this does not mean that the world will become Jewish; just that it will become more welcoming, more human. I belong after all to a generation that has learned that whatever the question, indifference and resignation are not the answer.«<sup>13</sup>

This also applies to one of the central questions in his entire oeuvre and especially in his autobiographies, the question of God:

»And God in all that? Am I asking myself that terrible question to chase away my anxiety and my pain? Now that I am confined to the hospital bed, that question arises again, obsesses me as it haunts all I have written. And, lover of insoluble philosophical problems that I am, I remain frustrated.«<sup>14</sup>

This shows that the questions in Wiesel's autobiographies are not a purely literary stylistic device, but touch on existential issues. For him as a survivor, questions are identity-forming, both on an anthropological and theological level.

If he could ask God even a single question, he writes in the same place, he would formulate it in one word: »Why?«<sup>15</sup> The question becomes a sharp accusation, a *leitmotif* in his entire work: »Shall I have the nerve, to reproach Him for His incomprehensible silence while Satan was winning his victories?

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12 Ibid., 72.

13 Ibid., 73.

14 Ibid., 65.

15 Ibid.

While my father, Shlomo son of Eliezer and Nissl, lay dying on his cot?«<sup>16</sup> Just as the questions about man's humanity become harsh accusations, here too questions about God's divinity become an accusation against His inaction and silence. Against this background, Wiesel's work can be read as an indictment of man and God. Wiesel does not have to and cannot provide the answers to these questions and complaints himself. The answers to these probing questions must be given by mankind today and by God in the future.

### 2.3. QUESTIONS IN THE TWO GREAT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

The two autobiographies *All Rivers Run to the Sea ...* and *... And the Sea is never Full*, are interwoven with countless questions.<sup>17</sup> The first autobiography, *All Rivers*, begins with a question in the prologue: »What profit hath a man of all his labor which he taketh under the sun?«<sup>18</sup> With this reference to Ecclesiastes, Wiesel places his autobiography directly in a tradition and form of reception: the entire text can be read as a question, as an inquiry. The Biblical text is thus less a fatalistic statement about the course of world events, as is often assumed, but rather opens up an ethical question about human behavior in the mode of critical inquiry.

The titles of the two autobiographies also convey this attitude, as »All rivers run to the sea, and the sea is never full« is also a verse from Ecclesiastes.<sup>19</sup> However, Wiesel transforms it from a statement to a question. The reader is thus set on a trail of questions that can equally be applied to the verses that follow in Ecclesiastes. In this way, the supposedly unchangeable actions »What was will be again, what happened will happen again«<sup>20</sup> retransformed into an ethical

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16 Ibid., 51.

17 Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Schocken Books, 1995); Elie Wiesel, *And the Sea Is Never Full: Memoirs, 1969–* (New York: Schocken Books, 1999).

18 Elie Wiesel, Prologue to *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Schocken Books, 1995).

19 Eccl 1,7.

20 Eccl 1,10.

question for people. In the transformation of the statement into a question, a space opens up for decisions on actions and the options for action individuals face, so that—as a perspective of hope—not everything necessarily has to repeat itself.

This statement at the beginning of his autobiography communicates Wiesel's cautious and repeatedly questioned hope for future world events and human coexistence. However, Wiesel's hope is characterized by fundamental and comprehensive doubts: as to whether his own survival and life's work have any meaning, whether the work of witnessing and remembering will remain meaningful in the future, insofar as future generations make responsible decisions.

Many of the questions formulated in the two autobiographies reflect these doubts and are condensed in the balance sheet at the end of *And the Sea Is Never Full*, the second autobiography. There, Wiesel describes, »I don't think I shall stop now. I trouble some people when I raise my voice, others when I don't speak up.«<sup>21</sup> However, he still fears that he has done too little.<sup>22</sup> These doubts are also formulated in Wiesel's theological and religious inquiries, for example in the questions: These doubts are also formulated in Wiesel's theological and religious inquiries, encapsulated in his questioning expectations, obscurity and God's motivations.<sup>23</sup> Wiesel dismisses any theodicy arguments on God's involvement as an answer to these problems. Likewise, he rejects any attempt to explain why the Holocaust could have happened: »Were the Lord Himself to offer me a justification, I think I would reject it.«<sup>24</sup>

Instead, for Wiesel, asking these critical, lamenting questions means adopting a (religious) attitude to life:

»All my life, until today, I have been content to ask questions. All the while knowing that the real questions, those that concern the Creator and His creation, have no answers.

21 Wiesel, *And the Sea*, 404–405.

22 »Have I failed my commitment?«; »How does one fight against the will to erase it all?« *ibid.*, 407–409.

23 Cf. *ibid.*, 409.

24 Wiesel, *All Rivers*, 105.

I'll go even further and say that there is a level at which only the questions are eternal; the answers never are. And so, the patient that I am, more charitable, repeats, ›Since God is, He is to be found in the questions as well as in the answers.«<sup>25</sup>

The aim is not to find the answer, but rather to keep the questions open, since the performative act of questioning represents the possibility of a deeper approach to »the real questions« and, beyond that, to God. This approach of a narrated autobiography with intentional questioning takes the readers into the narrative, unsettles them, and raises questions that aim to challenge their lives, thoughts and actions. In the face of the experience of Auschwitz, all certainties become questions.

#### 2.4. QUESTIONS IN ... *UN DI VELT HOT GESHVIGN* AND *NIGHT*

Elie Wiesel's survivor's account ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, presents us with two types of questions, which he formulates in different ways. On the one hand, there are the explicit, formulated questions, which will be discussed here in particular, and on the other hand, there are the implicit questions that Wiesel poses for or encourages in his audience through the way he describes individual events. The entire book ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, just like *Night*, is one big question.

Wiesel and many other survivors pointed out that conventional vocabulary is not sufficient to describe the experiences during the Holocaust. They therefore do not write *with* words, but rather *against* words.<sup>26</sup> In his writing, Wiesel asks questions and does not provide analyses or answers:

»I have no answers. I merely share my questions with others. I put the

25 Wiesel, *Open Heart*, 69.

26 Elie Wiesel, *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, ed. Irving Abrahamson (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), vol. I, 12.

reader into my own circle. I open my mind and say, »Please come in.«  
And what does he find? He finds questions. But the sharing itself of the  
questions can become a possibility of a direction, if not of an answer.«<sup>27</sup>

The questions that Wiesel asks in his testimony ... *un di velt hot geshvign* arise concerning to the situation in which he found himself at the time. An overview of the entire text reveals that the existential questions in particular are repeated and are posed again in an intensified form in each new situation. Figuratively speaking, one gets the impression of a constricting spiral that pulls the inquirer into the depths of the text and does not allow him to escape.

The first of these loops of questions begins with a description of the first deportations from his hometown Sighet: »Wohin bringt man die deportierten Juden? Weiß man schon etwas? Nichts erfahren?« [35]<sup>28</sup> »Wohin gehen wir? Zum Unbekannten, zu einem Rendezvous, zu einem Treffen mit dem Schicksal.« [39]. These existential questions arise from ignorance and uncertainty and cannot be answered at the time. Nevertheless, hope germinates and Wiesel tries to look optimistically into the future: »Was kann denn schon geschehen?« [41]. But when the Jewish population is driven out of their homes and through the streets of Sighet with great violence, questions about the reality of the events arise in disbelief and amazement: »Ist das alles nicht ein Traum?« [46]. When it later emerges on the deportation train that the route does not lead to Galicia for forced labor, but rather towards German-occupied Poland, the sobering realization sets in: »Wie konnten wir uns so täuschen lassen?« [49]

The first impressions of the concentration camp make the young Wiesel doubt his own sanity: He wonders whether his experiences are a nightmare, a fever-dream or even a vision. He questions his own imagination and sensitivity.

27 Ibid., 18.

28 The following quotes in German are from the new, first comprehensive translation of Wiesel's Yiddish memoirs which is about to be published in the annotated, full edition *Elie Wiesel Werke* (EWW, *Works of Elie Wiesel*) at Herder Publishing House. The numbers in square brackets refer to the corresponding page number in the Yiddish original: Eliezer Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, ed. Mark Turkov and Abraham Mitlberg, *Dos Poylishe Yidntum 117* (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-Farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine, 1956).

Finally, he is dismayed »Wie ist es möglich, wie ist es möglich, dass man hier Menschen verbrennt und die Welt schweigt?« [68] Wiesel's questions emphasize his feelings about his sudden confrontation, as a person coming from a completely different world, with the absolute horror of the camp. If questions arise at the limits of understanding and comprehension, then the last questions mentioned mark a climax. In his testimony, Wiesel gradually describes new situations of growing distress that leave him with less and less room for maneuver. He draws his readers into the maelstrom, which seems to reveal a pattern: announcement of a change (by the perpetrator), followed by uncertainty, then attempted self-suggestive optimism or hope against despair, but finally disillusionment (by the perpetrator).

Wiesel's questions give an impression of how the camp experience shaped the prisoners. In addition to highlighting the rigorous external restrictions placed on a formerly self-determined life, Wiesel's questions shed light on the process of psychological changes that took place due to the camp experience. He conveys the increasing disorientation and the growing feeling of unreality: »Wann haben wir unser Zuhause verlassen? Und das Ghetto? Und den Zug? Erst eine Woche? Nicht mehr? Nur eine Nacht—*eine*<sup>29</sup> Nacht? [...] Seit wann stehen wir, genauso, hier im Wind, vor der Magazin-Baracke? Eine Stunde? Nur eine Stunde?« [76] As the process progressed, all that remained was disinterest in such questions and the realization that such considerations were irrelevant under camp conditions: »Wir leben außerhalb der Zeit. Zeit ist ein Begriff für normale Menschen, für freie Menschen. Wir sind nicht frei und vielleicht auch schon nicht mehr normal.« [76–77] In this existential crisis, where everyone had to rely on themselves, Wiesel observed changes in his own behavior towards his closest caregiver, his father. Wiesel believed that his relationship with his father was at risk. He witnessed his father being abused several times and found himself doing nothing. »Ich verstand mich selbst nicht. Was ist mit *mir* geschehen? [...] Habe ich mich so schnell verändert?«<sup>30</sup> [81] Wiesel questions himself several times: »Was ist aus mir geworden?« [110] and thus illustrates

29 Emphasis in the Yiddish edition (1956).

30 Emphasis in the Yiddish edition (1956).

how the camp not only deeply damaged or even destroyed the relationships between even the closest confidants, but also how people became alienated from themselves. All moral and ethical principles that provided orientation for social coexistence in normal, peaceful life dissolved or were turned into their opposite.

As the time in the camp progressed, the hope of receiving help from the free world disappeared. Wiesel's gaze turned to God, the ultimate and highest authority, and his silence in the face of the atrocities: »Und in seiner Welt, in Gottes Welt, spielen sich solche Gräueltgeschichten ab! Und er schweigt?! Und Gottes Schweigen bedeutet, dass er einverstanden ist! Wie können wir mit *ihm* einverstanden sein?«<sup>31</sup> [137] These questions express the break with his previous faith. Growing up as a Hasidic boy, Wiesel's spiritual relationship with God was the purpose of his life: »You cannot imagine—I cannot imagine—how religious I was. I was drunk with God. I lived for God, with God, in God.«<sup>32</sup> When he and his family were deported, he took his most important possessions with him: »The tallit [prayer shawl] and the tephillin [prayer straps], my religious objects, my books.«<sup>33</sup> »[...] a commentary by Rabbi Haim David Azoulai [the Hida], the K'dushat Levi of the Berdichever Rebbe.«<sup>34</sup> But the reality of the camp called this previous path of faith into question. The old, much-discussed Talmudic questions no longer seemed up-to-date and became completely inadequate for the reality of the camp. Wiesel asks himself: »Welche Diskussionen hätten die Talmudgelehrten abgehalten, wenn sie nach Birkenau geworfen worden wären?« [65]

The camp destroyed the biblical ideal of man as the image of God, and the conviction that a divine spark lives in every human being and that every human life is sacred. In the preface of his report, Wiesel asks whether clinging to this ideal did not obscure the cruel reality and thus unwittingly contributed to the

31 Emphasis in the Yiddish edition (1956).

32 Wiesel, *Against Silence*, vol. I, 39.

33 Elie Wiesel, »Wer meine Legenden hört, stellt sein Leben in Frage,« in *Erinnerung als Gegenwart: Elie Wiesel in Loccum*, ed. Olaf Schwencke, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Loccum: Loccumer Protokolle 25/1986, 1988), 46.

34 Wiesel, *All Rivers*, 76.

catastrophic course of events.<sup>35</sup> What remained is the desperate question of why, deep shock and helplessness: »Weshalb sollen wir seinen Namen loben? Wegen der Kinder, die ich habe lebendigen Leibes in den Feuergräben verbrennen sehen? Wegen der sechs Krematorien in Birkenau, die ohne Ende funktionieren, ohne Unterbrechung, Tag und Nacht? Weshalb ihn loben?« [136]

In the last chapter of ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, Wiesel writes about the first weeks after liberation and how he decided to go on living: »Ich sah mich selbst nach meinem Tod. In diesem Moment erwachte in mir der Wille zum Leben. Ich habe—unwillkürlich—meine geballte Faust erhoben und den Spiegel zerbrochen, die Gestalt, die in ihm lebte, zerbrochen.« [244–245] He began writing down everything he experienced. As a survivor, Wiesel followed the imperative to bear witness. He expresses the feeling that he had a special obligation to give his life meaning and to »justify every moment [...]«. He elaborates: »For the survivor, however, writing is not a profession, but a calling.«<sup>36</sup>

However, disillusionment set in when he realized that the world did not completely change after this catastrophe. On the contrary, many former perpetrators returned to or remained in office, while others have a carefree private life. Wiesel began to question his role as a contemporary witness. »Die Vergangenheit wird weggewischt. Vergessen.« [245] All the more reason for him to ask himself whether it was right to choose life: »War es das wert, den Spiegel zu zerbrechen? War es das wert?« [245] Wiesel uses his questions to take the reader and himself back to his own experience. Through them, he makes visible the process of dehumanization in the camp and the consequences for the human psyche as well as the spiritual rupture. Finally, the questions also seem to serve

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35 »Am Anfang war der Glaube, der kindische Glaube; und das Vertrauen, das vergebliche Vertrauen; und die Illusion, die gefährliche Illusion.

Wir glaubten an Gott, hatten Vertrauen in den Menschen und lebten mit der Illusion, dass es in jedem einzelnen von uns einen heiligen Funken des Feuers der Shekhinah gibt, dass jeder einzelne von uns in seinen Augen und in seiner Seele das Ebenbild Gottes trägt. Und dies war die Quelle—wenn nicht gar die Ursache—all unseren Unglücks.« [7]

36 Elie Wiesel, »Why I write,« in *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences* (New York: Summit Books, 1990), 14–15.

the purpose of reflection and to allow Wiesel to assure himself of his experience in the unimaginable reality of the camp:

»Es ist unglaublich, dass alles, was ich schreibe—wirklich geschehen ist, mit mir selbst geschehen ist. [...] Ich denke: wenn wirklich alles, was in meiner Erinnerung lebendig ist, wahr gewesen ist, alles, was im Herzen brennt—hätte ich denn nachts schlafen können? Hätte ich in Ruhe ein Stück Brot essen können?« [210]

As is well known, the survivor's account *Night* is an abridged and revised version of ... *un di velt hot geshvign*. For this reason, numerous motifs that appear in the Yiddish version are also repeated in *Night*. Here, too, the questions are given eminent importance. In contrast to ... *un di velt*, in *Night* the depiction of Moishe is more prominent, appearing right at the beginning of the story. Moishe is not only a synagogue servant, but also a great Scholar of *Kabbalah* (Jewish mysticism). He introduces the young Wiesel to the secrets of the *Zohar* and the other *Kabbalistic* books. At their first meeting, Moishe asks the boy, who was praying alone in the synagogue at night: »Why do you cry when you pray?«<sup>37</sup> The confused boy replies that he does not know. Moishe stubbornly continues to ask:

»Why do you pray?« he asked after a moment.

Why did I pray? Strange question. Why did I live? Why did I breathe?

›I don't know,‹ I told him, even more troubled and ill at ease.

›I don't know.‹

From that day on, I saw him often. He explained to me, with great emphasis, that every question possessed a power that was lost in the answer ...

Man comes closer to God through the questions he asks Him, he liked to say. Therein lies true dialog. Man asks and God replies. But we don't understand His replies. We cannot understand them. Because

37 Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang Pub, 2006), 4.

they dwell in the depths of our souls and remain there until we die. The real answers, Eliezer, you will find only within yourself.

»And why do you pray, Moishe?« I asked him.

»I pray to the God within me for the strength to ask Him the real questions.«<sup>38</sup>

Through such conversations and continuous study of the mystical writings, the two of them delve deeper and deeper into the mystery of God: »And in the course of those evenings I became convinced that Moishe the Beadle would help me enter eternity, into that time when question and answer would become ONE.«<sup>39</sup>

These passages are deliberately placed by the author at the beginning of a section which, after briefly mentioning his childhood, describes the period of occupation by the National Socialists, the immediate ghettoization and the deportation to Auschwitz. The survivor's account is thus conceived against the background of the questioning encounters with the Kabbalistic tradition and the realization that the question is ultimately more important than an answer. For there is no answer to Auschwitz, as Wiesel writes in the foreword to the new edition: »Sometimes I am asked if I know ›the response to Auschwitz;‹ I answer that not only do I not know it, but that I don't even know if a tragedy of this magnitude *has* a response.«<sup>40</sup>

As discussed above, many questions from ... *un di velt* are repeated in *Night*. At the end, the survivor also refers to the scene in the newly liberated Buchenwald camp, where he straightens up with all his might to see himself in the mirror: »From the depths of the mirror, a corpse was contemplating me. The look in his eyes as he gazed at me has never left me.«<sup>41</sup> The look in the mirror and the look out of the mirror at the end of a report on Auschwitz is not a conclusion—it is a question to the reader.

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38 Ibid., 4–5.

39 Ibid., 5.

40 Ibid., xv.

41 Ibid., 115.

## 2.5. CONCLUSION

As is well known, an autobiography is always a construction or reconstruction, and the subsequent ordering, of experiences, aiming to structure them in a meaningful way.<sup>42</sup> However, Auschwitz and the experience of the Holocaust, as Wiesel constantly emphasizes, elude any form of meaning and meaningful structuring. In the face of Auschwitz, meaningful narratives fail and answers become impossible. Thus, questions serve as a method to engage with and understand an experience, without providing an instant coherent story, but instead leaving room for ongoing interpretation.

As our analysis shows, the questions in Wiesel's autobiographical work can be seen not only as a descriptive category of content and a form of communication, but also as a literary stylistic device. They unite Wiesel's various works into an overall composition, link thematic complexes across works and represent a central stylistic feature of his writing. At the same time, this style allows his deep despair and his hope to shine through, simultaneously, in varying degrees of intensity.

And yet despite this ambivalent position in Wiesel's mode of questioning, looking back on his life and especially his life's work in his credo in *Open Heart*, he keeps the following cautious perspective of hope: »Such is the miracle: A tale about despair becomes a tale against despair.«<sup>43</sup> This contains the overarching question that is directed at us, the readers, and our decisions, the question of whether Wiesel's cautious hope will manifest or whether man is condemned to repeat Auschwitz.

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42 Cf. Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, *Autobiographie* (Stuttgart, Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 2005).

43 Wiesel, *Open Heart*, 73.

### 3. »AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MOOD« AS META-MOTIF, META-NARRATIVE, AND META-STRUCTURE OF ELIE WIESEL'S OEUVRE

VALESCA BAERT-KNOLL

#### 3.1. INTRODUCTION

With more than 50 published books, the Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel has created a comprehensive body of writing that transcends genres. Roughly categorized, it comprises of autobiographical, Jewish, and essayistic writings and numerous prose texts that include novels and a few dramas.<sup>1</sup> Despite this diversity, his work does not disintegrate into individual parts but instead operates, as characterized by Wiesel himself, as »un *oeuvre* —a body of work« whose texts »relate to the same world, the same theme, and to the same obsessions«<sup>2</sup> triggered by his experience of Auschwitz. »Autobiography constitutes an integral element of Wiesel's work and plays a central and complex role in it«<sup>3</sup> notes Irving Abrahamson in his programmatic *Introductory essay in Against Silence—The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*. That argument is followed und developed: The inner coherence of this *oeuvre* is generated by the thematically recurring narrative of Wiesel's life story, which permeates the

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1 For more details, see the introductory article in this volume.

2 John Weisman, »Storyteller Elie Wiesel Weaving His Spell at a Local Synagogue,« Detroit Free Press, March 12, 1972, quoted in *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, ed. Irving Abrahamson (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), vol. I, 51. [originally in *Against Silence*: New title »A Body of Work« supplied by the editor, where none previously existed]

3 Irving Abrahamson, ed., »Introductory Essay,« in *Against Silence*, vol. I, 14. The central role of the autobiographical in Wiesel's work has already been noted many times, for example Molly Abramowitz, who writes: »Wiesel's writings are thoroughly autobiographical.« Molly Abramowitz, *Elie Wiesel: A Bibliography* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1974), 5. Likewise, Boschki refers to Wiesel's fictionalized texts, which contain »a wealth of life-historical fragments,« see Reinhold Boschki, *Der Schrei: Gott und Mensch im Werk von Elie Wiesel* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1994), 80.

work in richly varied motifs. This is not limited to the decidedly autobiographical part of the work but also includes his fictionalized writings, novels, and dramas. It furthermore determines the conditions of the reading and reception of Wiesel's *oeuvre*, often described as autobiographical or even that the entire body of work functions as an autobiography. Wiesel states this differently in an interview with Harold Flender: »You said all of my books are autobiographical. The only one is *Night*. The others are not. [...] I would say, however, that *the mood* of all of my books is autobiographical.«<sup>4</sup>

In the following, Wiesel's nuance of *autobiographical mood* will be understood as the meta-narrative of his *oeuvre* that guarantees inner coherence. This will be supplemented by two further readings of the autobiographical mood as a meta-motif in terms of content and an external meta-structure to show that the autobiographical represents a particular thematic-motif continuum and provides a unifying access to Wiesel's *oeuvre* that transcends genres.

### 3.2. AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MOOD AS A META-NARRATIVE

The term *autobiographical mood* raises the issue of the relationship between the representation of »reality« as veracity and literary fictionality in literary studies. The debates span the relationship between historical truth and experienced veracity,<sup>5</sup> which rely on neuroscientific findings. These contains findings about the constructional character of autobiographical memory<sup>6</sup> as well as for the memory processes emanating from it. Both link to relevant literary theories: While

4 Harold Flender, »The Key to the Mystery,« *Women's American ORT Reporter*, March/April 1970, 4–6, quoted in *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, ed. Irving Abrahamson (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), vol. III, 198 [Emphasis by Valesca Baert-Knoll; new title supplied by the editor; replaces the original].

5 For an in-depth discussion of the differentiation between autobiographical truth and veracity, see Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, *Autobiographie* (Stuttgart, Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 2005), 41–46. For further reading, see the remarks in Aleida Assmann, »Vier Grundtypen der Zeugenschaft,« in *Behutsames Lesen: Alttestamentliche Exegese im interdisziplinären Methodendiskurs: Christof Hardmeier zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Sylke Lubs et al. (Leipzig: EVA, 2007), 145–149.

6 See Hans Markowitsch and Harald Welzer, *Das autobiographische Gedächtnis* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2005).

early theories of autobiography argued that autobiographical texts can never fulfill their historical truth content due to their linguistic composition, more recent scholarship demonstrates that the autobiography falls (necessarily) behind the historical reliability, which represents its constitutive moment.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the new and comprehensive handbook on this topic was also published under the double title *Autobiography/Autofiction* (2019), intended to correspond to the mutability of these texts.<sup>8</sup> Autobiographical texts of Holocaust survivors have a unique role since their memories and accounts are subject to particular demands regarding their narrated, historical truth and referentiality. The momentum of the autobiographical becomes a specific medium and, simultaneously, the goal of representation. The relationship of communication between survivors and readers is in the foreground of the research interest, which is why textuality and referentiality are not mutually exclusive regarding these autobiographical accounts of survival.<sup>9</sup>

Wiesel's *Night* has always been the subject of debate about whether it is an autobiographical account, a memoir, or a novel.<sup>10</sup> Victoria Nesfield and Philip Smith have noted in their recent anthology *The Struggle for Understanding* that *Night* is »too literary to be pure memoir [...] too committed to the ideal of testimony, and too autobiographical, to be read as fiction [...] Wiesel's

7 Cf. Wagner-Egelhaaf, *Autobiographie*, 210.

8 Cf. Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, ed., *Handbook of Autobiography / Autofiction: Theory and Concepts* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2019), xvi.

9 Cf. Wagner-Egelhaaf, *Autobiographie*, 208.

10 For discussion of whether Wiesel's *Night* should be regarded as a novel or a memoir and for further discussion of the constitution and differentiation between Holocaust testimonies and Holocaust literature, see pertinently: Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Lawrence L. Langer, »Whose Testimony? The Confusion of Fiction with Fact,« in *Elie Wiesel: Jewish, Literary, and Moral Perspectives*, ed. Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 201–210; Rosemary Horowitz, ed. *Elie Wiesel and the Art of Storytelling* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006); and Alan Rosen, ed., *Literature of the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).—For a comprehensive and explanatory overview, see Victoria Nesfield and Philip Smith, eds., »Introduction,« in *The Struggle for Understanding: Elie Wiesel's Literary Works* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), xii–xvi.

works suggest that we lack a widely accepted vocabulary to discuss this kind of work.«<sup>11</sup> Nesfield and Smith implicitly refer to a well-known gap in the canon of genres, which has been discussed since the 1950s and 1960s and later led to the relevant theories of the autobiographical pact (Lejeune 1971) and autofiction (Doubrovsky 1977):<sup>12</sup> According to these theories, the text offers both: An autobiographical-referential and a fictional reading. Ultimately, the reader decides under which approach he/she perceives the text.

Wiesel's characterization of his *oeuvre* as perceivable in an *autobiographical mood*, suggests that these theories can be applied to the reception of his *oeuvre* as a whole. Their applicability to texts with testimonial character—such as the reports of Holocaust survivors, in Wiesel's case his first work *Night*—may seem questionable. However, since these theories do not explicitly consider the claim of truthfulness and convey a memory against its oblivion, these testimonies do not want to be understood as fictionalized. This problem clarifies why Wiesel consistently refers to *Night* as *autobiographical* and as a *memoir*, an attribution followed here. Wiesel's fictionalized work, the readings of *autobiographical mood*, autobiographical pact, and autofiction can be constructively combined, as recently demonstrated by Sue Vice.<sup>13</sup>

Nesfield and Smith further state that »Wiesel's biography is important to

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11 Ibid., xiv.

12 See Philippe Lejeune, *L'Autobiographie en France* (Paris: Armand Colin Editeur, 1971). This is followed in 1975 by the essay *Le pacte autobiographique* in a collection of essays of the same name, see Philippe Lejeune, ed. »Le Pacte Autobiographique,« in *Le Pacte Autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 13–46; cf. Serge Doubrovsky, *Fils* (Paris: Galilee, 1977). See also Serge Doubrovsky, Jaques Lecarme and Philippe Lejeune, eds., *Autofictions & Cie* (Paris: Université Paris, 1993).

13 Following on from the problem of the literary classification of *Night*, Sue Vice's contribution *Allegories of the Holocaust in Elie Wiesel's Late Fiction*, takes into account Wiesel's later meditations on the relationship between memory and autobiographical writing and argues that the texts *The Forgotten*, *The Sonderberg Case*, and *Hostage* should be read as autofiction. Vice clearly defines *Night* as »testimony.« Sue Vice, »Allegories of the Holocaust in Elie Wiesel's Late Fiction,« in *The Struggle for Understanding: Elie Wiesel's Literary Works*, ed. Victoria Nesfield and Philip Smith (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 261.

those who study his novels,« and it is often »difficult to disentangle the two.«<sup>14</sup> This is exemplified by the misunderstandings and irritations caused by the genre classification of the first two fictionalized publications following *Night: Dawn*, and *Day*.<sup>15</sup> Because these novels are available as a trilogy,<sup>16</sup> they are often read as autobiographical sequels to *Night*, therefore Wiesel had to clarify their fictional character repeatedly: »I was never a terrorist, like the central character in Dawn. The Accident is partly autobiographical, but the others are fiction.«<sup>17</sup> What is interesting about this statement is the differentiation made between *Dawn* as pure »fiction« and *Day* as »partly autobiographical.«<sup>18</sup> If *Night*, *Dawn*, and *Day* are considered a trilogy it spans three different literary genres or dimensions of autobiographical truth or veracity. The unifying momentum in this context is the meta-narrative of the *autobiographical mood* cited here; all texts are differently enriched with autobiographical content and historical truths. *Day*, for example, is *partly autobiographical* where Wiesel discusses his accident with a cab in New York City: »Then I came to the United States as a correspondent for an Israeli newspaper. [...] Three months after I arrived, as I was coming back from the cable office one night, a cab hit me. That is the story of The Accident.«<sup>19</sup>

14 Nesfield and Smith, »Introduction«, xiii.

15 Cf. Elie Wiesel, *Dawn* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961); German edition: Elie Wiesel »Tag« in *Die Nacht zu begraben, Elischa (Trilogie: Nacht, Morgengrauen, Tag)* (München, Esslingen: Langen-Müller, 2016), 263–400; Elie Wiesel, *The Accident* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1962).

16 See exemplarily the German-language trilogy: Wiesel, *Die Nacht zu begraben, Elischa*.

17 Flender, »The Key to the Mystery,« 198 [New title supplied by the editor; replaces the original].

18 In *Open Heart*, this differentiation is no longer made; there he says: »My very first works of fiction are set not during the Event, but after. In Dawn, about the clandestine struggle of the Jews against the British army in Palestine—a survivor of the death camps is ordered to execute a British officer. In Day, a young journalist is run over by a cab in New York. [...] I often think of these entirely fictional works, losing myself in an elusive elsewhere, searching for my inner compass.« Elie Wiesel, *Open Heart* (New York: Schocken Books, 2012), 43.

19 Elie Wiesel, »A Small Measure of Victory,« interview by Gene Koppel and Henry Kaufmann, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974, April 25, 1973, quoted in *Against Silence*, vol. III, 217–218. [Adaption from the original source]

Though declared pure fiction, *Dawn* has recently been analyzed by Rosemary Horowitz as opening up fundamental insights into Wiesel's political beliefs and those of society at the time.<sup>20</sup> Wiesel has revealed that after the publication of *Night*, he used fiction to discuss different perspectives, broaden his horizons about them, and—centrally—thereby to communicate his stance:

»I wrote it [*Dawn*], first of all, because I wanted to explore the other side: What does it mean to kill? But mainly, I wrote it against killing. I wrote that book against political violence. Very few people noticed, but the end of *Dawn* is not really a murder but a suicide. When Elisha, my hero, kills the major, he says, ›I killed Elisha.«<sup>21</sup>

Here, autobiography is not understood as a genre but as a particular narrative mode. It can be considered as a unifying meta-dimension, specifically, a meta-narrative. Consequently, *Dawn* and *Day* can be perceived in the autobiographical mood named by Wiesel.

The readability of the *autobiographical mood* is more comprehensive than these publications. Wiesel's fictionalized writings, prose, drama, and other non-fictionalized texts, such as the Jewish Hasidic publications and essays, contain details of his life in a more or less heavily distorted form. Vice, a researcher of Holocaust Fiction, speaks of how »in each instance, a range of similar narrative elements is evident.«<sup>22</sup> She identifies in Wiesel a technique »of blurring the lines between allegory and realism,« which she understands as his characteristic strategy »that tends to prioritize ideas over their literary incarnation.«<sup>23</sup> This idea ties in nicely with the literary, scholarly observation regarding the peculiarities of Holocaust survivors' accounts. The text functions as a medium, but the con-

20 Rosemary Horowitz, »Wiesel's Political Vision in *Dawn*, The Testament, and Hostage,« in *The Struggle for Understanding: Elie Wiesel's Literary Works*, ed. Victoria Nesfield and Philip Smith (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 240.

21 Elie Wiesel, »Questions and Answers at Brandeis-Bardin,« Brandeis-Bardin Institute, Simi Valley, California, January 22, 1978, quoted in *Against Silence*, vol. III, 250.

22 Vice, »Allegories of the Holocaust in Elie Wiesel's Late Fiction,« 261.

23 *Ibid.*, 277.

tent is in the foreground of the medial constitution—this content is autobiographical or at least of an *autobiographical mood*.

### 3.3. AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MOOD AS A META-MOTIF

In addition to these debates on genre regarding the autobiographical content of Wiesel's writings, the question of whether the *autobiographical mood* can be considered a unifying momentum arises. More specifically, whether the *autobiographical mood* is a unifying momentum on the level of content as well, and therefore represents a meta-motif. The *autobiographical mood* determines some of the central motifs in *Night* since these connect immanently to the autobiographical theme and thus establish a nexus between them in content.

Such a reading of autobiography as a meta-access is already implicit in Reinhold Boschki's work, where it is related to the motif of the messenger: »The motif of the messenger who has a message to deliver is more than just a literary one. It is the life story of the survivor [Wiesel] himself.«<sup>24</sup> Messengers appear in several of Wiesel's novels, referencing the experience of Wiesel's involuntary messenger-hood: They are often younger characters who learn from older characters and must assume the role of both witness and messenger but do not know how to do so.<sup>25</sup> There is a good example of this in the novel *The Oath*, in which two messengers, Azriel and his counterpart, repeatedly find themselves in the above situation in different phases of their lives. In *The Oath*, this double casting of the messenger is a particularly pronounced self-referential casting of characters, which relates to the experience of Wiesel as a captive of Auschwitz and the resulting mission of the survivor's messenger-hood.

This motif of involuntary witnessing and messenger-hood is closely related to another highly self-referential leitmotif, the problem of speaking or writing about the Holocaust, as Wiesel points out:

24 Reinhold Boschki, »Elie Wiesel im Spiegel seiner Autobiographien,« in *Kultur allein ist nicht genug: Das Werk von Elie Wiesel—Herausforderung für Religion und Gesellschaft*, ed. Reinhold Boschki and Dagmar Mensink, Religion in Geschichte und Gesellschaft 10 (Münster: LIT Verlag, 1998), 33.

25 Elie Wiesel, *The Oath* (New York: Random House, 1973).

»As you remember, the book begins with Azriel's saying, ›No, I will not speak, I will not speak, I will not speak‹. Moreover, it ends with his telling the Kolvillág tale to the young man. Why the oath of silence in between? He explains to Azriel's father, the scribe, that he does not believe in the written word because it is too easily distorted. He believes only in silence. Here he reflects on my ambivalence about having written about the Holocaust. Many of us feel guilty: Maybe we should not have written a word. For years and years, I spoke about the need for silence. Only one of my books, *Night*, deals directly with the Holocaust; all the others reveal why one cannot speak about it.«<sup>26</sup>

As seen in the quotation above, only in *Night* he directly wrote about the Holocaust as »an autobiographical story, a kind of testimony of one witness speaking of his own life, his own death.«<sup>27</sup> Despite describing his memory as testimony, Wiesel assumes it can never be accurately depicted: »What happened during that night I'm afraid, will not be revealed.«<sup>28</sup> For Wiesel, speaking about the Holocaust is accompanied by a fundamental experience of ambivalence. He speaks about this time in the face of the immanent question of whether silence is not better after all, as he finds himself in the situation of »communicating something in words that defies words.«<sup>29</sup> In *Night*, as in all his works, he has chosen the communication of the *eclipsed secret* based on this premise: »I tried to communicate a secret, a kind of an eclipse, and, in the Kafka tradition, even the eclipse is eclipsed. The secret itself is a secret.«<sup>30</sup>

26 Lily Edelman, »Interview with Elie Wiesel,« *National Jewish Monthly*, November 1973, quoted in *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, ed. Irving Abrahamson (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), vol. II, 81.

27 Harry James Cargas, *Conversations with Elie Wiesel* (New York: Diamond Communications, 1976), 86.

28 Ibid.

29 Elie Wiesel, »The Holocaust and the Anguish of the Writer,« City University of New York Graduate School Symposium on »The Holocaust Century: Implications and Anxieties,« New York, March 22, 1973, quoted in *Against Silence*, vol. II, 66.

30 Elie Wiesel, »Talking and Writing and Keeping Silent,« in *The German Church Struggle and the Holocaust*, ed. Franklin H. Littell and Hubert G. Locke (Detroit: Wayne State

This particular form of communication ties back to the motif of the storyteller, which comes from a Jewish tradition and is another leitmotif in Wiesel's works. Storytelling, as a particular mode of witnessing, represents a fluid and multifaceted narrative form. Storytelling marks a specific form of communicative performance and literary act, that counts largely for autobiographies as well.<sup>31</sup> Following that argument an autobiography is not a work of art autonomously put into the world by an author. In fact, it is rather the product and medium of communicative processes between author and audience. This process is captured by Wiesel's self-image as a messenger and storyteller, which can be read against the background of his biography as a Jewish Holocaust survivor: »For most writers, their work is a commentary on their life; for Jewish writers it is the opposite; their lives are commentaries on their work. And that is what has happened in my own life.«<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, storytelling can contain both continuities and ruptures and is enriched rather than undermined by contradictions.<sup>33</sup> It allows Wiesel »a layering of variant narratives that together negotiate a complex and thick representation of experience.«<sup>34</sup> Storytelling is analogous to the conception of his *oeuvre* as a »body of work that [...] relate[s] to the same world, the same theme, and to the same obsessions,«<sup>35</sup> and blurs the boundaries to fictionality yet remains genuinely autobiographical: »I write about things that are true. There are things that happened that are not true. And some things are true, even though they never happened.«<sup>36</sup> For Wiesel, storytelling means more than just a narrative form;

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University Press, 1974), 269.

31 Wagner-Egelhaaf, *Autobiographie*, 57.

32 Elie Wiesel, »Hasidism and Man's Love of a Man,« *Jewish Heritage*, no. Fall/Winter (1972), quoted in *Against Silence*, vol. II, 255.

33 Cf. Sara R. Horowitz, »The Storyteller in History: Shoah Memory and the Idea of the Novel,« in *Elie Wiesel: Jewish, Literary, and Moral Perspectives*, ed. Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 113.

34 Ibid.

35 Weisman, »Storyteller Elie Wiesel Weaving His Spell at a Local Synagogue,« 51. [originally in *Against Silence*: New title »A Body of Work« supplied by the editor, where none previously existed]

36 Joseph A. Kanofsky, »Waking My Ear to Understand as a Student,« in *Take a Teacher*,

it is a way of life involving activism. In the multiple literary and genre-specific possibilities of his *oeuvre*, he can communicate his remembered truth as a storyteller, always in the hope that his recipients will internalize it and reflect on their actions accordingly. The narrator figure in *Day/The Accident* exemplifies this: »To listen to a story is to play a part in it, to take sides, to say yes or no, to move one way or the other. From then on there is a before and an after. And even to forget becomes a cowardly acceptance.«<sup>37</sup> Storytellers, Wiesel summarizes elsewhere, have »one motivation: to tell of themselves while telling of others«.<sup>38</sup>

This illustrates the possibility of reading the *autobiographical mood* as a meta-motif.<sup>39</sup> As exemplified by the novel *The Oath*, Wiesel can communicate his remembered truth through the fictionalized characters of his novels (or dramas), making the eclipsed secret of his past accessible to his readers: Wiesel bears witness to his life by telling stories about other (fictionalized) characters, but written in an *autobiographical mood* and received accordingly. The leitmotifs of the messenger or witness, the ambivalence of speaking or remaining silent in the face of the Holocaust, and the role of the *storyteller* are genuinely autobiographical since they are based exclusively on the experience of the Holocaust. This is reflected in many ways in their content at the textual level and makes it clear that the *autobiographical mood* can be seen as a meta-motif that unites them in terms of content: Through their constant recurrence, they generate an inner thematic coherence and show that the meta-motif of the autobiographical or *autobiographical mood* encompasses Wiesel's entire *oeuvre*. *Autobiography* as such can also be placed in the circle of leitmotifs. This also applies for Biogra-

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*Make a Friend: Students Write for Elie Wiesel*, ed. Michael Zank and Leanne Hoppe (Boston: Elie Wiesel Center for Judaic Studies, 2014), 73.

37 Wiesel, *The Accident*, 95; Subsequent publications as Elie Wiesel, *Day* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), 95.

38 Elie Wiesel, »Menahem Mendl Kotzk,« in *Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters*, ed. Elie Wiesel (New York: Random House, 1972), 259.

39 Wiesel's speech on Holocaust Memorial Day on January 27, 2000, in the Bundestag, which he opened with the words »Let me begin with a story,« also speaks for this. See Elie Wiesel, »Rede von Elie Wiesel (27.01.2000),« Address to the German Bundestag, Deutscher Bundestag, January 27, 2000, <https://www.bundestag.de/parlament/geschichte/gastredner/wiesel/rede-247400>.

phy. Repeatedly, the biographies of others and their life testimonies are taken into account in Wiesel's *oeuvre*, already beginning with *Night*. An example of this is the central figure of Moyshe the Beadle. Wiesel opens *Night*—his own testimony—with a short biography Moyshe, an orphan who belongs to the victimized group of so called »foreign jews« that is even more severely persecuted than Wiesel and his family.<sup>40</sup>

Since Wiesel assigns a special place to the beginning of his works, this setting marks an exceptional accentuation:

»A text stands and falls with its beginning. The first page contains everything else. For me, the challenge lies in the first sentence: If it rings true, it carries me to the climax of the whole book. Sometimes I spend weeks and months looking for it. Once I've found it, I can't let it go.«<sup>41</sup>

It can be argued that since *Night* is a debut work, it cannot be expected of Wiesel to have had a sophisticated literary agenda. However, *Night* was condensed from the Yiddish *un di welt hot geschwign*, edited, adapted to a Christian readership, and the narrative fleshed out in many places.<sup>42</sup> This suggests that *Night's* beginning was not chosen at random. In addition, it can be noted that Wiesel, as a Hasid,<sup>43</sup> remained in the Jewish tradition, where the beginning, *Bereshit*, occupies a prominent position: »As a Jew, I shall tell them the story of our past, beginning with Bereshit.«<sup>44</sup> He also elaborates on this in his novels,

40 See the opening sentence of *Night*: »They called him Moyshe the Beadle,« in Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 3.

41 Elie Wiesel, »Jenseits des Schweigens,« in *Das Gegenteil von Gleichgültigkeit ist Erinnerung: Versuche zu Elie Wiesel*, ed. Dagmar Mensink and Reinhold Boschki (Mainz: Grünewald, 1995), 9.

42 See the remarks on this in the editorial notes to the new German translation Elie Wiesel, *Die Nacht: Erinnerung und Zeugnis—Neu übersetzt Forschungsstelle Elie Wiesel* (Freiburg: Herder, 2022), 170–174.

43 For instance, Wiesel described his childhood in a Hasidic Orthodox community and his extensive religious socialization. Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Random House, 1995), 9–12.

44 Elie Wiesel, »First Louis L. Kaplan Convocation Lecture,« Baltimore Hebrew College,

exemplified in *The Beggar of Jerusalem*: »In the beginning was the Word; the Word is the story of man; and man is the story of God.«<sup>45</sup>

In terms of content, Moyshe had a particular influence on Wiesel's life; he was more than a friend to Wiesel; he was his first »master of Kabbalah«.<sup>46</sup> In the autobiography *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, Wiesel describes at various points the central role that Moyshe played in his life: »[M]y Moshe—the man I speak of in my writings, Moshe the beadle, also known as Moshe the madman, who returned from there to warn us of disasters to come—[...]«.<sup>47</sup> This unexpected positioning of another biography as the beginning of Wiesel's own autobiography highlights *Night's* narrative construction. The short story of Moyshe the Beadle is the first reference to a foreign biography that Wiesel incorporates into his autobiography. His later autobiographies, *All Rivers Run to the Sea* and *And the Sea Is Never Full*, are enriched with numerous references to foreign biographies and their influence on Wiesel's life and literary activity. The citation of foreign biographies, which influence Wiesel's biography, can therefore be seen as another dialectical leitmotif. The (auto)biographical or biographical references are a recurring motif in content and simultaneously a purposefully placed narrative. Given the reading of the *autobiographical mood*, the autobiographical can therefore be identified as formative in terms of motifs and determining in terms of narratives, thus as a meta-motif in terms of content and a meta-narrative that determines narrative form.

### 3.4. AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS META-STRUCTURE

The *autobiographical mood* can also be seen on the structural level, specifically in the conception and structure of Wiesel's *oeuvre*. It represents an order-creating and framing meta-structure: at the beginning and end of the entire work, there is a decidedly autobiographical text, which takes on a programmatic function

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Baltimore, Maryland, October 23, 1973, quoted in *Against Silence*, vol II, 287.

45 Elie Wiesel, *A Beggar in Jerusalem* (New York: Random House, 1970), 133.

46 Wiesel, *Night*, 4.

47 Wiesel, *All Rivers*, 361.

in terms of content.<sup>48</sup> Starting with *Night* and concluding with *Open Heart*, one can speak of a framing of the entire work through autobiography. *Open Heart* takes on a special retrospective, which Wiesel introduces in one of the last chapters of this book with the words »[a] Credo that defies my path.«<sup>49</sup> *Night* marks the literary starting point of his message and his lifelong commitment to universal human rights.<sup>50</sup> The fundamental themes of his life are once again brought into view, ordered, (re)evaluated and concluded with his credo regarding his literary work in *Open Heart*:

»I still believe in man in spite of man. I believe in language even though it has been wounded, deformed and perverted by the enemies of mankind. And I continue to cling to words because it is up to us to transform them into instruments of comprehension rather than contempt.«<sup>51</sup>

### 3.5. CONCLUSION

Wiesel's *oeuvre* is framed by autobiographical texts and contextualized by his two great autobiographies; they mark its meta-structure. His fictionalized writings with particular reference to *The Oath / Day*, and *Dawn*, are developed in a varying but permanently self-referential manner. The central leitmotifs of the messenger/witness, the ambivalence between speaking and silence in the face of the Holocaust, as well as the motif of the storyteller, which originates in the Jewish tradition, can be subsumed under the *autobiographical mood* as a meta-motif. The autobiographical represents the unifying character of these leit-

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48 One can argue that the two significant autobiographies *All Rivers Run to the Sea* and *And the Sea Is Never Full* also take on an organizing function. Published in 1994 and 1996, they mark the end of Wiesel's main literary phase and offer important self-interpretations, backgrounds, and contextualizations of his work.

49 Wiesel, *Open Heart*, 72.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

motifs. Likewise, »(auto)biography« can be added as another leitmotif since it marks the *oeuvre's* inner coherence and thematically comprehensive framework.

The autobiography as a meta-narrative becomes significant insofar as all parts of the body of work and each publication can be read in the *autobiographical mood*, a way of reading which proves to be connectable to recent literary theories.

#### 4. ELIE WIESEL'S TESTIMONY—CHALLENGES AND REFLECTIONS ON THE GERMAN TRANSLATION OF ... *UN DI VELT HOT GESHVIGN*

MARION EICHELSDÖRFER

»Remember!« said the father to his son, and the son to his friend: gather the names, the faces, the tears. If, by a miracle, you come out of it alive, try to reveal everything, omitting nothing, forgetting nothing. Such was the oath we had all taken: »If, by some miracle, I survive, I will devote my life to testifying on behalf of all those whose shadows will be bound to mine forever.«<sup>1</sup>

Elie Wiesel considered it his duty to bear witness, even if he struggled with the fact that any attempt to express the unspeakable in language must fail. Since his liberation in Buchenwald on April 11, 1945, he has made private notes about his experiences. In the last chapter of his Yiddish text ... *un di velt hot geshvign* (... *and the World was Silent*, 1956; later published in a shortened version as *La Nuit* 1958), Wiesel describes how he, still in the provisional hospital of the American army in Buchenwald, began to record his memories<sup>2</sup> »I stayed in bed for a few more days, during which I wrote down a sketch of the book you dear reader hold in your hands.«<sup>3</sup> Later, when he was taken from Buchenwald to France with other Jewish orphans, he continued to write down his memories of his time in the camps.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Elie Wiesel, »Why I Write,« in *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences*, (New York: Summit Books, 1990), 15.

2 All non-English quotations have been translated into English by the author. Eliezer Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, ed. Mark Turkov and Abraham Mitlberg, *Dos Poylishe Yidntum* 117 (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-Farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine, 1956).

3 Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, 245.

4 Elie Wiesel, preface to *Les enfants de Buchenwald: Que sont devenus les 1000 enfants juifs sauvés en 1945?*, by Judith Hemmendinger (Lausanne, Paris: Favre, 1984), 179.

Even though he had probably been engaged in writing his memoirs for several years, ... *un di velt hot geshvign* was not published until 1956. As Wiesel writes, he imposed on himself a ten-year silence:

»Someday, in years to come, I would celebrate memory, but not yet. Even then I was aware of the deficiencies and inadequacies of language. [...] The Sohar [sic] speaks of Galut ha-Dibbur, the exile of the word, for words, too, are exiled. A chasm opens between them and their content; they no longer contain the meanings they once harbored. Having become obstacles more than points of reference, words broke my spirit. [...] I decided to wait, to make a kind of vow: Ten years would pass before I would speak, before I would come forward with my deposition.«<sup>5</sup>

When Wiesel finally dared to put his memoirs into words in Yiddish and bring them to publication, another process of editing his text followed shortly after that, intending to describe his survival to the wider French public.

In the following, I will provide a few key details here without delving into the complex textual genesis of ... *un di velt hot geshvign* and *La Nuit*. According to Wiesel's memoirs *Tous les Fleuves Vont à la Mer ... (All Rivers Run to the Sea ...)*, French 1994, English and German 1995), the text of the Yiddish edition was based on an extensive manuscript of 862 pages. These were edited and shortened to the 245 pages finally printed.<sup>6</sup> In addition, a Hebrew-language draft with the same title as the Yiddish text *VeHaOlam Shatak* (And the World was Silent, probably written in 1954/55) was created in parallel. This text resembles *La Nuit* in passages but remains a fragment.<sup>7</sup> Finally, a phase of editing and shortening of the Yiddish text followed, resulting in a French-language version, now 178 pages long, which we know today as *La Nuit*. It is diffi-

5 Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Schocken Books 1995), 150–151.

6 Wiesel, *All Rivers*, 319.

7 See the editorial notes on the new German translation: Elie Wiesel, *Die Nacht: Erinnerung und Zeugnis—Neu übersetzt Forschungsstelle Elie Wiesel*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 2022), 170–174.

cult to trace which editorial interventions occurred at what time and on whose initiative. The last two French- and English-language editions published during Wiesel's lifetime (2006/2007) were once again authorized by him and appeared for the first time with a preface by the author. What is known is that the French publisher Jerome Lindon at the publishing house Minuit greatly influenced the edition of *La Nuit*. In this way, Wiesel underlined his agreement with the numerous cuts he had to make. He described it in his memoirs: »In hindsight, I also see that Lindon was right. I have never regretted having cut the text. The deleted passages are nevertheless present. In the case of Auschwitz, what is not said weighs more heavily than the rest.«<sup>8</sup>

*La Nuit* was for Wiesel his first and most important book, as he emphasized, without which he would not have written all his other works. As can be seen from this brief sketch of the text's genesis, the Yiddish text of ... *un di velt hot geshvign* played an essential role in the creation of *La Nuit*. Neither text is the »correct version.« Rather, ... *un di velt hot geshvign* and *La Nuit* constitute Wiesel's testimony, written for two different readerships at their creation.<sup>9</sup>

In the following, however, the focus will be on the Yiddish text and its form, and at the same time, on the question of making this text accessible to a German-speaking audience. This article outlines my approach to my German translation of Wiesel's Yiddish memoir, which is informed by two key aspects: First, the way language functions in the original (its intertextuality, its Yiddish and Jewish reference points, the switch between languages in the text, etc.) and second, the purpose of the text as a witness account that retells and informs about the experiences of the camp. With my translation, I aim to solve the lack of nuance in the shortened, novel form of the memoir in *Night*. To emphasize my argument, I will demonstrate that the aspects of bearing witness or retelling the story of the camps are getting lost in the existing translations of Wiesel's story.

8 Elie Wiesel, *Tous les fleuves vont à la mer: Mémoires* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 413. This passage only exists in the French version. Translated by the author of this contribution.

9 Wiesel describes the process of transformation and editing in his memoirs: Wiesel, *All Rivers*, 319–321.

#### 4.1. YIDDISH—A LANGUAGE AND PLACE OF MEMORY

Although several languages were spoken in Wiesel's family, such as Romanian, Hungarian, and German, if only because of the daily contact with customers in the family grocery store, Wiesel's mother tongue was Yiddish.<sup>10</sup> His Yiddish, however, was at first purely colloquial and not elaborate enough for him to have been able to write longer texts. Only in France after the war did he become acquainted with Yiddish as a literary language. When, at the age of just nineteen, he accepted a position in Paris at the Yiddish magazine *Tsion in Kamf*, the organ of the Jewish resistance movement in Palestine (*Irgun*) and worked as a translator of newspaper articles from Hebrew into Yiddish, he realized: »I was wholly ignorant of Yiddish grammar and its vast, rich literature. I had not yet read—except for a few fragments—the works of Peretz, Sholem Aleichem, or Mendele. The names Leivik and Markish, Bergelson and Der Nister, Glatstein and Manger, were still unfamiliar to me. I had a lot to learn.«<sup>11</sup>

Almost ten years later, ... *un di velt hot geshvign* appeared. This reflected both Wiesel's increased literary knowledge of the great Yiddish authors and the emotionality of the language of the heart—Yiddish. In his article »Rand Makhshoves Vegn Yiddish« (»Reflections on Yiddish«) for the Yiddish journal *Di Goldene Keyt*, Wiesel comments on the central role of Yiddish in his thinking and writing in the shadow of the Shoah:<sup>12</sup>

»And speaking of these times of darkness and night, perhaps we should emphasize that there is no language in the whole world that can evoke these times like Yiddish. The literature of annihilation would be all but soulless without Yiddish. I know it is written in other languages as well.

10 *Ibid.*, 22.

11 *Ibid.*, 163.

12 Yiddish journal published between 1949 and 1995 under the direction of Avrom (Avraham) Sutzkever (1913—2010). It published works by Yiddish established and emerging writers in Israel and the diaspora, Yiddish translations of Hebrew literature, and studies of literary and linguistic problems. Sol Liptzin, »Golden Keyt, Di,« *Encyclopedia Judaica*, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/goldene-keyt-di>.

But you can't compare it. The most authentic works about the extermination, both prose and poetry, are written in Yiddish. Is it because most of the victims were from that language and lived there? This question should be answered by experts. As for me, I know only one thing: if my first book had not existed in Yiddish, if my memoirs had not existed in Yiddish, my other books would have sunk into muteness.<sup>13</sup>

For Wiesel, Yiddish was initially the first access and the only linguistic means to write about what he had experienced. It opened the floodgates and made the act of »sharing« possible. Rachel Ertel, a literary scholar, and translator of Yiddish texts by Avrom Sutzkever and Leib Rochman into French, notes that the peculiarity of Yiddish is that it is the only language that has shared the fate of its speakers. Although a few smaller groups still strive to preserve Yiddish, Yiddish was murdered in Auschwitz along with the people who spoke it.<sup>14</sup> For this very reason, this language seems particularly suitable for expressing this vanished world, although Wiesel, like many survivors writing in other languages, struggled with the language's ability to express anything about what had happened.

In ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, Wiesel describes the place of his childhood by bringing his *shtetl*<sup>15</sup> (Yiddish for »small town«) to life once again in the memory of its destruction. Wiesel's *mame-loshn* (Yiddish: mother tongue), Yiddish, is not only a means of communication, but for him, it has certain qualities (in

13 Quoted from Rachel Ertel, »Écrits en Yiddish,« in *Autour de Élie Wiesel: Une parole pour l'avenir*, ed. Michaël de Saint-Cheron (Paris: Édition Odile Jacob, 1996), 23.

14 Ertel, »Écrits en yiddish«, 24. Ertel worked as a Yiddish lecturer and was concerned with transmitting the language and its literature. She has a book dedicated to this topic titled *Memoire du Yiddish: Transmettre une Langue Assassinée* (Paris: Édition Albin Michel, 2019).

15 »Shtetl« over time became a general term for any small town in Eastern Europe with a large Jewish population. »Two aspects of the shtetl experience, besides religion, were especially important in shaping the character of East European Jewry. One was demographic concentration, the impact of living in a community where Jews often formed a majority. The other was the language of the shtetl, Yiddish.« See: Samuel Kassow, introduction to *The Shtetl: New Evaluations* by Steven T. Katz, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 2.

Yiddish, one would say: *a spetsiyeln tam*—a special taste) and nuances of expression. Thus, the language itself seems to embody his childhood homeland:

»Yiddish was of course the language of the shtetl—a language that dates back to the high Middle Ages. Feverish, rich in meaning and fantasy, it carries better than any other tongue the life and dreams of the shtetl. There are Yiddish words that have no equivalent in any other language: *cholent* is something other than a hot plate; *yarmelke* is something other than a kipah; *yossem* is something other than an orphan; and *rakhmoness* is something other than *rakhmanut* or compassion. [...] I've said it often, I love speaking Yiddish. [...] I love Yiddish because it has been with me from the cradle. It was in Yiddish that I spoke my first words and expressed my first fears. It was in Yiddish that I greeted the Shabbat. I did not say ›*Shabbat shalom*‹ but ›*gut Shabess*‹.«<sup>16</sup>

Yiddish as a mother tongue is thus essential for Wiesel to describe the world of his childhood adequately. The lost homeland lives on in this language, and it is in this language that the emotional connection to this place is best expressed.

In ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, Wiesel describes his childhood environment, Jewish Sighet. He mentions the names of many people who shaped him: family members, teachers, rabbis, or friends.<sup>17</sup> He pays tribute to them and remembers them, much as is customary in *Yizkor* books.<sup>18</sup> In addition, he mentions the names of various synagogues and *batey midrash* (prayer and learning houses)

16 Elie Wiesel, »The World of the Shtetl,« in *The Shtetl: New Evaluations*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 301.

17 Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, 32–60.

18 Memorial books record the history of Jewish communities destroyed in the Shoah. They are written in either Yiddish or Hebrew, often in both languages. In them, lists of deceased community members are often recorded. However, the entire community's history is also described, and the most important personalities, such as rabbis and scholars, are named. Collection of digitized 650 Yizkor books from the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst: <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yizkor-books/city-or-town>; Yizkor Books Overview of YIVO Library: <https://www.yivo.org/Yizkor/>; Search engine to translated Yizkor books: <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Translations/>.

in Sighet. Beyond the description of the external environment, Wiesel's Jewish socialization, and thus his perception of events, is an expression of the *shtetl*. Wiesel's narrative is shaped by the Jewish time structure: daily prayer times (e.g., *Mincha*, the afternoon prayer, *Ma'ariv*, the evening prayer), the Jewish calendar of holidays (such as *Pessach*, *Shavu'ot*, *Rosh HaShana*, *Yom Kippur*), their lived rites and customs within the family.<sup>19</sup> Wiesel grew up as a deeply religious Hasidic boy whose trust in the ways and justice of God, with the increased restrictions, ghettoization, and finally deportation, is shaken more and more with each step.

Wiesel's perception of the destruction of Jewish life at all levels of daily life can be seen, for example, in his description of the Pesakh feast. He describes how everyone in the community prepared for the feast as they do every year—»[b]ut something is in the air. The heart is heavy with anxiety, with fear, as if loaded with stones. A holiday without joy is not a holiday. On that Passover [Pesakh], there was no joy.«<sup>20</sup> At the end of Pesakh week, it became clear that the holiday of liberation in 1944 was turned into its opposite for the Jewish community of Sighet; the Germans used the festival to demonstrate their power and took part of the community, about 140 leading members, into captivity.<sup>21</sup>

In his description of his family's deportation from the ghetto, Wiesel emphasizes, »*Shabbes*—the day of rest—was the day of our expulsion.«<sup>22</sup> Wiesel

19 Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, 16–17.

20 Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, 17. In his memoirs, Wiesel reports on the Pesakh Seder. It was the first time that the family had not had a guest at the table. The father disappeared for quite some time and finally brought Moyshe the *Shammes* as a guest. After the evening ritual, the latter had tried to be heard again and to tell the family about the mass shootings, which he had survived only by chance. He wanted to prepare them for their future. However, Wiesel's father did not allow it because Passover was a festival of joy, and this content did not fit in. Cf. Wiesel, *All Rivers*, 60.

21 Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, 18. These community members were reportedly arrested for the period of ghettoization and held in a synagogue without rations. This was probably a precautionary measure by the Hungarian authorities, who feared that these individuals might form a resistance. Cf. Guy Miron and Shlomit Shulhani, *The Yad VaShem Encyclopedia of the Ghettos during the Holocaust*, BD I (A-M), trans. Helmut Dierlamm et al. (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2014), 456.

22 Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, 44.

expresses his bewilderment at a scene later that day, when they were herded into the Great Synagogue of Sighet now the assembly point for those scheduled for deportation: »Downstairs, in the men's section, only men; upstairs, in the women's section, only women. That was the way the gendarmes wanted it. Strange: today is *Shabbes*. Isn't all this a dream? A holy joke of God's right hand, Satan? Did the Jews come—simply—to pray? Or to listen to the Rebbe's *droshe* [sermon]? It is incredible that the gray, large synagogue is a place of inspection, to prepare for departure ...«<sup>23</sup> The separation of the seating areas for men and women in the synagogue was traditionally done anyway, but now this »idea« from the Hungarian gendarmes seemed absurd. Equally absurd or disrespectful was the perpetrators' intended misuse of the synagogue. One was in the synagogue on *Shabbat*, where one would have celebrated services under normal circumstances but was now being held under reversed auspices.

Again and again, Wiesel reflects on the rupture between the experiences of an intact Jewish life and the shattering and violent dissolution of his world. In Yiddish, Wiesel finds the words to express his Jewish religious perspective:

»The *shtetl* is gone. Forever. [...] Oh yes, Jewish life is once again flourishing, vibrant with creativity. But the life of the *shtetl* belongs to the past. Need I say that I miss it? Must I say aloud what, in many of my writings, I repeat in whispers? The *shtetl* is my childhood. I remain attached to it. And faithful.«<sup>24</sup>

How Sighet remained present for Wiesel despite all the distance of time and space from his childhood was described by his son Elisha Wiesel for *Rosh Hashana* 2017 in the newspaper *Forward*. He described how he watched his father change each time the High Holidays approached:

»This time of the year was a difficult time for my father. [...] As Rosh Hashanah got closer each year, I could see his attention wander. I could

23 Ibid., 46.

24 Wiesel, »The World of the Shtetl,« 292–293.

see him spending more time in *Sighet Shel Maalah*, the Sighet Above, the Sighet that was. I could see him reviewing the entirety of his life before God and questioning if he had done enough, truly uneasy at the thought of how he should be judged. And as I sat by my father's side in the synagogue, was my grandfather somehow on his other side, somehow just behind the wall my father leaned against?»<sup>25</sup>

#### 4.2. THE AUDIENCE THEN AND NOW

... *un di velt hot geshvign* appeared in 1956 in the series *Dos Poylishe Yidntum* under the direction of Mark Turkov. He founded the series in 1946, continuing it until its 175<sup>th</sup> volume in 1966.<sup>26</sup> By the time Wiesel's memoirs were published, 116 books had appeared. About ten volumes were published yearly; by 1954, a quarter of a million books had been sold.<sup>27</sup> Among them were several memoirs by Shoah survivors, including one of the first female survivor testimonies, *Malke Ovshyani Dertseylt ... A Khronik fun Undzer Tsayt* («Malkah Ovshyany Tells Her Tale ... Chronicle from Our Time», vol. 1),<sup>28</sup> texts by Chaim Grade (*Pleytim*, «Refugees», vol. 17; 1947), Shmerke Kaczerginski (*Partisaner Geyen*, «Partisans March!», vol. 18, 1947), Mordechai Strigler (*Maidanek*, vol. 20, 1947

25 Elisha Wiesel, «Remembering my father, Elie Wiesel, on the eve of Rosh HaShanah,» Forward, September 19, 2017, <https://forward.com/life/382988/remembering-my-father-elie-wiesel-on-the-eve-of-rosh-hashanah/>.

26 Nachman Blumenthal, *Shmuesn Vegn der Yidisher Literatur unter der Daytsher Okupatsye* [Conversations about Yiddish Literature during the German Occupation] (Amherst: National Yiddish Book Centre, 1966).

27 Jan Schwarz, *Survivors and Exiles: Yiddish Culture after the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015), 92.

28 Malke Ovshyani was a survivor, able to emigrate to Buenos Aires after the end of the war. Shortly after she arrived in 1945, she told Turkov her story, thus bearing witness. The publication is not her account in her own words but merely a retelling by Turkov. Cf. Mark Turkov, *Malke Ovshyani Dertseylt ... Khronik fun Undzer Tsayt* (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-Farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine, 1946).

and other volumes of his series *Oysgebrente Likht*, »*Extinguished Lights*«, and even K. Tzetnik (*Dos Hoys fun di Lyalkes*, »*The House of Dolls*«, vol. 115, 1955).<sup>29</sup>

The series was a veritable *Zeykher leKhubrm* (Shoah memorial), as Abraham Nowersztern describes it: »In hundreds of Jewish homes throughout Argentina one could immediately recognize the shelves of volumes standing back-to-back in their distinctive black bindings [...].«<sup>30</sup> The volumes were also sold in Europe. The series' co-publisher, Abraham Mitlberg, established a cooperation with the Jewish Historical Commission in Poland in 1947. Subsequently, volumes were sent to survivors in Poland and DP camps. The series became a center of attraction for Yiddish writers.<sup>31</sup>

The Yiddish writer and literary critic Shmuel Niger writes the following about the situation of Yiddish literature ten years after the end of the war:

»The destruction of the old home has awakened among us the wish to mourn its passing, to tell its history, to erect a gravestone and memorialize. Since the Holocaust, a sorrowful call has resounded through Yiddish literature: the tree of Jewish life in Europe has been pulled up by its roots. May its genealogical tree live on in literature! Writers cannot stop writing about their family origins. They write in different forms: novels and stories, history and biography, and personal memoirs, ghetto chronicles, and more than ever, *Yizker books*.«<sup>32</sup>

This is the context in which Wiesel brought his ... *un di velt hot geshvign* to publication. His book addressed a Jewish and Yiddish-speaking audience, who presumably also subscribed to the *Dos Poylishe Yidntum* series and were aware of the important content of the work in this context. With his book, Wiesel joined a group of modern Yiddish authors whose concern was to remember and

29 For all volumes published, see: Schwarz, *Survivors and Exiles*, 253–268.

30 Ibid., 93.

31 Cf. *ibid.*, 95.

32 Ibid., 99.

bear witness to the loss of the old Jewish world. Many of these works remained untranslated and largely unknown.<sup>33</sup>

#### 4.3. TRANSLATING ... *UN DI VELT HOT GESHVIGN*

Now, for the first time, the complete Yiddish text of ... *un di velt hot geshvign* is to be translated into German, 66 years after the publication of the Yiddish original. Literary scholar Alan Astro notes that Wiesel's choice of the title ... *un di velt hot geshvign* alone signaled that he wanted to address a universal audience. The book demands a translation, because the Yiddish version alone is not sufficient to indict the world meaningfully. This had only become possible with the French version of ... *un di velt hot geshvign*.<sup>34</sup> As previously noted, Yiddish plays a crucial role in Wiesel's communication of his memory. The translation attempts to make the author's very personal Jewish voice audible as best we can.

In translation studies and Holocaust studies, there is a debate about the role of translation and that of the translator. The question arises of how translators can do justice to the witnesses' concern that their words be rendered as authentically and transparently as possible. To what extent should a translation be evaluated as a creative act of writing, and what is the relationship between the translation and the original? This is because the translator plays a significant role in shaping the text through translation decisions that underlie their interpretation. According to translation scholar Lawrence Venuti, translations

33 A few have been translated into German, such as most recently the first four volumes of Mordechai Strigler, from his six-volume series »Extinguished Lights:« Mordechai Strigler, *Majdanek: Ein früher Zeitzeugenbericht vom Todeslager*, ed. Frank Beer, trans. Sigrid Beisel, Verloschene Lichter 1 (Springe: zu Klampen Verlag 2016); Mordechai Strigler, *In den Fabriken des Todes: Ein früher Zeitzeugenbericht vom Arbeitslager Skarzysko-Kamienna*, ed. Frank Beer, trans. Sigrid Beisel, Verloschene Lichter 2 (Springe: zu Klampen Verlag 2017); Mordechai Strigler, *Werk C: Ein Zeitzeugenbericht aus den Fabriken des Todes*, ed. Frank Beer, trans. Sigrid Beisel, Verloschene Lichter 3 (Springe: zu Klampen Verlag 2019); Mordechai Strigler, *Schicksale: Ein früher Zeitzeugenbericht über die Opfer der Schoah*, ed. Frank Beer, trans. Sigrid Beisel, Verloschene Lichter 4 (Springe: zu Klampen Verlag 2024).

34 Alan Astro, »Revisiting Wiesel's *Night* in Yiddish, French, and English,« *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 12, no. 1 (2014): 140.

tend to tame texts and adapt them to reading habits. He argues, however, that a translation should instead alienate, that is, confront the reader with the unfamiliar by reading as literal a translation as possible.<sup>35</sup>

In her article *Berman and Beyond: The Trial of the Foreign and the Translation of Holocaust Literature*, Stephanie Faye Munyard draws attention to how translations can affect the understanding of memory literature. Through an analysis that compares *La Nuit's* translation into English and German, she demonstrates the different moments of text deformation through translation:

»Translations of Holocaust literature traditionally assume forms which appropriate Jewish history, indicating that the primary aim of translation is not one which seeks to retain legacies and memories, but one which allows the Holocaust to be understood by its target audience, who come from predominantly Christian cultures.«<sup>36</sup>

Munyard is guided by Antoine Berman's analysis criteria, according to which there can be twelve negative tendencies within the translation process;<sup>37</sup> Munyard uses the tendencies of »expansion« (e.g., elaboration of sentence fragments), »qualitative impoverishment« (e.g., elimination of word repetition), »destruction of the underlying networks of signification« (e.g., words repeated in the text characterize the dehumanized world of the camp), and the »destruction of expressions and idioms« (e.g., through the use of pejorative phrases), to show

35 Jean Boase-Beier et al., eds., *Translating Holocaust Lives* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 6–11.

36 Stephanie Faye Munyard, »Berman and Beyond: The Trial of the Foreign and the Translation of Holocaust literature,« in *Translating Holocaust Literature*, ed. Peter Arnds (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2015), 104.

37 Antoine Berman, »Translation and the trials of the foreign,« trans. Lawrence Venuti, in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2012), 244. These tendencies are: 1. rationalization, 2. clarification, 3. expansion, 4. ennoblement and popularization, 5. qualitative impoverishment, 6. quantitative impoverishment, 7. the destruction of rhythms, 8. the destruction of underlying networks of signification, 9. the destruction of linguistic patternings, 10. the destruction of vernacular networks or their exoticization, 11. the destruction of expressions and idioms, and 12. The effacement of the superimposition of languages.

how the rhythm of language, vocabulary, and thus the conveyed content of the experience is affected.<sup>38</sup>

The difficulty in this way of translating is thus that the text often cannot be transferred to its full extent with all contents, references, allusions, etc., which it conveys in its original language. To keep the translational interventions as comprehensible as possible, both the approach and the translator's intention should be disclosed.<sup>39</sup> In order to preserve the Jewish character of ... *un di velt hot geshvign* as much as possible, certain terms will therefore be left in their original form. Some linguistic expressions and terms will thus be left in their specifically Jewish context. However, since Yiddish is written in Hebrew letters, these selected words must be included in the transcription of the German-language text. This is written in the scientifically generally accepted YIVO transcription.<sup>40</sup> The original language words are names (*Moyshe*), occupational designations (such as *Shammes*, *Melamed*), places and religious time indications (such as *Shabbat*, *Pesakh*, and *Shavu'ot*), or terms of religious concepts such as *Shekhinah* (indwelling of God on earth) and other expressions for which there is no adequate German translation, or a translation would cause a reduction or change in meaning. The retranslation or adaptation of names in translations of Holocaust literature is especially prone to amount to an appropriation of history. In the camp, prisoners were stripped of their names and replaced with numbers, erasing part of their identity. This is how Wiesel experienced it:

»Yes, it's me. A-7713. Not Elieser Wiesel, but A-7713. A number. A number had become the content of my ײ.׳<sup>41</sup> If someone called me by name—I did not answer, I did not know that they meant me. I only be-

38 Munyard, »Berman and Beyond,« 90–98.

39 On the role of the translator of textual testimonies of the Shoah: Peter Davies, »Translation and Holocaust Testimonies: A Matter for Holocaust Studies or Translation Studies?,« in *Literary Translation: Redrawing the Boundaries*, ed. Jean Boase-Beier (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 204–218.

40 YIVO (*Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut*, Institute for Jewish Research); The YIVO Transliteration Chart: <https://yivo.org/yiddish-alphabet>.

41 Emphasis in Yidd. Edition of ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, 103.

lieved that a distant, foreign voice was speaking to me from the deep pit of generations. My name had become an anachronism, contradicting myself. Only the number spoke to my consciousness. Even from sleep I jumped up when my number was called. There were times when I had forgotten my name altogether. Forgot what my name was.«<sup>42</sup>

Through writing, Holocaust survivors have tried to counteract this identity theft.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, the names in the German translation of ... *un di velt hot geshvign* will be rendered in transcription. In this way, the phonetics of the respective name can be best understood in the pronunciation of the time.

If one wants to consider Wiesel's text as Jewish as well as on other levels of content, explanations of the most diverse kind must be undertaken. Always embedded in his descriptions are Jewish expressions or phrases, which can only be understood within the religious and cultural framework. For example, Wiesel comments in his text on a situation in which Hungarian policemen come to search Jewish homes for valuables concerning the utterances of pious Jews, who »whispered: *MiSheNatan Reshut LeMashkhit*<sup>44</sup> ... If one has given permission to the destroyer to do evil—who will be able to stop him?«<sup>45</sup> This abbreviated Talmudic quote is used to comment on the hopeless situation of being at the

42 Ibid., 103–104.

43 Munyard, »Berman and beyond,« 98–99.

44 Heb.: *MiSheNatan Reshut LeMashkhit*—»as soon as permission is given to the destroyer [...]« shortened quote from b BQ 60a: »R. Joseph taught: It is said, *None of you shall go out to the door of his dwelling until morning* [Ex. 12:22]; once the strangling angel has been given liberty (*MiSheNatan Reshut LeMashkhit*), he does not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked; and even more, he even begins with the righteous, for it is said, *I will cut off from among you the righteous and the wicked* [Ez. 21:8]. At this, R. Joseph wept: Even this, they are counted as nothing! Then Abajje said to him, »This [that they are taken away at the beginning of the judgment, so that they do not have to watch it]; is a blessing for them, because it is said: *before wickedness [Before it occurs.] the righteous was taken away* [Isa 57:1].« Cf. Lazarus Goldschmidt, ed., *Babylonian Talmud, Masechet Nesikin, Baba Qamma* (Berlin: Calvary, 1907), 223.

45 Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, 19.

mercy of others. Likewise, Wiesel uses the Aramaic phrase *Let din ve'let dayan*<sup>46</sup> (There is no law and no judge) to assess the situation before the first deportation. After the decree was announced that the people of the ghetto would be deported street by street, everyone packed a few belongings in a panic. Many things could not be taken with them; among them were the ritual objects, indispensable for the religious Jewish life practice. But in that moment of expulsion and chaos, everything seemed worthless and useless.<sup>47</sup> There were no longer any binding rights that those affected could have claimed and that would have held the perpetrators accountable:

»In the courtyard—a market: valuables, expensive carpets, silver candelabras, a *khalla blanket*, a *bezamim box*, *makhzorim*, *siddurim*—all rolling on the dirty earth, under the blue sky. As if they never had an owner, as if there never were owners. *Let din ve'let dayan*. Everything is abandoned, frighteningly abandoned. When man is no longer man, the world is no longer a world.«<sup>48</sup>

In the same way, Wiesel uses the quotation *kol dikhfin yejtey ve'yekhol* (Whoever is hungry, come and eat) from the Passover Haggadah, which he slightly

46 Aram.: *Let din ve'let dayan*—»There is no law and no judge«; state of arbitrariness and anarchy. The formulation is found, among others, in *Vayikra Rabbah* 28:1. The discussion is whether the Book of Kohelet should be counted among the sacred writings. The Book of Kohelet was controversial, and the sages thought that it contained ideas and thoughts that could already be classified as heretical: »Moshe said, Do not walk about according to your own heart and according to your own eyes (Num. 15:39), but Shelomo said, Walk in the ways of your heart and in the eyes of your eyes (Kohelet 11:9)! What now? Should all inhibitions be lifted? Is there neither justice nor judge [*Let din ve'let dayan*]? When, however, he said, »But know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things« (Kohelet 11:9), they admitted that Shelomo had spoken well.«

47 Many Jews had tried to take with them ritual objects or religious books (*sforim*) important to them. However, due to luggage restrictions, most had to be left behind. Wiesel reports that he took his Tallit and Tefillin and two of his most valuable books—a commentary by Rabbi Haim David Azoulai (the Hida) and the *K'dushat Levi* of the Berdichever Rebbe. Cf. Wiesel, *All Rivers*, 76.

48 Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, 30.

changes to *kol dikhfin yeitey ve'yikakh* (Whoever is hungry, come and take), thus applying it in a twisted way. Within Passover, this phrase is used to invite the needy to the *Seder*.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, here it is synonymous with an »invitation« for looters to enrich themselves:

»Open apartments everywhere. Doors and windows—wide open, as if after a fire, after a destruction. A lawless world. *Kol dikhfin yeitey ve'yikakh*,<sup>50</sup> whoever wants—can come and take everything his greed demands. Everything. But—who now thinks of going and taking other people's property? What can be done with it? Tomorrow, after all, we must leave our own possessions, our own belongings, to the grace of God.«<sup>51</sup>

Wiesel writes from a traditional Jewish perspective and uses traditional religious terms to illustrate, in ironic usage, the absurdity of what is happening. A readership of his Yiddish text familiar with Jewish culture and religion would most likely understand these references. There are many such passages in Wiesel's ... *un di velt hot geshvign* that cannot remain without comment. Astro addresses several passages in the Yiddish text that he characterizes as »untranslatable« and cites this as one reason why, these very passages were deleted in the French translation.<sup>52</sup>

I argue that it is better to include untranslated references in the translation

49 The short form *Kol dikhfin* can also be used in other contexts in Yiddish and generally means »whoever/anyone who wants or needs something.« See explanation in: Yitzchak Niborski, *Verterbukh fun loshn-koydesh-shtamike verter in Yidish*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Paris: Bibliotheque Medem, 2012), 2142. References to this passage can also be found in: Astro, »Revisiting Wiesel's *Night* in Yiddish, French and English,« 134; Susanne Klingenstein, »*Night*'s Literary Art: A Close Reading of Chapter 1,« in *Approaches to Teaching Wiesel's Night*, ed. Alan Rosen (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2007), 82 (footnote 8); Jan Schwarz, »The Original Yiddish Text and the Context of *Night*,« *ibid.*, 56.

50 It is a modified quote from the Passover Haggadah: *kol dikhfin yeitey ve'yekhol*—»Whoever is hungry, come and eat«.

51 Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, 34.

52 Astro, »Revisiting Wiesel's *Night* in Yiddish, French, and English,« 133.

rather than removing them altogether which we can see in the following passage: Wiesel and his father received a note from an acquaintance from Sighet shortly after they arrived in Auschwitz after the latter had been selected for a *Sonderkommando*. In *Night*, this passage reads, »he had been forced to place his own father's body into the furnace.«<sup>53</sup> In Yiddish, however, it is »ikh hob gemakht boyre meoyre hoeysh oyfn tatn!«<sup>54</sup> Translation into another language is complicated because the central phrase is a partial quotation of the *havdala* blessing. At the end of Shabbat, the *havdala* light is spoken over: »Praised be You, Eternal One, our God, King of the World, Creator of the Luminous Powers of Fire (Hebrew: *Bore MeOrey HaEsh* [Yiddish: *boyre meoyre hoeysh*]).«<sup>55</sup>

In addition, the quotation is embedded in the frame phrase »ikh hob [...] gemakht,« which would mean »I have made/done [...].« The Yiddish phrase for pronouncing a blessing over something is »ikh makh a brokhe (iber),« literally »I make a blessing (over).« This formulation shows that the blessing is not only recited, but that it is at the same time a performative speech-act through which something happens to the blessed. Translating the whole sentence into English, it should read in this case: »I have made over him ›Creator of the luminous powers of fire!« However, in this case, neither what happened, nor the significance of the religious dimension is revealed. Only the following explanation by Wiesel shows the extent of the cruel occurrence, in which a son was forced to act against the commandment of physical integrity, according to which a corpse must be buried completely: »He had burned—with own hands—his old father ...«<sup>56</sup> Therefore, the English translation should read, »I have made

53 Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 35.

54 Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, 72.

55 In the *Comprehensive Yiddish—English Dictionary*, the phrase is found with the translation »deliberately start a fire,« with the addition that this is usually a humorous usage. An example from Yiddish literature is Scholem Aleichem's monologue »A Nis-ref« (Burned Out, 1903), in which a merchant makes *boyre meoyre hoeysh* several times and sets fire to his goods to collect the insurance money. Cf. Solon Beinfeld and Harry Bochner, *Comprehensive Yiddish-English Dictionary* (Indiana University Press, 2013), 164, based on the *Dictionnaire Yiddish-Français* by Yitskhok Niborski and Bernard Vaisbrot, published by the Bibliothèque Medem in Paris in 2002.

56 Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, 72.

over him *boyre meoyre hoeysh!*« to indicate the reference to a ritual act. A corresponding explanation is given in the commentary on the passage. It is not the goal to make the translation as reader friendly as possible by explanatory reformulations, but to let the readers intentionally stumble over such passages, to »alienate« them and thus to offer the opportunity for a more intensive examination of the text.

#### 4.4. GERMAN WORDS IN THE YIDDISH TEXT

Translating a Yiddish text into German can present difficulties not encountered with other languages. Yiddish consists of several linguistic components: Slavic languages, Hebrew, Aramaic, and, to a notable extent, Middle High German. As a result, it can often be ostensibly well-understood, yet include words that convey a different meaning in current usage, impeding the understanding of the language. For example, the Yiddish »*bahalt'n*« sounds very much like the German »*behalten*« (to keep) but is used in the sense of »to conceal, to hide.«

In Wiesel's text, Yiddish is the language in which the camp experience is described, and the German language of the perpetrators is also conveyed in passages. He reflects in ... *un di velt hot geshvign* on using new words and phrases that invaded his language, signaling that »his world« is under the enemy's influence, with whom one must somehow come to terms:

»Someone says: ›we will stay here all day and all night. Tomorrow, they will einwaggonieren us [they will load us onto a train].‹ Strange: we are still here, in the city, a few meters from home, and—already we are using a new terminology. Already we behave like old, born exiles ... einwaggonieren! As if it were about goods, about livestock, and not about us ...«<sup>57</sup>

In Nazi parlance, it was common to camouflage acts of dehumanization with bureaucratic, neutralizing, or euphemistic terms. I am intentionally not trans-

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57 *Ibid.*, 46.

lating the word »Einwaggonieren« into English to refer to the Nazi usage of the language and to emphasize the foreign character of this word from Elie Wiesel's perspective.

As Wiesel found himself in the camp, words from Nazi terminology began to pile up. For example, the designations of the functionary prisoners were named in a parallel structure to the SS hierarchy: *Lagerältester*, *Lagerkapo*, *Blockälteste*, *Kapos*, and other positions. Wiesel reproduces these designations and those on the SS side phonetically in the transcription so that they can be easily identified as *SS-ofitsir*, *SS-man*, *heftling*, *kapos*, *blok-eltester*, etc. While Wiesel makes the terms stand out merely by his spelling, elsewhere, he emphasizes words that belong to the so-called camp language. These linguistic phenomena originated in the camp and were composed of fragments of different languages. They served mostly the purpose of communicating in a kind of internal secret language.<sup>58</sup> At one point, Wiesel explicitly refers to the concept of camp language in ... *un di velt hot geshvign*: »The way took ten minutes. There, the electric magazine. A German civilian official (in camp language: *Meister*) is coming toward us.«<sup>59</sup> Elsewhere, Wiesel puts a term from the camp language in quotation marks: »At every opportunity he ›organized‹<sup>60</sup> a kettle of soup for the young, the weak, and just about anyone who dreamed more of a bowl of soup than of freedom.«<sup>61</sup> In Yiddish and German, »organize« could be used in other contexts outside of the Holocaust experience. However, when used inside the camp, the verb takes on a new meaning: stealing extra food or items.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, their

58 For further analysis of the phenomena of camp language, see: Nicole Warmbold, *Lagersprache: Zur Sprache der Opfer in den Konzentrationslagern Sachsenhausen, Dachau, Buchenwald* (Bremen: Hempen Verlag, 2008); Danuta Weselowska, *Wörter aus der Hölle: Die »lagerszpracha« der Häftlinge von Auschwitz*, (Krakow: Impuls, 1998).

59 Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, 101.

60 Emphasis in Yidd. Edition (1956); Further discussion of the term in the section »organisieren und (Kameradschafts-)diebstahl« in: Warmbold, *Lagersprache*, 232–235.

61 Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, 103.

62 Danuta Weselowska comments: »The prisoners did not consider the *organizowanie* [organizing] to be theft, nor the *organizatorzy* [organizers, those who ran the *organizowanie*] to be thieves, since, after all, the losses were at the expense of the

emphasis must be taken from Yiddish and annotated even in the German translation. Otherwise, the terms would disappear from the text and no longer be identifiable as an expression of the camp experience.

Commentary is also necessary for places where Wiesel reproduces from his memory passages of verbatim speech by SS personnel. For example, he describes the degrading military drill and the new vocabulary that prisoners had to master to survive. During the so-called roll call, the camp prisoners often had to stand in rows for hours and follow the same orders over and over again:

»Mützen ... ab [Caps ... off]!<sup>63</sup>—resounds the order of the *Lagerältester*. All ten thousand prisoners take off their caps—simultaneously, in the same second. The *Lagerältester* gives the report. Infinite two minutes of silence. »Caps on!« Ten thousand prisoners—simultaneously, in the same second—put their caps back on their heads.<sup>64</sup>

The exercise of power and attrition, which, in addition to the physical exercise of violence, finds expression in the constant repetition of such language fragments in the form of commands or even threats, may weaken from the transition to a German-language text. While within Yiddish, the intrusion of the language of violence into conventional communication is perceptible. Therefore, it is

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Germans and allowed the prisoners to meet their basic needs, at least in part.« Weselowska, *Words from Hell*, 179.

63 Danuta Wesolowska, in her book on camp language, notes that the commands »Caps off!« and »Caps on!« were part of a humiliating »dressage«: »[...] and he practices with them »Mützen ab!« and »Mützen auf!«. He wants them all to learn to grab their caps simultaneously on the command »Mützen ab« and then pull them off their heads with a quick jerk and press them to their bodies with an energetic movement, clapping their hips loudly. The command »Mützen auf« is different. When the command »Mütze« is given, one must immediately put the cap on the head and hold the arm in this position for a moment. When the command »auf« is given, the arm must be brought to the body with an energetic movement. And also the clapping of the serve must be done at the same time.« Mieczysław Szachewicz, *Noce bez świtu: wspomnienia z Oświęcimia i Neuengamme* [Nights without dawn: Memories of Auschwitz and Neuengamme] (Waszawa: Wydawn, 1973), 83, quoted in Weselowska, *Wörter aus der Hölle*, 233.

64 Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, 123–124.

also necessary for the commentary to refer to parallel accounts and descriptions from camp experiences and thus to show the patterns of disenfranchisement and torture through language.

The preceding remarks have illuminated a few issues of translation work and, in particular, of Wiesel's Yiddish memoir. The effort to remain as faithful as possible to the author's text and to let the peculiarities of ... *un di velt hot geshvign* shine through in German makes an extensive commentary necessary. This approach attempts to inform the reading public about the historical, linguistic, cultural, religious, and intertextual aspects. At the same time, translation decisions are disclosed at questionable points and substantiated with arguments. This way, the translation process will be made as visible as possible. The potential losses due to translation are to be narrowed down, for it is, above all, also a matter of preserving and supporting Wiesel's testimony by giving the German-speaking reading public the opportunity to come into the closest possible contact with the text and to experience Wiesel's specifically Jewish perspective.



## 5. ELIE WIESEL AS A NARRATOR. HIS JEWISH WORK

DANIEL KROCHMALNIK

The following scene can often be observed: Two Jews with roots in the shtetl get to know each other. One of them immediately asks where his interlocutor originally came from. »From Kossow! Oh no, you don't say, my ancestors are not far from there at all, from Kutow—also from Galicia.« Immediately, a lively conversation begins about flight and expulsion, about persecution and extermination. The descendants have an insatiable appetite for these old stories; their »narratomania« is a reaction to the genocide, which was also a mnemocide. The genealogical interest for the *Yikhus* (Yiddish: *Yikhes*) is older, but it was usually limited to the Jewish scholarly and moneyed nobility. In these conversations, however, ancestry itself is the pound to be gained. From isolated photos and anecdotes that somehow made it across the sea of flames, one sticks together a family album and genealogy.

Elie Wiesel was one of the great narrators of the shtetl: »You want to know what it was like living and dying there? Listen, I come from a shtetl ...«<sup>1</sup> Of course, he did not tell picturesque and humorous stories from *Kasrilevka* or *Anatevka*.<sup>2</sup> In his eyes, the angel of death has always hovered over the shtetl—a precarious »parenthesis« between two pogroms, until it was engulfed by the greatest pogrom of all time. Yet, he does not give in to the nostalgic temptation to idyllize this »world that is no more« (I. J. Singer) as an »anti-Sodom.« However, he celebrates the »spiritual richness« of the shtetl, especially its very own

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- 1 See his exemplary portrait: Elie Wiesel, »The World of the Shtetl,« in *Wise Men and their Tales: Portraits of Biblical, Talmudic, and Hasidic Masters* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 316–336. In addition, with more background: Mark Zborowski and Elisabeth Herzog, *Life is With People, the Culture of the Shtetl* (Melbourne: Hassell Street Press, 2021). With critical deconstruction of the shtetl myth: Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, *The Golden Age Shtetl: A New History of Jewish Life in East Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).
  - 2 In the style of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, *Contes juifs: Récits de famille* (Paris: L'Anatolope, 2021).

religious creation: »Hasidism was born in the shtetl, for the shtetl, and could not have been born anywhere else.«<sup>3</sup>

What was the magic potion with which a Hasidic tzaddik instilled the strength for spiritual resistance in the small Jewish village in the claws of the great European powers? He had understanding and kindness for the »little mentshelech« (Sholem Aleichem) of the shtetl, he condescended over them in order to lift them up.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, he even gave the shtetl the strength to survive the most systematic ›Jew-eaters‹ of all time, Hitler and Stalin. »There are no more Jews left in Wizsnitz,« Wiesel writes,

»but there are Wiznitzer Hasidim on both sides of the ocean. The same is true for the other Hasidic branches or dynasties. Ger, Kossov, Sadigor, Karlin—these kingdoms have but transferred their capitals. Lubavitch is everywhere except in Lubavitch; Sighet and Satmar are no longer in Transylvania but wherever Satmarer and Sigheter Hasidim live and remember.«<sup>5</sup>

Just as in history one can speak of a *translatio imperii*, so here one can speak of a *translatio pagi*. One need only pick up the great *Historical Atlas of Hasidism* by Marcin Wodziński and Waldemar Spallek and open the map of Hasidic communities of Bnei Brak 2016, to find the map of Galicia drawn on the north-west-southeast axis of Tel Aviv—from Nowy Sandec (Sanz) in western Galicia to the Bukhovinian Vyzhnitsa (Wischnitz) across the border river Czeremosz opposite Kossov and Kutov in eastern Galicia,<sup>6</sup> where the Baal Shem lived as a hermit for seven years before his revelation surrounded by the snowy giants

3 Wiesel, »The World of the Shtetl,« 321.

4 Cf. Samuel H. Dresner, *The Tzaddik: The Doctrine of the Tzaddik According to the Writings of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polony* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 148–190 incl. footnotes, 283–293.

5 Elie Wiesel, *Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Random Haus, 1972), 38.

6 Cf. Marcin Wodziński and Waldemar Spallek, *Historical Atlas of Hasidism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 213.

of the Carpathians.<sup>7</sup> This is referred to in the Yiddish song *Tsvishen Kossiiv un Kitew is a brikerle verhanen vi der Ba'al Schem, der heylige Baal Schem, shpaziren is gegangen*.<sup>8</sup>

The extinction of the Terra Judaica in Galicia did not happen suddenly in the destruction of the Holocaust; it had been in the making for some time in the German guidebooks. According to the 1914's *Durch Galizien*, for example, Kossow counts 3000 inhabitants. The area is »inhabited almost exclusively by Jews, dirty, on the other hand [sic!] charming surroundings.«<sup>9</sup> This stereotype appears even in well-meaning accounts. Thus, Dr. A. v. Guttry writes: »One of the characteristic features of the Galician Jews is the lack of any sense of order and cleanliness.«<sup>10</sup> The desire for purification is unmistakable. Kossow itself is praised as a climatic health resort in a beautiful and sheltered location.<sup>11</sup> There is talk of Hutsuls and Armenians, of apricots, peaches and grapes. But what befell the majority of Kossow's population, about 4000 Jews? They were shot on the spot in the »actions« of October 16–17, 1941 and September 7, 1942, and the rest were suffocated afterwards in the gas chambers of Belzec. On November 4, 1942, Kossow was »judenrein,« and Baedeker impatiently noted that »in 1942, no German spa operations had yet begun.«<sup>12</sup>

But the murdered and presumed dead shtetl has returned. One of the tireless necromancers was Elie Wiesel—along with Shmuel Agnon, Marc Chagall, Manès Sperber. The shtetl not only forms the pictorial background of his Hasidic portraits, but it is also the moral atmosphere of his entire Jewish history

7 Karl Erich Grözinger, ed., *Die Geschichten vom Ba'al Schem Tov: Schivche ha-Bescht, Jüdische Kultur: Studien zur Geistesgeschichte, Religion und Literatur 2* (Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1997), 25; Simon Dubnow, *Geschichte des Chassidismus*, trans. Aaron Steinberg (Königstein, Taunus: Jüdischer Verlag, 1982), vol. 1, 82–83.

8 Fahlenkamp, Yaakow, »cantor yaakov berlin,« Youtube, accessed October 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/user/cantorfahlenkamp>.

9 Mieczysława Orłowicz and Roman Kordys, *Illustrierter Führer durch Galizien* (Wien, Leipzig: Hartleben, 1914), 289 [translated by the editors].

10 Aleksander von Guttry, *Galizien. Land und Leute* (München, Leipzig: G. Müller, 1916), 96 [translated by the editors].

11 Cf. Karl Baedeker, *Das Generalgouvernement* (Leipzig: Baedeker, 1943), 251.

12 Ibid. [translated by the editors].

since Adam and Eve. With his rescue of the shtetl, Wiesel has done much for the revival of *Yiddishland* in the New World.

### 5.1. PASSOVER HAGGADAH

Wiesel's storytelling has deep Jewish roots, of course. In the beginning there was undoubtedly the »narrative« par excellence, the Passover Haggadah. Throughout his work, Wiesel returns to the narrative ritual of the Pesakh Seder »in my small town tucked away in the Carpathian Mountains«<sup>13</sup>. The Torah enjoins the father's narrative duty no less than four times: if your son asks you in the future, tell ... (*WeHigadeta LeWincha*, Ex 12:26f.; 13:8; 13:14; Deut 6:20). The *Haggadah* is designed as a response to the son's question (*Mah*), corresponding, on the one hand, to the four repetitions of the mitzvah in answer to the son's four questions, and on the other hand, to the four variations of the question from four types of sons. »What is most appealing about the Seder?« asks an elderly Wiesel in his commentary on the *Haggadah*, »Its challenge to children to ask questions.«<sup>14</sup> Passover, »a festival of questions,« says Ari Lipinski, who translated the 100 (sic) questions with which R. Isaac Abrawanel (1437–1508) introduces his Haggadah.<sup>15</sup>

But Wiesel's relationship to the *Haggadah* is permanently disturbed by the 1944 Seder, the beginning of the anti-exodus, the »journey to death«<sup>16</sup> from Sighet to Auschwitz. In his autobiographical works, he recounts how that last Seder was joined by an uninvited guest, a veritable anti-Elia who heralded the

13 Elie Wiesel and Mark Podwal, eds., *Haggadah Shel Pesach: A Passover Haggadah: As Commented Upon by Elie Wiesel and Illustrated by Mark Podwal*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 8. Cf. also Elie Wiesel, *The Golem: The Story of a Legend* (New York: Summit Books, 1983).

14 Wiesel, *Haggadah Shel Pesach: A Passover Haggadah*, 6.

15 Ari Lipinski, *Hebräische Perlen der Torah* (Wrocław: Independently published, 2022), 335–344.

16 Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 23–46. Cf. also Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Schocken Books, 1996).

impending doom.<sup>17</sup> After that Passover of 1944, when the Lord of plagues did not pass over the houses of the Israelites, the community of the survivors included the murdered *fifth son*—the title of a novel—who silently questions the whole *Haggadah* of salvation.<sup>18</sup> How should the father answer this silent question? A new *Haggadah* would be needed, one that recalls both liberation and annihilation.<sup>19</sup>

There has been no lack of attempts in this regard, from the *Pessach-Buch* published by Israel Blumenfeld in 1946 »for the first liberation and spring festival of the remnants of Israel in Europe« for the sake of the »remnant of the saved« (*Sche'erit HaPleta*) in Germany, to the artistically high-quality *Wolloch-Haggada zum Gedenken an den Holocaust* by David Wanda and R. Yonah Weinrib in 1988.<sup>20</sup> However, Wiesel remained skeptical of an all too easy reconciliation. True, in the introduction to his 1993 *Haggadah*, he writes that his generation, too, more than any other, would have experienced the turn from slavery to freedom: »not only the Kingdom of Night, but *also* the rebirth of a dream; not only the horror of Nazism, but *also* the end of the nightmare.«<sup>21</sup> But his last sentences apply again to the irrevocable memory: Passover 1944—the assembled at the meal sat dejectedly at the table and nobody dared to ask whether God would intervene this time with »a strong hand and an outstretched arm« (Deut. 5:15)

17 Cf. *ibid.* 60; Elie Wiesel, *Legends of our Time* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968) 23–30; Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences* (New York: Summit Books, 1990), 154. On this evidence and the whole context, see Gundula van den Berg, »Elia: Elie Wiesel's Rezeption des Propheten,« in *Kultur allein ist nicht genug: Das Werk von Elie Wiesel—Herausforderung für Religion und Gesellschaft*, ed. Reinhold Boschki and Dagmar Mensink, *Religion in Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 10 (Münster: LIT Verlag, 1998), 221–230.

18 Elie Wiesel, *The Fifth Son*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), 35.

19 Cf. Alan L. Berger, »Elie Wiesel and the Second Generation Witness: Passing the Torch of Remembrance,« in *Kultur allein ist nicht genug: Das Werk von Elie Wiesel—Herausforderung für Religion und Gesellschaft*, ed. Reinhold Boschki and Dagmar Mensink, *Religion in Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 10 (Münster: LIT Verlag, 1998), 147.

20 Israel Blumenfeld, ed., *Pessach-Buch 5706–1946: Zum ersten Befreiungs- und Frühlingsfest der Überreste Israels in Europa* (Marburg: Verlag Jüdische Rundschau, 1946); Peter von der Osten-Sacken and R. Chaim Z Rozwaski, eds., *Die Wolloch Haggadah: Passa-Haggadah zum Gedenken an den Holocaust* (Berlin: KIJ, 2010).

21 Wiesel, *Haggadah Shel Pesach: A Passover Haggadah*, 7.

at the very least, only for him to then conclude quite abruptly: »Passover is also a story of hope.«<sup>22</sup>

## 5.2. MIDRASH AGGADA

Since the »first Bible lessons in the cheder« Elie Wiesel was accompanied by the rabbinical midrash Aggada, or at least what the standard gloss of Rashi (abbreviation of Rabbi Schlomo ben Jizchak, 1040–1105) has filtered out of it.<sup>23</sup> For the midrash, however, the Bible is not an unquestionable word of the living God; rather, it is interrogated word by word. The Bible is, as the word root *darash* indicates (a word which is at the exact center of the Torah, Lev 10:16) a »questioning,« »searching« examination of Scripture. Thus, Rashi's commentary on the first word of the Bible begins immediately with the protest: it would not have been necessary (*Lo Haja Zarich*) for the Torah to begin as it naturally does with the beginning.<sup>24</sup>

The Wiesel Bible, which eventually includes 40 published and unpublished portraits or double portraits of biblical personalities and subjects,<sup>25</sup> surpasses even the Midrash Aggada in this respect. To cite just one example: in the Cain and Abel chapter of his book *Messengers of God. Biblical Portraits and Legends*, in which Wiesel cites ten midrashim from the 22<sup>nd</sup> chapter of the Midrash Aggada on Genesis (Bereshit Rabbah 22), he manages to put 71 question marks in 17 pages.<sup>26</sup> This penetration of questions is reminiscent of Wiesel's biblical

22 Ibid., 9.

23 Cf. Elie Wiesel, *Rashi: A Portrait* (New York: Schocken Books, 2009), x.

24 Ibid., 33.

25 1. God, 2. serpent, 3. Adam, 4. Cain and Abel, 5. Noah, 6. Lot's wife, 7. Ishmael and Hagar, 8. Isaac, 9. Jacob, 10. Esau and Jethro, 11. Joseph, 12. Moses, 13. Aaron, 14. Miriam, 15. Jethro, 16. Nadab and Abihu, 17. Eldad and Medad, 18. Korah, 19. Joshua, 20. Gideon, 21. Jiftach, 22. Samson, 23. Samuel, 24. Saul, 25. David's sons, 26. Josiah, 27. Elijah, 28. Elisha, 29. Isaiah, 30. Jeremiah, 31. Ezekiel, 32. Hosea, 33. Jonah, 34. Job, 35. Ruth, 36. Esther, 37. Daniel, 38. Ezra and Nechemiah, 39. The people, 40. Creation.

26 Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2005), 37–64.

alter ego, Job, the Man of Sorrows, and his God, who torment each other with interrogating questions.<sup>27</sup> He ends his portrait of the prophet Jonah with the following observation:

»[...] the book ends with a question—and that is what leaves us astonished and deeply affected. How many other sacred and eternal, inspired and inspiring books are there in which the last sentence is neither affirmation nor injunction, nor even a statement, but, quite simply, a question?«<sup>28</sup>

Wiesel's teacher in this regard was the mysterious Talmudist »Monsieur Shoushani.« Wiesel writes about Shoushani in the first volume of his memoirs: »It is to him I owe my constant drive to question ...«<sup>29</sup> The insistence on questioning is, of course, a feature of the Talmud itself, where it is difficult to find a line without the Aramaic interrogative word *maj*. *Maj* is rendered *wus* in Yiddish, the language of the Eastern Jewish Talmudic academy. This interrogative word occurs so often that the Sephardic Jews nicknamed the Ashkenazim *Wuswus*, *Wuswusim*. It is therefore no wonder that Wiesel had a fondness for Rabbi Tarfon (1<sup>st</sup> century CE), the partner of Rabbi Akiva. Like Socrates, he used to lure his students into doctrinal conversation by asking them, »Can I ask?« (*Eschal*, tBer 4,16). Wiesel comments: »How can one who loves questions more than answers not love Rabbi Tarfon, at least, for that.«<sup>30</sup>

The *reteller* of the Midrash Aggadah, however, is distinguished not only by the pervasiveness of his questions, but also by another characteristic which is not immediately ascribed to the sad »Job of Auschwitz«: his inexhaustible hu-

27 Cf. e.g., Job's seven questions (Job 7:17–21) and God's 17 counter-questions (Job 38:1–40:10).

28 Elie Wiesel, *Five Biblical Portraits* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 154–155.

29 Wiesel, *All Rivers*, 128; also quoted in: Sandrine Szwarc, *Fascinant Chouchani* (Paris: Hermann, 2022), 194.

30 Wiesel, *Wise Men*, 218; Cf. Reuven Kimelman, »Wiesel and the Stories of the Rabbis,« in *Elie Wiesel: Jewish, Literary and Moral Perspectives*, ed. Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 44–46.

mor, which knows how to work out the hidden humor of the Midrash Aggada. One midrashic commentary on the revelation says:

»God appeared to them with a serious face, with a normal face, with a cheerful face and with a laughing face. With a serious face regarding the Torah, with a normal face regarding the Mishnah, with a cheerful face regarding the Talmud, with a laughing face regarding the Aggada.«<sup>31</sup>

Wiesel reflected the connection between the Holocaust and laughter in the figure of Yizchak, whose name means »he will laugh«<sup>32</sup>. But he, of all people, is bound to be slaughtered on the altar of the Holocaust. In his portrait *The Sacrifice of Isaac: A Survivor's Story*, Wiesel explains the strange dissonance of the name and life of the second patriarch:

»Here is why. As the first survivor, he had to teach us, the future survivors of Jewish history, that it is possible to suffer and despair an entire lifetime and still not give up the art of laughter. Isaac, of course, never freed himself from the traumatizing scenes that violated his youth; the holocaust had marked him and continued to haunt him forever. Yet he remained capable of laughter. And in spite of everything, he did laugh.«<sup>33</sup>

31 Midrash Tanchuma and Jalqut Shimoni on Ex 20:1, cited in *Sefer HaAggada. Torah*, ed. Chajim Nachman Bialik, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1956).

32 For the play on these names (midrash Shemot), see verses Gen 17:17, 19; 18:12, 13–15; 21:3, 6, 9–10.

33 Elie Wiesel, »The Sacrifice of Isaac: A survivors Story,« in *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2005), 97. On the subject of laughter in Wiesel, see the monograph by Joe Friedemann, *Le rire dans l'univers tragique de Élie Wiesel* (Paris: Librairie A.-G. Nizet, 1981); and the essay by Jacqueline Bussie, »Laughter in the Limits of Holocaust Storytelling: Wiesel's The Gates of the Forest,« in *Elie Wiesel and the Art of Storytelling*, ed. Rosemary Horowitz (Jefferson, London: McFarland, 2006), 123–155, which draws out especially the parallels with Hasidic narratives, especially those of R. Nachman of Bratzlav. A variant of the quoted passage, cited by A. Roy Eckardt, »Das Weinen Gottes: Eine göttliche Komödie,« in *Kultur allein ist nicht genug: Das Werk von Elie Wiesel—Herausforde-*

This is, of course, an auto-portrait, as Wiesel reveals, »In my own way I speak of Isaac constantly, in all my writings. In fact, I speak of almost nothing else.«<sup>34</sup>

### 5.3. AGGADA

Wiesel's Talmudic work, 20 portraits or double portraits of rabbinic masters, further draws from the Talmudic Aggadah—one of the two major Talmudic genres. Although it cannot compete quantitatively with the other, the Halakhah, which constitutes about 90% of the textual mass, it is nevertheless its twin sister, since the master according to whose understanding (*Al Datan*) the Halakhah is considered a living code of law (*nomos empsychos, lex animata*). Aggadot anthologies from Rabbi Jacob ben Salomon ibn Habib's (1445–1515) *Source of Jacob* ('*Ejn Ja'akow*) to Chaim Nachman Bialik's great *The Book of Legends/Sefer Ha-Aggadah* (1908–1911) served, as it were, as a light version of the *Talmud*. The vernacular edification books that drew from it, such as the Yiddish *Mayse-bukh* (Basel 1602) with hagiographic narratives about Talmudic, medieval rabbinic and Hasidic masters, served the same function.

Wiesel's Aggadot collection, however, aims to be more than an anthology. The portraitist tries to make a character visible in the scattered legends (*ma'as-siyot*) about a Tana or Amora and to focus on a theological problem, talmudically speaking, of a *ba'aja*, which is also named in the subtitle of the French version, e.g., »Elisha ben Abuja. Rebel or Heretic.«<sup>35</sup> This example is especially instructive for Wiesel's rabbinic gallery of paintings. In itself, one would expect an honorific salvation of this Talmudic arch-heretic, whom the rabbis simply called *Acher* (Other) (bChag 15a–b). After all, Elisha seems to have been an

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*rung für Religion und Gesellschaft*, ed. Reinhold Boschki and Dagmar Mensink, Religion in Geschichte und Gesellschaft 10 (Münster: LIT Verlag, 1998), 262: »Laughter thus becomes a sign of defiance as well as victory. The only way to defeat God is to be able to laugh.« [translated by the editors].

34 Elie Wiesel and Michaël de Saint-Cheron, *Evil and Exile* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 172. See also Wiesel, *Messengers of God*, xiii.

35 Elie Wiesel, *Célébrations: Portraits et Légendes* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 311–332; cf. engl. edition: Elie Wiesel, *Sages and Dreamers: Biblical, Talmudic, and Hasidic Portraits and Legends* (New York: Summit Books, 1991), 256–269 (without subtitles).

ancient Elie Wiesel (bChul 142a) in his revolt against God who does not intervene even though his chosen ones are led to the slaughter. And Wiesel indeed identifies with the questions of this rebel, »constantly defying the heaven he is invoking«. <sup>36</sup> But Wiesel firmly rejects Acher's answers, antinomianism, assimilation, and collaboration with the enemy. <sup>37</sup> He has nothing for Isaac Deutscher's »gentile Jews« à la Acher from Spinoza to Trotsky, Deutscher included. For all his protest against God, he demands solidarity with his persecuted people. Wiesel revisits the trial of Elisha ben Abuja and after carefully weighing the pros and cons, judges: »Elisha *was* guilty,« his rehabilitation is rejected. <sup>38</sup>

From this example, one can see that Wiesel is not merely an anthologist of the aggada, he is himself an aggadist. And not in the sense that David Patterson points out in his empathetic essay »Wiesel's Aggadic Outcry« in relation to the Aggada reminiscences in Wiesel's literary work, <sup>39</sup> but like the Talmudic Aggadists themselves, who in ever new attempts roll up biblical and rabbinic cases, shed new light on them and judge them.

#### 5.4. SIPPUR HACHASSIDI

Wiesel's own domain, however, was the Hasidic narrative (*Sippur HaChassidi*). In the renouveau juif in postwar France, Léon Ashkenazi was responsible for the *Pensée juive*, André Neher for the *Leçon Biblique*, Emmanuel Lévinas for the *Lecture Talmudique*, and Elie Wiesel for the *Légende Hassidique*. Wiesel invokes a living Hasidic tradition that was passed on to him by his grandfather Dodye Feig, a Hasid of Vizhnits. He is indebted to this living and murdered tradition and its *Rebbes*, he says: »à mon tour de les montrer tels que l'enfant en moi les a vues, tels qu'il les voit encore« <sup>40</sup>. Indeed, the telling of such saintly legends

<sup>36</sup> Wiesel, *Sages and Dreamers*, 256.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 269.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Cf. David Patterson, »Wiesel's Aggadic Outcry,« in *Elie Wiesel: Jewish, Literary and Moral Perspectives*, ed. Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 190–200.

<sup>40</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Célébration hassidique: Portraits et legends* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), 11–12. Cf.

is considered a mitzvah in the Hasidic tradition.<sup>41</sup> The telling of miracles is believed to have the same magic power as the narrated miracle, as a paradigmatic story, which no historian of Hasidism can afford to miss and which Wiesel also repeats several times, testifies:

»When the Baal Shem Tow had something difficult to do, some secret work for the benefit of the creatures, he went to a certain place in the forest, lit a fire and, absorbed in mystical meditation, said prayers—and everything happened as he had planned. When a generation later the Maggid of Meseritz had to do the same, he would go to that spot in the forest and say, ›We can no longer make the fire, but we can say the prayers‹—and everything went according to his will. Again, a generation later, Rabbi Moshe Leib from Sassow was to perform that deed. He too went into the forest and said, ›We can no longer light a fire, nor do we know the secret meditations that animate prayer; but we know the place in the forest where all this belongs, and that must suffice.‹—And it was enough. But when, again, a generation later, Rabbi Israel of Rishin had to perform that deed, he sat down in his golden chair in his castle and said, ›We can't light a fire, we can't say prayers, we don't know the place anymore either, but we can tell the story of it.‹<sup>42</sup>

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Elie Wiesel, »Dodye Feig, un portrait,« in *Un juif, aujourd'hui* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), 67–74.

- 41 Evidence in Yitzhak Buxbaum, *Storytelling and Spirituality in Judaism* (Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc. Publishers, 1994), 9–15.
- 42 With this story Gershom Scholem closes his major work *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen* (Zürich: Rhein-Verlag, 1957), 384 (engl.: *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, various editions). Similarly, Susanne Talabardon ends with it her excellent monograph *Chassidismus* (Tübingen: utb, 2016), 239. This version owes itself to the Hebrew poet and storyteller Shmuel Agnon. However, it is original Hasidic at its core and was first published in the collection of Reuven Zak, *Knesset Yisrael* (Warsaw: 1983), 23. Based on this original version, Moshe Idel, as usual, comes to quite different assessments than Scholem and his student Joseph Weiss, Moshe Idel, »Hasidism in Bukovina and Its Reverberations: From Marginality to Prominence,« in *Terra Judaica: Literary, Cultural and Historical Perspectives on Judaism in Bukovina and Galicia*, ed. Francisca Solomon and Ion Lihaciu (Konstanz: Hartung-Gorre-Verlag, 2020), 23–28. Similarly, Nehemia Polen, »Yearning for Sacred Place: Wiesel's Hasidic Tales and Postwar Hasidism,« in *Elie Wiesel: Jewish, Literary and Moral Perspectives*,

The narrative act does as much as the magical practices, the theurgic incantations and the mystical meditations used to do. Strictly speaking, in this story the mnemonic energy makes up for the loss of the magical energy; the commemoration of miracles (Ps 111:4: *Secher Assa LeNifleotaw*), in turn, works miracles because it recalls the possibility of miracles in hopeless situations. But the »night« of the Holocaust destroyed even this dwindling stage of belief in miracles, as Wiesel suggests in an addition to this story in his *Célébration Hassidique* (1972): »Today it [i.e., the telling of the miracle stories] is no longer enough. Proof: the calamity [a disaster for the Jewish people] was not prevented. Perhaps we no longer know how to tell the story?«<sup>43</sup>

In that »night« by all means not only the Hasidic, but also the rabbinic and biblical stories failed, although perpetrators and victims shared them. If Jesus had walked under the »windows of the Pope« in the Vatican on the night of October 15–16, 1943, he would have been arrested as a full Jew and deported to Auschwitz together with 1007 Roman Jews and probably exterminated.<sup>44</sup> But the day after the end of the world, the Hasidic stories unfolded their old magic again and contributed to the resurrection of the Hasidic shtetl in our time. As being said, Wiesel contributed significantly to this negation of annihilation.<sup>45</sup> But how does Wiesel tell the Hasidic stories?

Notwithstanding the autobiographical authentication, Wiesel, as a narrator of Hasidic stories, is one of the latecomers to neo-Hasidism who, since the publication of Micha J. Berdyczewski's *Sefer Hasidim* in 1900 and of J. L. Peretz's *Di Goldene Keyt* (1903 and 1909) and *Hasidic* (1908), have used Hasidism as a picturesque projection screen for their revivalist ideas. Wiesel was born near the

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ed. Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 74–75.: »savons nous plus raconter l'histoire? [...]«

43 Wiesel, *Célébration hassidique*, 166.

44 This would be a variation on Dostoevsky's legend of the Grand Inquisitor (The Brothers Karamazov II, V, V). Cf. on this legend the ill-fated but material-rich book by Helmut Lethen, *Der Sommer des Großinquisitors: Über die Faszination des Bösen* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2022).

45 Wiesel had elsewhere used the same Hasidic story to underscore the power of storytelling: Elie Wiesel, *The Gates of the Forest*, trans. Frances Frenaye (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), motto at the very beginning of the book.

Galician cradle of Hasidism. He grew up surrounded by strictly anti-modern and anti-Zionist Hungarian Hasidism. Arthur Green points out, however, that the leading Hasidic courts of his homeland, Sighet-Ujhely, Szatmár, Munkács, and Vizhnits, play no role at all in Wiesel's presentation of Hasidism.<sup>46</sup>

As often as Wiesel refers to his childhood memories, he cannot be classified as an uninvolved observer; similarly to the other authors of literary neo-Hasidism (*HaChassidut HaSifrutit*), he pursues his own philosophical agenda. It should also be asked how he relates to the older representatives of neo-Hasidism, e.g., Martin Buber's *Die Erzählungen der Chassidim* (*Tales of the Hasidim*). Ran HaCohen's exemplary edition of this publication, which is also a model for EWW, facilitates an investigation of this question.<sup>47</sup> In the following, we will contribute some observations to these aspects by way of example.<sup>48</sup>

The material overlap of the stories, for example about the *tzaddik* R. Israel Friedmann von Rižin (1797–1850), who was formative for the Hasidic experience of both Buber and Wiesel,<sup>49</sup> is not very large. Of the nearly 40 stories in Buber's anthology (MBW 18, nos. 625–664, pp. 465–481), only three recur in Wiesel's portrait. But although both authors tell the same stories, they mean quite different things: while Buber monotonously proclaims the »message of the Hasidim« in over 1300 stories in *stilus gravis*, Wiesel is concerned with fathoming the personalities of the Hasidic masters. He asks questions like »Qui était le voyant de Lublin?«<sup>50</sup> or »Qui était Menahem Mendl de Kotzk?«<sup>51</sup>. Buber

46 Cf. Arthur Green, »Wiesel in the Context of Neo-Hasidism,« in *Elie Wiesel: Jewish, Literary and Moral Perspectives*, ed. Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 54.

47 Cf. Martin Buber, *Chassidismus III: Die Erzählungen der Chassidim*, Martin Buber-Werkausgabe 18.1 and 18.2, ed. Ran HaCohen (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2018).

48 Cf. Martina Urban, *Aesthetics of Renewal: Martin Buber's Early Representation of Hasidism as Cultural Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

49 Cf. Martin Buber, *Chassidismus II: Theoretische Schriften*, Martin Buber-Werkausgabe 17, ed. Susanne Talabardon (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2016), 43–44.; and Wiesel, *Célébrations*, 653.

50 *Ibid.*, 852.

51 Wiesel, *Célébration hassidique*, 242.

lines up the »sacred anecdotes«<sup>52</sup> of the Rižiner, while Wiesel seeks to capture the religious individuality that unfolds in this series. In his double portrait of Rabbi Abraham Jacob of Sadagora, son and successor of the Rižiner, and Chaim Halberstam of Zans, Elie Wiesel reconstructs the conflict between the opposing directions of Hasidism, the rabbinic in western Galicia and the royal in eastern Galicia, as the antagonism of the personalities of the tzaddikim.<sup>53</sup> In Buber's anthology, the doctrinal sayings of Rabbi Abraham Jakob (MBW 18, nos. 665–674) and of Rabbi Chaim Halberstam (nos. 962–982) may not be exactly interchangeable, but they do not in any way foreshadow the sharpness of the sectarian dispute, which almost paves the way to a schism.

Here the »raving reporter« is in his element—Wiesel grippingly recounts this duel that shook the Jewish communities of Galicia and still reverberated in the distant Holy Land. That Wiesel is a *storyteller* has often been repeated, but one must recognize more than before the journalist's signature, who seeks the exciting plot in the story and flavors it with background and captivating details. Buber and Wiesel as narrators of Hasidic stories, however, are separated above all by a deep epochal break. The shadow of the Holocaust falls on Wiesel's retelling, and his intellectual milieu is postwar French existentialism. His tzaddikim wrestle desperately with God and their demons; they are not preachers of the *Lebensreform* (life reform) and the new community as with the youth-engaging Buber of the 1900 generation.<sup>54</sup>

Carina Brankovic, from the *Elie Wiesel Research Center Potsdam Branch*, is currently preparing a postdoctoral thesis on Wiesel's intellectual environment as a Parisian philosophy student. Admittedly, the Kierkegaardian »angoisse exis-

52 Cf. on this concept his afterword to his »Chronicle«: Martin Buber, »Gog und Magog,« in *Chassidismus III*, 1256.

53 Cf. Elie Wiesel, »Zanz and Sadagur,« in *Wise Men*, 295–315.

54 Green, »Wiesel in the Context of Neo-Hasidism,« 55.

tentialielle<sup>55</sup> and »melancholy solitude<sup>56</sup> are no less questionable as interpretive grids of Hasidism than Nietzschean vitalism. Steven T. Katz has established four criteria for testing the authenticity of Hasidic retellings: Nomism, Lurianism, Tzaddikism, Messianism. Where these traits are toned down or suppressed out of concern for modern sensibilities, we would be dealing with a neo-Hasidic imitation. Katz concludes that Wiesel's retellings pass this test.<sup>57</sup>

The suspicion remains, however, that Wiesel paints his portraits more extremely than necessary.<sup>58</sup> There is, of course, incontrovertible evidence that melancholy resides in Hasidic courts as well. The most glaring example is the court of Kotzk. But even the reader of Camus's *Homme révolté* does not want to go as far as the rabbi, or rather »anti-rabbi,« of Kotzk, the »divin rebelle,« or the »non-conformiste forcené.«<sup>59</sup> In his diptych of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (1787–1859) and his renegade disciple Rabbi Mordechai Joseph Leiner of Izbica (1801–1854), whose portrayals he uses to contrast ethics of mind and responsibility, fanaticism of truth and sense of community, he finally sides with the uprising against the Kotzk rebel: »Rabbi Mordechai-Yoseph [...] knew that

55 See Wiesel's masterful portrait of Rabbi Menahem-Mendel de Kotzk: Elie Wiesel, *Célébration hassidique*, 233–256, where he compares »Mendel le ténébreux« with Sören Kierkegaard (ibid., 242) and underlines his contemporaneity: »Etranger à sa génération, Rabbi Mendel de Kotzk semble appartenir à la nôtre; on le dirait notre contemporain. Ses colères sont nos colères, nos révoltes reflètent les siennes« (ibid., 254). The Kierkegaard-Kotzk comparison is topical. Wiesel's teacher at JTS, Abraham Yehoshua Heschel, who was descended from three important Hasidic lineages and had Kotzker Hasidim as teachers, also opens his Yiddish monograph with this comparison: *Kotzk. Ajn gerangl far emsdigkejt* (Tel Aviv: 1973), vol. I, 15–16.: »kierkegaard's chiduschim senen mir ojsgekumen hajmisch«. Cf. Arthur Green, »Abraham Joshua Heschel: Recasting Hasidism for Moderns,« *Modern Judaism* 29 (2009): 62–97. On Kotzk now also the beautiful monograph by Catherine Chalié, *Le Rabbi de Kotzk (1787–1859): Un hassidisme tragique* (Paris: Arfuyen, 2018).

56 Elie Wiesel, »Kotzk and Izbitze,« in *Sages and Dreamers: Biblical, Talmudic and Hasidic Portraits and Legends* (New York: Summit Books, 1991), 401.

57 Cf. Steven T. Katz, »Reflections on Wiesel's Hasidic Tales,« in *Elie Wiesel: Jewish, Literary and Moral Perspectives*, ed. Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 59–68.

58 Cf. his portrait of the seer of Lublin: Wiesel, *Célébrations*, 845–847.

59 On the characteristics of the Kotzker Rebbe as a rebel, see Wiesel, *Célébration hassidique*, 235, 244–245, 252 et al.

something had gone wrong in Kotzk: his friend had finally gone too far. In the name of abstract truth, he had turned his back on the suffering of real people.«<sup>60</sup>

However, he does not dedicate a portrait of his own to the »religious anarchist« of Izbica. In particular he does not deal with his bold antinomism, which the Rebbe of Izbica illustrates with the character antithesis of the progenitors Judah and Joseph, whereby the son of Rachel stands for the strict observance of the law (*Din*) and the son of Leah, with whom he obviously sympathizes, for the teleological suspension of the halakha (Ps 119,126, rabbinic term: *Hora'at Shaah*). It is not difficult to recognize in this brotherly antagonism the contemporary conflict between the Hasidim, the true »Jews«, and their rabbinic opponents, the *Mitnaggdim*. The reconciliation between the antipodes »Josephism« and »Judaism« must of course wait for the Messiah (see Isa 11:13).<sup>61</sup>

As is evident from the, admittedly, originally radical Hasidut of Izbica, nomism is not a proprium of Hasidic stories; rather, the conflict of law and »gospel« in them is a matter of negotiation and by no means, as Katz suggests, a symptom of neo-Hasidic retrojection.<sup>62</sup> It is true that the Hasidic stories told at the Rebbe's »table« like a new Haggadah have first of all a conformist meaning, they offer a narrative model of identification. Nehemiah Polen writes: »The stories of a particular lineage encapsulated the collective wisdom of the school where they were told and the dynasty that preserved them. Tales pointed to core hasidic values as embodied in the life of the court.«<sup>63</sup> However, these tales often have a nonconformist, sometimes even antinomian punchline. It happens that the »man from the countryside« (*'Am Ha'Arez*), who is at the bottom of

60 Wiesel, »Kotzk and Izbitze,« 419.

61 Cf. also: Joseph Weiss, »A Late Jewish Utopia of Religious Freedom,« in *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism*, ed. David Goldstein and Joseph Weiss (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1985), 209–248. Fundamental remains the dissertation by Morris M. Faierstein, *All Is in the Hands of Heaven: The Teachings of Rabbi Mordecai Joseph Leiner of Izbica* (New York: Gorgias Press, 1989), 52–55. See now also the fine monograph by Catherine Chalier, *R. Mordecai Joseph Leiner (1801–1854): La liberté hassidique* (Paris, Arfuyen: 2020), 23–29.

62 See Ran HaCohen, introduction to *Chassidismus III*, 22–28, against which the accusation of antinomian falsification of the sources has always been raised.

63 Polen, »Yearning for Sacred Place,« 70.

the traditional hierarchy, the illiterate shepherd boy with his whistle,<sup>64</sup> is ascribed a greater power over heaven than the Torah-scholarly and Torah-observant worshipper.<sup>65</sup> Precisely because of such reevaluations, these stories also came in handy to Jewish Nietzscheans like Berdyczewski and Buber, since the tzaddik appeared like a shatterer of old tablets hostile to life.<sup>66</sup> Tsippi Kauffman has elevated the nonconformist character to the essential feature of the Hasidic story, setting narrativity against normativity, rule against exception, or, speaking in rabbinic categories, *Din* against *Rachamim*.<sup>67</sup>

### 5.5. SIPPURÉ-MA'ASSIJOT

David Patterson begins his fundamental essay on the Jewish context of Wiesel's storytelling with a quote from *Somewhere a Master*<sup>68</sup>, where Wiesel places his narrative work in the tradition of Hasidic tales: »In retelling these tales, I realize once more that I owe them much. Consciously or not, I have incorporated a song, an echo, a word of theirs in my own legends and fables. I have remained, in a vanquished kingdom, a child who loves to listen.«<sup>69</sup>

Wiesel felt a kinship with the »greatest of all Hasidic storytellers,« Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlaw (1772–1810) in a special way: »my« Rabbi Nahman,«

64 Cf. Qwuzat Jaakov 54b–55a; Buber, *Chassidismus III*, 221–222, 873.

65 The story of the type »The ignorant's prayer« is admittedly an old Hasidic commonplace, cf. in the medieval *Sefer Hasidim* 4–6: Jehuda Wistinetzki and Jacob Freimann, eds., *Sefer Hasidim* (Frankfurt/M.: M.A. Wahrmann, 1924).

66 Cf. Daniel Krochmalnik, »Neue Tafeln: Nietzsche und die jüdische Counter-History,« in *Jüdischer Nietzscheanismus*, ed. Daniel Krochmalnik and Werner Stegmaier (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 55.

67 Cf. Tsippi Kauffman, »The Hasidic Story: A Call for Narrative Religiosity,« *Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy* 22 (2014): 101–102.

68 Elie Wiesel, *Somewhere a Master: Further Hasidic Portraits and Legends* (New York: Summit Books, 1982), 205.

69 David Patterson, »The »Maggid« of Sighet: Jewish Contexts for Wiesel's Storytelling,« in *Elie Wiesel and the Art of Storytelling*, ed. Rosemary Horowitz (London: McFarland, 2006), 102; Elie Wiesel, *Four Hasidic Masters and Their Struggle Against Melancholy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 123.

as he says in the double portrait »The Shpöler Zeide«<sup>70</sup>. He attests to the author of the 13 stories (*Sippuré-Ma'assijot*),<sup>71</sup> »that he has mastered his craft from the ground up« and compares him to Kafka<sup>72</sup> and the Surrealists.<sup>73</sup> The apparent shortcomings in the craft of his stories (»why is the plot interrupted ten times and patched up seven times?«) merely reflect Bratzlawer's view of man and the world: man is a scattered, disjointed and unfinished flawed being in a fragmented world in need of redemption.<sup>74</sup> That is why most of Rabbi Nachman's stories do not end »happily« but »openly,« like Kafka's stories and like Rabbi Nachman's story in real life<sup>75</sup>.

However, one example, the eighth of the 13 canonical tales, »Of the Rav and the Only Son,« also shows the tensions:<sup>76</sup> This son possessed everything a pious Jewish youth could wish for according to traditional ideas. As the sheltered only child of a wealthy rabbi, he had all the time in the world to learn, pray and fulfill commandments. Instead of enjoying it, he finds no »right taste« in

70 Wiesel, *Sages and Dreamers*, 351, the previous quotation: *Ibid.*, p. 355. There also the declaration of love: »[...] I prefer Rabbi Nahman's stories. I love his imagination, his warmth. His way of leading out of ourselves, and back again by a shortcut, a detour, by a word that hides another, a thousand others« (*ibid.*, 363).

71 Cf. the German translation from Yiddish and Hebrew, annotated by Michael Brocke, *Die Erzählungen des Rabbi Nachman von Bratzlaw*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (München, Wien: Hanser, 1986).

72 The comparison is now also topical, cf. Michal Oron, »Kafka und Nachman von Bratzlaw—Erzählen zwischen Traum und Erwartung,« in *Kafka und das Judentum*, ed. Karl Erich Grözinger, Stéphane Mosès and Hans Dieter Zimmermann (Frankfurt/M.: Jüdischer Verlag bei Athenäum, 1987), 112–121.

73 Cf. Elie Wiesel, *Célébration hassidique*, 177–179.

74 Cf. *ibid.*, 179.

75 *Ibid.*, 192–194. Cf. also Martin Cunz, *Die Fahrt von Rabbi Nachman von Brazlav ins Land Israel (1798–1799)* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997).

76 Cf. Brocke, *Die Erzählungen des Rabbi Nachman*, 81–84; Martin Buber, *Chassidismus I: Frühe Erzählungen*, Martin Buber-Werkausgabe 16, ed. Ran HaCohen and Bernd Witte (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2016), 93–97.

it.<sup>77</sup> He is advised to seek out a certain Hasidic tzaddik.<sup>78</sup> His father, however, an old-school rabbi, is strictly against it; he considers the tzaddik unworthy.<sup>79</sup> After many pleas, he sets off with his son, but because of supposed signs from heaven, he repeatedly interrupts the journey and turns back without having achieved anything. The son resigns and dies. In a dream he repeatedly appears to his father and commands him to go to the tzaddik. On the way there, the father learns that he had been fooled by the devil to undo the messianic work to which his son was destined. The moral of the story is not at all Kafkaesque: to follow at all costs the restlessness and the call of the heart against tradition, against paternal authority, even against supposed signs from heaven. It is thus an example of the unconditional value of faith (*Emuna*) and the worthlessness of despair (*Ye'ush*) in Bratzlaw. Despite formal similarities with small travel narratives by Kafka, such as »Railroad Travelers,« »An Everyday Incident,« »The Departure,« what Wiesel says is true: »nothing (is) really absurd in Rabbi Nachman's fantasy world.«<sup>80</sup>

## 5.6. THE MAGGID OF SIGHET

What, thus, characterizes the Maggid of Sighet? What does Wiesel's »Retelling of Traditional Jewish Narratives« preach? The young Wiesel called for a critical »ré-écriture« (André Neher), a total »re-reading« (Emil L. Fackenheim) of Jewish tradition in the light of the »tremendous flames of the Holocaust«<sup>81</sup>. In itself, renovations of the ancient are nothing new; each generation brought its experiences to the Holy Scriptures. Radically new this time, however, was the

77 Martin Buber, in his retelling of the stories of Rabbi Nachman (1906), fans out this simple discord into a »Pauline« conflict between the dead letter and the living spirit (MBW 16, 93, line 19; 94, line 19).

78 With Martin Buber, it too »does not lie above learning,« Buber, *Chassidismus I*, 94, line 40.

79 With Buber, he considers him a »foolish miracle man.«

80 Franz Kafka, *Das erzählerische Werk I: Erzählungen. Aphorismen. Brief an den Vater*, ed. Klaus Hermsdorf (Berlin: Rütten & Loening, 1983), 341–342 and 364.

81 Wiesel, *Célébrations*, 77.

extent of the damage. Was there anything left at all of the building's foundations? Can one still believe after Auschwitz? Did faith not prove to be a »narishe emune,« a stupid, dangerous faith?<sup>82</sup> »The Night« is virtually a »kakangeliem«; Passover 1944—an anti-exodus »de l'être au néant«<sup>83</sup>; Rosh HaShanah 1944—an abdication of the celebrated with coronation songs (Malchuyot); Yom Kippur 1944—not a selection of God, as in the well-known Piyut, »Who to life, who to death, [...] who to the fire and who to the sword« (Unetane Toqef Kedushat HaYom), but a selection of the SS.

Doubt never completely left even the late Wiesel, and in most of his portraits it returns either hidden or quite openly. Thus, his portrait of the Bratzlaver Rebbe ends with a personal memory: »[...] for the first time I met a Hasid of Brazlaw *down there (là-bas)*, in the realm of night. To anyone who would listen, he repeated a saying of his rabbi, the only one that had survived: »By the love of Heaven, Jews, do not despair!«<sup>84</sup> The German translation is misleading; according to the French original, it was not the saying that was literally the last to survive, but the rabbi, because he had no successor. In that »night,« the Bratzlav Hasid is admittedly of the sad type. The late double portrait of the Shpoler Seyde and Rabbi Nachman also ends with Wiesel's *ceterum censeo*, the vision of the closed castle of the Messiah anno diaboli 1940, although not entirely without hope for his future coming—»one day, one day ...«.<sup>85</sup>

The Maggid of Sighet may have had his doubts, but he tirelessly did his messianic work, breathing new life into the souls and their stories that were buried under the ashes of the Holocaust. In the language of Jewish mysticism:

»Man must seek out the lost sparks, gather them, and deliver them to their sacred source. Everywhere there are souls waiting to be called. Everywhere, and especially beneath the ashes, sparks exist only for this

82 Eliezer Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, ed. Mark Turkov and Abraham Mitlberg, *Dos Poylishe Yidntum* 117 (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-Farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine, 1956), 7.

83 Elie Wiesel, *Signes d'exode: Essais, histoires, dialogues* (Paris: Grasset, 1985), 211.

84 Wiesel, *Célébration hassidique*, 197.

85 Wiesel, *Sages and Dreamers*, 366.

call. What is required is for man to find these souls and save them; when all have been ›restored‹, the divine will become the messianic light.«<sup>86</sup>

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86 Elie Wiesel, »The Shpoler Zeide,« in *ibid.*, 353 f. Patterson also ends his article on the Maggid of Sighet with this quote: Patterson, »The ›Maggid‹ of Sighet,« 119.



## 6. HISTORICAL HAUNTINGS IN ELIE WIESEL'S EARLY NOVELS

JULIEN JEUSETTE

»[...] history is always contemporary history, that is, political.«  
Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, vol. 2, p. 1242.

Elie Wiesel's novels are full of ghosts, supernatural events and characters that seem possessed by external forces. In a 1959 letter addressed to Jérôme Lindon, his editor at Minuit, Wiesel writes that *Dawn* (1961), the first novel he wrote after the publication of *Night*, recounts »the empire of death over living reality [la réalité vivante].«<sup>1</sup> This description applies to many of Wiesel's texts; the haunting of the dead is a major feature of his literary work. Holocaust literature in general is imbued with spectral presences, and as such, it marks an exception in the post-war literary field: after an overwhelming presence in nineteenth century literature, »the ghost tends to fade away during the [twentieth] century«,<sup>2</sup> notes Daniel Sangsue in a book on the fantastic genre. In many texts of Holocaust survivors, however, the characters are revenants who see and live with revenants: the past mingles with the present and haunts the living<sup>3</sup>. »How to remain alive amidst this people of the dead?«,<sup>4</sup> asks the narrator of Charlotte Delbo's *Measure of Our Days* [*Mesure de nos jours*], the third volume of her *Auschwitz and after* trilogy. In Nelly Sachs' *Chor* series, and especially in her *Chor der Geretteten*, the traumatic past survives in the present and holds

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1 Dominique Moncond'huy, ed., *L'espèce humaine et autres écrits des camps* (Paris: Gallimard, 2021), 1436 [translated by Julien Jeusette].

2 Daniel Sangsue, *Fantômes, Esprits et Autres Morts-Vivants: Essai de Pneumatologie Littéraire* (Paris: José Corti, 2011), 571 [translated by Julien Jeusette].

3 Reformulating Pierre MacOrlan's notion of »fantastique social«, one could speak here of »fantastique historique«.

4 Charlotte Delbo, *Mesure de nos jours* (Paris: Minuit, 2013), 56. [»Comment être vivante au milieu de ce peuple de mortes ?«] In the body of the article, I will translate the literary texts in English, and provide the original in brackets in the footnote.

the »saved« captive. Such—often pathological—existential anachronisms give these literary texts a somewhat supernatural mood, even if they can hardly be categorized as »ghost stories«.

The motif of haunting in texts of first-generation Holocaust survivors, and especially in Wiesel's, has rarely been studied. Perhaps it was seen as »too symbolic«, as Jérôme Lindon put it when he refused to publish *Dawn* with Minuit. During the twentieth century, the interest in ghosts faded away along with the fantastique genre. In recent decades, however, the Humanities have witnessed a renewal of interest in the topic: »since the 1990s, the specter has insistently returned to the intellectual scene.«<sup>5</sup> As early as 1992, Slavoj Žižek analyzed the return of the dead—»the fundamental fantasy of contemporary mass culture«<sup>6</sup>—from a psychoanalytical perspective, but it was without a doubt Jacques Derrida who legitimized »hauntology«. His 1993 *Spectres de Marx* was a plea to take the ghosts seriously, and many scholars of various disciplines have since followed his lead. In her influential *Ghostly Matters* (2008), for instance, Avery F. Gordon calls upon sociology to take spectrality into account, for it is a fundamental »part of social life«:

»If we want to study social life well, and if in addition we to want to contribute, in however small a measure, to changing it, we must learn how to identify hauntings and reckon with ghosts, must learn how to make contact with what is without doubt often painful, difficult, and unsettling.«<sup>7</sup>

The interest in Aby Warburg's concept of *Nachleben* in Art history (Didi-Huberman 2002), the analysis of cyclical time in modern literature (Hamel 2006),

5 Ezio Puglia et al., *Ritorni Spettrali: Storie e Teorie Della Spettoralità Senza Fantasmi*, *Linguistica e Critica Letteraria* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2018), 7 [translated by Julien Jeunesse].

6 Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 22.

7 Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 7.

or the study of south-African zombies in anthropology (Comaroff 2010) are but a few examples of this spectral turn. Against the post-1989 ideology according to which history had come to an end, these rich and varied transdisciplinary approaches to »hauntology« attest to the fact that the ghosts of the past do not accept their relinquishment—just as the victims of the Nazis did not accept theirs in post-war France.<sup>8</sup>

This article analyzes the motif of haunting in Elie Wiesel's first two novels: *Dawn (L'Aube)* and *Day (Le Jour)*. In these texts, the motif is present in different ways—apparition of ghosts, possessed characters, collective haunting, but it is always linked to traumatic historical events. According to Giorgio Agamben, haunting is in fact *always* historical, because spectral figures convey in the present the moment of the past at which they died: »a specter always carries with it a date wherever it goes; it is, in other words, an intimately historical entity.«<sup>9</sup> In this article, I would like to suggest, however, that the specter, as a historical entity, does not haunt everyone in the same way: we are not equal before the ghosts of the past. For the survivor of mass murder, haunting has a different meaning than for the generations of »postmemory« (Hirsch 2012). Contemporary Polish literature, for instance, has witnessed in the last decades »the emergence of a paradigm of memory, in which the medium of the fantastique is employed to deal with a collective trauma«:<sup>10</sup> Igor Ostachowicz's *Night of the Living Jew* (2012), for instance, recounts the invasion of Warsaw by Jewish zombies. Here, the return of the dead is obviously a literary way of interrogating a troubled national memory. The function of haunting differs in novels written by first generation Holocaust survivors: the specters are at once historical *and* personal,<sup>11</sup> and as such, their return is not so much addressed to

8 One should not forget, indeed, that the reception of Holocaust literature really started in the 1970s, more than a decade after Wiesel's first novels.

9 Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 38.

10 Magdalena Waligórska, »Healing by Haunting: Jewish Ghosts in Contemporary Polish Literatur,« *Prooftexts* 34, no. 2 (2014): 209.

11 In Delbo's book, the narrator is visited by anonymous »a people of the dead« [people de mortes], and by specific dead women she befriended with in the camp.

the forgetful mass, than to the victims themselves. As I show in the following pages, haunting is not cathartic in Wiesel's early novels: on the contrary, it is a dreadful curse capable of destroying the subject's life.

### 6.1. JUDGED BY THE PAST: *DAWN*

In a chilling scene that takes place in the middle of the novel *Dawn*, a dense crowd of ghosts suddenly appears in the room where the narrator, Elisha, is sitting:

»As my gaze wandered around the room, I realized that everyone who had helped shape who I was, my most enduring self, was there. Some of them looked familiar, but I couldn't remember who they were; they had nameless faces or faceless names. However, I knew that at some point in my life they had been on my path. And then father was there, of course. Mother was there too. The beggar was there. The English soldiers from Hedera's military convoy were there. My old schoolmaster with the yellowed beard was there, too. And around them, so many friends, so many brothers, so many comrades, faces that I had known in my childhood and others that I had seen living and dying, hoping and blaspheming, in Buchenwald and in Auschwitz.«<sup>12</sup>

These nightly ghosts appear for a specific reason: Elisha is at a turning point in his life. An 18-year-old Jew, survivor of the concentration camps, he was recruited in 1947 by the »Movement«, a radical political group fighting for the

12 Elie Wiesel, *L'Aube* (Paris: Seuil, 1960), 76. [»En laissant mon regard se promener dans la chambre, je m'aperçus que tous ceux qui avaient contribué à former celui que j'étais, mon moi le plus durable, s'y trouvaient. Quelques uns me semblaient familiers, mais je ne pouvais me rappeler leur identité ; ils avaient des visages sans nom ou des noms sans visage. Cependant, je savais qu'à un moment donné de ma vie, ils s'étaient trouvés sur ma route. Et puis père était là, bien sûr. Maman aussi. Le mendiant était là. Les soldats anglais du convoi militaire de Hedera étaient là. Mon vieux maître d'études à la barbe jaunie était là, lui aussi. Et autour d'eux, tant d'amis, tant de frères, tant de camarades, des visages que j'avais connus dans mon enfance et d'autres que j'avais vu vivre et agoniser, espérer et blasphémer, à Buchenwald et à Auschwitz«]

liberation of Palestine from the British occupation. Gad, one of the leaders of the Movement, met him in Paris a few months before and convinced him to join the fight. Most of the novel takes place in one single room, where Elisha is staying with several members of the group. In the basement of the building, John Dawson, an English prisoner is held hostage: the Movement is planning to execute him at dawn, in retaliation for the hanging of one of their own, David ben Moshe, captured after an attack against British soldiers. Elisha has been chosen to carry out the execution, and throughout the book, he hopes for the release of ben Moshe, and reflects upon his potential upcoming act, hesitating between aversion and self-affirmation. When he realizes that the die is cast, the dead appear.

The haunting, in this scene, is strictly personal. Elisha is the only one in the room who sees the ghosts, and even if some cannot be precisely identified, he knows they are the ghosts of his own past: dead family members, friends, acquaintances. As the other members of the Movement fail to see the ghosts, the reader may interpret this strange scene in two different ways: From a rationalist view, one could say that the narrator is simply prone to hallucinations: tormented by an inner debate that he is unable to resolve (commit to the future and become an executioner, or render justice to the dead and stay blocked in the past), his mind projects this dilemma before his eyes—or more precisely, his superego materializes and commands his conscience to be faithful to the past. From a more spiritual perspective, one could say that the narrator has particular psychic abilities: because of his traumatic experience (the fact that he survived what he was not supposed to survive), he now has the power to communicate with the dead. However, as it is often the case in the *fantastique* genre, such interpretative conflicts only exist for the reader: whatever the ghosts' ontology (real or unreal) and location (the narrator's mind or the room), the fact is that they are present *for the narrator*. The dead surround him and impose a dark and gloomy atmosphere on the room: »this crowd, behind me, this crowd made of silences whose shadows absorbed the light and made it a black, sad, funereal, hostile light, this crowd fixed in a petrifying immobility, was silent«. <sup>13</sup> Rather

13 Ibid., 97. [»cette foule, derrière moi, cette foule faite de silences dont les ombres

than choosing between hallucination or psychic ability, I will try to understand why the ghosts appear, and what they represent.

In *Looking Awry*, Žižek writes that »the return of the dead is the sign of a disturbance in the symbolic rite, in the process of symbolization; the dead return as collectors of some unpaid symbolic debt.«<sup>14</sup> This might be true in contemporary culture, but in Wiesel's case, the dead do not return to »collect« their due; they show no overt hostility towards the narrator: »My father smiled at him and he, the little boy, took it and sent it to me, over the multitude of heads that separated me from him.«<sup>15</sup> Such benevolence is however double-edged. Under the guise of sympathy, the dead formulate an imperative ethical demand: the demand to be loyal to the past, in the form of specific actions (or non-actions) in the present. To kill, Elisha must indeed not only reject his education, but more importantly, embrace an ideology that, just like Nazism, justifies the murder of innocents—that is precisely what the ghosts cannot bear. By their very presence, they aim to prevent Elisha from performing this act: »I knew that behind me, standing close together as if to protect themselves from the cold, they were judging.«<sup>16</sup> Thus, the present is being judged by the past. Should the narrator kill the hostage, his guilt would be multidirectional: guilt towards present moral and legal laws; dual guilt towards the dead (by becoming an »executioner«<sup>17</sup>, he enables the repetition of what caused their death, *and* transforms them into proxy assassins<sup>18</sup>); guilt towards the future: »The dead

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absorbait la lumière et en faisaient une lumière noire, triste, funèbre, hostile, cette foule fixée dans une immobilité pétrifiante, se taisait.}]

14 Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 23.

15 Wiesel, *L'Aube*, 77. [»Mon père lui adressa un sourire et lui, le petit garçon, le prit et me l'envoya, à moi, par-dessus toute cette multitude de têtes qui me séparaient de lui.«]

16 *Ibid.*, 97. [»Je savais que derrière moi, debout, serrés l'un contre l'autre comme pour se protéger du froid, ils jugeaient.«]

17 »I imagined myself in a uniform, a dark gray uniform, an S.S. uniform.« *Ibid.*, 42.

18 »An absolute act, like that of giving death, commits not only the being itself but also all those who participated in its formation. By killing a man, I was turning them into murderers.« *Ibid.*, 80.

don't forget anything. To their eyes, I will be a murderer for all eternity.«<sup>19</sup> In Wiesel's texts, the past shapes the present and governs the future.

Jacques Derrida, in *Specters of Marx*, also considers the specter, »the completely-other«, as an imperative force: »The completely-other—and the dead person is the completely-other—watches me, addresses me, without however replying to me, a prayer or an injunction, an infinite demand, which becomes the law for me.«<sup>20</sup> Even if the specter acts as a kind of despot, Derrida nevertheless calls on us to welcome it like an honoured guest: instead of running away or being paralyzed with terror, we should lend the ghosts a listening ear. In regard to Holocaust literature, however, such a kindhearted plea seems out of tune. In a moving scene from Charlotte Delbo's *Mesure de nos jours*, the return of the dead casts a black veil on her son's birth, as the narrator's maternal joy is crushed by the sudden appearance of silent ghosts:

»The son I had wished for was there, mine. A calm and beneficial joy. I could not let myself be carried by this joy, I could not abandon myself to it. At the same time that this soft and enveloping water of joy was rising around me, in me, my room was invaded by the spectres of our companions.«<sup>21</sup>

The sufferings of the unburied is the burden of the survivor: here, the narrator's companions who did not survive the concentration camps claim their share of joy. In Delbo and in Wiesel, actions and emotions are always evaluated in light of the past, which »weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living«.<sup>22</sup> to quo-

19 Ibid., 95. [»Ils n'oublient rien, les morts. A leurs yeux, je resterais bourreau pour toute éternité.«]

20 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 2006), 120.

21 Delbo, *Mesure de nos jours*, 55. [»Ce fils que j'avais souhaité, il était là, à moi. Une joie calme et bienfaisante. Je n'ai pas pu me laisser porter par cette joie, je n'ai pas pu m'y abandonner. En même temps que montait autour de moi, en moi, cette eau douce et enveloppante de la joie, ma chambre était envahie par les spectres de nos compagnes«]

22 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, »The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,« in *Col-*

te Marx's famous phrase. Such a predicament comes from what one could call the »existential heterochrony« of the survivor: he or she lives in several different temporalities at once. Lending the ghosts a welcoming ear thus implies, in the best case, to be bound to the identity of »survivor« (as carrier, and perhaps messenger, of the sufferings of the dead), and in the worst case, to give up one's life.

Interestingly, however, Elisha does not accept his burden. Although terrorized and on the verge of paralysis, he refuses to acknowledge the specters and to meet their silent demand. Contrary to Wiesel's own description of *Dawn* as »the empire of death over living reality«, the narrator follows the Movement's revolutionary philosophy of history, entirely turned towards the future. In a long tirade, one of the members indeed convinces him that his sacrificial act is a necessary step towards utopian times:

»Soon, all this will be over. The British will evacuate the country and we will come up to the surface, to live a normal, healthy, simple life. You will get married. You will have children. You will tell them stories. You will make them laugh. You will be happy, because they will be happy; and they will be, I promise.«<sup>23</sup>

The advent of this better future is based on a clear cut with the past. The murder of John Dawson is at once the founding act of a new Jewish community and a break with its traditions: »Our only chance now, John Dawson, is to know how to hate you, to learn the art and necessity of hate. Otherwise, otherwise, John Dawson, our future will be a continuation of the past and the Messiah will wait for his deliverance forever.«<sup>24</sup> According to the Movement's ideology,

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*lected Works XI* (New York: International Publishers, 1979), 10.

23 Wiesel, *L'Aube*, 92. [»Bientôt, tout cela sera terminé. Les Anglais évacueront le pays et nous remonterons à la surface, pour vivre une vie normale, saine, simple. Tu te marieras. Tu auras des enfants. Tu leur raconteras des histoires. Tu les fera rire. Tu seras heureux, parce qu'ils seront heureux ; et ils le seront, je te le promets«]

24 *Ibid.*, 135–136. [»Notre seule chance, à présent, John Dawson, c'est de savoir vous haïr, c'est d'apprendre l'art et la nécessité de la haine. Autrement, autrement, John Dawson, notre avenir ne sera que le prolongement du passé et le Messie attendra toujours sa délivrance.«]

the Holocaust signals to the Jews that they must change their ethical stance to survive. As such, acts are not evaluated according to their moral character, but to their future effect: the end justifies the means. Embracing this ideal, Elisha rejects the judgement of the past: against the ghosts' will, he kills the hostage—and the ghosts disappear. Wiesel's novel describes Elisha's liberation from the burden of the past.

However, the last words of the book shed a particular light on this liberation:

»Soon there was only one piece left of the night, one very small piece. It was hanging on the other side of the window. I looked at this piece of night and fear seized me by the throat. The black piece, made of shreds of shadow, had a face. I looked at it and understood my fear. That face was mine.«<sup>25</sup>

Once again, it is not necessary to determine if the narrator is terrified by a simple, dark reflection of his face in the window, or if his face is »truly« detached from his body. What matters here is that the view of his own lifeless face is meaningful (horrifyingly meaningful) for the narrator—yet the reader is left with no key to interpret this strange finale. Perhaps intertextuality can allow us to make sense of it. At the end of *Night*, the narrator goes through a similar experience: after having been liberated from the camps, he looks in a mirror and sees a corpse. If one agrees that *Dawn's* last scene replays this ending (remember that Elisha is also a camp survivor), the whole book takes on a new meaning: far from departing from the horror of the past, the murder of the innocent Englishman reopens the possibility of its repetition. While putting an end to his existential heterochrony by detaching from the past, Elisha creates a new existential split, but this time in the present: it his split present that he sees in the window. As *Dawn* recounts the birth of the state of Israel, this scene could

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25 Ibid., 140. [»Bientôt, il ne resta de la nuit qu'un morceau, un tout petit morceau. Il était suspendu de l'autre côté de la fenêtre. Je regardai ce morceau de nuit et la peur me saisit à la gorge. Le morceau noir, fait de lambeaux d'ombres, avait un visage. Je le regardai et je compris ma peur. Ce visage, c'était le mien.«]

be read as an implicit warning to the Jewish community: one cannot build an ethical future by turning away from the ethical demands of the past. From an autobiographical perspective, one could say that Wiesel has followed this line through his literary works: all of his subsequent texts (be they fictional or autobiographical) are pleas to keep the past alive in the present.

## 6.2. POSSESSED BY THE PAST: *DAY*

*Day* (1961), Elie Wiesel's second novel, is the story of Eliezer, a young Holocaust survivor hit by a cab in New York City. While recovering in a hospital room, unable to move, he reflects on his past. As such, the novel's plot is a matrix for many texts to come: the theme of the enclosed and static character who recounts his memories is a narrative topos of Wiesel's literary work. In *La Ville de la Chance*, *Les Juges* and *L'Otage*, among others, characters are locked up against their will and manage to cope with their predicament by immersing themselves in the past. In *La Ville de la Chance*, the protagonist is being tortured in a Hungarian communist prison during the Cold War: forced to stand all day in front of a wall, he survives by taking refuge in his memory. The past acts as a kind of reservoir of vital energy in many of Wiesel's novels: it keeps the characters from despair or even death. The fact that Wiesel often defines himself as a »storyteller« rather than a »writer« echoes this narrative structure, which evokes Scheherazade of *The Arabian Nights*—except that here, it is not stories that offer refuge, but personal history. Even in texts that do not include locked up characters, the narrative unfolds in reflexive digressions: the main plot is often stagnant, barely moving forward, while the »true« stories, the only ones worth telling, have already happened. Such radical nostalgia is obviously linked, sometimes veiled, sometimes unequivocally, to the existential fracture that the concentration camps represented. In *Day*, the narrator is well aware of his nostalgic fate: »I knew that I no longer existed, that my true self had remained there, that my present self had nothing in common with the other, true self.«<sup>26</sup>

26 Elie Wiesel, *Le Jour* (Paris: Seuil, 1961), 56. [»Je savais que je n'existais plus, que mon vrai moi était resté là-bas, que mon moi d'aujourd'hui n'avait rien de commun avec l'autre, le vrai.«]

At least from the narrative point of view, it is clear in this sense that Wiesel is in disagreement with the character of his first, preceding, novel: if true life is in the past, any attempt to break free from it will dramatically fail.<sup>27</sup>

Unlike later texts, however, *Day* remains ambivalent towards the past. Eliezer wants to be faithful to the dead, yet they represent a heavy burden for him. There are no ghosts in the novel, but the past is omnipresent, in the form of haunting: the narrator is possessed by forces that prevent him from leading a meaningful life. In a restaurant with his girlfriend Kathleen, for instance, he is unable to eat his dish:

»So I took a piece of meat and put it in my mouth. The smell of blood made my stomach turn. Suddenly I felt the urge to vomit. Once I had seen a man who was devouring a slice of meat without bread with appetite. Starving, I had watched him for a long time. I followed, hypnotized, the movement of his fingers and his jaws. I hoped that when he saw me there, in front of him, he would throw me a piece. He hadn't seen me. The next day, his barrack mates had hanged him: it was human flesh he was eating. In his defense, he shouted, ›I did nothing wrong! He was no longer alive‹ As I saw his body swinging in the bathroom stall, I had thought, What if he had seen me?—Eat, said Kathleen. I took a sip of juice.—I'm not hungry, I said with effort.«<sup>28</sup>

In this excerpt, memories of the concentration camp resurface unexpectedly: for

27 It is also interesting to note that the character of *Day* does not live in Israel, as one might have imagined following *Dawn*, but in New York.

28 Wiesel, *Le Jour*, 13. [›Je pris donc un morceau de viande et le portai à ma bouche. L'odeur du sang me fit tourner l'estomac. Une envie de vomir me prit soudain. Un jour, j'avais vu un homme qui dévorait avec appétit une tranche de viande sans pain. Affamé, je l'avais observé un long moment. Je suivais, hypnotisé, le mouvement de ses doigts et celui de ses mâchoires. J'espérais qu'en m'apercevant là, devant lui, il m'en jetterait un morceau. Il ne m'avait pas vu. Le lendemain, ses camarades de baraque l'avaient pendu : il mangeait de la chair humaine. Pour sa défense, il avait crié : ›Je n'ai rien fait de mal ! Il n'était plus vivant ...‹ En voyant son corps se balancer dans la baraque des toilettes, j'avais pensé : Et s'il m'avait vu ?—Mange, dit Kathleen. J'avalai une gorgée de jus.—Je n'ai pas faim, dis-je avec effort‹]

the narrator, the piece of meat acts as a kind of noxious Proustian »madeleine«. After a somatic reaction (the urge to vomit), the taste and smell of the meat trigger the memory of a traumatic scene which condenses the dehumanizing horror of the camps.<sup>29</sup> Without knowing it, the starved narrator desired human flesh, and could have been hanged if he had eaten it. Starvation, cannibalism, brutal death—such interlinked memories keep intruding in the character's present and prevents him from living his daily life. An act apparently as harmless as eating in a restaurant becomes impossible; like the narrator of *Dawn*, his existence unfolds in heterochrony, one foot in the present, one foot in the past.

In a striking passage of the novel, he explains to his worried doctor that »man can become a cemetery for the unburied dead.«<sup>30</sup> This statement resonates with an heterodox psychoanalytical theory developed in the late 1970s by two Hungarian psychoanalysts, Maria Torok and Nicolas Abraham. According to their theory, a subject can be the repository of traumas of others than himself: when mourning is unsuccessful due to traumatic events, an individual may *incorporate* the dead into his self, in what the two psychoanalysts call a crypt. Hidden most of the time, the inhabitants of the crypt can however manifest themselves to the conscience of the »cryptophore«:

»Sometimes, however, at the time of the libidinal realizations, »at midnight«, the ghost of the crypt comes to haunt the cemetery guard, by sending him strange and incomprehensible signs, by obliging him to carry out unusual acts, by inflicting him unexpected feelings.«<sup>31</sup>

According to this theory, the dead survive in—and through—the living: the preservation of this »artificial unconscious, housed within the ego itself«,<sup>32</sup> is a

29 One could say, however, that the hanging of the cannibal is a way for the camp community to remain, however paradoxically, in the realms of »humanity«.

30 Wiesel, *Le Jour*, 57. [»l'homme peut devenir un cimetière pour les morts sans sépulture«]

31 Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *L'écorce et le noyau* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999), 266.

32 *Ibid.*, 254.

way for the mourner to prevent a loved one from completely disappearing. Such an analysis seems fitting to explain, from a psychoanalytical point of view, the behavioral troubles of Eliezer and his inability to relate sincerely to others: his unconscious is inhabited by the dead.<sup>33</sup> They alter and dictate his present life. In Torok and Abraham's theory, however, cryptophoric patients are not aware they carry a crypt: by making their patients aware of it, the psychoanalysts can cure their ailment. Eliezer, on the contrary, is perfectly aware of his crypt: in fact, he is proud to be a living cemetery for the dead. In this sense, he is closer to Derrida and deconstruction: the French philosopher was familiar with the theories of Abraham and Torok,<sup>34</sup> but disagreed with them about the cure: »To put it schematically, deconstruction is about learning to live with ghosts, psychoanalysis is about learning to live without them.«<sup>35</sup> Before coming to this derridean conclusion, however, Eliezer makes an attempt to learn to live *without* them.

In the novel, it is his girlfriend Kathleen who convinces him to try and let go of the dead. Through love, she seeks to remove his burden and exorcise the forces of the past that haunts his life: »She wanted to make me happy at all costs. To make me taste the pleasures of life. To make me forget the past. ›It is dead, your past. Dead. Buried‹, she said. And I answered: ›My past is me. If it is buried, I am buried with it.‹ She was relentless in her struggle.«<sup>36</sup> The struggle lasts one year—and fails dramatically. »I try to give you joy: an image rises in your memory and it's over. You are no longer there. The image is stronger than

33 It would be interesting, moreover, to reflect on the Jewish mythological figure of the »dybbuk« in regard to haunting in Wiesel's novels.

34 Jacques Derrida wrote a preface, under the title »Fors«, to Abraham and Torok's *Le Verbier de l'Homme aux loups*, Jacques Derrida, »FORS: Les mots anglais de Nicolas Abraham et Maria Torok,« In *Cryptonymie: Le Verbier de L'Homme aux Loups*, ed. Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok (Paris: Flammarion, 1976).

35 Colin Davis, *Haunted Subjects: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis and the Return of the Dead* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 89.

36 Wiesel, *Le Jour*, 73. [»Elle voulait à tout prix me rendre heureux. Me faire goûter aux plaisirs de la vie. Me faire oublier le passé. ›Il est mort, ton passé. Mort. Enterré‹, disait-elle. Et moi je répondais : ›Mon passé, c'est moi. S'il est enterré, je suis enterré avec lui.‹ Elle était acharnée dans sa lutte.«]

me. You think I don't know that?»<sup>37</sup> Kathleen blames him for not trying hard enough, but he insists on his passivity: just like the rise of involuntary memory, he controls neither the arising of traumatic »images«, nor his strange behaviors. »This is what she refused to understand: that the dead are invincible. That through me it was they who stood up to her.«<sup>38</sup> Kathleen is not fighting Eliezer, she is fighting the ghosts that have taken hold of his body—and as he puts it, they cannot be defeated. The ghosts hold the crypt like a fortress; nothing, not even love, is powerful enough to loosen their grip. Frustrated by her repeated failures, Kathleen ends up resenting him, and they separate.

This motif of failed exorcism is present in other texts by Holocaust survivors, and notably in Imre Kertecz's famous *Kaddish for an Unborn Child*. In the last pages of his long monologue, the narrator recounts how his ex-wife, born of Jewish parents after the Second World War, tried to free him from the past:

»When she had wanted to have a part in these stories, in order to steer the stories out of their maze, their rut, yes, their mire, and guide me to her, to her love, so that *together* we might extricate ourselves from the swamp and leave it behind forever, like the bad memory of an illness—then all at once I had let go of her hand (as my wife expressed it) and started to run away from her, back into the swamp [...].«<sup>39</sup>

Kertecz's narrator is explicit: the refusal to »move on« is an ethical—yet unbearable—stance. As soon as he understands that his wife wants to divert him from the »swamp« of the past, he leaves her. The gothic image of the swamp denotes temporal stagnation, suffocating miasma and death—it is a place of

37 Ibid., 125. [»J'essaie de te donner de la joie: une image se lève dans ta mémoire et c'est fini. Tu n'es plus là. L'image est plus forte que moi. Tu crois que je ne le sais pas ?«]

38 Ibid., 74. [»C'est ce qu'elle se refusait à comprendre: que les morts sont invincibles. Qu'à travers moi c'étaient eux qui lui tenaient tête.«]

39 Imre Kertész, *Kaddish for an Unborn Child*, trans. Tim Wilkinson (New York: Vintage International, 2004), 116.

desolation, yet it is the only place where the narrator's »damaged life«,<sup>40</sup> to quote Adorno, is not a false one. At first sight, Wiesel's protagonist seems more ambiguous about his connection to the past: he is proud to carry the dead, but accepts Kathleen's attempts to »heal« him. However, one can doubt his sincerity: does he really believe in the process? Is he truly ready to let go of the dead when he meets her? The fact is that, in Wiesel and in Kertecz's texts, nothing, not even love, is strong enough to leave Auschwitz behind. For these characters, the past is not a refuge: *they* are, in spite of themselves, a refuge for the past.

Compared to Kertecz's energetic and logorrheic narrator, however, Eliezer does not have the stature to carry his burden. From the moment when he accepts his existential heterochrony and consents to »the tragic condition of those who have returned and are left out, dead and alive«,<sup>41</sup> he gradually lets his life be absorbed by death. At the end of the novel, we understand that the cab accident was in fact no accident. In accordance with the passivity of the character, however, it was not a planned suicide either: he could have avoided the car which arrived by chance, at that moment. By letting the »empire of death« take hold of his life, Eliezer ends up not wanting to live anymore, as he admits to the doctor: »I don't care about life, deep inside myself there is no desire to continue the journey.«<sup>42</sup> The end of the book, however, remains open. In the final scene, Eliezer's Hungarian friend Gyula, a painter, comes to visit him in the hospital; when he understands the true cause of the »accident«, he goes on a long diatribe against the dead:

»You have to forget them. You have to chase them out of your memory. With a whip, if necessary.—Drive them out, Gyula? With a whip, you say? Whip my father out! And grandma? Do you want to lash her too?

40 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 1978).

41 Wiesel, *Le Jour*, 89. [»la tragique condition de ceux qui sont revenus, laissés pour compte, morts-vivants.«]

42 *Ibid.*, 83. [»je ne tiens pas à la vie, tout au fond de moi-même il ne reste plus aucun désir de poursuivre la route«]

—Yes, yes, and yes again. The dead have nothing to do here. Let them leave us in peace. If they refuse, use the whip.«<sup>43</sup>

Like Kathleen, but more brutally, the painter commands his friend to part with the dead. Yet in the eyes of the portrait that Gyula brought him as a gift, the narrator sees the specters of his past. »What about this painting, Gyula? They are present. In the eyes of the portrait. Why did you put them there, if you want me to chase them away?«<sup>44</sup> For Eliezer, the dead see through his eyes; coming to terms with the past would thus mean to shut his eyes forever. Enraged, Gyula rejects suicide as a nonsolution and performs a kind of magical gesture: he takes a match and sets fire to the portrait—to the dismay of the narrator, only ashes remain. For the third time in a row, Wiesel ends a novel with a distorted image of the narrator's face. In *Night*, the protagonist sees the face of a corpse when he looks in the mirror; in *Dawn*, Elisha sees his face hanging from the other side of the window; in *Day*, the portrait of Eliezer's face is burned to ashes. Interestingly, however, it is the first time that the »real« face of the character is intact—is it possible that the painter, through his gesture (of friendship), managed to break the curse and allow the narrator to finally mourn successfully, and let go of his internal crypt? The fact is that Eliezer cries like he has never cried before.

From the point of view of the relationship to the past, *Dawn* and *Day* are antithetical: in the name of a utopian future, the narrator of the first novel makes a clear cut with the past through murder; in the second novel, the narrator is faithful to his past, to the point of becoming a refuge for the dead. In both cases, however, the opposing choices lead to a similar result. At the end of *Dawn*, the character sees a distorted, terrifying reflection of his face, which probably

43 Ibid., 139. [»- Il faut les oublier. Il faut les chasser de ta mémoire. À coup de fouet, si c'est nécessaire.—Les chasser, Gyula ? À coup de fouet, dis-tu ? Chasser mon père à coup de fouet ! Et grand-mère ? Elle aussi, la chasser à coup de fouet ?—Oui, oui, et encore oui. Les morts n'ont rien à faire ici-bas. Qu'ils nous laissent en paix. S'ils refusent, sers-toi du fouet.«]

44 Ibid. [»Et ce tableau, Gyula ? Ils sont là. Dans les yeux du portrait. Pourquoi les as-tu mis là, si tu exiges que je les chasse ?«]

foreshadows a less bright future than expected: killing the ghosts of the past brings about a ghostly future. In *Day*, the dead are welcomed by the narrator, but progressively, they take hold of his body and of his behaviors: all of the narrator's social relationships are thus inauthentic, because his interlocutors interact less with him than with his ghosts. More dead than alive, he doesn't try to avoid the car that runs into him. In these early novels—his first texts published after *Night*—Wiesel seems to be in search of an answer: can there be a life after the concentration camps? The question is not how to *write* after Auschwitz, but how to *act* after Auschwitz. His two novels thematize an aporia: whether one suppresses the ghosts of the past, or whether one welcomes them, life becomes unbearable. All praxis is haunted by history—the curse of the survivor.

Yet from *Night* to *Day*, there is a kind of dialectical evolution. In the first, autobiographical text, the narrator is inside the concentration camp; in *Dawn*, the narrator tries to break free from it; in *Day*, he fully embraces it. Of course, throughout this last novel, the »empire of death« is overwhelming. As I have shown, the final scene of the book suggests a potential cure for the curse: with the help of his friend's brutal, yet cathartic gesture, the narrator seems to take the path of a successful mourning. This could thus be the synthesis of the dialectic movement: nor rejecting the past, nor being the puppet of ghosts, but living in the present in an appeased relationship with the dead. If this interpretation is correct, then *Day* is really a day, an exit from the night of the concentration camps—not in the sense that the past is forgotten, but in the sense that it no longer prevents life. In his *Mémoires*, Wiesel writes: »I write to prevent the dead from dying, I write to justify my survival. I write to speak to the departed. As long as I address them, they will continue to live in my memory.«<sup>45</sup> Writing might be the magical act through which the survivor can pursue his present life while staying immersed in the past.

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45 [»J'écris pour empêcher les morts de mourir, j'écris pour justifier ma survie. J'écris pour parler aux disparus. Aussi longtemps que je m'adresserai à eux, ils continueront de vivre dans ma mémoire.«] Elie Wiesel, *Tous les fleuves vont à la mer: Mémoires* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 333.



II  
CENTRAL THEMES AND MESSAGES



## 7. ELIE WIESEL AND JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS: A JOURNEY OF HOPE AGAINST DESPAIR<sup>1</sup>

ALAN L. BERGER

Discussing his religious life, Elie Wiesel told an interviewer that »[t]he thirst is there, the quest is there, but the wound [the Shoah] had not been there before, and now it is.« Crucially, he added: »[a]nd also my attitude toward non-Jews changed.«<sup>2</sup> As a deeply religious child in Sighet, Wiesel recalls that he would never walk by a church, preferring to cross the street, fearful that he would be kidnapped or forcibly converted. »I was right then«, he adds, »but I would be wrong if I did it now.«<sup>3</sup> Years later, reflecting on his experience in the Shoah, Wiesel was struck by what he terms a harsh truth: »In Auschwitz all the Jews were victims, all the killers were Christian.«<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, it is significant to note that Wiesel's attitude toward and relationship with Christianity and individual Christians evolved dramatically after the Shoah. This essay discusses Wiesel's evolving position, and impact, on Jewish-Christian dialogue. We begin first in Europe to better understand Wiesel's changing perception of Christianity and the importance of dialogue, as well as to comprehend more fully the distinctiveness of the American context for interfaith.

»It was wrong,« he attested, »for Jews to ignore Christianity for two thousand years.«<sup>5</sup> Yet, it was equally wrong for the Church to embrace and disseminate antisemitism or what came to be known as the »Teaching of Contempt« (T.O.C.) for Jews and Judaism, although the magnitude and impact of the two

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1 This essay is a shortened chapter from the author's book *Elie Wiesel: Humanist Messenger for Peace* (New York, London: Routledge 2021).

2 Elie Wiesel and Richard D. Heffner, *Conversations with Elie Wiesel* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 61.

3 Ibid.

4 Elie Wiesel, *A Jew Today*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Vintage, 1979), 13.

5 Harry James Cargas, *Conversations with Elie Wiesel* (South Bend: Justice Books, 1992), 47.

wrongs was radically unequal. Authentic interfaith dialogue is, historically speaking, a new phenomenon. Ironically birthed by the Shoah, this dialogue was initiated by two conferences; the second of which had world-wide impact. The International Emergency Conference on antisemitism was held in Seelisberg, Switzerland in 1947. Participants included Jews, Protestants and Catholics. Jules Isaac, the pre-eminent Jewish-French historian who lost most of his family in the Shoah, and whose own life was saved by a Christian family who hid him, was a notable participant. On the conference's agenda were three items: The current state of antisemitism, reasons why it continues after the Shoah; developing practical strategies for combatting antisemitism; and to begin a process for healing the Jewish-Christian relationship. The conference, issued the »Ten Principles« of Seelisberg which began an attempt to deal with the Shoah's implications for Christianity.

Fifteen years later, pope John XXIII convened the second Vatican council whose task was to reassess the church's relationship to the modern world. The Italian word *aggiornamento* (updating) was used. Questions had begun to arise about the possible relationship between church teachings and the Shoah. In essence, however, the 1965 document *Nostra Aetate* (hereafter referred to as N. A., In Our Time) was the most significant document issued by the council. Note four, dealing exclusively with Judaism affirmed the theological integrity of the Jewish tradition and was nothing less than in Professor Michael Phayer's well-chosen phrase a »theological somersault« in which the Roman Catholic Church rejected the antisemitism which had emerged out of its 1900 years of contempt for Judaism.

Subsequent implementing documents enabled far reaching changes to be instituted in church ritual and teaching. The church had in effect begun its move from parochialism to a more global perspective, ultimately rejecting the concept »that outside the church there is no salvation.« It is significant to note that *Jubilee*, a now defunct Catholic magazine, published the first excerpts of *Night* in America. It was here that Harry James Cargas, the Catholic thinker who was one of Wiesel's Christian dialogue partners and published two books based on their discussions initially read Wiesel's memoir. The first volume appeared prior to Wiesel's winning the Nobel prize and the second afterward. It

is also noteworthy that Wiesel's 1978 *Four Hasidic Masters and Their Struggle Against Melancholy* which originated as a Ward-Phillips Lecture series at the University of Notre Dame, was published by the University press and has a foreword written by the then university President Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C.<sup>6</sup>

Interfaith in the American cultural context emerged from a complex mix of events; three outstanding among them; Post-War America continued its embrace of religious pluralism the embryo of which began during World War II and which led eventually to the founding of the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ). Second, as Professor Jonathan Sarna reminds readers, »liberal-minded Protestants, Catholics and Jews worked together to promote ›brotherhood.« Brotherhood Day, first celebrated in 1934, thirteen years later became Brotherhood Week. The work of »influential Christians and Jews [pushed] Judaism from the margins of American religious life toward its very center.«<sup>7</sup> At the same time (1948) the military became integrated under President Harry S. Truman.

America embraced religious pluralism, at least as far as Judaism and Christianity were concerned. Will Herberg's influential 1955 book *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* argued that America's religious identity was encompassed by these three religious traditions. Although there was a major demographic imbalance among the three religions, with Judaism being the smallest in number, it nevertheless was ranked as an equal component of American religious identity. In a less scholarly vein, President Dwight D. Eisenhower famously remarked: »[O]ur form of government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is.«<sup>8</sup> It is also significant that many of

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6 It is noteworthy that these books, by and about Elie Wiesel, were published by one of America's pre-eminent Catholic institutions. This would have been unimaginable prior to 1945.

7 Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 267.

8 This remark is widely attributed to President Eisenhower, although no direct source appears to exist.

the American clergy who were delegated to the Second Vatican Council were theological liberals.

### 7.1. PRE-SHOAH JEWISH-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

Christianity's contempt for Jews and Judaism, coupled with its triumphalist theology, made authentic dialogue impossible. Prior to the Shoah, »dialogue« typically consisted of the ritual humiliation of a rabbi by a priest. While it is true that individual Christians and Jews did interact, as Professor John Connelly stresses, the idea of a Jew achieving salvation was a theological impossibility for Christian believers. Business, and sometimes social, interaction was one thing, although the latter was rare. Salvation was quite a different matter. Yet in *Night*, Wiesel notes two isolated instances of Christian help for Jews in the Sighet ghetto: Maria, the family servant who spoke Yiddish and understood Jewish ritual practice, offered to hide her employers in her cabin »in a remote hamlet.« Wiesel has written of her: »If other Christians had acted like her, the trains rolling toward the unknown would have been less crowded.«<sup>9</sup> Wiesel's family declined this invitation because they did not know what fate awaited them. In the second instance Wiesel's father (who served as an intercessor on behalf of the Jewish community), had a friend, an inspector in the Hungarian police, who sought to warn the family of the impending round up of Jews. However, by the time the family had unblocked the barricaded window, the police officer had disappeared.

Wiesel also recalls two incidents from the death camps where non-Jewish prisoners said or did something to re-affirm the human image. In Auschwitz, the first speech by the Polish-Catholic chief of block 17 included the words

»Comrades, you are now in the concentration camp Auschwitz. [...] Have faith in life, a thousand times faith. By driving out despair, you will move away from death. Hell does not last forever ... And now, here

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<sup>9</sup> Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 69.

is a prayer, or rather a piece of advice: let there be camaraderie among you. We are all brothers and share the same fate.«

Wiesel concludes this passage by writing, »Those were the first human words.«<sup>10</sup> In Buchenwald, the final camp where Wiesel was imprisoned and where his father perished, the chief of his block, a non-Jewish Czech, saved the entire block of a few hundred children. These two acts of altruism imprinted themselves on the teenager's consciousness. »These people,« Wiesel writes, »stand out.«

## 7.2. WIESEL'S STANCE ON INTERFAITH DIALOGUE: SHIFTING PERSPECTIVE

Wiesel, as noted, was a God-intoxicated youth in Sighet. His life revolved around the teachings and rituals of Judaism which provided him a sacred canopy under whose shelter he lived. He remembers Moïse the beadle, his teacher asking: Why do you pray? Wiesel muses; »Why did I pray? Strange question. Why did I live? Why did I breathe?«<sup>11</sup> Moreover, he reports that during the early years of the war he was absorbed in his Jewish studies. He told Harry James Cargas: »I was more aware about what went on three thousand years ago than what was going on in the present.«<sup>12</sup> Christianity evoked neither his interest nor curiosity. Quite to the contrary, the Christian faith appeared totally other, and antithetical to his own. He was unaware that Judaism birthed Christianity nor that the two traditions claimed certain similar traditions and teachings. His fear of Christianity was so great that as a child he avoided all contact with Christians. Significantly, Wiesel writes: »It is only when I reached adulthood that I understood the importance of dialogue between people of different religions. I understood the danger of living in a world made of stereotypes.«<sup>13</sup> I shall return to this point shortly.

10 Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 41.

11 Ibid., 4.

12 Cited by John K. Roth, *A Consuming Fire: Encounters with Elie Wiesel and the Holocaust* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979).

13 Elie Wiesel, *And the Sea Is Never Full: Memoirs, 1969–*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New

Wiesel views the Shoah as a paradigm shattering event that demands both a rethinking of Enlightenment certainties, and the notion of a covenant. Was the Sinai covenant broken in Auschwitz? At certain moments, Wiesel says yes. However, he also said it was renewed:<sup>14</sup> »At Auschwitz not only man died, but also the idea of man. [...] It was its own heart the world incinerated at Auschwitz.«<sup>15</sup> Wiesel emphatically notes that the first impact of his iconic memoir *Night* was on Catholic and Protestant intellectuals who felt that a »tremendous confession of guilt« was necessary.

When Wiesel arrived in America in 1955, he found a complex inter-religious landscape. Traces of antisemitism which had peaked during World War II, still lingered in the air. There were, for example, the »unholy trinity« of antisemitic cultural icons: Charles Lindbergh, Henry Ford, and Father Charles E. Coughlin in the 1920s and 1930s. Others, such as the syndicated columnist Westbrook Pegler added to the growth of antisemitism before the War. Many people were influenced by these and other openly antisemitic figures. But when the War began, Lindbergh and Coughlin were in disgrace for their pro-Nazi speeches. By 1942, »Lucky« Lindbergh had been stripped of his commission in the Army and probably avoided being investigated and prosecuted only because of his great fame. The government nearly prosecuted Father Coughlin for sedition, but this was averted when Coughlin's bishop forbade him from any public activities in 1942. By then he was already much diminished as most radio stations would no longer air his hate-filled programs. That year, Ford apologized for his previous antisemitic activities in a letter to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the leading Jewish civil rights organization in the country. Ford spent considerable money to suppress one of his own publications, *The International Jew*, although personally he remained a classic antisemitic bigot. In the 1940s and 1950s, Pegler, the widely read columnist, endorsed antisemitic views in appealing to America's nativistic and xenophobic cultural strains. During the War, the justice department considered charging him with sedition. In 1962,

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York: Schocken Books, 1999).

14 Cargas, *Conversations with Elie Wiesel*.

15 Elie Wiesel, *Legends of Our Time* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982).

he was fired from his newspaper position, and disappeared from public view. Other antisemites wrote and spoke in this period, although increasingly they were marginalized by political leaders in both major parties.

Nineteen hundred years of the teaching of contempt were not easily discarded, but by the 1960s, in part because of reaction to the Shoah and the 1961 trial of Adolph Eichmann, who implemented Hitler's Final Solution, antisemitism was clearly less virulent than it had been before World War II. Illustrative of this emphatic exposure of cultural antisemitism is the popular movie *Gentleman's Agreement*, starring Gregory Peck, which was nominated for eight Academy Awards in 1947. It won three, including best picture of the year.

As historian Jonathan Sarna writes: »In response to wartime antisemitism, liberal Jews and Christians joined together to promote »better understanding and »goodwill.«<sup>16</sup> The National Conference of Christians and Jews worked to help create a new and more religiously pluralistic image of America. Interfaith became immortalized in a manner of speaking when in 1948 an American postage stamp was issued commemorating the heroism of four chaplains, two Protestants, a Catholic, and a Jew who had given their life vests to seaman aboard the ill-fated USS *Dorchester*, torpedoed in 1943. The four chaplains, in a selfless act of altruism, »arm in arm in prayer« went down with the ship.<sup>17</sup> Interfaith dialogue was in its infancy but began to gain new currency for a variety of reasons including the growing liberalism of American democracy and an emerging post-War commitment to human rights.

Mention should also be made of N. A.'s liberalizing impact on American culture. The American bishops who attended the Second Vatican Council were, on the whole, liberal and endorsed N. A. It should also be remembered that the drive for improving Jewish-Christian relations and the proclamation of National Brotherhood week were very much a part of mainstream American culture. N. A. was a major point of departure for Catholic religious thought. The proclamation noted that religions other than Catholicism had their own validity, but its most significant statement in this regard was note four with its reversal

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16 Sarna, *American Judaism A History*, 266.

17 *Ibid.*, 267.

of the church's long history of antisemitism, thereby opening the door to a positive evaluation of Jewish theology and, consequently, improved relations with Judaism as well as other traditions. Wiesel's message of the possibility of authentic interfaith dialogue was viewed as a step in the right ecumenical direction.

But Wiesel had first to work through his traumatic Shoah legacy. In addition to his memoir his first two novels *Dawn* and *The Accident (Day)* portray, in the words of Professor Ellen Fine, »the voyage away from his origins, the long descent into the multiple layers of darkness that dispossessed him of his identity, his traditions, his community.«<sup>18</sup> At that particular moment, Wiesel was wrestling like the Biblical Jacob with the monumental task of seeking to reconcile the beliefs of the God-intoxicated youth he had been and the post-Shoah theologically traumatized survivor that he had become. During the time that Wiesel's first three books were written (1955–1960), one of the most popular plays on Broadway was *The Diary of Anne Frank*, directed by Garson Kanin and revised by playwrights Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett. The play presented a sanitized version of the Shoah, intentionally omitting Anne's more fearful observations. The playwrights essentially Christianized the diary, evidently with the consent of Anne's father Otto Frank. Focusing on the optimistic passages in Anne's diary they stressed Anne's observation: »In spite of everything I believe in the goodness of people.« Omitted was Anne's more ominous and accurate statement: »I hear the approaching thunder which will destroy us all.« As historian Deborah E. Lipstadt writes: »Uplift and optimism were in the American air. This production of [Goodrich and Hackett's] translation the diary provided more of it.«<sup>19</sup> It is instructive at this point to emphasize that Wiesel observed on more than one occasion that his Shoah experience began where Anne's ended.

In what follows, I discuss Wiesel's post-Shoah interfaith dialogues initially

18 Ellen Fine, *Legacy of Night* (Albany: Suny Press, 1982), 58.

19 Wendy Kesselman wrote a more realistic version of Anne's Diary. Starring Natalie Portman, the 1997 play was directed by James Shapiro and received two nominations for outstanding feature actress and actor (Harris Yela). It seems that 50 plus years after the Shoah, American culture was ready to face the horror more honestly.—Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Holocaust: An American Understanding* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 41.

in Europe and then in America, and elsewhere noting his increasing engagement with Christianity. I also discuss two of Wiesel's novels that illustrate and illuminate both his evolving position on interfaith dialogue and his understanding of the relationship between Jewish particularity and the universality of his message. Wiesel forthrightly asserts his starting point for engaging in interfaith dialogue. »I am a Jew,« he writes, »and I try out of my Jewishness to help other people understand my religion and their own.«<sup>20</sup> This declaration, in turn, leads to the essential historical and theological questions for Jewish-Christian dialogue. He asks: »Can one erase two-thousand years of suspicion and persecution endured under the shadow of the cross? The answer is no, one cannot; nor should one. Only if we forget nothing,« he attests, »shall we succeed in abolishing what divides us.«<sup>21</sup> Authentic dialogue, therefore, requires both memory of the past and hope for the future.

### 7.3. WHAT DIVIDES CHRISTIANS AND JEWS?

The fundamental divide between Judaism and Christianity is the issue of the Messiah. Christianity awaits the Messiah's second coming, Judaism speaks of the first appearance on earth. Eschewing the question of the Messiah's identity, one must first define their function. In addition to ushering in an era of world peace, the function of the Messiah is to unite people. Consequently, attests Wiesel, »A Messiah that divides the Jewish people is a false Messiah.«<sup>22</sup> Wiesel further observes »Jesus more than anyone else in history, provoked dissension and division in the world. So many massacres were conducted in his name. Can that be the Messiah?«<sup>23</sup> Moreover, he points to mis-interpretations, willful or otherwise, of religion which occur when followers misinterpret the message of the founder. »As far as the Jews are concerned,« Wiesel told Cargas that Jesus

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20 Alan L. Berger, ed., *Elie Wiesel: Teacher, Mentor and Friend* (Eugene: Cascade Press, 2018), 77.

21 Ibid.

22 Elie Wiesel, *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, ed. Irving Abrahamson (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), vol. I, 131.

23 Ibid.

»may be retroactively guilty for all the murders and massacres that were done in his name. I believe that the Christians betrayed the Christ more than the Jews did.«<sup>24</sup> In our discussion, Wiesel told me that problems occur when men claim to act in God's name or, even worse, when they claim to be God.<sup>25</sup>

Wiesel's novels reveal the ugliness of the »longest hatred« which reached its apogee in the unprecedented spasm of murder and horror unleashed during the Shoah and whose violent legacy in terms of preventable deaths and disregard for the sanctity of human life continues to plague the earth in the pandemic era of Covid 19. Yet, certain of these novels simultaneously provide glimpses of the isolated few Christians who sought to help their Jewish brothers and sisters during the time of testing. These antipathies do not of course cancel one another. They do, however, compel one to ponder the mystery of goodness which for Wiesel exceeds that of evil. Moreover, the acts of the righteous gentiles demonstrates that humans always have a choice between good and evil, between listening to their conscience and abandoning all moral considerations.

The present offers more than a glimmer of hope despite the continuing spread of antisemitic propaganda and outright calumny against Judaism. The provocative and distorted film *The Passion of the Christ* made by Mel Gibson, a traditionalist Catholic who rejects the teachings of Vatican II and denies legitimacy to all popes who succeeded Pius XII, the wartime pope, is the most egregious example. Wiesel told me that this film was »The Second Crucifixion of Jesus and clearly anti-Semitic.«<sup>26</sup> »But,« Wiesel also told me in the same interview, »never have Jewish-Christian relations been as good as they are now.«<sup>27</sup> He called Pope John XXIII the »[g]reat man in Christianity, (who) was the first to open the church, to admit its failings, and to correct the liturgy omitting all the insulting sentences.«<sup>28</sup> Wiesel thought John XXIII was a saint. He also engaged in important dialogues with Cardinals John O'Connor, Jean-Ma-

24 Cargas, *Conversations with Elie Wiesel*, 48.

25 Alan L. Berger, ed., »Interview of Elie Wiesel, February 23, 2006,« in *Elie Wiesel, Literature and Belief* 26, no. 1 (Provo: Brigham Young University, 2006), 19.

26 *Ibid.*, 16.

27 *Ibid.*, 14.

28 *Ibid.*, 13.

rie Lustiger, and Professor Johann Baptist Metz. Moreover, he dialogued with the Dalai Lama who enquired as to the secret of how the Jewish people stayed together during their long diaspora.

Wiesel's influence on Christian thought is profound, and is especially pronounced in the work of several influential American religious thinkers: Professors Mary Boys (a prominent Catholic voice in the Jewish Christian dialogue), Robert McAfee Brown (a distinguished Protestant theologian), Harry James Cargas (Catholic interpreter of Wiesel's work), Alice and Roy Eckardt (Protestant theologians), Franklin H. Littell (noted as the grandfather of Holocaust Studies in America), Father John Pawlikowski (Catholic theologian and prolific writer on Catholic Jewish Relations), Sister Carol Rittner (Catholic theologian and first director of the Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity), John K. Roth (Protestant thinker, theologian, and winner of the outstanding Professor of the Year Award), and Paul van Buren (a Catholic who headed the Department of Religion at Temple University) among others. I will return to many of these thinkers shortly. In return, these thinkers felt compelled by Wiesel's message to re-examine their own traditions' teachings about Jews. Moreover, various American religious institutions and agencies in dialogue with Wiesel's work sought their own *Cheshbon HaNefesh* (reckoning of the soul). Influential non-Jewish thinkers and lay people attended Wiesel's public lectures. Many thousands of college and university students were influenced—and challenged by—his campus presentations.

Perhaps most significantly, he owed much to François Mauriac, the great French Catholic writer and Nobel Laureate in Literature who personally took Wiesel's *Night* manuscript to various publishers. Although Wiesel's past was seared by the flames of the Shoah, he remained open to dialogue. He was first and foremost a witness committed to memory. Yediyah (beloved of God), a character in Wiesel's 2010 novel *The Sonderberg Case*, emphasizes the author's relationship to his Shoah past: »We don't live in the past,« the protagonist states, »but the past lives in us.«<sup>29</sup> It is this attestation which imbues Wiesel with

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29 Elie Wiesel, *The Sonderberg Case*, trans. Catherine Temerson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 165.

a sense of mission to bear witness to the living on behalf of the Shoah's victims. Furthermore, America's commitment to memory is, in Wiesel's estimation, an ennobling characteristic of the country.

#### 7.4. PRE-SHOAH INTERFAITH RELATIONS

Prior to the Shoah there was no serious interfaith effort. Christian theologians and thinker rarely granted Jews either theological autonomy or validation. From the perspective of most Christian religious leaders, pre-Shoah interfaith meant that Jews must agree that Christianity is superior. The Jewish and Christian communities distrusted one another. Christianity was viewed as an oppressor religion. As Professor Richard Rubenstein notes the two Abrahamic traditions found themselves in a position of »disconfirming otherness;« for one to be true the other by definition had to be false. In Eastern Europe, pogroms—state sanctioned violence against Jews—were typically the only organized interaction Christianity had with Judaism. However, in Western Europe, there were also acts of violence against Jews. For example, the trial of Captain Alfred Dreyfus in France was nothing short of an antisemitic show trial. The much-vaunted French Revolutionary slogan »Liberty, Fraternity, and Equality« was greatly resisted by three prominent groups in French society: the aristocracy, the Catholic church and the military. In this context, mention needs to be made here of Edward Drumont, founder of both the antisemitic League of France and the newspaper *La Libre Parole*, conveyor of vicious antisemitic stereotypes and falsehoods.

It is true that liberal impulses were present in Western Europe, e.g., the Balfour Declaration, Protestant support for Zionism. In America, there was a strong desire to bring Jewish voters into the American political parties. When Wiesel arrived in America in 1955, there had been three Jewish Supreme Court justices, many Jews in the House of Representative and some in the Senate and in Presidential Cabinets. Further back in time, there were a few Jewish lieutenant colonels and colonels in Washington's army and at least three Jewish generals in Lincoln's. By the time the Shoah had ceased as an historically anchored event, Wiesel, for good reason, was incapable of even conceiving of a dialogical

relationship with Christianity. »Though our universes existed side by side,« he wrote, »I avoided penetrating theirs, whereas they sought to dominate ours by force.«<sup>30</sup> It is worth mentioning here that Wiesel's first positive encounter with Christians came when African-American soldiers liberated the deathcamps and wept at the carnage they beheld.<sup>31</sup>

## 7.5. POST-SHOAH:

### AFFIRMING JEWISH FAITH, EXPLORING DIALOGUE

Two novels which appeared two years apart (1964, 1966) *The Town Beyond the Wall*, divided into four prayers rather than chapters, and *The Gates of the Forest* divided into four seasons initiate Wiesel's search for a *Tikkun* (repair) of both the self (*Tikkun Atzmi*) and the world (*Tikkun ha-Olam*). On the one hand, he seeks to affirm the Jewish tradition after the Shoah, even while attesting that his faith has been wounded. On the other hand, he begins to explore the possibility of authentic Jewish-Christian dialogue. It is important to understand that for Wiesel, authentic dialogue always includes God, especially according to the teachings of the Hasidic tradition which is a fundamental part of his identity. When a person speaks, contends Wiesel, three voices are heard: a person speaks to God, God is by definition everywhere. And therefore, is by definition *in* the person who listens and in the person, who speaks. And the voice of God which is the voice of his silence or the voice of the infinite.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, these two novels initiate their author's commitment to affirming life, to the importance of friendship, and to social action/justice.

Michael (»Who is like God«) the protagonist of *The Town Beyond the Wall* returns to his hometown (Szerencseváros, City of Luck) after the war where he confronts and indicts the apathy of the Christian onlookers/bystanders who passively watched as their Jewish neighbors were rounded up and taken to be exterminated. This led Wiesel to observe that »the opposite of love is not hate.

30 Berger, *Elie Wiesel: Teacher, Mentor and Friend*, 78.

31 Ibid.

32 Cargas, *Conversations with Elie Wiesel*, 165.

The opposite of love is indifference.«<sup>33</sup> Observed by an anonymous face peering from a window, Michael is turned over to the communist authorities who arrest and torture him. The torturers have diabolically termed torture »prayer;« forcing the prisoner to stand while they prayed until their knees gave out.

As the novel unfolds, the protagonist saves two lives: Menachem (»comforter«) who is described as having the moving face »of a Byzantine Christ,« is almost strangled by a demented young prisoner. Michael intercedes and saves him. Menachem, as McAfee Brown notes, »represents the explicit breath of a religious faith Wiesel had felt was gone forever.«<sup>34</sup> Pedro, a non-Jew, is Michael's friend who enabled him to enter Hungary illegally. Despite being tortured, Michael refuses to disclose information about Pedro, thus saving his life. Significantly, as Frederick Downing observes: »Wiesel has transformed the divine-human dialogue into a program of solidarity with the needy, the oppressed and the unfortunate children of God«<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, Pedro, who is Mexican and has memories not of the Shoah but of the Spanish Civil War, cautions Michael: »He who thinks about God, forgetting man, runs the risk of mistaking his goal: God may be your next-door neighbor.«<sup>36</sup> Pedro is proud of Michael for saving Menachem's life. Through a dream-like sequence, he tells Michael that next he must cure the would-be strangler; »Cure him. He'll save you.«<sup>37</sup> attests Pedro. Michael looks into the face of the mute prisoner and thereby symbolically reaches out to humanity. Pedro recites a personal prayer made just for him. »Oh God, give me the strength to sin against you, to oppose your will! Give me the strength to deny you, reject you, imprison you, ridicule you!«<sup>38</sup> Michael endorses this antinomian prayer as it does not absolve God of Shoah guilt. Dialogue

33 Often quoted by Elie Wiesel.

34 Robert McAfee Brown, *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 92.

35 Frederick Downing, *Elie Wiesel: A Religious Biography* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2008), 172.

36 Elie Wiesel, *The Town Beyond the Wall*, trans. Stephen Becker (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 115.

37 *Ibid.*, 172.

38 *Ibid.*, 48.

with humanity, notes McAfee Brown, »turns out to be a dialogue between humanity and God as well.«<sup>39</sup> Echoing Martin Buber's position, »God is present at any point of meeting between two who reach out toward one another,«<sup>40</sup> Wiesel's view has obvious importance for Jewish-Christian dialogue as well. In addition, *The Town Beyond the Wall* is the first of Wiesel's books that is life-affirming and provides initial impetus for what would become his life of passion for social justice.

Wiesel's earliest sustained literary treatment of Christianity occurs in *The Gates of the Forest*, a novel which is set both in Europe and America.<sup>41</sup> He describes this novel as both a »song of remembrance for Maria,« who was the family housekeeper in Sighet and as a »flight from myself into myself.«<sup>42</sup> Significantly, Wiesel's novels, unlike his public lectures, focus much more on Christian animosity to Judaism. This volume reports the author's brief but highly significant dialogue with Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, concerning the relationship of God to the Shoah. Their encounter took place in Brooklyn at the Lubavitch court (headquarters) during a *fahrbrengen* (Hasidic study gathering). Gavriel (»man of God«) and Gregor had exchanged names in the beginning of the novel to save Gavriel's life. Later Gregor asks *Rebbe* Schneerson how he can still believe in God after the Shoah. Unbowed, the *Rebbe* asks, »How can you *not* believe in God after what has happened?«<sup>43</sup> The holy man admits that God is guilty of being an »ally of evil, death, or murder.«<sup>44</sup> However, he continues, »Who says that power comes from a shout, an outcry rather than from prayer? The man who goes singing to his death is the brother of the man who goes to death fighting.«<sup>45</sup> Reflecting on this encounter, Wiesel contended that he accepted the *Rebbe's* response not as an answer but as one

39 McAfee Brown, *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity*, 155.

40 Ibid.

41 Elie Wiesel, *The Gates of the Forest*, trans. Frances Frenaye (New York: Schocken Books, 1982).

42 Downing, *Elie Wiesel: A Religious Biography*, 177.

43 Wiesel, *The Gates of the Forest*, 194.

44 Ibid., 199.

45 Ibid., 198.

more question.<sup>46</sup> *The Gates of the Forest* deepens and enriches Wiesel's view of the deity as he struggles to reconcile his pre-Shoah beliefs with the horror of his experience. From this point on, Wiesel committed himself to the fight for social justice on behalf of all who are oppressed.

## 7.6. THE »TEACHING OF CONTEMPT«

Gavriel is a Hungarian Jew in hiding but is the alleged illegitimate son of Maria's sister Ileana—a reputed prostitute. In addition to his checkered birth, he is presented to the villagers as a deaf mute. Consequently, they view him as a safe repository for their secrets, which include affairs with Ileana. Also, the local priest in the confessional booth—where he sits as the penitent—reveals that he has betrayed a Jew seeking refuge from forced conversion. The priest personifies the Christian tradition and its betrayal both of individual Jews and the Jewish people which rested on the fatal implications resulting from the church's two-millennia teaching of contempt. The town stages a passion play in which Gavriel is cast as Judas. The tension mounts as the performers on stage begin to avenge the death of their master by punishing Judas, the prototypical traitor in passion plays. Hurling epithets at Gavriel/Judas encourages the audience. Initially, they shout support for the actors. They then surge onto the stage and begin to beat »Judas.« Bloodied, Gavriel begins to shout. Judas is the only one who can forgive the village's sinners. Judas—and not Jesus—is the victim. The »injustice toward Judas,« notes McAfee Brown, »is being replicated six million times [...] two thousand years of victimizing members of the race of Judas (and Jesus).<sup>47</sup>

Wiesel employs the infamous Oberammergau Passion Play as a literary trope for a decisive scene which takes place in Eastern Europe and which encapsulates the pre-Shoah views of both Christianity and Judaism towards one another. The task of passion plays was to re-enforce negative and hostile attitudes toward Jews and Judaism, the more hatred of the Jewish tradition, the more »successful« the play. First, there is Christian hostility toward Jews and Judaism.

<sup>46</sup> Wiesel, *All Rivers*, 403.

<sup>47</sup> McAfee Brown, *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity*, 92.

Second, Wiesel »wished to say certain things about our attitude toward Christianity<sup>48</sup>. Originating in the Bavarian village of Oberammergau, the play—performed every ten years since 1634—portrays the primal animus of traditional Christianity towards Judaism based on the gospel accounts of the passion and resurrection of Jesus. The villagers had vowed to God that they would perform a passion play if they were spared the effects of the Bubonic Plague (17<sup>th</sup> century). Thoroughly antisemitic in tone and character, the performance vilifies Jews as a deicide people and Judas as the betrayer of Jesus. It also puts the blame for his death solely on Jewish shoulders. Historically, the passion play served to harden Christianity's heart against Jews and Judaism, reinforcing negative Christian stereotypes concerning the Jewish tradition.

It is significant to note a positive development over the last thirty years in the presentation of the Oberammergau performances. Hitler viewed the play in 1934 and praised it for its portrayal of the menace of world Jewry. But the Second Vatican Council in N. A. rejected the claim of collective Jewish guilt in the death of Jesus. Change began in 1987 when Christian Stucki was chosen to direct the play. He introduced the notion of a Jewish Jesus. Plus, both the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) sent representatives from their offices of interreligious affairs committees to work with the presenters of this play. Stucki continues as the play's director. The result has been a toning down of the performances hardcore antisemitism. In addition, the AJC formed an academic advisory group that consults with Stucki in addressing the play's continuing antisemitic bias.

The passion play scene in *The Gates of the Forest* is »a play within a play.«<sup>49</sup> It portrays the death of the Jewish Messiah for Christians but not for Jews. Jesus has been Christianized and thereby transformed into the Christian savior (son of God). This accounts for the eternity of Christian antisemitism and the acting out of a tradition of revenge. Further, Wiesel is unsparing in his description of the sheer indifference of those perpetrating this crime. He achieves his

48 Cargas, *Conversations with Elie Wiesel*, 47.

49 Victoria Aarons, »The Past Became the Present: Re-enactment of Trauma in Elie Wiesel's *The Gates of the Forest*,« in *Elie Wiesel*, ed. Alan L. Berger, *Literature and Belief* 26, no. 1 (Provo: Brigham Young University, 2006), 55.

purposes by juxtaposing historical events with scenes from the play in part two of the novel:

»Officers in dazzling uniforms stood in front of the firing squads, raising their arms and calling out, ›Fire, fire, fire!‹ And soldiers bored, fired their machine guns, indifferent, thinking of nothing, not even of death. And hundreds of hearts ceased beating, ceased advancing toward a future at the end of which a Messiah—it didn't matter who—was supposed to receive them. ›Fire!‹ called out the officers, and the Messiah himself, a thousand times, a thousand, thousand times multiplied, fell into the ditch.«<sup>50</sup>

This calls to mind images of *Wehrmacht* troops seated on the edge of a pit, smoking cigarettes and firing their machine guns at the Jews who, naked and forsaken, crowded into the pit. As »the executioners were moving closer to the stage ... Gavriel did not flinch,«<sup>51</sup> writes Wiesel.

»At the very same moment, in the crimson fields of Galicia, smartly turned-out officers were shouting the order: ›Fire! Fire!‹ A hundred Jews, ten thousand Jews were tumbling into the ditches. He would not die alone ... All Jews in Nazi dominated Europe shared a similar fate or would have had the Allied victory not ended the Holocaust.«<sup>52</sup>

In his novel *The Time of the Uprooted*, Wiesel again reveals the fact that during the Shoah many Christians were in fact guilty of apostasy. The fictional Catholic Archbishop Baranyi gives Rebbe Hananel (»merciful God«), a choice: convert or die. Hananel replies, »With every Jew you kill, you put your Lord back on the cross.«<sup>53</sup>

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50 Wiesel, *The Gates of the Forest*, 60.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid., 133.

53 Elie Wiesel, *The Time of the Uprooted* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 60.

»Tell me, man of the Church, do you know what you are doing to your Lord when you allow these murderers to massacre the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? And you dare to speak of saving my soul when it is your own that is in perdition?«<sup>54</sup>

## 7.7. CHRISTIANS WHO HELPED JEWS

Gregor/Gavriel, the novel's protagonist, is a Hungarian Jew hidden<sup>55</sup> by Maria, the now aging former servant of the Wiesels who first appeared in *Night*. She had been with the family for many years. Parenthetically, as noted earlier there is also a tribute to Maria in lie's memoirs. Maria offered to hide the entire family in her secluded mountain cabin. Maria, muses Wiesel, »if only more Christians had acted as she, the cattle cars to Auschwitz would not have been so full.«<sup>56</sup> As we have also mentioned, a nameless police detective, in *Night*, sought unsuccessfully to warn the Wiesel family of the impending Nazi roundup of Jews. Wiesel discovered this fact years later.

## 7.8. SEEDS OF DIALOGUE

Wiesel, while portraying the murderous antisemitic rage of the villagers, does recognize the few *Hasidei Umot HaOlam* (Righteous Among the Nations) who act to save Jewish life. In addition to Maria—Wiesel terms the novel »a song of remembrance for Maria«—a mysterious and only partially sketched figure, Petruskanu, the village's mayor, rescues Gregor, taking him in his carriage to the forest where he rendezvous with partisans. Wiesel alludes to the fact that the

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54 Ibid.

55 There were perhaps thousands of Christians who helped Jews during the Shoah. Yad VaShem, Israel's Memorial Museum and Research center has recognized the *Hasidei u'Mot HaOlam*, the »Righteous Among the Nations« by planting trees in their honour and recording their selfless deeds. But there were millions who either did nothing or actively co-operated with the murderers.

56 Wiesel, *All Rivers*, 69.

mayor may have been Ileana's lover. Furthermore, in this novel Wiesel broadens our understanding of Messiah in having Gregor tell Clara, his wife, that »The Messiah isn't one man ... he's all men. As long as there are men there will be a Messiah.«<sup>57</sup> Wiesel here shifts the main responsibility for maintaining the covenant from God to the human partner. How humans behave toward one another is a gauge of how close, or far away, the Messiah is. As Brown writes, »to claim that the Messiah isn't as dependent on us as we are on him is to deny that God asks us to share in the holy work of redemption.«<sup>58</sup>

### 7.9. GOOD VERSUS EVIL: THE ETERNAL STRUGGLE

Wiesel's more recent novel *The Judges*, set in America, involves a battle between the forces of evil and good. The judge, a non-Jew, assumes the role of God in the lives of his five prisoners who had survived a plane crash. Although a judge is not in charge of prisoners but supervises the trial, in Wiesel's novel the judge is judge, jury and executioner. Wiesel sketches psychologically accurate portraits of each of the protagonists as they muse on their impending doom. In Carole J. Lambert's intelligent reading of the novel she opines that, »Wiesel may be suggesting that the God whom he has interrogated since the Shoah has a dark, evil side.«<sup>59</sup> The fact that the judge is either murdered or compelled to commit suicide by his deformed servant before carrying out his intended murders deepens the mystery of this figure. In Wiesel's literary rendition, the judge exceeds his moral function in seeking to murder his prisoners. The novel indicates that the forces of evil succumb—eventually—to those of good. Wiesel's literary victory over evil is, however, far from being replicated in reality. Combatting the evil of antisemitism is the millennial task lying before the Christian-Jewish dialogue as each tradition in each generation engages in the eternal task of messianic waiting.

As this eternal task of messianic waiting unfolds in its own inexorable time,

57 Wiesel, *The Gates of the Forest*, 225.

58 McAfee Brown, *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity*, 175.

59 Carole J. Lambert, *The Judges* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 96.

it is heartening to note the existence of some positive developments, which have occurred on both the institutional and personal levels. Professional organizations such as the A.J.C. and the A.D.L. have found willing dialogue partners in many parts of the Vatican. Additionally, there are an increasing number of college and university courses on interfaith relations. These are all promising signs.

## 7.10. CONCLUSION

Wiesel has had an enormous impact on Christian-Jewish dialogue in America and Europe. His death was mourned by people of many faith communities; rabbis, ministers, and priests eulogized him. Kolbert notes that »[p]olls of his readers in France and the United States proved conclusively that far more non-Jews read Weisel than Jews.«<sup>60</sup> The American context itself is important. The country as a whole endorses Jewish-Christian dialogue; annual conferences are held, Jewish and Christian leaders speak at each other's houses of worship, colleges and universities have courses related to the dialogue. Moreover, the dialogue occurs both on the scholarly and lay levels. Leaders of professional Jewish organizations such as the A.J.C. and the A.D.L. regularly interact with Vatican leadership. This activity can be broadly subsumed under the mantle of America's concern for civil and human rights. In addition, many Christian thinkers who have been influenced by Wiesel's message are teachers who have influenced countless thousands of students who, in turn, become messengers as in Wiesel's aphorism—»To listen to a witness is to become a witness.«<sup>61</sup>

Wiesel's interfaith teachings are based on the fact that the Shoah shattered all pre-Shoah paradigms. People of good will need to emphasize the necessity for a new beginning. This new start requires at a minimum respect for the religious Other. Moreover, Wiesel has pointed to the fact that Christianity needs Judaism to cleanse itself of the disease of antisemitism in a way that refrains from punishing or blaming contemporary Christians who make sincere efforts

60 Jack Kolbert notes that »Polls of his readers in France and in the United States proved conclusively that far more non-Jews read Wiesel than Jews,« *The Worlds of Elie Wiesel* (Susquehanna: Susquehanna University Press, 2001), 124.

61 Often quoted by Elie Wiesel.

at redefining their tradition in a way that avoids both theological triumphalism, i.e., is morally and theologically superior to Judaism., and the claim that Christianity supersedes Judaism. For Wiesel no religion was superior. But all religious people need to interrogate the deity on behalf of humanity.

Wiesel's example creates a relationship with Christians within the context of a safe environment. By problematizing their own tradition and confronting those parts of their sacred text that preach hatred, Christians become pro-testants in the truest sense of the word. Genuine dialogue eschews conversion. Wiesel attests to the fact that the Shoah is a paradigm shattering event which compels all people of faith to rethink basic principles. His call for interfaith dialogue, as we have seen, presupposes that God is always present in authentic interfaith interchange.

This sets the bar very high. But it is a necessary standard in an uncertain world facing a multitude of complex issues. Wiesel as the *maggid* (preacher) of Sighet is a messenger to both Christians and Jews that a better mutual understanding is both possible and necessary. Moreover, Wiesel's example of dialogue makes possible public discussion of religion without rancor or weaponizing religion for political gain. Lack of respect for this position is one of the many contemporary worrying signs of the former Trump administration with its adherence to conspiracy theories, ridicule of the Other, lack of civility and the penchant for lying, has unfortunately been embraced by many. These four negative legacies stand in the strongest possible contrast to what Wiesel advocated. Authentic dialogue acknowledges a necessary relationship between *particular* identity and *universal* meaning whose implications embrace all those striving for a deeper understanding of the faith of others as well as that of their own tradition. Wiesel emphasized the necessity of moving away from stereotypes and engaging with one's fellow flesh and blood human beings as seekers of meaning in a complex and chaotic world.

## 8. WHO IS ELIE WIESEL FOR ME AND US TODAY?

STEVEN T. KATZ

### 8.1. ELIE WIESEL THE INDIVIDUAL

Elie Wiesel and I were first colleagues, and then friends, for nearly 40 years. We were introduced to each other in the 1970s by Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg in connection with an educational project that Yitz and Elie Wiesel had created called the National Jewish Research Center (now the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership). I was then a junior professor at Dartmouth, Yitz and Elie Wiesel were already very well-known names in the Jewish—and for Elie Wiesel the wider—community. By this time, *Night* had been published in English (in 1958) and had become one of the two or three most famous works about the Holocaust, along with the diary of Anne Frank and the writings of Primo Levi. Yet, despite the vast disparity in our professional standing, Elie Wiesel treated me, from the beginning, with courtesy and kindness as a full colleague. One incident, in particular, stands out. In 1984, Elie Wiesel gave a lecture that my mother, soon after my father's death, attended. He made, as later reported to me, a special effort to seek her out and offer complimentary words about her still very much unknown son. Elie Wiesel extended this pattern of kindness and generosity not only to me but to all of his junior colleagues and graduate students. So, for example, he asked an affluent friend to add to the funds being received by graduate students to make their lives easier.

As our connection strengthened and became more »personal,« I discovered five things about Elie Wiesel that made—and still make—a great impression on me:

1. His unshakeable moral integrity.
2. His profound sense of »*Ahavat Yisrael*«—love of the Jewish People. So, for instance, Elie Wiesel, remembering the Sighet Ghetto, writes of the residents of this hell: »throughout the ordeal they maintained their dignity as

human beings and as Jews. Imprisoned, reduced to subhuman status, they showed themselves capable of spiritual greatness.«<sup>1</sup>

3. His intense, unwavering commitment to the State of Israel. This was already evident in 1946 (before the State was created) when Elie Wiesel, at the age of 18, traveled from France to Israel to volunteer for the *Haganah* in order to join in the struggle to liberate Palestine from the British. In the event, he was rejected because of his poor physical condition. But his commitment to Israel never wavered. As Cynthia Ozick said of Elie Wiesel over 20 years ago, words that could not be truer today: »Above all, he was given his passion to the sustenance of peoplehood. To say it bluntly, he stands up for Israel in the clear knowledge that to stand up for Israel now is the defining act of Jewish valor for our generation.«<sup>2</sup> This unwavering support continued throughout the later years of Elie Wiesel's life and influenced actions in defense of the State of Israel that many criticized. Here I think of his public dispute with President Obama over the future of Jerusalem, and his intense criticism of the American-Iran deal. Regarding Elie Wiesel's public defense of the significance of Jerusalem to the Jewish People, he replied to President Obama, who he otherwise had very good relations with, »For me the Jew I am, Jerusalem is above politics.«<sup>3</sup> There was also a lighter side to this affair. Soon after this comment was publicly made, a photo appeared on the front page of *The New York Times* showing Elie Wiesel at lunch with the President at the White House. On seeing this, I called Elie Wiesel and asked him what had gone on and what it was like to have lunch alone with the President. He replied: »When the President speaks, you cannot eat, and you cannot eat when you are responding. So, it's not much of a lunch.«

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1 Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 66.

2 Cynthia Ozick, »Afterword,« in *Celebrating Elie Wiesel: Stories, Essays, Reflections*, ed. Alan Rosen (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 336.

3 Marc H. Ellis, *Encountering the Jewish Future: With Elie Wiesel, Martin Buber, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Hannah Arendt, Emmanuel Levinas* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 249.

The second and third of these qualities—these virtues—have been especially on my mind over the past few years since Elie Wiesel's death because of occasions such as the Hamas assault—4,300 to 4,500 rockets—on Israel in 2021. And again during the August 2022 conflict when five hundred plus rockets were launched against Israel by Islamic Jihad. While all too many Jewish leaders have been silent, or nearly silent on these deadly events, I knew, and took comfort from my knowledge, that Elie Wiesel would have scoffed at their cowardice. He would not be willing to sacrifice Jewish lives, and the Jewish State, just to get his name in *The New York Times*.

4. His ability, and willingness, to talk truth to power. In his biography he reflected critically on such actions.

»Rabban Gamliel, son of Rabbi Yehuda the Prince, said: »Be careful in your relations with those in power; they draw you close or allow you to approach them only when they need you. They are your friends when your friendship is useful to them and affords them pleasure, but they forget you when you are in trouble.« I have thought of this often. Is it wise for a writer to come too close to power? Is it prudent to be a friend to princes?»<sup>4</sup>

5. Three examples, among many, of his willingness to interject morality into the high-stakes politics that he was often engaged in, immediately come to mind:

- a) Elie Wiesel's rebuke on April 19, 1985, of President Reagan concerning his planned visit to a German military cemetery in Bitburg, Germany, where the bodies of thirty SS troops and seventeen other Nazis were buried. The German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, had organized the event during an official visit to Germany by the U.S. President. Before the trip took place, during a televised ceremony held to honor Elie Wiesel with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the honoree had the courage to tell

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4 Wiesel, *All Rivers*, 115.

the President on national TV, »I belong to a people that speak truth to power ... Your place is not that place. Your place is with the *victims* of the SS.«<sup>5</sup>

- b) Elie Wiesel's outspoken—and successful—appeal to President Clinton to intervene in the civil war in the former Yugoslavia.
- c) His central role in the Soviet Jewry movement—most widely chronicled in his book *The Jews of Silence* (1966). In this context, he would not be silent, contrary to the advice he received from many notable and influential individuals. He effectively, though holding no political or official position, convinced America and American Jewry not to be silent either. Wiesel insisted: »Man can't afford to wait for God's decision to send the Messiah because his life hangs in the balance.«<sup>6</sup> Acting on principle, he chose to do what the rabbi turned madman in Wiesel's *Zalman, or the Madness of God* teaches: »God requires of man not that he live, but that he chooses to live. What matters is to choose ... at the risk of being defeated.«<sup>7</sup> Specifically in the matter of Soviet Jewry, I would especially note that he even disagreed with the position of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, on the public tactics required in the existing situation. The Rebbe, one of the leaders of world Jewry, advocated a »quiet« approach to the issue of Jewish emigration from the USSR. In his view intervention in this highly sensitive issue needed to be carried on »below the radar.« This, in fact, had been, with some success, the policy of the Lubavitch movement in the Soviet Union for many years. However, Elie Wiesel rejected this position and went public with the matter, emphasizing protests on college campuses and among college students. In his view, the world, including the Jewish world, that had been silent during the Holocaust now again was faced with evil, and this

5 Elie Wiesel, »Text of Wiesel Plea to Reagan,« Los Angeles Times, April 20, 1985, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-04-20-mn-21758-story.html>.

6 Lawrence L. Langer, *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), 160.

7 Marilyn Kapp, *Love Is Greater Than Pain: Secrets from the Universe for Healing After Loss* (New York: Harmony Books, 2020), 9.

time it needed to do better than it had done. He, as a survivor, had a direct responsibility to see that ameliorative action was taken, including free migration. It was in this sense that the title of his famous book on the situation, *The Jews of Silence*, was meant to refer both to the oppressed Jews of Russia and to the Jews of America and Western Europe who were not making the noise they were obligated to make over the crime that they were witnesses to. »The crucial question is whether we Jews who live in freedom are worthy of their courage and faith [of Russian Jewry].«<sup>8</sup> As Elie Wiesel's decision came to bear real fruit in the rate of Jewish emigration, and in the increasing recognition of the importance of the subject by the public, a remarkable thing happened: The Rebbe, as Elie Wiesel told me, wrote him a note in which he acknowledged that he had been wrong, and that Elie Wiesel had been right. This may have been a singular event in the Rebbe's enormously productive career given the messianic fervor surrounding R. Schneerson.

The breadth of his moral vision. Elie Wiesel's ethical concerns were not restricted only to Jews and Jewish issues. He felt strongly that as a survivor he had a special responsibility to speak out against evil everywhere that it existed. Elie Wiesel took this inclusive responsibility very seriously. His engagement with the Dalai Lama, his efforts on behalf of the Aché Indians in Paraguay, his intervention on behalf of the »disappeared« in Argentina, his attempt to influence the end of the Bosnian Civil War, and his efforts vis à vis the war in Biafra—all speak to his universal concern. All situations of oppression demanded a response. As he wrote: »Wherever there is oppression, that place must become the Center of the universe ... Wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation, we must take sides.«<sup>9</sup> I would add, viewing all of Elie Wiesel's

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8 Michael Berenbaum, »Remembering Elie Wiesel, the Moral Force Who Made Sure We Will Never Forget,« *The Forward*, September 30, 2019, <https://forward.com/culture/430784/elie-wiesel-the-moral-force-who-made-sure-we-will-never-forget-evil-of/>.

9 Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences* (New York: Summit Books, 1990), 233.

individual moral interventions within a more holistic frame of reference, that it was always impressive to take note of the way in which Elie Wiesel avoided being seduced by political power. And not for lack of opportunity for self-promotion. I remember several occasions when he and I were in conversation in his office, and his secretary would come in and say that the White House, Angela Merkel or the President of France, Francois Mitterrand, was calling to enlist his support for some action, and how he would weigh up these requests very carefully before replying.

His relationship with President Mitterrand is particularly notable in this regard. He and Mitterrand were old and good friends. Yet, when he discovered that Mitterrand had worked for the Vichy regime, he publicly asked him to apologize. Mitterrand, however, refused to do so and told Elie Wiesel that he could not make such a gesture as, in his view, the honor of France was at stake. At this point, Elie Wiesel broke all ties with the French President in spite of repeated entreaties from Paris, and then, went so far as to publicly ask:

»How is it possible that a man so intelligent, knowledgeable, and informed could not have been aware of the anti-Jewish laws of Vichy? The plundering, the persecutions, the arrests, the roundups—how could he have failed to know about them?«<sup>10</sup>

In this recollection of Elie Wiesel's relationship with powerful people there is still a whole world of links and events yet to be remembered: his close relations with Vaclav Havel, the Dalai Lama, Kofi Annan, Hilary Clinton, Bibi Netanyahu, and others. But, because of reasons of space, I must leave a detailed analysis of all of these relationships for another occasion. There is, however, one that I would here comment on further, taking it as a paradigm of Elie Wiesel's uncompromising integrity, namely, his relationship with Prime Minister Netanyahu. As a rule, they treated each other with respect, and Elie Wiesel was always willing to help the prime minister when asked. His invited attendance at

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10 Elie Wiesel, *And the Sea Is Never Full: Memoirs, 1969–* (New York: Schocken Books, 1999), 79.

Netanyahu's 2012 controversial speech to the US Congress on the Iran nuclear threat is probably the most well-known of these interactions. But their relationship ended when Netanyahu, having made certain significant commitments to Elie Wiesel, failed to follow through on his promises. As a result, from then on, Elie Wiesel would not engage closely with Netanyahu as had previously been the case.

## 8.2. ELIE WIESEL'S PUBLIC ACTIVITY

It was not easy to be Elie Wiesel given all the demands and requests made on him. He once told me that he received up to twenty-five (or more) invitations to do something every day. Yet, when evaluating which invitations to accept and which to reject—and more generally, what to do and what not to do—he was continually guided by his own unwavering principles and existential values. I would here comment on five of these personal commitments that Elie Wiesel took to be essentially inviolate:

First and foremost, he acted as a Jew—»I am a Jew profoundly rooted in my people's memory and tradition, my first response is to Jewish fears, Jewish needs, Jewish crises.«<sup>11</sup> This awareness was the determinative fact of his being. He knew it from his Hasidic family roots, his profound Jewish studies, and his experience at Auschwitz. As a result, he understood that he was a member of a people who knew that they had to distinguish good from evil and were obligated to choose the good. As his character Moshe explains in the novel *The Oath*: »to be Jewish is to be able to distinguish ... His whole life the Jew is committed to separating light from darkness, Shabbat from the rest of the week, the pure from the impure, the sacred from the profane ... life from death ...« The biblical command »And thou shall choose life means you shall separate it [from evil].«<sup>12</sup>

Attempting to choose the good was the dominant factor in Elie Wiesel's adult life. And what such »choosing« meant within a distinctive Jewish context

11 Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, 233.

12 Ted L. Estess, *Elie Wiesel* (New York: F. Ungar Publishers, 1980), 106.

he had learned from his immersion in sacred Jewish texts. His knowledge of the Hebrew Bible was very deep, as was his mastery of the Jewish tradition of biblical commentary, stretching from the midrashim of the rabbinic era to the great medieval exegetes like Rashi and Nahmanides. Then, too, when he came to America after the war, his traditional learning was significantly increased through his participation in regular study sessions over decades with the greatest academic Talmudist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Professor Saul Lieberman, with whom he became very close.

In addition, Kabbalah and Hasidism were part of his most intimate identity formed early in life in Sighet and extended by his post-war friendship with individuals like Abraham Joshua Heschel and the Lubavitcher Rebbe. As he wrote: »When asked about my Jewish affiliation, I identify as a Hasid. Hasid I was, Hasid I remain.« Moreover, this spiritual legacy represented not only his Jewish identity but constituted his *human* identity. There was no separating Elie Wiesel from his Judaism. This reality, this sense of self, made him not only a »paradigmatic witness« to the Holocaust but led to his call to all individuals, Jewish and others, to become witnesses not only to the »Final Solution« but also to all the evils that continue to confront us. It was his Judaism that made him a universalist.

Second, his universalist commitment was both extensive and intensive. While he steadfastly believed that the Holocaust was unique, he insisted that every person must be active in defense of all victims of persecution and oppression. Indeed, as he stated clearly at the end of *The Forgotten*: »it is because I love the Jewish People that I can summon the strength and the faith to love those who follow other traditions and invoke other beliefs.«<sup>13</sup> From Auschwitz and the singular fate of the Jewish People emerges the obligation to pursue solidarity with, and between, all peoples. As Elie Wiesel wrote regarding the core message of Job: »Job was not Jewish, but his ordeal involved all humanity, just as suffering of the Jewish People ought to concern all humanity.«<sup>14</sup> Robert McAfee Brown summarized this key principle very nicely when he wrote:

13 Elie Wiesel, *The Forgotten* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 315.

14 Elie Wiesel, *Job Ou Dieu Dans La Tempête* (Paris: Fayard Verdier, 1986), 41.

»The particularity of Jewish suffering can never be remembered only as an end in itself; it is a foretaste of what can happen to any person, any people. If Jews can be burned, so can others. To start with a concern for his own people—as Wiesel always does—is never to end there; it becomes, in turn, a starting place for concern for all peoples. The most Jewish of writers becomes the most universal among them.«<sup>15</sup>

This specific sense of responsibility drove Elie Wiesel's activities after Auschwitz. So, for example, with regards to the killings in Kosovo, he wrote: »Now we are witnessing a nightmare in Kosovo, it demands action, not comparison.«<sup>16</sup> That is, he would have everyone comprehend, and act on the comprehension, that all victims are our concern. All of those who are oppressed make a demand upon us.

Here it is necessary to directly address, and to correctly understand, the issue of the »uniqueness« of the Holocaust. For Elie Wiesel (as for myself),<sup>17</sup> »uniqueness« does not mean positing a hierarchy of suffering between different victims. There is no way to quantify suffering so as to be able to make such a sensible comparative judgment. In its totality, Elie Wiesel told his readers and partners in dialogue:

»I always forbade myself to compare the Holocaust of European Judaism to events which are foreign to it. Auschwitz was something else. The universe of the concentration camps, by its dimensions and its design, lies outside, if not beyond, history. Its vocabulary belongs to it alone.«<sup>18</sup>

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15 Robert McAfee Brown, *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 16.

16 Wiesel, *And the Sea*, 398.

17 Cf. Steven T. Katz, *The Holocaust in Historical Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Steven T. Katz, *The Holocaust and New World Slavery: A Comparative History* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Steven T. Katz, *Holocaust Studies: Critical Reflections* (London, New York: Routledge, 2019).

18 Katz, *Holocaust Studies: Critical Reflections*, 278.

Through such explanations, he is attempting to describe the distinctiveness of the *Shoah*, not its place in an inventory of occasions of mass suffering. To claim *x* is not *y* is not to posit that *x* is superior to *y*. That is, *x* is defined by features and attributes *y* does not have. Or, put another way, *y* has features and attributes *x* does not have. *Y* is not necessarily inferior to *x* but it is different from *x*.

Accordingly, as Elie Wiesel explained in an interview, the topic of suffering was of crucial and equal importance to all victims of violence, and it must be confronted by others with openness, care, and a broad sympathy:

»Let's take the problem of suffering because it's one of the elements that moves me to write ... If we engage literature and human destiny as endeavors by men to redeem himself, then we must admit the obsession, the overall dominating theme of responsibility, that we are responsible for one another ... If not, we are condemned by our solitude forever and it has no meaning.«<sup>19</sup>

The key issue is the universality—and equality—of suffering. So, he was genuinely concerned and personally pained by the unjust situations in which many peoples found themselves. And it was this empathy that was the basis of his intervention in the many causes that he chose to become personally involved in. Examples include: the Aché Indians of Paraguay;<sup>20</sup> the victims in Serbia, Bosnia, and Kosovo; the subjugated and displaced community of the Dalai Lama; the victims in the Nigerian Civil War; the people of Cambodia under Pol Pot; and the victims of the Rwandan violence. And closer to home, the issue of racism in America. As he wrote regarding Biafra: »I don't think [the Jew] should become obsessed with only Jewishness. I think he should be obsessed with everything else as well, I am ... I saw the pictures [of Biafran] children in the newspapers and I couldn't sleep.«<sup>21</sup> And as he observed after reading about the intentional

19 Harry James Cargas, *Conversations with Elie Wiesel* (South Bend: Justice Books, 1992), 7.

20 Cf. Richard Arens, ed., *Genocide in Paraguay* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1976).

21 Gene Koppel and Henry Kaufmann, *Elie Wiesel: A Small Measure of Victory: An Interview* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1974), 12.

devastation of the Aché: »But now, after having read these [Aché related] testimonies, we know. Henceforth we shall be responsible. And accomplices.«<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere, reflecting, more generally, on the human condition, he argued: »when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant.«<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, this truth, and the moral obligation that it entails, remains—today—all too necessary. Accordingly, as I revise this essay on October 2, 2022, I am deeply aware that everyone must actively support the victims in Sudan, the persecuted in Myanmar, the political prisoners in Belorussia, the Uyghur in China, and, of course, the resisters in the Ukraine. Though employing a very different idiom, Elie Wiesel fully concurred with Kant's ›categorical imperative‹: always act so that your actions can become a universal law. In his own, more personal language, as he wrote in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech:

»I swore never to be silent, whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.«<sup>24</sup>

Third, is the need to remember. Elie Wiesel had a passion regarding the importance of memory and the role of remembrance. As he explained:

»If there is a single theme that dominates all my writings, all my obsessions, it is that of memory—because I fear forgetfulness as much as hatred and death. To forget is, for a Jew, to deny his people—and all that it symbolizes—and also to deny himself.«<sup>25</sup>

It is not simply a question of remembering the events of the Holocaust ... The Jew should remember »that you were a slave in Egypt. Remember to sanctify

22 Elie Wiesel, »Now We Know,« in *Genocide in Paraguay*, ed. Richard Arens (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1976), 167.

23 Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, 233.

24 Elie Wiesel, *Confronting the Silence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), 246.

25 Wiesel, Preface to *From the Kingdom of Memory*, 10.

the Sabbath ... No other Biblical Commandment is as persistent. Jews live under the sign of memory ... To be Jewish is to remember—to claim outright to memory as well as our duty to keep it alive.«<sup>26</sup>

Memory is essential. It is the source of strength and endurance for all individuals and communities. And nowhere is this more evident than among the generation that survived the Death Camps. As Wiesel explained, he belonged to a generation that was »obsessed by a thirst to retain and transmit everything. For no other has the commandment *Zachor*—»Remember!« had such meaning.«<sup>27</sup>

For survivors this ultimate imperative is satisfied above all through their testimonies. Accordingly, Elie Wiesel asks:

»Aren't we the people of memory? Is oblivion not the worst of curses? A deed transmitted is a victory snatched from death. A witness who refuses to testify is a false witness. As for me, I do not refuse; on the contrary, I do nothing else. I yearn to do nothing else.«<sup>28</sup>

And this because:

»Jews felt that to forget constituted a crime against memory, as well as against justice; whoever forgets becomes the executioner's accomplice. The executioner kills twice, the second time when he tried to erase the tracers of his crimes, the evidence of his cruelty.«<sup>29</sup>

This testimony reminds all humankind what human beings are capable of doing and what human beings must be prevented from ever doing again.

Memory helps each successive generation grasp the terrible history that it is heir to, full as it was of knowingly brutal and lethal acts. In this sense, memory is an interrogation of the past. It represents not only the reconstruction of

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26 *Ibid.*, 10–11.

27 Wiesel, *All Rivers*, 16.

28 Elie Wiesel, *One Generation After* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 187.

29 *Ibid.*, 237.

what has been but also functions as a severe critique that creates and imposes a demand to ensure that the future is better than the past. So, fulfilling this requirement at least in part, the memory of the Holocaust has, for example, led to fundamental changes in American policies, and those of other nations, vis-a-vis migration and refugees—see here Elie Wiesel's call to action on behalf of the Vietnamese »boat people,« when appointed Chairman of the President's Commission on the Holocaust or to unprecedented laws on rape during military conflicts, and to new legal rules governing the »right to intervene,« and the establishment of significant global organizations such as the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). Likewise, the Catholic and Protestant churches have, in most cases, reformed, to varying degrees, their teachings regarding Jews and Judaism. This has meant especially their acceptance of the legitimacy of the State of Israel and the reduction of an emphasis on supersessionism.

Nor is it inconsequential that remembrance of things past provides the fundamental evidence on the basis of which we can falsify the lies told about the history of nations, organizations, and individuals, as well as liberate us from our own illusions. I am, in this context, also reminded of Emil Fackenheim's well-known remark about responding to the Holocaust, that is consistent with Elie Wiesel's emphasis on memory: »forgetting is giving Hitler posthumous victory.«<sup>30</sup> Memory fights against all efforts to misrepresent and/or deny the »Final Solution.« Furthermore, it is apposite to remind ourselves that today we are confronted by the terrible example of Poland, with its deeply corrupt law of national memory, that willfully, knowingly, misrepresents the behavior of the Polish population during the *Shoah*. Revealing the truth as to the participation of Poles in the murder of their Jewish neighbors has now been made a state crime carrying a three year prison sentence. The court cases brought against historian Jan Gross for his study of Jedwabne,<sup>31</sup> and against Jan Grabowski for

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30 Emil Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflection* (New York: New York University Press, 1970), 84.

31 See: Jan Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

his and Barbara Engelking's work,<sup>32</sup> were wholly dishonest, as evidenced by the data first collected by Russian State Commissions in 1946 and 1947, other contemporary sources, and now extended by the archival and related research of Grabowski, Engelking and their courageous colleagues.

In effect, we see, in a major way, in the Polish case how memory gives »life« to those gassed and immolated in the Death Camps. (And comparable revealing testimony has played a similar role in cases like Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, and the persecution of the indigenous peoples in Central America.) As Elie Wiesel explained in his essay »Why I write«: »To wrench those victims from oblivion. To help the dead vanquish death.«<sup>33</sup>

Fourth, Elie Wiesel was both a dedicated Student and a devoted Teacher. A lifelong learner of classical Jewish texts from the Bible through the medieval period and up to Hasidism, and since the late 1940s of philosophy, especially French existentialism, including the works of Albert Camus. His devotion to study was not only, or primarily, an intellectual enterprise alone. It was the essence of his identity. In particular, the holy texts of the Jewish tradition taught him, as it has taught millennia of generations, how to give life meaning, how to learn values, how to respond to the pain and suffering of existence, and now, after the Shoah, how to respond to hate and extermination. These texts inform us how to go forward with dignity, sensitivity, and individual and collective strength.

Complimentarily, he saw his main calling, his deepest obligation, to be a *moreh*, a teacher, in a broad sense of this term. That is, as someone who acts as a bridge between the past and the future, between Jews and non-Jews, survivors and non-survivors. In the role of a *moreh*, he worked to provide an understanding of the history and literature of the past and create a humanizing understanding that will help guide the future.

32 Now available in English under the title: Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking, eds., *Night Without End: The Fate of Jews in German-Occupied Poland* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022).

33 Elie Wiesel, »Why Would I Write: Making No Become Yes,« *New York Times*, April 14, 1985, <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/04/14/books/why-would-i-write-making-no-become-yes.html>, sec. 7, p. 13.

To facilitate this ambition, he created his own interpretation of the classical sources. He did not deconstruct them like a Bible critic studying *Genesis or Exodus* would do, or as a historian of the Hasidic movement reconstructing the life of Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hassidism, would do. Instead, he »read« them to provide usable wisdom for his students and readers. His purpose was not to create literature in various forms—books, plays, poems—as artistic accomplishments but, rather, to use literature to convey the essence of being human. As a result, his retelling of biblical tales, his use of midrashic, i.e., rabbinic, sources, and his famous collections of Hasidic tales are not intended, in their innermost meaning, to be understood as acts of storytelling but as commentaries that help to teach us to cope with the human situation. This meant that Elie Wiesel raised such questions as the place of God and the relation between the Divine and the human; the issue of theodicy; the source of ethical values; the significance and goal of human activity; and the relation of the particular to the universal.

Consider, as one example, his influential retelling of biblical tales. And still, more specifically, his interpretation of the foundational story of Joseph that appears in *Genesis*. Describing Joseph's role as the Vizier of Egypt, he writes: »[he knew] how to reconcile his love for Israel with his love for other nations ... The first to know how absurd and futile it is to oppose Judaism to universality.«<sup>34</sup> This is a message that both Jews and non-Jews need to hear.

Describing the method and consequences of Rashi (1040–1105), the greatest of medieval Jewish biblical commentators, Elie Wiesel wrote:

»Commentary in Hebrew is *perush*. But the word *lifrosh* also means to separate, to distinguish, to isolate—that is, to separate appearance from reality, clarity from complexity, truth from its disguise. Discover the substance, always, Discover the spark, eliminate the superfluous, push back obscurity. To comment is to reclaim from exile a world or motion

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34 Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York: Random House, 1976), 167.

that has been patiently waiting outside the realm of time and inside the gates of memory.«<sup>35</sup>

And he attempted to replicate these goals that he attributed to Rashi in his own commentaries. The medieval exegete's questions and concerns are Wiesel's questions and concerns. Thus, the fundamental queries pass from the past to the present and, through Elie Wiesel's reworking of them from the present to the future.

Fifth: Life after Auschwitz. Elie Wiesel's fame rests most especially on *Night*, first published in French in 1958. And its power is such that this makes perfect sense. But I would emphasize the theme of »anti-night« that Elie Wiesel ultimately taught us. After publishing *The Town Behind the Wall* (1964) and *Gates of the Forest* (1966), both of which deal with the Shoah, he wrote dozens of books that do not focus on the Holocaust but, rather, with life after the war. His purpose in writing was now to help in the struggle against the continuing dehumanization and evil that surrounds us: »If there is nothing else I can do, I write a book. This is precisely the task of the witness today. We use words to try and alter the course of events, to save people from [the] humiliation of death.«<sup>36</sup> By design, these later works concentrate on the effort to create a world that, though broken, demands of us that we try to repair it. Instead of focusing on seeking answers to the paradoxes, ambiguities, and mysteries that the death camps provoke, Elie Wiesel tells us that we must authentically attempt to make a go at living meaningfully, no matter how difficult this seems to be. We have, that is, to learn how to live with our knowledge of the Holocaust while not letting this knowledge overwhelm everything else in our lives.

As his character Azriel tells us: »whether life has meaning or not, what mat-

35 Elie Wiesel, *Wise Men and Their Tales. Portraits of Biblical, Talmudic and Hasidic Masters* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 22.

36 Elie Wiesel, »Words Are the Link,« Boston University, November 10, 1980, quoted in *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, ed. Irving Abrahamson (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), vol. III, 116–117. [Adaption from the original source; Title supplied by the editor, where none previously existed; Never before published; transcripts are not here considered published material, 1985]

ters is not to make a gift of it to death. All you will get in return is a corpse.«<sup>37</sup> And, as *The Oath* unfolds, this character instructs us: »so you hope to defeat evil? Fine. Begin by helping your fellow man. Triumph over death? Excellent. Begin by saving your brother.«<sup>38</sup> »We must,« Elie Wiesel demands, »show that although there is no hope, we must invent hope.«<sup>39</sup> Perhaps »hope« is too great a reach, but in all cases there must be commitment to »never give up—[to] never yield to despair.«<sup>40</sup> And going still further, he elsewhere tells his readers:

»We owe it to our past not to lose hope. Say what you will, despair is not the solution. Not for us. Quite the contrary. We must show our children that in spite of everything, we keep our faith—in ourselves and even in mankind, though mankind may not be worthy of such faith. We must persuade our children and theirs that three thousand years of history must not be permitted to end with an act of despair on our part. To despair now would be a blasphemy—a profanation.«<sup>41</sup>

Finally, *Obligatory Action and Messianic Hope* – were concepts and values of transcending importance to Elie Wiesel. To understand what these categories meant to him, it is necessary to grasp his radical redefinition of messianism and the conception that he had come to have of the Messiah and the messianic. In his refashioning of these elemental theological ideas, messianism is not a term that refers to a divine, eschatological event marked by the intervention of God in human affairs that brings about the culmination of history and the redemption of the world. Instead, Elie Wiesel reconceptualizes these theological doctrines and redefines them as moral and human imperatives. To make clear what he has in mind, he retells a tale associated with the early hassidic master Rabbi Pinchas Shapiro of Koretz:

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37 Elie Wiesel, *The Oath* (New York: Random House, 1973), 281.

38 *Ibid.*, 14.

39 Cargas, *Conversations with Elie Wiesel*, 111.

40 *Ibid.*, 164.

41 Elie Wiesel, *A Jew Today*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Random House, 1978), 167.

»Basing myself on the Talmudic saying that if all men repented, the Messiah would come, I decided to do something about it. I was convinced I would be successful. But where was I to start? The world is so vast. I shall start with the country I know best, my own. But my country is so very large. I had better start with my town. But my town, too, is large. I had best start with my street. No: my home. No: my family. Never mind, I shall start with myself.«<sup>42</sup>

»Messianism,« as here reimagined, involves our bringing the Messiah who, in light of Auschwitz, has, in any case, been too late in coming. Reflecting on the absence of divine intervention during the »Final Solution,« Elie Wiesel says of the Messiah: »If the Messiah does not hurry, he may be too late, there will be no one left to save.«<sup>43</sup> And, again, in his poem, *Ani Maamin* he asks: »what kind of Messiah is a Messiah who demands six million dead before he reveals himself.«<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, the term must be given a revised meaning.

As now understood, it is not the divine that is required to act but human beings. Men and women, through our collective, communal efforts are responsible for bringing the »redemption.« As Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezritch, the second leader of the Hassidic movement, taught: »Whatever the event, you are its origin; it is through you, through your will, that God manifests Himself.«<sup>45</sup> And as we are instructed by Wiesel in *Messengers of God*: »It is given to man to transform divine injustice into human justice and compassion«<sup>46</sup> Men and women must do the »messianic« work; whether or not the Messiah, the promised transcendental redeemer, comes is not what now matters.

42 Steven T. Katz, »Elie Wiesel: The Man and His Legacy,« in *Holocaust Studies: Critical Reflections* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 286.

43 Elie Wiesel, *The Gates of the Forest* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 82.

44 Elie Wiesel, *Ani Maamin: A Song Lost and Found Again* (New York: Random House, 1973), 69.

45 Elie Wiesel, *Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters* (New York: Random House, 1972), 68.

46 Wiesel, *Messengers of God*, 235.

»We'll manage without him ... We shall be honest and humble and strong, and then he will come, he will come every day, thousands of times every day. He will have no face because he will have a thousand faces. The Messiah isn't one man ... he's all men. As long as there are men, there will be Messiah.«<sup>47</sup>

Given the centrality of human action in Elie Wiesel's universe, the burden of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world, falls on us and our children. With this in mind, I will conclude these brief reflections with Elie Wiesel's reworking of the Kotzker Rebbe's advice to a disciple who asked about God's management of the world: »You could have done better? ... Then what are you waiting for? You don't have a minute to waste. Go ahead, start working.«<sup>48</sup>

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47 Wiesel, *The Gates*, 222–223.

48 Wiesel, *Messengers of God*, 36.



## 9. DYNAMICS OF VIOLENCE— MODES OF WITNESSING, GAZING AND (NON)ACTIONS IN ELIE WIESEL'S WRITINGS

CHRISTIN ZÜHLKE

Elie Wiesel's words »For the dead and the living, we must bear witness« are engraved at the entrance of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM).<sup>1</sup> Barack Obama, the former President of the United States of America, described Wiesel's legacy as:

»Elie did more than just bear witness, he acted. As a writer, a speaker, an activist, and a thinker, he was one of those people who changed the world more as a citizen of the world than those who hold office or traditional positions of power. [...] In the face of cruelty, we must live with empathy and compassion. We must never be bystanders to injustice or indifferent to suffering.«<sup>2</sup>

Wiesel's work and legacy are foremost those of a witness. His struggle for understanding—the task of witnessing—remained after his death. His words—engraved at the entrance to the USHMM, one of the first things people see when visiting the museum—were passed on to us. His writings integrate us into his ongoing search for understanding and thought process; while reading, Wie-

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1 Elie Wiesel, »Elie Wiesel's Remarks at the Dedication Ceremonies for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,« United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, April 22, 1993, accessed February 8, 2022, <https://www.ushmm.org/information/about-the-museum/mission-and-history/wiesel>.

2 Barack Obama, »Statement by the President on the Death of Elie Wiesel,« The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, July 02, 2016, accessed January 1, 2022, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/07/02/statement-president-death-elie-wiesel>.

sel entangles the reader in the broader implications of the Shoah,<sup>3</sup> because all his works circle back to this traumatic event. As Alan Berger argues, the Shoah, the violence and suffering it entailed for the victims, is »the framing event for all his observations.«<sup>4</sup>

The Shoah was an expression of a »system of collective violence«<sup>5</sup> in which everyone was entangled but due to its dynamics, the behavior and role of each person could change at any given time and situation. This displays the complexity of the indifferent bystander and other people watching or gazing. Mary Fulbrook points out that analyzing the victims' perspective regarding the bystander can shine a light on these dynamics of violence and the role of those who were not discriminated against and murdered.<sup>6</sup> Thus, this chapter will be based on the victims' perspective drawn from Wiesel's writing and from it I will develop the different roles, reactions and modes of witnessing or gazing of those people who were neither perpetrators nor victims.

### 9.1. THE VICTIMS' GAZE OF SHAME

My first example is from Wiesel's memoir ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, later adapted and abbreviated into *Night*, first published in French in 1958,<sup>7</sup> in which he

3 I will use the term Shoah instead of Holocaust. According to Yad Vashem, »The biblical word Shoah (which has been used to mean »destruction« since the Middle Ages) became the standard Hebrew term for the murder of European Jewry as early as the early 1940s. The word Holocaust, which came into use in the 1950s as the corresponding term, originally meant a sacrifice burnt entirely on the altar.« [emphasis in the original]. Yad Vashem, »The Holocaust: Definition and Preliminary Discussion,« Yad Vashem, accessed June 30, 2017, [http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/resource\\_center/the\\_holocaust.asp](http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/resource_center/the_holocaust.asp).

4 Alan L. Berger, »Faith and God during the Holocaust: Teaching *Night* with the Later Memoirs,« in *Approaches to Teaching Wiesel's »Night«*, ed. Alan Rosen (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2007), 48.

5 Mary Fulbrook, »Bystanders: Catchall Concept, Alluring Alibi, or Crucial Clue?« in *Probing the Limits of Categorization: The Bystander in Holocaust History*, ed. Christina Morina and Krijn Thijs (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), 30.

6 Ibid., 29.

7 Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 22.

describes the destruction of the Jewish community in his hometown Sighet.<sup>8</sup> The memoir includes Wiesel's experiences of deportation in 1944, his imprisonment in the concentration camp complex Auschwitz and Buchenwald, and the death marches. I use the Yiddish original alongside an English translation. Where the passages are included in *Night*, as the version of Wiesel's memoir available in English, I use the published translation. However, when ... *un di velt hot geshvign* was translated into French and transformed into the memoir we now know as *Night*, many specific Jewish references were removed and it was shortened for a non-Jewish audience.<sup>9</sup> For those passages that are absent from *Night*, I use my own translation of the Yiddish. The Yiddish original is more detailed and provides more insight into Wiesel's emotional struggle and his perspective, which we will see in the following.

The memoir describes how Wiesel is watching the deportation of part of the Jewish population of Sighet:

»*Un ikh shtey azoy afn trotuar fun undzer hoyz (undzer hoyz ...) un kuk zikh ayn in bild, voz antplekt zikh far mayne oygn. Ikh volt gekent bahaltn zikh in shtub un nisht zen ot doz altz. Ez volt leykhter geven. Ober a masokhistisher kheyshek hot zikh dervekt in blut. 'z hot zikh gevolt epez laydn. Mitlaydn mitn klal. Bin ikh gestanen afn trotuar hoyz un gekukt.*<sup>10</sup>—And I stand on the sidewalk of our house (our house ...) and watch the picture, which is unfolding in front of my eyes. I could have hidden myself in the room and not seen all of this. It would have been easier.

8 Sighet is located in Northern Transylvania. During the time of Wiesel's deportation it belonged to Hungary.

9 The differences between the Yiddish original and the French translation (and the following translations based on it) is scholarly discussed. David Roskies' book *Against the Apocalypse* (published in 1984) paid especially attention to this issue for this first time. Alan Astro, »Revisiting Wiesel's *Night* in Yiddish, French, and English,« *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 12, no. 1 (2014): 130; Naomi Seidman, »Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage,« *Jewish Social Studies* 3, no. 1 (1996): 1–19.

10 Eliezer Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, ed. Mark Turkov and Abraham Mitlberg, *Dos Poylishe Yidntum* 117 (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-Farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine, 1956), 32.

But a masochistic desire awoke in [my] blood. I wanted to suffer. Suffer with everybody. I was standing at the house's sidewalk and watched.«

Wiesel expresses great distress as he suffers with the other victims leaving their homes for an unknown destination. He is watching from outside, from the sidewalk of the house. There is no physical barrier between him and the group, and he mentions that hiding from the scenery was an option he actively did not choose. He did not hide in his retreat, but placed himself outside, visible to everybody. Wiesel is not only part of the scenery, but part of the Jewish victims, bound together in their suffering and fate, as Esther Benbassa summed it up: They »[...] continue to suffer because they are Jews.«<sup>11</sup> What is also told in his memoir is that Wiesel's entire family helped those who were being deported. This passage depicts Wiesel as the one watching, but in a different way to the bystander who is performing the same action. The entire passage is missing in the *Night*, thus omitting these crucial nuances.

Wiesel is also describing the way the group of deportees react to him: they do not look at him, but it is unclear whether they do or do not want to. There is no visual communication between the sides:

*»Zey kukn nisht tzu mir, zeen mir nisht. Efsher zenen zey beyz, voz ikh blayb mekhutz lemakhne, voz ikh gey mitn noentstn, mitn letztn transport, voz ikh blayb nokh in der heym a por sho, a por teg. Toyzenter ton blay in hartzn.<sup>12</sup>—They do not look at me, do not see me. Maybe they are angry, as I stay outside the group, since I go with the nearest, with the last transport, as I stay at home a few more hours, a few more days. Thousand tons of lead in my heart.«*

The victims of the Shoah, and therefore also Wiesel, found themselves in an impossible situation, which is named by the historian Lawrence L. Langer as

11 Esther Benbassa, *Suffering as Identity* (London: The Jewish Paradigm, 2010), 34.

12 Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, 33–34.

the »choiceless choice«<sup>13</sup> dilemma. The situation Wiesel describes here—one example of a recurring experience during the Shoah—is the process of Jewish victims watching each other, sharing their pending fate, which is hanging over them like the sword of Damocles. This watching, gazing, as we can also see in the above passage, is deeply intertwined with feelings of guilt and shame—caused by being spared, at least for a moment, and allowed to »stay at home a few more hours« as Wiesel called it, and by the assumed anger of the victims he is watching.

## 9.2. THE BYSTANDER'S FACE OF INDIFFERENCE

Being himself a victim, Wiesel's role in my first example is not that of a bystander, but despite their marked difference, he has something in common with the bystander: the act of gazing. My second example is a fictional representative of the real bystander during the Shoah, taken from *The Town Beyond the Wall* (herein after called *The Town*). The bystander's act of watching/looking/gazing is central and crucial to his or her role of »watching the Holocaust.«<sup>14</sup> Thus, the concept of the bystander must be based on his or her being a visual subject, as Roma Sendyka describes.<sup>15</sup> This concept must also include spectator modes such as observation, surveillance, visual pleasure and forms of reading like decoding and interpretation which speaks to the role's transitional, contextual, dynamic, and ever-changing nature.<sup>16</sup> According to Sendyka the bystander as

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13 »Moreover, this little discredit falls to these victims, who were plunged into a crisis of what we might call ›choiceless choice‹, where crucial decisions did not reflect options between one form of abnormal response and another, both imposed by a situation that was in no way of the victim's own choosing.« Lawrence L. Langer, *Versions of Survival. The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), 72.

14 Roma Sendyka, »Bystanders as Visual Subjects: Onlookers, Spectators, Observers, and Gawkers in Occupied Poland,« in *Probing the Limits of Categorization: The Bystander in Holocaust History*, ed. Christina Morina and Krijn Thijs (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), 53.

15 *Ibid.*, 66.

16 *Ibid.*, 54, 66.

a visual subject only becomes a witness when he or she formulates an opinion regarding the violence that occurs in front of him or her.<sup>17</sup> But can someone really watch violence against somebody and feel nothing? Victoria Barnett describes the role of the bystander as: »In a criminal case, the bystander is neither victim nor perpetrator; his or her legally relevant role is that of witness.«<sup>18</sup>

In contrast, Wiesel portrays the bystander<sup>19</sup> in *The Town* as someone who watches the occurring violence without reacting: »The police beat women and children; the bystander did not stir. It was no concern of his. He was neither victim nor executioner; a spectator, that's what he was.«<sup>20</sup> His passivity stands in contrast with other people's behavior. But the bystander continues to watch. The bystander is both part of the scenery and separate from it: he is close enough to observe from inside the house across the street from the victims but still far enough away to avoid being involved in the violence.<sup>21</sup> Mary Fulbrook argues that the role of the bystander is not personal but highly context-dependent, as the bystander »happens to be close to something that is in essence part of someone else's history.«<sup>22</sup> This intertwines the bystander's role with the situation, but at the same time he or she is decontextualized: the bystander is standing by, withdrawn, outside of the conflict's dynamics unfolding in front of him, as we can see in the way Wiesel depicts this role. Whereas Fulbrook situates the bystander in a neutral position, I would define it as an in-between position, which speaks to its ambiguity.

Wiesel depicts the bystander in *The Town* as a »face in the window across the way.«<sup>23</sup> The Jewish victims' suffering stands in contrast to the bystander's

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17 Ibid., 54.

18 Victoria J. Barnett, *Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity during the Holocaust* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 9.

19 I will discuss the term »bystander« later in this article.

20 Elie Wiesel, *The Town Beyond the Wall*, trans. Stephen Becker (New York: Bergen Belsen Memorial Press, 1967), 150.

21 We must consider though that *The Town* is fiction, written from a victim's perspective and not a testimony from an actual historical bystander.

22 Fulbrook, »Bystanders,« 16.

23 Wiesel, *The Town*, 150.

safe place behind the window in several passages in Wiesel's work, in both *The Town* and in ... *un di velt hot geshvign*. The bystander is not touched by the suffering he observes, because the window separates him from the victims physically, emotionally, and symbolically. Jan Grabovski argues similarly that the real separation was in the people's minds, it was not by physically being shielded or because the Jewish victims were fully sealed away.<sup>24</sup> Most ghettos in Poland, for example, were half-open or open. The physical barriers were often permeable, consisting of wooden fences or barbed wire like in Sighet. Though the window which separates the bystander and the victims is physical, it is fully transparent, which means it poses no visible barrier.

Wiesel shows a different kind of observing, not indifferent but highly engaged in the scenery and not in favor of the victims. The people in the next passage are watching, waiting impatiently to get rid of the Jews. In the following, the point of view shifts and Wiesel himself is here among the deportees. He is now the one who is being watched, like the other Jews from Sighet before him. He portrays the continuous stream of Jewish victims to their deportation:

»M'firt untz durkh di hoypt-gazn. In der rikhtung fun der groyzer shul. Di shtot shaynt tzu zayn pust. Ober doz iz bloyz an eyndruk azelkher. In der emtzn shteyn di goyim—nekhlike gute un tayere fraynt!—hinter farmakhete fenster un vartn afn moment, ven zey veln zikh kenen araynrayzn in yidishe direz un roybn yidish farmegn.<sup>25</sup>—We are led through the main streets. In the direction of the Great Synagogue. The town seems to be empty. But this is just an impression. In fact, the non-Jews are standing—yesterday's dear and precious friends!—behind the closed windows and waiting for the moment when they can invade the Jewish apartments and steal the Jewish property.«

24 Jan Grabovski, »Natura Abhorret Vacuum: Polish ›Bystanders‹ and the Implementation of the ›Final Solution‹,« in *Probing the Limits of Categorization: The Bystander in Holocaust History*, ed. Christina Morina and Krijn Thijs (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), 189.

25 Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, 45.

It is even more upsetting for Wiesel, as those people watching are his former friends, who decide not to intervene and to stay indifferent.

In *The Town* the bystander is a single person, symbolizing the group of the bystanders, whereas in ... *un di velt hot geshvign* there are multiple people watching, depicted as a mass of people. The memoir goes even further than *The Town*: the bystanders' indifference is regarding the Jews as humans, but not towards their property. Within this passage in his memoir, Wiesel points to the cases where non-Jewish people turned their backs on their Jewish neighbors, becoming beneficiaries of the political situation during the Shoah by getting rich at the expense of the Jewish victims. He calls them »umgeduldike royb-fo-ygl«<sup>26</sup>—impatient birds of prey.

My last excerpt from ... *un di velt hot geshvign* is the following:

»A por ungarn shteyn afile in gaz un a freyd-oysdruk af zeyere khasirishe un vulgare penimer: ot, vern zey poter fun di yidn. Nisht af a tog-tsvey, nisht af a pshoresdikh oyfn, nor take af eybik!«<sup>27</sup>—A few Hungarians are even standing in the streets, expression[s] of joy on their pig-like and vulgar faces: At this moment, they will be freed of the Jews. Not for one or two days, not in a manner of compromise, but truly forever!«

Wiesel interprets the expression on their faces as a relief of finally getting rid of the Jews. The motifs are clear; the underlying assumption is, that the Jewish neighbors will be killed. In Eastern Europe, violence against Jews often happened publicly, in plain sight, visible also to the non-Jewish population of the town or city. This was the case in the infamous »Bloody Wednesday« in the Polish town Piotrkow, where »Jewish beards were sheared off not only publicly and by decree [...] whenever ›they‹ came across a Jew in the Street, when they seized Jews from their homes for work, during robberies, and wherever Jews were met—in the trolley, train, or elsewhere.«<sup>28</sup> But the violence did not stop

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Shimon Huberband, *Kiddush Hashem: Jewish Religious and Cultural Life in Poland du-*

there and the local civilians where not only those who watched but also those who acted. Omer Bartov called the killing of Jews by their Eastern Europeans neighbors »communal massacre« in which everyone turned into a »protagonist, hunter and prey, resister and facilitator, loser and profiteer.«<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, current researchers argue for a more nuanced understanding, even a rethinking, of the scope of actions which is associated with the bystander. Scholars argue that the interactions between Jews and non-Jews were of ambiguous, multilayered, and contradictory nature, to which Wiesel's work hints. In addition, the role of the bystander as the »eternal third« is considered as the vague.<sup>30</sup> The strict static triad by Raul Hilberg of perpetrator-bystander-victim<sup>31</sup> oversimplifies the tangled, complex historical reality of the Shoah, which consisted of highly dynamic social processes.<sup>32</sup> Thus, these schematic categories cause methodological and conceptual challenges, but also point to the ambiguity and hybridity of the spectrum between active and passive reactions.<sup>33</sup> The vast range of options available to non-Jews to react towards the persecuted included actions and non-actions such as: violence, exploitation, active exclusion, passive ignoring, resisting, complying with the Nazi terror, expressions of solidarity or affection, or helping the victims (secretly).<sup>34</sup> Christina Morina and Krijn Thijs clarify that ultimately even doing »nothing« was indeed never doing

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*ring the Holocaust* (Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House, 1987), 188.

29 Omer Bartov, »Wartime Lies and Other Testimonies: Jewish-Christian Relations in Buczacz, 1939–1944,« *East European Politics and Societies* 25, no. 3 (2011): 492.

30 Christina Morina and Krijn Thijs, eds., »Introduction: Probing the Limits of Categorization,« in *Probing the Limits of Categorization: The Bystander in Holocaust History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), 1.

31 Paul Hilberg, *Perpetrators victims bystanders: The Jewish catastrophe 1933–1945* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

32 Froukje Demant, »The Many Shades of Bystanding: On Social Dilemmas and Passive Participation,« in *Probing the Limits of Categorization: The Bystander in Holocaust History*, ed. Christina Morina and Krijn Thijs (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), 100; Morina and Thijs, »Introduction,« 3.

33 Ibid.

34 Demant, »The Many Shades of Bystanding,« 97–100.

nothing.<sup>35</sup> Further, the bystanders behavior did not only often depend on the situation but also shifted over time. In the end, all bystanders, at least to some extent, were part of the »social constellation of exclusion,«<sup>36</sup>—a complex position, which by design could never have been neutral. Nobody was excluded from the system of violence and therefore everyone had a co-responsibility.<sup>37</sup> Grabowski points out that the term bystander »obscures and obfuscates the dilemmas of people caught between the German killing machine and the desperate Jewish victims.«<sup>38</sup> Therefore, it no longer works well to describe the historical evidence. He goes even further by stating that the absence of an adequate term reflects the moral issue we have with the bystander.<sup>39</sup> However we will call this role in the Shoah, we must always consider its ambiguous reality of dynamics and the multitude of (non)reactions.

The actions of non-Jews regarding Jews, especially their Jewish neighbors, friends, and acquaintances, were often inconsistent and depended on the context. Thus, the public and the private sphere became more and more separated.<sup>40</sup> Wiesel unfolds the complex and ambiguous nature of the bystander throughout his body of work. Wiesel also points to the fact that some non-Jews stayed secretly in touch and even tried to rescue the Jews:

*»Undzers a kroyve, batia raykh, velkhe hot gevoynt bay undz, iz gekumen tsu loyfn:*

*—Emetser klapt in fenster!*

*Dos fenster iz geven farhakt, vayl es hot aroysgekukt tsu der kamer-gas, vos iz geshtanen, vi-gezogt, mkhuts litkhom hageto.*

*Biz mir zenen tsugegangen un bavizn tsu efenen hobn gedoyert etlekhe taye-*

35 Morina and Thijs, »Introduction,« 3.

36 Demant, »The Many Shades of Bystanding,« 100.

37 Morina and Thijs, »Introduction,« 1.

38 Grabowski, »Natura Abhorret Vacuum,« 200.

39 Ibid.

40 Demant, »The Many Shades of Bystanding,« 98.

*re minutn und an iz shoyt geven tsu-shpet. Mir hobn keynem nebn fenster nisht gefunnen.*<sup>41</sup>—

For a moment, we remained alone. Suddenly Batia Reich, a relative who lived with us, entered the room: ›Someone is knocking at the sealed window, the one that faces outside!‹ It was only after the war that I found out who had knocked that night. It was an inspector of the Hungarian police, a friend of my father's. Before we entered the ghetto, he had told us, ›Don't worry. I'll warn you if there is danger.‹ Had he been able to speak to us that night, we might still have been able to flee ... But by the time we succeeded in opening the window, it was too late. There was nobody outside.<sup>42</sup>

Wiesel's memoirs provide another case of a potential rescuer: »*Undzers a nisht-yidishe disnt, maria, iz arayngekumen in geto un zikh gebetn bay undz, mit treren in di oygn, mir zoln kumen tsu ir in dorf, zi vet undz bahaltn!*«<sup>43</sup>—»Maria, our former maid, came to see us. Sobbing, she begged us to come with her to her village where she had prepared a safe shelter.«<sup>44</sup>

The bystander represents the moral issue, the failure to intervene and help the victims. As shown in this article, the bystander was not involved in the violence against the Jewish victims unfolding in front of his or her eyes. He or she is not part of the situational conflict, just standing by and choosing not to take any side, neither the perpetrator's nor the victim's. The bystander's inaction is a reaction itself and thus not morally neutral. If the bystander does not intervene on the victim's behalf, he or she is reinforcing the perpetrator's violence.<sup>45</sup> The indifference of bystanders as a group left an impact on Wiesel's life and work. As *The Town* and ... *un di velt hot geshvign* show, Wiesel as an author and human being struggled to understand this indifference. He was haunted by it:

41 Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, 26.

42 Wiesel, *Night*, 16.

43 Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, 41.

44 Wiesel, *Night*, 20.

45 Fulbrook, »Bystanders,« 17.

»This, this was the thing I had wanted to understand ever since the war. Nothing else. How a human being can remain indifferent. The executioners I understood; also the victims, though with more difficulty. But the others, all the others, those who were neither for nor against, those who sprawled in passive patience, [...], those who were permanently and merely spectators—all those were closed to me, incomprehensible.«<sup>46</sup>

Wiesel's writing demonstrates that understanding the psychological mechanisms does not provide a solution; the struggle for understanding is a recurring theme and it is interwoven with Wiesel's background as a survivor. Wiesel's work does not offer any solution to the moral issue, but points to its complex nature. At the memorial of the former concentration camp Buchenwald, Wiesel said, »[b]ut the world hasn't learned. When I was liberated in 1945, [...] somehow many of us were convinced that at least one lesson will have been learned—that never again will there be war; that hatred is not an option, that racism is stupid [...].«<sup>47</sup>

In the two works I discussed, *The Town* and ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, Wiesel offers different modes of watching, looking, or gazing—all interpreted from the victim's perspective. Thus, Wiesel's role in ... *un di velt hot geshvign* stands in clear contrast to those of the non-Jewish people watching. His role is twofold: first, as the one observing, but who is not indifferent, unlike the bystander, and second, as the one who is being observed. All the options of looking presented in this article are modes of witnessing, but they differ in their position and reaction in regards to the watched victims. This article shows different positions during the Shoah as they are reflected in Wiesel's writing, but cannot depict the full spectrum of the historical reality. Wiesel's interpretation as well as Holocaust research shows the situational dynamics and ambiguity of the bystander while simultaneously raising the issue of moral responsibility. The fundamental question remains: »Whose side are you on?«<sup>48</sup>

46 Wiesel, *The Town*, 149.

47 Elie Wiesel, »Remarks by Elie Wiesel,« Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora Memorials Foundation, June 5, 2009, accessed June 22, 2017, <https://www.buchenwald.de/en/913/>.

48 Fulbrook, »Bystanders,« 17.

# 10. THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI KALONYMOS KALMISH SHAPIRO, THE PIASECZNA REBBE, IN THE LIGHT OF ELIE WIESEL'S WORK AND MESSAGE

NEHEMIA POLEN

## 10.1. PERSONAL INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

With this paper, I take the opportunity to reflect on what has changed in the forty years since I completed my doctorate under the direction of Elie Wiesel at Boston University. When I began my study of Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapiro's Holocaust period writings under the direction of Elie Wiesel in the nineteen-seventies, there were almost no scholarly publications on Rabbi Shapiro in English, and few in Hebrew. I was heartened, however by the direction I received from our great teacher. He was an unending source of wisdom, encouragement and guidance. I was spurred on by the example of his courage and boundless energy, his determination to see to it that the great luminaries of our past be not only remembered but treasured, appreciated for their spirit, their intellect, their innovative wit, their boldness and creativity in facing external obstacles and internal challenges. I had before me the example of *Souls on Fire*, Wiesel's pathbreaking work that was published to universal acclaim in 1972.<sup>2</sup> It was at once a popular best-seller and a scholarly sourcebook, adopted as a basic text in many theological seminaries and religious studies departments. It showed that it is possible to reach a wide audience with a gripping, nourishing and vital message while at the same time providing a foundational resource for the academic community and scholars of any denomination or no confessional commitment. With his example as a shining star before me, I resolved to begin my work on Rabbi Shapiro.

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1 I thank my colleague and friend Reinhold Boschki and his team for inviting me to share these words.

2 Elie Wiesel, *Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Random House, 1972).

Mozart once wrote that he aimed to reach the ›*Liebhaber*‹ and the ›*Kenner*‹ simultaneously. The ›*Kenner*‹ are those learned and proficient in music, perhaps professionally trained; while the ›*Liebhaber*‹ are amateurs who love music without knowing any of the theory. Musicologists have noted that music that endures for the ages has the quality that it has something to say to both ›*Liebhaber*‹ and ›*Kenner*‹—simultaneously.

Wiesel had exactly that quality. At Boston University in his academic courses as well as in his public lectures he was an exemplary teacher. His classes were uniformly electrifying. His mastery of multiple languages and complete ease and ability to switch between them effortlessly were mesmerizing. He was a master of sources—Bible, Talmud, Midrash and Jewish mysticism, as well as Eastern European folklore in various languages and cultures.

The student body of our classes was as variegated as the texts we were studying. Our teacher addressed a diverse student body with clarity and pedagogic effectiveness, leaving no one behind yet expanding the horizons of the more accomplished students. Always speaking quietly, gesturing modestly, his presence was understated yet transformative. His responses to student questions were often indirect, coming in the form of invitations to research more extensively and think still more deeply. Listening intently, he showed great respect for his students and at the same time challenged them to grow intellectually and spiritually. We were exposed to critical historical analysis of the legends that grew around the Baal Shem Tov and many other Hasidic masters, but critical analysis did not detract from the manifestation of spiritual stature. Our teacher's engagement with texts was a fruitful combination of intimate encounter combined with scholarly scrutiny. Wiesel spoke then and speaks now to both the ›*Liebhaber*‹ and the ›*Kenner*‹.

## 10.2. PARALLELS IN TEACHING

Theologian and educator Thomas Groome has written that

»[s]piritual beings need a pedagogy that engages and delves into their very souls, into the depths of their human spirit appealing to them personally and as persons. Indeed their minds must be well engaged too,

but it is in the soul and only through the soul that life-transforming education in faith can take place. [...] We engage and nurture people's souls by encouraging them to appropriate and see for themselves the wisdom of their faith, to make its spirituality their own, to choose to live their lives by its light.«<sup>3</sup>

This aptly captures the educational accomplishment of Wiesel, as well as the life and teaching of Rabbi Shapiro. A master educator as well as a Hasidic master, in 1923 he founded the Yeshiva Da'as Moshe, named after his father-in-law, which became one of the largest Hasidic yeshivot in Warsaw in the pre-war period. In his first book, *Hovat ha-Talmidim* (The Students' Responsibility), published in 1932 in Warsaw, Rabbi Shapiro writes that children must be imbued with a vision of their own potential greatness; they must be enlisted as active participants in their own development. The teacher must learn to speak the language of the student, and graphically convey the delights of a life of closeness to God. Teachers must invoke the power of the imagination, in such forms as the parable and the story, while imparting their message.

In his pedagogy, in his commitment to his students, in the warmth of his spirit and the openness of his heart, in Wiesel I had a living exemplar of the kind of person and teacher Rabbi Shapiro must have been. As I struggled with my dissertation and later the book that emerged from it, I had a living exemplar to inspire and guide me.

The parallels are striking. Both of my teachers—the one I met at Boston University and the one I met in the pages of his surviving writings—were totally devoted to their students. Both had faith in their students. Both empowered their students. And both expected much from their students.

Another parallel—there was an urgency and intensity in their writing and teaching, but no haste. I can still hear Wiesel's voice—gentle but strong, intense yet soft, challenging and inviting at once. That is how the Piaseczner Rebbe wrote, and according to reports of surviving disciples I was privileged to

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3 Thomas H. Groome, *Will There Be Faith: A new vision for educating and growing disciples* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 67–68 [adapted with thanks to Michael Shire].

locate and interview, how he spoke. Indeed, he believed that any worthwhile accomplishment requires time, patience, attentiveness, savoring. Rabbi Shapiro's manner was always deliberate, reflective, contemplative, sober, dignified. He was fond of quoting a Hasidic epigram based on a creative reading of a phrase from Deuteronomy 11:17, which reads in Hebrew »Va-avadetem meherah« The standard understanding is »[...] if you worship other deities] you will be quickly banished [from the good land which the Lord gives you].« But the Hasidic reading parses the phrase as an imperative, a religious desideratum: you must cause »Meherah«—haste—to perish. *You must banish haste.*

The Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin wrote:

»Lovelessness, indifference, will never be able to generate sufficient power to slow down and *linger intently* over an object, to hold and sculpt every detail and particular in it, however minute. Only love is capable of being aesthetically productive; only in correlation with the loved is fullness of the manifold possible.«<sup>4</sup>

It is this love—of Torah, wisdom, learning, teaching, children, the children of Israel and all human beings, and life—that characterized both Rabbi Shapiro and Wiesel.

In his Warsaw Ghetto writings, first published under the title *Esh Kodesh* [Fire of Holiness], Rabbi Shapiro made his own suffering into Torah, a communion-text which bares his soul, yielding a triadic fusion of student, text, and divine author. All who study it make contact with the soul of the human author—Rabbi Shapiro; with their own soul; and with the soul of the One who, in unfathomable ways, teaches Torah to His people Israel.

This is exactly the path that Wiesel took. He turned suffering into text, trauma into Torah.

In *Sages and Dreamers* (1991)<sup>5</sup> Wiesel gives a compelling portrait of Rab-

4 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 64.

5 Elie Wiesel, *Sages and Dreamers: Biblical, Talmudic, and Hasidic Portraits and Legends* (New York: Summit Books, 1991).

bi Akiva. It is extensive—the printed version runs to almost twenty pages, but it begins, ends and is dominated by the story of Rabbi Akiva's martyrdom, based on the portrayal in *Berakhot* 61a-b. Wiesel suggests that »[Rabbi Akiva] seems to have welcomed suffering and death.«<sup>6</sup> He writes, »As much as I admired and revered Rabbi Akiba, a hero of many dreamers, I could not but see him as a martyr who was attracted by martyrdom.«<sup>7</sup> Wiesel asks many questions, questions that reverberate particularly in light of recent experience: »Why was he so quiet?«<sup>8</sup>

Wiesel returns to these concerns at the end of the essay,<sup>9</sup> with a new perspective—one inspired by the teachings of Rabbi Saul Lieberman. He resumes the Talmudic narrative of the death of Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva says, in Wiesel's retelling:

»*Kol Yamai*—all my life I wanted to accomplish the commandment of loving the Almighty with all my heart and with all my soul and with all my life—now that the opportunity to do so has been given me, how could I not be happy? And the text in the Talmud emphasizes that ›*Ve-ota shaa, shaat kriet shma hayta.*«

He said *Sh'ma*, and that happened to be the hour for reciting the *Sh'ma*. Commented Rabbenou Saul Lieberman, ›Rabbi Akiba recited the *Sh'ma* because that was the thing to do—had he died at another hour of the day, he would not have recited the *Sh'ma*.

In other words: In dying, he did not intend to offer himself up as a spectacle, he did not prepare shattering speeches, grandiloquent statements; he simply followed the law. The hero of legends remained a man of *Halakha*.«<sup>10</sup>

6 Ibid., 225.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 226.

9 Ibid., 239–240.

10 Ibid.

The philosopher and literary critic Tzvetan Todorov speaks of two kinds of heroism. The first he calls »spectacular:« modeled after the heroes of the Greek epics, this kind of hero looks for glory and fame. The second kind of hero he calls »quotidian,« the heroism of everyday life, of the commonplace. This kind of hero, motivated by an ethic of love and hope, values life more than reputation or personal glory. The quotidian hero clings to life even when death would be easier; this person is willing to struggle in impossible conditions, temporarily surrendering dignity for the overarching purpose of saving lives and nurturing those values which impart meaning to existence.<sup>11</sup>

Wiesel gains a new understanding of Rabbi Akiva's martyrdom, seeing it as a higher heroism, the heroism of doing precisely what one is called upon to do with faithfulness and firm resolve, in any and all circumstances, whether ordinary or extreme. In fact, it is the consistency and regularity of one's practice that enable a person to grapple with, absorb and recover from exceptional situations, that equip one to avoid being destabilized and blindsided by unprecedented and shocking events.

There is a heroism of remaining quiet, there is a heroism of saying the *Sh'ma* at precisely the time that we are called upon to do so, but there is also a heroism of finding words to speak, to write, to express that which cannot be expressed and, it could be argued, should not be expressed. This is perhaps the greatest parallel between Wiesel and Rabbi Shapiro. Both rose to the highest heights when they displayed the courage and inner resources to speak when silence would have been the easier path. This is the enduring legacy of everything Wiesel taught and wrote in the postwar years, and the legacy of Rabbi Shapiro's writings from 1939 through 1942.

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11 See Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996).

### 10.3. ESH KODESH—THE HOLY FIRE

We encounter the struggle against silence early on in *Esh Kodesh*, in a sermon for *Parashat Va-Yeshev*, 5700 (December 2, 1939).<sup>12</sup> This *derashah* is a meditation on silence and its varied modalities: from the silence of spiritual ecstasy and realization beyond verbal description, to the mute silence of crushing defeat and despair. The exegetical *pivot* of the *derashah* is a verse in Genesis, from Joseph's dream: Joseph says, »And behold, my sheaf arose, and stood firm.«<sup>13</sup> A Midrashic wordplay based on lexical and phonological affinity enables Rabbi Shapiro to read the Hebrew word for sheaf, *alumah*, as »muteness« [*ilmut*]. The autobiographical nature of the *derashah* emerges in its description of the silence which strikes the leader who has himself suffered great tragedy, and who struggles to return to communication and creative leadership. At this point, Rabbi Shapiro has just resumed writing after a silence of seven weeks, a gap which followed the deaths of most of the Rabbi's immediate family. He writes:

»There is a distinction between the word *harishah* [silence] and the word *ilmut* [muteness]. The word *harishah* generally refers to someone who has the potential for engaging freely in speech but nevertheless does not speak. On the other hand, when the Israelite is so broken and crushed that he has nothing to say, then he does not feel, he has not even a head or a heart with which to perceive or feel; this is not silence [*harishah*], but rather muteness [*ilmut*], like the mute who has no power of speech. However, there are times when the Israelite sees that, Heaven forbid, it is inevitable that a time of trouble come to pass, involving decline, degradation and collapse. He then takes hold of himself, adapting himself to the time of trouble until the storm blows over. He says to himself, »At the present time I am indeed mute [*ilem*], but even the mute can communicate by signaling in a manner appropriate to his condi-

12 For bibliography and further information see: Nehemia Polen, *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto* (Northvale: J. Aronson, 1994).

13 Gen 37:7.

tion. So I too will speak a bit; I will sign from within my muteness.«  
 But when, Heaven forbid, Israel's troubles continue to increase, so that each individual feels even more broken and crushed, then a condition is reached ... where the state of *ilem*/muteness has become still more powerful, so that it is impossible to communicate even as a mute does. What happens then is that MY SHEAF/MUTENESS [ALUMATT] ROSE AND STOOD ERECT: at first I wanted to succumb and live a life of muteness; but when the muteness threatened to prevail, I could no longer bear it, so I took hold of myself, crying out to God more. And then, YOUR SHEAVES/MUTENESS [ALUMOTEIKHEM] TURNED AROUND ... That is, that you too [emphasis in original] found strength through me.«<sup>14</sup>

The words »at first I wanted to succumb and live a life of muteness« clearly refer to the author himself. After the shock of his overwhelming personal losses, he evidently found it impossible to preach for almost two months. But now, as this *derashah* itself informs us, he has taken a conscious decision to reject spiritual passivity and mute acceptance of suffering; he is manifestly encouraging himself to continue by observing that those around him have indeed been sustained and supported by his own steadfastness in his role as articulate teacher. This *derashah*, then, appears to be Rabbi Shapiro's account of his inner struggle with the silence of inner collapse, and his conscious, willed effort to move himself back to the world of communication and spiritual leadership.

Similar autobiographical remarks are to be found in the *derashah* for *Parashat Tavo* (Deut. 26:1–29:8), delivered on Sept. 21, 1940:

»In the face of death and bereavement, ... I have found the strength to rejoice and have inspired others to joy as well ... When others observed my self-possession and joy in the face of such great troubles, they too found inner strength in the face of their own troubles, through my

14 Kalonymos Kalmish Shapiro, *Esh Kodesh* (Jerusalem: 1960), 14–15; Kalonymos Kalmish Shapiro, *Sermons from the Years of Rage*, ed. Daniel Reiser (Jerusalem: 2022), 96–97.

example. This inner strengthening will itself have the effect of turning evil into good. [O God!]*—bless thy people Israel.*»<sup>15</sup>

In these words, we may observe Rabbi Shapiro mustering the will to continue through the thought that his inner strength has already been a source of encouragement to others.

There are those who say that after the Holocaust, the Covenant between God and Israel has been broken, severed. I do not believe that was the view of Rabbi Shapiro, nor that of Wiesel. Here, I turn to the evidence of *Esh Kodesh*, in which Rabbi Shapiro faces the pain of the hatred directed against the Jews unflinchingly, and, like Wiesel later, he avoids glib, superficial answers. There is an acknowledgment that there are sufferings which may be incomprehensible, counterproductive, not capable of assimilation into any framework of human benefit or understanding—like the commandments known as *hukkim*, which have no rational explanation, and which indeed may be designed to challenge our concept of rationality itself. Responding to such *hukkah*-sufferings requires a total surrender of the critical cognitive faculties, a complete submersion in the purifying waters of faith.

#### 10.4. SUFFERING OF GOD

Rather than attempting a theodicy for this category of suffering—which he came to see as the appropriate category for what was besetting the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto—Rabbi Shapiro shifts the emphasis from human suffering to divine suffering.

Drawing heavily upon the passages in Rabbinic literature which speak of the suffering of God, Rabbi Shapiro turns the idea of divine transcendence on its head. Precisely because God is infinite, God's suffering is infinite and beyond human conception. It is the infinite magnitude of Divine suffering which paradoxically explains the absence of a visible Divine response to Israel's catastrophe. God has not abandoned His people. Quite the contrary: God's distress

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15 Shapiro, *Esh Kodesh*, 62; Shapiro, *Sermons from the Years of Rage*, 152–153.

is so great that God is forced to escape to the innermost domain of heaven, so as to weep in secret. If one tear from the flow of divine weeping were to enter the world, the world would explode. So, God must hide the awesome secret of God's weeping and suffering from the world; this is what we perceive as *hester panim*. Rabbi Shapiro never entirely gives up hope in divine salvation in a historical sense; he continues to hope and pray for deliverance until the very end.

Rabbi Shapiro does not offer a theodicy; in fact, there are passages where he refutes the possibility of theodicy, denying the enterprise any legitimacy. Instead of attempting to justify God, he assumes the posture of total submission, of absolute surrender, of complete immersion in the waters of the divine will. At the same time, he does not shrink from calling God to task, imploring Him in the name of His suffering people to bring deliverance. At one point he even suggests that God perform the *mitzvah* of *teshuvah*, repentance.

He also freely admits where he has been wrong. Perhaps the most powerful instance is a passage written in late 1942, revising an earlier passage from the winter of 1941. In the earlier passage, Rabbi Shapiro had argued that, for all the sufferings of the contemporary period, nothing in them overshadowed what Jews had endured in earlier periods of catastrophe, such as the time of the destruction of the Temple. The marginal note from late 1942 (after the Great Deportation of summer 1942, when most Jews were sent to death in Treblinka) acknowledges that the most recent events were indeed different, surpassing in horrific cruelty anything ever previously recorded in Jewish history.

Even when the suffering is caused by a human enemy's hatred and persecution, one must never forget the dignity of Israel, the fact that each Jew is a prince, a child of the Master of the Universe. The evil that the enemy embodies will one day be transformed. Since the *Hasid* recalls the essential teaching of the Baal Shem Tov that the bad is the throne for the good, that evil is only provisional and phenomenal, that in the end Satan will be transformed into a sacred angel whose name encodes the divine, the *Hasid* is secure in the inner knowledge that Israel will triumph over her persecutors—more, that the persecutor can one day become an admirer and a friend.

In contrition and surrender, the *Hasid* fully accepts the reality of their personal suffering, and participate by compassion in the suffering of others. But in

the eyes of faith, the *Hasid* sees through the evil which is the proximate cause of the suffering, and believes that the vector of evil will one day be transformed and transmuted into a powerful vector of the good. In faith, Rabbi Shapiro engages in self-examination and self-improvement. He prays for deliverance. Equally in faith, he protests, imploring God to desist, to turn back, to relent: »But what if deliverance in the hoped-for, concrete sense, refuses to come?«

## 10.5. RELATIONSHIP OVERCOMES SUFFERING

In the end, what remains is relationship. Relationship with the other, compassion for the other, suffering with the other, is itself a kind of redemption. For what is redemption if not the finding of our most fully human self, in the act of *imitatio dei*? It is not just that God suffers with us, for us, because we suffer, but that God is most God when He suffers; God comes most into Godself when He identifies with the people of Israel, with their humanity, their vulnerability, their personal and collective destiny. Similarly, we become most like God when we transcend our own suffering, and participate in the suffering of others, and in the suffering of God.

Rabbi Shapiro observes that in Jewish history, it is often precisely during periods of suffering and persecution that the most profound and powerful sacred texts have emerged. Furthermore, Rabbi Shapiro introduces the notion of suffering itself as a kind of sacred text. Like all texts, suffering captures and conveys the soul of its author; it demands interpretation, which resides as much with the reader as with the writer.

Like all communication, it may be ignored or dismissed. But to interpret is to wrest meaning from the abyss.

## 10.6. WHAT HAS CHANGED?

What has changed in the forty years since I completed my dissertation under Wiesel's direction? What do I know now that I didn't know then, and what would I like to add to what I wrote then?

When I completed my dissertation in 1982, we had a much more limited

picture of Rabbi Shapiro's *oeuvre*. Poland was a member of the Warsaw Pact, veiled behind what was called the Iron Curtain, the Cold War was raging, and there were many obstacles for conducting archival research. I never saw the manuscript of *Esh Kodesh*—neither the original nor a full-color clear copy; my work was done primarily on the basis of the 1960 edition produced in Israel by Rabbi Shapiro's nephew in Tel Aviv. This was certainly a milestone publication that gave access to Rabbi Shapiro's wartime sermons for several generations of readers, and we are eternally grateful to Rabbi Elimelekh Shapiro and his *Hasidim* for their extraordinary contribution.

But recently a new edition has appeared, edited by the Israeli scholar Daniel Reiser. Reiser had access to the original manuscript in Warsaw and was able to make full-color copies of every single page. Thanks to Reiser, we now have a presentation of these wartime *derashos* that tracks and fully captures the author's intentions. Reiser's new edition, *Derashos Mi-Shnos ha-Za'am Sermons from the Years of Rage* (2017) arguably the best critical edition of any *Hasidic* text from any period, allows us to focus on the *derashos* as carefully crafted compositions as they were written, revised, augmented and updated by the author and as they now stand revealed to us with great clarity in Reiser's two volumes. Reiser's meticulous editing affords us nearly unprecedented access to Rabbi Shapiro's carefully laid out structure, revealing luminous creativity from impenetrable darkness. We now see the original manuscript in its rich layering, and then on facing pages we have an eminently readable transcription that preserves the strata while bringing clarity to the homilies in their entirety. Of special interest is the paragraphing that indicates the major sections of the pieces. As Reiser notes, the first edition did not always accurately reflect Rabbi Shapiro's own paragraphing. This is particularly significant in light of the fact that Rabbi Shapiro himself took great care to graphically indicate and preserve his divisional *schema*.

## 10.7. EXAMPLES FOR NEW RESEARCH POSSIBILITIES

For example, let us briefly focus on Rabbi Shapiro's reading of Numbers 20 (*Parashat Hukkat* 5702/June 27, 1942) which is called »Miriam, Moses, the

Divinity of Children: Human Individuation at the Cusp of Persistence and Perishability.« By any measure it is a large and substantial composition, a notable and rather surprising fact in light of the historical circumstances surrounding it. In spite of the chaos and utter collapse of the ghetto at the precipice of annihilation after three crushing years, we have before us not fragmentary notes or haphazard jottings but a complex, cohesive effort reflecting sustained and penetrating deliberation about ultimate theological matters. It was written in the summer of 1942, a time when most of the remaining Jews in the Warsaw ghetto were about to be deported to their deaths, and the violence directed against the defenseless and starving ghetto residents reached a shocking level of intensity. Just then, when the total scope of the catastrophe was coming into view, we find several *derashos* that are the most complex, deeply reflective, movingly written, and tightly constructed in the entire collection. This *derashah* is an extraordinary example of Rabbi Shapiro's power in adversity, astonishing in its originality, emotional and intellectual range, and depth of penetration into the human condition.

Reiser faithfully preserves Rabbi Shapiro's paragraphing, revealing six individual sections. Most paragraphs are indicated by blank spaces in the manuscript, either at the beginning of a new line, or at the end of a line. These sectional divisions were quite important to Rabbi Shapiro, as evidenced by the fact that the open spaces are preserved throughout the stages of revision and markup. That is, the manuscript reveals successive stages of correction, amplification, augmentation and updating—all meticulously presented in the Reiser edition. In order to find room for the additional words, the Rabbi wrote on the margins of his paper and devised a system of letter-keys enabling him to add sizeable new blocks of material at the top or bottom of the sheets. Space was at a premium, and it often took ingenuity to find an appropriate area of sufficient amplitude to hold the added words. With all that, Rabbi Shapiro never compromised the paragraphing schema by utilizing the blank lines in his layout that were readily available to be exploited for their space and that were so acutely needed. (In one case, the Rabbi indicated the end of a section with a markup sign equivalent to our letter ›Z,‹ reproduced faithfully by Reiser.) All this indicates that Rabbi Shapiro considered the design of his *derashah*, its divisions and

overall structure, to be essential to his message, crafted with care and attention to the finest detail.

Rabbi Shapiro writes:

»We are ›children of God‹ [Deut. 14.1]; as God's children, we have a tacit intuition of eternity that can only be realized by having children and seeing them survive and flourish. The intensity of one's identification with one's children emerges from a deep sense of divine nature. We are bearers of eternity and feel impelled to realize and instantiate that capacity. Sin makes us mortal, but our Godly nature is still intact, reflected in the urge to have children [and disciples]. Each individual life will come to closure, yet human beings still leave tracks pointing to eternity, through their progeny.«<sup>16</sup>

And ›progeny‹ here does not only mean one's biological children. Rabbi Shapiro adduces the Talmudic teaching that ›When a person teaches Torah to someone else's child, Scripture accounts it as if they had given birth to that child.‹ He explains that teaching Torah ›is like inter-sefirotic generation: to teach someone Torah is to cultivate and reveal their inner luminosity and holiness.‹ Having a hand in the spiritual growth of another person, especially a child, is as significant as giving birth to biological progeny—in a *kabbalistic* sense, perhaps even more significant.

Rabbi Shapiro evokes the *motif* that schoolchildren are the face of the *Shekhinah*. Teaching—the elicitation of new insight and realization in another person, especially a young person—is the very essence of what it means to create; it is a this—worldly parallel to inter-sefirotic generativity. Nothing partakes of divinity more than assisting in the moral, intellectual and spiritual formation of another person, especially a young person whose physical and spiritual growth are unfolding in tandem. Schoolchildren in their openness, energetic vitality and eagerness to learn, are the embodied personification of divinity's cutting edge. In the faces of children one can discern the leading surface of Godly gene-

<sup>16</sup> Shapiro, *Esh Kodesh*, 182–188; Shapiro, *Sermons from the Years of Rage*, 298–306.

rativity. One's progeny are emissaries to the future, voyagers of the self sent ahead in time to stake out a claim that gestures to eternity. A tragic consequence of the sacredness and vulnerability of children is that they are often the first targets of attack for malevolent actors who wish to harm not just Jews but God's very self. To murder the children of those already slain is to slay the dead a second time. The rabbi writes, »Even now [June 1942], to our great distress, we see that, beyond all the astonishingly sadistic, murderous actions directed against us, the house of Israel, the sadism and murderous actions directed against little boys and girls, exceeds everything. Woe! What has befallen us!«<sup>17</sup>

## 10.8. SACREDNESS OF HUMAN LIFE

Rabbi Shapiro refers to the classic Hasidic teaching of acosmism, the doctrine that denies ultimate reality to the cosmos since everything is God, all existence is the radiance of divinity. Yet Rabbi Shapiro immediately reframes this classic Hasidic doctrine in a manner that encourages the development of an individual spiritual self, countering the temptation to see the idea that there is nothing other than God as a negation of the world, or at least a negation of the value of particulars. If everything is God, as early Hasidic sources emphasize, then one may be prone to see all existence as homogeneous and undifferentiated, without meaningful texture and granularity. In particular, erasure of difference might seem to leave little room for the flourishing of individual human beings. So, consistent with the rest of his corpus and indeed with his entire life's work, Rabbi Shapiro endeavors to show how the omnipresence of God can foster awareness of the uniqueness and inestimable significance of individuals. The mysticism here is not one of negation of the world and absorption into the Absolute but of the centrality and sacredness of unique individuals, especially children. It follows that there is momentous significance in participating in the creation of other persons, whether by biological generativity (procreation) or in formation of mind and spirit by teaching Torah. Divinity is everywhere, but the traces of the divine are to be found in the nodal points where one human being

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<sup>17</sup> Shapiro, *Esh Kodesh*, 147; Shapiro, *Sermons from the Years of Rage*, 304–305.

interacts with another in positive ways, fostering development of the divine face that is the living, growing human person.

Because the human condition is biologically and temporally bounded, the importance of what we leave for others is heightened. We savor the sanctity of the particular the more we grasp the pervading immanence of the Absolute. The mystic maxim of acosmism, ›there is nothing other than divinity,‹ points to the irreducible granularity of existence and to the sacredness of human life, with its shout of joys and, tragically, its desperate calls for help. Divinity emergent in the world is embedded in an ever-propagating distributed network, and divinity's leading edge—the face of the *Shekhinah*—is the face of the child, vulnerable, open, vitally keen to grow and learn.

What the rabbi offers us here is not so much a philosophical or theological system, but rather a devotional stance. It will be recalled that he emphasizes again and again that his goal is not some graspable ultimate truth (that, he avers, remains unreachable) but rather ›*remez le-inyan avodah*‹—pointers, hints for sacred service and devotional practice. He is offering a way to think about the human condition, about birth, growth, death, and the way one person may beneficently influence another by inspiration, mentoring, and teaching.

The horrors of the moment are not divorced from this perspective. They are gazed at directly from within it. That gaze does not diminish their pain, does not make them more palatable or understandable. But it does give the believer a language to give meaningful voice to that pain, to protest, to remain present and engaged, to retain hope, to participate in the pain of others, including the pain of God. Rather than attempting to offer an explanation for what was transpiring, Rabbi Shapiro shuttles between theological polarities, each of which is inadequate in isolation: immanence and transcendence, autonomy and heteronomy, the infinite preciousness and holiness of humans, especially children, versus the reality of horrific attacks aimed specifically at the most vulnerable. Only by shuttling between opposites, only by traversing the places in-between, could Rabbi Shapiro authentically respond to both the extremity of the evil on the one hand, and the windows of blessed possibility that he still perceived on the other. Not a position-paper, not a theodicy, it may well be the single

most profound *Hasidic* teaching delivered and written at the very precipice of destruction.

This is quite an agenda for any single discourse. Coming shortly before the so-called Great Deportation—the nearly total annihilation of the Warsaw ghetto and the brutal removal of its inhabitants to their destruction—I see it as a self-aware reflection on Rabbi Shapiro's own role and the legacy he wished to leave, a spiritual will for posterity.

This one discourse spans ninety-two manuscript lines in six major sections—this is a long, intricately constructed, and carefully edited piece. *Rabbi Shapiro's entire world has collapsed, but he is not crushed by the collapse.* His compass still operates—pointing to the Holy of Holies, pointing to heaven, to earth, to a still blessed future, to bountiful possibility, to children, to disciples who would read and be inspired by his writings. Isaiah the prophet spoke mockingly of those faithless who have made a ›covenant with death.‹ (Isaiah 28.18) Rabbi Shapiro has made a covenant with life, and the covenant is intact, animating, vibrant.

## 10.9. HUMAN INITIATIVE

There is also, towards the end of *Esh Kodesh*, a heightened emphasis on human initiative, what the *kabbalists* call *itaruta de-le-tata*, »arousal from below.« At a time when there appeared to be only silence from heaven, Rabbi Shapiro works to break through the silence by means of a self-generated call to spirit. Since *itaruta de-le-eila*—the gift of grace from above—seemed temporarily to be unavailable, then the *Hasid* would have, through his own initiative and labor, to wrest the spirit of song from the abyss itself. At a time when the enemy was doing all he could to push God out of the world, Rabbi Shapiro knew that it was the *Hasid's* task to awaken the numinous in one's soul, inviting the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to recover Her place in the world.

This posture places the emphasis on human initiative, human creativity, and divine anchoring in the human (Jewish) condition. The suffering of man is transcended by a shift of focus to the suffering of God, and the suffering of God

provokes a move to new birth, new creation, to the eruption of new initiatives out of the abyss.

#### 10.10. THE POWER OF SONGS AND *NIGGUNIM*

This leads me to another major theme that deserves more emphasis than it was given in my dissertation, and that is the role of song, of melody, of *niggun*. Throughout his corpus, Rabbi Shapiro speaks of the power of songs and *niggunim* to lift one's spirit, to break away from total collapse with the buoyancy of resonant notes that are focal points, the *pivots* of the soul. In an earlier work he given specific instructions how to work with *niggunim* to achieve greater interiority:

»Turn your face to the wall, or just close your eyes and reflect again that you stand before the Throne of Glory. You have come with shattered heart to pour out your soul to God in song, the melody that emerges now from the deep recesses of your heart. You will spontaneously sense that your soul emerges with exultation. At first you were singing to your soul, to rouse it from its sleep. But slowly, slowly you feel that your soul has begun to sing on its own. Melody has always been a puzzle to you: what are those tones? What is the significance of tones rising and falling? Why are sounds sometimes extended and at other times short? But, now you begin to see it all: your soul—revealed in voice—carves a path to heaven, and you feel heaven seizing your soul's sigh, grabbing her by the tongue. The *niggun* pulls out your soul's heart and guts, propelled by sound. All your soul's ascents and descents, all her winding ways are etched in sound ... Thus, the *niggun* is embroidered. The *niggun* carries your soul in its innards, to pour it out, to bring you close, as an offering to God. ... When in a group of Hasidim ... don't sing just to hear the sound of your own voice, in the manner of aggressive domination. Rather sing

to uncover and propel your soul upward, in the manner of ›As the musician played, the hand of the Lord came upon him.‹ (2 Kings 3.15).«<sup>18</sup>

Rabbi Shapiro returns to the power of song and melody throughout the wartime sermons.

- In a homily for *Shmini Atzeret*, corresponding to October 24, 1940, he explains that by means of song, the ultimate unity of *din* [cosmic severity] and *rahamim* [divine compassion] is revealed; in the eschaton, all prophets—both the prophets of judgement and admonition, and those of comfort and consolation—with join in a single voice of redemptive love.
- On January 17, 1942, he advanced the startling, provocative image of a musical instrument made out of ashes, capable of lifting up total depression and changing ash into desire for God and transcendence.
- On January 31, 1942, he quoted the earlier master Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev who taught that the biblical Israelites while still enslaved in Egypt already sang a song of redemption, envisioning freedom and thereby hastening that very freedom from enslavement.
- On February 28, 1942, he invoked a Talmudic tradition about Assyrian king Sennacherib's army, the army that had besieged Jerusalem in the days of Hezekiah, but was miraculously decimated due to divine intervention. They were not defeated in battle, rather the Talmud says, they were given to hear the song of the angels, and the angelic choir was so ravishing, so holy, that they all expired. (*Sanhedrin* 95)
- Finally, on July 11, 1942—near the end of the Warsaw Ghetto—he draws upon a Talmudic passage (*Pesahim* 117) to teach that there are times when we must begin with song even if the spirit seems to be absent; we can rouse ourselves and channel holy spirit with song even in seemingly impossible circumstances.

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18 Kalonymos Kalmish Shapiro, *Hakhsharat HaAvrekhim*, 47a–b.

### 10.11. THE NIGGUN IN WIESEL'S WORK

This focus on the power of *niggun* to enable the persecuted to not only survive but to persist and even prevail deserves much more careful study and analysis, and is consistent with the role of *niggun* in the life and teachings of Elie Wiesel. Consider, for example, *The Tale of a Niggun*, recently republished with a new introduction by Wiesel's son Elisha.<sup>19</sup> The *Niggun* is the song of the Jewish people throughout the ages, especially the song of the Baal Shem Tov. While it may not prevent the deaths of martyred Jews, it assures their immortality, it continues and will continue until the end of time.

*Niggun* is meant to foster a softening of the hard edges of the being, an opening of the heart, and an enhanced proximity and shared vision with other beings and with God. On display here are the values of gentleness and openness, and an invitational, non-coercive spirit. The generosity of *niggun* is of its essence: the ability to move without judgement, without comparing one note in the *niggun* to another. All notes participate equally in the gentle unfolding, as well as in the rich holiness of the silence that precedes and follows the notes. We are invited to orient ourselves to this experience each time we sing a *niggun*.

The noble repose, gentle accessibility, and invitational beckoning that characterize the *niggunim* of Koziencice and Piaseczna facilitate the experience of »distinction without a difference.«<sup>20</sup> *Niggun* assists in the process of sensitization to holiness. *Niggun* softens the soul and dissolves calcification. The exfoliation results in joy and *eydelkeit*: nobility of spirit. It is an essential way of becoming aware of the presence of the divine in the world.

In light of all the attention now being shown to the legacy of Rabbi Shapiro by both *Liebhaber* and *Kenner*, by spiritual seekers as well as scholarly academicians—and sometimes they are the same person!—I can say with confidence that studies of the Piaseczner Rebbe are actually just beginning, still in the early stages. So many areas are just starting to be investigated. I would call this the

19 Elie Wiesel, *The Tale of a Niggun*, ed. Elisha Wiesel (New York: Schocken Books, 2020).

20 Kalonymos Kalmish Shapiro, *Derekh Hamelekh* (Jerusalem: 1991), sermon for Parashat Beshalah 5690 [1930], 89–94.

field of »Piaseczner *Hasidism* Studies,« a *Hasidic* mysticism of personalism, a mysticism of pedagogy, of realization of the infinite through the lens of the individual, of the particular. The techniques of this mystical path are already being described by scholars and they deserve even closer study. These include employing the imagination, in the form of *mahshavah hazakah*—intense thought, focusing on specific mental images and scenes, designed to bind one's bodily emotions to a sacred matrix. Most important, Piaseczner Studies will emphasize the role of *niggun* and the importance of community.

Similarly, for Elie Wiesel—his life and his work—I believe that his influence is only starting to be felt.

Now that both my teachers are in the World of Truth, I hear their voices calling to me, calling to us all—urging us to make wise choices; to think, speak and act with nobility grace and kindness; to linger intently with love over what really matters; to cherish curiosity, assume good intentions, to be better listeners, to value friendship, to honor both past and future—learn from revered ancestors as well as from young children, to remember that the first word of the Bible is *Bereshit*—*In the beginning* ...



# 11. ELIE WIESEL'S FIGHT AGAINST ANTISEMITISM. A KEY THEME IN HIS COMPLETE WORK

VALESCA BAERT-KNOLL, ELISABETH MIGGE, REINHOLD BOSCHKI

## 11.1. INTRODUCTION

In Elie Wiesel's first, Yiddish account of his time in the camps, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*,<sup>1</sup> there is a scene at the end that formed the basis for the final section of his later book *Night*,<sup>2</sup> which includes somewhat more detail. The scene describes how most of the former prisoners remained in the barracks for some time after the liberation of the Buchenwald camp, until it became clear where they could go now that they were free. Wiesel depicts this moment:

»Three days after the liberation I became seriously ill: stomach poisoning. They took me to the hospital and the doctors said I was lost. I was in the hospital for two weeks, hovering between life and death. My condition got worse from day to day. One fine day I got up—with my last strength—and went to the mirror hanging on the wall. I wanted to see myself. I had not seen myself since the ghetto. A skeleton looked at me from the mirror. Skin and bones. I saw myself after my death. At that moment, the will to live awoke in me. I raised—involuntarily—my clenched fist and broke the mirror, broke the figure that lived in it. And—I fainted.

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1 Eliezer Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, ed. Mark Turkov and Abraham Mitlberg, *Dos Poylishe Yidntum 117* (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-Farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine, 1956).

2 Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).

From that moment on, my health improved.  
I stayed in bed for a few more days, during which I wrote down an outline, of the book you dear reader hold in your hands.«<sup>3</sup>

The heavily shortened and edited version *Night*, which originated from ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, ends with a look in the mirror. In the Yiddish original, this scene is followed by a decisive reflexive passage that foreshadows Wiesel's struggle against antisemitism in his further life and work:

»But ...

Now, ten years after Buchenwald, I see that the world forgets. Germany is a sovereign state. The German army has risen from the dead. Ilse Koch, the sadist of Buchenwald, has children and is happy.<sup>4</sup> War criminals walk the streets of Hamburg and Munich. The past is wiped away. Forgotten.

Germans and anti-Semites tell and persuade the world that the story of six million Jewish victims is only a legend, and the naive world may believe them, if not today, then tomorrow or the day after tomorrow.

I thought it was necessary to publish in book form the notes I wrote down in Buchenwald.

I am not so naive as to believe that this book will change the course of history and trouble people's consciences.

Nowadays, a book no longer has the power it once had.

Those who remained silent yesterday will remain silent tomorrow.

I often ask myself: now, ten years after Buchenwald:

Was it worth breaking the mirror? Was it worth it?«<sup>5</sup>

The passage reveals Wiesel's fundamental doubts about the efficacy of Holo-

3 Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, 244 [translated by Marion Eichelsdörfer].

4 Wife of camp commandant Karl Otto Koch, who was camp commandant of Buchenwald concentration camp from July 1937 to December 1941.

5 Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, 245 [translated by Marion Eichelsdörfer].

caust memory. Despite the accounts by the survivors of Auschwitz and the other Nazi death camps, the course of history and the world did not change.

Almost forty years—a generation—after the quoted lines were written, Wiesel looked back again and wrote about this passage: »What I said, in 1955, about forgetting, indifference and the fatal ambitions of those who deny the Holocaust, I could repeat unchanged, even today, in 1994.«<sup>6</sup> Here despair is mixed with bitterness: when he and the other survivors left the camp gates behind them, they had the irrepressible hope that the public awareness of this catastrophe would shake up the world, so that there could never again be hostility or hatred against Jews. But the disappointment of this hope was not long in coming. As Wiesel later wrote, if someone had told the survivors, back when they were liberated, that they would again have to fight against antisemitism, and worse, that they would have to prove that they had actually suffered and the victims of the Holocaust had really been murdered, »we would have had no strength to raise our eyes from the ruins.«<sup>7</sup>

But the survivors were convinced that if they told their story, the world would change. However, they were thoroughly disappointed in this belief, because despite their tireless testimony, everything remained the same: antisemitism revived, or more precisely, it never disappeared, and it even intensified in many parts of the world and society—including the Internet in modern times.<sup>8</sup> The survivors' impression was that no one wanted to hear their story:

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6 Elie Wiesel, *Tous les fleuves vont à la mer : Mémoires* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 413. Translated by the authors and quoted from the original French: »... Ce que J'ai dit, en 1955, sur l'oubli, l'indifférence et les néfastes ambitions des négationnistes, je pourrais le répéter, sans y toucher, aujourd'hui, en 1994.« In the English version this part hasn't been translated and is missing, cf. Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).

7 Elie Wiesel, *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, ed. Irving Abrahamson (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), vol. I, 216.

8 Cf. Monika Schwarz-Friesel, »Antisemitismus 2.0—die kulturelle Konstante Judenhass und ihre Kontinuität im Internet,« in *Schule als Spiegel der Gesellschaft: Antisemitismen erkennen und handeln*, ed. Julia Bernstein, Marc Grimm and Stefan Müller, *Antisemitismus und Bildung 2* (Frankfurt/M.: Wochenschau Verlag, 2022) 147–170, 147.

»In the beginning they [the survivors] tried to raise their voices—however shyly, however clumsily. In vain. People turned away, and shrugging their shoulders, muttered, »Poor devils, they are exaggerating, for they want our pity.«<sup>9</sup>

They turned backs and continued living in the world, and with it, the eternal hatred of the Jews resumed its usual course.

All of Wiesel's other statements about antisemitism, as well as more broadly about racism, hatred and violation of human dignity in various parts of the world, stand in this dialectical tension. The hope that people would be stirred and activated by the message of remembering the Holocaust and that they would henceforth commit themselves to human rights, and fight against racism and hostility to Jews<sup>10</sup>, contrasts with the perception of the reality of continuing antisemitism. The difference between real world events and his appeal to humanity triggers in Wiesel a repeatedly described ambivalence, which already surfaces in his first work through the programmatic question of whether »it [was] worth breaking the mirror?<«<sup>11</sup> He remained committed to human dignity and against antisemitism: »I [Elie Wiesel] belong, after all, to a generation that has learned that whatever the question, indifference and resignation are not the answer.«<sup>12</sup>

## 11.2. TEXTUAL FINDINGS FROM WIESEL'S COMPLETE WORKS

The complex structure of the complete works, which include more than 50 books, in addition to numerous articles in magazines and newspapers not included in the books, a large number of interviews, speeches, radio or television

9 Elie Wiesel, »A Plea for the Survivors,« in *A Jew Today*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Vintage, 1979), 233.

10 For an understanding of antisemitism as hostility toward Jews, see Julia Bernstein, *Antisemitismus an Schulen in Deutschland: Befunde—Analysen—Handlungsoptionen* (Weinheim, Basel: Juventa, 2020), 21, 36–37.

11 Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, 245 [translated by Marion Eichelsdörfer].

12 Elie Wiesel, *Open Heart*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 73.

addresses, video messages, notes, and other still unpublished testimonies in a range of archives, especially the Elie Wiesel Archive at Boston University, contain countless references to an overarching theme that was imposed on Wiesel from the outside since his childhood: the struggle against antisemitism. His two major autobiographies<sup>13</sup> from the 1990s show that antisemitism is a key issue that accompanied him throughout his life—from his childhood days in Sighet, Hungary (nowadays Romania), through the time of his deportation, to his journalistic activities in the postwar period, when he had to repeatedly address anti-Semitic incidents,<sup>14</sup> to his books and his struggle for human dignity around the world, which is particularly documented in his essay work.

The following textual findings exemplify numerous references to this theme in the four major genres of Wiesel's work: autobiographies; novels and dramas; biblical-Talmudic-Hasidic writings;<sup>15</sup> and essay collections. His autobiographical writings are, of course, permeated with the theme of Jew-hatred and Jew-hostility. Looking at his fictional or autofictional<sup>16</sup> work, a few select passages

13 Wiesel, *All Rivers*; Elie Wiesel, *And the Sea Is Never Full: Memoirs, 1969–*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Schocken Books, 1999).

14 Compilations of his articles in the Yiddish-language journal »Forwärts« of the 1950s and 60s demonstrate the importance of the topic, with dozens of articles directly referring to antisemitism: Amanda Miryem-Khaye Seigel, »Elie Wiesel at the Forverts: A Bibliography,« IN GEVEB A Journal of Yiddish Studies, March 23, 2023, accessed May 27, 2023, <https://ingeveb.org/pedagogy/elie-wiesel-at-the-forverts-a-bibliography>; Amanda Miryem-Khaye Seigel, »Elie Wiesel Forverts Datasheet«, accessed May 27, 2023, <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1BI2fHv65R3KG1CYACUUhKtYQ-tEsdYG-zqkbXOb6TYU/htmlview#gid=1450730597>.

15 Even in the biblical Talmudic Hasidic reinterpretations, passages can be identified that have Jew-hatred and the memory of Auschwitz as their theme. Wiesel writes in one of his most important essays, »When I write about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, when I keep alive the memory of Rabbi Jochanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Akiba, it is in order to understand them better in the shadow of Auschwitz.« Elie Wiesel, »Why I Write,« in *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences* (New York: Summit Books, 1990), 19.—In order to limit the scope of this paper, we will not discuss this part of the work specifically.

16 On the proposal of an autofictional reading of Wiesel's work, see the contribution by Valesca Baert-Knoll in this volume. For further reading, see Serge Doubrovsky, Jacques Lecarme and Philippe Lejeune, eds., *Autofictions & Cie* (Paris: Université Paris, 1993).

can stand paradigmatically for other novels and dramas. The confrontation with antisemitism is most clearly articulated in his essayistic writings. Wiesel gave several speeches explicitly addressing this problem, and published articles as well as essays on the subject. These examples will emphasize his perspective on the historically and presently omnipresent phenomenon of antisemitism.

### 11.3. ANTISEMITISM AS AN EXPERIENCE IN WIESEL'S CHILDHOOD

Born and raised in Sighet, Elie Wiesel, like all Eastern European Jews, experienced hostility toward Jews as a child.<sup>17</sup> In his autobiographical accounts, he writes that the general, unstable world situation, which he learned about from his father's conversations with guests at the table, caused him little concern, because it seemed to be none of his business.

»The local situation, on the other hand, did scare me. When the anti-Semitic Iron Guard<sup>18</sup> raised its head, we lowered ours. Slogans would sprout on the walls: ›Jews to Palestine!‹ Thugs, their faces twisted with hate, would assault Jews in the street, tearing at their beards and side

17 Overview of historical background: Trond Berg Eriksen, Håkon Harket and Einhart Lorenz, »Osteuropa in der Zeit zwischen den Weltkriegen,« in *Judenhass: Die Geschichte des Antisemitismus von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, trans. Daniela Stilzebach (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019), 425–446 (further reading there); Wolfgang Benz, ed., *Handbuch des Antisemitismus: Judenfeindschaft in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), vol. 1 (here esp. the entries on Hungary, Romania, Belarus, Ukraine, Poland).

18 A brutal anti-Semitic fighting organization active in Romania from about 1927. See Benz, *Handbuch des Antisemitismus*, 69, 296. This terrorist group was also active in Transylvania, Elie Wiesel's home region: »With the founding of the Romanian Legionary Movement (›Legion of the Archangel Gabriel, renamed ›Iron Guard‹ in 1930), violence takes on a new dimension: In the Maramureş region in 1930–1933, numerous attacks with fatalities are recorded, in many localities the Legionnaires devastated stores and synagogues, in Borşa they set fire to 140 houses.« *Ibid.*, 329.

curls<sup>19</sup>. The Kuzists<sup>20</sup>, as they called themselves, were the Romanian version of Nazis. Savages thirsting for Jewish blood, they would launch pogroms on the slightest pretext. ›Don't go to *heder* today,‹ my worried father would say. My sisters often didn't go to school. On those days the store was bolted shut, and regular customers were escorted in through the living room. At the slightest warning we rushed to the cellar, [...].«<sup>21</sup>

In such situations, fear was omnipresent, because Jews had no protection, not even from the police, who were themselves often anti-Jewish and sometimes took part in such actions. The old anti-Semitic stereotypes dating back to the Middle Ages were revived; Jews were even accused of ritual murder.<sup>22</sup> In a sense, anti-Semitic outrages and accusations were normal for the youthful Wiesel. On the high Christian holidays, it was better to make oneself invisible as a Jew, especially on Good Friday. Threats and beatings, as well as anti-Jewish narratives of host desecration, well poisoning and the murder of Jesus Christ were common during such days.

Even then, Wiesel asked about the reasons for and the meaning of the hatred towards Jews. His teachers told him the stories of the Jewish people since biblical times, which are always about persecution, expulsion, annihilation and, above all, about the fact that Jews remained faithful to the covenant with their God despite all suffering. Antisemitism, according to the widespread interpretation in the Jewish tradition, was seen as a test. But these answers did not convince Wiesel then or later:

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19 *Payot*.

20 Cuzists or Cuzists: supporters of the anti-Semitic »League of National-Christian Defense« (Liga Apărării Național Creștine, LANC), founded by the nationalist and anti-Semite Alexandru Constantin Cuza; see Andrea Kaltenbrunner, »Multiethnischer Antisemitismus: Ein Fall an Rumäniens östlicher Peripherie in der Zwischenkriegszeit. Königstreu, antisemitisch und multiethnisch: die Liga der national-christlichen Verteidigung,« *Der Standard*, 23 September 2020, accessed May 27, 2023, <https://www.derstandard.de/story/2000120151564/>.

21 Wiesel, *All Rivers*, 18.

22 Cf. *ibid*.

»To this day, half a century later, these are open questions, and I still cannot answer them. And just as the hatred that continues to be directed at the Jewish people never leaves my mind, its survival never ceases to amaze me.«<sup>23</sup>

References to the antisemitic measures in Wiesel's childhood, the time before his deportation, can also be found at the beginning of his autobiographical accounts of the concentration and death camps.

#### 11.4. AUSCHWITZ—ABYSS AND CULMINATION OF ANTISEMITISM

»And then, one day all foreign Jews were expelled from Sighet.«<sup>24</sup> Wiesel recounts their deportation in the early 1940s, as they also affected his teacher Moyshe-the-Schammes, who introduced him to Kabbalah, the mysterious books of Jewish mysticism. The measures were an expression of the antisemitic mood among the population and the authorities. The intention was to banish as many Jews as possible from Hungary, since they were allegedly taking jobs away from Christian-Hungarian citizens. Years later, in the spring of 1944, fascism and antisemitism were elevated to the status of Hungary's state policy. A relative who had returned from Budapest told the Wiesel family:

»The Jews of Budapest live in an atmosphere of fear and terror. Anti-Semitic acts take place every day, in the streets, on the trains. The

23 Ibid., 33.

24 Wiesel, *Night*, 6; Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, 7 [translated by Marion Eichelsdörfer]. However, not only Jewish refugees from neighboring countries fell victim to the decree for the expulsion of foreign Jews, but often also Hungarian Jews who could not legitimize themselves with papers. Whole communities were deported in this way because the local authorities wanted to get rid of them. However, there is a difference between the historical account and Wiesel's recollection. He dates the enactment of the law to 1942, but it went into effect in July 1941. (We thank Marion Eichelsdörfer for these historical references).

Fascists attack Jewish stores, synagogues. The situation is becoming very serious ...«<sup>25</sup>

When the German Wehrmacht overran Hungary, all measures were immediately taken to deport the Hungarian Jews: Sighet was no exception. In addition to curfews and the obligation to hand over all valuables, the Jewish population also had to wear the yellow star on their clothing. Wiesel quotes his father as saying placatingly, in order to avoid alarming the family and the Jewish community further: »The yellow star? So what? It's not lethal ...«<sup>26</sup> Wiesel immediately follows this quote with a respectful comment in which he contrasts his father's death as a result of the Nazis' policy of extermination with this memory: »Poor father! Of what then did you die?«<sup>27</sup> What begins with resentment, exclusion and disenfranchisement ends with deportation and systematic murder: Wiesel's father dies in the Buchenwald concentration camp. Throughout his life, Wiesel argues that anti-Jewish actions do not stop at individual measures, such as the decree that required the presentation of a yellow star for identification, but rather, that they ultimately lead to the will to extermination.

The books ... *un di velt hot geshvign* and *Night* attest to this. They reveal the systematic dehumanization of the Jewish prisoners in the National Socialist death camps—a consequence of the millennia-old anti-Judaism and antisemitism of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, which eventually became the core ideology of National Socialism.<sup>28</sup>

Wiesel's testimonies speak for themselves, but the dehumanization of the Jews is particularly highlighted in some places in the texts. After the inhumane and absolutely degrading deportation in cattle cars, the prisoners lost not only

25 Wiesel, *Night*, 9.

26 Ibid., 11.

27 Ibid.

28 For an overview see for example: Peter Schäfer, *Kurze Geschichte des Antisemitismus*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (München: Beck, 2022); Trond Berg Eriksen, Håkon Harket and Einhart Lorenz, *Judenhass: Die Geschichte des Antisemitismus von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, trans. Daniela Stilz bach (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019); David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: Eine andere Geschichte des westlichen Denkens* (München: Beck, 2015).

their last belongings and their families upon arrival at the death camp, but also any form of human identity and individuality. Infamously, the prisoners in Auschwitz were given numbers instead of names: »I became A-7713. From then on, I had no other name.«<sup>29</sup>

Shortly before the Auschwitz camp was abandoned by the Nazis in the face of the approaching Soviet army, the forced prisoners had to clean the barracks: »For the liberating army«« the block elder yelled. »Let them know that here lived men and not pigs.« Wiesel sarcastically responds to this scene: »So we were men after all?«<sup>30</sup>

The dehumanization and extermination began with words: with ideology, propaganda and agitation. What Hitler wrote down in the 1920s and Alfred Rosenberg formulated as core National Socialist ideology, became a deadly reality for European Jews. Wiesel quotes an unnamed fellow prisoner who said—also sarcastically—»I have more confidence in Hitler than in anyone else. He is the only one who has kept his promises, all the promises he made to the Jewish people.«<sup>31</sup> Wiesel's testimony is an expression of this fatal culmination of antisemitism.

### 11.5. POGROMS AND HOSTILITY TOWARDS JEWS IN WIESEL'S LITERARY WORKS

Wiesel's novels and dramas are not fictional Holocaust literature, since throughout his life he strongly rejected any literarization of the Holocaust.<sup>32</sup> Most of the protagonists in Wiesel's novels are either survivors of the camps or their

29 Wiesel, *Night*, 42.

30 *Ibid.*, 84.

31 *Ibid.*, 81.

32 See Wiesel's programmatic demarcation of the term Holocaust literature and the following criticism of any literary-fictional Holocaust representation: »A Holocaust literature? The very term is a contradiction. [...] A novel about Auschwitz is not a novel, or it is not about Auschwitz. [...] The abyss between the survivor's memory and its reflection in words, including his own, is unbridgeable. [...] Auschwitz signifies death—total, absolute death—of man and of mankind, of reason and of the heart, of language and of the senses.« Elie Wiesel, »A Plea for the Survivors,« 234.

children. They desperately try to come to terms with the horrific memories and attempt to start a new life, which they usually fail to do.

In Wiesel's novels, antisemitic actions and themes are omnipresent, since most of the tragic, anti-heroes are haunted by their memories, often unable to recount them at all or only fragmentarily. In the early novels *Dawn*<sup>33</sup> and *Day*<sup>34</sup> the dead of the death camps are ever-present as shadows and ghosts,<sup>35</sup> but the survivors cannot put their experiences into words. Elisha, the protagonist in Wiesel's first novel, is recruited by Gad, a resistance fighter, to fight in Palestine against the British and for the establishment of the state of Israel. Gad tells him about the heroic struggle against the occupiers: »This was the first story I had ever heard in which the Jews were not the ones to be afraid. Until this moment I had believed that the mission of the Jews was to represent the trembling of history rather than the wind which made it tremble.«<sup>36</sup>

Jewish history, which until that point has consisted of hatred of Jews and persecution of the Jewish population, finally has the chance to turn around. Elisha agrees, but the change from the role of victim to that of perpetrator becomes an existential catastrophe for him. Overcoming antisemitism by switching roles, according to the plot of this novel, fails. The attempt to confront indifference to hatred of Jews, in which the main character in *The Town Beyond the Wall*<sup>37</sup> engages when he confronts the indifferent bystander who was watching the deportations, similarly ends in failure. Revenge in the fight against Jew-hatred, as told in the novel *The Fifth Son*<sup>38</sup>, also falls short, as does the descent into madness in the novel *Twilight*<sup>39</sup>.

Could silence put an end to pogroms and antisemitic hatred? Elie Wiesel

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33 Elie Wiesel, *Dawn* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).

34 Elie Wiesel, *Day* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).

35 See the contribution by Julien Jeusette in this volume.

36 Wiesel, *Dawn*, 15.

37 Elie Wiesel, *The Town Beyond the Wall*, trans. Stephen Becker (New York: Schocken Books, 1982)

38 Elie Wiesel, *The Fifth Son*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Schocken Books, 1998).

39 Elie Wiesel, *Twilight* (New York: Penguin, 2013).

plays out this motif in the novel *The Oath*<sup>40</sup>. In *The Oath*, set in a town in nineteenth century Eastern Europe, the Jewish and Christian populations live largely peacefully together until one day a Christian boy disappears without a trace. The culprits are quickly identified and blamed as the town's Jews, who are blamed for committing a ritual murder. Before a deadly pogrom breaks out, the Jewish community makes an oath to itself: if anyone should survive the massacre by chance, they must never speak about it. After centuries of speaking and remembering the sufferings of the Jewish tradition, a new strategy is now employed in the fight against Jew-hatred: silence. In the end, this path also fails. The main character, who survives the pogrom as a child, cannot overcome the antisemitism of history through silence either.

Pogroms are a frequent motif in Wiesel's literature; they stand for the millennia-old history of hatred against Jews, for example in the drama *The Trial of God*,<sup>41</sup> where two pogroms frame the theme of the plot: an earlier pogrom that had taken place before the events of the play and a new pogrom that threatening the town. Pogroms against Jews are also mentioned in *Twilight*<sup>42</sup> and in *A Beggar in Jerusalem*<sup>43</sup>, whereas the novel *The Testament*<sup>44</sup> is entirely devoted to Stalinist antisemitism, which was characterized by anti-Jewish »purges«: systematic murder of Jewish intellectuals, and suppression of Jewish culture and religion.

But Wiesel does not leave the reader in despair or hopelessness. His style is characterized by a positive perspective. In his early novel *The Gates of the Forest*, for example, the main character Gregor recalls a scene from his childhood. He had to walk a long way to school alone and knew that an antisemitic gang was lying in wait for him:

»The gang thinks it's funny: beating up unaccompanied Jewish chil-

40 Elie Wiesel, *The Oath* (New York: Random House, 1973).

41 Elie Wiesel, *The Trial of God* (New York: Random House, 1979).

42 Wiesel, *Twilight*.

43 Elie Wiesel, *A Beggar in Jerusalem* (New York: Schocken Books, 1997).

44 Elie Wiesel, *The Testament* (New York: Summit Books, 1981).

dren, humiliating them, forcing them to drink mud. It's been going on for centuries, it's become more than a habit: a tradition, a law.«<sup>45</sup>

Just before the gang strikes, however, he is joined by another Jewish boy who has no fear and is therefore called »Leib the Lion.« The antisemites pounce on them, shouting: »Filthy Jews, filthy Jews, go, go off to Palestine, you killed Christ, you shall see what it costs to kill Christ, you shall pay for his blood, his sacrificial death.«<sup>46</sup>

Here the author deliberately takes up old Christian anti-Jewish motifs. The narrator comments that the members of the gang would probably have learned these words at school, at home and in church. They pounce on the two boys, but Leib does indeed fight like a lion. Gregory witnesses how he does not give in, does not give up and does not give the attackers any space. He sees in him the spirit of Yehuda HaMakkabi, the biblical resistance fighter and insurgent against the Romans. Gregory fights alongside Leib and they beat back the gang. For the first time, the main character of the novel feels that it is worthwhile to stand up to the haters of the Jews. In the fight against the antisemites, the main things that help are vigilance, friendship, solidarity and the courage not to let them get you down. These motifs also recur in Wiesel's speeches, articles and essays.

#### 11.6. FIGHT AGAINST ANTISEMITISM IN WIESEL'S SPEECHES AND ESSAYS

Wiesel passionately denounces every form of hostility to Jews in speeches or essays, and raises awareness against antisemitic thought and action. This can be categorized into a few main themes:

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45 Elie Wiesel, *The Gates of the Forest* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 40.

46 Ibid., 42.

### 11.6.1. ANTISEMITISM IN THE SOVIET UNION

In the early 1950s, Elie Wiesel first heard about state-controlled antisemitism in the Soviet Union.<sup>47</sup> In the postwar period, Stalinist antisemitism was reported in the West,<sup>48</sup> but continued after Stalin's death. Wiesel took note of newspaper reports and attended conferences where the fate of Soviet Jews was discussed.<sup>49</sup> In 1965, he made his first trip to the Soviet Union to assess the situation of the Jewish population first hand.<sup>50</sup> He published his report on it in the book »Les Juifs du Silence,« which was published in German under the title »Die Juden in der UdSSR. Antisemitism in the Soviet Empire.«<sup>51</sup>

Wiesel, however, saw himself less as an objective reporter who analyzes the situation and its political background, and more as a »witness«<sup>52</sup> who gives his experiences a subjective literary expression. He did not speak to official representatives or well-known personalities, from whom he expected only the same old phrases, but sought out the anonymous Jews, and celebrated their services on Shabbat and the High Holidays. In doing so, he experienced a contradictory, dichotomous atmosphere: on the one hand, the omnipresent fear of spying and persecution by the Soviet system, the state suppression of Jewish culture and religion and the feeling of abandonment and loneliness because the Western world and even Western Jewish communities were not interested in their fate.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, Wiesel learned about the courage of desperate individuals

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47 Cf. Wiesel, *All Rivers*, 218–220. Wiesel was working as a translator into Yiddish at the time; his journalistic career was still in its infancy.—For the historical background, see: Matthias Vetter, »Soviet Union,« in *Handbuch des Antisemitismus: Judenfeindschaft in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Wolfgang Benz (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), vol. 1, 337–345.

48 Cf. Wiesel, *All Rivers*, 250–251.

49 Cf. *ibid.*, 505.

50 Cf. *ibid.*, 519–536.

51 Elie Wiesel, *Les Juifs du Silence* (Paris: Seuil, 1966); engl. edition: Elie Wiesel, *The Jews of Silence: A Personal Report on Soviet Jewry* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011).

52 Wiesel, *The Jews of Silence*, 5.

53 Cf. *ibid.*, 27–29, 79–89.

and groups to live their Jewishness despite state repression, to celebrate Jewish religious festivals and even to live them publicly.<sup>54</sup> He was particularly impressed by the Jewish youth who defied antisemitism and stood by their Jewishness all the more despite anti-Jewish actions.<sup>55</sup>

The message he took away from his trip was: »Go home and tell! [...] You must not forget anything, you must tell everything.«<sup>56</sup> The encounters with the oppressed Jews in the Soviet Union at the time can be interpreted as a decisive marker for Wiesel's future path, since from the 1960s he became committed to fighting antisemitism and oppression of other populations all over the world. He wanted to break the silence of the Jews, to give them a voice, since they were deprived of it. Looking back at this experience, he wrote: it »became a turning point in my life«<sup>57</sup>. Immediately after his return, he raised his voice against Soviet antisemitism at conferences, in articles, essays and books. Later, as mentioned above, he dealt with the fate of Soviet Jews in a literary way in his novel *The Testament*.<sup>58</sup> The fight against antisemitism henceforth remained a key theme in his work.

#### 11.6.2. ANTISEMITISM AS A WORLDWIDE PHENOMENON

Wiesel characterizes antisemitism as a worldwide phenomenon that runs through human history and different cultures.<sup>59</sup> In current times, hostility against Jews is flaring up in new ways in many countries around the world, despite the Holocaust and survivors' attempts to keep the memory alive. But Wiesel questions the category »new.« Is antisemitic thinking really new? Have patterns of hostility towards Jews not remained the same over the centuries

54 Cf. *ibid.*, 33–42, 53–66.

55 Cf. *ibid.*, 76–78.

56 *Ibid.*, 14.

57 Wiesel, *All Rivers*, 365. Quotation in the original French: »me permettra d'écrire une nouvelle page dans le livre de ma vie,« Wiesel, *Tous les fleuves*, 484.

58 Wiesel, *The Testament*.

59 On the following in particular: Elie Wiesel, »The new Anti-Semitism,« in *Against Silence*, vol. I, 376–381.

and millennia? As already told in the Bible, in the Book of Esther among other places, there were already attempts to exterminate the Jewish people centuries before our era. The Talmud, too, reports of acts of hostility against the Jews, for example, during the Roman occupation of Palestine. Some of the writings of the church fathers, as Wiesel notes, read like the speeches of Streicher, the editor of the Nazi inflammatory paper *Der Stürmer*, and Goebbels, the Nazi minister of propaganda.<sup>60</sup> Other writings, also by theologians, are so ridiculous in his eyes as to be hard to believe. Wiesel cites an example from the sixteenth century that states that Jews can be recognized by their smell and especially by their devilish tail, which, however, is invisible. The text further asserts, that Jewish men menstruate. One cannot believe, writes Wiesel, that thoughts like these were taken seriously by those in power, even in the Vatican.

But today's antisemites also revive the old prejudices by using, among other things, world conspiracy theories and the irrational claim that Jews ally themselves with Satan. In current antisemitic hate sheets and Internet forums, the same distorting depictions of Jewish people can be found as in earlier eras, for example, identifying Jews with the devil, money and wealth, now communicated through digital media such as GIFs or memes.

Wiesel identifies one of the reasons for the worldwide hatred against Jews in the envy of other nations and religions for a religion and culture that has not ceased to exist despite all opposition and oppression.<sup>61</sup> The very existence of the Jewish community incites enemies to increase their dislike and hatred. Antisemitism, Wiesel concludes, seems to exist always and everywhere, even when there are no longer any Jews in a country: for then they are imagined, and the hatred for them remains unbroken.

### 11.6.3. GUILT AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF CHRISTIANITY

Elie Wiesel refers repeatedly to the role of Christianity in the emergence and spread of antisemitism. Reading what Christians have written about Jews, Wie-

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60 Cf. *ibid.*, 377.

61 Cf. *ibid.*, 380.

sel concludes that Christianity helped pave the way to the Holocaust.<sup>62</sup> For him, the origins of the Holocaust are deeply embedded in the history of the Christian Church and the anti-Judaism long espoused there. From the writings of the church fathers, through the medieval pamphlets against Jews to the late Martin Luther's hatred of Jews, rejection and contempt runs through Christian history. Jews were portrayed as Christ-killers, despised by God—they were replaced by God's new covenant with Christians and thus became historically superfluous.

Because of its inherited antisemitism, Christianity also fundamentally failed in the face of modern racial antisemitism and National Socialism.<sup>63</sup> Christian preachers and fanatics laid the groundwork for the dehumanization of Jews and the crimes of the Holocaust. It is also disturbing that most of the murderers under Nazism were baptized Christians.

Nevertheless, Wiesel clearly differentiates between Christianity before and after the Holocaust, because he does not condemn today's Christianity. He knows very well that Pope John XXIII established a completely new theology and policy towards Judaism. This can be seen in the documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), which demonstrate that Christian theology today actively faces up to its history, and express the Church's guilt in light of the past. Throughout his life Wiesel maintained intensive relationships and friendships with Christians.<sup>64</sup> For him, this does not change the fact that the historical, and especially the Christian, roots of antisemitism and anti-Judaism must be clearly identified and eradicated.

#### 11.6.4. ANTISEMITISM, REVISIONISM, ANTI-ZIONISM

According to Wiesel, antisemitism and historical revisionism go hand in hand. Anyone who denies the Holocaust is marked by hostility or hatred of Jews from

62 Cf. *ibid.*, 33.

63 Cf. *ibid.*, 34–35, see also 210, 378.

64 For example, Robert McAfee Brown, Harry James Cargas, Cardinal Lustiger (Paris), Sr. Carol Rittner, and many more.

the outset.<sup>65</sup> Just as often, today, anti-Zionism is paired with antisemitism.<sup>66</sup> All too often, anti-Israel propagandists are anti-Zionists in name only. They oppose the state of Israel and its actions, but at heart, Wiesel argues, they are deeply antisemitic and despise all Jews, whether in Israel, Europe, or the rest of the world. Wiesel advises to think critically at the ideologies of revisionism and anti-Zionism and to ask for the real reasons why people wanted to rewrite history or criticized the Jewish state, respectively. Unmasking the motivation reveals the true face of antisemites.

#### 11.6.5. ANTISEMITISM AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF WESTERN CULTURE

In Wiesel's view, Auschwitz was not only the result of Nazi political agitations and actions, but the consequence of a Western cultural tradition in which antisemitism plays a crucial role. The Holocaust the culmination of centuries of Christian antisemitism and irrational hatred.<sup>67</sup> The entire European culture bears responsibility for dehumanizing the Jews. Antisemitic tendencies can be found even in the writings of enlightened thinkers such as Kant, Fichte and Voltaire, or poets such as Goethe. According to Wiesel, they are also at the root of the crimes in Treblinka. These great philosophers and humanists are to blame for what ultimately happened, because they believed they could reconcile hatred for Jews and love for man, and preach emancipation, the idea of equality and the importance of truth and justice, while at the same time being fanatically antisemitic or superstitious towards Jews.

Most Nazis, even the worst murderers and members of the notorious Einsatzkommandos or the Wannsee Conference, were educated people, some of them holders of academic degrees in philosophy, sociology, biology, medicine,

65 Here and for the following: Elie Wiesel, *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, ed. Irving Abrahamson (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), vol. III, 174.

66 Cf. *ibid.*, 244.

67 Here and for the following: Elie Wiesel, *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, ed. Irving Abrahamson (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), vol. II, 69.—On this section, see also: Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaismus*; Samuel Salzborn, *Antisemitismus als negative Leitidee der Moderne: Sozialwissenschaftliche Theorien im Vergleich* (Frankfurt/M.: Campus, 2010).

psychiatry, art or theology. Their deep involvement in the height of Western culture, Wiesel argued, suggests that this culture cannot be rendered innocent. The implication of European culture in the action of the Nazis was complete when well-known thinkers like Heidegger remained university professors and rectors and bought into the ideology.

#### 11.6.6. CONSPIRACY MYTHS AS THE CORE OF ANTISEMITISM

In his public treatise on the so-called »Protocols of the Elders of Zion,« an antisemitic pamphlet that emerged in the early twentieth century and is clearly forged, Wiesel emphasizes the centrality of conspiracy myths to the rise and spread of antisemitic ideas.<sup>68</sup> Conspiratory lies accompanied antisemitic hatred since ancient times and were also used in the Christian Middle Ages to explain plagues, deaths, crop failures and starvation. Jews were to blame for everything that went wrong in the world, for everything inexplicable and terrible; within these conspiracy fantasies they were scapegoats—projection surfaces for everything negative.

As Wiesel discusses, one of the most dangerous variants of antisemitic myths formed in fascist-nationalist thought during the post-World War I period in Germany. Time and again, the suggestion was made that ›world Jewry‹ was behind Germany's defeat and the ›humiliation‹ of the Versailles treaty. The National Socialists drew much of their political capital from this myth during their struggle to crush the democratic Weimar Republic.

Likewise, Wiesel continues, contemporary conspiracy theories blame Jews for political events ranging from the assassination of Kennedy to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which are alleged to be the doing of the Israeli secret service, the Mossad. Why, he asks, do such myths keep cropping up in relation to hatred of Jews? Wiesel suspects that people seek simple explanations for the complex reality of a world that has become inscrutable. They find them,

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68 Cf. Elie Wiesel »Protocols of Infamy: A Study of Anti-Semitic Forgery and Hatred,« lecture at the Jewish Cultural Association 92ndY, 92Y: Elie Wiesel Archive, September 26, 2006, 59 min., 15 sec., accessed May 27, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFUheqthD48>.

for example, in the simple division of the world into good and evil. According to Wiesel, Jews were always seen to represent the forces of evil, secretly ruling the world and at the same time seeking to destroy it. Current analyses of conspiracy theories and their appeal certainly confirm Wiesel's approach.<sup>69</sup>

#### 11.6.7. EVERY FORM OF ANTISEMITISM LEADS TO AUSCHWITZ

Wiesel sums up his analysis of antisemitism: »Anti-Semitism in any form inevitably means Auschwitz.«<sup>70</sup> Anyone who expresses antisemitism, or even entertains antisemitic thoughts, sides with the enemies and haters of Jews throughout history, including Eichmann, Himmler, and Hitler. »Scientific abstractions, social and economic assertions, nationalism, xenophobia, religious fanaticism, racism, mass hysteria, and above all anti-Semitism, whether religious or social—all these forms of hatred found their final expression at Auschwitz.«<sup>71</sup>

#### 11.6.8. EDUCATION AND MEMORY AS THE KEY TO FIGHTING ANTISEMITISM

There is only one consequence in the face of antisemitism: it is never too late to fight.<sup>72</sup> Through education and remembrance, we can be made aware of how dangerous every form of antisemitism is. In order to make people aware, remembrance is fundamental for the survivor. At the end of his treatise on antisemitic conspiracy theories, Wiesel contemplates, »So what should we do? I don't

69 See e.g. Michael Blume, *Verschwörungsmymthen—woher sie kommen, was sie anrichten, wie wir ihnen begegnen können* (Ostfildern: Patmos, 2020); Michael Blume, *Warum der Antisemitismus uns alle bedroht: Wie neue Medien alte Verschwörungsmymthen befeuern* (Ostfildern: Patmos, 2019); Michael Blume, »Verschwörungsmymthen—Warum der Antisemitismus nicht ›irgend ein‹ Rassismus ist,« *Zeitschrift für christlich-jüdische Begegnung im Kontext*, no. 3 (2018): 225–233; Michael Butter, *Nichts ist, wie es scheint: Über Verschwörungstheorien* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2018).

70 Wiesel, *Against Silence*, vol. I, 381.

71 Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences* (New York: Summit Books, 1990), 242.

72 Cf. Wiesel, *Against Silence*, vol. I, 133.

really know. I don't know the answer to essential questions, but I do know, and I repeat it so often: that whatever the answer, education must be its major component.«<sup>73</sup> In spite of everything, Wiesel points out in his last publication before his death, »I still believe in man in spite of man.«<sup>74</sup>

In Wiesel's complete works, it becomes clear that remembrance of the Holocaust is a preoccupation with, and a form of struggle against, antisemitism. If the Holocaust is remembered today, all forms of hostility and hatred towards Jews now and then must be remembered. Holocaust remembrance and the fight against antisemitism are deeply intertwined in Wiesel's work.<sup>75</sup> This includes, first and foremost, listening to victims' and survivors' testimonies.<sup>76</sup>

### 11.7. CONCLUSION

With this focus, we believe Wiesel's work and message is highly transferable to fighting antisemitism in all areas of society. For example, the »National Strategy Against Antisemitism and for Jewish Life« (NASAS)<sup>77</sup> proposes in 2022 three main areas of action:

- Remembrance culture, historical awareness and commemoration
- Learning/teaching Jewish life and history
- Education to prevent antisemitism

All three fields are also central to Wiesel's work. In addition to dealing with the memory of Auschwitz, commemoration of the victims and the attempt to

<sup>73</sup> Wiesel, *Protocols of Infamy*.

<sup>74</sup> Wiesel, *Open Heart*, 73; Ekkehard Schuster and Reinhold Boschki, *Trotzdem hoffen: Mit Johann Baptist Metz und Elie Wiesel im Gespräch* (Ostfildern: Topos plus, 2018), 74.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Wiesel, *Against Silence*, vol. III, 314.

<sup>76</sup> See the contribution by Elisabeth Migge in this volume.

<sup>77</sup> Federal Government Commissioner for Jewish Life in Germany and the Fight against Antisemitism, ed., »National Strategy against Antisemitism and for Jewish Life,« November 2022, accessed May 27, 2023, <https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/downloads/EN/publikationen/2023/BMI23001.html>.

establish a remembrance culture, Jewish themes are so strongly embedded in his work that readers encounter Judaism everywhere—in all parts of the work, not only in the biblical, Talmudic, and Hasidic writings. Likewise, Wiesel's emphasis on education results in the antisemitism-critical culture that is currently proposed for all areas of education, from day care centers to schools, universities and adult education.<sup>78</sup> Thus, Wiesel is particularly concerned with the perception of responsibility for the present and the future.<sup>79</sup> The fight against antisemitism must take place on many levels—political, legal, criminal, defense, international and in the media—but education is a central building block, in which examining Wiesel's work can be extremely useful.

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78 Exemplary: Nina Kölsch-Bunzen, *Kindertageseinrichtungen gegen Antisemitismus: Aus guten Geschichten lernen* (Weinheim: Juventa, 2023); Julia Bernstein, Marc Grimm and Stefan Müller, eds., *Schule als Spiegel der Gesellschaft: Antisemitismen erkennen und handeln*, *Antisemitismus und Bildung 2* (Frankfurt/M.: Wochenschau-Verlag, 2022); Victoria Kumar et al., eds., *Antisemitismen. Sondierungen im Bildungsbereich* (Frankfurt/M.: Wochenschau-Verlag, 2022).—See also Valesca Baert-Knoll, Elisabeth Migge and Reinhold Boschki, »Antisemitismuskritische Bildung im Handlungsfeld religiöse Bildung / Religionsunterricht,« in *Antisemitismus an Schulen—Analysen und Prävention*, ed. Wilhelm Schwendemann (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2024).

79 Cf. Schuster and Boschki, *Trotzdem hoffen*, 92, 103.

## 12. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ELIE WIESEL'S TESTIMONY *NIGHT* FOR RESPONSIBLE LIVING TODAY— CONTRIBUTION AND POTENTIAL FOR EDUCATION

ELISABETH MIGGE

On July 19, 2022, the newspapers *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and *Jüdische Allgemeine* reacted<sup>1</sup> to the video »Nizar-Shitstorm«,<sup>2</sup> which was uploaded to YouTube in June 2022.<sup>3</sup> In this clip Nizar Akremi, a comedian born in Bonn (Germany) and the son of Tunisian parents, recites antisemitic ideas on stage for several minutes.<sup>4</sup> Akremi uses a wide variety of antisemitic images and narratives, always laughing and stressing that he is only joking. He reproduces antisemitic narratives, talking about »money- grabbing Jew«, Jews as the »ultimate rulers« and »the Jews as child murderers«. He uses racist antisemitism with the pretended recognizability of Jews by means of their typical physiognomy, tells jokes at the expense of Jews murdered in the Shoah, expresses himself in terms of both Israel- related antisemitism and post-Shoah antisemitism by talking about Jews in Germany enjoying the freedom to do whatever they want. Akremi receives lively applause in his show and numerous encouraging comments on YouTube, among others, that »this is exactly what society needs«, that »most people think

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1 Joshua Schultheis, »Löckchen und Hakennase: Der Comedian Nizar Akremi,« *Jüdische Allgemeine*, July 19, 2022, accessed July 20, 2022, <https://www.juedische-allgemeine.de/kultur/loeckchen-und-hakennase/>; Marc F. Serrao, »Juden aus Israel, also richtig original ... mit so Löckchen und Hakennasen,« July 19, 2022, accessed July 20, 2022, <https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/antisemitismus-der-comedian-nizar-und-die-hakennasen-ld.1694210>.

2 Nizar Akremi, »NIZAR—SHITSTORM,« YouTube, June 12, 2022, 66 min., 28 sec., accessed August 28, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fkBN04Lc8zl>.

3 Date of submission for this article: September 12, 2022. This article was published in a similar form in German: Elisabeth Migge, »Das Werk *Die Nacht* im Kontext der Antisemitismusprävention—Potenziale für schulische Bildung und Erziehung,« *Zeitschrift für christlich-jüdische Begegnung im Kontext*, no. 2/3 (2022): 201–208.

4 All quotations from German literature, mentioned in this article, were translated by the author (EM).

even worse—they just don't dare to say it«, that »people don't fancy political correctness« and that it's »just banter«. <sup>5</sup> With his live programs, his YouTube channel with over 190,000 subscribers and his presence in various social media channels such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and TikTok, he reaches a wide audience. The *Jüdische Allgemeine* states in its newspaper article that great indignation about his show published on YouTube failed to appear for a long time.

This is just one example of how, in the year 2022, antisemitism is not a phenomenon of the past, but rather a remaining and even increasing threat in present time. <sup>6</sup> Despite »all efforts of enlightenment after the experience of Auschwitz, the age-old concepts and argumentation patterns of classical hostility towards Jews are still primarily reproduced«. <sup>7</sup> Antisemitism did not end up after the Shoah rather there is a continuity of antisemitism, <sup>8</sup> while nowadays hostility towards Jews is, in addition, an integral part of the net culture. <sup>9</sup> This development in the virtual world »correlates in the real world with antisemitic assaults and attacks, threats and insults«. <sup>10</sup> According to the *Situation Report on Antisemitism 2020/21*, of the German domestic intelligence services (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz), antisemitic offences in Germany have been rising continuously since 2015, reaching 2,351 offences in 2020—the highest number since recording began in 2001, while the number of unrecorded cases is not taken into account. <sup>11</sup> This reveals a permanent challenge for society as a whole

5 A total of 922 comments could be viewed by July 20, 2022 and all quoted states are part of these comments.

6 Cf. Monika Schwarz-Friesel, *Judenhass im Internet: Antisemitismus als kulturelle Konstante und kollektives Gefühl* (Berlin, Leipzig: Hentrich&Hentrich, 2019), 14–16.

7 Monika Schwarz-Friesel, »Antisemitismus 2.0—die kulturelle Konstante Judenhass und ihre Kontinuität im Internet,« in *Schule als Spiegel der Gesellschaft: Antisemitismen erkennen und handeln*, ed. Julia Bernstein, Marc Grimm and Stefan Müller, *Antisemitismus und Bildung 2* (Frankfurt/M.: Wochenschau Verlag, 2022), 147.

8 Cf. Julia Bernstein, *Antisemitismus an Schulen in Deutschland: Befunde—Analysen—Handlungsoptionen* (Weinheim, Basel: Juventa, 2020), 17–18.

9 Cf. Schwarz-Friesel, »Antisemitismus 2.0—die kulturelle Konstante Judenhass und ihre Kontinuität im Internet,« 147.

10 *Ibid.*, 151.

11 Cf. Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz—Public Relations, ed. »Situation Report on Antisemitism 2020/2021,« September 2022, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://>

and an urgent task, whereby the school system, with its teaching mission for young people and youth, has an essential responsibility.

In his essay *Education after Auschwitz*, Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969) emphasizes the principle that the very first task in education is that Auschwitz should never be repeated,<sup>12</sup> as this possibility persists.

Elie Wiesel (1928–2016), who survived the Shoah as a youth, underlines the immense importance of education,<sup>13</sup> in which he sees a key role for change. In his seminal work, *Night*, he tells about his life and his experiences of violence and death during the Shoah. In his literary writings and throughout his life, there is an evident link between past and present, between what has happened in the history of mankind and man's responsibility for what is happening today or rather what should not happen for man's sake. The following text explains in detail what this means nowadays and the utmost significance Wiesel's fundamental work *Night* can have with respect to the aforementioned teaching mission.

### 12.1. NIGHT—MEMORY AND TESTIMONY

According to the literary-scientific conceptualization, *Night* is a work of so-called Holocaust literature.<sup>14</sup> It was written by Elie Wiesel and tells in about 115 pages<sup>15</sup> his life story as an adolescent who survived the concentration camp

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[www.verfassungsschutz.de/SharedDocs/publikationen/EN/right-wing-extremism/2022-09-20-situation-report-antisemitism.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile&v=2](http://www.verfassungsschutz.de/SharedDocs/publikationen/EN/right-wing-extremism/2022-09-20-situation-report-antisemitism.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=2), 20–22.

- 12 Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, »Erziehung nach Auschwitz,« in *Erziehung zur Mündigkeit: Vorträge und Gespräche mit Hellmut Becker 1959–1969*, ed. Theodor W. Adorno, Hellmut Becker and Gerd Kadelbach (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), 92.
- 13 Cf. Ekkehard Schuster and Reinhold Boschki, *Trotzdem hoffen: Mit Johann Baptist Metz und Elie Wiesel im Gespräch* (Ostfildern: Topos plus, 2018), 95–96.
- 14 Cf. Markus Roth, »Gattung Holocaustliteratur? Überlegungen zum Begriff und zur Geschichte der Holocaustliteratur,« in *The Aspects of Genres in the Holocaust Literatures in Central Europe: Die Gattungaspekte der Holocaustliteratur in Mitteleuropa*, ed. Jiří Holý, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Praha: Akropolis, 2015), 15.
- 15 Originally, his memoirs comprised a much more extensive work written in Yiddish with the title ... *un di velt hot geshvign*: Eliezer Wiesel, ... *un di velt hot geshvign*, ed.

Auschwitz-Birkenau, the death march across Gleiwitz to Buchenwald, as well as his time in the concentration camp Buchenwald until its liberation on 11 April 1945. At that day, Wiesel was 16 years old, his parents as well as the youngest of his three sisters had been murdered in the concentration camps.<sup>16</sup> Through the boy Eliezer<sup>17</sup>, the reader is immersed in the life of Eastern European Jewry, is confronted with the atrocities of the Nazis and learns of the many facets of being human during the Holocaust. This way, existential questions come to the fore about one's own existence and behavior, but also the question of God in the face of all the suffering. *Night*, as memory and testimony, has fundamental significance for Wiesel and his further work,<sup>18</sup> while Wiesel understands memory in a double sense. For him, memory does not only mean responsibility towards all the otherwise forgotten victims,<sup>19</sup> but also memory for the sake of the present. Therefore, to take a look into the past should not mean to get trapped in it, rather, we have to use this view for the benefit of a present and future worth living. Wiesel writes: »Due to my experiences in Auschwitz and due to the fact that no one stood up for the Jews at that time, I try to raise my voice today everywhere where people have to suffer from injustice.«<sup>20</sup> With his work Wiesel wants to bear witness—witness also in order to lead to humane behavior and action in the present. Moreover, we have to bear in mind that Wiesel rejected

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Mark Turkov and Abraham Mitlberg, *Dos Poylishe Yidntum 117* (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-Farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine, 1956).

- 16 His mother Sarah and his younger sister Tzipora were murdered in Auschwitz, his father in Buchenwald.
- 17 Eliezer is the Hebrew name of Elie Wiesel. The name is a composition of the word »God« and »help« and could be translated as »My God is help«.
- 18 Cf. Elie Wiesel, »Vorwort von Elie Wiesel zur französischen Neuauflage 2007,« in *Die Nacht: Erinnerung und Zeugnis—Neu übersetzt Forschungsstelle Elie Wiesel*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 2022), 7.
- 19 Cf. Elie Wiesel, *Tous les fleuves vont à la mer. Mémoires* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 438; Elie Wiesel, *Alle Flüsse fließen ins Meer: Autobiographie*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1995), 470. In the English translation this part hasn't been translated and is missing. See: Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea. Memoirs*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 337.
- 20 Schuster and Boschki, *Trotzdem hoffen*, 96. Elie Wiesel was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986 for his work for peace, reconciliation and human dignity.

the idea of a collective guilt of later generations and thus also the young generation throughout his life.<sup>21</sup> He rather states:

»There is no need for reconciliation with the young Germans, because there has never been any guilt. They are innocent of what happened. The problem of the young Germans is to reconcile with their own past. They do not need to bear guilt, but must feel responsible for what is happening in Germany *today*, and how to deal with this memory nowadays.«<sup>22</sup>

Hence we can learn that Wiesel regards the Holocaust memory to be important for our present and he especially turns to the young generation to feel responsible for it.

Considering these reflections on *Night* and Wiesel's understanding of memory combined with responsibility, a hint can be detected of how this work can be meaningful in the education of young people. To what extent the work can be treated in school lessons and the possibilities it offers will be discussed in more detail below.

## 12.2. NIGHT IN THE CONTEXT OF SCHOOL EDUCATION— SPECIAL POTENTIALS?

Through *Night*, students immerse themselves in the reality of the life of a Jewish boy, about the same age as them, who begins to tell his story as a thirteen-year-old boy in 1941 and finally ends with the then sixteen-year-old survivor of the Shoah in 1945. Since the protagonist of the work, who also tells about his relationship to his mother, father, siblings, and friends, is about the same age as the students, the work appears approachable for young people. The reading

21 Cf. Elie Wiesel, »Rede von Elie Wiesel (27.01.2000),« Address to the German Bundestag, Deutscher Bundestag, January 27, 2000, accessed August 4, 2023, <https://www.bundestag.de/parlament/geschichte/gastredner/wiesel/rede-247400>; Cf. Schuster and Boschki, *Trotzdem hoffen*, 79.

22 Schuster and Boschki, *Trotzdem hoffen*, 103.

of *Night* offers a starting point for a wide variety of topics in different school subjects such as history, social studies, religious education,<sup>23</sup> ethics, politics, and literature. In countries with other statutory subjects, the possible thematic fields presented below show to what extent a reception of the work in class can be significant.<sup>24</sup>

Based on Wiesel's life story, students can learn about the historical context, the historical events at the time of Nazi-fascism and deal with the Shoah and the systematic persecution, deportation and murder of Jews. The stigmatization and murder of other groups, such as homosexuals, Sinti and Roma, homeless or people with disabilities, can also be addressed. This raises the question of what it means to be human and how people can treat each other with dignity. At the same time, the question of God and God's role in the face of all the suffering is brought up. The experiences and descriptions of the deeply religious Jewish boy Elie Wiesel also reveal the struggle with God and for God in the face of all the misery he was forced to see and to experience during his deportation and in the concentration camps Auschwitz and Buchenwald.<sup>25</sup> His history thus enables students to encounter the faith of another young person and the challenge and questions associated with the faith in a merciful and good God and one's own humanity. Even by looking at the adult person, they can recognize that Wiesel is still struggling and questioning. As a 72-year-old he wrote, regarding the fate of the Jews in the Holocaust, that this did not really touch anyone, neither other nations nor God himself. »Not even God, the God of Israel, seemed to care. More than anyone else's, his silence was a mystery that continues to puzzle and distress many of us to this day.»<sup>26</sup>

As Wiesel's most fundamental literary work, a close connection can be

23 Some pedagogical material is available from the Elie Wiesel Research Center. Forschungsstelle Elie Wiesel, »Pädagogische Impulse,« accessed August 31, 2022, <https://uni-tuebingen.de/fakultaeten/katholisch-theologische-fakultaet/lehrstuehle/religionspaedagogik/forschungsstelle-elie-wiesel-1/paedagogische-impulse/>.

24 For the international discussion on teaching Wiesel's *Night* see: Alan Rosen, ed., *Approaches to Teaching Wiesel's Night*, Approaches to teaching world literature 96 (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2007).

25 See for example: Wiesel, *Night*, 63–65.

26 Wiesel, »Rede von Elie Wiesel (27.01.2000)«.

drawn between *Night* and his other works, for example his fictional novels and dramas, his essays and speeches, such as in the German Bundestag<sup>27</sup> or in the White House<sup>28</sup>. The question of how Wiesel lived his life and his faith as a survivor of the Shoah can be explored with young people. Students can understand by themselves how committed he was to promote peace, reconciliation, and human dignity, both in his writing and in his actions, for which he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986. For example, his commitment to other people can be seen in his work »against apartheid in South Africa, against the extermination of Indian people in South America and against nuclear war«. <sup>29</sup> His legacy can show students, how much he stood up throughout his lifetime for the most diverse groups of people who suffered from injustice.

Due to the multiple possibilities of reference and questions, which are certainly only outlined here, the work is also particularly suitable for interdisciplinary teaching. This way, the different aspects and perspectives can be linked for the students during the learning processes and so, the adolescents and young adults take a look at their own reality of life. For instance, they can think about how people are oppressed and defamed nowadays in their own society. They can discover to what extent antisemitic attitudes are still reproduced and passed on in various forms. Therefore, learning about the past and from the past for a better future. Moreover, teachers can reflect with the students on the great potential that lies hidden in literature.

### 12.3. LEARNING ABOUT AND LEARNING FROM HISTORY

Based on *Night*, different school subjects can become cross-linked, perspectives and topics can be worked out together with the students. Moreover, learning can take place outside classroom. Education takes place not only at school, but also out-of-school in special places of learning, thus enabling »authentic and

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27 Cf. *Ibid.*

28 Cf. Elie Wiesel, »The Perils of Indifference,« *American Rhetoric*, April 12, 1999, accessed July 18, 2022, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/PDFFiles/Elie%20Wiesel%20-%20Indifference.pdf>.

29 Schuster and Boschki, *Trotzdem hoffen*, 96.

immediate learning«. <sup>30</sup> In the context of *Night*, a visit to a memorial site—such as the former concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau or Buchenwald, to which Wiesel had been deported and which he describes in his book—offers a »high degree of activation and self-direction for students« <sup>31</sup> which enables them to comprehend all the above mentioned topics more profoundly. At the same time, however, Eva Gruberová and Marc Grimm note that memorial visits alone do not cause a change in attitudes. Although young people »show empathy for the victims of the concentration camps, this remains limited to the dead«. <sup>32</sup> Thus, a potential can be seen in working with biographies in connection with memorial visits. Particularly autobiographical reports enable students to encounter history and allow a personal access, because a

»biographical approach can provide information about personal experiences, feelings and sufferings of people who lived during the Nazi era. It promotes empathy with victims, which is indispensable both for the process of historical understanding and for raising awareness of human rights and civil courage in the present.« <sup>33</sup>

Thus, by embedding the visit in the overall context of the learning process in the context of reading the autobiographical work *Night* by Wiesel, the cognitive learning of relevant basic data and facts, around the topic of Nazi-fascism and the Shoah, can be combined with emotional learning and the development of empathy skills of the adolescents and young adults. Adorno already emphasized the importance of emotions in his 1970 essay. For him, the »indifference to

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30 Ulrich Riegel and Dominik Helblin, »Religiöses Lernen an außerschulischen Lernorten,« in *Handbuch Religionsdidaktik*, ed. Ulrich Kropač and Ulrich Riegel, Kohlhammer Studienbücher Theologie 25 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2021), 333.

31 Ibid.

32 Eva Gruberová and Marc Grimm, »Zeitzeugen und Gegenwartszeugen: Möglichkeiten emotionalen Lernens anhand von Biographien in der historischen und politischen Bildungsarbeit,« in *Schule als Spiegel der Gesellschaft: Antisemitismen erkennen und handeln*, ed. Julia Bernstein, Marc Grimm and Stefan Müller, Antisemitismus und Bildung 2 (Frankfurt/M.: Wochenschau Verlag, 2022), 223.

33 Ibid., 229.

the fate of others is the reason, why only very few were touched«<sup>34</sup> and in his socio-psychological reflection he points out the danger of emotionlessness.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the didactic discussion of the 1980s already shows a turn towards personal orientation in the context of political education. This means to attempt to free the learners from their pedagogical object role and in particular to take into account the importance of emotions in the learning and reflection process.<sup>36</sup> The »insight that feeling and ratio are not unmediated dichotomies, but that feelings are integrated into our rational decisions and are indispensable as a drive«<sup>37</sup> represents the so-called ›emotional turn‹ in the social sciences of the 1990s. In this respect, the particular potential of learning from *Night* by Wiesel is extraordinary, because reading it allows exactly such an insight into the feelings and experiences of a Jewish youth at the time of the Shoah.

Regarding this, it is important to remember a rule in the pedagogical practice of political education suggested in the ›Beutelsbacher Konsens‹ (1976, Germany), the first principle of which is that overwhelming the learner must be avoided. Thus, even when reading *Night*, students may not be »taken by surprise in the sense of desired opinions and [thus be] incapable to reach an independent judgement«. <sup>38</sup> Rather, they should be encouraged to think critically,<sup>39</sup> self-reflect and include their emotions. Thus, the process of learning is about perceiving, verbalizing, and reflecting on one's own feelings. Here again we can

34 Adorno, »Erziehung nach Auschwitz,« 106.

35 Cf. *ibid.*, 102.

36 Cf. Bernhard Sutor, »Politische Bildung Im Streit Um Die ›Intellektuelle Gründung‹ Der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Die Kontroversen Der Siebziger Und Achtziger Jahre,« *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte (APuZ)* 45 (2002): 27, accessed July 20, 2022, <https://www.bpb.de/medien/26636/OVWZGK.pdf>.

37 Gruberová and Grimm, »Zeitzeugen und Gegenwartszeugen,« 228.

38 Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, »Beutelsbacher Konsens,« April 7, 2011, accessed August 31, 2022, <https://www.bpb.de/die-bpb/ueber-uns/auftrag/51310/beutelsbacher-konsens/>.

39 On teaching *Night* in regard to critical thinking at courses and classroom see for example: Paul Einstein, »*Night* and Critical Thinking,« in *Approaches to Teaching Wiesel's Night*, ed. Alan Rosen, *Approaches to teaching world literature* 96 (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2007).

say with Adorno: »Education would be meaningful at all only as an education for critical self-reflection.«<sup>40</sup>

Taking into account the aspect of self-reflection, the process of learning can also be based on Wiesel. The learners can discover that Wiesel, as a survivor of the Shoah, later grappled with his past. For example in his autobiography *All Rivers Run to the Sea* they can discover consistently appearing passages of self-reflection and self-questioning, also in view of events in his youth. For example, Wiesel writes: »I would later see men of all ages who, in extreme situations, brutally exercised their power over their fellow inmates. Sometimes I ask myself whether I would have been like them had I been appointed a kapo or *Vorarbeiter*.«<sup>41</sup> Unfortunately one more sentence by Wiesel hasn't been translated in the English version of his autobiography. In his original French written oeuvre<sup>42</sup> *Tous les fleuves vont à la mer* Wiesel then asks: »Aurais-je cogné comme eux?«<sup>43</sup>— »Would I have struck like them?«.

By turning to different thematic complexes based on *Night*, it can become clear to the learners what kind of lasting responsibility and way of self-questioning is associated with this testimony and the past. According to Wiesel, a responsibility that does not mean guilt but a task and challenge for the present and future.

Here we can recall the YouTube sequence described at the beginning of the article. It is therefore a matter of historical knowledge that enables students to identify exclusions, devaluations and generalizations, stereotypes, prejudices and vituperation,<sup>44</sup> which manifest themselves as hostility towards Jews, as antisemitism, in the midst of our society. Moreover it should enable students to deal with them confidently. This implies to promote a kind of wakefulness for

40 Adorno, »Erziehung nach Auschwitz,« 94.

41 Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, 311.

42 Wiesel chose French as literary language, beside Yiddish.

43 Wiesel, *Tous les fleuves vont à la mer*, 398. The original French version is as follows: »Plus tard, je verrai des hommes jeunes et moins jeunes qui, dans des situations extrêmes, exerceront brutalement leurs lamentables privilèges sur leurs compagnons d'infortune. Parfois, je m'interroge : si l'on m'avait nommé kapo ou *Vorarbeiter*, leur aurais-je ressemblé ? Aurais-je cogné comme eux ?« See also the German translation: Wiesel, *Alle Flüsse fließen ins Meer*, 430.

44 Cf. Bernstein, *Antisemitismus an Schulen in Deutschland*, 21.

the things that are happening right now, to develop awareness and sensitivity. At the same time, however, with regard to self-reflection, students should take a look at their own prejudices and formerly unquestioned opinions. I. e., to become aware of them, get the opportunity to bring them up in a safe place and to get into dialog. School is one of the

»most important places in this context, an institution that is supposed to educate to maturity, equality and civil courage, a place of socialization and education. School prepares for how to shape a society and also decides which social inclusion and exclusion mechanisms, which discriminations will (or will not) shape social life in the future.«<sup>45</sup>

School is to be understood as a »social microcosm«, »i. e. a social, cultural and political cell of the whole organism of society«.<sup>46</sup>

Within this context, it seems alarming however, that many teachers not only lack knowledge but also ignore, trivialize, and refuse to discuss antisemitism.<sup>47</sup> This means that in order to guarantee school such a status as mentioned above, teachers in charge as well as future teachers must be enabled to develop an appropriate attitude and to act professionally.

Therefore and finally, let us have a last glance at the education of teachers who are above all responsible for the education of students.

#### 12.4. FURTHER THOUGHTS— IMPROVEMENT OF TEACHER EDUCATION

Teaching and learning by means of *Night* can bear great potential, but at the same time it also poses a challenge for the teaching staff. However, it should

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45 Julia Bernstein, Marc Grimm and Stefan Müller, eds., »Jüdinnen und Juden als Objekte oder als Subjekte? Überlegungen zu einem Paradigmenwechsel,« in *Schule als Spiegel der Gesellschaft: Antisemitismen erkennen und handeln*, Antisemitismus und Bildung 2 (Frankfurt/M.: Wochenschau Verlag, 2022), 18.

46 Bernstein, *Antisemitismus an Schulen in Deutschland*, 15.

47 Cf. *ibid.*, 138.

not be up to the individual teacher to work out the meaning and far-reaching consequences of the Shoah on their own. Verena Nägel and Lena Kahle show in their study (2018) the need for »systematic improvement of teacher education in the field of conveying the history of National Socialism and the Holocaust.«<sup>48</sup> They therefore suggest to consider the introduction of a Studium Generale for all student teachers regardless of their subjects, »in which, among other things, the history of National Socialism and the Holocaust, but also the basic issues of democracy education and human rights, are being taught.«<sup>49</sup> Julia Bernstein, Marc Grimm, and Stefan Müller argue similarly that we need

»structural reforms, such as the curricular safeguarding of education against and about antisemitism—both in teacher training and in school curricula. Only then an education can be provided ready to detect, name and discuss past and present forms of antisemitism in a lasting process.«<sup>50</sup>

Relating to this, an approach was constructed by the Julius Maximilian University of Würzburg (Germany), which set up a supplementary course for student teachers, offered for the first time in winter semester of 2022/23. The course called *Zertifikat Antisemitismuskritische Bildung für Unterricht und Schule* (ZABUS) aims at »widening pedagogical and methodological competences, so that teachers can classify antisemitism within our present society and develop a corresponding ›professional habitus‹ to cope with these challenges.«<sup>51</sup> In three teaching sessions, each based on the previous one, prospective teachers

48 Verena Nägel and Lena Kahle, *University teaching about the Holocaust in Germany*, trans. Roderick Miller (Berlin: Refubium, 2018), 101.

49 Ibid.

50 Bernstein, Grimm and Müller, »Jüdinnen und Juden als Objekte oder als Subjekte? Überlegungen zu einem Paradigmenwechsel,« 28.

51 Cf. Institut für Evangelische Theologie und Religionspädagogik, »Zertifikat Antisemitismuskritische Bildung Für Unterricht Und Schule (ZABUS): Zusatzstudiengang Für Das Lehramtsstudium,« Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg, accessed August 24, 2022, <https://www.ev-theologie.uni-wuerzburg.de/fileadmin/06070200/2022/ZABUS-gesamt.pdf>.

acquire knowledge, develop a professional habitus and reflect on didactic and pedagogical possibilities for their own repertoire of activities.<sup>52</sup> At the moment, this seminar is voluntary for student teachers and depends on their personal initiative.<sup>53</sup> However, it can be a signpost for taking over responsibility on the macro-level of the educational system for this relevant topic related to society as a whole.

## 12.5. BOTH WARNING AND HOPE?

Wiesel deals with historical incidents not only in his account in *Night* but also in other novels, such as *Dawn* or *The Judges*, which offer different, and fictional, contexts. However, the reader is not left alone with interpretation and comprehension, because Wiesel constantly self-reflects on his literature for example in his autobiographical writings. He states, that for him, the sense of literature is closely linked to an ethical demand. Literature calls upon the readers to self-reflect and to self-question.<sup>54</sup> He explains:

»For me literature must have an ethical dimension. The aim of the literature I call testimony is to disturb. [...] Most of all, I disturb those who are comfortably settled within a system—be it political, psychological, or theological. If I have learned anything in my life, it is to distrust intellectual comfort.«<sup>55</sup>

Literature should therefore stir, unsettle, move one's conscience in the original meaning of the word, that is, lead to action. If we consider in this outline the utmost significance that Wiesel ascribes to literature, Pestalozzi's (1746–1827)

52 Cf. *ibid.*

53 Cf. Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg, »Zentrum für Antisemitismuskritische Bildung (CCEA),« Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg, accessed August 26, 2022, <https://www.ev-theologie.uni-wuerzburg.de/forschung/ccea/zabus/>.

54 Cf. Schuster and Boschki, *Trotzdem hoffen*, 90.

55 Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, 336–337. See also: Wiesel, *Tous les fleuves vont à la mer*, 438.

holistic approach—»with head, heart and hand« comes to mind. *Night* as well as Wiesel's other works want to move people to change something, encourage and enable us, especially persons involved in the education system, to take a closer look into our present time, to learn from the past for the sake of this day and age, question ourselves and analyze conditions. Wiesel put it like that in his Preface of *Night* (2006): »... I am not so naive as to believe that this slim volume will change the course of history or shake the conscience of the world.«<sup>56</sup> At the same time, however, he states »despite that: I must, we all must, try to find a source of hope. We must believe in man in spite of man.«<sup>57</sup> Thus, the work *Night* can certainly only contribute one tiny piece in a jigsaw to remember the past of the Shoah and the lasting responsibility associated with it. *Night*, with its simplicity and at the same time lasting complexity, bears great potential for an education of adolescents and young adults that is appealing, stimulates critical thinking, encourages self-reflection, provides personal involvement and trains empathy skills, and thus hopefully can make a lasting contribution to young people taking over responsibility for living in a humane society. A responsibility on both a personal and systematic level.

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56 Elie Wiesel, »Preface to the New Translation,« in *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), xii–xiii.

57 Schuster and Boschki, *Trotzdem hoffen*, 74.

III  
PARTICULAR ASPECTS AND FOCI



# 13. ANXIETY AND ADMONITION. RESONANCES IN KAFKA AND WIESEL

JOSEPH A. KANOFSKY

## 13.1. INTRODUCTION: MIRROR OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

»One man in one age may pose a question. In another age, another man may pose another question, and without knowing it, his question is an answer to the first.«<sup>1</sup> Elie Wiesel often cited this aphorism and attributed it to Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Chasidic master and teller of tales. This dialogic image of literary extratemporality may also provide a lens through which to view the affinity between *belle époque* fabulist Franz Kafka and witness for humankind Elie Wiesel.

Their lives bracket the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Just 4 years intervene between Kafka's demise and Wiesel's birth; a few hundred miles separate their hometowns. Kafka's chilling vision of humanity sometime seems at times a foreshadowing of the unique horrors of the destruction of European Jewry—a precursor of the lawlessness, terrorism, and further degradation of human rights and humanity itself that in so many ways typified the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Wiesel endured the Holocaust and the camps, lived to bear witness, and wrote to awaken the conscience of humanity.

In the following we will explore some elements of Wiesel's work that recall Kafka and ask why this may be so; and also attempt to attune ourselves to some Wieselian resonances in Kafka's writing; the better to see these unsparing contemporary witness's reflections on our modern condition. The echoes between the literary and human concerns of these two writers are bookends of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most profound inhumanity: Kafka a sensitive observer and scribe of

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1 Elie Wiesel, *Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Random House, 1972), 201.

our propensity and tendency toward lawlessness and worse; and Wiesel a witness and chronicler of the Kingdom of Night, subsequently an earnest advocate for us to learn from the past and better our world. In voices that still command attention, both Kafka and Wiesel used every literary mode at their disposal, including shorter and longer fictions to memoirs, letters, and essays, to sound an alarm at our slouch toward amorality. They both asked, in their own timbre, the question that Wiesel so often articulated in public forums: »Will the world ever learn?« The moral force of this question should continue to weigh on our consciences forever—or as Kafka would say, until it is no longer necessary.

Kafka's literary force derives from his imagination. He lived the most quotidian of lives for his era: a petit bourgeois in a major city of a sunsetting empire, first of his family to attend university and seek a profession. Without profound anchor in faith or politics, Kafka suffered only from what are today called »first word problems:« *ennui*, lack of job satisfaction, hypochondria. The *angst* of his characters, the bizarre situations of his narratives, the sense of impending doom and loss and crushing of the individual emerged from his afflictive imagination and his empathy. Stock characters of his era: bureaucrats, emperors, writers, doctors, laborers, and enigmatic religious figures people his stories, and Kafka portrays their inner lives and troubled psyches in his literary creations. Kafka's words thus precede action; his pen adduces the inner anxieties of the characters. Elie Wiesel is the inverse of Kafka. Having seen the unimaginable, rather than imagining things not seen; Wiesel's literary force originates in what he has endured, rather than what he has not yet come to pass. Wiesel is less an author of wholly imaginative worlds although the majority of his works are novels; he is laboring to enclothe his real-world or surreal-world experiences in literature. He is a witness, struggling perhaps for his entire literary career to find words to encompass, to convey, what he has experienced. The ineffable inhumanity of the Shoah defies the parameters of language, the truth is quite literally »stranger than fiction;« so the writer's task is that much more daunting.

Furthermore, Wiesel's early background by his every account was of a pious, learned student of classical rabbinic texts.<sup>2</sup> While he had slight exposure to

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2 In fact, his earliest literary creations, a traditionally-styled commentary on Holy Scrip-

secular literature, his intellectual diet for most of his childhood and adolescence was the vast yet circumscribed world of scriptural commentary, midrashic parable, and Talmudic legal discourse. This universe and its entire worldview were uprooted *in toto* with the deportations of teenage Wiesel, his family, and much of Hungarian Jewry in 1944. How disorienting and jarring it must have been to be transported so swiftly from the Kingdom of God's dominion and the Torah's justice to the lawlessness, caprice, and evil of the Kingdom of Night. The flames, the suffering, the death, the punishment of empathy and kindness—the nightmarish inversion of the ordered world of holiness and piety Wiesel knew growing up—caused a disequilibrium that Wiesel struggled valiantly, with every intellectual and literary tool he could summon, to comprehend and restore to balance. When that failed, he committed to testify to what had happened and nurture many others in the same project; so that at some time hence, perhaps he would grasp its terrible powers of destruction and rein them in. Observing Wiesel's experimentation with various literary forms and narrative strategies over time is both fascinating and compelling. In the unembellished memoir to the fictional self-projection to the *roman à clef* to the imagined tale that is true although it has not yet transpired; to essay, reflection, theater script, and even *cantata* and finally full circle back to memoir; Wiesel cannot be faulted for a lack of innovation and effort in attempting to shape words that could encompass experience.

### 13.2. ELIE WIESEL'S ENCOUNTER WITH KAFKA'S WRITINGS

Elie Wiesel encountered Kafka's writings for the first time in 1946 or 1948 by his own account, on a recommendation from a student friend. Wiesel began reading *The Trial* and *The Judgment*, which compelled his interest all through the night. Finishing the book at daybreak, Wiesel heard the usually unwelcome racket of garbage collectors in the street. That morning, Wiesel wanted to run

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ture, was naïve enough to be embarrassing, in his retelling of the story (personal notes).

out into the street and embrace them, because they reminded him that there is another world outside the world of Kafka.<sup>3</sup>

Teaching a seminar at Boston University devoted to Kafka's writings, Wiesel said »I see in him a predecessor.«<sup>4</sup> From his lectures in this class in the fall of 1992, we have some insight, commentary and reaction to some of Kafka's writings through Wiesel's eyes. As an introduction to this course, Wiesel discussed *Before The Law*, a one-paragraph excerpt from *The Trial* which also stands alone as an independent parable. In it, the anonymous »man from the country« is made to wait the rest of his life for entry into »The Law« (whatever that may be) before learning as he is dying that that portal was intended only for him, and now it was being closed. An absurdity and paradox of alienation and isolation is simply portrayed here.

Wiesel commented on *Before the Law* and asks his own questions of Kafka's place in modern letters: »Literature today would not be what it is if not for him.«<sup>5</sup> This parable conveyed many points in Wiesel's interpretation. He said, »In a dictatorial society, they give you the truth. Kafka says you must look for it. You won't find it, but you must look.« The absurdity in the tale is because of the lack of communication: the seeker, the man from the country, doesn't want to upset the doorkeeper, and the doorkeeper maintains a benign pity for the sincerity and the inherent impotence of the seeker and his quest. Wiesel said, »Maybe not letting him in was an act of compassion. Maybe it's better not to know ... that itself is a truth.« Wiesel said, »I think Franz Kafka was seeking in a way no one else has in this century—he says, ›[t]ruth is terrible, but it's worth seeking.«

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3 Note from lecture; see also Elie Wiesel, *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, ed. Irving Abrahamson (New York: Holocaust Library 1985), vol. II, 114.

4 *Ibid.*, 114.

5 Elie Wiesel, »Literature of Memory: Franz Kafka's Exile and Memory,« course at Boston University, lecture notes, September 9, 1992 (All quotations in this paragraph *ibid.*).

### 13.3. INJUSTICE—A MAJOR THEME IN KAFKA AND WIESEL

Kafka and Wiesel both intuit the injustice of the world they perceive, and try to bridge the chasm between that reality and the ideal of a just and orderly world they are convinced still exists on some plane. Wiesel's 2002 novel *The Judges* places five characters before a judge of sorts who hears their stories of inhumanity, injustice, witness, and silence; and lets them know that one of them will pay with their lives for their past deeds or misdeeds. Much like the condemned man in Kafka's *In The Penal Colony*, part of the process is coming to understand their offenses. Yet death looms over each one and the entire novel. Although the enigmatic host of the gathering fills the role of judge and sentencer, the title suggests, that the five protagonists are to sit in judgment of the balance of their lives.

Kafka opens his best-known work *The Trial* with the presumption of guilt and the unawareness of the guilty: »Someone must have traduced Josef K, for without having done anything wrong, he was arrested one morning.« Exploring the theme that would haunt many of his works, ignorance of the crime on the part of the condemned; Kafka carries this through *The Trial*; the novel-fragment ends with the death of the hero, or anti-hero, Josef K, »like a dog.« The merciless execution is only part of the human tragedy; the more relatable aspect is that he fails throughout the novel even to learn of the crime of which he is accused. Kafka's effort in this work is to convey, beyond the absurdity of the inscrutable process and sentence; the vacuum of clarity of the accusation.

Wiesel evaluated *The Trial* (some years before he wrote *The Judges*) as »a literary jewel,« as important in its own way in western literature as the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*. He remarked that »the worst thing for Kafka and his protagonists is that everyone else knows more about him than he does.«<sup>6</sup>

Kafka perceived the tremors of impending totalitarianism in the post Great War dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's dark middle decades. Kafka and Lenin were roughly contemporary; they both died in 1924. While Kafka wrote in passing

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6 Notes from class discussion, February 11, 1992.

about the exotically Asiatic Russia in *The Judgment*, he was likely unaware he was of Stalin's consolidation of power in that period. Kafka's familiar model of empire and autocrat was that of Franz Josef, the emperor as bureaucrat. In short fictions like *A Knock at the Manor Gate*, *Building the Great Wall of China*, and an excerpt from that tale published separately as *An Imperial Message* portray the power imbalances particularly in the mind of those subject to authoritarian rule.

#### 13.4. FORESHADOWING—AND REMINISCENCE

Perhaps Kafka sensed the potential for the manipulations of power that would lead to totalitarian rule in the years following his death. Kafka's own world did not witness the twisting of political, social, judicial, and police power that would reach its nadir in the Soviet and Nazi regimes of the 1930s and '40s or the Chinese state of the '50s and '60s. Yet he was able to imagine the dimming of hope and autonomy in the minds of their citizens, and the perversions of privacy and autonomy in friendships and other relationships that would be the evil hallmark of the police states of the Warsaw Pact countries. For example in *A Knock at the Manor Gate* the slightest of slight offences results in pursuit by police arrest, and apparent impending torture. This has the unnamed protagonist of the short story retrojecting furtive signals of fear and warning onto the expressions and gestures of the villagers he had passed along the way—the bringing into the realm of the doubtful and dubious the most humane expressions of affinity (familiar in the rear-view mirror of history along with Kundera's *The Joke*, the DDR's Stasi internal surveillance empire, etc.)

Wiesel anatomizes the perversions of trust, loyalty, and citizenship, and familial relationships as they were betrayed under communism, most notably end-stage Stalinism with his longest novel *The Testament*. In this prizewinning historical fiction, Wiesel imagines a written testament left by a victim of the night of the murdered Yiddish poets, Stalin's penultimate purge. Wiesel explores the attraction that communism held for young idealistic Jews tired of waiting

for the messiah, a sympathy he understood but did not hold.<sup>7</sup> Paltiel Kossover, the author of this testament which his son reads with sympathy and self-recognition after his father's murder, is a pastiche of the Yiddish writers who balanced their creative drive with fealty to the Soviet regime and a desire for self-preservation; and ultimately lost it all. Wiesel tries at very least to redeem their stories. *The Testament* is sweeping in its scope, following its characters along the *via dolorosa* of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century inhumanity. Berlin in the 1930's, the last years of Stalinism, the Eastern block and its primitive repressions, Zionism pre-1948; even the ingathering to Israel of early waves of Jewish refugees freed from the grip of the USSR in the early 1970's, where the novel opens. Jews, embodied in Kossover *père et fils* and the narrator, who is probably Wiesel doing his best to make sense of the senselessness of it all, appear uncannily in all these epochal moments. In his own words, Wiesel is trying to extract the blessing from the whole dark chapter of history; as Jacob wrestling with the angel all night (Gen. 32) and demanding a blessing at the close of the grappling.<sup>8</sup>

Kafka and Wiesel depict, decry and warn us of the human capacity for inhumanity and amorality. Kafka senses the distant tremors in the collapse of the age of empire; Wiesel chronicles in testimony and fiction just how vulnerable

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7 Wiesel commented on both the attraction that communism held for early 20<sup>th</sup> century idealists, with its quasi-religious fervor of »a messianism without God« (Wiesel, »Literature of Memory«) and even noted that several of his fellow yeshiva students in the time leading up to the outbreak of WWII were closet communists who sought to embrace the advancing Red Army and were promptly arrested: *In my town—I was too young. If I would have been 10 years older, I might have joined the party. I found out later—we had a clandestine cell in my town—made of bochurim. When the Russians were 20km away, about 25 or 30 young ones (one had my first name—Leizer) left one night—I found out later, they went to the Russians—afraid of the secret service—they thought they'd be welcomed as heroes. They were arrested and accused of spying, sabotage, etc. Just 2 survived. One of those who died was my cousin and his fiancée. They were arrested and spent 1950–1954 in the gulag, never knowing about one another.* (Notes from lecture, November 16, 1993). The extent to which Wiesel's circle of friends in immediate postwar Paris, like Giacometti, were communist »fellow travelers« may shed more light on Wiesel's grappling with this secular religion.

8 Notes from lecture, November 16, 1993.

relationships writ large and small remain to the murderous shadows of tyranny and authoritarianism.

### 13.5. IMPRISONMENT AND TORTURE IN KAFKA AND WIESEL

Imprisonment and punishment are themes hardly unique to these two among 20<sup>th</sup> century writers. Michel Foucault abstracted the roles to grand theory, Arthur Koestler and Alexander Solzhenitzyn distilled the prisoner's eye view for the reader, and Wiesel taught them all in his university graduate seminars. Kafka fearlessly charted the terror and horrible self-realization of the prisoner and even more so, the captor's inhuman fascination with the technology of confinement and torture in his 1919 short story *In the Penal Colony*, which had been drafted before the then-designated »Great War.«

Whether there is or is not such a thing as a »holocaust prophet,«<sup>9</sup> Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* certainly sheds a grim light on the notions of torture and cruelty that humanity labored diligently to refine to a staggering efficiency and scale in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This short story of punishment and awful knowledge and the pride which technicians and mechanics of death take in their work illuminates a very dark side of humanity which reigned unbridled in the Shoah. It is the entire weave of *In the Penal Colony*. Here the condemned man, a soldier, is incidentally revealed to have been sleeping at his watch post; but that is peripheral to the story even as it is the impetus for the drama. The focus of the narrative is the officer's fascination with the mechanics and efficiency of the punishment apparatus, how well-designed it is, how efficient, and how effective. The bizarre and fantastic mode of punishment inscribes the crime on the body of the guilty, bringing him to self-awareness and recognition of his offense in the punishment (which is really an execution) process. It is chilling to read this short story knowing what we know about the 20<sup>th</sup> century's catalogue of secret police, torture, imprisonment, show trials, gulag archipelagos, and re-education camps; and avoid the thought that Kafka was telling a truth of human nature

9 Lawrence L. Langer, »Kafka as Holocaust Prophet: A Dissenting View,« in *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays*, ed. Lawrence L. Langer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 109–124.

of how close below the surface of many, if not most people the torturer or the executioner might dwell. Tracing back the work of torture and punishment through the age of mechanical reproduction, we find Kafka grinning ruefully, wanly, sombrely at the outset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; mapping for us all too clearly where humankind's unchecked darkest impulses were soon to take us.

In the middle of that same century, Wiesel took us inside the prisoner's mind with *The Town Beyond the Wall*. 1964 was past the era of Stalin and Andrey Vyshinsky, past the age of the Nuremberg trials for crimes against humanity; but in Wiesel's enduring question, the world still had not learned. Michael in *The Town Beyond the Wall* is just such a prisoner of communist secret police, yet the past also confines him. The trajectory of the story is of a native of an eastern European small town who has survived the war and returned to what was once his home. Wiesel described both the anticipation and the reality of this journey decades later.<sup>10</sup> *Town Beyond the Wall* draws from Wiesel's own experience of postwar visitation to the land of his birth, yet elides the autobiographical in the use of the third person narrative voice.<sup>11</sup> It is also a novelistic creation, as Wiesel's return to Hungary/Romania had not yet occurred; the autobiographical element is the imagining of what might take place.<sup>12</sup> And yet, Wiesel's ubiquitous questions are all there. Michael tries fitfully to pray; which is to say to converse with God. He was trained and able to do this in his youth; but so much has changed; in the world and even more in him. The question of madness, and what it is that the madman sees that the rest of us cannot.

Kafka and Wiesel proffer questions from divergent angles of the same phe-

10 As Wiesel told the story at a public lecture at Boston University in the »Three Encounters« series (notes from lecture, April 5, 1993) he took a camera crew with him on the visit. Meeting the town's lone Jewish survivor, now the synagogue caretaker, Wiesel asked if he could somehow help alleviate his plight. The caretaker said that the roof of the synagogue leaked. Wiesel offered to feature that maintenance need on camera, with assurance that the government would get word and fix the leak in short order. With the camera rolling, Wiesel asked the caretaker, »What problems are you facing here, now?« expecting the answer to be about the leak. »The messiah still hasn't come,« was the caretaker's answer. I am still perplexed by the laughter that this tale aroused in the Boston audience; I gasped.

11 Cf. Wiesel, *Against Silence*, vol. II, 272 (interview with Harry James Cargas).

12 Cf. Wiesel, *Against Silence*, vol. III, 65.

nomena of imprisonment and torture Kafka really knew neither element in the drama firsthand. Yet he persuades us, however elliptically, that torture has effect on the soul of the perpetrator, like the officer of *In the Penal Colony*, pernicious if not parallel to the pain that the victim or prisoner suffers. Kafka investigates the suffering on both sides of the interaction.

### 13.6. SOLIDARITY WITH THE VICTIMS

Significantly, Elie Wiesel's first foray into fiction explores the very same question. In his first novel *Dawn*, he portrays the inner conflict of a *Haganah* fighter in pre-state Palestine, a Jewish survivor of the Shoah now finding himself in the executioner's seat. He is to kill a British soldier as a reprisal for Jewish comrades captured by the British. At one level, the question raised here is the same as Kafka's *Penal Colony*: what is the extent of damage the executioner is willing to inflict on himself in the process of torturing or killing his prisoner?

Both in *The Town Beyond the Wall* as in *Dawn*, we sense similar articulations of the genesis of Wiesel's moral direction and compass: to remain free, to address our own suffering; we work to free others, to address and mitigate the sufferings of others. At very least, as he would say elsewhere, to show solidarity with the victim; to let him know he is neither alone nor forgotten in his suffering.

Precisely this may be the answer to Kafka's question of suffering and isolation, clearly on display in *A Hunger Artist*. While once hunger artistry was a box-office draw, a vaudeville attraction; it has lost its hold on the imagination of the audience, as the story goes. Now the hunger artist who is the protagonist of this short piece can barely make himself noticed. Janitors have trouble distinguishing his emaciated body from the straw that lines his cage. In the end he is swept away with the dross. And what was his wish? Only to be seen, to be noticed, not to suffer in isolation and alone. The clincher, if there is one, of the story, is the penultimate sentence: »I always wanted you to admire my fasting.« One reading of *A Hunger Artist* is its affliction and heartbreak of the one who endures agony alone; it is doubly miserable. Even for those for whom victimhood is a profession, a calling, even show business; the very human element of

the forlorn solitariness of one who has no audience is tragic. Compare this to the loneliness of Moses for example, whom Wiesel calls »The most solitary ... hero in Biblical history« in *Messengers of God*.<sup>13</sup>

Wiesel viewed his late novel *A Mad Desire to Dance* as a response to his earlier *The Town Beyond the Wall*.<sup>14</sup> In the latter, Wiesel articulates his protagonist Doriel Waldman's tumultuous road to self-understanding in conversation with another. In this case, it is a nonromantic interlocutor of the opposite sex, his therapist Dr. Therese Goldschmidt. Waldman's parents survived the Holocaust only to die soon after in a crash. So he grapples with his past of having been a hidden child of the Shoah, then an orphan, and with his irrational fears of demonic possession.

### 13.7. SELF-DISCOVERY AND SELF-REVELATION

Wiesel's ever-present themes of madness, witness, the heavy presence of the dead, and tenuous identity are on display here in full. Yet the element of self-discovery and self-understanding through dialogue and friendship (two more of Wiesel's pervasive themes which receive less attention) make this work a stand-out in his *oeuvre*. Doriel's rambling, discursive verbal torrent at the beginning of his conversations with Dr. Goldschmidt are as self-revelatory as they need be to develop the novel's exposition. And further along in the discourse, once Doriel has exhausted himself with unburdening; he is able to ask questions of:

»Did I say anything original to you about man's destiny? About love? Am I capable of it? Did I describe the love of a real live woman, hidden away between the spring and the diviner? And life—what is life? I have no idea. But how are we to live? That's the real question. Is it worse to live in isolation, bumping into every corner, against every passerby,

13 Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York: Random House, 1976), 181.

14 Cf. Susan Salter Reynolds, »Elie Wiesel's Work is Never Done,« *Los Angeles Times*, February 22, 2009, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2009-feb-22-ca-elie-wiesel22-story.html>.

against every wall, or to live in a downy, misty space lacking consistency, where everything is blurry and translucent? As for life, Doctor, I think I've drunk it down to the sediments. Did I tell you often enough that I'm not happy? Did I tell you why I remained a bachelor? Did I talk to you enough about faith? I see it as a test without end, a confrontation. I fight, and I no longer remember why.«<sup>15</sup>

And in another section of the novel:

»At the slightest little thing, I and often for no apparent reason, I weep without shedding tears and I roar with laughter. I'm lonely, terribly lonely, through a crowd surrounds me and hems me in ... I feel like screaming, but no sound comes out of my tight throat. I feel like keeping quiet, and I hear myself speaking but in the language of birds.«<sup>16</sup>

Kafka's deepest self-revelation may well have come in a similarly one-sided conversation. Wiesel suggested that Kafka's singular novel or work that can be considered »complete«<sup>17</sup> may have been his letters to Felice Bauer, his fiancée for a short period of time in the early 1910's who lived in Berlin. Felice's letters to Kafka have never surfaced, so the voluminous epistolary conversation from Kafka to Felice form an impressive and even comprehensive album of Kafka's inner doubts, struggles, demons, and confidences. In the absence of the other half of the dialogue, the reader comes to depend only on Kafka's self-revelation in his letters, in which he reveals, with whatever degree of dramatic intent, his anxiety not just over marrying (really the least of his worries) but over existence, life, writing, and relating to others and his milieu.

Kafka's *Letters to Felice* span a period from September 1912 to October

15 Elie Wiesel, *A Mad Desire to Dance* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2009), 104.

16 Ibid.

17 Notes from class. The scholarly convention is to refer to *The Trial*, *The Castle*, and *Amerika* as Kafka's »novel-fragments« as he neither prepared nor permitted publication of them as novels; nor indicated that they were complete in any sense. Max Brod fitted the puzzle pieces together and published them as novels, albeit uncompleted.

1917, also his most fruitful era of literary productivity. Max Brod introduced Kafka to Felice, and the couple became engaged. They broke it off, and some years later they were engaged a second time. They never married. After Kafka's death, Felice married and moved from Germany to Switzerland and then to America. Kafka wrote her frequently, often daily, and wondered in those letters why she didn't write him back as frequently. Felice sold Kafka's letters to publisher Salman Schocken in 1955, who published them soon after.

In a letter in the earlier stages of their courtship, Kafka wrote Felice about his anxiety over the creative process:

»After all, who knows within himself how things really are with him? This tempestuous or floundering or morasslike inner self is what we really are; but by the secret process by which words are forced out of us, our self-knowledge is brought to light, and though it may still be veiled, yet it is there before us, wonderful or terrible to behold.«<sup>18</sup>

Later that year, he tried to convey the impossibility of Felice's fully knowing him: »For it is I alone who carry all anxieties and fears within me, as alive as snakes; I alone who scrutinize them constantly; and only I know what they are.«<sup>19</sup> And some time after they broke off their first engagement, and before becoming engaged a second time, Kafka wrote »At times I feel crushed by these torments on every side. But my present suffering is not the worst. The worst is that time passes, that this suffering makes me feel more wretched and incapable, and prospects for the future grow increasingly more dismal. Is that not enough?«<sup>20</sup>

No reader knows with certainty the degree of curation that a writer employs in ostensibly self-revelatory journals, diaries, letters; to say nothing of fictions. Perhaps the writer himself or herself would be hard-pressed to determine this.

18 Franz Kafka, »Letter to Felice, February 18/19, 1913,« in *Letters to Felice*, ed. Jürgen Born and Erich Heller (New York: Schocken Books, 1973).

19 Franz Kafka, »Letter to Felice, August 22, 1913,« in *Letters to Felice*, ed. Jürgen Born and Erich Heller (New York: Schocken Books, 1973).

20 Franz Kafka, »Letter to Felice, August 09, 1915,« in *Letters to Felice*, ed. Jürgen Born and Erich Heller (New York: Schocken Books, 1973).

Kafka's own *Letter To His Father* ultimately reached its addressee, but with perhaps as little candor and as much deliberate drama and rewriting of history as a later response piece by Nadine Gordimer, *Letter from His Father*.<sup>21</sup> The Letters to Felice, which Canetti called »Kafka's other Trial«<sup>22</sup> ask as much about literary form and self-revelation in its own way as Wiesel's *Mad Desire to Dance* does in its fictive transcripts of therapy sessions—itsself a precursor of later »reality-based« video series and podcasts that invite the audience in to turbulent inner dialogues with an indeterminable degree of authenticity.

### 13.8. WHAT REMAINS—MEMORY OR FORGETTING

After the quandary of literary creation versus testimony and witness that Kafka and Wiesel engage in *Letters to Felice* and *Mad Desire to Dance*, the question of what remains with time and with aging; as memory is occluded by forgetting.

Wiesel's *The Forgotten* constitutes in some ways another installment in his chronicle of the Shoah's aftereffects on survivors and their children. *The Forgotten* also folds in a new dimension of memory; namely its opposite: forgetting. The main figure here, Elhanan Rosenbaum, is suffering from Alzheimer's. Although that illness is not named, Wiesel called it »cancer of the memory.«<sup>23</sup> This appellation suggests the weight that the anxiety of forgetting brought about in Wiesel's thinking. If memory contains the secret of redemption, as Wiesel frequently cited/attributed to the Baal Shem Tov; then forgetting might be a condemnation to repeat the mistakes and even the horrors of the past, à la George Santayana.

The dissolution of memory in Alzheimer's or Dementia or whatever was plaguing Rosenbaum calls into question the very core of identity. If we are what we have seen, heard, lived, felt, perceived; then when those experiences begin to crumble and disintegrate, what is left? A gulf widens between our own self-

21 Nadine Gordimer, *Something Out There* (New York: Viking Press, 1984), 39–45.

22 In an extended essay by that title.

23 Elie Wiesel, *And the Sea is Never Full: Memoirs 1969–*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Schocken Books, 1999), 362.

perception and self-understanding and others' view of us. Viewed externally, we are the same figure with the same features, the same name, the same Social Security number; but inside we may forget who others are, who we ourselves are, and where and when we are existing. The identity withers and even vanishes such that the victim of Alzheimer's or Dementia no longer perceives himself or herself, much less in relation to others.

Kafka's short parable *An Imperial Message* has forgetting as its central image. A dying emperor transmits a message to a herald, who immediately confronts the impossibility of transmitting the message. Thus, this very important communicate is lost even as it is spoken. The larger conundrum that both Kafka and Wiesel view with great anxiety is the danger and the chaos of forgetting. As in *Before the Law*, the question appears again in a familiar key: Is it worse never to know, or to know but then to become unable to remember?

### 13.9. CONCLUSION—EXILE AND FIGHTING INDIFFERENCE

In a concluding session of a Kafka seminar at Boston University in December 1992, Wiesel related a story about Isaac Babel, the nonreligious Jewish journalist and writer of Ukraine a century ago. Toward the end of WWI, Babel was assigned as a war correspondent to the First Cavalry Army, a Cossack formation during the Russian Civil war (it became the genesis for his collection *The Red Cavalry*.) The regiment came to Chernobyl, and the Jews there hid out of fear. But Babel asked to be taken to the local Chassidic Rebbe, who had not gone into hiding; Babel wanted to convert him to communism, as Wiesel related. Babel was ushered into the Rebbe's study; and the Rebbe thought to himself, »If he came here, it means he needs me.« The Rebbe asked Babel in Yiddish, »what can I do for you?« Babel was so taken with this personage, he found only words from the depths of his being: »Rebbe,« Babel asked, »give me fervor.« Chassidism, Wiesel explained, teaches fervor—not to be cold and indifferent. Coldness and Chassidism are incompatible. Kafka was taken by the ideas he read about Chassidism toward the end of his life, because there was not any fervor in his life. »Although Kafka is a universal writer,« Wiesel explained, »he

remained a Jewish writer, through themes of exile,<sup>24</sup> the stranger, the inability and at the same time the need to pray, and the notion of waiting for someone.«

Wiesel himself portrayed these themes: of exile in geography, time and even from one's own self; of engagement with the stranger and the need for friendship (an element of humanity that Kafka always struggled with, in his own relationships, in his fictions, and in his letters and diaries); and the need to pray—in just one example, the torture of Michael in *The Town Beyond the Wall*, which is mockingly dubbed »prayer« by his captors.

Yet if what Wiesel taught about Kafka's lack of fervor is accurate, then this is a distinguishing feature of Wiesel's writings over Kafka. If Kafka was a literary visionary who could only warn of the treacherous paths down which Western civilization ambled blithely in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; Wiesel was the witness to its consequences and the terrible price it exacted on victims, bystanders, and perhaps even perpetrators. Wiesel spoke out with passion, conviction, and even desperation on behalf of persecuted people worldwide. Before US president Bill Clinton at the Dedication of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, Wiesel said »I have been to the former Yugoslavia, and I cannot sleep for what I have seen!«<sup>25</sup> Wiesel carried heavily the burden of knowledge of the depths of our inhumanity and depravity toward one another; and even worse of our vast capacity for indifference. Wiesel used every spoken and written medium at his disposal, and even his very physical presence, to shake us out of our indifference and willful ignorance of suffering and persecution.

Kafka sounded the alarm before it became too late; Wiesel lamented that for many it was already too late. Perhaps they would agree that humankind's redemption, if it is still possible, lies in our efforts to free one another from suf-

24 Though in a 1980 lecture, »Exile and the Human Condition,« Wiesel seemed to draw a fundamental distinction between the exile Kafka depicts and Jewish notions of exile: »Kafka's heroes always try to reach a castle but never do. Their exile occurs before, not after. It is much worse to enter the castle and then to leave it than not to be able to enter at all.« Wiesel, *Against Silence*, vol. I, 179.

25 Elie Wiesel, »Elie Wiesel's Remarks at the Dedication Ceremonies for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,« United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, April 22, 1993, <https://www.ushmm.org/information/about-the-museum/mission-and-history/wiesel>.

fering and isolation. As Kafka put it: »The Messiah will come only when he is no longer necessary; he will come only on the day after his arrival; he will come not on the last day, but on the very last.«<sup>26</sup>

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26 Franz Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 81.



# 14. MEMORY, ANGUISH, SUICIDE, AND THE HEALING POWER OF FRIENDSHIP IN ELIE WIESEL'S NOVEL *LE JOUR/DAY*

JANET E. MCCORD

## 14.1. APPROACHES

When asked how many case studies it would take to gain reliable insights into the problem of suicide, Edwin S. Shneidman, who was one of the leading experts in the field, replied: only one. He stated »... our best route to understanding suicide is not through the study of the structure of the brain, nor the study of social statistics, nor the study of mental diseases, but directly through the study of human emotions described in plain English, in the words of the suicidal person.«<sup>1</sup> Shneidman reminds us that much of life is taken up by the daily and ordinary aspects of the day-to-day. »And then there is pain and all of life's unhappy aspects: sorrow, shame, humiliation, fear, dread, defeat, anxiety. The dark side and dark moments.«<sup>2</sup> The risk factors and warning signs for suicide identified through research are limited in usefulness because they number into the hundreds. At the end of the day, every suicide is a solitary event and one can only do justice to those who die by suicide through paying attention to the details of each individual case. To understand suicide, we must understand the pain of suffering, torment, anguish, and why some people consider death as a way to escape from pain. »Pain warns us; pain both mobilizes us and saps our strength; pain, by its very nature, makes us want to stop it or escape from it.«<sup>3</sup>

The motifs of suffering, torment, anguish, and pain are common across many of Wiesel's stories, books, and plays. The motif of suicide may be subli-

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1 Edwin S. Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 6.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., 7.

minally present in some of these works, but it is only in the novel *Le Jour* (*Day* in English; *Tag* in German) that it is an explicit theme. The word »suicide« does not appear in the novel. The question of suicide hovers beneath the surface, only specifically referenced in the final pages and, even there, is not named as suicide or self-destruction, but as a reference to an event that was an accident »only in the most limited sense of the word.«<sup>4</sup>

The novel was originally published in French as *Le Jour* by Editions du Seuil in 1961, and published in English as *The Accident* in 1962. In 1985, *Night Dawn Day* was published as a trilogy, the inaugural volume of the B'nai B'rith Judaica Library by Aronson. This is the version used for this chapter, along with the 2006 Hill and Wang electronic version for Kindle that features a new preface by Elie Wiesel. Both the Aronson and Hill and Wang versions were translated by Anne Borchardt, and the texts are identical.

In his Introduction to the 1985 Aronson trilogy, Wiesel notes that these three books live in everything he subsequently wrote. With respect to the novels *Dawn* and *Day*, he speaks »of society's attraction to violence on one hand and the temptation of suicide on the other. How can we explain the hate that burns in so many homes? How can we understand the despair that pushes so many young people to suicide if not in the context of the Event?«<sup>5</sup> In his preface to the 2006 Hill and Wang electronic version, Wiesel notes *Day* is a sequel to *Dawn* and that the characters in these two novels, although not the same, »can be found in each other« (n.p.). For Wiesel, the primary theme of the novel is a question: How can one go on living in a hostile or indifferent world, a world dominated by despair and suffering?

In this chapter I will examine the novel *Day* as a portrait of the suicidal impulse. I will summarize the theoretical perspective of Edwin S. Shneidman regarding suicide, that suicide is always the result of intense and intolerable, for that person, psychological pain. An analysis of the main character of the novel in light of Shneidman's theories will offer insight into what may have been going on for him that unbearably hot and humid July evening. Finally, I will offer

4 Elie Wiesel, *Night. Dawn. Day (Trilogy)* (New York: Aronson B'nai B'rith, 1985), 315.

5 *Ibid.*, 3.

the hope of friendship, in this case the friendship offered by Gyula, referred as friend of the main character, as lifesaving and an antidote to suicidality.

## 14.2. SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL

Wiesel chooses a hot, July evening in New York City as the setting for the initial scenes. A slim novel of about 111 pages, *Day* is written in the first person—we do not learn the name of the narrator until the sixth of nine chapters (p. 280).<sup>6</sup> It is notable that the narrator bears the same name as the author: Eliezer ben Sarah. Notable also is that the protagonist's grandmother, who he describes as wearing a voluminous black shawl, bears a similarity to Wiesel's grandmother of whom he speaks in his remarks at the Prague Conference on Holocaust Era Assets (June 26–30, 2009). After a Hungarian lieutenant entered his parents' home to collect valuables, the lieutenant made his way to Wiesel's grandmother's home where he collected a few coins and his grandmother's Shabbat candlesticks. His grandfather had died in battle; his grandmother, a pious woman, wore only black clothes. Of this event he writes:

»Why the Hungarian and German armies needed what was her pitiful life's savings and her Shabbat candlesticks to win the war is beyond me. At times I am overcome with anger thinking of the red coat my little 8-year-old sister Tsipuka had received for our last holiday: she wore it in Birkenau, walking hand in hand with my mother and grandmother towards ... A daughter of an SS must have received it as a birthday present.«<sup>7</sup>

But in the first pages of the novel, we do not know any of this about the narrator—we do not even know he is a survivor of the Holocaust.

6 Page numbers in the main text refer to Wiesel's Novel *Day*, in Wiesel, *Night. Dawn. Day*.

7 Elie Wiesel, »Keynote speech by Elie Wiesel,« lootedart. The Central Registry of Information on Looted Cultural Property 1933–1945, June 26–30, 2009, accessed January 19, 2024, [https://www.lootedart.com/web\\_images/pdf2018/Wiesel1.pdf](https://www.lootedart.com/web_images/pdf2018/Wiesel1.pdf).

The summary of the novel will focus on the relationship between Eliezer and Kathleen, and on the appearance of Gyula in the final chapter. In between these elements of the novel are experiences Eliezer has with the nurses, his friends who visit, and his relationship with the surgeon, Dr. Paul Russel.

The air is heavy, and Eliezer and Kathleen, the woman in his life, are near Times Square, trying to decide what to do that evening. We learn that Kathleen loves Eliezer, and seems distressed that Eliezer is distant. They do not quarrel, but Eliezer recognizes that she wants more from him than he feels he can give—she wants him to love her, to focus on her and on their relationship.

We surmise that Eliezer is Jewish. We learn he pressures himself to lie to Kathleen, to pretend to love her, pretend to focus on her, to pretend to need her love. He thinks to himself how he must learn to lie: »I'll have to learn to lie, I kept thinking. Even for the short time I have left. To lie well. Without blushing. Until then I had been lying much too badly. I was awkward, my face would betray me and I would start blushing« (p. 209).

They go into a restaurant and order dinner, and Kathleen implores him to eat, even though he protests he is not hungry. She is accusatory: »How long do you think you can hold out? You're slowly killing yourself« (p. 210). It is here that we learn Eliezer is a survivor of the Holocaust—it is here he has his first intrusive memory. Triggered by the juices of the rare burger, he recalls someone in the barracks eating a slice of meat, wishing the man would throw him just one piece. The next day the man was hanged by fellow prisoners in the barracks—the flesh was from a man who had died (p. 210).

He cannot take another bite.

They pay for their meals and leave—and decide to go to the movies. There, at least, it will be air conditioned. The accident happens just eight pages into the novel, page 214. Much of the rest of the novel offers us windows into Eliezer, Kathleen, and their relationship as it unfolds over years. Because Eliezer is the narrator, all is described from his perspective and lived experience.

The accident was serious for Eliezer as the taxi had dragged him several meters. All bones on his left side were broken; there was internal bleeding; concussion. After three days there were many hours of surgery; blood transfusions; repair of arteries followed by two days in which Eliezer is hovering between life

and death. On the fifth day he regained consciousness, and found he was in a body cast. Regaining consciousness was followed by intense fever and the battling of infection. And, Kathleen.

Beginning the second chapter, Eliezer recounts how they met, in Paris. They leave the theater where they had met, introduced by mutual friends. From here, the novel alternates between memories of his growing relationship with Kathleen, and his experiences in the hospital over many weeks. Along the way, Eliezer experiences intrusive memories of his grandmother; of his childhood; of Kalman the cabalist; his parents; his sister; and various additional traumatic experiences.

He recalls Kathleen wanting him to tell her about himself but he refuses, afraid if he tells her what he has seen and experienced, she will hate him. Here we realize that he wants Kathleen's love, he wants to be in relationship, but is unsure how to proceed. He remembers a time on a ship, sailing from France to South America, and a time when he stood on the deck watching the sea. Here, we learn, may be the first time Eliezer considers the idea of ending his life by jumping into the sea—and yet he does not. Instead, he talks the entire night about himself and his experiences to a stranger who stands with him on the deck quietly listening and who, at daybreak, tells Eliezer that he thinks he will hate him. The next day, the stranger is gone, and no one remembers seeing him—it is as if he did not exist.

He considers, in his own mind, how he has felt:

»At first I had had a hard time getting used to the idea that I was alive. I thought of myself as dead. I couldn't eat, read, cry: I saw myself dead. I thought I was dead and that in a dream I had imagined myself alive. I knew I no longer existed, that my real self had stayed there, that my present self had nothing in common with the other, the real one. I was like the skin shed by a snake.« (p. 246)

Suddenly, the identity of the stranger on the ship's deck, the man who hated him, the man who embodied all the nameless and faceless people who live in the universe of dead souls, becomes clear. Eliezer is a survivor who belongs nei-

her to the dead nor among the living. He is dead and alive at the same time, ultimately abandoned by both worlds, living in exile, in the space between times, between spaces. Seen in this way, the stranger on the ship was his alter ego, and the hatred from the stranger is self-hatred. Many survivors of the Holocaust experienced utter abandonment by the world that knew and did nothing. Eliezer's sense of being rejected by the living is hard enough. He does not want to risk being abandoned by the dead by forgetting them, by failing to remember them in every hour of every day. This, then, is the root of his suffering.

She asks, doesn't suffering lead to saintliness? He responds, forcefully, emphatically:

»Suffering brings out the lowest, the most cowardly in man. There is a phase of suffering you reach beyond which you become a brute: beyond it you sell your soul—and worse, the souls of your friends—for a piece of bread, for some warmth, for a moment of oblivion, of sleep. Saints are those who die before the end of the story. The others, whose who live out their destiny, no longer dare look at themselves in the mirror, afraid they may see their inner image: a monster laughing at unhappy women and at saints who are dead ...« (p. 247)

And then he tells her everything, every story, of his grandmother, his sister, his father and mother, the screams, the nightmares. »I described to her how man can become a grave for the unburied dead« (p. 247). He hoped to rid himself of what he considered the filth inside of him. Finding no relief in hurting her with words, he takes off her clothes and tells her »I am going to take you ... but I don't love you« (p. 249), wanting her to know for certain he is not a saint. »I took her brutally, trying to hurt her. She bit her lips and didn't cry out« (p. 250).

A while later, they decide to go their separate ways, only to return to one another after five years. She had been married, unhappily, and now he considers it is his turn to help her through lying that he loves her. And yet, the relationship does not improve. On the day before the accident, Kathleen confronts him: »you claim you love me but you keep suffering. You say you love me in the present but you're still living in the past« (p. 302).

He is able to see and share, maybe for the first time, that his feelings of guilt keep him from living in the present, as well as his pledge never to forget.

»We cannot forget. The images are there in front of our eyes ... Our stay there planted time bombs within us. From time to time one of them explodes. And then we are nothing but suffering, shame, and guilt. We feel ashamed and guilty to be alive, to eat as much bread as we want, to wear good, warm socks in the winter« (p. 303).

He does not think anyone can help him. He does not think he can change or connect. He concludes that he would have to leave Kathleen. »I told myself: suffering pulls us farther away from other human beings. It builds a wall made of cries and contempt to separate us« (p. 303). He rationalizes that his solitude, his inability to connect, is fitting, a rejection and punishment he deserves. »A man who has suffered more than others, and differently, should live apart. Alone. Outside of any organized existence. He poisons the air ... He kills hope and the will to live ... He suffers and his contagious suffering calls forth echoes around him« (p. 304).

Kathleen offers a proposition: »I suggest an agreement ... I'll let you help me, provided you let me help you. All right?« (p. 304).

This is followed by two pages in which Eliezer ruminates on all the reasons this cannot and will not work. The past would have to be changed. Happiness is dead. Lying in bed, naked, next to a beautiful woman is incongruent with thinking about the dead in the clouds. The present time is a desert, with nothing. Life is a train station where a child has been left behind. Men like him should be left alone. »Our dead take with them to the hereafter not only clothes and food, but also the future of their descendants. Nothing remains below« (p. 305).

»So you accept?« Kathleen says. He agrees to her proposal. He agrees to let her make him happy; to forget the past; and to think only about their love.

She asks him where he »was« between her proposition and her question that brought his attention back to their conversation, back to real time. He shares he was at the train station where his parents had just left him on the platform—

and then he saw the train go into the smoke-gray sky. She reminds him that he had just promised not to think of his past anymore.

The accident happened the next day.

### 14.3. GYULA, ELIEZER'S FRIEND

In the final chapter, we meet Gyula. Eliezer muses »He alone had guessed. Gyula was my friend« (p. 308). Although Gyula appears in only ten or eleven pages in the novel, he is a key character. He is a Hungarian painter and he and Eliezer would often meet for lunch in a restaurant on the East Side of New York, perhaps in one of the restaurants in what was known at the time as Little Hungary in Yorkville, an enclave for immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe.

Gyula came to the hospital every day, announcing he would be painting Eliezer's portrait. As he paints, he tells Eliezer wild stories about his life. He does not ask about the accident, and refuses to allow Eliezer to tell him about it. Gyula likes to discover everything for himself, and he does not want Eliezer to tell him what happened or to explain anything. He will know.

One day, Gyula tells him of his »unsuccessful drowning« while swimming. He had a cramp, he allowed himself to sink, and was calm as he was about to die. Dying was fine with him. Alas, he found himself on the beach, revived, and disappointed. »Later, this unsuccessful drowning made me sing and dance. But there, on the sand, under the burning, purple sun ... I felt disappointed, disappointed at having come back« (p. 313).

On the day before Eliezer is to leave the hospital, Gyula comes with the finished portrait and places it on a chair for Eliezer to see.

»My heart was beating violently. I was there, facing me. My whole past was there, facing me. It was a painting in which black, interspersed with a few red spots, dominated. The sky was a thick black. The sun, a dark gray. My eyes were a beating red, like Soutine's. They belonged to a man who had seen God commit the most unforgiveable crime: to kill without a reason.« (p. 314)

Gyula asks Eliezer only one thing: do not talk. Eliezer realizes, having seen the painting and now Gyula's back as he stands at the window looking out at the East River, that Gyula had guessed. »The accident had been an accident only in the most limited sense of the word. The cab, I had seen it, I could have avoided it« (p. 315). Earlier, during one of his morning chats with the surgeon Dr. Russel, Eliezer realized that Dr. Russel had also guessed. Russel asks him: »Why don't you care about living? ... Don't deny it. I know ... You abandoned me. I had to wage the fight alone, all alone. Worse, you were on the other side, against me, on the side of the enemy ... Why don't you want to live? Why?« (p. 267).

Eliezer realizes he was on the edge of death, and he had been brought back to life by Dr. Russel against his will. He persuades Dr. Russel he was wrong—he emphasized his desire to live, to create, to find fulfillment and, finally, the winning argument, he wanted to live because he loved Kathleen. The physician-patient relationship is transactional. It is not a friendship. Thus, convincing Dr. Russel he was wrong about his perception was easy.

Eliezer could not hide from Gyula. In the novel, no one other than Gyula, not even Kathleen (or not especially Kathleen) is referred to as a friend, and this makes all the difference. Gyula can hear what Eliezer does not say and, in fact, wants Eliezer to remain silent. So they engage in a silent dialogue (p. 315):

»You see? Maybe God is dead, but man is alive. The proof: he is capable of friendship.«

›But what about the others? The others, Gyula? Those who died? What about them? Besides me, they have no friends.«

›You must forget them. You must chase them from your memory. With a whip if necessary.«

›Chase them, Gyula? With a whip, you said? To chase my father with a whip? And Grandmother? Grandmother too, chase her with a whip?«

›Yes, yes, and yes. The dead have no place down here. They must leave us in peace. If they refuse, use a whip.«

Eliezer cannot do as Gyula asks—he cannot strike out at the painting, hit

it, chase away the dead. Gyula can only shake his head. He reminds Eliezer that the dead do not suffer, and it is the duty of humanity to make suffering cease. Gyula tells him:

»If your suffering splashes others, those around you, those for whom you represent a reason to live, then you must kill it, choke it. If the dead are its source, kill them again, as often as you must to cut out their tongues ... Man must keep moving, searching, weighing, holding out his hand, offering himself, inventing himself« (p. 316).

Gyula's argument is for friendship, for relationship. »You should know this ... you should know that the dead, because they are no longer free, are no longer able to suffer. Only the living can. Kathleen is alive. I am alive. You must think of us. Not of them« (p. 316).

Suddenly the mood of conversation shifts and they have a brief conversation of how Kathleen can take care of him after leaving the hospital, that she loves him. That he can lean on her. Eliezer concurs—and again thinks to himself about how he will need to learn to lie well enough that Kathleen can be happy. »The living like lies, the way they like to acquire friendships« (p. 317).

Eliezer wants to love Kathleen. He needs to love Kathleen. He does not, yet, feel free to do so, so strong is the hold the dead have on him ... so strong is the hold he allows the dead to have on him. He is a survivor who does not belong to the dead, yet has not been able to find his way to the living.

Gyula, as if he knows that Eliezer is again back with the dead, takes a match and burns the painting, turning it this way and that, until it is reduced to ashes. As Gyula leaves the room, Eliezer is overcome and finally, for the first time, begins to cry.

#### 14.4. UNDERSTANDING THE SUICIDAL IMPULSE

Eliezer ben Sarah provides the reader with a portrait of a single suicide attempt that at no point seems sentimental or artificial.

How, then, can we understand the suicidal impulse? Edwin S. Shneidman, one of the founders of the discipline of suicidology, tells us

»In sum, in most cases, suicide stems from psychological pain, and the psychache itself arises from frustrated psychological needs. The suicidal state is a tense drama in the mind. It is a drama that often can benefit from the talents of a »rewrite specialist,« a psychotherapist or a consultant who can help recast the faulty final scene into something other than a tragic last act. Our goal should be nothing less than an effective orthosuicidology.«<sup>8</sup>

For Shneidman, suicide is not an inevitable action if pathways to shift the drama in the mind can be found. The notion of a »rewrite specialist« opens the possibilities for a suicidal person to find help beyond a psychotherapist. A »rewrite specialist« can offer life-saving and nonjudgmental succor, a listening ear, wisdom, life experience, support, and alternatives offered in a spirit of friendship. For Shneidman, anyone and everyone can prevent suicide.

Suicide, according to Shneidman, is a simple phenomenon: it is the notion that death is preferable to life, an action taken in the knowledge of its irreversibility, because one can no longer bear the pain. Shneidman explains this concept as the

»hurt, anguish, or ache that takes hold in the mind. It is intrinsically psychological—the pain of excessively felt shame, guilt, fear, anxiety, loneliness, angst, dread of growing old or of dying badly. When psychache occurs, its introspective reality is undeniable. Suicide happens when the psychache is deemed unbearable and death is actively sought to stop the unceasing flow of painful consciousness. Suicide is a tragic drama in the mind.«<sup>9</sup>

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8 Edwin S. Shneidman, »Perspectives on Suicidology: Further Reflections on Suicide and Psychache,« *Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior* 28, no. 3 (1998): 249.

9 Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind*, 13.

Suicide is thus a *psychological event*: the drama of pain, inner anguish and despair—whatever the cause and in whatever way it may find expression in the individual—always takes place in the *consciousness* of the individual. It is a »transient tempest« in the mind.<sup>10</sup> A person is at risk of dying by suicide when the individual's tolerance for psychological pain is exceeded. »The prevention of suicide (with a highly lethal person) is then primarily a matter of addressing and partially alleviating those frustrated psychological needs that are driving that person to suicide. The rule is simple: Mollify the psychache.«<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, suicide is also a *phenomenological* event and not a disease or mental disorder. Shneidman was undeniably a mentalist, but he also focused on cognition and he never conceded that psychiatric illness was the cause of suicide.<sup>12</sup> Instead, he theorized that suicide was always logical, from the distinctive perspective of the suicidal individual. As Jobes (2023) noted, Shneidman argued that, to help a suicidal person, the clinician must »deeply understand that person's idiosyncratic psychological suffering—what he referred to as the phenomenology of the suicidal mind.«<sup>13</sup>

Shneidman proposed looking at suicide as a cubic model, considering suicide as a convergence of three elements: pain; press; and perturbation.<sup>14</sup> Each of these elements has a range of severity from 1 to 5, with 5 being the most intense. When all three elements are at their highest severity, the person is at highest risk of suicide. Conversely, reduce the severity of any of the three, even a little bit, and the person will usually choose to live.

»Individuals can lead long, unhappy lives as 4s and 3s, but the specific

10 Edwin S. Shneidman, *Suicide as Psychache: A Clinical Approach to Self-Destructive Behavior* (Northvale, London: Jason Aronson, 1993), 55.

11 *Ibid.*, 53.

12 Edwin S. Shneidman, *Definition of Suicide* (New York, Wiley, 1985).

13 David A. Jobes, *Managing Suicidal Risk: A Collaborative Approach* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2023), 24–25.

14 Edwin S. Shneidman, »A psychological approach to suicide,« in *Cataclyms, crises, and catastrophes: Psychology in action*, ed. Gary R. VandenBos and Brenda K. Bryant (Washington: American Psychological Association 1987), 147–183; Shneidman, *Suicide as Psychache*.

goal in suicide prevention is to remove the individual from the 5-5-5 cubelet—to save his or her life. All else (demographic variables, family history, previous suicidal history) is peripheral, except as those and other factors bear on the presently felt pain, perturbation, and negative press.«<sup>15</sup>

Experienced at lower levels of severity, the cubic model brings together three elements that anyone can experience at any time, to varying degrees that do not necessarily lead to a suicidal outcome.

The *pain* is psychological pain, or *psychache*, that stems from one or more of twenty psychological needs that are not met or that are thwarted. These might include the need to accomplish something; to affiliate with another person in, for example, friendship; to make up for failure; to protect the self, maybe by preserving psychological distance; to nurture another person. The needs can be simple but intense, like the need to be loved; the need to strike first; or the need to belong.

*Press* is defined by Shneidman as occurring in the inner and outer world of an individual—those things that move in on an individual, to which the individual responds in positive or negative ways. There is good press (like winning the lottery) and bad press (situations that harm the individual or are experienced as threatening to well-being).

*Perturbation* is defined as the state of being upset. Within a suicidal crisis, perturbation includes cognitive constriction (the narrowing of the blinders), and the intense feeling that a decision (for or against self-killing) must be made. A high state of perturbation may result in what looks, to others, as an impulsive action. In fact, the suicidal act takes place when the person is in the middle of a transient psychological constriction of affect—a moment when, to the individual's thinking, the choice is dichotomous: continue in unbearable pain, or kill the body so the pain will end.

The three elements do not include psychiatric illness, including depression. Psychiatric illnesses, Shneidman emphasized throughout his work, were irrele-

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15 Shneidman, *Suicide as Psychache*, 44.

vant unless the individual experienced them as unbearably painful. Leenaars et al. (2022) have suggested that in many cases it is not a psychiatric illness at all, but a state in which individuals are »basically totally paralyzed by pain and have no reason for living.«<sup>16</sup>

The cubic model illustrating the three primary elements that lead to a suicidal episode offer a window into how to help. Shneidman argued that if the intensity of one or more of these three elements can be reduced, even a little, the suicidal crisis may pass. To help a suicidal person, Shneidman argued there are only two questions that are needed: Where do you hurt? How can I help you? A nonjudgmental listening ear can, then, allow a person in crisis to share what is going on, and to make their way towards an alternative coping strategy. To help requires empathy and the creation of a therapeutic alliance with the suicidal patient, thereby establishing a safe space for a suicidal person to explore their suffering and create strategies for coping.

#### 14.5. ANALYSIS IN WIESEL'S NOVEL

In the case of Eliezer ben Sarah, it is challenging, at first, to identify him as a suicidal individual. Although he is in deep psychological pain, and he may be experiencing his relationship with Kathleen as a source of stress, he does not seem particularly perturbed. He is immersed in his memories of his grandmother, his sister, his parents, the others who died. He does not seem to think about killing himself and he does not make any attempts—at least that we know of. He does not express a wish to be dead, but at the same time, he does not want to live—he feels guilty he is alive while his parents, his sister, and his grandmother are dead. He is stuck *there*, in the past, in the abyss—he is unable and, perhaps, unwilling to make the memories go away. He cannot, or will not, pull himself out of his past to live in the present.

In Times Square, before crossing the street to the theater, Kathleen asks him

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16 Antoon A. Leenaars, Gudrun Dieserud and Susanne Wenckstern, »The Mask of Suicide,« *Archives of Suicide Research* 26, no. 3 (2022): 1075.

where he wants to go. »Far ... very far« he answers (p. 211). In his mind, he shares with Kathleen:

»I was thinking: to go far away, where the roads leading to simplicity are known not merely to a select group, but to all; where love, laughter, songs, and prayers carry with them neither anger nor shame; where I can think about myself without anguish, without contempt; where the wine, Kathleen, is pure and not mixed with the spit of corpses; where the dead live in cemeteries and not in the hearts and memories of men.«  
(p. 211–212)

This is the closest we get in the novel to an expression of a suicidal wish, a wish that is not thought out, not planned, but that intrudes. But even here, it is not a wish to *be dead*, but a wish to be somewhere the dead are *not*. Given, however, that the dead are with him every hour of every day, and he cannot escape them, it is possible he realized that the dead are with him and, ironically, the only way to be away from the dead is to *be dead*.

Eliezer has been experiencing high levels of psychological pain for years, since liberation. His relationship with Kathleen presents him with high levels of negative press with a self-imposed requirement that he lie about his love for her, his ability to love her, in order to make her happy. His negative press includes high levels of self-loathing, the inability to forgive himself for surviving when so many others did not. These two elements converge within his mind and, in this brief moment, it is too much for him. His levels of perturbation skyrocket and he is catapulted into a suicidal crisis.

Stepping in front of the taxi is unplanned and opportunistic. It is one way to go far, far away.

Thinking back on this moment, Eliezer wonders: »What did I hear first? The grotesque screeching of brakes or the shrill scream of a woman? I no longer remember« (p. 214).

The notion of dissembling can help in our understanding of how Eliezer arrives at this moment without anyone, including him, seeing it coming. Shneidman and others have theorized that the majority of suicidal people give clues

and warnings about their suicidal state, and suicidal intentions. Some have estimated that 90% of suicidal people give warnings or make comments indicating their intent, even if these comments make sense only in retrospect.<sup>17</sup>

»We are then thrown, conceptually, into the world of *dissembling*. This is the world of individuals who keep their own secrets even, or especially, from their spouses. They are people who live undisclosed lives. We are then in the world of masks and pretense; it is the world of double lives, even of spies and secret agents; and also of quiet, laconic, and naturally taciturn people; of people who live together and seemingly love each other and still do not share their most important personal plans, such as the plan to kill themselves on the morrow.«<sup>18</sup>

Shneidman puzzled over how individuals could dissemble, and how the clues they offered could be veiled, distorted, sometimes misleading, often indirectly. There is almost no research on the phenomenon of dissembling with respect to suicide. One study that examines dissembling<sup>19</sup> relies on interviews with the bereaved after suicide, through interviews conducted between 6 and 18 months after the death.

In this study, nearly 80% of the survivors of suicide deaths detected, in retrospect, the ways the deceased had dissembled. They were described as keeping things to themselves; hiding behind a façade; very closed off from others: »We found in 78 cases, a large majority (65.0%) were well aware (conscious) of the decedent's mask.«<sup>20</sup> They found, further, that the decedents were perceived to have had difficulty coping with adversity, were unable to adjust, and lacked resilience.

In the novel, if Eliezer is actively suicidal, he is unaware of it on a conscious level—therefore, his dissembling is unconscious. Only in retrospect can

17 Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind*; Leenaars et al., »The Mask of Suicide«.

18 Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind*, 57.

19 Leenaars et al., »The Mask of Suicide«.

20 *Ibid.*, 1087.

we see his spiral towards a suicidal impulse: his repeated entreaties to himself to learn how to lie, to learn how to eat, to learn ways to make Kathleen happy, and to make her think he is happy as well, alongside the intrusive memories of those he loved, those who died in the Holocaust. He is vigilant in his efforts to convince her he loves her, that he is capable of loving her, and capable of being loved. Over the years they are together, he tries to conform to her expectations of what it means to demonstrate love, to be in relationship. Only occasionally does he push back such as when she tells him »Your past is dead. Dead and buried« and he replies with »I am my past. If it's buried, I'm buried with it« (p. 260).

#### 14.6. CONCLUSION

It is possible that, had Eliezer not survived his injuries and had died on the operating table, Dr. Paul Russel would have concluded that the patient had no will to live, and the altercation with the speeding taxi was an intentional suicidal event.

If Eliezer had died, given the history of their relationship and the challenges they faced in establishing intimacy on an emotional level, Kathleen may have had many questions, even suspicions, about whether or not the altercation with the taxi was intentional. Kathleen knew about the memories that haunted him. She knew he found stepping away from his past to be nearly impossible. But, he had promised to let her make him happy, to forget his past, and to concentrate on their love for each other. Thus, Kathleen may have concluded that the event was, in fact, an unfortunate and tragic accident.

Gyula would not have been fooled. He knew Eliezer in ways no one else did—he knew Eliezer in ways Eliezer did not know himself. He was also a survivor, and had struggled with choosing life over death. After his unsuccessful drowning, Gyula was initially disappointed to be alive. At the same time, later on, after he survived, Gyula came to sing and dance, happy to be able to live, to help a suffering person, and to aid in that person's struggle past the suffering. In other words, Gyula learned the importance of being a friend, and he knew that Eliezer could find his way to suffer less. This is why Gyula goes to Eliezer's

room every day, and why he paints Eliezer's portrait—he wants to help Eliezer discover who he is, and find a way to send the dead away and become the person he can be.

Gyula sees that Eliezer is unable to banish the memories that dominate his life. Allowing himself to be held captive in despair, firmly in the grip of the dead, Eliezer was unable to be in relationship with or extend his hand to those who loved him here and now. This shifts when Gyula, in rage, burns the painting. Angry that the memory of the dead almost cost Eliezer his life, Gyula burns the painting under Eliezer's protest.

Gyula knows that without his help, Eliezer would not be able to silence the spirits and, therefore, out of friendship, he does what Eliezer is unable to do. Gyula knows that if Eliezer is to live, someone must shift the drama in Eliezer's mind. In burning the painting, Gyula becomes what Shneidman calls the »rewrite specialist«<sup>21</sup> offering Eliezer nonjudgemental succor, a listening ear, wisdom, life experience, support, and alternatives—all in the spirit of friendship.

Eliezer, for his part, is not quite ready for this. Devastated, he sees his loved ones go up in smoke a second time, but he finds he is able to cry for the first time. Ultimately, it is a result of an act of friendship offered by Gyula, as challenging as it was, that wakes Eliezer up and, we hope, gives him a new awareness of himself and a way back to life.

After Gyula leaves the hospital room, leaving the ashes of the painting behind, we do not know what happens next.

Eliezer's path had led to ever deeper tendencies toward self-destruction because his inner anguish, the result of isolation and loneliness that he had not been able to stop, became too much to bear. He needed to move forward and compartmentalize the past in a new way, a way that allowed him to live. He needed to find a way to loving another person, of being in relationship. He needed to identify reasons for living. It may be that the ability to cry allows Eliezer to find his footing in life.

Eliezer's tears are tears of hope in the midst of a seemingly hopeless situation. They represent a spark of growth. We sense that life for Eliezer will shift in

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21 Shneidman, *Suicide as Psychache*.

genuine and authentic ways, that his relationship with Kathleen will grow, and the next chapter of his life will be fruitful. If the central question of the novel is »how can one go on living in a hostile or indifferent world, a world dominated by despair and suffering?« then the answer is linked to friendship. It is the outstretched hand of friendship that saves Eliezer's life, and it is the reality and difficulty of friendship that Elie Wiesel presents to the reader as the defining aspect of a post-Holocaust world.<sup>22</sup>

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22 Shneidman, *Suicide as Psychache*.



## 15. HEEDING THE MUTED CRY: EMBLEMS OF REDEMPTION IN ELIE WIESEL'S *THE FORGOTTEN*

CHRISTINE J. WUNDERLI

»Forgetfulness leads to exile; remembrance is the key to redemption.«  
—The Ba'al Shem Tov

### 15.1. TRAUMA AND THE POWER OF MEMORY

Biographical narratives, both individual and collective, are always written by way of memory; our stories, small and large, are constructed by what we remember, and how and why we remember. Memory is also the necessary component of all reconstruction of historical events; as such, it is the prerequisite of all truth and truthfulness. Indeed, there can be no truth without it. Memory is the handmaiden of truth, its closest friend and sometimes most feared enemy.

Elie Wiesel's narratives underscore his commitment to memory, remembrance, and truth. Each story, essay, legend, lecture, memoir, and novel are (in)formed and driven by memory. At times, Wiesel's remembering is clear, transparent, and direct; at other times foreboding and vague. This propensity is, to some extent at least, intentional, a tool Wiesel has carefully crafted to best convey his message. Undoubtedly, however, it is unintentional as well, the fallout of atrocity, tinged by trauma and time.

In his novel *The Forgotten*,<sup>1</sup> Wiesel sets out to investigate the consequences of trauma, and the necessity and power of memory. At the center of the work lies an act of atrocity—a rape—whose impact is felt not only by those who remember it, but also by those who unknowingly stand at its periphery, distanced from it by both time and space. Within this context, as Wiesel addresses issues of intergenerational and secondary trauma, he raises questions regarding the

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1 Elie Wiesel, *The Forgotten* (New York: Summit Books, 1992).

redemptive potential of memory; in the attentive, sensitive transmission of memory; and in subsequent acts of kindness and love. In so doing, he explores the ethical dimension of remembrance, and the need for a radical, humane ethic. Wiesel's conclusion is clear, uncompromising, and surprisingly simple: *memory* alone is not enough for it requires transmission through *remembrance*, followed by responsible action by those who have listened and received it. Redemption can take place only when remembering, hearing, and responding coincide.

*The Forgotten* hosts a small nucleus of characters whose biographies are carefully interwoven. Together they fashion the plot into an intricate, multi-layered whole. Each biographical strand is essential to determining the arc and outcome of the story. The result is a remarkable tale not only of suffering and loss but also of personal liberation. Strikingly, the work's most poignant emblems of redemption clandestinely draw from Kabbalistic and Hasidic traditions. Hasidism's particularly strong impact on Wiesel's mystical worldview has been, of course, well-reviewed.<sup>2</sup> Distilling Kabbalistic and Hasidic elements of *The Forgotten* helps to unlock the deep heart of the work and elicit its compelling message.

## 15.2. PLOT

*The Forgotten* subtly embraces two protagonists whose lives are inextricably linked: a prominent one, and a silent, passive one. Elhanan is the first of these. A Holocaust survivor now living and working in New York City, he works as a therapist who treats other survivors. The second protagonist is an unnamed sexual assault victim who, though now an ageing woman, has never ventured far from home. Though the two have only met once—at the scene of the rape in Feherfalu, Romania, decades before—they remain bound to each other by

2 Cf. Elie Wiesel, *Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters*, trans. Marion Wiesel (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1993), vii–viii; Reinhold Boschki, »Heimweh nach Sighet: Einführung in die literarische Welt Wiesels,« in *Das Gegenteil von Gültigkeit ist Erinnerung: Versuche zu Elie Wiesel*, ed. Dagmar Mensink and Reinhold Boschki (Mainz: Grünewald, 1995), 54–55; Robert McAfee Brown, *Elie Wiesel. Messenger to All Humanity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 117–122.

the crime committed and all the suffering that ensued. Over time and great distance, and unknown to each other, the yoke of their shared trauma had come to determine the devastating course of their lives. Elhanan has spent the years attempting to flee the past and atone for its perceived failures; the woman has known only sorrow, crisis, and mental illness. Indeed, for both, the wounds of the past have never closed.

The rape had taken place in Feherfalu as the war's end was approaching. Elhanan, having joined a Jewish militia group, had witnessed it himself. The victim had been Zoltan's widow—Zoltan, a Christian tyrant with a notorious reputation of violence against shtetl Jews. The perpetrator was Elhanan's closest comrade and friend Itzik, who sought to avenge the shtetl's dead. Itzik had brutally raped the woman as Elhanan, paralyzed by shock and fear, watched on.

The horror of that moment came to mark the lives of both Elhanan and the widow for the rest of their lives. The rape remains frozen in time, and frozen within them. It repeats itself over and over again, continuing to maim and imprison, to shatter and leave bereft, thus rendering impossible all future life and joy.

Years pass; for Elhanan, time and place change. Still, he has never spoken of the rape. He never spoke of to his wife Talia, now dead. Nor to his son, Malkiel, who has drawn himself away. The slate had needed to be wiped clean of memory; no traces of the past were to remain. Elhanan's now clean and structured life has retained but few traces of the past. He treats his patients, and in his spare time he immerses himself in obscure Hasidic texts.

Elhanan's life, however, remains replete with guilt and remorse; indeed, it is driven by these. Though silenced, the past is always present. Inasmuch as Elhanan continues to believe he could have prevented the rape, the widow remains present, too. Deep within, Elhanan considers himself responsible for the rape. Even now, decades later, he attempts to atone for that one grave failure with his entire life. The attempt, however, has failed; there is no balm for the wound. Even as Elhanan is diagnosed with dementia, he considers it a punishment for his role in the as of yet unspoken of past.

Sending Malkiel to Romania to find the widow is intended to amend the past. Elhanan, knowing the time will soon come when he will forget the story

altogether, decides to bear witness to the crime by relaying the story to Malkiel. As Malkiel receives his father's testimony, his own world changes. He now knows the reasons for his struggles are more complex than once thought, and realizes that his brokenness is bound to his father's own. Moved by the story, and driven by his own sense of trauma, Malkiel travels to Romania to find the lost shtetl and the woman.

The shtetl, of course, has vanished, and its location now bears another name. All that remains of the shtetl is the Jewish cemetery, watched over by a Jewish madman, the only survivor of the carnage that had taken place decades earlier. The man is now old, and has visions of the dead. They meet at night there, he tells Malkiel, they discuss the past and pass their judgments. They too have not forgotten, he claims. The past is alive; it has not gone away at all. All that once was, still is. Nothing has happened which could set any of it free. Intrigued by what he hears, Malkiel decides not to alter his course of action.

By chance or by fate, Malkiel finds the widow. He confronts her about the rape. She is distraught, and quickly full of memory. She proceeds to tell Malkiel her version of the story. She indicates that the only thing which sustained her since that day has been the memory of the kind face of an innocent stranger who had been present at the rape. Upon learning that Malkiel's father was, in fact, that very man, she collapses in disbelief. As his father's proxy, he offers her his olive branch. Events have come full circle now. Upon finding a balm for the ancient wound, the perpetuation of the trauma has finally been broken. Strikingly, as Elhanan is reconciled to the widow through this proxy son, the widow's won exile is ended. Though the past cannot be undone, a form of personal liberation is born. For Elhanan, for the widow and for Malkiel, this liberation has been facilitated by both memory and an act of compassion and love.

### 15.3. EMBLEMS OF REDEMPTION

Both Kabbalistic and Hasidic thought embrace deep and beautiful theologies. Their images are rich, sonorous, and resound with mystery. Within their overarching theme of redemption, they set out to explore how redemption relates to all aspects of creation. Their conclusion is striking: redemption is rendered

necessary by way of the very *act* of creating itself. Inasmuch as a fracturing of the cosmos has occurred, it is incumbent upon human beings to assist in its vital reparation. The ethical implications of these findings are momentous. At their center lies, of course, the universal longing to understand the existence and purpose of all things. In this context, the theme of redemption emerges as a touchstone of meaning and hope.

A »deep reading« of *The Forgotten*, with a view to redemption themes in particular, distills the clandestine presence of Kabbalistic and Hasidic themes. Subtly subsumed by Wiesel, these help mold the plot and propel it forwards. Vivid images emerge that drive home his urgent warning. In this context, any illusion of the world as being a fundamentally good place is shattered. We learn that goodness in the world is always painfully won. Though revolted by the sight of brutality, we are compelled to not look away. In being called to *reality*, however, we are also drawn towards new possibilities of redemption.

### 15.3.1. GENOCIDE, THE SHTETL, AND SHEVIRAT HA-KELIM

In *The Forgotten*, Wiesel understands the devastation of genocide as being rooted in the human condition's profound brokenness and evil. The images he conveys echo of Jewish myth and legend, referencing at times mystical explanations for the very fact of existence. With them, we are drawn back into ancient stories of creation and its fall into cosmic chaos.

Although their versions of creation differ on some points, both Kabbalistic and Hasidic spirituality understand creation as not having unfolded without calamity. According to the Lurianic Kabbalah, God's creating entailed an enormous exertion. The amount of light flowing in and through the *sefirot*—divine emanations or attributes that had taken on the form of vessels—had likewise been immense. During an upheaval known as *Shevirat ha-Kelim*, the lowest *sefirot* broke and shards of divine light were violently dispersed throughout the cosmos.<sup>3</sup> This primordial catastrophe wreaked havoc in the cosmos, resulting in

3 Cf. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in European Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 265–268; Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Quadrangle, 1974), 135–140; Joseph Dan, *Kabbalah: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford Uni-

an unspeakable crisis within the divine realm. Evil abounded, and all of creation cried out for redemption. Redemption, or *Tikkun*, would therefore entail returning all the scattered shards of light back to their rightful place and mending every broken vessel.<sup>4</sup>

*The Forgotten* hints at this primordial catastrophe and its devastating aftermath, and reiterates the call for redemption. Significantly, inasmuch as the shtetl of Feherfalu serves as a microcosm of Eastern European Jewry, its annihilation represents the Holocaust. The Holocaust can be understood as the time all the vessels of God were shattered and their divine light was scattered. The destruction of Feherfalu is utter; as such, it carries with it the weight of the Holocaust, and of all the broken vessels that were crushed at the beginning of time.

*The Forgotten* suggests that, though the situation be dire, the light of the shtetl has not been entirely lost. Instead, it has been transferred to *memory*, and as such now resides within the spirits of witnesses and survivors. It waits there to be released and returned to its rightful place, and therewith to be redeemed and made whole once again. It is in this context that the redeeming power of memory—of remembrance—emerges as the central theme of the work.

### 15.3.2. THE WIDOW AND THE SHEKHINAH

Genocide is violence on the largest possible scale; rape is violence on the most intimate scale. The nameless widow of *The Forgotten* represents the *Shekhinah* of Kabbalistic and Hasidic lore, and the existential fallout of her violation represents her exile. According to Kabbalistic myth, as God—the *ein sof* («The Infinite») —called the cosmos into being *ex nihilo*, he contracted himself infinitely in the act of infinite exertion known as *Tzimtzum*.<sup>5</sup> As he did, his ten, light-filled *sefirot* emanated their divine light, calling forth the cosmos by way of a vital and dynamic layering. Ten descending spheres of the cosmos were then

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versity Press, 2007), 74–78.

4 Cf. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 265, 273–78; Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 140–144, 167; Dan, *Kabbalah*, 78–80.

5 Cf. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 260–264; Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 128–135; Dan, *Kabbalah*, 74–76.

generated, each of them corresponding to a particular *sefira*, and therefore to an aspect of God.

It is in the lowest sphere that the *Shekhinah* is found.<sup>6</sup> The *Shekhinah* constitutes the feminine essence, or Divine Presence, of God.<sup>7</sup> Her new abode is full of darkness and evil; it is a place of exile for the *Shekhinah*.<sup>8</sup> In being continuously exposed to evil of all kinds, her exile is a grievous one. Sensitive to every form, flow, and movement of evil, she longs to be fully reunited with the divine.<sup>9</sup>

In Hasidic thought, human beings are understood to help usher in *Tikkun* by way of humane, ethical acts on earth.<sup>10</sup> By doing good deeds, the sparks can be lifted back up, the vessels can be mended, and the flow between the divine and *Shekhinah* can be restored. Ultimately, when all goodness is fulfilled, the *Shekhinah* will be fully liberated, set free from her exile, and released back into the divine.<sup>11</sup>

In *The Forgotten*, the story of the widow's rape constitutes a complex figuring of the myth of the *Shekhinah*. That singular act of violence has transported the woman to a place where no light can enter. As with the *Shekhinah*, she finds herself in a place of grievous exile. Importantly, however, her release from exile is brought about only by the actions of others. As Malkiel finds her and speaks of the rape, a first step towards redemption is made: all at once, the past is made present through memory. There is no longer any distance between what once was and now is. Then, as Malkiel reveals himself as Elhanan's son and the bearer of his father's memory, a dramatic exchange occurs: the widow accepts the olive branch and then extends her own. She indicates that that which had tormented Elhanan for so long—his presence at the rape—is exactly what has sustained

6 Cf. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 111–112; Scholem, *Major Trends*, 229–230.

7 Cf. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 17, 111; Dan, *Kabbalah*, 47–50.

8 Cf. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 142–143, 164, 167.

9 Cf. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 230–235.

10 Cf. Susanne Talabardon, *Chassidismus* (Tübingen: utb, 2016), 52–54.

11 Cf. Martin Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, ed. and trans. Maurice Friedman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 37–44.

her all the years past. With this, the dark and imprisoned memory of both parties is filled with light, and they are set free. The widow's exile has now ended.

### 15.3.3. ELHANAN AS THE »JUST MAN«

Hasidic lore is replete with legends of the »Just Man« or »Righteous Man«. According to the tradition, thirty-six »just« men—known as *Tzadikim Nistarim*—walk the earth. Though unbeknownst to them, they play a crucial role in *Tikkun* by their acts of kindness, mercy, and love; by their humility and miracles; and by seeking what is good even in the presence of evil. While living in close mystical communion with God, the thirty-six secretly help elevate the scattered shards of light back into the divine. By transforming evil into good in this way, they actively participate in redeeming the creation from its entanglement in the lowest levels of the cosmos. In so doing, they will ultimately play a vital role in liberating the *Shekhina* from her exile.<sup>12</sup>

Elhanan stands as the Just Man par excellence. Even in the torment of memory and unresolved guilt, he does what he can. He knows he cannot heal himself by ridding himself of the past. He knows, too, that his therapeutic work cannot undo the harm that has been done or atone him for the crime of omission he once committed. Still, he functions as a receptacle for others' suffering. By listening to the stories of other survivors, he receives their memories into his own and in so doing assists in lessening their pain. The power of past evil abates as its psychological grip on them eases. Whether or not this act of receiving others' pain exacerbates Elhanan's own is not addressed in the text; however, we can well assume it to be so.

As Elhanan's memory begins to fade, he knows that a final chance at redemption must not be lost. By bearing witness to his son, and in commissioning him to find the widow and make amends with her, he acts rightly. His commitment to honor life by dispelling evil and death finds hands and feet, even as it entails acting with profound vulnerability. Elhanan cannot know whether the

12 Cf. Erwin K. J. Hilburg, *Der Chassidismus* (Köln: Germania Judaica, 1968), 23–25.

journey to find the widow will bear fruit, but he knows the journey must be made. At its heart, the very redemption of the world is at stake.

#### 15.3.4. THE THWARTED TIKKUN

The devastation resulting from the breaking of the vessels stands in urgent need of complete restoration. For this restoration—*Tikkun*—to occur, however, all conditions must be fulfilled: all dispersed shards of light must be lifted back up into the divine, and all the broken vessels must be mended. Obedience to the Torah, indeed, to the whole of the law—the *Halakhah*—is required for *Tikkun* to take place. *Tikkun* has been easily thwarted, however, should an error occur. Disobedience and omission tend to draw shards of light back into the realm of evil, thereby fortifying evil's insidious powers. Such occurrences always pose a setback to *Tikkun*.<sup>13</sup>

The hope of final redemption in *The Forgotten* remains, at the end of the novel, unfulfilled. When Malkiel returns home from Romania, he finds his father on his deathbed. Elhanan is still bearing witness as he shifts between moments of lucidity and sudden forgetting. Yet somehow he knows he has one final message to relate to his son. This message is vital for all to be well in the end. However, it slips away as Elhanan finally succumbs to his illness. This last piece of the puzzle has now been lost forever. *Tikkun* has been thwarted once again.

#### 15.4. THE ETHICS OF REMEMBRANCE

Modern trauma theory has sought to understand the dark mechanisms of trauma, memory, and pathological response, and to develop therapeutic methods of addressing them.<sup>14</sup> It speaks less of redemption than of the need for psychological integration. But are these terms interchangeable? On first reading,

13 Cf. Dan, *Kabbalah*, 79–80.

14 Cf. Susannah Radstone, »Trauma Theory: Contexts, Politics, Ethics,« Paragraph 30, no. 1 (2007): 9–29; Dori Laub, »An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival,« in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 57–92.

*The Forgotten* seems to suggest they are. I would argue, however, that Wiesel's findings are much more nuanced. In the following, I would like to address this issue briefly, and relate it to the central message of the work.

#### 15.4.1. TRAUMA, ALIENATION, AND EXILE

Elhanan has spent his career as a therapist helping patients integrate their trauma into their respective biographies. At the same time, however, his own trauma remains in tact; it is yet an open wound left unhealed by all the acts of penance and goodwill intended to abate it. The widow's rape has not been forgotten, not at all; in fact, its wound has chafed and festered with the passing of time. The widow's wound is, in fact Elhanan's own. Indeed, memory alone has not been enough, and more is required. Elhanan knows he must tell his story, and also knows it must be heard by the right person. His son Malkiel is that person. The reasons for this are complex, and relate to the difficult father-son symbiosis that has developed over the course of their relationship.

Importantly, Malkiel, though he knows nothing of the rape, has been traumatized by it as well. In essence, Elhanan, who has never spoken of the crime, has left his son with his trauma, but not his *memory*. A dangerous entanglement has resulted that vacillates between feigned intimacy and distain. Both men need to be redeemed.

The first step towards redemption is made when Elhanan, now old and ill, bears witness to Malkiel. A kind of »memory transfusion« takes place.<sup>15</sup> The journey towards healing, however, has only just begun. Both Elhanan and Malkiel know that true redemption is only possible if the widow is redeemed as well, if she is found and the alleged crime of omission is confessed, repented of, and forgiven. Because it is she who has carried the brunt of the trauma, the key to redemption and liberation lies ultimately with her.

In this context, the widow of *The Forgotten* functions as the work's silent,

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15 Cf. Alan L. Berger, »Transfusing Memory: Second-Generation Postmemory in Elie Wiesel's »The Forgotten«,« in *Obligated by Memory: Literature, Religion, Ethics: A Collection of Essays Honoring Elie Wiesel*, ed. Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 117–128.

second protagonist. Hard-pressed, one might even claim she is its sole protagonist. Her rape, though referenced in Wiesel's story most times obliquely, forms the story's epicenter. The story thus revolves around her as the primary victim and wounded innocent.

The widow's trauma has been fossilized within her, manifested in her self-alienation and inner exile. Rape is exile; accordingly, the widow functions as the *Shekhiyah*. The frequent collapses, hospitalizations, and tragedies that have marked her biography all draw from a single wound. Though Elhanan knows nothing of her subsequent fate, he has always known the crime must have ravaged her. The moment of their meeting in Feherfalu decades earlier had bound them indefinitely.

Elhanan's sense of guilt is misplaced, of course, for he could have not prevented the rape. The guilt he feels actually belongs to Itzik. The sense of Itzik's guilt had been insidiously transferred to Elhanan at the time of the rape. The psychological mechanisms associated with such phenomena are complex, but well-documented.<sup>16</sup>

*The Forgotten* illuminates how confessions and repentance are not meant to be mechanical exercises, but rather deeply *ethical* undertakings directed at a wounded Other. In *The Forgotten*, confession and repentance are part and parcel to Elhanan's need to tell,<sup>17</sup> to bear witness. As such, they are intrinsic elements of his testimony and necessary for redemption. They constitute for him the return of shards of scattered light to their divine source. Strikingly, Elhanan's confession becomes crucial to the outcome of the story, to redemption, even though he is not responsible for the crime. Ultimately though, redemption must embrace Elhanan, the widow and Malkiel, for the liberation of one hinges of that of all three.

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16 Cf. Joseph Sandler, ed., »The Concept of Projective Identification,« in *Projection, Identification, Projective Identification* (London: Karnac Books, 1988), 13–26; Sheldon Cashdan, *Object Relations Therapy: Using the Relationship* (New York: Norton, 1988), 55–78.

17 Cf. Laub, »An Event,« 78–79.

#### 15.4.2. REMEMBRANCE AS LIBERATION

*The Forgotten* distinguishes between memory and remembrance. As Elhanan bears witness to Malkiel, the past becomes present; as a result, its grip eases. Still, his testimony remains incomplete; Elhanan knows it cannot be an end in itself. The past must be witnessed to its entirety, and in a different place, and in the presence of a different person. For this reason, Malkiel returns to Romania as a proxy for his father, and seeks out the widow. With this profound act of kindness and contrition, remembrance is revealed as an *ethical* category.<sup>18</sup> We sense how memory without *ethics* holds the potential of suspending past trauma, deferring redemption, and even inflicting new pain. Remembrance can be understood as constituting a triad of testimony, transmission, and *message*. In this constellation, it has the power to liberate and redeem. In Wiesel's tale, we learn that hate and revenge can never foster life and peace. Hate and revenge must never be granted the last word; *life and love must be chosen above both in every case*. This message is radical, and decidedly uncomfortable.

Elhanan's quest for redemption in receiving the stories of others' pain in therapy fails miserably; he cannot be liberated thus. However, in his journey to find the widow and liberate *her* through Malkiel, he himself is set free. This reality defies all implicit irony. Instead, it points to those deeper, mysterious inflections of redemption that transcend all notions of psychological integration. *The Forgotten* claims redemption and liberation—*Tikkun*—lie in remembrance alone, and that forgetting means exile.

#### 15.4.3. THE SHTETL CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

Reminiscent of a Hasidic legend,<sup>19</sup> *The Forgotten* indicates how past events always contain a lesson to be learned as well as a message to be heeded. Through

18 Cf. Reinhold Boschki, »Towards an Ethics of Remembrance after the Shoah,« in *Celebrating Elie Wiesel: Stories, Essays, Reflections*, ed. Alan Rosen (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 203–222; Berger, »Transfusing Memory,« 117–118.

19 Cf. Gedalyah Nigal, *The Hasidic Tale*, trans. Edward Levin (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2008), 54, 75.

its tragic tale of atrocity and woe, forgiveness and love, the reader is learns that personal liberation can never occur in a vacuum, that it always involves a connection to and responsibility for those caught up in our stories. As such, it is, and must always be, reality-based and reality-focused. The implications here are far-reaching in our many and varied contexts.

The shtetl of Feherfalu, though annihilated, is revived by way of remembrance. We sense how something of the shtetl's light had been retained in the memory of survivors. For Elhanan, releasing and returning that light require his son's physical return to a place now far away and to a person still caught up in trauma. Remembrance, we find, extends beyond a mere recalling of events, and embraces a concreteness that deals thoroughly with *reality*. The shtetl's categorical imperative is not new: it is indicative of the Jewish call to life, to actively *choose* life above destruction and death (Deut. 30:19). It constitutes an ethical imperative born not of a Kantian-like metaphysic, but rather of the realities of the human condition, of concrete experiences of redemption—in a word, of memory.<sup>20</sup>

Through remembrance and the kinds of redemption it engenders, narratives are re-written and lives are changed. The widow testifies that Elhanan, who was present at the rape, had been kind and well-meaning, and connected to her in his compassion. This testimony finally sets her, Elhanan and Malkiel free. Elhanan's suffering was not a punishment for his complicity in a crime, but rather the consequence of his humane participation in the widow's trauma. Elhanan can now die in peace. Malkiel can rewrite his story in knowing the reason why he, too, has suffered, and in knowing that his father has loved him, and that he too has loved his father. He too has been set free. All three characters can now move forwards: Elhanan into death, the widow into life, and Malkiel into a future where coming generation will know the truth, and honour it by themselves bearing witness as well.

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20 Cf. Boschki, »Towards an Ethics,« 212, 214–217.

### 15.5. REDEMPTION, OR THE END OF ALL EXILE

As a strictly theological notion, redemption frequently contains eschatological connotations. It is often considered a projected state of future, blissful existence. For this reason, it is a notion avoided by most other genres, often being replaced by other words or imagery.

Significantly, Wiesel's tale suggests that redemption is no clear category. Instead, it constitutes a highly ambiguous, highly nuanced way of being-in-this-world. As such, redemption is no mere theological *concept*, but rather an existential, ethically-focused, reality-focused way of life, of living. In this sense, it echoes the Kabbalistic and Hasidic understanding that ethical action is needed in this world to bring about change and to set things right. Just as right living constitutes a prerequisite for *Tikkun*, it is also necessary for the liberation of us all, to end all exile.

Within this meta-context, Wiesel's tale highlights his own ambivalence with regard to the notion of redemption. Conspicuously, the ultimate redemption known as *Tikkun* is thwarted in the end. As the Just Man, Elhanan has yet another message to tell, one he believes might just save the world. Forgetfulness and death overcome him, however, and he takes his saving admonition to his grave. For this reason, the world remains a vulnerable, fragile, and ultimately fractured place. The ethical implications here are obvious: life is a complex and ambiguous state of affairs and there is still work to be done. The ethical imperative retrieved from the ashes of the crushed shtetl awakens in the reader a sense of urgency to act compassionately and responsibly in the world.

Importantly and prophetically, the juxtaposition of the widow's liberation to the thwarted *Tikkun* demonstrates how *tempered* a view of redemption is necessary for both the religious and non-religious person alike. It is a strong reminder that humanity cannot afford the escapism found in particular religious or ideological beliefs—indeed, in *any* belief that tends to bracket the humane. In *The Forgotten*, the widow's muted cry was heeded, and that made all the difference. With Elhanan's passing, however, it becomes incumbent upon the next generation to learn the forgotten message that might just possibly save us all.

## 16.A STATEMENT: ELIE WIESEL'S ECHO. THE INTEGRITY OF IDENTITY AND TRUTH IN MEMORY

ELANA HEIDEMAN

*Israel and the Jewish People are again being targeted globally. Following the October 7 massacre, the savage and brutal murders and horrors brought upon on the Jewish people since the Holocaust, the world has erupted in blatant Jewhatred, lies, and demonization. Now more than ever humanity must raise its voice and take action to prevent the spread of systematic, rational antisemitism that gave rise to the Holocaust and the pogroms of generations before it. To do so, the world must stand firm in a commitment to Jewish human rights as Elie Wiesel did for an entire generation. The integrity of humanity relies on it.*

### 16.1. INTRODUCTION

Elie Wiesel frequently said in his teaching: »One person of integrity can make a difference.«<sup>1</sup> This sentence defined and drove him in his life's work—for the sake of memory, for humanity, for the hope he kept in his heart even as despair invaded his subconscious. With a sincerity and honesty rooted in the annals of Torah, Talmud, Shabbat and prayer alongside his endless struggle with God and faith; Wiesel's legacy cannot be separated from the Jewish soul from which his passion, his hope, his purpose were born.

Wiesel dedicated his life, his every word and deed, to ensuring that the stories of history and human experience could inspire others, without ever compromising the integrity of identity and truth in memory and action. He was a man who witnessed so much darkness, and yet spread so much light; A man who saw the most twisted timber of humanity, but who possessed a courage and clarity that pierced through every challenge like the straightest of arrows;

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1 Elie Wiesel, »Acceptance Speech,« The Nobel Prize, December 10, 1986, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1986/wiesel/acceptance-speech/>.

A man who was a proud son of Israel and who made all of Israel proud as he wove the integrity of truth into the transmission of memory, identity and understanding of not only the Holocaust, but of the value of human rights and collective responsibility. Wiesel gave new meaning to the notion of a strong Jew, a fighting Jew, a Jew who refuses to allow anyone to dictate his fate for him or his people—by using his voice, passion, and faith in humanity to propel his mission forward.

His dignity and wisdom were courageous in every forum that would listen. He taught that our remembrance must shape our character and has the capacity to transform the future. With his soft-spoken power, and the way in which he soothed the world's pain, Wiesel was a link to something precious that was nearly lost, a tradition, and wisdom inherited from the generations before him. He helped humanity to see the risk of forgetting and the dangers of indifference; he paved a path of hope with unwavering faith in our ability to improve and change. Ignorance and hatred were his enemy—memory, questions and listening were essential to him on the path to righteousness. With Wiesel gone, many claim to speak for the voiceless, but few possess the quiet power to answer the call with the integrity and authenticity of a man who chose to find his voice and speak out for Jewish rights, memory and destiny.

## 16.2. MESSAGE TO ALL HUMANITY—IN DANGER

Friends, family, and communities commemorate Wiesel's life as a Holocaust survivor, Nobel laureate, teacher, writer, and activist on his anniversary of death. From local programs to national commemorations, Wiesel continues to be remembered in many forums as a moral compass for all peoples. Yet over the years, the public memorials have become ceremonial rather than personal, universalized to fit current issues, with less recognition of the unique, soft voice that carried a powerful message that embodied his commitment to Jewish life and ideas. Is there anyone left to listen?

Each year, the ceremonies of remembrance end, life goes on, and the measurable impact of the messages are lost in the chaos of daily life. Among the young generations, fewer and fewer have heard of Wiesel's name or understand

how he illuminated truth and purpose for so many throughout the years. His message is too heavy, too Jewish, too literary, too Zionist, too frightening for the young generation trying to survive in this polarized world. *Night* is less used in Holocaust education or memory, as newer versions of the story are more accessible, more relevant for the universalization of the messages that can keep the Holocaust even somewhat relevant to the common person.

There are those who will always know Wiesel as the public face of Holocaust survivors and a voice of conscience, but while the dedicated few work to ensure the future of his voice and legacy, inevitably, time will inevitably take its toll, attention spans will wane, and other popular leaders will fill the void left by Wiesel's absence. The danger is the erasure of the Jewish core, the essence of Jewish faith, mysticism, and hope that drove his every effort and were the foundations of his messages for human rights and dignity.

### 16.3. VULNERABLE FAITH

Wiesel has said that, when he was a young boy, he was »drunk with God, prayer, Torah and song.«<sup>2</sup> Even in his later years, he would say he was still led by his questions of realms of the spirit and mind as when he was a child in the Carpathian Mountains in his hometown of Sighet. He found inspiration from among the mystics and leaders of Jewish thought, passed down through the stories he inherited as a child in one of the thousands of Jewish communities where Jews once lived, prayed, celebrated, and mourned—the loss of the Temple in Jerusalem and the loss of their brethren with the many outbursts of antisemitism they had witnessed even before the onslaught of Nazi tyranny and the attempted extermination of the Jews.

The sacred world of song and beauty was shattered:

He came to Auschwitz shaped by a faithful family whose life was suffused with the mitzvot commanded by God at Sinai, and with the Rabbinic scholarship developed to understanding and transmitting those commandments. He came to Auschwitz from a family of followers of the Rebbe of Vishnitz, whose

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2 Elie Wiesel, »Literature of Memory,« course at Boston University, lecture notes, 2004.

Hasidic traditions were imbued with singing and worshiping God in joy and elation.<sup>3</sup>

Wiesel, like the millions of Jews targeted for persecution, dehumanization and murder, was forced into a life of momentary survival. Existence became a question without an answer, and the world became an echo chamber of silence in the face of the annihilation of the Jewish people. Like other Holocaust survivors, Wiesel's first years were focused on building a life out of the ashes. He could not know how the transformation he experienced during and after the Holocaust would affect his potential to translate that experience into empowerment.

#### 16.4. JEWISH VOICE FOR PEACE AND HUMAN DIGNITY

Elie Wiesel became a voice of the Jewish people in a most unique way. Who before him served such a role—helping to heal the wounds of the past by trying to address the pains of the present? »Chronicles, historians, prophets, wandering messengers—all are our teachers.«<sup>4</sup> He would share his insights with his students in his classes, and with his growing audiences that yearned to listen and glean from his wisdom on how »in the light of tragedy, exile, our suffering has meaning when we come from the darkness and see the light, and when we carry their lessons with us through every trial and tribulation.«<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, Wiesel's strength was fortified by the Jewish experience—both his own and that of thousands of years before him. He channeled their messages into the present day as he recounted the struggle of being a Jew in the world. Even in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize, Wiesel invoked the *Baal Shem Tov* as the inspiration for his own commitment to memory:

On the verge of despair. And yet he does not give up. On the contrary, he

3 Yehiel E. Poupko, »Wiesel was universal because he was totally particular,« *Crux. Taking the Catholic Pulse*, July 5, 2016, <https://cruxnow.com/commentary/2016/07/wiesel-universal-totally-particular>.

4 Elie Wiesel, »The Jewish Response to Jewish Persecution,« lecture at Boston University, lecture notes, October 12, 1976.

5 *Ibid.*

strives to find a place among the living. He believes that the memory of evil will serve as a shield against evil; that the memory of death will serve as a shield against death ... The Jewish people, all humanity, were suffering too much, beset by too many evils. They had to be saved, and swiftly ...<sup>6</sup>

He recalled—to an international, interfaith, universal body—the ancestors, the writers, the dreamers, the survivors, the dead who cannot speak of generations of persecution against the Jews. He wove the messages of the forefathers within the cries of the women, men, children burned in the flames and burned into our memory. The ancient Jewish past was a part of his every effort to remember.

Years later, there are few who carry Wiesel's leadership and talent of bringing Jewish pride into the public sphere with such passion. A man of unique charisma, talent, and eloquence, Wiesel faced every situation with vision, courage and humility. To him every life was valuable, and every individual endowed with infinite worth. He challenged us to speak out on behalf of the world's victims, and to hold those in power accountable for mass atrocities that go unaddressed.

We thought it would be enough to tell of the tidal wave of hatred which broke over the Jewish people for men everywhere to decide once and for all to put an end to hatred of anyone who is ›different‹—whether black or white, Jew or Arab, Christian or Moslem—anyone whose orientation differs politically, philosophically ... A naive undertaking? Of course. But not without a certain logic.<sup>7</sup>

In his mind, human evil festered in a climate of forgetfulness. For him, remembering was the key: »In the end, it is all about memory, its sources and its magnitude, and, of course, its consequences.«<sup>8</sup> He reminded us through brutally honest prose that we can never forget the core values of our civilization.

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6 Elie Wiesel, »Nobel Lecture: Hope, despair and memory,« The Nobel Prize, December 11, 1986, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1986/wiesel/lecture/>.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

## 16.5. AND YET—AND YET

And yet, he touched on world issues while never straying from what he saw as the core of his being: Jewish faith, identity, and the importance of Israel to every single Jew in the world. He embodied what it meant to be a Jewish leader—to uphold the ideals of Jewish ethics, morality, integrity, pride, and honor. Wiesel wove this understanding into the consciousness of every reader of his books, every listener in every audience, and every student in every classroom. As he said:

»Remembering is a noble and necessary act. The call of memory, the call to memory, reaches us from the very dawn of history. No commandment figures so frequently, so insistently, in the Bible. It is incumbent upon us to remember the good we have received, and the evil we have suffered.«<sup>9</sup>

The Jewish sage Hillel asked: »If I am not for me, who will be for me? If I am for myself alone, what am I?«<sup>10</sup> Wiesel embodied this ethic. Each speech, each effort of activism, embodied a desire to seek positive change, combined with an integrity drawn from a respect for the past and its implications on the present. He inspired audience after audience because he made the past ever-present, and the present ever-meaningful.

Wiesel's leadership and vision were imbued with vast knowledge and a burning passion to advance the cause of memory, identity, and continuity. His prominence catalyzed a movement of international recognition and remembrance of the Holocaust. He bore a great responsibility and made the personal a collective obligation to remember and learn from the survivors, from the horrors, from hope. Wiesel implored his fellow witnesses to join in his mission—to speak out and to share truth, »[m]uch depends on us. On our inner dedication to

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9 Ibid.

10 Pirkei Avot 1:14.

truth. On our willingness to share our innermost memories. And we survivors have promised that we shall try.«<sup>11</sup>

The survivor as witness was linked with the ancient history of the victimized Jews, as he writes:

»In Judaism witnesses are a very important integral part of the faith, even more important than the judges, because the witness establishes the truth. The Bible and the Talmud are filled with the notion of bearing witness in almost every segment of our life cycle. The Torah sees the witness as validating relationships, setting forth the calendar of time and establishing law and justice. It also categorically admonishes the false witness.«<sup>12</sup>

## 16.6. FIGHT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Wiesel spent most of his public life speaking about the atrocities he had witnessed and urging the public to notice, acknowledge, consider, and intervene against, other acts of cruelty around the world, though he drew the line at direct comparisons to the Holocaust. Wiesel's private memory became the collective memory of an entire people who had no voice. Where others saw difference, he saw humanity's common thread. Where others sowed division, he orchestrated disparate parts into a more beautiful whole. He saw in every stranger an equal spark of the divine as he personified the Biblical imperative of loving our fellow man as ourselves. And he saw his destiny as bound with the ancestors before him. Thus, it became Wiesel's imperative to show others how to translate the lessons of the Jewish experience into actions that could bring about positive change for the benefit of all of humanity.

Wiesel challenged presidents, heads of state, and administrations as well

11 Wiesel, »Nobel Lecture«.

12 Asher Jacobson, »Elie Wiesel Speaks About His Legacy,« *Jewish Federations of Canada—UIA*, July 11, 2016, <https://www.jewishcanada.org/opinions/of-interest/eli-wiesel-speaks-about-his-legacy>.

as the common man. Sometimes people listened, sometimes they did not, but Wiesel always spoke. For him, political allegiances did not drive personal principles, status was never an excuse for silence, and friendship demanded an honest exchange of ideas and ideals. What mattered to him was the truth, no matter how uncomfortable or inconvenient it was for him to speak or for others to hear. In his address to the United Nations on bearing witness, each word held tremendous power. His honest inquiry of the facts urged everyone to ask the questions he raised: How could human beings imagine and commit such inhuman actions against others? How is one to believe in humankind after the atrocity of the Holocaust? How can one have hope in a world of hate and indifference? What more can we do to tackle the issues of today by learning from the voices of yesterday?

### 16.7. RE-WRITING TRADITION

Indeed, the integrity of his identity and voice as a Jew once made his story more personal in a way that would generate recognition, acknowledgment, and continued study of its horrors, traumas and their impact on the future. Whatever his topic, he found a way to shape words to suit each context, each philosophical, rational, or logical chain of thought to help the listener engage with both complex and simple topics. He could speak of the Bible, prophets, rebbes and help make it palatable to the common Jew who may not otherwise have entered into that realm. He wrote masterfully about the lives of Judaism's heroes, both ancient and modern. He brought to life sketches of Biblical personalities like Joshua, Jeremiah, Ruth, and Esther. He explored the lives of the rabbis from Tarfon to Yehoshua Ben Levi, and welcomed onlookers into the mystical world of the Hasidic masters, the power of the Hebrew word, the world of the shtetl. He welcomed outsiders to come learn of the fears that rest in the heart of a Jew, from the perspective of a witness, a survivor of a universe none of us may ever truly understand.

He shared his introspections and interpretations with precision, with depth, and with meaning with everyone who listened. In his classrooms, lectures, or personal encounters, Wiesel led with his words and with his passion through Bi-

blical anecdotes and complex literary and historic manifestations of humanity, of God, of evil, of silence. He shed light on the personal experiences of suffering and persecution, by representing all victims of human rights violations. He held the belief that, »[t]he role of human beings is not to be a saint, but to be human. What we do to each other determines our humanity. Nothing is more beautiful than to possess that gift and share it with one another.«<sup>13</sup> Drawn from the pages of the ancient writings *Ethics of our Fathers*, *Pirkei Avot*, for Wiesel, the source of human goodness grew out of the values of faith gained in the pages of the Mishnah and Talmud from which his hope for humanity was formed.

## 16.8. FROM PARTICULARITY TO UNIVERSALITY

Wiesel's powerful and unique messages emphasized universalistic human values drawn from Wiesel's identity as a Jew.

»My anchor was study. Jewish studies. I come from a very religious family and my father, my grandfather, my mother, they all belonged to Hasidic groups and my joys, all my interests were my studies of Jewish stories that inspired the spirit of my existence ... What I wanted to know was what happened in the Temple 2000 years ago. The conversations, the dialogue, the dilemmas—that was my passion.«<sup>14</sup>

Bound to the ancient and recent past alike, Wiesel embodied the spirit of his ancestors in his role as the messenger—to the world, and the Jewish people. As many continue to raise universal commonality over Jewish particularity, the voice, and vision of Wiesel must serve as a reminder that one cannot and should not erase the Jew, the Jewish experience, the Jewish message that is part of every lesson of Holocaust memory.

This was true even of the distinguished figures of the United States Holo-

13 Elie Wiesel, »A Portrait of the Messiah,« lecture at Boston University, lecture notes, October 16, 2006.

14 Ibid.

caust Memorial Council, who helped bring to life Wiesel's dream of a national museum of memory that would educate all peoples as to the dangers of hate, silence and indifference. In his address he emphasized,

»We, here represent a broad spectrum of the American people ... all share a passion for truth, a commitment to memory, a dedication to justice ... We must show the world at large that we are capable of transcending petty divergences ... I do not view the memory of the Jewish victims as a forum to exclude the others ... But to mix all the victims together is unfair and unjust. There was something unique—uniquely Jewish—about the Holocaust. The event was Jewish, yet the implications are universal. To our non-Jewish colleagues, I address my humble plea: try to understand our sensitivity as we shall try to understand yours.«<sup>15</sup>

What that inheritance of memory means for the future is best determined by the impact of the experience on the next generation. As he reminded the world again and again, »*Not all the victims were Jews. But all Jews were victims.*« Wiesel challenged us—every day and in every way—to make sure that »Never Again« meant more than just empty words. »I belong to a generation that has often felt abandoned by God and betrayed by mankind,« he wrote.

»And yet, I believe that we must not give up on either ... Was it yesterday—or long ago—that we learned how human beings have been able to attain perfection in cruelty? That for the killers, the torturers, it is normal, thus human, to act inhumanely? Should one therefore turn away from humanity?«<sup>16</sup>

15 Elie Wiesel, »Elie Wiesel's Remarks at the Dedication Ceremonies for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,« United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, April 22, 1993, accessed February 8, 2022, <https://www.ushmm.org/information/about-the-museum/mission-and-history/wiesel>.

16 Elie Wiesel, *Open Heart*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Schocken Books, 2012), 72–73.

## 16.9. THE ANSWER TO AUSCHWITZ IS RESPONSIBILITY

And so, it is our responsibility, as Wiesel taught us, to speak truth to power and to hold power accountable to truth, without compromising our commitment to the uniqueness of the Jewish story.

Wiesel, the tireless defender of peace, understood that the connection we as Jews have to our homeland is intricate to our collective and individual identity. In his powerful statement on Jerusalem, he wrote:

»Jerusalem is above politics ... It is mentioned more than six hundred times in Scripture, and not a single time in the Koran. It belongs to the Jewish people and is much more than a city, it is what binds one Jew to another in a way that remains hard to explain ... Since King David took Jerusalem as his capital, Jews have dwelled inside its walls with only two interruptions; when Roman invaders forbade them access to the city and again, when under Jordanian occupation, Jews, regardless of nationality, were refused entry into the old Jewish quarter to meditate and pray at the Wall, the last vestige of Solomon's temple. The anguish over Jerusalem is not about real estate but about memory. Jerusalem is the heart of our heart, the soul of our soul.«<sup>17</sup>

For Wiesel, Israel's existence as the Holy Land was integral to the Jewish people's existence as a place »where the stones themselves tell the story of the only people of antiquity to have outlived antiquity.«<sup>18</sup> Moreover, he saw it as a component of how we as a nation uphold the legacy of the Holocaust and deliver a message of hope, peace and respect between people worldwide. »Jerusalem, the eternal capital of Israel, symbolized to him our ability to lift ourselves up from the very bottom to reach new heights,«<sup>19</sup> Netanyahu once said of Wiesel's love

17 Elie Wiesel, »Jerusalem in my Heart,« *New York Times*, January 24, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/01/24/opinion/jerusalem-in-my-heart.html>.

18 Wiesel, »Elie Wiesel's Remarks at the Dedication«.

19 Wiesel, »Jerusalem in my Heart«.

for our ancestral capital. Just as he implored us to become the witnesses to the witness of the Holocaust, so, too, are we the heir to the legacy of our ancestors. Their land, their remnants, their faith, their commitment, their hope. They are we, we are them.

We are moving toward a future where most will have never heard of him, and might never know of the power and influence this one man had—on Jews, and the world. Most have never or might never read any of his other writings which are vibrant depictions of a world that once was, both in Jewish history and in the Jewish imagination. But the world has grown weary of the Holocaust, and Jewish apathy is now being met with the threats of a very real rise in antisemitism from all sides. It is precisely at this time that we must raise the voice of Wiesel-inspired empowerment.

#### 16.10. AGAINST SILENCE

Elie Wiesel's quotes are often taken out of context, ignoring the fact that they are derived from Jewish suffering and survival in a world where Jews are still persecuted despite widespread acceptance. Examples such as the »Opposite of love is not hate but indifference,«<sup>20</sup> or »Silence aids the oppressor«<sup>21</sup> have since been used to advance antisemitic and anti-Israel movements, even by Jews, who distort the origin and essence of Wiesel's message.

By emphasizing the themes that encouraged Wiesel's life mission and unapologetically emphasizing the distinctiveness and integrity of Jewish identity, suffering and hope, we can trace the values and ideals drawn from the breadth of the collective Jewish experience. The echo of his voice can have eternal value in this careful and meaningful pride as a Jew. Future generations will be better able to explore the essential constructs of identity, connection, respect, hope and other fundamental themes relevant to human behavior, kindness, acceptance and respect for the Jewish people.

Wiesel's clarity and honesty contributed to the conceptual and practical

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20 Elie Wiesel, »On Indifference,« US News & World Report, 27 October 1986.

21 Ibid.

value of studying the Holocaust. This must continue as a collective mission that will preserve not only memory of the suffering, of the phases of experience before, during and after, and what it means for all Jews as time continues to make memory and pain to fade into the distance. Wiesel never gave up a lingering dread of anti-Semitism as an ever-present reality, despite his determination to combat its spread from every corner of the globe and every aspect of humanity. If the Holocaust did not bring an end to Anti-Semitism, nothing will.

As the »moral compass for humanity,«<sup>22</sup> Wiesel directed his energy not only to the transmission of Holocaust memory but to the protection of human rights for all humankind, drawn from his suffering when »not all victims were Jews, but all Jews were victims.«<sup>23</sup> He mutually emphasized the need to remember and to take action, on the value of life, and the importance of dignity. He understood, with every fiber of his being, the essential connection between the Jewish people and our homeland. He recognized the unique reality that Israel faces being the »Jew of the world«—eternally hated, resented, and demonized by the endless litany of countries and peoples determined to wipe out the Jewish nation.

### 16.11. FIGHTING ANTI-SEMITISM

Wiesel was concerned how others would succeed in drowning out the voices of the deniers and haters, and the power they were gaining in society. He truly believed that the future of humanity will be determined by those who imbue their homes and hearts, mindsets and missions with the lessons that can be learned from the Holocaust. He believed that it was possible to emphasize the importance of the collective human experience, and an understanding rooted

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22 Ronald S. Lauder, »Elie Wiesel Was the World's Moral Compass,« *Time Magazine*, July 3, 2016, <https://time.com/4392426/ronald-lauder-elie-wiesel-holocaust/>.

23 Elie Wiesel, »Remarks on Presenting the Congressional Gold Medal to Elie Wiesel and on Signing the Jewish Heritage Week Proclamation,« Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum, Archives, April 19, 1985, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-presenting-congressional-gold-medal-elie-wiesel-and-signing-jewish-heritage>.

in the human connection between the past, present and future that can be enlightened through an appreciation of the particularity of the Jewish experience.

He was driven towards perpetuating memory that was not divorced of its pain and challenged easy complacency about history. Non-Jewish interest in Holocaust history should reflect the unique Jewish experience. While learning of the victim's pain and trauma, non-Jews can increase their awareness of how the Holocaust represents the culmination of ancient, medieval and modern tropes of anti-Jewish and anti-Zionist rhetoric and violent expression. Wiesel made it clear that the Jewish ancestral love for our homeland should be recognized as an asset in the face of criticism, stating: »It is because of the passion that we have for Israel [that] we are Jews, and decent people in America, that we have faith in humanity and in America.«<sup>24</sup> He believed that moral education respected the history of the Jewish people, their bond with their indigenous homeland and their eternal capital Jerusalem. It seems that he believed that the transmitted Holocaust experience through a Jewish lens must be rooted in the ancestral connection. In turn, efforts to advance peace and human rights in the world must be rooted in the same purpose and passion that Wiesel's voice gifted to the world.

With the identity dynamics taking place today, as well as a simultaneously growing assimilationism and antisemitism, it is even more important for us to help the next generation to recognize the value of leadership, integrity, and respect for Jewish life as something they, too, can inherit, protect, and teach.

Today, more than ever, we need to both share the facts and meaning of the Holocaust for humanity to ensure future generations know about the difference one person can make in the world. Wiesel impacted the lives of millions of others. He was a teacher, a mentor, a witness whose voice touched their souls as readers or listeners. He was an endless defender of Jewish rights, human rights, memory and an advocate of Israel.

Wiesel understood that there cannot be freedom for anyone in a world in which Jews are persecuted or demonized. Yet today, the unique Jewish experience in the Holocaust is easily cast aside for the universalistic messages that better

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24 Wiesel, »Elie Wiesel's Remarks at the Dedication«.

suit the general public. Jews are demonized again either for their love of Israel, public identity as part of the nation of Israel, or for protecting the very rights of Jewish freedom that Wiesel was determined to fight for. It is our responsibility to engage with remembrance as a tool to inspire the activism that led Wiesel in his every endeavor, to spark that passion so that we may become the heirs to remembrance in a personal, meaningful way—for today, tomorrow, and forever.

While the demonization and persecutions may not have ceased entirely, Wiesel's wisdom, his words, his passion, his commitment must continue to inspire the next generation. We can learn from Wiesel's talents and gifts that enabled him to overcome many obstacles, to face the ghosts in his own private life, to be the public face of Holocaust memory and human rights activism for so many years. He challenged even those who dared to silence him. As he stated time and again, we ignore the past at our own peril.

Once invited to speak to a group of Catholic priests and intelligentsia, a nun raised her hand and asked Elie Wiesel: »How long will you continue to burden us with the Holocaust?« Wiesel responded, »You want us to stop talking about the Holocaust? You want us to forget the six million Jews murdered just a few years ago? And yet, you won't let us forget the death of one man, a Jew who died two thousand years ago.« From Auschwitz, he insisted that we join him on a journey of witness and outcry to Bosnia, to Rwanda, to Darfur. And so, he also taught that when Iran threatens the Jewish people with genocide, it is threatening all humanity. In this, he presented a foundational principle of Judaism. He was radically particular and absolutely universal, at one and the same time. Jewish universalism is the product of Jewish particularism and cho-seness. Each is the handmaiden of the other.<sup>25</sup>

## 16.12. MESSAGE FOR THE FUTURE

Today we, in a different time and history, are facing a different generation of advocates and enemies. We can be those who chose to carry on that legacy of leadership bestowed by those before us as articulate and passionate defenders

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25 Poupko, »Wiesel was universal because he was totally particular«.

of Israel and the Jewish people and not just a universalized interpretation for humanity. Unfortunately, we still find ourselves having to deal with the hatred of Holocaust deniers and their supporters, the constant manifestation of anti-semitism and the dangers caused by the ignorance of many. Therefore, it is our duty to continue Wiesel's struggle against hatred, fanaticism, and demons of the past.

The real measure of memory transfer success is the impact on the next generation. Holocaust education continues, and more young minds are being informed about the dangers of hate and extremism, but emphasizing the trends of modern antisemitism is critical to learning. Protecting memory, the integrity Wiesel's voice, amplifying its echo can bridge worlds even in his absence. This is possible through a global appreciation of his contribution to identity and empowerment, one directed towards pride and activism rooted in Jewish values, and one that also welcomes non-Jewish engagement with the value of the particular Jewish experience.

Through Elie Wiesel's echo, we can learn how to contextualize Jewish rights within human rights without compromising particular and important Jewish values and ideals drawn from the historical Jewish experience. In a collaborative effort to unite students, teachers, and the common person, between classrooms and campuses, homes and hearts, in different countries, we continue to work together to carry on the exemplary leadership of Wiesel to demonstrate how each individual can make a universal impact with their message. Educators, leaders, parents, and youth alike can be inspired and empowered by understanding how this one man of integrity indeed has impacted an entire world, and that we must carry on his legacy.

### 16.13. TRANSLATING THE MEMORY OF SUFFERING INTO MEANING

Fellow students of Wiesel aim to carry on elements of his teachings, and some recognize his Jewishness to the universalist value of those potential lessons.

It would be understandable for a survivor of such a Jewish calamity to consistently choose Jewish causes, and to ignore all others. It would be understand-

dable for a survivor of such a Jewish calamity to consistently choose universal causes, to create as much distance as possible between the traumatized self and Judaism. Wiesel overcame this temptation, holding the tension between particular and universal, and more: teaching us that the two principles augment one another. »The more Jewish I am, the more human I am.« The choice between your tribe and general human causes is always a false one, and if they ask you to leave your identity behind when you sign up for the great march to human progress, something is wrong.<sup>26</sup>

The historical experience can be translated into meaning. Wiesel's ideas on suffering, faith, hope, survival, and leadership are exemplary as we explore the role and responsibility of Jewish leaders today and as we face the rising hate against our people and state.

An immoral society betrays humanity because it betrays the basis for humanity, which is memory. An immoral society deals with memory as some politicians deal with politics. A moral society is committed to memory: I believe in memory. The Greek word *aletheia* means truth, things that cannot be forgotten. I believe in those things that cannot be forgotten and because of that so much of my work deals with memory ... What do all my books have in common? A commitment to memory.<sup>27</sup>

#### 16.14. »CONTINUE, CONTINUE!«

In the future, people may not remember Wiesel's name, want to forget the Holocaust, and erase the Jew or particularity of the Jewish experience from which Wiesel's passion was born. Those who knew him or had the privilege of studying his work hold an even greater responsibility to carry his unique voice forward and to create connections for future generations that hold memory, identity, and integrity as central values of activism and purpose. It is our duty to continue his work and ensure that evil never triumphs. For in that certainty lies

26 Ariel Burger, »The Last Temptation of Elie Wiesel,« *Ariel Burger*, July 1, 2019, <https://arielburger.com/the-last-temptation-of-elie-wiesel/>.

27 Elie Wiesel, »Building a Moral Society,« lecture at Lewis & Clark College, lecture notes, 1995.

our only claim to the restoration of our birthright as civilized people. The admiration he earned during his life will grow with each passing generation. This young man who became a leader can be an inspiration and a name that will be intentionally, actively, and passionately remembered.

Together, we join our voices in a chorus to remind others that it is possible to overcome our fears as Jews, even if we cannot defeat the hate that triggers it. Jewish fear is nothing new, nor shall it disappear. But we can continue the vision of Wiesel, who was a moral guide of humanity, to hope for humankind, and peace for the Jewish people. To live in peaceful existence driven by acceptance, ease, kindness, and love will be our freedom.

Let us not forget his call that we must never be bystanders to injustice or indifferent to suffering; that silence only assists the perpetrators, as we enter into a new era of political leadership for the United States, and learn to live in a world without the profound contributions and eloquence of Wiesel. In the growing climate of socially-acceptable antisemitism and anti-Israel rhetoric, it is incumbent upon us to demand what Wiesel proclaimed in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech: »Let Israel be given a chance, let hatred and danger be removed from their horizons, and there will be peace in and around the Holy Land.«<sup>28</sup>

We must further show the world that forgetting our ancestral connection to Israel is enabling another, different albeit dangerous onslaught against the Jewish people. It may not be through killing us. Instead through dehumanization and discrimination, perpetuated by those who believe themselves capable of whitewashing our historical legitimacy and rights. Destructive to the spirit and humanity of every Jew, everywhere, in every past and future generation, we must perpetuate the very determination of which Wiesel spoke and which guided his every endeavor: to do for the Jewish people and land, »where the stones themselves tell the story of the only people of antiquity to have outlived antiquity.«<sup>29</sup>

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28 Wiesel, »Nobel Lecture«.

29 Elie Wiesel, »The Jewish Response to Jewish Persecution,« lecture at Boston University, lecture notes, September 21, 1976.

Wiesel should forever be etched in the history books, but it is up to us to ensure that his heart, his passion, his hope will be etched in the hearts of all Jews and all human beings today and for generations to come.

»Nothing good comes of forgetting; remember, so that my past doesn't become your future ...«

—Elie Wiesel.<sup>30</sup>

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30 Elie Wiesel, »Speech at the UN World Peace Day,« Speech in UN Webcast, 21 September 2006.



# 17. ELIE WIESEL'S NOVELS IN A UNIVERSITY SETTING LITERATURE AND THEOLOGY IN PRACTICE A CRITICAL REFLECTION

JEAN EHRET

This paper returns to a Master's seminar that I taught in the summer semesters of both 2022 and 2023, during my visiting professorship at the University of Tübingen's Faculty of Catholic Theology. It also fits within the broader framework of an understanding of »spirituality,« in which literature contributes to exploring, contemplating, and conveying something of the spiritual. The paper retains the character of a report of my experiences, with critical and methodological reflections integrated alongside the personal ones. I begin by exploring how and why I came to teach a seminar that seeks to combine literature and theology, and address the students' motivations for taking the course. Then, without making any claims to completeness, I describe different aspects that proved to be particularly important in terms of content and course design, always with a view to taking literature seriously, as *sui generis* texts that not only produce meaning, but also create an »effect of life«—a concept that I will explain in more detail. Finally, I briefly consider the role that literature, and Elie Wiesel's literary works in particular, might play for theology students in the early twenty-first century. Rather than merely providing a report on the seminar, this paper serves as a narrative introduction to a literary aesthetic that speaks to people through all the senses, making it possible to experience the presence of that which is narrated.

## 17.1. LITERATURE, THEOLOGY AND WIESEL IN TÜBINGEN

Tübingen has a tradition of combining literature and theology, an approach pioneered by Walter Jens and Hans Küng in the 1980s, at a time when the two

were rarely combined elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Karl-Josef Kuschel, Küng's student, made an unparalleled contribution to the field throughout his own career<sup>2</sup>. The focus then was primarily on German authors; Elie Wiesel was only rarely studied.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the reception of Wiesel's literary work has remained limited to this day. In the following, I discuss the encounters that led to Wiesel's works becoming the subject of research in Tübingen, before outlining my own motivation for studying literature, and turning to the literature of the concentration camps. Here, I consider what literature is capable of in light of Auschwitz. I then describe the context in which we speak of Auschwitz today, and position myself as a theologian, before briefly commenting on the students' motivations for taking the seminar.

### 17.1.1. ENCOUNTERS AT THE OUTSET

Research on Wiesel arrived at Tübingen's Faculty of Catholic Theology with Reinhold Boschki in 2015. Professor Boschki's enthusiasm for the life and works of Wiesel was sparked by his own encounter with the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize winner, and the distress that he experienced on reading Wiesel's debut

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- 1 See, e.g., Walter Jens and Hans Küng, *Dichtung und Religion: Pascal, Gryphius, Lessing, Hölderlin, Novalis, Kierkegaard, Dostojewski, Kafka* (München: Kindler, 1985); Walter Jens, Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel, eds., *Theologie und Literatur: Zum Stand des Dialogs* (München: Kindler, 1986). As a concise overview of the »landmarks in the theological-literary movement,« see Georg Langenhorst, *Theologie & Literatur: Ein Handbuch* (Darmstadt: wbg, 2005), 13–76.
  - 2 As an introduction to Kuschel's life, work, and theology, see Georg Langenhorst, *Im Dialog mit der Dichtung: Karl-Josef Kuschels narrativ-poetische Theologie* (Ostfildern: Grünewald, 2023). See also Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Magische Orte: Ein Leben mit der Literatur* (Ostfildern: Patmos, 2022), Kuschel's own rereading of his life with literature, and the interview conducted by Matthias Drobinski and Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Ich lerne durch Begegnung: Ein Leben im Dialog mit Literaturen und Religionen* (Ostfildern: Patmos, 2023).
  - 3 Kuschel is one of the few authors to have written about Wiesel's novels: Karl-Josef Kuschel, »Verweigerung der Theodizee—Warten auf Theodizee: Zu Elie Wiesels Drama ›Der Prozess von Schamgorod‹,« in *Das Gegenteil von Gleichgültigkeit ist Erinnerung: Versuche zu Elie Wiesel*, ed. Dagmar Mensink and Reinhold Boschki (Mainz: Grünewald Verlag, 1995), 104–128.

work *La Nuit* (Night)<sup>4</sup>. This resulted in a personal commitment to not only study and publish on Wiesel's works, but to make them accessible to a wider audience. Indeed, Wiesel himself wanted to see his works published in German<sup>5</sup>.

The Elie Wiesel Research Center<sup>6</sup> was initially based in Tübingen and Potsdam. The subsequent decision to involve the Luxembourg School of Religion & Society,<sup>7</sup> opening it up to francophone research, was the result of an encounter in Berlin—a conversation among friends passionate about reading and studying Wiesel's works. Academia does not happen in books and experiments; it is borne and shaped by human beings and by relationships—relationships between people, but also sometimes with the characters of a literary work, if these characters have sufficient presence.

#### 17.1.2. WHY A PRIEST IS STUDYING THE »LITERATURE OF THE CAMPS«

My interest in the »literature of the camps« was sparked during my studies, when it seemed that it was not permissible—or even possible—for a literature lecture to be held without an evocation of Theodor W. Adorno's statement<sup>8</sup>: »nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch«<sup>9</sup> (»to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric«<sup>10</sup>). The actual wording »quoted« varied substantially.

4 Reinhold Boschki, *Elie Wiesel: Ein Leben gegen das Vergessen: Erinnerungen eines Weggefährten* (Ostfildern: Patmos, 2018), 7–18.

5 *Ibid.*, 128.

6 See their website for further information, accessed June 8, 2024, <https://uni-tuebingen.de/en/fakultaeten/katholisch-theologische-fakultaet/lehrstuehle/religionspaedagogik/elie-wiesel-resarche-center/>.

7 See their website for further information, accessed June 8, 2024, <https://lsrs.lu>.

8 See Petra Kiedaisch, ed., *Lyrik nach Auschwitz? Adorno und die Dichter* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1995), 10; Peter Stein, »»Darum mag falsch gewesen sein, nach Auschwitz ließe kein Gedicht mehr sich schreiben.« (Adorno) Widerruf eines Verdikts?« *Weimarer Beiträge* 42 (1994): 485–508.

9 Theodor W. Adorno, ed., »Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft,« in *Prismen: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*, Gesammelte Schriften 10.1 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998), 30.

10 Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen and Samuel Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 34.

Likewise, it was customary to regularly and intensively call on the »inexpressible« and »unutterable.«

I had started to study literature as a young priest, seeking a language that described things as they were, a language that could free me from sterile theological jargon, in order to let life have its say and come into its own. An idea of literature—a definition, which was also a pathway to literature—was offered to me by Marc-Mathieu Münch,<sup>11</sup> my teacher in Metz, France, when he explained to us that what literature would initially produce was not meaning but an »effet de vie« (»effect of life«), a mental experience of virtual worlds, or, as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht puts it, »presence.«<sup>12</sup> Literature could enable me to experience something that was different than real life or to experience a narrative from real life differently, perhaps afresh, beyond merely comprehending it.

### 17.1.3. LITERATURE AFTER AUSCHWITZ— POTENTIAL FOR HUMAN LIFE (AND SURVIVAL)

Auschwitz became the negation of literature and its promise; that proper name devoured the concept; that unspeakable place annihilated realms of life, including those created by literature. I did not want to accept this. Indeed, I could not accept it. Adorno's verdict was dogmatic, hard, and thus wrong. And yet, for precisely that reason, it was also very much right. But the idea, the desire, the drive, the will to let literature create worlds in me persisted, as did the experience of doing so: I thus wrestled with literature and its promise. I could not do otherwise, because of me, because of it, this thing that I had sought salvation and healing from.

What could literature do when faced with the terrible crimes that had been committed against the Jews? What could it do, not just remark on and convey an understanding of, but actually do about these crimes? To what extent could

11 Marc-Mathieu Münch, *L'effet de vie ou le singulier de l'art* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2004).

12 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

literature take action to ensure that »it«<sup>13</sup> would not happen again? Could it possibly help the victims? The dead? The survivors? Their relatives and friends? Jews? And even, but can I be so bold as to write this question? Could it »help«—help?—the perpetrators and their descendants in some way? Could it even help those who were neither perpetrator nor victim; those who are somewhat removed, having been born later; those who learned about »it« only from other people's stories and from pictures? (Do such people truly exist? Is everyone not [more or less actively] involved in this?) How and to what extent could literature, which is capable of giving us virtual experiences of life in its sheer unending diversity, not deny death in the same breath, and yet not simply be »black milk«, as in Paul Celan's 1945 poem »Death Fugue«? How could literature serve life?

#### 17.1.4. AFTER AUSCHWITZ, AT THE START OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

During my years in Paris, my interest turned to David Rousset,<sup>14</sup> the first author to write about the camps. I did not read Wiesel then. It was later, in America, that I started to study him, and gave a lecture on the Holocaust and on Wiesel's novel *La ville de la chance* (published in English as *The Town Beyond the Wall*<sup>15</sup>).

13 Cf. Wiesel struggling with finding the right words: »I had many things to say, I did not have the words to say them. Painfully aware of my limitations, I watched helplessly as language became an obstacle. It became clear that it would be necessary to invent a new language. [...] Writing in my mother tongue [...] I would pause at every sentence, and start over and over again. I would conjure up other verbs, other images, other silent cries. It still was not right. But what exactly was »it«? »It« was something elusive, darkly shrouded for fear of being usurped, profaned. All the dictionary had to offer seemed meager, pale, lifeless.« Elie Wiesel, »Preface to the New Translation,« in *Night*, transl. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), vii.

14 David Rousset, »*L'univers concentrationnaire* (1945/1946),« in *L'Espèce humaine et autres écrits des camps*, ed. Dominique Moncond'huy, Michèle Rosellini and D'Henri Scepi (Paris: Gallimard, 2021), 7–70. There are two English translations of this work: David Rousset, *The Other Kingdom*, trans. Ramon Guthrie (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947); David Rousset, *A World Apart*, trans. Yvonne Meyser and Roger Senhouse (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951).

15 Elie Wiesel, *La ville de la chance* (Paris: Seuil, 1962); Elie Wiesel, *The Town Beyond the Wall*, transl. Stephen Becker (New York: Schocken Books, 1982).

I met the Nobel laureate himself in Luxembourg. His talk on the »Binding of Isaac,«<sup>16</sup> which he held at the University of Luxembourg, stuck in my memory; his novel did not, however, though impressions from *La Nuit* certainly did.

I wrote my Master's dissertation against a background of debate surrounding the proposed memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, which German novelist Martin Walser contested in his 1998 acceptance speech on being awarded the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade.<sup>17</sup> Following his speech, Walser was accused of spiritual arson by Ignatz Bubis, chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany.<sup>18</sup> A quarter of a century later, the conversation has changed. At an event on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, people contemplated how one might preserve memory as a living, tangible, personal experience once the final witnesses have died. A Jewish colleague described how his children had bottles thrown at them on their way to school. An acquaintance of mine, a history teacher, related how a pupil of hers had asked her who Adolf Hitler was. »Yet we still were not worried,«<sup>19</sup> writes Wiesel in *La Nuit* (*Night*). Why? Why don't people sit up and think? Because, Wiesel says, for them, it simply could not be. We no longer live in those dark times. »Spring 1944. [...] Hitler will not be able to harm us [...] Yes, we even doubted his resolve to exterminate us. [...] In the middle of the twentieth century! [...] Of course, we had heard of the Fascists, but it was all in the abstract.«<sup>20</sup>

But gone are the days when we believed in linear progress and the end of war in Europe.<sup>21</sup> Do people want to acknowledge this? Surely, whoever opens

16 See Elie Wiesel, »The Sacrifice of Isaac: A Survivor's Story,« in *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (1976) (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 69–97.

17 Martin Walser, *Erfahrungen beim Verfassen einer Sonntagsrede* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1998).

18 See Frank Schirmacher, ed., *Die Walser-Bubis Debatte. Eine Dokumentation* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1999).

19 Wiesel, *Night*, 9.

20 *Ibid.*, 8–9.

21 François Mauriac, foreword to *Night*, by Elie Wiesel, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), xviii: »The dream conceived by Western man in the eighteenth century, whose dawn he thought he had glimpsed in 1789, and which until August 2, 1914, had become stronger with the advent of the Enlightenment and scientific

their eyes can see that war is no longer taboo. Antisemitism, too, is on the rise. François Heisbourg, senior adviser for Europe at the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), notes that our time bears much similarity to that of the 1930s.<sup>22</sup> »Yet we still were not worried.« Society is disintegrating into individuals who are no longer prepared to sacrifice themselves for the common good; they celebrate the self, taking it not just as their compass, but as their own North Star. This is one aspect that plays a role here.

My own thinking and work are shaped by societal reality. This is not just limited to sociological analysis, however. My task is to practice theology. What role, then, does studying Wiesel's novels have here?

#### 17.1.5. OPENING UP LITERATURE'S THEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

In our secularized, pluralized, technological society, shaped as it is by virtual social networks, faith is no longer a given; the church is grappling with its mistakes and with internal dissent; in the light of this, faith is becoming a subjective decision.<sup>23</sup> It is in this context that I teach theology. Which theology? By training, I am a »systematic theologian.« I like to think about things, fathom them, make connections, and put them in some kind of order. The coherence of a thought process says nothing about its correspondence to reality, however.

I am not giving up my entitlement to truth; my entitlement to want to do justice to reality in my cognition; that is, to want to come closer to a perception of things as they are, and in their mutual relations.<sup>24</sup> Though the reality of life

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discoveries—that dream finally vanished for me before those trainloads of small children.« We recognize in Mauriac, to some extent, the same tendency to ignore ruptures that we discover in the Jews of Sighet. In fact, he writes that the dream came to an end in 1914 but it only vanished some thirty years later.

22 François Heisbourg, »Notre monde en guerre ressemble décidément trop à celui des années 1930,« *La Croix*, January 31, 2024, <https://www.la-croix.com/a-vif/notre-monde-en-guerre-ressemble-decidement-trop-a-celui-des-annees-1930-20240131>.

23 See, e.g., Hans Joas, *Glaube als Option: Zukunftsmöglichkeiten des Christentums* (Freiburg: Herder, 2012).

24 Jean Ehret, »Spiritualität als interaktives Beziehungsgeschehen von Gott, Welt und Ich: Versuch einer dichten Begriffsbestimmung,« in *Anthropologie und Spiritualität*

has demolished my thought system, it is in this now open but desolate space that I breathe. Here, I seek—God (among other things). The path to literature is an attempt to understand lived life as a *locus theologicus*, and to seek God in and with life. With a life that does not unfold organically, but encounters chance, unexpected setbacks and awakenings.

The announcement of the first seminar on Wiesel's novels referred to his search for God and man's place in the world after Auschwitz, and to Wiesel, who saw himself as both a teacher and a writer. It thus also referred to the role of literature in his works as a whole. What does Wiesel's literary work achieve that is different than his autobiographical writings, his retelling of biblical and Talmudic narratives, his essays? This question is (as yet) unanswered and continues to preoccupy me. I will highlight a few aspects in the final section of this paper.

#### 17.1.6. MOTIVATIONS BEHIND THE SEMINAR

The seminar came about not only to introduce students to Wiesel's works, engage in remembrance work, prevent antisemitism, and promote Jewish-Christian dialogue. It was not only there to think »after Auschwitz« (I ask myself: after Auschwitz? Or actually before it happens again?) It was also there to open up literature as a way of searching for God and man's place in the world.

Why do students take the seminar? Some take it because Reinhold Boschki mentions Wiesel so frequently in his classes, and their curiosity has thus been piqued; others take it because they have seen videos about the Holocaust; others because they want to learn about Judaism, and some, more pragmatically, take it because they need the credits, and the seminar fits into their timetable well. Very few are drawn in by the literary angle, or have a particular tie to »literature.«

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*für das 21. Jahrhundert*, ed. Sebastian Kießig and Marco Kühnlein (Regensburg: Pustet, 2019), 187–202; Sebastian Kießig and Marco Kühnlein, »(Laisser se) dire Dieu: De l'incarnation du Verbe à la théologie comme discipline,« in »Transformés en son image« (2Co 3, 18). *Théologie et mystique: Mélanges en l'honneur de Marie-Anne Vannier*, ed. Silvia Bara Bancl and Jean Ehret (Turnhout: Brepols, to be published in 2024), chapter 2.2 (»La philosophie: explorer, contempler, exprimer quelque chose d'une spiritualité.«).

Many of the students live with their tablets, laptops, and smartphones as virtual companions. They »like« the images and messages that they scroll past. One headphone remains glued to their ear throughout the day. I share their attention with various apps, which continually feed them notifications. For many, answering the question of what they read is embarrassing. They think back to their grammar school days, and mention the classics. They need encouragement to tolerate reading other texts to a certain extent and to concede their aversion to—and disinterest in—novels. Without this honesty, though, we cannot make progress.

In the breaks, the students are more present in the moment, not just in their social networks. We drink coffee, chat, debate, get annoyed, and laugh. For some, glancing at their smartphones has become a tick, much like drawing on a cigarette once was. Our relationship opens up to personal impressions. What are they looking for in theology? What motivates them to study theology? One would like to become a priest, another a religious education teacher, another sees theology as a route to fighting for certain values in society later on, another has existential questions. And me?

Will I succeed in allowing them to experience something through the seminar and Wiesel's works, something that raises questions, and breaks open their thinking? Something that they can't let go of? Something where the search for answers involves everything they experience and think? Or, if that has already happened, can the seminar nurture their search? Is this not perhaps asking too much of the students? Might it be an expression of professorial or clerical hubris? Is university not about reason and rationality? Do emotions, life stories and imagination have a place there at all? And if so, what might that look like?

Moishe the Beadle is not just a guide for the young Eliezer in *La Nuit*; his words also guide the direction of the seminar, where reason has its place: »I pray to the God within me for the strength to ask Him the real questions.«<sup>25</sup> The questions do not come from outside, but are formed at the deepest levels of our ego. It is not the answers that bring us closest to God—and to man. Indeed, »man comes closer to God through the questions he asks Him.« The answers,

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25 Wiesel, *Night*, 5.

too, do not come from outside: »The real answers, Eliezer, you will find only within yourself.« And yet answers are just waymarkers: »[...] every question possessed a power that was lost in the answer ...« Teaching theology and reading literature entails integrating reason, but not reason alone. Theology and literature can overcome rationalism. Every part of us is subject to the demands of reason, albeit differently in theology and literature.

I have briefly situated the seminar in terms of the institutions, my own biography, society, theology, and pedagogy. Münch's understanding of literature, which I mentioned as a fundamental insight, necessitates a certain way of dwelling on the texts, and a rethinking of lesson planning. This is the focus of the next part of this paper.

## 17.2. BRINGING THE PRINTED WORD TO LIFE

In *Le Testament d'un poète juif assassiné* (The Testament), Wiesel's character Paltiel Kossover describes how he learned the Hebrew alphabet, »les lettres sacrées et éternelles à l'aide desquelles Dieu est censé avoir créé l'univers—et à l'aide desquelles nous, ses adversaires, rationalistes acharnés, pensons pouvoir l'expliquer«<sup>26</sup> (»holy, eternal letters with whose help God is supposed to have created the universe, and with whose help, we fierce rationalists, his adversaries, think we can explain it.«) Literature has the potential to overcome rationalism if it is not expected to produce meaning first and foremost, but is allowed to produce an »effect of life,« that is, to create a virtual world in the reader in an interplay between text and reader.<sup>27</sup> This experience is linked, on the one hand, to the nature of a text, and, on the other, to the sensitivity of the individual readers to linguistic stimuli, and the capacity of those readers to activate all their mental assets, and thus create a vibrant imaginative world within themselves. In this section of the paper, I explain how this can happen, as well as everything that inhibits it, particularly in a university setting. If words are not just ink on paper, but borne by a voice, then new life can

26 Elie Wiesel, *Le Testament d'un poète juif assassiné* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), 32.

27 Münch, *L'effet de vie*, 35–38, 43–98.

open up within a human being. In the following, I will first relate a short story before discussing certain aspects of both theology and literary studies that can inhibit the production of the effect of life. I will consider this first more generally, and then look more specifically at aspects that affected my preparations for the seminar. This will be followed by a couple of examples of how one can try to open up a pathway for students to discover life within literature.

#### 17.2.1. THE WORD(S) COMING TO LIFE

Children are capable of some things that many adults have lost—sometimes as a result of education. A colleague's memory illustrates this: As a child, he played *Starship Enterprise* with a classmate on the bus that took them to the swimming pool. In front of the boys stood a partition, but for them, it was full of the spaceship's buttons and levers, and they called out orders to each other as they travelled between their hometown and the sports center.

As a teenager, he found books boring. He dreamt of cars, adventures, and girls. In his late twenties, he tried to get back into reading novels again. He did not find this easy after studying sociology, however. The texts had somehow become evidence, a basis for rational analysis. He understood how to identify the key behavioral types, and interpret their motivations. He found an expert interpretation of the conduct of even the most curious characters. But he had not turned to novels for that.

Acquaintances gave him numerous explanations for the suicide of his friend Marcel, but none of them came even half-way to that which had tied the two together. It had been an implicit understanding, requiring no words. And yet, the one he loved slipped away from him. His first efforts to read novels left him empty; he read them to the end merely out of a feeling of obligation to himself. And hoped beyond hope to somehow find something else.

It was an audiobook on a car journey that awakened his senses. In the voice, the language developed its own tone, its own density. It was a scene that reminded him of Camus' *La peste* (The Plague), a novel he had read at school, admiring the relationship between Rieux and Tarrou then.

Now, he was hearing the words; they described a scene; they awakened the experiences with Camus, and the pain over the death of his friend. He saw the scene of the ship fading on the horizon in the falling fog, and he felt himself succumb to the pull of the incipient cold of the night in the book.

After the passage had faded, he stopped the book, and his car, on the side of the road. It took some time for the sun to bring him back from the literary night. His lips tasted of salt; he did not wipe the tears away. His pain had altered. Was this deliverance? Was it theology?

### 17.2.2. WHEN A SINGLE RATIONALITY BECOMES A LAW UNTO ITSELF

Sociology is not the only academic field to alter thinking, and the way we see and use our other senses. The schools of academic theology also provide rules, structures, and examples of thinking. They become yardsticks. As a form of textual scholarship or humanity, theology educates, fosters, and celebrates the critical spirit. Reason finds joy in being the counterweight to faith, fathoming it, and freeing it from that which divides human beings. Is reason not the queen of freedom, the law of things and of man, the true religion? This is a caricature of academic theology, though not entirely.

Reasonableness always develops as part of a greater structure. In contexts outside of German universities, such as in traditional orders, a certain form of rationality is part of the institutional fabric, legitimizing the members' claim to truth. The less vibrant relationships support social structures, the more people need ideologies, which develop their own rationality. It would be wrong to denounce these ideologies as mad. Even the Final Solution had its own logic. But if theology establishes God, as well as itself and the institution that practices it, its *quaestiones* are hardly an expression of a *quaerere Deum* any longer.

Theology qualifies and discredits. This is part of its purpose. But, one might ask, by what right? With what self-assuredness? And, how far? Does (academic) theology thus block the path to a holistic experience because it only permits that which corresponds either to its own partial view, or to a meaning that has already been defined? How does the »non-identical«—such as my collea-

gue's friend's suicide, and, to an immeasurable extent, such as Auschwitz—fit in here? Can literature provide the remedy? And is a literary studies approach therefore better suited than a theological one?

### 17.2.3. WHEN THE »MEANING« REPLACES THE WORK

A seminar »examining« a novel by Wiesel—I can never quite escape the medical connotations of that word. Such a seminar usually commences with a presentation on the author, his works, and the classification of the selected title. This is followed by basic information on the text's content, structure, and characters. A few details on the genre of the novel and its main characteristics are needed, as well as information on authors who served as inspiration, a little about the reception of the novel, the main interpretations, and film adaptations. The students are then equipped with everything they need to, well, *explain* the novel.

Study guides provide further assistance. School pupils sometimes study these more intensively than they do the literary texts themselves; they become well acquainted with the *language of analysis*, even where this necessitates learning specialist terms. The *language of the authors*, however, remains foreign to them, and so too does the world that might arise within them; this language requires a different approach. The school pupils learn and explain »the meaning of the work« without truly exploring the work itself. For each excerpt from a text that they have to comment on, they can find the central ideas; they can even elucidate the cultural and linguistic value of each »book« without having read it.

A »classic«—that is, ultimately, done »according to the book«—introduction to a literary work provides the tools needed for its proper execution, dissection, and classification. Creative writing is reduced to identified influences and sources, aesthetics to comprehension. By comparison: While dissecting a frog can help us to understand its anatomy, what purpose would that serve if we had never seen a living specimen? Perhaps because it supports a different kind of experience.

## 17.2.4. WHEN MYTH AND METHOD MERGE

As I was preparing the seminar, I was entranced by the notion of teaching in Tübingen. Tübingen is more than just a mid-sized city in southern Germany; it is a place name with which I can illustrate what it means to experience an immense effect of life.

»Tübingen,« that is, the mental representation of Tübingen, is something different than a city history or map. It comes to life through the memory of the activities of many individuals who left their traces in history, and how they are honored; it comes to life through the reputation of a university that is among Germany's eleven Universities of Excellence, and it comes to life through all that is associated with reputation and wonder, through all that I imagined of the faculty, which had collected in my mind's eye from my reading on the Tübingen School, and names such as Joseph Ratzinger, Hans Küng, Walter Kasper, Karl-Josef Kuschel, Max Seckler, and Peter Hünemann. In addition, there was all that I had heard about the city, all that I could feel of the aura surrounding the name when I mentioned it to others, and all that I experienced in terms of my own desires, self-doubt, and expectations. And everything else in my psyche that played into these factors, as well as my suppositions about what the seminar participants would expect of a Tübingen professor.

A lot that is unsaid awaits, accompanies, oppresses, carries, motivates, and stimulates the lecturer walking into the seminar room in Tübingen's theology building. This is a small example of the »power« that can be associated with a name, a power over my spirit, which wanted to meet these expectations.

Part of the »Tübingen myth«—and for good reason I do not identify my colleagues with this—was a certain form of abstract scholarship, a form of methodological rationality, which neither entirely did justice to its »object« of study as something living, nor to the students as subjects. Might we consider such a method to be the professorial »original sin,« allowing that which is needed to experience literature—an alert and sensitive imagination that is receptive to the word—to atrophy? To return to that quote from *Le Testament d'un poète juif assassiné*, this professorial original sin makes the lecturer God's adversary, who, in this world, stifles the life of those twenty-four »lettres sacrées et éternel-

les à l'aide desquelles Dieu est censé avoir créé l'univers»<sup>28</sup> («holy eternal letters, with whose help God was supposed to have created the universe»). There is another way.

#### 17.2.5. A WAY THAT BRINGS LANGUAGE TO LIFE

Münch's aesthetics and practice can help us decipher Tübingen's effect of life (or even that of Sighet, Wiesel's hometown), and its »power«; they also show us a way of engaging with Wiesel's novels differently.

For Münch, aesthetic theory was tied to a particular way of teaching. In 2004, I invited him to a secondary school to give a talk, and work with a class. He began by asking the pupils to not write anything down, but to simply listen attentively to a very short poem, which he recited by heart. They then described what they had experienced. He recited the poem again; the students described more intense impressions. From there, he worked with them to explore the origin of what they had experienced, in the encounter between text and spirit. He discussed the content of the text, and how it synergized with other people's comments, and with what they had seen, felt, and experienced, and then also with the form of the poem, and the grammar of the poetry, resulting in a symphony of all the elements.

The aim of Münch's aesthetics is to read in such a way that the reader can strongly experience the virtual world that a text creates within them and with their involvement. As the above example shows, Münch is not representative of pure subjectivism. Instead, he goes into the individual lexical, grammatical, stylistic, historical, and structural elements that contribute to the creation of the effect of life, whether that be the openness of the text, or the density of the words with all that they encompass in terms of experience, and all the connotations that they evoke, or the interplay of different stylistic devices, or the procedures that ensure the text's coherence. Literary studies is thus at the service of reading.

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28 Wiesel, *Le Testament*, 32.

## 17.2.6. THREE EXAMPLES

Münch's aesthetics provide an approach, which accompanied me in the seminar as I remembered it. I would like to explain this through three examples. The first relates to a quotation, the second to the novel's opening words, also known as the incipit, and the third to the structure of the novel.

On the basis of a short quotation, I tried to let the students experience how the imagination can connect to different senses, to emotions, memories, and desires, when reading. In *La ville de la chance*, Wiesel describes Shabbat as follows: »Tel un manteau de soie pourpre, le Shabbat s'ouvrait déjà le vendredi au coucher du soleil.«<sup>29</sup> (»Like a cloak of purple silk, Shabbat unfurled each Friday at sunset.«) Before I read this quotation aloud, I asked the class »What is Shabbat?« Students gave more or less precise responses. Then Wiesel's sentence came into play, not immediately as a full quotation, but in fragments: Shabbat is like a cloak. What do the students see or feel when they hear such a simile? And do their ideas and experiences, their haptic perception, for instance, their associations, change if one switches from »cloak« to »purple cloak«; if this purple cloak is made of »silk,« and finally, if the cloak opens up? What do they see and smell? What do their fingers want to feel? Are there any erotic emotions at play here if this happens »at sunset«? And what does the »Shabbat« that was defined and explained after my initial question become if one reads that quotation aloud, followed by a second comparison, »Shabbat est comparé à une reine« (»Shabbat is compared to a queen«), adding that: »il est juste d'avoir l'âme et le corps propres pour mériter sa visite«<sup>30</sup> (»it is right to have both spirit and body clean to merit her visit«)? The students then repeated this experience with other parts of the text. My impression is that such micro-exercises can open the mind to an aesthetic experience that can develop its own content in time, and that this approach can turn out to be useful throughout the students' theology studies. Indeed, in a colleague's class, a student mentioned this exercise, because it had helped him to understand the real presence of Christ in the liturgy differently.

29 Wiesel, *La ville de la chance*, 22.

30 Ibid.

Literature can contribute to the acquisition of a unique kind of insight that cannot entirely be obtained through abstract terminology alone.

The second example relates to the novel's incipit. Like the opening of a symphony, these words establish the mood and content of the piece *in nuce*—as an experience that, at the end, is enhanced, rather than replaced, by a *da capo*. The novel *Les juges* (The Judges) begins as follows: »Dehors, les loups, s'il y en avait, devaient jubiler: ils régnaient sur un monde en perdition. Razziel les devinait [...] et cela lui rappelait vaguement [...].«<sup>31</sup> (»Outside, the wolves, if there were any, must be exulting: They reigned over a world in distress. Razziel pictured them [...] and that reminded him vaguely [...].«) The aim here is not just to read the passage silently and analyze its structure, but to let it develop its effect of life step by step, through an exercise. Thus we started with the students initially relating what they had understood from the text: what was it saying? Then they began to wonder who the narrator was, from which perspective he was speaking, what »outside« referred to, for example, why a subclause indicated that the wolves might not be real, and so on. The analysis of the structure of the passage was tied to the interplay between the images and perceptions that the words created. The students began to describe the change that they experienced in their understanding, indicating questions associated with this, and describing how their expectations of the novel were changing. At the end of the novel, we returned to the opening lines, and again tried to outline the »theme« of the novel (in the sense of the theme of a musical work). Why can one read a novel several times, and potentially understand it differently each time? Literary texts describe and condense situations; they transcend any dissolution or annulment; they nurture questions, helping you to explore them, or serve to silence them. As a boy, the narrator in *La Ville de La Chance* sees »une bonté infinie«<sup>32</sup> (»infinite goodness«) in Moishe's eyes, but shortly afterwards »tant de ténèbres, une telle concentration de nuit dans les pupilles de Moishe qu'il en eut le vertige«<sup>33</sup> (»so many shadows, such a concentration of night in Moishe's

31 Elie Wiesel, *Les juges* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), 9.

32 Wiesel, *La ville de la chance*, 26.

33 *Ibid.*, S. 28.

pupils that he experienced vertigo») and his questions dry up. Wiesel's novels enable encounters with people who live with their questions.

Wiesel did not write just one novel, however. He saw himself less as a novelist, and more as a storyteller.<sup>34</sup> Telling stories in endless variations is part of the Jewish, and particularly the Hasidic tradition. He developed his own style, which admittedly earned him ample criticism, and which must be further researched. For students, it is important to understand what is involved in writing, in order to be conscious of artistic intentions. In this regard, Peter Bieri's short essay *Eine Erzählung schreiben und verstehen*<sup>35</sup> (»Writing and Understanding a Narrative«) can help. While Bieri does not include »experiencing« as a constitutive literary factor in his title, in just a few pages the paper is an introduction to poetics that not only provides students with an insight into the writer's craft, but also introduces them to a philosopher who became a literary author. It can serve as a comparative aid for understanding Wiesel's own poetics, as long as Bieri functions not as a standard, but as an example open to other ideas.

#### 17.2.7. WAS THIS DELIVERANCE?

I started this section of my paper with a short story about a man who, perhaps on the basis of a subconscious memory from his childhood, was searching in literature for something that would help him to come to terms with his friend's suicide. This story not only allowed me to critically reflect on that which inhibits the effect of life, including in the context of my own teaching practice. It also served as a point of contrast, enabling me to avoid reflections on literature, theology, and Auschwitz falling all too quickly into truisms. Münch's teaching then served as an example to help understand how students could be sensitized to Wiesel's own poetics in this way. I alluded to this through three examples, which show that the contribution of literary studies is required, but in such a

34 See Rosemary Horowitz, ed., *Elie Wiesel and the Art of Storytelling* (Jefferson, London: McFarland, 2006); concerning his literary works, see Victoria Nesfield and Philip Smith, eds., *The Struggle for Understanding: Elie Wiesel's Literary Works* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019).

35 Peter Bieri, *Eine Erzählung schreiben und verstehen* (Basel: Schwabe, 2012).

way that it can feed the effect of life. Then interpretation is part of reception; arising from encounters with the characters and content of the story. The two questions with which the story concludes can only be answered through these encounters, demonstrating why Wiesel's novels could be important for theologians in the early twenty-first century.

### 17.3. WIESEL'S NOVELS FOR THEOLOGIAN IN THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY?

Perhaps I can rephrase this question, putting it more simply: Why did I teach a seminar on Wiesel's novels at a faculty of theology? What did I want to impart to my students? The answer can be found in everything that I have written above. It is firstly about conquering the rationalism that does not do justice to life, and learning to live with open questions when faced with radical contingency. At the same time, this means being on the path to a truth, in which life is already grounded. From here, an approach opens up that combines literature and theology, one that is based on, and alludes to, vibrant relationships.

#### 17.3.1. DOING JUSTICE TO THE NON-IDENTICAL

My personal need to account for something that, with some theological thinking, might be described as the »non-identical,«<sup>36</sup> and to try to tie it into the overall web of relations, increases on reading Wiesel, such that the non-identical, which bears the name »Auschwitz,« represents the negation of the fundamental relationship poles of »God,« »world,« and »self.« »Tel le fou, l'artiste substitue une logique à une autre, invente des personnages, établit de nouveaux systèmes de valeur. La différence entre eux? L'artiste s'interroge, le fou non.«<sup>37</sup> (»Like the madman, the artist substitutes one logic for another, invents charac-

36 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik: Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*, Gesammelte Schriften 6 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998), 17, 184.

37 Wiesel, *Les juges*, 200.

ters, establishes new value systems. The difference between the two? The artist questions himself, the madman does not.«).

*La ville de la chance* brings reason into play. In the novel, the father »[qui] ne croyait qu'à la puissance de la raison« (»who only believed in the power of reason«) frequently converses at length with »mad« Moïshe »[qui] se refusait à toute clarté«<sup>38</sup> (»[who] rejected all clarity«). By appearing to substitute one logic for another—like a madman—but also questioning himself, the artist integrates something of reason, without bowing to it in all respects. Literature, like real life, cannot be assigned either to reason and sense, or to madness; it constitutes a third option that shines a spotlight on the mutual referencing of the other two.

Being »literature« in Münch's sense, Wiesel's novels enable encounters with characters who are shaped by Auschwitz. The reader's experience of the novels can impart more than ideas and numbers; the novel's characters come alive within the reader. The characters, as well as the questions that they pursue, defy intellectual appropriation. They oppose clarity, preserving ambivalence and ambiguity. The question remains, the doubt about whether this quest can help them »[...] to live [their] future as [they are] incapable of living [their] past.« (»[...] vivre [leur] avenir, puisqu'[ils sont] incapables de vivre [leur] passé.«<sup>39</sup>)

### 17.3.2. LEARNING TO LIVE WITH OPEN QUESTIONS

The interplay between one's biography and one's own intellectual positioning goes hand in hand with the pedagogical approach of neither giving students complex final answers, nor guiding them to find such conclusive and somewhat absolute answers themselves, but allowing questions to arise, looking at those questions in more depth, and developing answers that help them come closer to the truth. This is a process that never ends. »For we live by faith, not by sight« (2 Cor. 5:7). But to have faith means to seek.

38 Wiesel, *La ville de la chance*, 23.

39 Wiesel, *Les juges*, 200.

On the very first page of the novel *Le cinquième fils* (The Fifth Son), we find the line:

»Il fut un temps où je connaissais le but et non la route; maintenant, c'est le contraire. Et encore. Plus d'une voie s'offre à l'homme. Laquelle mène vers Dieu, laquelle conduit vers l'homme? Je ne suis qu'un errant. Et pourtant je cherche. Je cherche peut-être à demeurer cet errant.«<sup>40</sup>  
(There was a time when I knew the aim and not the route; now, it is the opposite. More than one path lies ahead of us. Which one leads to God? Which leads to man? I am just a wanderer. And yet, I seek. Perhaps I seek to remain that wanderer.)

To go on searching, to not be satisfied with the penultimate, but also not to despise it. Is this a feasible route? A necessary one even?

### 17.3.3. RECOGNIZING CONTINGENCY AS A TRUTHFUL SITUATION

In a time when faith in God is not self-evident, and when neither church institutions nor theologians can automatically maintain their sovereignty in matters of interpretation, even literary texts reveal themselves to be expressions of spirituality, that is, of the human need to observe and express the relational structure of God, the world, and the self, and thus to contribute to how it is shaped. This does not mean that God must always be named. The triad of »God,« »world,« and »self« simply refers to the mental representations of the three fundamental relationship poles.

Literary texts retain the character of something that is just for now, but that is also inherently necessary. A novel is but one book among millions, and yet it may demand the entire energy of its author. Each novel could have been written differently, and yet also could not have been. A novel reflects how things can be, could be, must be, must have been, or how they had to be written down, at any rate. Life is yet another variant, the novel is a laboratory, enabling an

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40 Elie Wiesel, *Le cinquième fils* (Paris: Grasset, 1983), 9.

experiment in how things could be (or could have been). Confronting the (im)possible is part of the way in which humans reach decisions nowadays.

In this paper, I have not mentioned determining the themes and motifs that appear throughout Wiesel's works. My main interest was in recovering that aesthetic perception that comprises all mental faculties and creates an experience on the basis of a stimulus and one's own mental power. Münch's theory helps us to understand the construction of the effect of life, and to become conscious of the interplay between subject and object in the shaping of mental representations. Literary analysis does not become a law unto itself but remains oriented towards reading as a conscious act, the entire effect of which is shaped even more strongly by the potential perception of different elements and factors that play a role.

#### 17.3.4. REPETITION AND VARIATION AS A PATH TO TRUTH

As part of Wiesel's overall works, the novels are attempts to drive and the search for God and man through fictional characters in contemporary contexts. Those who have read *La Nuit* experience déjà vu more than once in Wiesel's novels, which place the reader in different contexts. Biographical situations that have a clear hold on the author appear as anthropological or religious archetypes, taking shape differently in the life of the narrator and the novels' characters.

The novels take place shortly before the establishment of the state of Israel (*L'aube*; Dawn), under Stalin (*Le Testament d'un poète juif assassiné*), after the Six-Day War (*Le mendiant de Jérusalem*; A Beggar in Jerusalem) and even towards the end of the twentieth century in the USA (*Les juges*), to name but a few times and places. In his fictional worlds, Wiesel will relate something over and over, each time in a different way. This creates an anthropology that cannot altogether be achieved conceptually, because conceptually guided discourse has an inner logic that the story does not bow to.

This is part of literature's »cognitive potential.« »Notwithstanding that I have written a novel, purely with a novelist's intentions, I would be pleased if I have managed to contribute something to our store of understanding. Truths

needn't always depend on facts for their expression,«<sup>41</sup> writes Cambridge graduate and historian Dr. Tom Crewe in the afterword of his debut novel *The New Life*.

Where theologians too easily forget analogy or negative theology, literary works, given their fictitiousness and contingency, and their dependence on their recipients, resist the urge to make perceptions absolute. Literary pluralism can therefore be understood as the expression of a continuing search for truth, which breaks through conceptually driven discourse.

### 17.3.5. AN EXISTENTIAL ANCHOR FOR THE SEARCH

An approach that rejects the clarity of logic requires an existential anchor. In all its diversity and uncertainty, literature alone cannot provide this anchor, though the work of an author emerges from it, and thus also exerts an influence on it.

In Wiesel's case, this existential anchor occurs through his being shaped by Judaism since childhood, something that is mentioned time and again. The novels are only part of his oeuvre. Biographical writing retains a certain literary character, but one that is bound to the truth of facts. His recounting of biblical and Talmudic narratives is to be anchored as »literature« in the reading, storytelling, and interpretative tradition of the Hassidic communities, with their own rules, authorities, and enforcement. Wiesel's biographical writing and these narratives both serve as points of reference for his novels. This is made explicit where the novels are preceded by quotations from the Talmud, sometimes alongside references to other writers, as epigraphs. But it is also evident in his essays, where it is not just rhetoric that counts. Memory and religious sources remain fundamental reference points here.

Wiesel's oeuvre thus allows people to partake in this anchoring, and to experience it in the most varied of situations. It taps into realms of experience, the impressions of which intensify through repetition, and can then serve as reference points in the reader's own spiritual differentiation process.

Why does one read one author, and not another, though? Confrontation

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41 Tom Crewe, *The New Life* (London: Chatto & Vindus, 2023), 373.

with texts and this question also helps one to become aware of one's own demands, expectations, and context. This relates not only to literary writers and books, but also to philosophical and theological ones.

### 17.3.6. SPEAKING FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF ENCOUNTERS AND RELATIONSHIPS

As has always been the case, theology students in the early twenty-first century are expected to train their capacity to account (to themselves) for the faith that they have practiced and nourished in the church community. Their lives are not that of Wiesel; reading his novels entails being willingly introduced to people whose stories, while already established, only come alive through the reader.

I have tried to provide a few examples of how one can work towards reading like this. In this way, literary texts are no longer used as mere illustration in theological papers, or in approaches to religious pedagogy, but are valued for their own cognitive function. This attitude also has consequences for reading the Holy Scriptures, and theological texts with their own rhetoric and poetics.

The relationship that arises from this depends on the radiant power of the texts, and the receptiveness of the reader. The lecturer works on creating the conditions that make encounters possible, and in part on accompanying such encounters. He guides students to record their encounters and relationships, and only then to interpret them. Description, commentary, and interpretation will not be able to exhaust the reality of real and fictional life, however. One must engage with both, explore them, observe them, and express something of them. Wiesel's novels are part of his »spirituality.«

The way in which one accounts for these encounters and relationships can be either literary or discursive. Literature can also be theology, if one does not limit theology to a certain type of academic discourse, such as analysis, criticism, or dialectics, but instead sees it as an existentially binding, contextual expression of spirituality, as a fragment with a claim to truth, in which God himself speaks. Both literary studies and academic theology, which are committed to a particular terminology and methodology, reveal processes that pervade the text, are stimulated by it, and emerge in relation to it. They do not replace life.

The short story relating a colleague's experience ended with two questions: »Was this deliverance? Was it theology?« Who posed these questions? The protagonist, the narrator, or possibly even the readers as they see themselves reflected in the text? The text leaves this open, and thus offers different ways of answering the questions. If this, too, is down to the readers, they must disclose their preconception of deliverance and theology, then engage with whatever a story evokes in the protagonist, and thus internalize the experience of a third person by giving that person a space within themselves, thanks to the effect of life.

Encounters and relationships were mentioned as two terms at the start of this paper, describing the basis on which the research project on Elie Wiesel, among other things, arose. By being able to give life to its characters, literature enables such encounters, and thus also a living dialogue. In doing so, it opposes death.



IV  
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## AUTHORS

**ALAN L. BERGER**, PhD, is Professor of Judaic Studies at Florida Atlantic University, where he holds the Raddock Family Eminent Scholar Chair in Holocaust Studies and directs the Center for the Study of Values and Violence After Auschwitz. His work focuses on Holocaust literature, second-generation witness, and Jewish-Christian dialogue.

**CARINA BRANKOVIĆ**, Dr., is coordinator of Lower Saxony's »Certificate Critical Education against Antisemitism in Lower Saxony in the Context of School« (ZABIN) at the University of Oldenburg, and a postdoctoral researcher at the Potsdam branch of the Elie Wiesel Research Center. She studied Religious Studies, Protestant Theology and Jewish Studies at the University of Heidelberg, the Hochschule für Jüdische Studien Heidelberg and the University of Zurich. Her research interests focus on the critical education against Antisemitism, on Jewish cultural life in contemporary Germany, and post-Holocaust Jewish Literature.

**JEAN EHRET**, PhD, PhD, Professor of Theology & Spirituality, Director of the Luxembourg School of Religion and Society, Distinguished Visiting Professor at Tübingen University.

**ELANA HEIDEMAN**, PhD, is a historian, educator, and Jewish rights activist specializing in Holocaust studies, antisemitism, and Jewish identity. She completed her PhD under Professor Elie Wiesel and has served as a lecturer, guide, and consultant for institutions in the U.S. and Israel, including Yad Vashem. A delegate to the World Zionist Council and recipient of the Herzl Prize, she develops educational programs focused on combating Holocaust denial and fostering Jewish empowerment.

**JULIEN JEUNETTE**, Dr., Research Programme Director, Käte Hamburger Kolleg CURE, Saarland University, Germany.

**JOSEPH A. KANOFSKY**, PhD, Rabbi of Congregation Kehillat Shaarei Torah in Toronto, Canada. He was an Andrew W. Mellon Teaching fellow at Boston University for Professor Elie Wiesel, who supervised his graduate studies. He was ordained by the late Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel at the Rabbinical College of America, where he was a Wexner Fellow.

**STEVEN T. KATZ** is Professor and holds the Alvin J. And Shirley Slater Chair in Jewish Holocaust Studies at Boston University and is the former Director of the Elie Wiesel Center for Jewish Studies.

**DANIEL KROCHMALNIK, Dr.**, Rabbi, was Professor of Jewish Religion and Philosophy at the School of Jewish Theology at the University of Potsdam. He previously taught at the University of Heidelberg and the Hochschule für Jüdische Studien. A co-founder of the Elie Wiesel Research Center, his research focuses on Jewish hermeneutics, rabbinic literature, and modern Jewish thought.

**JANET E. McCORD, PhD, FT**, Professor of Thanatology, Director: Master of Science in Thanatology, Edgewood University, Madison, Wisconsin. She was an Andrew W. Mellon Teaching fellow at Boston University for Professor Elie Wiesel, who supervised her graduate studies.

**NEHEMIA POLEN, PhD, Rabbi**, is Professor of Jewish Thought at Hebrew College, Massachusetts. Educated at Ner Israel Rabbinical College and Johns Hopkins University, he completed his doctorate under Elie Wiesel. He is a leading Hasidism scholar and has also published on Tanakh and early Rabbinic literature. He has received fellowships from the NEH and Harvard.

**CHRISTINE J. WUNDERLI, Dr.**, wrote her dissertation »Elie Wiesel, the Shtetl, and Post-Auschwitz Memory« at the University of Lucerne. She currently lives as a freelance author in St. John's/Canada. She specializes in theology, philosophy and Jewish studies.

## EDITORS

**VALESCA BAERT-KNOLL**, Dr., head of the President's office at Tübingen University. She wrote her PhD on Elie Wiesel's work and co-headed the Elie Wiesel Research Center at Tübingen University until 2023.

**MARION EICHELSDÖRFER**, M.A., is a research assistant at the Elie Wiesel Research Center of the Catholic Theological Faculty (University of Tübingen). She studied Jewish Studies (Heidelberg University for Jewish Studies) and German Studies (University of Heidelberg). She worked as a research assistant and lecturer at the Heidelberg University for Jewish Studies. Her research focuses on Yiddish testimonial literature written in the ghettos and camps and in the early post-Holocaust period.

**ELISABETH MIGGE**, Dr. theol., is a postdoctoral researcher and project coordinator at the Elie Wiesel Research Center at the Faculty of Catholic Theology, University of Tübingen. She studied Catholic Theology and Biology, did her PhD in Systematic Theology and now works as a lecturer in the Department of Religious Education. Her research focuses on interreligious dialogue and the critical education against antisemitism.

**CHRISTIN ZÜHLKE**, Dr., is the Chaiken Postdoctoral Researcher in Jewish Studies at the University of Delaware, USA. Her research focuses on Jewish experiences and responses to the Holocaust, with a specific emphasis on Yiddish, gender (masculinities), and religious aspects. She holds a PhD from the Center for Research on Antisemitism, Technical University of Berlin, Germany, and studied philosophy, German, and Jewish studies.

**REINHOLD BOSCHKI**, Dr., is Professor at Tübingen University, Campus of Theologies. He is heading the Elie Wiesel Research Center and the Department for Religious Education. He is co-editor of the annotated complete edition of Elie Wiesel's works in German.

## WITH THE COLLABORATION OF

**MORITZ SACHERER**, M.Ed., PhD candidate and research assistant at the Elie Wiesel Research Center at Tübingen University.

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