

Below the Quadrangle

Elie, Elie

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"By its uniqueness the holocaust defies literature" writes Elie Weisel, survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald.

On Yom Kippur, the Day of Repentance, Jews are asked to open their souls to God, confess that they are fallible, and implore once again the mercy of God. The day is also one of remembrance for those who have died, for those who have for any reason sacrificed themselves for the purposes of brotherhood, love, or their Judaism. In synagogue on that day it has become a custom to read poems and stories and prayers written by contemporaries that celebrate their beliefs, bare their fears, and commemorate their dead.

Perhaps the most saddening and horrifying story that is read is one by Elie Wiesel, the French novelist, and much acclaimed literary descendant of Sholem Aleichem. The story is entitled "The Death of My Father." We would, of course, initially expect the solemnity of such a remembrance, but with this sense a banality about the story to be read, a feeling that this will be variations on a theme, replete with the pain of loss, yet somehow lacking literary originality.

"My father gave back his soul at Buchenwald," Wiesel writes. We sense then that his story will be different. And it is. He writes that every year since the event he has been forced into a quandary. The eighteenth day of the month of Shvat is the anniversary of his father's death, and, according to ritual and custom he should chant this, say this prayer, hallow in his heart once again the memory of his departed father. Yet to him such a regimen only reminds him that this was no ordinary death, this was not natural death, nor a cankerous one from a cancer, from tumor, or even an accidental death from, say, a fall. This, he writes, was a death ripped from the womb of some eternal reservoir of human perversity, a meaningless death brought about by not one not two, but by a civilization gone wild into the infinite possibilities of degradation.

Yeats writes that when he envisions the poet Keats, he sees a young man with his nose pressed tight against the window of a sweetshop. For Yeats, the single vision captures both Keats and his poetic sensibility. I have since reading that always endeavored to think in that way about writers, so for Alan Paton I have envisioned a man walking slowly across the greenest of veldts, for Wolfe a young boy forever young, forever gangling, listening from the window of his room to the sound of trains in the night.

But for Wiesel, the vision is not so soft, nor so romantic. I have tried often to extinguish the vision, have employed any number of arguments to do so, but have failed consistently. For Wiesel I see a child sitting in gray tattered clothes in an equally gray squalid detention barracks in Buchenwald. There are others in the block,

many others, but they seem as shadows limping quietly over the cold boards of the barracks, lying on board pallets looking out with eyes still somehow adhering to their emaciation. He is in the center of the barracks and above him to his left dying from exhaustion, is his father. The young boy turns his head through the grayness and through the window he sees the smoke, the fetid whorls of smoke rising from the crematoria, and he bows his head and thinks that these, yes these, must be the last dancing shadows of his mother and his little sister,

*... the smile of the child
who was thrown as in play
into the playing flames ... (Nelly Sachs)*

Elie Wiesel is a child of Buchenwald and Auschwitz, one who survived. He left his parents, his sister and friends in the camps and has spent much of his life thinking and rethinking the events of the Holocaust. His first novel, *Night*, which appeared in 1958, is the only novel of his which deals directly with his concentration camp experience. A number of subsequent short stories and dialogues also concern themselves with this experience.

I have always admired both Mr. Wiesel's writing and his courage. I am not alone. His novels and short story collections have always been accepted with praise by the critics, and purchased by Jew and non-Jew. Camus once said to Wiesel that he envied him, that he had a connection with events that he could never experience. Francois Mauriac, the French-Catholic novelist, writes in his introduction to Wiesel's *Night* that after he met "the young Israeli" for the first time he could only respond with tears.

So it was with interest beyond the ordinary that I attended a lecture of his a few weeks ago. The auditorium was completely filled. On the stage sat Wiesel behind a rather ordinary desk scattered with his books and papers. The brief introduction completed, Wiesel spoke into the light. "I am only a story teller," he said. "I only tell stories." The sound system was quite adequate so his diminutive French voice effected in one a clear sense of place, not of America, but of Europe, a wildly raped Europe. The lights on him focused his face, the carelessly tossed hair, the trenches that he cut into face when he gathered emotion when reading, and the soft, almost child-like eyes.

Their eyes—I must tell you about their eyes. I must begin with that, for their eyes precede all else, and everything is comprehended within them. The rest can wait. It will only confirm what you already know. But their eyes—their eyes flame with a kind of irreducible truth, which burns and is not consumed.

Wiesel wrote this in his account of a trip he made to the Soviet Union, *The Jews of Silence*. That night he spoke of the Jews there, and, as he writes in his account, the look in their eyes is all one needs to know. It was a look of fear, of sadness. They were eyes that hid away in the darkness of a Moscow evening, eyes that forever chased away into the night for fear of the lustful surveillance of the Russian police. Yet, he commented, they were still eyes of hope.

That night Wiesel spoke of the Jews in Russia, of the little town of Sighet where so many of his stories were born, and of the Holocaust. I have since then tried to forget it all for a while. I have tried to forget Wiesel's voice, that thin haunting thread that wound itself into the texture of my thoughts; I have tried to blur the vision of the rusted German trains rolling on through the countryside with the stock of crowded humans, scholars whose heads were destined for decapitation, young Jewish women with soft skin bound for the corrosive touch of commandants, young children soon to know the play of fire on their skins. I have tried, but I cannot.

When he finished reading, and looked into the light once more in silence, I could see his eyes. It was his eyes that I cannot forget, and it is in his eyes that I could see once again the unwept tears of those whose deaths still defy understanding, and whose sacrifices on the pyre of human perversity will forever haunt the human temper with the specter of so many smoke-spirals in the German countryside.

Those were tears that were his eyes.