

faith as a way to dismiss the doubt that Rubenstein's address raised for you. You must not try to get around it, for his is the brook of fire for you to pass through on your way to meaningful faith."

Ryan's point was that "to have a Jew [Rubenstein] question the existence of the God of Torah, as the God of history, was even more threatening [to Christian tradition and belief] than Jewish statements of faith, for it attacked the fundamental premise of all Biblical faith."

Ryan is not alone in reporting that he still ponders "the issue between Wiesel who spoke with the authority of a survivor and Rubenstein who spoke with the authority of complete honesty and from his own rational perception of an irrational universe." Ryan concludes: "Richard Rubenstein's resignation to life in this absurd world of power without benefit of consolation of traditional religious faith is just as authentic as Wiesel's affirmation of religious faith as a kind of holy madness appropriate for our time."

Those who were not there can still listen and learn—the reader can wrestle with these men and against them. The issues that permeate religious discussions of the Holocaust were all raised in this critical debate.

Perhaps the answers too—but most certainly all the questions.

Richard L. Rubenstein and Elie Wiesel

An Exchange

I. *Rubenstein: Some Perspectives on Religious Faith after Auschwitz*

One of the oldest tasks confronting a father in the Jewish tradition is that of deciding what he will hand down to his children. Personality is very largely a distillation of memory. A very significant part of the personality children take with them is dependent upon what they receive from their father. I therefore begin this discussion of theology by sharing with my audience some things that have happened to me within the family circle. I do so because of my conviction that theology can no longer be an interpretation of the received Word of God. It may have been that at one time. Since Søren Kierkegaard, a certain subjectivity has entered the discipline. The theologian must share with his readers his own personal religious existence. It is no longer possible for the theologian to be primarily the spokesman for or the defender of institutionally defined faith. If one wishes to be a theologian in our time, one must begin with the personal equation.

In the summer of 1960 I visited Europe for the first time. I spent the summer partly in Amsterdam and partly at a Dutch North Sea resort, Wyk aan Zee. I had just completed my doctorate and wanted to visit my wife's native land. She was the same age that Anne Frank would have been had she survived. She had escaped from Holland

From Franklin H. Littell and Hubert G. Locke, eds., *The German Church Struggle and the Holocaust*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974. Reprinted by permission of Franklin H. Littell and Hubert G. Locke.

during the four days of the German invasion of May 1940. Her family was among the very few Dutch Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. We wanted to visit her childhood home as well as to come to know those of her relatives who had been fortunate enough to survive.

At first it did not occur to me that I might have any interest in meeting Germans or visiting Germany in spite of the fact that Germany was only a few hours away. Then I began to notice German visitors, especially at Wyk aan Zee. There were signs everywhere in German advertising *Zimmer frei*, "room available." I remember my first contact with a German. An elderly man thought I was Dutch and asked me for directions. I did not know whether to be courteous or react in rage. At the time I could only see Germans as cold-blooded, mass murderers of my people.

Things became more complicated on the beach. My children often played ball with their Dutch cousins. Occasionally, the ball would roll near a German family. They would invariably return it. Eventually, I had to face the question: Could I permit my children to play with Germans? This may seem trivial, but the question had great existential import for me at the time. And, I was not able to resolve it satisfactorily.

In August of that year, I took my eleven-year-old son Aaron into Germany to see the country that had caused our family and our people so much horror. When I first crossed the border, I had the distinct feeling that I was entering enemy territory. The town we first visited was Düsseldorf. By accident we met Dr. Hans Lamm and the editors of the *Allgemeine Wochenzeitung der Juden in Deutschland*. Through Dr. Lamm's good offices, we were invited to attend a briefing which was being given by the *Bundespresseamt*, the Press and Information Office of the Federal Republic, in Bonn. This followed the season of the "*Schmiererei*," the defacing of synagogues which had just taken place throughout West Germany.

My son listened intently during the briefings. He was understandably very curious. As we drove back to Holland, he began to ask me questions about Auschwitz. They were not the kind of questions I had expected. I thought my son would ask me about the Germans. He did not. He took it for granted that the murders had been the will of the German people and their legally constituted government. Most of his questions were about the United States.

"Daddy," he said, "didn't the Americans know there was an Auschwitz?"

"Yes, they did," I replied.

"Well, if that's so, couldn't they have done anything about it?"

"I'm not sure."

"Well, didn't we have any German prisoners of war?"

"Yes, we did."

"Couldn't they have been used as hostages to make the Germans behave?" he asked.

I couldn't answer and I would not today suggest that we could have effectively held German prisoners hostage to Nazi good behavior. What is important was that my son perceived that more was involved in the Holocaust than the Nazis and their victims. As I wrote in *After Auschwitz*, a shadow of alienation entered that eleven-year-old boy which has never left him. One of the most important effects of my taking my son into Germany was that both of us had to face the question of what kind of human community might be possible for him—not only with Germans but also with his fellow Americans. Both of us had to ask ourselves what sense of community we might have with our fellowmen, especially since we refused to delude ourselves that only the Germans thought the world would be better off without Jews.

Above all, I did not want him to hate Germans, not for the sake of Germans but for his own sake. I understood that hatred is a poison which eats away at the soul. If hatred cannot be directed against an external object in realistic action, it will sooner or later turn against the subject who possesses the hate. It was not my wish to see my son grow up possessed of a hatred against Germans which he would be compelled to expend against himself.

Nor did I want his image of himself as a Jew to be controlled by that of the helpless victim going up in smoke. There was nothing in any way dishonorable or degrading about those who were compelled to become victims. Nevertheless, it was not an identity which any man ought to be compelled to choose if he were not compelled by fate so to do.

The problem of my children's developing identities was further intensified by the fact that they knew that their mother had literally escaped by the skin of her teeth. One day during that 1960 sojourn, I chanced upon my nine-year-old daughter Hannah. She was walking

near the Westerkerk opposite the Anne Frank House. I noticed that she was reading and was oblivious of everything around her.

"What are you reading, Hannah?" I asked.

"Anne Frank's Diary."

In June 1969, nine years later, I again visited Germany, this time to take delivery of a new Volkswagen at the factory in Wolfsburg. We were visiting Paris at the time. The day before I was scheduled to go, my younger son Jeremy who was then eleven, the same age his older brother had been nine years before, asked,

"Daddy, can I come with you?"

After thinking it over, I replied, "Yes, Jeremy, you may."

The two of us took the night train to Hanover and thence to Wolfsburg where we picked up the car. We were impressed by the enormous industrial chimneys which towered above the Volkswagen plant, but somehow they made us think of the chimneys of the crematoria of yesteryear. We returned to Paris by way of Cologne where we spent the night. While in Cologne, Jeremy began to ask me almost the same questions his brother had nine years before. Jeremy was aware of the family history. His reaction was, however, slightly different.

As we stood in the plaza before the great Cologne Cathedral at about nine in the evening, Jeremy suddenly turned to me and shrieked.

"Daddy, get me out of here. I don't want to be near these people."

I understood his reaction. It was a shudder of utter horror when he realized the enormity of what the people around him had done. Nevertheless, as a father, it was my responsibility to help him mature as an individual who was beyond both hatred and resentment, the fruitless aggression of the powerless, so that he could deal realistically not only with Germans but with all non-Jews in the years to come.

Regrettably, there is more to the problem. I am not unaware of the history of the Nazi period. Although I would certainly defer to historians of the period for some precise details—I am painfully aware of the relations between both the Evangelical and the Catholic Church and the Nazis. There were, of course, individual and group resistance; but, in general, the record of the Christian Church towards the specific issue of the extermination of the Jews was less than heroic. The mystery of Pope Pius XII's reaction to the events remains a painful question to this very day. It is clear that the Pontiff knew in great detail what was happening. For considerations which remain unknown to

this day, he was unwilling to utter any protest. How shall I interpret this to my children? Shall I simply say that the fraternal bond, problematic as it has been throughout history, between Jew and Christian broke down completely? Could I encourage my children to look for a reconciliation some day based upon Christian repentance and Jewish acceptance of the Christian confession? To look for such a result would be neither realistic nor even desirable. Were Christians made to feel guilty, they might someday be driven to justify the very thing that made them feel guilty. Any human encounter based upon the idea that one side bears some kind of mark of Cain and must forever do penance to the other precludes genuine reconciliation, especially between rival religious traditions.

Another way of handling the problem might be simply for Jews to avoid, wherever possible, all relations with Christians. One important Jewish theologian is reported to have declared that he will abstain from dialogue with Christians until they repent. It is difficult to take such a position seriously. The theologian in question has willingly accepted many invitations to appear before Christian audiences. Such speaking is already an act of dialogue and encounter. The man's actions simply belie his words. It is no more possible for Jew and Christian to break off dialogue than for the various segments of the family of man to become totally exclusive, non-communicating atomic units. It simply will not work.

The question of what I, as a father, can hand down to my sons and daughter involves another visit to Germany, one which I describe in *After Auschwitz*. On August 15, 1961, two days after the DDR (*Deutsche Demokratische Republik*) erected the wall between East and West Berlin, I arrived in Bonn from Amsterdam to survey political and cultural trends in West Germany. At the urging of my hosts, the *Bundespresseamt*, the Press and Information Office of the Federal Republic, I decided to fly immediately to Berlin.

On August 17, 1961, at 4:30 in the afternoon, I had a two-hour conversation with Probst Dr. Heinrich Grüber at his home in Berlin-Dahlem. Dean Grüber had been the only German to testify in Jerusalem against Adolf Eichmann at the celebrated trial earlier that summer. He had a distinguished record in the defense of Jewish rights, or at least, the rights of Christians of "non-Aryan" origin, during the Nazi period. He had himself been a concentration camp inmate. We talked under almost apocalyptic conditions. American army tanks

rumbled outside his home. He was pastor of a church in East Berlin. Living in West Berlin he was very upset that he was cut off from his flock. He began to use the imagery of the biblical theology of history to describe what was happening.

God was punishing a sinful Germany, he declared. He asserted that God was making Germans refugees as the Germans had made others homeless. Having commenced with his biblical interpretation of recent history, he could not stop until he asserted that it had been God's will to send Adolf Hitler to exterminate Europe's Jews. At the moment that I heard Grüber make that assertion, I had what was perhaps the most important single crisis of faith I have ever had. I recognized that Grüber was not an Antisemite and that his assertion that the God of the Covenant was and is the ultimate Author of the great events of Israel's history was no different from the faith of any traditional Jew. Grüber was applying the logic of Covenant Theology to the events of the twentieth century. I appreciated his fundamental honesty. He recognized that, if one takes the biblical theology of history seriously, Adolf Hitler is no more nor less an instrument of God's wrath than Nebuchadnezzar.

If I were a fundamentalist Christian I might be tempted to say to the Jewish community, "See here, you deluded people. When are you going to see the light? When are you going to stop being punished by God and accept his supreme gift to you, by confessing that Jesus Christ is the Redeemer of Israel?"

Nor do I regard such a question by an evangelical Christian as Antisemitic. If one accepts the doctrine that God is distinctively involved in the history of Israel, the fundamentalist Christian may indeed be right in asserting that the sorrows of the Jews have been inflicted upon them for rejecting Jesus. Whether one is a fundamentalist Christian or a traditional Jew, it is impossible to regard the sorrows of Jewish history as mere historical accidents. They must in some sense express the will of God as a just and righteous Creator. Either such a God is a sadist who inflicts pain because he enjoys it or he has a reason for the misfortune he inflicts. The only morally defensible motive for a superior to inflict pain on an inferior would be punitive chastisement which has as its purpose altering the victim's mode of behavior. If one takes Covenant Theology seriously, as did Dean Grüber, Auschwitz must be God's way of punishing the Jewish people in order that they

might better see the light, the light of Christ if one is a Christian, the light of Torah if one is a traditional Jew.

I have often stated that the idea that a God worthy of human adoration could have inflicted Auschwitz on what was allegedly his people is obscene. But, notice the terrible price one must pay if one rejects the God of the Covenant. If the God of the Covenant exists, at Auschwitz my people stood under the most fearsome curse that God has ever inflicted. If the God of history does not exist, then the Cosmos is ultimately absurd in origin and meaningless in purpose. We have been thrust into the world in which life proliferates, has its hour, only to disappear amidst the further proliferation of life. As human beings we are divided by historical and geographical accident into the tribes of mankind, to no ultimate reason or purpose. We simply are there for but a moment only to disappear into the midnight silence of Eternal Chaos. Like Kierkegaard, I have had to choose between a world without the biblical God and the leap into faith. I have had a slightly different "Either-Or" than Kierkegaard. I have had to decide whether to affirm the existence of a God who inflicts Auschwitz on his guilty people or to insist that nothing the Jews did made them more deserving of Auschwitz than any other people, that Auschwitz was in no sense a punishment, and that a God who would or could inflict such punishment does not exist. In other words, I have elected to accept what Camus has rightly called the courage of the absurd, the courage to live in a meaningless, purposeless Cosmos rather than believe in a God who inflicts Auschwitz on his people.

I have done so as a rabbi and a theologian in the full knowledge that my choice has been rejected by my people. Nevertheless, I would rather be rejected by my people than affirm their guilt at Auschwitz.

Nor does Israel's victory in the Six Day War of 1967 alter that judgment. It might be argued that the same God who delivered the Jews to the ovens also gave them Jerusalem in 1967. When I stood at the Wall for the first time during the summer of 1967, people who knew me came up to me and asked,

"What do you think now? God has given us all of Jerusalem!"

"God is not on the side of the Jews," I replied, "nor is he against the Arabs. The Jews and the Arabs both love this place and consider it their own. We have a terrible conflict. But, to treat the Arab as villain

rather than *enemy* is to misconceive the nature of the conflict. I refuse to say *Gott mit uns* under any circumstances."

The Six Day War, tentative as its conclusions may have been, is no royal road back to the God of History.

Nor can I make sense out of Auschwitz by regarding it as the latest of a long series of Antisemitic acts inflicted upon Jews by Christians. Auschwitz represents something altogether novel and materially distinct from previous Jewish misfortunes. There is, for example, a difference between the "civilized" Antisemitism of earlier ages and what must be called the Antisemitism of the technological barbarians of the twentieth century. As bitter as was the hostility of Ferdinand and Isabella, the Catholic monarchs of Spain in 1492, against the Jews, they must be seen as civilized Antisemites. They reigned at a time when 781 years of Islamic presence was coming to an end on the Iberian peninsula. Once the Moors had departed, the monarchs had to face the problem of whether they had achieved the religious unity for which their people had fought. As long as there were non-Christians in Spain, that nation's sacred consensus eluded them. At the time, the idea of a secular society was totally unthinkable in Spain. There were several hundred thousand Jews in Spain. The way the monarchs dealt with them highlights the difference between civilized Antisemitism and modern Antisemitism.

They gave the Jews three options: The first was to be baptized and become part of Christian Spain; the second was to leave the country if baptism was impossible. Jews who left were permitted to take what they could carry with them. The choice was a harsh one, but it is crucial that we understand that Ferdinand and Isabella had no interest in exterminating Jews simply because they were Jews. Their interest was in the creation of a Christian Spain, not the extermination of the Jews.

The Jews had a third, tragic option: they could remain on Spanish soil as Jews, but they would be killed if they did so. Nevertheless, this option of extremity was not without dignity. Let us imagine a Jew saying to himself, "I can neither leave this place which I love nor become a Christian."

By his decision such a man elected martyrdom. His death was freely chosen. It served as a witness both to his love of place and his Jewish faith. This is in stark contrast to what took place in the Nazi death camps. One of Hitler's greatest victories was that he deprived

the Jews of *all* opportunity to be martyrs. There can be no martyrdom without free choice. In the camps it made no difference whether you were Dr. Edith Stein, who had become a Carmelite nun, or a Hasidic rabbi. All Jews were slaughtered without distinction. Even baptism provided no escape. It must sadly be noted that the pathetic attempts of the Jewish community to see the six million as martyrs is a tragic albeit understandable misperception.

Unfortunately, Auschwitz can be seen as the first triumph of technological civilization in dealing with what may become a persistent human problem, the problem of the waste disposal of superfluous human beings in an overpopulated world. I hope that my deliberate use of language indifferent to the moral dimension is noted. I have attempted to use language as did the Nazis when they spoke of exterminating people as *Sonderbehandlung*, special handling. Part of the technology of mass slaughter involves a process of so laundering the language used to describe the process that it appears to be a technological problem and not an act which takes place between human beings.

When I visited Poland in 1965, it was immediately apparent that, for all of their hatred of the Jews, the Poles could not have created Auschwitz. They simply did not have the technological competence required for the rationalized, bureaucratic structures employed so successfully by the Germans. It is because the Germans were so much at home in technological civilization that they were able to succeed so well in their experiment in human waste disposal.

Hitler has demonstrated how superfluous people can be dispatched with an extraordinary economy of means. He has also demonstrated that such a project need have few, if any, lasting, undesirable effects on the perpetrating group. The Germans are today a healthy, prosperous community. As a frequent visitor to that country, I have often been struck with how healthy Germany is—for Germans. Having gotten rid of the disturbing presence of the Jews, the Germans have solved a problem which had plagued them since the emancipation. Germany today is closer to being the *Volksgemeinschaft*, the homogeneous Volk community, the Nazis sought than at any time since the emancipation. If we dismiss all moral considerations, as did the Germans themselves, Hitler's project can be seen as a superlative success. It also invites repetition, if not against the Jews then against other minorities which disturb the harmonious existence of a dominant majority.

Furthermore, as Hannah Arendt has pointed out in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, there is today no longer any credible intellectual basis for affirming the existence of *human rights*. Such rights in the abstract are meaningless. The only rights an individual has are those he possesses by virtue of his membership in a concrete community which has the power to guarantee him those rights. Without such a community, a man can rely on no residue of universally accepted human rights. Such isolated individuals can easily find themselves in a situation of total rightlessness, as did the death camp inmates.

Miss Arendt's observations are profoundly important theologically. If an individual has no rights beyond those granted to him by his political or kinship community, then all talk about natural, moral law or about a God who endows man with a certain irreducible dignity has been demonstrated by the Germans to be of no consequence when such talk might really matter. Theologians or moralists may argue that all men possess some God-given irreducible measure of dignity, but such talk will neither deter future emulators of the Nazis nor comfort realistically their victims. The Germans have proven their point in the most effective way possible, by successfully dispatching their victims with no countervailing force to impede them until it was too late. Even the verbal impediment of denouncing the Nazis was withheld by those religious authorities who have been most insistent in their assertion of the existence of natural law and the reality of human rights under God. It is not I who have rejected human rights. The German success in ridding themselves of population elements they deemed undesirable has made those rights no longer credible.

A very interesting example is cited by Miss Arendt in support of her argument that human rights are no longer credible. At the conclusion of the war in 1945, the Italian government offered all Jews on Italian soil immediate Italian citizenship. Almost all of the Jews involved instinctively understood that such an offer, as generous and well-intentioned as it may have been, was nevertheless an illusory solution to their problem. They knew that they could not possibly achieve instantaneous affiliation in one of the many primary communities which together constitute the larger Italian community. In good times their citizenship and the rights which accrued to it might be undisturbed; in times of stress their citizenship would prove as worthless as had that of the Jews of Germany. If any reason for the establishment of the State of Israel makes sense to the survivors of the camps,

it is that the survivors understood that neither divine sanction nor abstract assertions about civic equality and human decency has any practical credibility to *any* group of people any longer. This is no longer primarily a Jewish problem. Human rights and dignity can only be attained by membership in a community that has the power to guarantee those rights. Regrettably, the word power must be underscored. Niebuhr.

Paradoxically, this insight has made it possible for me and, hopefully, my children to encounter the non-Jewish world, especially the Christian world, without anger or resentment: we could only be angry or resentful if we expected some standard of conduct from the Christian world which it failed to observe. But if Auschwitz has taught us anything, it is that in times of stress rights and dignity are most likely to be operative within one's primary or kinship group, if indeed they are operative at all. I earnestly wish it were otherwise. It is my conviction that in pre-modern societies it often was otherwise. Nevertheless, I do not see how one can escape the sorrowful conclusion that he alone has rights and dignity who has the power to enforce those rights or belongs to a group that possesses such power. The possession of power is indispensable for human dignity.

In 1967 there was disappointment and even anger in the Jewish community that most Christians did not share their fears for Israel's survival. It was my conviction that the Jewish attitude was fundamentally mistaken. Because of my background and religious commitments, the fate of Israel is of overwhelming importance to me. Nevertheless, I have no right to expect that what was decisive for me has to be decisive for Christians as well. The fundamental issue for Israel is whether it has the capacity to survive. Reluctantly, I have come to the conclusion that, in the long run, Israel will survive only if it has the capacity to do so unaided by any other power. Without such a capacity, there will be no credible moral deterrent to the extermination of its Jewish population by the surrounding Arabs were they ever to be victorious.

As bleak as this view may seem, it nevertheless makes human fellowship possible for me and, again, hopefully, for my children. I have no unrealistic expectation that human beings will act contrary to their nature. I believe in the psychological reality of the Fall. I am neither disappointed nor resentful when people behave in a way which is both predictable and consistent with their nature. In times of stress,

it is unrealistic to expect much virtue or magnanimity from the generality of men, no matter how praiseworthy such behavior may be when it surfaces unexpectedly.

This does not mean that Hitler was right in his leadership of the German people. On the contrary, had Hitler really taken power seriously, he would have recognized the *limits* of German power. Had he acted more circumspectly, Germany would not today be a divided country caught between Russia and the United States. The German catastrophe took place because Hitler did not have the ancient pagan understanding that all action which overreaches itself—all *hubris*—is sooner or later defeated by Almighty *Nemesis*.

The German catastrophe was, I believe, largely due to the fact that Nazism was never a *genuine* paganism but a kind of Judeo-Christian heresy. In *After Auschwitz* I cite an observation of Jean-Paul Sartre in his biography of *Baudelaire* which is relevant to this point. Sartre contends that the priest who celebrates a black mass, thereby inverting Christian ritual and belief, is by no means indifferent to Christianity as might be a genuine pagan. He hates Christianity, but he is dialectically related to the religious system he both accepts and rejects at the same time. Thus, Nazism cannot be understood as neo-paganism, as it has been by the distinguished Jewish theologian, Emil Fackenheim. Nazism dialectically negated heretical Christianity. Had the Germans been true pagans, they would have practiced the ancient pagan virtues of moderation and respect for limits.

In conclusion, I would like to offer my own confession of faith after Auschwitz. I am a pagan. To be a pagan means to find once again one's roots as a child of Earth and to see one's own existence as wholly and totally an earthly existence. It means once again to understand that for mankind the true divinities are the gods of earth, not the high gods of the sky; the gods of space and place, not the gods of time; the gods of home and hearth, not the gods of wandering, though wanderers we must be. Though every single establishment Jewish theologian rejects this position, the Jewish people have given their assent—with their feet. They have gone home. The best part of that people has ceased to be wanderers. They have once again found a place of their own on this earth. That is paganism.

In spite of the apprehensions of the Jewish theological mainstream, paganism does not mean the rejection of one's people's ances-

tral dance, its distinctive rituals, or its ancestral story. Both the dance and the story have their place within the renewed affirmation of earthly existence. Before the return to Israel, the story seemed to point to a linear progression of the Jewish people in exile. In reality, the story was always about a cyclical movement. Exiled from their land for two thousand years, after Auschwitz they have come home. Auschwitz was indeed the terminal expression of exile. After Auschwitz the Jews of Europe had no viable alternative save homecoming if they were to survive with dignity. The deepest and the most profound of all strivings in the individual and the group may indeed be the striving to return to one's place of origin. Theologically, that striving may be conjoined with a return to the archaic gods of the place of origin.

I should like to conclude with an anecdote about my maternal grandmother. She came to the United States as a young woman from Lithuania. She was an Orthodox Jewish woman who never learned to speak English. Once settled in New York City, she never moved from what was then the Jewish ghetto in the Lower East Side.

I remember one day in 1936 when, as a twelve-year-old, I went to visit her. This was difficult for me because I could not speak Yiddish. Our communication was, of necessity, almost completely non-verbal. I accidentally opened up one of her drawers where I discovered a paper bag filled with dirt. On the outside of the bag, there was the stamp of the British government of Palestine. The bag, with its dirt, had been sent to her from the Holy Land. My own Jewish training was exceedingly limited but I had the good sense not to ask her any questions about the bag. I shut the drawer and did not see the bag until years later. As they lowered my grandmother's coffin into her grave, her oldest son took that paper bag containing the earth of the land of Israel and poured it on the head of the coffin. At that moment I understood something about my grandmother for the first time. My grandmother was a wandering Jew all of her life, but she did not want to wander forever. Somewhere deep within her psyche, she wanted to go home. Her way of going home, at least symbolically, was to return to the earth of her ultimate place of origin as a Jew, the Holy Land. She was a child of earth. In death she wanted her dust to mingle with the dust of the home of her ancestors. I am also convinced that she was returning to the Great Goddess of that earth. In her own way, my grandmother was as thoroughgoing a pagan as I am.

II. Wiesel: Talking and Writing and Keeping Silent

In truth, I think I have never spoken about the Holocaust except in one book, *Night*—the very first—where I tried to tell a tale directly, as though face to face with the experience. All my subsequent books are built around it. 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. &

Let me, therefore, not stick to the subject I have been given but rather tell you a few stories. One of them I heard was told not by a Jew but by Jean Cocteau, a French surrealist. It is only an anecdote, but it fits me and us very well. Jean Cocteau was asked, "Mr. Cocteau, if your house were on fire, what would you take away?" And he said, "The fire, naturally." I think what we took away from our tales and from our burning houses in European history was the fire.

A second story, not by Cocteau and not about him was about a *shammes*. A *shammes* means, in English, a beadle, someone who performs certain tasks in the synagogue. In American synagogues there is no beadle—they are all very high officials, very elegantly dressed. The *shammes* is one type that has completely disappeared from our American Jewish scene. Usually the *shammes*, the beadle, was a poor man, often hunchbacked, usually taciturn. I speak about one in my "Moishe-the-Beadle," and there is an authentic story about another: Somewhere in Russia, in a ghetto, a *shammes* called Moishe went mad; day after day he would come to the synagogue, ascend the *bima*, a kind of podium, bang his fist on the pulpit, and say to God, "*Ribbono shel Olam*, Master of the Universe, I want you to know that we are still here." Day after day. Then began the transports. The ghetto was decimated; it had fewer and fewer Jews. Still the beadle came, mad as he was, and with anger or was it laughter, he would pound his fist on the table, saying, "Master of the Universe, I want you to know, we are still here." Finally came the last transport, and he was the only Jew who remained in the ghetto. For some reason, the madmen were left behind, as they remained behind in my own town. He was alone in the ghetto. He came to the synagogue, again ascended the *bima*, opened the sanctuary, and banged his fist against the sanctuary, "Master of the Universe, I want you to know, I am still

here." And then he stopped, only to murmur: "But *you*—where are you?"

I don't know what happened to Moishe-the-beadle. I don't even know what happened to Him, the One he addressed. I don't even know whether I am here. I say it because, when I think back twenty-five years—one generation, a quarter of a century—sometimes I wonder whether the person inside me who was a child during the war comes from the same root as I, has lived the same experiences, has seen what I have seen. I wonder whether there was a Holocaust at all.

The first three days of the war—in 1944—when the child entered the Kingdom of Night, I remember that the child did not believe—for three days he did not believe that there was a war; that there was such a thing as war. And for three days I didn't believe that the Jews were being killed. I still remember the dream I thought I had: I was with my father, and for three days and three nights the child I was kept saying to his father over and over, "It's not true; it cannot be. It is impossible that Jews could be killed in such a manner, and the world remain silent?" That was my question: Could the world remain silent? Later I found out that the world was silent and that the things which I *thought* happened did indeed occur.

But during the war all the Jews who were trapped inside had no idea that the outside world was aware of what was happening. I listened today to Dick Rubenstein. Of course I share his anger and his despair. Indeed you must know it was fortunate that Jews in the camps didn't realize what was happening in the world. Had the Jews in the camps known that Roosevelt and Churchill and De Gaulle and the Pope and everybody knew, and no one cared, I think they would have committed suicide. I think they would have chosen not to survive.

The only ones who *did* know were those who went to their death. I don't know whether you have ever had an occasion to see albums—albums of pictures taken as souvenirs by German officers, amateur photographers, to entertain their guests. It is unbelievable: they were taking pictures. I spent hours looking at those pictures, wondering how any man could have taken them, and how the life immobilized there is still there.

When you look at those pictures, what strikes you are the eyes. And then when you see the eyes, you understand what they were thinking. They went to their deaths without anger, without hate,

without sadness, and without shame. I think that they went to their deaths with a terrible feeling of pity. They felt pity—pity for those in the outside world who could go on living with the knowledge of what was happening inside. And here I must disassociate myself from Dick. His was a very moving, eloquent, and disturbing address, in which he tried to explain his philosophy of how one survives or lives in a cruel, cold world of absurdity, what he termed the "God-is-dead world." I never spoke of God in that way, Dick. I never spoke of God at all. Maybe because I come from a little *shtetl* and because I was a *Yeshiva Bocher*—and still am, in a way. And maybe because, for years and years throughout my childhood, I learned that before I said "God is alive," I had to be prepared. I remember we had to go to the *Mikvah*—the ritual bath—in order to be worthy of affirming something as important as "God is blessed"; God is God.

Therefore, I never speak of God now. I rather speak of men who believed in God or men who denied God. How strange that the philosophy denying God came not from the survivors. Those who came out with the so-called God is dead theology, not one of them had been in Auschwitz. Those who had never said it. I have my problems with God, believe me. I have my anger and I have my quarrels and I have my nightmares. But my dispute, my bewilderment, my astonishment is with men. I didn't understand how men could be so "barbarian," as you called it, Dick. I still don't understand it. Maybe because I come from a Yeshiva and that all I learned at the Sorbonne was nothing comparable to what I studied in the Yeshiva. I also don't understand how so many Jews remained human inside the camps. I will never understand it. You spoke of hate—that you don't want your children to hate. Let me reassure you, Dick, a Jew is incapable of hate. In the Bible, wherever hate is mentioned, it always refers to self-hate. The only hate that a Jew is capable of—unfortunately—is self-hate. But then he does it well. We cannot hate our neighbors; we cannot even hate our enemies. Look at Israel; Israelis do not hate the Arabs. ✕ ?

Let me tell you something else. Strange as it may sound, there was no hate involved in the relationship between Jew and German. We didn't hate the Germans, and the Germans didn't hate us. It was worse. You can hate only a human being. To them we were objects. Man doesn't hate objects. And we didn't hate them because we are incapable of hate, especially as they then represented the *Malach Hamavet*, the Angel of Death. How can you hate death? How can you

hate something which is beyond you and which sometimes wears the mask of God? How can you? We didn't.

Furthermore, when I think of the Jews in the camps, what astonishes me is that so many of them remained human despite everything. I'll give you an example. As I told you, I came from a *Yeshiva* taken away straight from the Talmud. All of us—I wasn't the only one; when I say "I," I mean all of us—were taken away from the *Yeshiva*, from the Talmud, straight to Birkenau. And for three days I was in a daze, I couldn't believe what I saw. Then I awakened and I remember that immediately after, it must have been on the fourth or fifth day, I was sent to a commando. I have never told this story, because I consider it too personal. I was sent to a commando to carry stones. The man with whom I carried stones—I never saw his face, only his neck and I remember only his voice—the very first day he asked me, "Where do you come from?" I told him. "What do you do at home?" I said I was a *Yeshiva Bocher*; I studied. He said, "What tractate did you study?" I told him. He said, "What page?" I told him. He said, "Let's continue." I said, "Are you mad? Here?" Without books, without anything and why?" He said, "We must continue. That is the only way." And believe it or not, we continued. He was a famous *Rosh Yeshiva*, the famous head of a famous *Yeshiva Talmudic* school in Galicia. He used to recite a passage and I would repeat it, day after day. We studied Talmud to the very end. That a man like this not only studied but also taught Talmud in Auschwitz, that is a source of wonder to me. Also the fact that he was not the only one.

There was a man who smuggled in a pair of *tefillin*, phylacteries. It cost him I don't know how many rations, portions of bread. He smuggled them in and there were at least two hundred Jews who got up every day one hour before everybody to stand in line and to perform the *Mitzvah*. Absurd! Yes, it was absurd to put on the phylacteries. Do you know there were Jews there who fasted on Yom Kippur! There were Jews who said prayers! There were Jews who sanctified the name of Israel, of their people, simply by remaining human!

Within the system of the concentration camp, something very strange took place. The first to give in, the first to collaborate—to save their lives—were the intellectuals, the liberals, the humanists, the professors of sociology, and the like. Because suddenly their whole concept of the universe broke down. They had nothing to lean on. Very few Communists gave in. There were some, but very few. They had

their own church-like organization—a secular church, but very well organized. They were the resisters. Even fewer to give in were the Catholic priests. There were very few priests who, when the chips were down, gave in and collaborated with the torturer. Yet there were exceptions. But you could not have found one single rabbi—I dare you—among all the kapos or among any of the others who held positions of power in the camps.

You say, Dick, that Hitler deprived the Jew of martyrdom. That is not true. Many Jews, especially the rabbis, could have saved their lives. In my town all the rabbis could have saved their lives, and do you know who wanted to save them? The priests. It's not the first time in history that they wanted alibis. The priests came to our rabbis—we had some thirty of them in our center—offering them refuge in the monastery, in the church. But, of course, what rabbi would choose it? I think there were two, out of at least fifty thousand rabbis in Eastern Europe, two who chose to escape individually. All the others preferred voluntarily, knowingly, to go with their Jews. How did these rabbis maintain their Jewishness and their humanity? *That* is the wonder! After all the system was so strong and the whole world was an accomplice!

What the Germans wanted to do was not only to exterminate the Jewish people physically; first of all, they wanted to exterminate them *spiritually*. Therefore, they invented this whole society—what we call in France *univers concentrationnaire*—with its princes and priests and high priests. The Germans wanted to deprave, to debase the Jew, to have him give up all values and dehumanize him. That was the first thing. Even the language in the camp—what kind of language was it? The most obscene language you could imagine, meant to create a climate, to impose an inhuman concept of man and of the universe upon the Jewish people.

There is a joke which is not funny. The joke is that, in one ghetto an SS officer tortured a Jew, and at one point clobbered him on the head while at the same time firing a blank shot. When the Jew came to, there was the SS man laughing, saying, "You are dead. But you don't know it. You think that you escaped us? We are your masters, even in the other world." It's a macabre joke, but it contains some truth. What the Germans wanted to do to the Jewish people was to substitute themselves for the Jewish God. All the terminology, all the vocabulary testifies to that. And in spite of all, here were these men who remained human and who remained Jewish and went on praying to God.

And here I will tell you, Dick, that you don't understand them when you say that it is more difficult to live today in a world without God. NO! If you want difficulties, choose to live with God. Can you compare today the tragedy of the believer to that of the nonbeliever?! The real tragedy, the real drama, is the drama of the believer.

It took me ten years to write my first book. It was not a coincidence; it was deliberate. I took a vow of silence in 1945, to the effect that I would wait ten years to be sure that what I would say would be true. In the beginning people did not talk about what happened over there. Those who survived refused to reveal the darkness they had seen. Today you have novelists and sociologists, you have everybody writing about it. In the early days, those who were there did not touch on it: it was fire. Why didn't they? For many reasons.

First, because they were afraid that no one would believe them. Second, they were afraid that, in the very process of telling the tale, they would betray it. Certain tales must be transmitted orally or not at all, must be transmitted like secrets, as a whole, from mouth to ear, in whispers—like the real oral tradition which was never transmitted, never written down according to the Kotzker rabbi. I think it was Braque who said that literature is a wound turned fire; and we were afraid to invite that fire. You remember in the Bible what happened to the two children of Aaroni Hacoheh, the high priest? One doesn't play with fire!

So we didn't speak about it because we were afraid of committing a sin. Even today all of my friends have the feeling that, when we write books and publish them, we have committed a sin. Don't ask me why. It's irrational. Something is wrong, something is impure. The real story, perhaps, will never be told. The real truth will never be communicated. The real vision can never be shared, so why speak about it?

I'll go even farther. Today, twenty-five years after the event, I wonder whether we shouldn't have chosen silence then. For some reason, I believe that had all the survivors gathered in a secret conclave, somewhere in a forest, and decided together—I know it's a poetic image, unfeasible, but I feel this sense of loss of this opportunity—if we had then all of us decided never to say a word about it, I think we could have changed man by the very weight of our silence. But then I also believe that mankind wouldn't have been able

to bear it. It would have driven man and peoples to madness. That is why, I think, we spoke.

Then we also spoke for a different reason. Somehow the Jew in us is so strong that we believe in communication, we believe in transmission, we believe in sharing. I think the single factor in Jewish existence is this need to communicate. Therefore, we begin always with names; the Bible is full of names. Why do we have all these names—the father and the son, the father of the son—why? To give us this feeling of being linked, of having to continue. We must communicate. This is the central theme of Jewish existence and has been—always—throughout the four thousand years of our history. During World War II it was even more so. Hundreds of people in ghettos sacrificed themselves to enable one of them to get out of the ghetto and tell the tale.

When Shimon Dubnov, probably the greatest historian we have had, was led to the mass grave in Riga together with all the Jews, he shouted, "Jews, open your ears and open your eyes! Take in every cloud; take in every smile; take in every sound. Don't forget!" He was even then, even there, obsessed with the need to communicate, to tell us certain tales. In Auschwitz—worse, in Birkenau, in the Sonderkommando, the commando that worked in the crematoria—there were historians; men who wrote down, day after day, fact after morbid fact, dryly and soberly. They were conscious of the necessity to transmit. Why? Why did they do it? And what for? In whom could they believe? In man? That is what bewilders me and astonishes me: that they could still think of man and of God and of us, while they lived and died in an age in which both Jew and man were betrayed by man and God. This story of spiritual strength—I won't call it "resistance" because the word itself was devaluated—of the Jew has to be told. I think this is what makes us so humble. But here we touch, I believe, the very substance of what I call *Jewishness*—because I don't like the word *Judaism*. There are too many *isms* in this world. What do I call *Jewishness*?

There is a story in the Talmud, a very beautiful one. And it's relevant, because you spoke of martyrs, and we speak of martyrs. The story goes: When Rabbi Ishmael, one of the ten martyrs of the faith in Roman times, was led to his death, a heavenly voice was heard, saying, "Ishmael, Ishmael, should you shed one tear, I shall return the universe to its primary chaos." And the Midrash says that Rabbi Ishmael was a gentleman and did not cry. And I couldn't understand for quite a

while: why didn't he cry? The hell with it! If this is the price to pay, who needs it? Who wants this kind of world? Who wants to live in it? Yet there are many reasons why he didn't cry.

One, he was a martyr. Two, he obeyed. Three, the last and most poetic ultimate reason why he didn't cry is because he wanted to teach us a lesson in Judaism. Rabbi Ishmael—contrary to his classical opponent, Rabbi Akiba—was a rationalist. Even while dying, he wanted to teach us a lesson: Yes, I could destroy the world, and the world deserves to be destroyed. But to be a Jew is to have all the reasons in the world to destroy and not to destroy! To be a Jew is to have all the reasons in the world to hate the Germans and not to hate them! To be a Jew is to have all the reasons in the world to mistrust the church and not to hate it! To be a Jew is to have all the reasons in the world not to have faith in language, in singing, in prayers, and in God, but to go on telling the tale, to go on carrying on the dialogue, and to have my own silent prayers and quarrels with God.

That is the lesson that Rabbi Ishmael, when he died, taught me; but then he was Rabbi Ishmael and I am only a teller of his tales. But then, perhaps, that is the meaning of Jewish existence, especially for a storyteller, to tell tales lived so many times by so many Jews, and I am only one of them.

Postscript

On September 29, 1988, Harry James Cargas convened a symposium on "Elie Wiesel: The Man and His Work." Held at Webster University in St. Louis, Missouri, the symposium celebrated both the thirtieth anniversary of Wiesel's *Night* and the writer's sixtieth birthday. The proceedings included a paper by Franklin Littell, who referred back to the original exchange between Rubenstein and Wiesel. When it was Wiesel's turn to respond to the presentations he had heard all day long, he told a story about that first conference in 1970:

After finishing his response to Rubenstein that evening, Wiesel recalls, Rubenstein stood up and stated that he wished to say something. Wiesel's expectation was that Rubenstein would try to refute him. Instead, Rubenstein's reply to Wiesel was simply: "I as a rabbi want to give you my blessing."

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