4-1-1999

Memory and remembrance in selected nonfiction works of Elie Wiesel

Jordana L. Nissen

MEMORY AND REMEMBRANCE

IN

SELECTED NONFICTION WORKS OF ELIE WIESEL

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of English

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

By

Jordana L. Nissen

April 1999

THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College,
University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree Master of Arts,
University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Committee

[signature]

Phillip C Smith

Chairperson Susan M. Maher

Date 5 April 1999

DEDICATION

To both the children who survived the Holocaust and to those who perished, this thesis is dedicated. You are not forgotten.

And to my own children—may your biggest concerns in life continue to be about bedtime rules. I love you dearly; you are the very air that sustains me.

CONTENTS

Introduction: Nonfictional Writing as Literature and History

"You will never understand." – Elie Wiesel

Although nonfictional writing provides critical insights into history in ways that fictional writing never could, it is very often relegated to a "second-class citizen" status in the realm of literary criticism and appreciation. Literary tradition has created a

> hard line between literature, specifically novels and short stories and poetry, which we regard as created fictions, and nonliterary tests—journalism, biography, history, essays, and so on—which we think of as records of actuality. This distinction is what prevents us from applying to nonfiction the analytical tools we use to uncover the secrets of "literary art. (McCord 748)

Accordingly, "literary texts" and "non-literary" texts have become analogues for fiction and nonfiction. This classification system not only winds up excluding nonfiction from academic consideration, but also designates nonfiction as unworthy of critical interpretation. The neglect stems from the widespread fallacy that only fictional writing wholly involves the creative process, but nothing could be further from the truth. Nonfictional writing is not simply a stream of consciousness method whereby the writer purges his soul of the trivial to the traumatic. Quality nonfiction writing is a highly disciplined art that can offer guidance for future generations in ways that fictional writing cannot. Compositionist Randall Roorda further declares that the genre one is working with, particularly nonfiction, is critical in creating literature as well as defining it (404).

Benjamin Franklin's highly lauded Autobiography offers ordinary readers, literary critics, and historians a true sense of eighteenth-century life. In spite of the fact that Franklin was one of the privileged wealthy, and thereby a member of a slim minority, his writings are compulsory for the reader wishing to gain a sense of what mattered to the common person of the post-revolutionary period of America. Similarly, James Boswell's Life of Johnson is often praised because the ideas rise above the facts. If they did not, Boswell's biography of the famed lexicographer would be nothing more than a doting tribute to his literary idol.

Likewise, Walden, Henry David Thoreau's treatise about his spiritual affinity with Nature, has become a twentieth-century guidebook for the transcendentalist movement of the mid-nineteenth century. Even more notable is a work of nonfiction that influenced future generations, Thoreau's earlier essay, "Resistance to Civil Government[1]," which became the spark that provoked such leaders as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. to abhor violence and seek radical change through non-violent ways. Nonfictional works, therefore, wield an incredible weapon—Truth—which can not only arouse people on an emotional level, but also propel them to change the world in which we live[2].

Writers who experience traumatic events offer the world insights that could never be apperceived by the "normal" fictional route, especially if the events are written by an author who has had no first-hand experience of the event. Consider John Hershey's account, Hiroshima, of the days after the United States bombed Japan with the world's first atomic bomb. Even though Hershey's style is fairly detached and impersonal, his writing is also a controlled historical document for generations to come. Indeed, Hershey's narration has become somewhat of a bible for those who wish to ban nuclear weapons altogether—such are the power of words.

Furthermore, some writers believe that nonfiction writing of a unique event such as the Holocaust surpasses fictional writing of the same genre because both writers and readers of such material "fear that the transmutation of historical atrocity into imaginative literature necessarily entails a trivialization and betrayal of the real events of the Holocaust" (Horowitz 16).

> is true for an individual, it is six million times more true for one of the largest communities of the dead in history. (Wiesel, "Trivializing Memory" Kingdom 169)

Films such as Escape From Sobibor, Schindler's List[3], and the recent "comedy," Life is Beautiful, may provide insights into a subject deemed too loathsome or distasteful to read about by the general public, but no one can deny that these motion pictures would not have been produced had there been a possibility of losing money on such a project. Filmmakers may hold strong artistic values, but the studios are in business for one reason—to make money. The horrible deaths of so many men, women, and children therefore become little more than the source of dramatic "inspiration" for a money-making machine that reminds moviegoers to run back to the concession stand for popcorn before they commit themselves to becoming cinematic witnesses. Moreover, simply the very fact that actors have the choice of whether or not to perform these pseudo-terrifying acts is an insult to the memory of the dead. Hence, both fictional works and performances of the Holocaust, whether based on fact or fiction, are part of a general "desanctification" of the memory of those who were murdered in the Holocaust (Wiesel, "Trivializing Memory" Kingdom 169).

> tradition to be the only revealed tradition, handed down by God, not by man. (Edelman 10)

Writing about the Holocaust is therefore not simply a matter of desire, but duty—and with that obligation comes a necessitated understanding of the reverence for words and their power. Because he was so cognizant of this responsibility, Wiesel did not put his memories of this horrific event in Jewish history into written words until he felt he could do so justly. After a self-imposed silence of over a decade, Wiesel finally was able to put aside his fears of the inadequacies of words that he feels are inherent in writing and recorded his memoirs of his experiences in the concentration camps (Wiesel, All Rivers Run to the Sea 150 – 51).

Aside from having powerful reservations about writing, and therefore speaking, for those who never gave him permission to, Wiesel has an explicit awareness of how very effortlessly words can be altered, thereby manipulating their genuine meanings. For instance, the sixth commandment of the Torah[5], *lo tirtza'ach* (in Hebrew), is often mistranslated as "Thou shalt not kill," when *lo tirtza'ach* literally means, "Do not murder." One does not have to hunt for textual nuances to plainly see that "kill" and "murder" have thoroughly different meanings. To murder someone, there must be an intent to take a life, yet a person might be killed in order to prevent another crime—in defense of one's own life, for instance. Elie Wiesel likely did not wish his words to be misinterpreted so blatantly (although they subsequently often have been), so he wanted to be sure about the commitment that he was undertaking.

Further, Wiesel discerns the energized potential that words contain which can either enlighten or suppress those they affect. As Wiesel points out, Jews often feel the weight of these words before any actions are taken against them: "Whenever the enemy—and the enemy may be an invisible enemy in the beginning but will become visible later on—plans to do something against our people, they begin with words" (Berkowitz 301). The ultimate devastation of the Holocaust did not begin with the crematories of Auschwitz, but with Germany's "Nuremberg Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor." Words, therefore, empower those who use them, but often at the expense of other people's inherent rights. Wiesel takes great care to ensure that he does not wield his words with ungainly force, but rather sows them as seeds of understanding.

Nevertheless, this understanding can never truly come to fruition for two significant reasons that Wiesel is entirely cognizant of. The first problem concerns the inescapability of the boundaries of language itself. Language is a finite system of words bound by the limitations of syntax that cannot possibly communicate the abstract horrors of Auschwitz. Many survivors who attempt to write, or even speak about their ordeals discover that words are "unable to convey the sense of the memories that exist" (Harvey 35). The indisputable quandary, however, is the ability to understand and internalize the dynamics of Auschwitz—how could it have happened in both relation to human beings and God—by both reader and writer alike. Wiesel and other Holocaust survivors who have documented their experiences, repeatedly state that they themselves do not comprehend the dynamics of Auschwitz, so how can a writer possibly expect to convey any essence of the truth to their readers? For Wiesel, "[h]is task is not to *achieve* the impossible—understanding; but only to *persist* in his search for it" (Greenfield 33). Wiesel's writing is then not solely about the quest for truth, but about the journey itself.

Wiesel has said that he wrote his first book, Night, "for the other survivors who found it difficult to speak" (Wiesel, Interview). Because of his connection to other survivors, Wiesel has always written about the Holocaust—either directly or indirectly—in both his fictional and nonfictional works. His predominant themes include the ability and desire to survive in the camps; the sub-human conditions of the camps and what this did to the prisoners; and his disgust with how humankind could have allowed such a moral and ethical defeat for the entire human race. Still, Wiesel's most critical theme is "the importance of remembering and relating what happened" to the rest of the world (Adams 115). From those now-famous words, "Never shall I forget," that Wiesel utters in Night, through the four decades since he first composed those words, Wiesel has kept his promise to himself and the rest of humanity (43).

As Wiesel himself admits, "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" (Wiesel, From the Kingdom of Memory 9). Although Wiesel uses this motif in all of his work, only in his nonfiction writings does he confront it so directly. Keenly aware that much of his audience is Jewish, Wiesel reminds them that without memory, there can be no survival for the Jewish people. Yet as his explanatory style implies, Wiesel's message is for all humankind. This prolific author interweaves Jewish history into his work with skillfulness not often seen in contemporary literature. In fact, one Holocaust scholar credits Wiesel with writing "with a moral authority so pronounced and so rarely found in our day that, to grasp it, one has to bypass almost all of modern literature and seek for interpretive parallels in the Bible and its major commentaries" (Rosenfeld 59).

The skill with which Wiesel writes, especially in his nonfiction works, is unparalleled due to the author's respect for both Jewish ideals and the necessity of speaking the truth without glorifying it in order to gain a wider audience. Wiesel is the most skilled of Holocaust writers not simply because he was the first, but also because his ability to achieve a level beyond that of his contemporaries such as Primo Levi and Gerta Stein lay in his ability to painstakingly recreate the urgency and desperation of the time without bombarding his audience with overwhelming details. These trivialities often give rise to inaccuracies in Holocaust testimonies, and therefore lead critics and historians to doubt the authenticity of the testimony as a whole. Although many other writers of nonfictional Holocaust literature are, like Wiesel, professional writers, few seem to grasp the necessity of creating a lesson plan for humankind in the way that Elie Wiesel does.

[1] Published posthumously as "Civil Disobedience."

[2] This statement is not meant to denigrate the authenticity of fictional literature, which also holds many truths for writer and reader alike. The "Truth" that I am speaking of in nonfictional works is one that comes through a purposeful attempt to change people on an intellectual and emotional level that is often absent in fictional writing.

[3] Schindler's List must be included in this category of fictionalized Holocaust accounts due to the fact that the film is vastly different—indeed, more dramatic and "entertaining"—than Thomas Keneally's rather dry (although factual) book.

[4] Fictional writings of the Holocaust are questionable chiefly among survivors like Wiesel as well as historians.

[5] The Torah consists of the five books of the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) and is considered, by Jews, to contain the 613 commandments upon which all Jewish law is based. For this thesis, I have chosen to use The Pentateuch and Haftorahs edited by J.H. Hertz because this edition offers the Hebrew text, English translation, and traditional rabbinical and modern (Jewish and non-Jewish) commentaries. This book is the most popular Pentateuch throughout the English speaking world and has been in use since 1936.

Another dilemma surrounding testimonials is that almost without exception, some years pass before the witness is able to write about these traumatic events in their lives: "Analysts who are doing current work on trauma have suggested that a 'latency' period is part of the very structure of trauma: 'events, in so far as they are traumatic, assume their force precisely in their temporal delay'" (Suleiman 57). So although memories may take years to surface for the trauma survivor, when they do arise, they are much more forceful. Further, the trauma victim must access the layers of his memory in the same way one must approach a prickly artichoke—so many of the outer layers seem to contain very little of use, but in combination, these bits produce an effectual whole. Also, with great care and patience, one can eventually advance upon the very heart that contains everything concealed.

Writing the actual testimony seems to be, in itself, a kind of therapeutic working through (healing would be impossible) of the circumstances. When enumerating their traumatic pasts, victims must access the "deep memory, the memory of the senses" as opposed to the "external memory, the memory of thought" (qtd. in Suleiman 53). Accessing this deep memory is no simple undertaking. The writer must not only commit time to the project, but must also be prepared to confront the terrifying demons of the past. Courage, therefore, plays no small part in composing a testimony. When memories do come to the surface, they often overwhelm the trauma survivor. The victim then needs to find a release for the flood of information finding its way to the surface. Some victims are fortunate enough to be able to express themselves in their writings; others endorse therapy of various kinds. For those victims who find no release for the overwhelming emotions, they are often subject to hallucinations, flashbacks, and breakdowns (LaCapra 10).

Strangely enough, "[a]s late as the 1970s potential researchers were advised that insufficient time had lapsed for historians to reach thoughtful conclusions about Nazi genocide. Jewish historians were told not to deal with a subject that was certain to evoke emotional, rather than objective, responses" (Saul Friedman xx). Memoirs, as part of this historiography, needed an even greater, detached perspective than the three decades had provided them. Jewish historians and critics disagreed, believing that some of the dangers with waiting even longer than these thirty years are that memories would become less focused on what the survivor deemed important and that potential witnesses would die before having a chance to record their testimonies. For many Holocaust survivors, writing their testimonies became proof of their own survival; therefore, they could wait no longer before recording their experiences.

Flawed though it may be, memory is critical to studying history, not because of the accuracy of its facts, but because of the impact those memories have on the victims' lives as well as their descendants. As historian Dominick LaCapra relates,

> Even in its falsifications, repressions, displacements, and denials, memory may nonetheless be informative—not in terms of an accurate empirical representation of its object but in terms of that object's often anxiety-ridden reception and assimilation by both participants in events and those born later. (19)

Testimony is therefore judged by historians to be a "crucial source for history" because it represents an insiders' view of an event that illuminates the humanity behind the events in the same way letters and correspondence do (LaCapra 11).

No other historical event has produced as many written documents, specifically memoirs, as the Holocaust. Never before have so many men and women felt compelled to leave their testimonies for future generations. As John Harvey points out, part of the reason for this phenomenon is that "the Holocaust exemplifies loss at its penultimate" (127). For both the survivors of the Holocaust and for much of the rest of world Jewry, there is simply no comparison of tragedy.

Because testimonial writing is immanently subject to so much scrutiny, Holocaust writers must be cautious in how they present their memories. Sara Horowitz claims that "Holocaust writers *simultaneously* succeed and fail in the act of retrieving buried or suppressed Holocaust memories and transmuting their details into testimonial narrative" (40). Survivors often feel as if they are betraying those murdered if they share their ordeals in a public forum, but also feel the same if they do not. Their testimonies, therefore, waver between exposing too much to the reader and not revealing enough, and finding a balanced position is often all too impossible for the non-professional writer.

Furthermore, writers of Holocaust testimonies are not the only ones burdened by a sense of inadequacy. Although many critics and historians are able to maintain a balance between judging the testimonies by their individual merits and acknowledging the possible confusion of events that occurs with traumatic memory, many are "overcome with a sense of simple human decency, have questioned their right to examine an extreme experience in which they had no part" and certainly have no basis of comparison in their own lives (Avni 204). How can literary critics, who have never known a day of starvation in their lives or a moment of absolute terror make presumptive analyses about the validity or accuracy of these works? They cannot if they desire to maintain a sense of decency and empathy for their fellow human beings; therefore, testimonies must often stand on their own.

Ironically, the very horrors that make the Holocaust such a critical subject of study for understanding how such an atrocity could have occurred also prevent the very people trying to gain insight into this absurdity from doing so. Critics and historians, as a rule, try to fit events into orderly little packages that can be explained fairly easily: England's restoration of the monarchy, America's fight for independence from England, and even events as broad as Russia's revolution are readily discussed in a cause and effect philosophy. The Holocaust, however, "as historical fact or personal experience, cannot be comprehended by human intelligence and should not be distorted or its enormity mitigated for the sake of making it encompassable by neat rules or glib generalizations" (Greenfield 39). The unique status of the Holocaust—from the brutality of the Germans to the apathy of the world to the helplessness of the Jews to the suffering of each individual—has created a complex historical enigma that will probably never be understood. Yet just as the testimonial author writes to begin the process of understanding, so must historians and critics read these testimonies in order to try to comprehend the antilogy before them.

Prolific Holocaust writer Elie Wiesel very often elaborates on this problem of intransmutability of the reality of the concentration camps. Survivors, constantly bombarded with questions about their seeming willingness to go to the slaughter like cattle, perpetually attempt to convey their feelings about Auschwitz: "'You cannot understand, you cannot understand'" (Wiesel, Kingdom "To Believe or Not to Believe" 34). While Wiesel feels it is imperative to bequeath as much testimony of the truth of the abominations of Auschwitz, he acknowledges that true understanding is impossible for those who did not live through the events: "Naturally, witnesses must write and readers must read. And yet, I know that their secret cannot really be transmitted" (Wiesel, Kingdom "To Believe or Not to Believe" 35). This paradoxical relationship between writer and reader, although unsolvable, is the link that bonds the two together: one could not exist without the other.

Wiesel further explains why survivors, including himself, must conquer the contradictory nature of even attempting to communicate the impossible: "Sometimes we must try *because* it is for nothing. Precisely because death awaits us in the end, we must live fully. Precisely because an event seems devoid of meaning, we must give it one. Precisely because the future eludes us, we must create it" (All Rivers Run to the Sea 17).

Why, then, is testimonial writing of the Holocaust so significant to the realm of nonfiction writing? As Wiesel elucidates in "A Plea for the Dead," victims of the Holocaust suffered more cruelly "from the indifference of the onlookers than from the brutality of the executioner" (Legends 189). The diaries, memoirs, and other testimonials to come out of the Holocaust force all of humanity to cast aside their apathy and *feel* for their fellow human beings. Even though humankind can never appreciate the magnitude and scope of their sufferings, by reading their words, humanity can attempt to empathize. This willingness to *try* and understand and to make a commitment to never be indifferent in the face of evil is perhaps the one true attainable goal of these testimonies.

Wiesel further acknowledges how important these testimonies are to those who died in the Holocaust, those who survived, and those to come in succeeding generations:

> Poems, litanies, plays: to write them, Jews went without sleep, bartered their food for pencils and paper. They gambled with their fate. They risked their lives. No matter. They went on fitting together words and symbols. An instant bcforc perishing in Auschwitz, in Bialistok, in Buna, dying men described their agony. In Buchenwald, I

> attended several "literary" evenings and listened to anonymous poets reciting verses I was too young to understand. They did not write them for me, for us, but for others, those on the outside and those yet unborn. (Wiesel, One Generation After 39).

Preserving the grim details of the Truth became an obsession by all who endured the worst Germany had to offer. Clearly, if these starving, emaciated people were willing to forgo food—the very thing that might help them survive their tortures—in order to safeguard their experiences for the world to learn, then these writings take on a new level of importance in the realm of nonfictional works. Additionally, even the doomed "members of the *Sonderkommando*, those inmates forced to burn their fellow inmates' corpses before being burned in turn, left behind extraordinary documents. To testify became an obsession" (Wiesel, "The Nobel Lecture" Kingdom 244). The ideas that are bound up in words are what make life worth living then—not food or shelter or even safety—but the abstract concept of these things. The remembrance of sleeping in a safe, warm bed and the hope of doing so again became more important than the act itself.

One must wonder, then, with impending death looming overhead, why men, women, and even children kept diaries and journals about the suffering going on around them? Why would these victims pour their souls on to paper? Part of the reason is, of course, an attempt to leave some remnant of themselves untouched in this world. If their words survived, then they are not completely forgotten. Wiesel further believes that the victims inexplicably had a desire to warn future generations of the ghastly results of prejudice and hatred (Wiesel, "President's Commission").

Nevertheless, the bulk of testimonial writing was produced well after the threat of annihilation was over. Wiesel actually apperceives some level of culpability at having become a world-renown author at the expense of millions of people's lives, yet he also admits that "I never intended to be a novelist. The only role I sought was that of witness. I believed that, having survived by chance, I was duty-bound to give meaning to my survival, to justify each moment of my life" (One Generation After 56; "Why I Write" Kingdom 14). The significance of the testimonies, however, does not rest on either the threat of death or the result of fortune: the value lies in the desire to convey and the desire to understand.

Just as the process of writing is both a release and a mechanism to self-understanding and acceptance, the process of reading thereby works in a similar manner. Readers of Holocaust testimonies do not simply read, analyze, and accept the material before them; there is a course of internalization that creates a deeper awareness of the uncommunicability of Auschwitz. Hence, the knowledge gained is that of a realization that the reader knows, comparatively speaking, nothing. Subsequently, the more the reader grasps of Holocaust testimonies, the less, he discovers, he actually knows. Knowledge does not bring understanding, but an awareness of the impossibility of understanding.

Communication from writer to reader conveys less information than it does create questions: How could the Holocaust have happened? How could Jews have gone so blindly to their deaths? How could they not have known? Readers of Holocaust testimonies are forced into acknowledging that they cannot begin to imagine what they would have done. They would have fallen under the same shroud of ignorance; therefore they cannot judge, only accept.

When Elie Wiesel wrote his first manuscript of his memories in the concentration camps, publishers considered the topic "too morbid" for the general public (Wiesel, Interview). Significantly, Wiesel originally published the story that would become Night in the Yiddish novel Un di Velt Hot Geshvign (And the World Remained Silent) in 1956 at the prompting of his friend François Mauriac, a Roman Catholic writer. Simply the fact that Wiesel published his experiences in Yiddish rather than French or English is indicative of the reluctance the author had of sharing his

Hungarian, or even Yiddish pulls the victim into a more personal zone of anguish.

Still, though Wiesel's writings are created in French, the soul of all his works remains completely Jewish. His memoirs, though articulated in French, reflect not the sophisticated knowledge of a Sorbonne-educated man, but the humble background of a Jew who acknowledges that his true education stems from Jewish traditions, faith, and values. In his writings, Wiesel not only explores the memories of yesterday, but he also creates a cultural memory for tomorrow. In another generation or so, the testimony of survivors like Wiesel will be the only memory Jews and the rest of the world, have of the Holocaust. Wiesel's concern that the world will one day forget the uniqueness of the Holocaust reflects the guilt that surrounds the Holocaust survivor. Plagued by the feeling that he is not worthy of having been spared a torturous death, albeit by chance, Wiesel perpetually commits himself to compelling the world to remember.

In this sense, many readers believe that Wiesel's works surpass that of many other famous nonfictional classics. Whereas many earlier memoirs and autobiographies such as that of Benjamin Franklin focus on personal growth and change, Wiesel's essays and memoirs perpetually create a sense of obligation upon the reader to internalize the essence of his writings. Consequently, the change this author hopes to achieve is not so much from within as it is from without. Since he accepted his role as witness to the Holocaust, Wiesel has attempted to educate not only Jews of their own complicated history, but also to elevate the consciousness of the world entire.

Chapter 2: Jewish History and Lessons of the Torah

"Who has fully realized that history is not contained in thick books but lives in our very blood?" – Carl Jung

"Every time history repeats itself the price goes up." – Anonymous

Although Elie Wiesel is not the first or only author to use history as a link to the present, his use of key elements in the Jewish tradition highlight his own affinity with the Jews of the past, present, and future. Patriarchal figures such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob offer Wiesel insights into contemporary occurrences thereby sustaining the perpetual cycle of wisdom through Jewish history (Cargas 106). As a learned Jew, that is, one who has an astute knowledge of Torah and Talmud[1], Wiesel observes that only when the connection between yesterday and today is dismembered, will Jewish tradition be eradicated. One of the very explanations for the continued survival of the Jewish people is this dedication to remembering Jewish history—not as an addendum to world history—but as a unity unto itself with relevance for today's Jews.

One of Wiesel's most intimate desires is to reanimate the Jews of his past in order to breathe new life into them. If Wiesel can credibly recreate those he loved but were taken from him, then they will live in perpetuity rather than be unremembered corpses of the Holocaust: "My father is not dead. My father is a book. And

In this haunting excerpt, Wiesel's former years as a student of the Talmud become evident with his use of the number seven. Seven has always had a powerful significance in Jewish history, beginning with the creation of the earth: "And on the seventh day God finished His work which He had made; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and hallowed it; because that in it He rested from all His work which God in creating had made" (Gen. 2:2-3). The world may have been *created* in six days, but it was not *complete* until God has rested.

There are other abundant occasions of seven in Jewish tradition that additionally stem from the Torah. Before the flood, God told Noah to gather two of each species of animal, but to collect seven pairs of those animals designated as clean (Gen. 7:2-4). Rashi, the great Talmudic commentator and teacher of the early medieval period, concludes that God ordered the additional clean species so that Noah and his family would be able to perform the ritual sacrifices once they left the ark (Hertz 27). Jacob worked and waited seven years, although "they seemed unto him but a few days" to marry Rachel, the beautiful daughter of his uncle Laban (Gen. 29:20). After finding out he had been duped into marrying Rachel's not-so-fair elder sister, Leah, Jacob diligently served his uncle for another seven years in order to marry his beloved Rachel.

Numerous Jewish holidays center themselves around the number seven as well. The festival of Shavous, or the Feast of Weeks, lasts for seven weeks (Lev. 23:15-16), the solemn High Holy Days, including Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, take place in Tishri, the seventh month of Jewish calendar (Lev. 23:27-31), the holiday of Sukkot commands people to dwell in booths for seven days to remember the forty years of hardships in the desert following the exodus from Egypt (Lev. 23:39), and the ancient celebration of the Sabbatical year and the year of the Jubilee was based on allowing the land to have a sabbath of one year after six years of growth in order for it to rest. After seven cycles of this kind, literally seven sabbaths, Israel would hold a fiftieth year Jubilee where the land would revert to its original owners, preventing both land barons and paupers (Lev. 25:1-13).

Moreover, sacrifices and offerings were very often presented in groups of seven, such as the seven unblemished lambs that the Hebrews were to slaughter as an offering (Lev. 23:18). The Torah further commands farmers to bring the first fruits of seven kinds of produce as an oblation to God (Deut. 8:7). The intriguing realization here is that all of the commandments and tales of the Torah that contain the number seven embrace a positive outcome: the establishment of the holy Sabbath, a harvest celebration of freedom, or a long-awaited love fulfilled. Whatever the circumstance, Jews benefit substantially from performing the various commandments encompassing the number seven.

In Wiesel's passage, he creates a paradox in Judaic history and presents his audience with the crux of the predicament: seven and its holy implications are no more – murdered at the hands of the Nazis. Seven – an embodiment of numerical purity in the Torah – has now become a curse instead. In order to highlight the horrors that seven now brings, Wiesel also uses the phrase "Never shall I forget" seven times in this passage and seals it with his final utterance: "Never." Wiesel further attaches historical significance to this passage with the sealing of the curse, in the same way, Jews believe, that a person's fate for the year is sealed at the close of Yom Kippur. The deconstruction of seven's purity is an allusion to the cold reality of the inescapability of death at Auschwitz.

The anti-symbolism of seven is not restricted to Wiesel's experiences at Auschwitz. When he returned to his hometown of Sighet twenty years after being forced from his home, Wiesel crept back in the cloak of night as if he might be deported again if discovered. The strangeness and familiarity enveloped his senses: "Nothing had been moved out of place. The empty barrel at the entrance to the cellar, the empty bucket hanging above the well, the tree with its withered arms turned toward the garden: I could see them all through seven layers of darkness" (Wiesel Legends of unique role in the purpose of man on earth: "The mission of the Jewish people has never been to make the world more Jewish, but to make it more human" (The New York Times). In spite of this conception, the anti-Semitism that grew from this wellspring climaxed in the twentieth century with the rise of Nazi Germany after World War I.

Nevertheless, the idea of an annihilation of all the Jews throughout Europe did not seem possible. Wiesel reflects that Jews held that they were essential to society's continuing function: "The rabbis said: 'Nothing will happen to us, for God needs us.' The merchants said: 'The country needs us.' The doctors said: 'The town needs us.' They all considered themselves indispensable and irreplaceable" (Legends of Our Time, "The Last Return" 124). Jews, they believed, were as much a part of European culture as the class system itself and therefore absolutely essential to the continuing function of that society. In addition, the Jews ingenuously believed that there was a sharp distinction between the fearsome Nazis and the civilized Germans. Wiesel reveals that "We kept telling ourselves that this was, after all, a civilized people, that we must not give credence to exaggerated rumors about its army's behavior" (All Rivers Run to the Sea 27). The Jews, in their heart of hearts, believed that the German populace simply would not permit these rumored atrocities.

One of the greatest downfalls of Jewish history is that the Jews themselves forgot the relevance of history, for if history has taught the world anything, it is that no one is irreplaceable. This "forgetfulness" that the Jews of Europe allowed to fall over them like a numbing snowfall would eventually be the key facilitator in the destruction of nearly an entire culture. Yet it is crucial to point out that Wiesel does not blame

> the Jews for imaginative failure, or for taking refuge in religious belief or for assuming the mask of political sophistication or for clinging to the subterfuge afforded by 'common sense.' Rather, he believes that the Holocaust, having no precedents or analogies in history was irrational, unique, intrinsically incredible, and remains so today, even to those, like himself, who experienced it.
> (Alexander, <u>The Resonance of Dust</u> 21)

Because Wiesel is so keenly aware of this reality, he continually draws lessons from the Torah in order to find significance for the world today, especially for the world of the Jew. Unconditionally interconnected to history as a whole, Jews must understand that without this elemental relationship between themselves and history, they cannot maintain a Jewish identity. Wiesel views the birth of this concept from the very beginnings of man—lessons found in the Torah (Berkowitz 307).

By the same token, Wiesel asserts that all Jews are part of the Holocaust, whether they are survivors themselves, descendants of survivors, or Jews untouched by the tragedies of Auschwitz. All Jews, by nature of their birth, must carry with them the affliction of the memory of the Holocaust or they cannot be truly Jewish (Sicher, "The Burden of Memory" 30). The sharing of Jewish identity is crucial to a people so spread apart across the Diaspora. Without a connection between Abraham and Moses, Moses and Maimonides, Maimonides and the Spanish Jew, the Spanish Jew and the Jew of the Holocaust, and the Jew of the Holocaust and the Jew of today, there would be no personal history therefore no national or cultural history for the Jew.

Contradictions within Jewish history are prevalent throughout Wiesel's writings. In <u>Night</u>, the Jews are deported from Sighet shortly after the holiday of Passover. Rather than an exodus to freedom, the Holocaust brings about an exodus to death. Passover offers other symbolic dilemmas for Wiesel. In "An Evening Guest," Wiesel describes how the Jews of Sighet naïvely believed "that the war was coming to an end, that liberation was near, that, like our ancestors, we were living the last hours in bondage" (<u>Legends of Our Time</u> 25). The irony of this passage is that the Jews of Sighet had not even begun to taste the tears of bondage yet. Comparatively speaking, while still in Hungary, they were living their last days in the Garden of Eden before being cast into the fiery pits of hell.

On this Passover night, Wiesel's father invited a guest for what would be their last Passover Seder together. Yet rather than be grateful for the meal, the guest chastised the family for focusing their attentions so greatly on the past—the miracle of the exodus from Egypt—that they are blind to the present. Pharaoh, he told them, was alive, and this time there would be no deliverer. The family's reaction to this stranger is not one of realization or even anger, but of pity for this delusional madman. Wiesel and his family recounted the tale of the exodus, not as a lesson for themselves, but merely as a remembrance of the great miracles of the past, and therein lay their fatal error. Like Moshe the Beadle of Night, who escaped a mass execution and came back to warn the Jews of Sighet, this man was equally rebuffed by their own blindness to Jewish history.

Only later, after it was too late, does the author come to be convinced that it was Elijah, who Jewish tradition predicts will come during the Passover Seder to announce the arrival of the messiah, who visited them that night. Wiesel's depiction of the prophet who brings news of death rather than that of the coming of although cruel and unjust as well, at least offered the Spanish Jews a chance to live.

For his part, Wiesel envied the victims of the Inquisition: "For them, the choice was posed in such simple terms: God or the stake, abjuration or exile" (Legends of Our Time, "Testament of a Jew from Saragossa" 65). Wiesel and the rest of European Jewry were never given this choice. Significantly, Wiesel at no time implies that he would have chosen conversion, and indeed, many of Europe's Jews, like the Spanish Jews of the fifteenth century, would have remained loyal to their religion. Most Jews of the fifteenth century chose to remain in Spain where they became Marranos, or secret Jews, but the eventual tragedy of this situation is that the Marranos' strategy failed: within two generations, nearly all of them were practicing Christians (Berkowitz 307). Still, the essence of what Wiesel covets is the issue of choice—he could have *chosen* to become a martyr. As observant in the ways of Judaism as he was, Wiesel would probably never have chosen conversion, but the question of choice would have given him a sense of empowerment and gratification that he was slated for death in order to consecrate God's name. Wiesel's faith may have also been bolstered significantly because his placement at Auschwitz would have been *his* choice. God would not have and Sodom and the punishments they endured, while trying to fathom the reason for the brutal tortures and murders of starving men who, weeping, shout the praises of the same God who allows their sufferings. In spite of that, Wiesel maintains a close connection to God while simultaneously becoming an objector of God's incomprehensible ways. Still, even in protest, Wiesel invokes Jewish history as a criterion for his "right" to do so:

> I have never renounced my faith in God. I have risen against His justice, protested His silence and sometimes His absence, but my anger rises up within faith and not outside it. I admit that this is hardly an original position. It is part of Jewish tradition. But in these matters I have never sought originality. On the contrary, I have always aspired to follow in the footsteps of my father and those who went before him. Moreover, the texts cite many occasions when prophets and sages rebelled against the lack of divine interference in human affairs during times of persecution. Abraham and Moses, Jeremiah and Rebbe Levi-Yitzhak of Berdichev teach us that it is permissible for man to accuse God, provided it be done in the name of faith in God. (All Rivers Run to the Sea 84)

the whole culture that Wiesel grew up in awe of was completely annihilated, he maintains a sense of deep faith in God and holds hope for the world that betrayed his people and entire way of life.

[1] Whereas the Torah is the Written Law of the Jews, the Talmud is the Oral Law. Although the name is misleading, rabbis of the second century (of the Common Era) feared that the Oral Law would be lost due to political instability and failed revolts (leading to the deaths of many prominent rabbis), so they decided to write down the Oral Law. These writings, and the written commentaries of these writings, are collectively called the Talmud.

Chapter 3: Faith and Kaddish

"Suffering is by no means a privilege, a sign of nobility, a reminder of God. Suffering is a fierce, bestial thing, commonplace, uncalled for, natural as air. It is intangible; no one can grasp it or fight against it; it dwells in time—is the same thing as time; if it comes in fits and starts, that is only so as to leave the sufferer more defenseless during the moments that follow, those long moments when one relives the last bout of torture and waits for the next." – Cesare Pavese

"Perhaps some day someone will explain how, on the level of man, Auschwitz was possible; but on the level of God, it will forever remain the most disturbing of mysteries." – Elie Wiesel

As a child, Elie Wiesel, like millions of other Eastern European Jews, was raised as an orthodox Jew who believed unconditionally in the benevolence of God and in the coming of the Messiah. As a simple human being, Wiesel viewed God's ways as mysterious, yet he always maintained perfect faith in the ultimate wisdom and goodness that lay therein. Similar to many of his friends and teachers, he believed that every human being held the power to bring the Messiah simply by the power of prayer and the performance of a single good deed. In his small town of Sighet in the Carpathian mountains, "where every Jew was drunk with God," Wiesel spent his days and nights in prayer and study (Wiesel, "Dedication Address"). So fervent was he in his beliefs, that even when the Germans evacuated all the Jews from their homes to move them into the temporary ghetto before deportation, he arose early in order to say the morning prayers.

(Night 53). For Wiesel, God was no longer the spiritual entity Who wisely governed his pet species, humanity, with an incontestable design. God had lost all the shine and luster that Wiesel had believed befitted the Master of the universe. God's ways were neither perfect nor just, and for Wiesel, this mutation of ideals represented a complete destruction of his own purpose in life. If it no longer mattered whether or not he prayed—if his words fell on deaf ears—then his purpose of being was shattered as well.

Wiesel continually explores the theme of faith in his testimony, Night. During his internment at Buna, a small resistance group blew up an electric power station. Of the people tortured and put to death as a result of this act of sabotage, was a sweet young boy with "the face of a sad angel" (70). This instance became yet another moment when many of the men's faith simply crumbled under the pressure of seeing such a abominable act take place. Even for the payment of a precious bowl of soup, the SS could find no prisoners who would help string up the young boy. The importance of soup, or food of any kind, in the camps holds great meaning for Wiesel. As he reiterates in One Generation After, "God—here [in the camps] is the extra bowl of soup pushed at you or stolen from you, simply because the man ahead of you is either stronger or quicker than you. God—here—cannot be found in humble or grandiloquent phrases, but in a crust of bread" (35). Food, consequently, held a level of unrivaled consequence, yet not one man would participate in the assassination of this innocent child. Still more significant, this murder caused the men to weep—men who had lost the capacity to grieve for their own fathers, sons, and brothers.

As both a deterrent to possible future acts of subversion and as a form of mass torture for the witnesses, the SS forced the prisoners to view the hanging bodies:

> Then the march past began. The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues hung swollen, blue-tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive. . . .
>
> For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes were not yet glazed.
>
> Behind me, I heard the same man asking:
>
> "Where is God now?"
>
> And I heard a voice within me answer him:

> "Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on the gallows. . ."
>
> That night the soup tasted of corpses.
>
> (Night 71 – 72)

Many critics have mistakenly interpreted this passage as proof that Wiesel believed, at least at that point in his life, that God is dead. Wiesel, however, is not implying that God Himself is dead, but that God's omnipotence and the purity surrounding the belief in Him are. If Wiesel had become an atheist, or conjectured that God was dead, there would be an indication of this in both Night and his subsequent non-fiction works concerning the Holocaust. Wiesel's devotion to God, though certainly defiled, remained largely intact. Wiesel's reaction to seeing the angelic child hang is one of ultimately becoming a prosecutor in an on-going trial of God's antipathy to the misery of the Jews during their near genocide.

For Wiesel and many other prisoners of the concentration camps, the very existence of the camps themselves destroyed not just millions of human beings, but the very core of humanity. The one ideal that separates man from beast was forever destroyed—man's unadulterated faith in a just and omnipotent God. In a later discussion of the loss of faith he endured, Wiesel sadly admits that

> my father gave back his soul at Buchenwald. A soul useless in that place, and one he seemed to want to give back. But, he gave it up, not to the God of his fathers, but rather to the impostor, cruel and insatiable, to the enemy God. They had killed his God, they had exchanged him for another. (Legends, "The Death of My Father" 2)

The God of his father, and that of his forefathers, may have punished Israel for sins or transgressions, but He was never unappeasable. The sheer magnitude of the miseries bestowed upon the Jews had left the unmistakable impression that God was so foreign that He surely must be an evil impersonator. The intimate connection between Jews and their God had finally begun to show some tangible signs of weakness after thousands of years.

Despite this deterioration of relations, when Wiesel was confronted with questions about Judaism's death as a result of the concentration camps, he maintained that "[i]t wasn't Judaism that died at Auschwitz . . . it was Christianity" (Cargas, Rev. 211). Emanuel Goldberg echoes this theme in his review of Legends of Our Time and further declares Auschwitz "the failure of 2000 years of Christian civilization" (2). The Germans, in their eagerness to obliterate every remnant of Jewish life, faith, tradition, and history, instead demonstrated that it would be the selflessness, and utmost fealty" (76). Both parents and children like to be certain that nothing on earth would cause a son to strike his father or a mother to conceal food from her children to keep for herself. Auschwitz, however, was outside earth's natural boundaries. Only in hell could such generational decimation take place. While in the concentration camps, Wiesel witnessed numerous instances of fathers and sons betraying each other in order to survive including a brutal struggle over a crust of bread that left both father and son dead.

Still, Wiesel himself is not above this dehumanizing affect. From the time he and his father are taken into Birkenau, he began to feel the changes taking place in himself. During their first night in captivity, his father was fiercely smacked down to the ground for asking where the latrines were. Wiesel felt his filial duties slipping away because he did not attack the gypsy who struck his father. The fear that the Germans instilled in the Jews by making them the nethermost block in a hierarchy of tormentors took hold of the prisoners instantly. No longer could father and son defend each other—the punishment would be the same or perhaps worse—and the defender would bring calamity upon himself. The only recourse was a guilt-impregnating silence.

orphan—the most pitied of humans—and being free to look out for his own survival. This theme builds like a crescendo until, ultimately, Wiesel's debilitated father dies. Again, the guilt Wiesel felt was twofold: "I did not weep, and it pained me that I could not weep. But I had no more tears. And, in the depths of my being, in the recesses of my weakened conscience, could I have searched it, I might perhaps have found something like—free at last!" (Night 116). In this sense, although the Germans lost the war, they won many battles against the Jews. Not limiting themselves to depriving the Jews of life and property, the Germans extirpated the Jews' faith. Suffering was no longer part of God's concealed plan, it was simply a means to an end.

This suffering is one of the key reasons why so many Jews lost faith, at least while in the camps, in God's unlimited authority. The Talmud teaches that God punishes much like a father punishes a son—with love and always for a reason. Notwithstanding, "[s]uffering so extreme as to disable the sufferer from studying Torah or from praying cannot be understood as 'afflictions of love'" (Horowitz 122). Wiesel was unable to pray once he became acclimated to concentration camp life because the suffering endured by the Jews was outside the boundaries of God's love. There can be no justification or purpose for this degree of suffering; therefore, it diminished the faith of the prisoners to an unparalleled extent. What kind of purpose might one attribute to the burning of babies, the slow, agonizing starvation of those "chosen" to live, the mental agony of not knowing whether each day was the last, or the horrors of being a witness to it all? What kind of God would sanction this level of agony? What could possibly be the objective?

One of the greatest difficulties that Wiesel encountered after his father's death was his own ability—or refusal—to say Kaddish for his father. In the Jewish tradition, no prayer commands so much awe and respect as the Kaddish prayer. Often known as "the prayer for the dead" by both Jews and non-Jews alike, its very invocation creates an instant, eternal sense of filial duty. When a Jew recites Kaddish, the community appreciates that this is the highest token of remembrance that can be paid on behalf of the dead. The Kaddish, however, is not a prayer for the dead, but a prayer of sanctification of God's name:

> May His great Name grow exalted and sanctified in the world that He created as He willed. May He give reign to His kingship in your lifetimes and in your days, and the lifetimes of the entire Family of Israel, swiftly and soon. Now respond: Amen.

> May His great Name be blessed forever and ever.
>
> Blessed, praised, glorified, exalted, extolled, mighty, upraised, and lauded by the Name of the Holy One, Blessed is He beyond any blessing and song, praise and consolation that are uttered in the world. Now respond: Amen.
>
> May there be abundant peace from Heaven, and life, upon us and upon all Israel. Now respond: Amen.
>
> He who makes peace in His heights, may He make peace upon us, and upon all Israel. Now respond: Amen. (Scherman and Zlotowitz 483)

The dead, Jews believe, receive atonement and merit through the Kaddish others say in their behalf. Accordingly, the Kaddish a son recites on behalf of a parent is perhaps the most important prayer he may utter in his lifetime[1].

The Kaddish creates a bond between God and man each time it is spoken because although a child loses a parent, they praise God rather than complain to Him "that the loss came too soon, or was preceded by too much suffering, or that the years on earth could have been happier, easier, more successful" (Scherman xx). Wiesel was unable to say Kaddish, "that beautiful and moving prayer dedicated to the departed, yet in which death itself figures not at all," for his father because it is proof of his own inadequacy (Legends, "The Death of My Father" 7). One critic even goes so far as to say Wiesel considered his father an "icon of God" due to his lineage dating back to Abraham (Cunningham 27). In this regard, Wiesel would have doubly felt the pain of losing his father—a symbolic substitute for his God. If Lawrence Cunningham is correct in his assumption, then perhaps the death of Wiesel's father is simply further proof of his own impotence. Why should he say Kaddish when there is no one there to hear it?

Wiesel implies this theme of personal deficiency throughout Night. In his testimony, the Jews are unable to say Kaddish for the dead. After one particular selection, one man condemned to die asked the others to recite Kaddish for him in three days time, after the execution would surely be over. Although everyone promised to say the Kaddish on his behalf, Wiesel reports, they all "forgot" when the time came (83). Perhaps part of this forgetfulness reflects the prisoners' inability to think past themselves and their own immediate situations, but this possibility is doubtful as the sole explanation for their amnesia. More plausible is the probability that the men could not bring themselves to chant one of the holiest prayers in the Jewish liturgy one is what isolates man from God, consequently thrusting man into a world of obdurate evil.

For the inmates of the concentration camps, this actualization of the evil brought about a deprivation of faith and an aberration in their religious criteria. Consider the metamorphosis Wiesel and the other inmates underwent since their arrival at the camps. Just before Wiesel and his father escaped the furnaces, Wiesel seriously considered running up to the electrified fences to kill himself rather than suffer the deliberate torture of the furnace. As he prepared himself to break free from the ranks, and as his faith in God began to degenerate, "in spite of myself, the words formed themselves and issued in a whisper from my lips: Yitgadal veyitkadach shmé raba. . . . May His name be blessed and magnified. . . ." (Night 43). Wiesel reluctantly said Kaddish for himself because he could not absolutely suspend nearly fifteen years of religious upbringing, but at the same time, he was only able to emanate a whisper of an invocation. He could not recite the assertion distinctly to praise his God—the prayer was a muffled tribute to his vanished way of life. Shame and embarrassment overwhelmed Wiesel; he could not admit to himself how deeply his faith was buried.

Only moments before, Wiesel was shocked to hear other men saying the Kaddish because he did not know "if it has ever happened before, in the long history of the Jews, that people have ever recited the prayer for the dead for themselves" (Night 42). This statement reiterates Wiesel's theme that the Holocaust was a unique episode in the extensive past of the Jews. Never before had the Jews been confronted with such a sudden and horrible reality. They had no knowledge of any historical martyrs with whom they could compare themselves in order to gain faith and strength.

Yet this act of saying Kaddish on behalf of themselves is crucial in understanding the Jews' mindset. Men, dying with their sons, would have no one to remember them with this traditional honor. There would be no Kaddish said on their behalf, no one to release them from their celestial bonds. These Jews, many of them Orthodox, believed that even the most tortured of souls would be released from their torments if their sons recited Kaddish for them (Schnerman xxi – xxii). Pronouncing the Kaddish for themselves was imperative then—there would be no survivors left to express it for them.

Under normal circumstances, if a son dies before his father, the natural continuity of the life cycle is broken, but not destroyed. Still, Jews take some measure of comfort in being able to say Kaddish for that child because the parent is still able to render and act of love on behalf of the child. However, when the father dies with his son, the community often takes up this honor and responsibility if there are no male relatives left to take up this duty. These Jews, doomed to their deaths, were well aware that this was the end of the millennia-old line. In addition, the afflictions that they witnessed and endured themselves were one of the primary justifications for why they could not bring themselves to say Kaddish. People who endure great stress, hardship, or pain are unlikely to be able to focus on others. As Maslow's hierarchy of needs[3] indicates, the need to feel safe predominates all other needs. Though some of the men were able to recite the Kaddish upon arrival at Auschwitz, the prolonged period of intensity that they endured dulled their ability to think beyond immediate survival.

Nevertheless, the Jews maintained a sense of dignity and, in their own way, a sense of triumph. On Rosh Hashanah, Wiesel reports, the men all said Kaddish in unison "for the dead and for the living as well" (Legends, "Yom Kippur: The Day Without Forgiveness" 35). Had they all simply treated this Holy day as any other and disregarded their memories to the dead, they would have indeed been like the timid sheep being led to the slaughter. Wiesel's memory of Rosh Hashanah varies according to the text one reads. In Night, he claims he was too inculpatory towards God bccausc hc was only a mere shadow of his former self. IIe could not fathom how these ten thousand men could prostrate themselves before the God who had turned them over to the enemy. Feeling empowered by his newfound awareness, Wiesel at the same time considers himself an outsider among his people: "I stood amid that praying congregation, observing it like a stranger" (Night 75).

Years later, in his essay "Yom Kippur: The Day Without Forgiveness," Wiesel clearly states that he actively partook in the Rosh Hashanah service: "we had implored the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to end our humiliation, to change sides, to break his pact with the enemy. In unison we had said *Kaddish* for the dead and for the living as well" (Legends 35). Wiesel's inclusion in the group by his use of "we" creates a sense of unity among the Jewish prisoners among which the author wishes to be included. This contradiction in memory between the two accounts of Rosh Hashanah has several possibilities, but the likeliest is that Wiesel's anger against God had softened in the decade since his work on the Night manuscript. In his later works, Wiesel allows himself to be included in the group that held out that last shred of faith in God's ultimate benevolence.

Because modesty forbids him from doing so, he cannot openly accept the acclamation he and his fellow prisoners are due for this display of open defiance towards the Nazis. Punishments for adhering to the religion for which they were being murdered were often swift and merciless, yet these men—in spite of the cruel hardships thrust upon them—refused to castrate their religion or their God. Not surprisingly though, Wiesel prayed more as a sanctification to his memories than to God's name. If he did not pray and say Kaddish with the others, his whole life prior to his internment would have no meaning, thus the Nazis would have succeeded in destroying that too.

In Wiesel's collection of essays, Legends of Our Time, he begins with "The Death of My Father," perhaps the most poignant and revealing of all the expositions in this accumulation. The placement of this stark reflection of his most tragic memory in the outset of this collection has enormous signification. Of the fifteen essays contained within the compilation, only in "The Death of My Father" does Wiesel bare his soul so exhaustively. This positioning hints at what Wiesel is too modest to admit—that he has remarkable courage in sharing this account. Why does he share it? Because he wants to remind the world that for the survivor, the suffering continues in perpetuity. Every day is a battle—he must decide whether to say Kaddish, whether to sanctify the name of the God who betrayed them in their most desolate hour. Consequently, Wiesel discusses the internal conflict he has fought in the years since his father's death at Buchenwald over whether or not to conform to tradition and say Kaddish for him. At times desperate, at times accusatory against God, Wiesel writes as though attempting to find the answers in his own words.

Echoing the views of Lawrence Cunningham, Alvin Rosenfeld asserts that on the day Wiesel's father died, Wiesel became "doubly orphaned—bereft of his father and of his father's God" and this was the reason why he did not say Kaddish (94). Not uncoincidentally, Wiesel reiterates this abstraction in "The Orphan." In this remembrance of this younger days spent in prayer in search of the Messiah, Wiesel now declared that "Today I believe I have proof that the Torah itself has become an orphan" (Legends 20). In this regard, Wiesel ascertains the Torah, poor, lonely orphan, as his counterpart: they were both left alone to struggle in a sea of despair because the "executioner arrived before the Messiah" (Legends 21).

Elie Wiesel's struggle to sustain faith in God—the God who his father seemed to embody for the young boy—became a struggle that continued past the days of liberation and melded into the rest of his life. The uniqueness of the Holocaust gave Wiesel no historical precedent to lean upon for guidance, and it gave him no explanation for why God would hide His face so utterly from the afflicted Jews. All Wiesel could glean from this event was that it was now *his* duty to bring forth the memories of those who had become silent clouds of dust and to evoke change in a world that refused to take responsibility. His quest to aid the weak and the

[1] In Judaism, the obligation to say Kaddish is placed on sons, not daughters, therefore the references here to G-d and man are intentional because of this duty that men have. In today's Judaism, especially among Conservative and Reform Jews, women take this obligation upon themselves as well, but among Wiesel's Orthodox community of Sighet (and other Eastern European communities), the duty was strictly a man's honor and duty.

[2] The Torah is written and read in Hebrew, but many rabbinical writings and several significant prayers are written in Aramaic, a Semitic language used extensively in the Middle Ages by rabbis and scholars.

[3] Psychologist Abraham H. Maslow (1908 – 1970) theorized that humans are driven by a "hierarchical scheme of motivation[s]" in which people must achieve one level before the next ("Abraham H. Maslow"). These deficiency levels include (in order) safety and security, love and belongingness, and self-esteem. Only when a person is able to fulfill these deficient needs can they pursue higher goals of self-actualization.

Chapter 4: The Murdered Acquire a Voice

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."
– George Santayana

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." – Edmund Burke

Elie Wiesel began his journey of remembrance not only as a cathartic measure in order to release some of the demons of his past, but also to leave a living testimony for the world. Even more fundamental to his own needs for writing, Wiesel feels that he must write because of a "secret or conscious desire to carve words on a tombstone: to the memory of a childhood in exile, to the memory of all those I loved and who, before I could tell them I loved them, went away" ("My Teachers," Legends of Our Time 10). Like most children, Wiesel did not fully appreciate his family, teachers, and friends. Although this attitude among the young is so common that it is considered normal in modern society, Wiesel is plagued by the guilt of never growing up fast enough to show his love for his family and friends. Regardless that this was not his fault, Wiesel still carries this burden with him. His desire to create invisible memorials for those he lost is therefore a cleansing release of some of the liability he has amassed and renews each day. The diaphanous words that Wiesel hopes to leave on their behalf are consequently more than cold marble: they are created disparity. Although it happened inadvertently, Wiesel exchanged his father's life for several others; however, upon further reading of his self-analyzing essays and memoirs, one can see that this incident in general and his own survival in particular did have a profound affect on his consciousness. This specific selection in Gleiwitz is but one illustration of how Wiesel's staying alive meant another human being's death. Every incident—from the time of the first transports to Auschwitz to his moment of liberation at Buna—depended on someone dying while Wiesel himself survived. Had the actual survival rate been close to fifty-fifty, this in itself would have been enough for Wiesel and others like him to pause for reflection. Yet the chances of surviving the concentration camps—in a situation where entire villages were gassed and cremated in a single night, leaving no survivors at all—were so astronomical that Wiesel is of the complete understanding that each time he met and defeated Death, someone else went in his stead.

Part of Wiesel's success as a writer of Holocaust testimony is his ability to realize that his feelings are not unique among Holocaust survivors:

> Here lies the tragedy of the witness: What shall he do with his testimony? He incessantly asks himself the meaning of a survival some mistakenly call

> miraculous; he feels guilty toward the dead who have charged him with an impossible mission; he is destined to feel that he exists in the place of someone else. ("To Believe or Not to Believe" Kingdom 34)

One of the explicit facts that Holocaust survivors have come to accept is that there was no master list of survivors. Each person survived by chance—if a prisoner received an extra ration of soup, then someone went without any. Wiesel acknowledges that his own survival was not due to anything he did to save himself: "I did not do anything to survive. When I think about it, that's how I remember it. I never took any particular step, never made any definite decision or thought of any way out. It was pure chance" (de Saint-Cheron 8).

To say, though, that one particular person was slated to live while someone else died would be equivalent to saying that one person was worthier than another to live. If one person is more deserving to live, another must be more deserving to die. How could this be true if so many good and just people died? How could one and a half million children deserve to die, much less even one? No—there was no justification—no rhyme or reason why one human died and another one lived. Survival in the camps was like winning some barbaric lottery where even the winner felt as if they had lost.

Spawned by this ever-present guilt, Wiesel repeatedly confronts himself with unanswered questions in his later works—How could he have outlived his childhood friends who had the same chance of survival? Does he have the right to speak for the dead? ("A Celebration of Friendship" Kingdom 77; "The Nobel Address" Kingdom 232). Just because Wiesel survived by virtue of standing in the rear of the cattle car rather than the front or because he stood in line for soup five minutes sooner rather than later, he is endowed with nothing more than random good fortune—if even that. Does this destiny of survival give him the right to speak for those who lost their battle with Death? Wiesel is wholly unsure of his role as spokesman for the murdered because he understands the randomness of his survival.

Wiesel repeatedly expounds on the need to do his loved ones justice in both his writing and in interviews. Feeling as if his parents, grandparents, teachers, and other loved ones are "literally, physically" standing over his shoulder as he writes, Wiesel finds not only inspiration, but a sense of obligation as well (Wiesel, Interview). This accountability compels Wiesel to writc as if cach phrase, each word were the only one he would ever be able to produce or use on behalf of the dead. The reality of Wiesel's

The change Wiesel desires is not merely one for the Jews of the world. Wiesel does indeed want to eliminate anti-Semitism and enliven Jewish studies throughout the world, but he cares deeply about all of mankind. Wiesel has conferred with American Presidents on matters ranging from Cambodia to Yugoslavia, but his message is always the same: prevent genocide at any cost. Never turn the other way when humans suffer and die at the hands of those in power. Had some people taken an interest in the fate of the Jews during World War II, the outcome may have been drastically different. The very fact that American and British allies knew of the existence of concentration camps as early as 1942 is proof of the harsh reality that few people cared about the minorities of this world—a trend that unfortunately continues today. Those people designated as "different" by the powerful, white, Christian populace of the West cannot rely on the humanity of their neighbors, and this antipathy is something Wiesel strives to convert. Simply by sharing his testimony and the optimistic words of change with humanity, Wiesel hopes to create a new master race—one where all humans are masters of their own formidable prejudices.

Over the past few years, Wiesel, like other Holocaust survivors, worries about the day when there are no living survivors left to tell the world their testimonies. As the last generations of continually reminded him that it is far easier to forget. For this burdensome task alone, humans owe Elie Wiesel a debt of gratitude for making humanity a little more humane.

Afterword: The Sin of Forgetfulness

"I have not made a study of it, but believe that it [the Holocaust] is a minor point in the history of the war." – Jean-Marie Le Pen

"Without centuries of Christian anti-semitism, Hitler's passionate hatred would never have been so fervently echoed." – Robert Runcie, Archbishop of Canterbury

"Forgetting the extermination is part of the extermination itself." – Jean Baudrillard

In 1967, Elie Wiesel declared that he did not believe that another Holocaust was possible for Jews, but just seven weeks later Arab countries surrounding Israel pledged to push the entire Jewish nation of Israel into the Mediterranean Sea. Once again, the mere existence of Jews proved to be enough to provoke anti-Semites into taking radical action against the Jews. Once again, the goal was utter annihilation of the Jewish people. Likewise, Wiesel's blindness to the true intentions of Israel's enemies mirrored the pre-war events surrounding the European Jews of the Holocaust. The Six-Day War that ensued solidified the inescapable fact that for the Jews, another Holocaust is indeed impossible (Alexander, <u>The Resonance of Dust</u> 21-22).

Regardless of this painful lesson in reality that Wiesel learned, he maintained his duty in the role of witness and refused "to look at the world in an apocalyptic light" (Alter 66). Had Wiesel completely given up on the hope of humanity, then he would have been unable to continue his writings on behalf of the

the time has come to bury the past. If this mentality is truly effective, however, why is history taught in schools? Does not the message of the Holocaust provide more lessons for humanity today than the various battles of the American Civil War? Still, in scrutinizing American history textbooks that are used in teaching high school and college classes, several pages are often devoted to the Battles of Bull Run, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg, while little more than a few paragraphs briefly describe America's inaction to the systematic murder of six million Jews.

Apparently the writers of these textbooks do not see the irony they are creating in that by methodically reducing the gravity of the Holocaust in world history, they are reproducing the identical result. Diminishing the magnitude of the Holocaust is truly only a breath away from revising history altogether. Holocaust revisionists, led by neo-Nazis, neo-Fascists, and anti-Semites, try to gain strength by denying the facts of the Holocaust. Their goal is the same as the Nazis of the 1930s and 1940s—they wish to create a web of deceit by claiming that the Jews themselves created this "hoax" in order to gain world sympathy and thereby gain monetary benefit. Notwithstanding, although Holocaust revisionists pose as a real threat to the sanctity of the Truth, Wiesel does not see the books they publish as the primary menace. The internet, Wiesel admits, reaches far more unsuspecting young people than any combination of books ever could (Wohlgelerntner). This readily accessible platform for deniers of the Holocaust has far-reaching consequences.

Wiesel is only too keenly aware of the power of rhetoric and the impact it has on young people. During World War II, Germany's Hitler-Jugend (Hitler Youth) movement was absorbed by the young children of Germany who found strength in the discourse of their leader and never questioned his motives or the outcome of his actions. The same persuasion holds true for young people today who are often in desperate need of a group to make them feel important and needed. With no counter argument to help guide these naïve readers in their quest for truthful information, they are often bombarded with falsehoods laden in elocution.

Over fifty years after the Holocaust, Wiesel finds it disgusting that there is no public outcry against neo-Nazis and Holocaust revisionists. Highlighting how hatred finds a home in even the most seemingly placid of locales, Wiesel says he is "appalled that there are people in Nebraska who belong to a Nazi party, that there are two Nazi parties in Chicago" (Berkowitz 298). Desecrating the memory of the victims is, to Wiesel, a crime of equal proportion to the annihilation itself.

The role of revisionists, Wiesel is convinced, is an extension of the work the Nazis began over sixty years ago. If society continues to allow—that is, not protest—the lies generated by a hateful group of racists, then society is granting the murderers a "posthumous victory" (Wiesel, "President's Commission"). Forgetting the dead and who was responsible is commensurate with being an accessory to the murders themselves. This ideology equates to the sin never having occurred if there is no one there to remember it. If a coma patient is raped while she is unconscious, yet does not remember the event later on, is she any less a victim? The answer, of course, is no, but the critical detail of this argument is that even if the victim herself has no memory of the event, someone does—either the rapist or perhaps a witness. Indeed, if we cannot remember something—as an individual or a society—it never really happened. Is this amnesia then a cure or a curse? Forgetfulness can never be a remedy, for while it may provide a temporary pacification, inevitably this protection will aid the culprit and not the victim.

While acting as chair of the President's Commission on the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel observed that Jews were not always mentioned on Polish monuments to war victims, and Russian monuments made no mention of them at all. Appreciating the gravity of this situation is one of the goals that Wiesel would like to impart upon the world. Jews were the chief object of destruction in Hitler's Final Solution—to declare that they were merely some (or none) of the victims is a travesty of the Truth and a destruction of the memory of the victims (Wiesel, "President's Commission").

Though many historians might consider Germany's sharp reaction to the Versailles Treaty following World War I as the reason for the world's comparatively "soft" treatment of its enemy after the Second World War, Wiesel believes differently. The establishment of Israel just three years after the end of the war quickly appeased the guilt of the West, allowing the world to forget the actual abominations that took place throughout Europe (Kahn 186). Furthermore, while Israel was granted its independence on May 14, 1948, just thirty-five days later, the Soviets blockaded West Berlin from receiving any food, coal, and other necessities into the city. The United States and England quickly rushed to West Berlin's aid, surprising even the Soviets, providing ample supplies to the citizens of the blockaded city. Had the United States and England not been able to pacify their culpability by making note of Israel's self-governing rule, the Allies might not have been so willing to help the same country that was directly responsible for the Holocaust. Hence, Israel's independence allowed the Allies, and the rest of the Western world, to believe that the slate was clean and that Jews, in fact, should be grateful to have a homeland of their own.

Few non-Jews and even fewer German non-Jews have been willing to voice their opposition to forgetting the indescribable horrors of the Holocaust and Germany's responsibility during the war. President of the Federal Republic of Germany, Richard von Weizsäcker (1984-1994), is one of this slim minority. Perhaps feeling some of the weight of guilt because his father was the Nazi's ambassador to the Holy See and his own role in World War II, von Weizsäcker displaces some of the culpability and lays it on the shoulders of the German populace:

> We need to look truth straight in the eye—without embellishment and without distortion. . . . Remembering means recalling an occurrence honestly and undistortedly so that it becomes a part of our very beings. This places high demands on our truthfulness. . . . At the root of the tyranny was Hitler's immeasurable hatred against our Jewish compatriots. Hitler had never concealed this hatred from the public, but made the entire nation a tool of it. . . . Hardly any country has in its history always remained free from blame for war or violence. The genocide of the Jews is, however, unparalleled in history. . . . All of us, whether guilty or not, whether old or young, must accept the past. We are all

> affected by its consequences and liable for it. The young and old generations must and can help each other to understand why it is vital to keep alive the memories. . . . Anyone who closes his eyes to the past is blind to the present. (qtd in Alexander, The Holocaust 213)

Von Weizsäcker, however, is a member of an ever-shrinking minority who believe that redemption can only come through accepting responsibility and remembering both the victims and their tormentors. Few politicians have had the valiancy to speak openly about this global need to remember, and von Weizsäcker must be credited for doing so.

For his part, as a "messenger of the mystery and majesty of the Jewish condition," Elie Wiesel has repeatedly written about the victims and perpetrators of the Holocaust. The memory of those victims—the men, women, and children who were cruelly slaughtered without an ounce of pity or remorse—remind us that the suffering never ends for those who survived and that forgetfulness is the enemy of progress towards a peaceful and tolerant world (Berkowitz 297).

Works Cited

"Abraham H. Maslow." International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences. Ed. David L. Sills. 19 vols. New York: The Free Press, 1979.

Abramowitz, Molly. Elie Wiesel: A Bibliography. Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow, 1974.

Adams, Steven H. "Asking Unanswerable Questions: A Bibliographic Study of Post-Holocaust Jewish Philosophies." Saul S. Friedman 106 – 120.

Alexander, Edward. The Holocaust and the War of Ideas. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1994.

---. The Resonance of Dust: Essays on Holocaust Literature and Jewish Fate. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State UP, 1979.

Alter, Robert. "The Apocalyptic Temper." Commentary 41 (1966): 61 – 66.

Avni, Ora. "Beyond Psychoanalysis: Elie Wiesel's Night in Historical Perspective." Kritzman 203 – 218.

Berkowitz, William, ed. Dialogues in Judaism: Jewish Dilemmas Defined, Debated, and Explored. Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1991.

Cargas, Harry J. Harry James Cargas in Conversation with Elie Wiesel. New York: Paulist, 1976.

---. Rev. of One Generation After, by Elie Wiesel. America 27

Feb. 1971: 210 –11.

Cunningham, Lawrence S. "Elie Wiesel's Anti-Exodus." Responses to Elie Wiesel: Critical Essays by Major Jewish and Christian Scholars. Ed. Harry James Cargas. New York: Persea, 1978. 23 – 28.

Edelman, Lily. "A Conversation with Elie Wiesel." Responses to Elie Wiesel: Critical Essays by Major Jewish and Christian Scholars. Ed. Harry James Cargas. New York: Persea, 1978. 9 – 22.

Fine, Ellen S. Legacy of Night: The Literary Universe of Elie Wiesel. Albany, New York: State U of New York, 1982.

Freeman, Mark. Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative. London: Routledge, 1993.

Friedman, Saul S., ed. Holocaust Literature: A Handbook of Critical, Historical, and Literary Writings. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1993.

Goldberg, Emanuel. "Did Auschwitz Kill the World's Heart?" Boston Herald 1 Dec. 1968: Christmas Book Section.

Greenfield, Jerome. Rev. of Legends of Our Time, by Elie Wiesel. Jewish Frontier Sep. 1969: 32 – 39.

Halperin, Irving. Messengers From the Dead: Literature of the Holocaust. Philadelphia: The Westminster, 1970.

Harvey, John H. Embracing Their Memory: Loss and the Social

Psychology of Storytelling. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1996.

Hertz, J.H., ed. The Pentateuch and Haftorahs. London: Soncino, 1992.

Horowitz, Sara R. Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction. New York: State U of New York, 1997.

Idinopulos, Thomas A. "The Holocaust in the Stories of Elie Wiesel." Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal 55 (1972): 200 – 215.

Kahn, Lothar. Mirrors of the Jewish Mind: A Gallery of Portraits of European Jewish Writer's of Our Time. New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1968.

Kaplan, Harold. Conscience and Memory: Meditations in a Museum of the Holocaust. Chicago: The U of Chicago, 1994.

Klein, Dennis. Foreword. Saul S. Friedman xiii – xvii.

Kutler, Laurence. "Holocaust Diaries and Memoirs." Saul S. Friedman 521 – 32.

LaCapra, Dominick. History and Memory After Auschwitz. Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1998.

Lask, Thomas. "The Stain That Won't Go Away." Rev. of One Generation After, by Elie Wiesel. New York Times 15 Dec. 1970: 43.

Luban, Marvin. "The Kaddish: Man's Reply to the Problem of Evil." Studies in Torah Judaism. Ed. Leon D. Stitskin. New York: Yeshiva UP, 1969.

McCord, Phyllis Frus. "Reading Nonfiction in Composition Courses: From Theory to Practice." College English 47 (1985): 747-762.

Roorda, Randall. "Nature/Writing: Literature, Ecology, and Composition." JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory 17.3 (1997): 401-414.

Rosenfeld, Alvin H. Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP, 1980.

Scherman, Nosson. Kaddish: The Kaddish Prayer. Brooklyn, New York: Mesorah, 1980.

Scherman, Nosson and Meir Zlotowitz, eds. The Complete Artscroll Siddur. Brooklyn, New York: Mesorah, 1987.

Sicher, Efraim. Breaking Crystal: Writing and Memory after Auschwitz. Urbana, Illinios: U of Illinois , 1998.

---. "The Burden of Memory: The Writing of the Post-Holocaust Generation." Sicher 19 – 80.

Suleiman, Susan Rubin. "War Memories: On Autobiographical Reading." Kritzman 47 – 62.

Walker, Graham B. Elie Wiesel: A Challenge to Theology. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 1988.

Wiesel, Elie. All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs. New York: Schocken, 1995.

---. "Elie Wiesel – Dedication Address – May 11, 1979." Holocaust Collection Speeches. http://www.holycross.edu/departments/library/website/hiatt/elie.htm (19 May 1998).

---. From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences. New York: Schocken, 1990.

---. Interview. Sun Valley, Idaho. 29 Jun. 1996. http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/wie0int-1 Three sections. 19 May 1998.

---. A Jew Today. Trans. Marion Wiesel. New York: Vintage, 1978.

---. Legends of Our Time. New York: Schocken, 1968.

---. The New York Times. 27 Sep. 1992. http://ajc.org/identity/wiesel.html (19 May 98).

---. Night. Trans. Stella Rodway. The Night Trilogy: Night, Dawn, The Accident. New York: Hill and Wang. 5 – 119.

---. One Generation After. Trans. Lily Edelman and Elie Wiesel. New York: Schocken, 1982.

---. "President's Commission on the Holocaust." 27 Sep. 1979. http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/HOLO/holo.htm (19 May 98).

---. The Testament. Trans. Marion Wiesel. New York: Summit, 1981.

Wiesel, Elie, and John Cardinal O'Connor. A Journey of Faith. New York: Donald I. Fine, 1990.

Wiesel, Elie, and Philippe de Saint-Cheron. Evil and Exile. Trans. Jon Rothschild. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame, 1990.

Wohlgelernter, Elli. "Fears for the Future." The Jerusalem Post. 4 Jun. 1997. http://www.jpost.co.il/com/Archive/04.Jun.1997/Features/Article-17.html (21 May 1998).