

PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

"REMEMBER IT ALWAYS": RECLAIMING HUMANITY THROUGH MEMORY

IN ELIE WIESEL'S *NIGHT*

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CH3670 SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

BY

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"Never shall I forget," Elie Wiesel repeats as he details the horrors of Auschwitz. "Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never."<sup>1</sup> The refrain in this famous passage is the lynchpin of his autobiography *Night*; throughout the book, Wiesel's commitment to remember comes up again and again. When he first arrived in Birkenau, Wiesel received the one command which he would obey far past his liberation: "Remember," the SS officer ordered. "Remember it always, let it be graven in your memories. You are in Auschwitz....If you don't [work] you will go straight to the chimney....Work or crematorium – the choice is yours."<sup>2</sup> There is a deep irony in this command by the SS officer. On the one hand, Wiesel obeys: he will never forget his experience in Auschwitz. On the other hand, Wiesel resists the intent behind the command: he will remember, not in order to succumb to the mental torture of degradation and dehumanization, but rather to resist it, to hold onto his personhood, to rebel against annihilation by claiming his story. To remember is both fundamentally human and fundamental to the identity of the Jewish people; and in remembering, Wiesel asserts his humanity. In obeying, he disobeys. By telling the stories of the Holocaust victims, including himself, Wiesel takes the memories intended to dehumanize and demean, and he uses them instead to reclaim the humanity of the Jewish people.

Throughout his autobiography, Wiesel shows how the dignity of the Jewish people was slowly stripped away through a series of progressively invasive tactics. On one level, there were events which specifically denigrated their religious identity. First, it was during the Passover that the German invasion began, the advent of the hellish nightmare that was the Holocaust. As they celebrated the Exodus – the liberation of the children of Israel – their freedom was slowly taken away. Frederick Downing writes, "As in the first exodus, there is a 'going out,' but this

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<sup>1</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Night*. Trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 34.

<sup>2</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 38.

time the going out is from an ordered land into chaos – a movement from the secure and ordered world of Sighet into the unspeakable horror of the death camps. The season of the year is the same as in the first exodus. Yet this time, the Angel of Death does not spare the Hebrew children."<sup>3</sup> Then there came the order that all Jews wear the yellow star; their cultural and religious symbol was used to mark them for extermination. Wiesel recounts how his father attempted to stay positive, little knowing that the yellow star was only the beginning: "'The yellow star? So what? It's not lethal...!' (Poor Father! Of what then did you die?)"<sup>4</sup> Looking back, Wiesel recognizes that wearing the star was only one in a subtle progression of decrees. The Jews were ghettoized, the leaders arrested.<sup>5</sup> Wiesel recalls the painful irony of their deportation on the Sabbath, the day of rest; they spent twenty-four hours crammed into the overcrowded synagogue. Because they were not allowed to leave, their place of worship was desecrated by their waste.<sup>6</sup>

On another level, not just their religious/cultural identity but any sense of human value or personal agency was taken from them. As Jacqueline Bussie explains, "The Nazi objective was to dehumanize Jews to the point where they had internalized that dehumanization, thereby creating a people filled with self-hate who would be easier to control and destroy."<sup>7</sup> They were loaded onto cattle cars for the long journey to Birkenau, with barely room to move. A casual looking-over determined their fate to be the labor camp or the crematorium, as though they were nothing more than products on an assembly line checked for defects. And perhaps most

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<sup>3</sup> Frederick Downing, "The Poetics of Memory and Justice: Elie Wiesel and Post-Holocaust Theological Reflection," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 35 (2008): 290.

<sup>4</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 11.

<sup>5</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 10-11.

<sup>6</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 21-22.

<sup>7</sup> Jacqueline Bussie, *The Laughter of the Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Wiesel, Morrison, and Endo* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 37.

dehumanizing of all, their names were replaced with numbers tattooed on their arms.<sup>8</sup> Wiesel writes, "From then on, I had no other name."<sup>9</sup> With that act, their uniqueness was utterly discounted, reduced to nothing more than a number, a statistic. "No soul, no self," writes Robert McAfee Brown. "Only a number, tattooed on the left arm....To reduce persons to numbers is an efficient way to shatter a self."<sup>10</sup> Wiesel recalls how quickly the environment seemed to change him: "The child I was had been consumed by the flames. All that was left was a shape that resembled me....When had we left our homes? And the ghettos? And the train? Only a week ago? One night? *One single night?*"<sup>11</sup>

During the course of the nightmare of Auschwitz, the survivors, driven mad by the mental and physical torture, became devoid of humanity and compassion. They abandoned those they loved for their own survival or killed one another for a scrap of bread; "in their eyes, the living bodies and corpses are now only other numbers like themselves."<sup>12</sup> To some extent, the objective of the Nazis to completely dehumanize the Jews had prevailed. At some point, all had succumbed to their basest instincts of survival. And yet, their humanity could not be completely extinguished. Elie Wiesel, holding close all the memories which he had been commanded not to forget, reclaims the shreds of humanity for the Jewish people by memorializing the brutality which they had endured.

First, Wiesel uses memory as a way to restore the dignity and humanity of the Jewish people as a whole. As shown, the experience of Auschwitz was intended to control and dehumanize; indeed, the SS officer's command to "remember always" was a command to

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<sup>8</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 22-23, 31-32, 42.

<sup>9</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 42.

<sup>10</sup> Robert McAfee Brown, *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1983), 57.

<sup>11</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 37.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, *Messenger*, 57.

internalize the fact that he was nothing, a non-person. Yet because memory and story-sharing are fundamentally human activities, the very act of remembering and telling proves that Wiesel is human. Rather than letting the experiences control him, he harnesses the memories and externalizes them for the purpose of sharing them. In doing so, he validates himself and the worth of his story.

Memory is also a vital part of Jewish heritage, which is based upon the collective history of the people of Israel.<sup>13</sup> Their present is based upon a past rich with stories of God's work among God's people, which have been passed down from generation to generation. For the entire history of the Jewish people, communal remembrance has been the foundation of their identity; the stories and traditions of their ancestors are part of their cultural DNA. In remembering, then, Wiesel makes an important statement concerning not only his value as an individual, but also the value of the entire Jewish people; he takes the memories of events intended to destroy them, and by telling them, he reaffirms the Jewish tradition of passing down the stories of their people. "[The survivor] has no right to deprive future generations of a past that belongs to our collective memory," Wiesel explains as his impetus for writing.<sup>14</sup> He declares that Jewish memories matter, that Jewish traditions matter, that Jewish *people* matter. The process of sharing the memories restores the identity that was shattered by their inhumane treatment.

Second, Wiesel makes a point of memorializing the dead, telling the story of their last moments as a sort of eulogy. "To forget the dead," he writes, "would be akin to killing them a second time."<sup>15</sup> As long as they are remembered, they are not gone. To the unmourned and unburied, Wiesel's words are a memorial, a way to honor those who were dishonored. As he

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<sup>13</sup> Downing, "Poetics," 285.

<sup>14</sup> Elie Wiesel, "Preface to the New Translation" in *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), xv.

<sup>15</sup> Wiesel, "Preface," xv.

commemorates them, he returns to them their name, their personality, and their identity; he grants them the dignity to be remembered, not by the numbers tattooed on their arms, but by their last moments of life. Immortalized in Wiesel's writing, they are not a statistic; rather, they are people. By telling their stories, he declares that their lives mattered, and that their deaths mattered. There are four stories in particular which I will mention here. Although Wiesel mentions many individuals, these four are set apart by a kind of eulogy statement, a moment where Wiesel intentionally commits their last moments to memory.

The first is Zalman, a young Polish boy who ran alongside Wiesel during the march to Gleiwitz. Overcome by stomach cramps and unable to go on, he "lowered his pants and fell to the ground." Wiesel notes simply, "That is the image I have of him."<sup>16</sup> Having fallen in the path, Zalman was surely trampled to death by his fellow prisoners. This is a dehumanizing death which Wiesel chooses to tell in its raw and unpolished grotesqueness; there is no glory in it. Yet by preserving the story of his death, Wiesel gives it a certain kind of dignity. Although unseen and trampled by the masses, Zalman was noticed by Wiesel. Fallen by the wayside, his final resting place unmarked, his last moments are nevertheless marked by Wiesel's memory. What otherwise would have been an invisible, unmourned death is now seen and remembered by all of Wiesel's readers; in writing, he has granted Zalman the honor of a noteworthy death.

The next story Wiesel recounts is that of Juliek, the violinist who played in the Buna orchestra. Unlike Zalman, Juliek preserved his last moments in beauty, resisting rather than succumbing to the inhumanity of his death. Having carried his violin all the way to Gleiwitz and salvaging it as he climbed from the pile of dead and dying bodies, Juliek played a Beethoven concerto until his life drained away. Wiesel writes, "It was as if Juliek's soul had become his bow. He was playing his life. His whole being was gliding over the strings. His unfulfilled hopes.

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<sup>16</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 86.

His charred past, his extinguished future. He played that which he would never play again." Then, Wiesel poignantly adds, "I shall never forget Juliek."<sup>17</sup> Wiesel notes earlier in the book, back at Buna, that the Jews were not allowed to play Beethoven or any other German music – presumably because they were unworthy.<sup>18</sup> Wiesel once made the statement that "art means for man to say no to death" – and this is precisely what Juliek does here.<sup>19</sup> Not only does he resist dehumanization by embracing beauty in his last moments, but he also reclaims his human right to play the music of Beethoven. By sharing this story with his readers, Wiesel memorializes Juliek's last act of resistance, a small victory against the chaos of the Holocaust.

The third person to whom Wiesel specifically pays tribute is his father. On the last night of his father's life, after ignoring his cries for help, Wiesel forces himself to commit his father to memory: "I remained more than an hour leaning over him, looking at him, etching his bloody, broken face into my mind."<sup>20</sup> If he did not, who else would remember? In the last days of his life, even his fellow inmates beat him; he was hardly a person anymore. Yet his son makes the effort to see him as human once more, determined to remember and validate his last moments, although he could not grieve. "No prayers were said over his tomb," Wiesel writes. "No candle lit in his memory. His last word had been my name. He had called out to me and I had not answered."<sup>21</sup> Although he had remained silent, something in him understood the need to look on his father's broken body and remember his life. His painful retelling of his father's suffering and death is the candle lit for his father, one which will never go out as long as his story is told.

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<sup>17</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 95.

<sup>18</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 49.

<sup>19</sup> Elie Wiesel, interview with John S. Friedman, *The Paris Review* no. 91, spring 1984 (<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2995/the-art-of-fiction-no-79-elie-wiesel>), accessed March 28, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 112.

<sup>21</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 112.

Wiesel's fourth memory is of himself. After his liberation, he saw his reflection in a mirror – that of a corpse. He finishes his autobiography with the words, "The look in his eyes as he gazed at me has never left me."<sup>22</sup> This is his memorial to himself; Wiesel feels the need to remember the death of the child that he was. It is vital to preserve that moment in memory, for the "corpse" he was after liberation represented the worst of what the Nazis had done to him. It was important for Wiesel not to lose this particular identity to the man he would later become; he needed to remember the death of innocence and the death of faith. By refusing to forget, by letting the world see the broken man in the mirror, Wiesel grants to himself the same dignity and validation that he granted to the other victims. Perhaps the greatest gift we can give to ourselves is to honor our past selves when we might rather forget.

Finally, Wiesel uses memory as a form of resistance – both against God and against the perpetrators of evil. For him, assertion of self in any way is a sort of "existential rebellion" – as he noted in an interview, "I lose and still I rebel – for my own dignity. Although I know I will never defeat God, I still fight Him. Suddenly the role of man is greatly enhanced. Therefore his defeat is not really a defeat."<sup>23</sup> There are several ways in which people can resist God and their oppressors. As noted earlier, Wiesel believes art to be one of these. Jacqueline Bussie, in her study of Wiesel's works, identifies laughter to be another – a "subversive form of protest" which "symbolizes a refusal to bend to the oppressive will."<sup>24</sup> I submit that memory is yet another form of human rebellion against death, one of those transcendent human experiences which cannot be controlled or extinguished by an outside force. By memorializing the events which occurred, and specifically the deaths of the victims which have been noted, Wiesel resists the permanence

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<sup>22</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 115.

<sup>23</sup> Wiesel, Interview.

<sup>24</sup> Bussie, *Laughter*, 39.

of death: "I try to bring some characters back, and defeat death, defeat the killer, defeat God."<sup>25</sup> By using his writing to rebel against a force larger than himself, Wiesel suggests that memory is a vital part of the struggle to assert the power of humanity. Wiesel also resists oppression by sharing his story to spread awareness of the evil of which man is capable. If the memories are forgotten, it is more likely that history will repeat itself; and so, painful as it is, Wiesel brings himself to warn the world of what happens when we remain silent in the face of others' suffering. Finally, bearing witness to the suffering is also a form of psychological resistance to trauma; to recreate the traumatic experience in storytelling helps the brain process the experience correctly, rather than reliving it in the present or repressing the memory entirely.<sup>26</sup> By telling his story, Wiesel ensures its survival, both in his own mind and for future generations of readership.

"Remember it always," the SS officer orders. "Never shall I forget," answers Wiesel. Yet for him, the memories are no longer dehumanizing; they are his weapon of resistance against the horrors of the Holocaust, the means by which he denies death and rebels against the God who allowed it to happen. The memories are no longer characterized by fear but by anger; no longer crippling, but empowering. As Wiesel takes hold of his memories to tell his stories and those of the deceased, he is no longer a slave to them. While obeying the order of the SS officer, he turns it completely on its head. He will remember that he was treated as a non-human – and he will tell the world who was truly inhuman. He will remember that he was a prisoner, condemned to work or die – and he will remember his strength to survive against all odds. He will always remember Auschwitz – and he tells the world what he experienced, ensuring that he will not remember alone.

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<sup>25</sup> Wiesel, Interview.

<sup>26</sup> For more information on trauma and memory, see Herman, Judith Lewis, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), ch. 9.

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