Elie Wiesel

# Night

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*Translated from the French by*
*MARION WIESEL*

PENGUIN BOOKS

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PENGUIN CLASSICS

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ELIE WIESEL is the author of more than forty internationally acclaimed works of fiction and nonfiction. He has been awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the United States of America Congressional Gold Medal, the French Legion of Honor, and, in 1986, the Nobel Peace Prize. He is the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities and University Professor at Boston University.

MARION WIESEL was born in Vienna. She has translated most of her husband's works from original French into English.

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*In memory of my parents and of my little sister, Tzipora*

E.W.

*This new translation in memory of my grandparents, Abba, Sarah and Nachman, who also vanished into that night*

M.W.

# Preface to the New Translation by Elie Wiesel

IF IN MY LIFETIME I WAS TO WRITE only one book, this would be the one. Just as the past lingers in the present, all my writings after *Night*, including those that deal with biblical, Talmudic, or Hasidic themes, profoundly bear its stamp, and cannot be understood if one has not read this very first of my works.

Why did I write it?

Did I write it so as *not* to go mad or, on the contrary, to *go* mad in order to understand the nature of madness, the immense, terrifying madness that had erupted in history and in the conscience of mankind?

Was it to leave behind a legacy of words, of memories, to help prevent history from repeating itself?

Or was it simply to preserve a record of the ordeal I endured as an adolescent, at an age when one's knowledge of death and evil should be limited to what one discovers in literature?

There are those who tell me that I survived in order to write this text. I am not convinced. I don't know *how* I survived; I was weak, rather shy; I did nothing to save myself. A miracle? Certainly not. If heaven could or would perform a

miracle for me, why not for others more deserving than myself? It was nothing more than chance. However, having survived, I needed to give some meaning to my survival. Was it to protect that meaning that I set to paper an experience in which nothing made any sense?

In retrospect I must confess that I do not know, or no longer know, what I wanted to achieve with my words. I only know that without this testimony, my life as a writer—or my life, period—would not have become what it is: that of a witness who believes he has a moral obligation to try to prevent the enemy from enjoying one last victory by allowing his crimes to be erased from human memory.

For today, thanks to recently discovered documents, the evidence shows that in the early days of their accession to power, the Nazis in Germany set out to build a society in which there simply would be no room for Jews. Toward the end of their reign, their goal changed: they decided to leave behind a world in ruins in which Jews would seem never to have existed. That is why everywhere in Russia, in the Ukraine, and in Lithuania, the Einsatzgruppen carried out the Final Solution by turning their machine guns on more than a million Jews, men, women, and children, and throwing them into huge mass graves, dug just moments before by the victims themselves. Special units would then disinter the corpses and burn them. Thus, for the first time in history, Jews were not only killed twice but denied burial in a cemetery.

It is obvious that the war which Hitler and his accomplices waged was a war not only against Jewish men, women, and

children, but also against Jewish religion, Jewish culture, Jewish tradition, therefore Jewish memory.

CONVINCED THAT THIS PERIOD in history would be judged one day, I knew that I must bear witness. I also knew that, while I had many things to say, I did not have the words to say them. Painfully aware of my limitations, I watched helplessly as language became an obstacle. It became clear that it would be necessary to invent a new language. But how was one to rehabilitate and transform words betrayed and perverted by the enemy? Hunger—thirst—fear—transport—selection—fire—chimney: these words all have intrinsic meaning, but in those times, they meant something else. Writing in my mother tongue—at that point close to extinction—I would pause at every sentence, and start over and over again. I would conjure up other verbs, other images, other silent cries. It still was not right. But what exactly was "it"? "It" was something elusive, darkly shrouded for fear of being usurped, profaned. All the dictionary had to offer seemed meager, pale, lifeless. Was there a way to describe the last journey in sealed cattle cars, the last voyage toward the unknown? Or the discovery of a demented and glacial universe where to be inhuman was human, where disciplined, educated men in uniform came to kill, and innocent children and weary old men came to die? Or the countless separations on a single fiery night, the tearing apart of entire families, entire communities? Or, incredibly, the vanishing of a beautiful, well-behaved little Jewish girl with golden hair and a sad smile, murdered with her mother the very night of their

arrival? How was one to speak of them without trembling and a heart broken for all eternity?

Deep down, the witness knew then, as he does now, that his testimony would not be received. After all, it deals with an event that sprang from the darkest zone of man. Only those who experienced Auschwitz know what it was. Others will never know.

But would they at least understand?

Could men and women who consider it normal to assist the weak, to heal the sick, to protect small children, and to respect the wisdom of their elders understand what happened there? Would they be able to comprehend how, within that cursed universe, the masters tortured the weak and massacred the children, the sick, and the old?

And yet, having lived through this experience, one could not keep silent no matter how difficult, if not impossible, it was to speak.

And so I persevered. And trusted the silence that envelops and transcends words. Knowing all the while that any one of the fields of ashes in Birkenau carries more weight than all the testimonies about Birkenau. For, despite all my attempts to articulate the unspeakable, "it" is still not right.

Is that why my manuscript—written in Yiddish as "And the World Remained Silent" and translated first into French, then into English—was rejected by every major publisher, French and American, despite the tireless efforts of the great Catholic French writer and Nobel laureate François Mauriac? After months and months of personal visits, letters, and telephone calls, he finally succeeded in getting it into print.

Though I made numerous cuts, the original Yiddish version still was long. Jérôme Lindon, the legendary head of the small but prestigious Éditions de Minuit, edited and further cut the French version. I accepted his decision because I worried that some things might be superfluous. Substance alone mattered. I was more afraid of having said too much than too little.

Example: in the Yiddish version, the narrative opens with these cynical musings:

> In the beginning there was faith—which is childish; trust—which is vain; and illusion—which is dangerous.
>
> We believed in God, trusted in man, and lived with the illusion that every one of us has been entrusted with a sacred spark from the Shekhinah's flame; that every one of us carries in his eyes and in his soul a reflection of God's image.
>
> *That* was the source if not the cause of all our ordeals.

Other passages from the original Yiddish text had more on the death of my father and on the Liberation. Why not include those in this new translation? Too personal, too private, perhaps; they need to remain between the lines. And yet ...

> I remember that night, the most horrendous of my life:
>
> "... Eliezer, my son, come here ... I want to tell you something ... Only to you ... Come, don't leave me alone ... Eliezer ..."
>
> I heard his voice, grasped the meaning of his words and the tragic dimension of the moment, yet I did not move.

It had been his last wish to have me next to him in his agony, at the moment when his soul was tearing itself from his lacerated body—yet I did not let him have his wish.

I was afraid.

Afraid of the blows.

That was why I remained deaf to his cries.

Instead of sacrificing my miserable life and rushing to his side, taking his hand, reassuring him, showing him that he was not abandoned, that I was near him, that I felt his sorrow, instead of all that, I remained flat on my back, asking God to make my father stop calling my name, to make him stop crying. So afraid was I to incur the wrath of the SS.

In fact, my father was no longer conscious.

Yet his plaintive, harrowing voice went on piercing the silence and calling me, nobody but me.

"Well?" The SS had flown into a rage and was striking my father on the head: "Be quiet, old man! Be quiet!"

My father no longer felt the club's blows; I did. And yet I did not react. I let the SS beat my father, I left him alone in the clutches of death. Worse: I was angry with him for having been noisy, for having cried, for provoking the wrath of the SS.

"Eliezer! Eliezer! Come, don't leave me alone ..."

His voice had reached me from so far away, from so close. But I had not moved.

I shall never forgive myself.

Nor shall I ever forgive the world for having pushed me against the wall, for having turned me into a stranger, for having awakened in me the basest, most primitive instincts.

pleas of a witness who, having escaped the massacre, relates to them what he has seen with his own eyes, but they refuse to believe him and call him a madman—this set of circumstances would surely have sufficed to inspire a book to which, I believe, no other can be compared.

It is, however, another aspect of this extraordinary book that has held my attention. The child who tells us his story here was one of God's chosen. From the time he began to think, he lived only for God, studying the Talmud, eager to be initiated into the Kabbalah, wholly dedicated to the Almighty. Have we ever considered the consequence of a less visible, less striking abomination, yet the worst of all, for those of us who have faith: the death of God in the soul of a child who suddenly faces absolute evil?

Let us try to imagine what goes on in his mind as his eyes watch rings of black smoke unfurl in the sky, smoke that emanates from the furnaces into which his little sister and his mother had been thrown after thousands of other victims:

> Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed.
>
> Never shall I forget that smoke.
>
> Never shall I forget the small faces of the children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent sky.
>
> Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever.
>
> Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live.
>
> Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes.

a Martin Luther King Jr.—one person of integrity can make a difference, a difference of life and death. As long as one dissident is in prison, our freedom will not be true. As long as one child is hungry, our life will be filled with anguish and shame. What all these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them, that when their voices are stifled we shall lend them ours, that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs.

This is what I say to the young Jewish boy wondering what I have done with his years. It is in his name that I speak to you and that I express to you my deepest gratitude as one who has emerged from the Kingdom of Night. We know that every moment is a moment of grace, every hour an offering; not to share them would mean to betray them.

Our lives no longer belong to us alone; they belong to all those who need us desperately.

Thank you, Chairman Aarvik. Thank you, members of the Nobel Committee. Thank you, people of Norway, for declaring on this singular occasion that our survival has meaning for mankind.

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