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:
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> " . . . 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.

His last word had been my name. A summons. And I had not responded.

In the Yiddish version, the narrative does not end with the image in the mirror, but with a gloomy meditation on the present:

And now, scarcely ten years after Buchenwald, I realize that the world forgets quickly. Today, Germany is a sovereign state. The German Army has been resuscitated. Ilse Koch, the notorious sadistic monster of Buchenwald, was allowed to have children and live happily ever after . . . War criminals stroll through the streets of Hamburg and Munich. The past seems to have been erased, relegated to oblivion.

Today, there are anti-Semites in Germany, France, and even the United States who tell the world that the "story" of six million assassinated Jews is nothing but a hoax, and many people, not knowing any better, may well believe them, if not today then tomorrow or the day after . . .

I am not so naïve as to believe that this slim volume will

change the course of history or shake the conscience of the world.

Books no longer have the power they once did.

Those who kept silent yesterday will remain silent tomorrow.

THE READER would be entitled to ask: Why this new translation, since the earlier one has been around for forty-five years? If it is not faithful or not good enough, why did I wait so long to replace it with one better and closer to the original?

In response, I would say only that back then, I was an unknown writer who was just getting started. My English was far from good. When my British publisher told me that he had found a translator, I was pleased. I later read the translation and it seemed all right. I never reread it. Since then, many of my other works have been translated by Marion, my wife, who knows my voice and how to transmit it better than anyone else. I am fortunate: when Farrar, Straus and Giroux asked her to prepare a new translation, she accepted. I am convinced that the readers will appreciate her work. In fact, as a result of her rigorous editing, I was able to correct and revise a number of important details.

And so, as I reread this text written so long ago, I am glad that I did not wait any longer. And yet, I still wonder: Have I used the right words? I speak of my first night *over there*. The discovery of the reality inside the barbed wire. The warnings of a "veteran" inmate, counseling my father and myself to lie about our ages: my father was to make himself younger, and I older. The selection. The march toward the chimneys looming in the distance under an indifferent sky. The infants thrown into fiery ditches . . . I did not say that they *were alive*, but that was what I thought. But then I convinced myself: no, they were dead, otherwise I surely would have lost my mind. And yet fellow inmates also saw them; they

were alive when they were thrown into the flames. Historians, among them Telford Taylor, confirmed it. And yet somehow I did not lose my mind.

BEFORE CONCLUDING this introduction, I believe it important to emphasize how strongly I feel that books, just like people, have a destiny. Some invite sorrow, others joy, some both.

Earlier, I described the difficulties encountered by *Night* before its publication in French, forty-seven years ago. Despite overwhelmingly favorable reviews, the book sold poorly. The subject was considered morbid and interested no one. If a rabbi happened to mention the book in his sermon, there were always people ready to complain that it was senseless to "burden our children with the tragedies of the Jewish past."

Since then, much has changed. *Night* has been received in ways that I never expected. Today, students in high schools and colleges in the United States and elsewhere read it as part of their curriculum.

How to explain this phenomenon? First of all, there has been a powerful change in the public's attitude. In the fifties and sixties, adults born before or during World War II showed a careless and patronizing indifference toward what is so inadequately called the Holocaust. That is no longer true.

Back then, few publishers had the courage to publish books on that subject.

Today, such works are on most book lists. The same is true in academia. Back then, few schools offered courses on the subject. Today, many do. And, strangely, those courses are particularly popular. The topic of Auschwitz has become part of mainstream culture. There are films, plays, novels, international conferences, exhibitions, annual ceremonies with the participation of the na-

tion's officialdom. The most striking example is that of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.; it has received more than twenty-two million visitors since its inauguration in 1993.

This may be because the public knows that the number of survivors is shrinking daily, and is fascinated by the idea of sharing memories that will soon be lost. For in the end, it is all about memory, its sources and its magnitude, and, of course, its consequences.

For the survivor who chooses to testify, it is clear: his duty is to bear witness for the dead *and* for the living. He has no right to deprive future generations of a past that belongs to our collective memory. To forget would be not only dangerous but offensive; to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time.

SOMETIMES I AM ASKED if I know "the response to Auschwitz"; I answer that not only do I not know it, but that I don't even know if a tragedy of this magnitude *has* a response. What I do know is that there is "response" in responsibility. When we speak of this era of evil and darkness, so close and yet so distant, "responsibility" is the key word.

The witness has forced himself to testify. For the youth of today, for the children who will be born tomorrow. He does not want his past to become their future.

E.W.

Foreword
by François Mauriac

FOREIGN JOURNALISTS frequently come to see me. I am wary of them, torn as I am between my desire to speak to them freely and the fear of putting weapons into the hands of interviewers whose attitude toward France I do not know. During these encounters, I tend to be on my guard.

That particular morning, the young Jew who came to interview me on behalf of a Tel Aviv daily won me over from the first moment. Our conversation very quickly became more personal. Soon I was sharing with him memories from the time of the Occupation. It is not always the events that have touched us personally that affect us the most. I confided to my young visitor that nothing I had witnessed during that dark period had marked me as deeply as the image of cattle cars filled with Jewish children at the Austerlitz train station . . . Yet I did not even see them with my own eyes. It was my wife who described them to me, still under the shock of the horror she had felt. At that time we knew nothing about the Nazis' extermination methods. And who could have imagined such things! But these lambs torn from their mothers, that was an outrage far beyond anything we would have

thought possible. I believe that on that day, I first became aware of the mystery of the iniquity whose exposure marked the end of an era and the beginning of another. The dream conceived by Western man in the eighteenth century, whose dawn he thought he had glimpsed in 1789, and which until August 2, 1914, had become stronger with the advent of the Enlightenment and scientific discoveries—that dream finally vanished for me before those trainloads of small children. And yet I was still thousands of miles away from imagining that these children were destined to feed the gas chambers and crematoria.

This, then, was what I probably told this journalist. And when I said, with a sigh, "I have thought of these children so many times!" he told me, "I was one of them." He was one of them! He had seen his mother, a beloved little sister, and most of his family, except his father and two other sisters, disappear in a furnace fueled by living creatures. As for his father, the boy had to witness his martyrdom day after day and, finally, his agony and death. And what a death! The circumstances of it are narrated in this book, and I shall allow readers—who should be as numerous as those reading *The Diary of Anne Frank*—to discover them for themselves as well as by what miracle the child himself escaped.

I maintain therefore that this personal record, coming as it does after so many others and describing an abomination such as we might have thought no longer had any secrets for us, is different, distinct, and unique nevertheless. The fate of the Jews of the small town in Transylvania called Sighet; their blindness as they confronted a destiny from which they would have still had time to flee; the inconceivable passivity with which they surrendered to it, deaf to the warnings and 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 mad-

man—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.
>
> Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God Himself.
>
> Never.

It was then that I understood what had first appealed to me about this young Jew: the gaze of a Lazarus risen from the dead

yet still held captive in the somber regions into which he had strayed, stumbling over desecrated corpses. For him, Nietzsche's cry articulated an almost physical reality: God is dead, the God of love, of gentleness and consolation, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had, under the watchful gaze of this child, vanished forever into the smoke of the human holocaust demanded by the Race, the most voracious of all idols.

And how many devout Jews endured such a death? On that most horrible day, even among all those other bad days, when the child witnessed the hanging (yes!) of another child who, he tells us, had the face of a sad angel, he heard someone behind him groan:

> "For God's sake, where is God?"
>
> And from within me, I heard a voice answer:
>
> "Where He is? This is where—hanging here from this gallows."

On the last day of the Jewish year, the child is present at the solemn ceremony of Rosh Hashanah. He hears thousands of slaves cry out in unison, "Blessed be the Almighty!" Not so long ago, he too would have knelt down, and with such worship, such awe, such love! But this day, he does not kneel, he stands. The human creature, humiliated and offended in ways that are inconceivable to the mind or the heart, defies the blind and deaf divinity.

> I no longer pleaded for anything. I was no longer able to lament. On the contrary, I felt very strong. I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes had opened and I was alone, terribly alone in a world without God, without man. Without love or mercy. I was nothing but ashes now, but I felt myself to be stronger than this

> Almighty to whom my life had been bound for so long. In the midst of these men assembled for prayer, I felt like an observer, a stranger.

And I, who believe that God is love, what answer was there to give my young interlocutor whose dark eyes still held the reflection of the angelic sadness that had appeared one day on the face of a hanged child? What did I say to him? Did I speak to him of that other Jew, this crucified brother who perhaps resembled him and whose cross conquered the world? Did I explain to him that what had been a stumbling block for *his* faith had become a cornerstone for *mine*? And that the connection between the cross and human suffering remains, in my view, the key to the unfathomable mystery in which the faith of his childhood was lost? And yet, Zion has risen up again out of the crematoria and the slaughterhouses. The Jewish nation has been resurrected from among its thousands of dead. It is they who have given it new life. We do not know the worth of one single drop of blood, one single tear. All is grace. If the Almighty is the Almighty, the last word for each of us belongs to Him. That is what I should have said to the Jewish child. But all I could do was embrace him and weep.