

EXCERPT FROM *NIGHT*

Elie Wiesel

The beloved objects that we had carried with us from place to place were left behind in the wagon and, with them, finally, our illusions.

Every few yards, there stood an SS man, his machine gun trained on us. Hand in hand we followed the throng.

An SS came toward us wielding a club. He commanded:

“Men to the left! Women to the right!”

Eight words spoken quietly, indifferently, without emotion. Eight simple, short words. Yet that was the moment when I left my mother. There was no time to think, and I already felt my father’s hand press against mine: we were alone. In a fraction of a second I could see my mother, my sisters, move to the right. Tzipora was holding Mother’s hand. I saw them walking farther and farther away; Mother was stroking my sister’s blond hair, as if to protect her. And I walked on with my father, with the men. I didn’t know that this was the moment in time and the place where I was leaving my mother and Tzipora forever. I kept walking, my father holding my hand.

Behind me, an old man fell to the ground. Nearby, an SS man replaced his revolver in its holster.

My hand tightened its grip on my father. All I could think of was not to lose him. Not to remain alone.

The SS officers gave the order.

“Form ranks of fives!”

There was a tumult. It was imperative to stay together.

“Hey, kid, how old are you?”

The man interrogating me was an inmate. I could not see his face, but his voice was weary and warm.

“Fifteen.”

“No. You’re eighteen.”

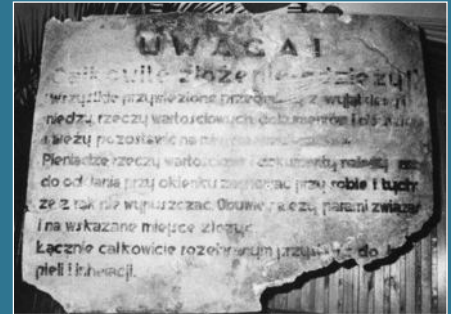
“But I’m not,” I said. “I’m fifteen.”

“Fool. Listen to what I say.”

Then he asked my father, who answered:

“I’m fifty.”

“No.” The man now sounded angry. “Not fifty. You’re forty. Do you hear? Eighteen and forty.”



A sign written in Polish in the camp, Belzec, Poland. The sign, which was intended to deceive the victims, reads:

Attention! All belongings to be handed in the shed, except money, documents and other valuables, which you must keep with you. Shoes must be tied together in pairs and put in the marked area. Afterwards, you must go to the showers completely naked.

Yad Vashem Photo Archive (4613/194)



A pile of victims’ shoes, Majdanek, Poland. Courtesy of State Central Photos and Film Archive, Kiev

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He disappeared into the darkness. Another inmate appeared, unleashing a stream of invectives:

“Sons of bitches, why have you come here? Tell me, why?”

Someone dared to reply:

“What do you think? That we came here of our own free will? That we asked to come here?”

The other seemed ready to kill him.

“Shut up, you moron, or I’ll tear you to pieces! You should have hanged yourselves rather than come here. Didn’t you know what was in store for you here at Auschwitz? You didn’t know? In 1944?”

True. We didn’t know. Nobody had told us. He couldn’t believe his ears. His tone became harsher:

“Over there. Do you see that chimney over there? Do you see it? And the flames, do you see them?” (Yes, we saw the flames.) “Over there, that’s where they will take you. Over there will be your grave. You still don’t understand? You sons of bitches. Don’t you understand anything? You will be burned! Burned to a cinder! Turned into ashes!”

His anger changed into fury. We stood stunned, petrified. Could this be just a nightmare? An unimaginable nightmare?

I heard whispers around me:

“We must do something. We can’t let them kill us like that, like cattle in the slaughterhouse. We must revolt.”

There were, among us, a few tough young men. They actually had knives and were urging us to attack the armed guards. One of them was muttering:

“Let the world learn of the existence of Auschwitz. Let everybody hear about it while they still have a chance to escape....”

But the older men begged their sons not to be foolish:

“We mustn’t give up hope, even now as the sword hangs over our heads. So taught our sages....”

The wind of revolt died down. We continued to walk until we came to a crossroads. Standing in the middle of it was, though I didn’t know it then, Dr. Mengele, the notorious Dr. Mengele. He looked like the typical SS officer: a cruel, though not unintelligent, face, complete with monocle. He was holding a conductor’s baton and was surrounded by officers. The baton moving constantly, sometimes to the right, sometimes to the left.



*“We mustn’t give up hope,
even now as the sword
hangs over our heads. So
taught our sages”*

About Photo

Jews undergoing the selection process on the Birkenau arrival platform known as the “ramp.” The people in the background are on their way to Crematorium II, Auschwitz-Birkenau. Yad Vashem Photo Archives (4522)

In no time, I stood before him.

“Your age?” he asked, perhaps trying to sound paternal.

“I’m eighteen.” My voice was trembling.

“In good health?”

“Yes.”

“Your profession?”

Tell him that I was a student?

“Farmer,” I heard myself saying.

This conversation lasted no more than a few seconds. It seemed like an eternity.

The baton pointed to the left. I took half a step forward. I first wanted to see where they would send my father. Were he to have gone to the right, I would have run after him.

The baton, once more, moved to the left. A weight lifted from my heart.

We did not know, as yet, which was the better side, right or left, which road led to prison and which to the crematoria. Still, I was happy, I was near my father. Our procession continued slowly to move forward.

Another inmate came over to us:

“Satisfied?”

“Yes,” someone answered.

“Poor devils, you are heading for the crematorium.”

He seemed to be telling the truth. Not far from us, flames, huge flames, were rising from a ditch. Something was being burned there. A truck drew close and unloaded its hold: small children. Babies! Yes, I did see this, with my own eyes ... children thrown into the flames. (Is it any wonder that ever since then, sleep tends to elude me?)

So that was where we were going. A little farther on, there was another, larger pit for adults.

I pinched myself: Was I still alive? Was I awake? How was it possible that men, women, and children were being burned and that the world kept silent? No. All this could not be real. A nightmare perhaps.... Soon I should wake with a start, my heart pounding, and find that I was back in the room of my childhood, with my books...

My father’s voice tore me from my daydreams:

“What a shame, a shame that you did not go with your mother... I saw many children your age go with their mothers....”

His voice was terribly sad. I understood that he did not wish to see what they would do to me. He did not wish to see his only son go up in flames.

My forehead was covered with cold sweat. Still, I told him that I could not believe that human beings were being burned in our times; the world would never tolerate such crimes....

“The world? The world is not interested in us. Today, everything is possible, even the crematoria....” His voice broke.

“Father,” I said. “If that is true, then I don’t want to wait. I’ll run into the electrified barbed wire. That would be easier than slow a slow death in the flames.”

He did not answer. He was weeping. His body was shaking. Everybody around us was weeping. Someone began to recite Kaddish, the prayer for the dead. I don’t know whether, during the history of the Jewish people, men have ever before recited Kaddish for themselves.

“*Yisgadal veyiskadash, shmey raba....* May His name be celebrated and sanctified....” whispered my father.

For the first time, I felt anger rising within me. Why should I sanctify His name? The Almighty, the eternal and terrible Master of the Universe, chose to be silent. What was there to thank Him for?

We continued our march. We were coming closer and closer to the pit, from which an infernal heat was rising. Twenty more steps. If I was going to kill myself, this was the time. Our column had only some fifteen steps to go. I bit my lips so that my father would not hear my teeth chattering. Ten more steps. Eight. Seven. We were walking slowly, as one follows a hearse, our own funeral procession. Only four more steps. Three. There it was now, very close to us, the pit and its flames. I gathered all that remained of my strength in order to break rank and throw myself onto the barbed wire. Deep down, I was saying good-bye to my father, to the whole universe, and against my will, I found myself whispering the words: “*Yisgadal, veyiskadash, shmey raba....* My heart was about to burst. There. I was face-to-face with the Angel of Death....

No. Two steps from the pit, we were ordered to turn to left and herded into barracks.

I squeezed my father’s hand. He said:

“Do you remember Mrs. Schächter, in the train?”

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.

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