

SANDU FRUNZĂ

ETHICS, RELIGION AND MEMORY IN ELIE WIESEL'S *NIGHT*

Sandu Frunză

Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Babes-Bolyai
University, Cluj, Romania.
Email: sfrunza@yahoo.com

Abstract: In this paper I show that, from a philosophical perspective, in Elie Wiesel's work in general and in *Night* in particular, the relation between ethics and religion is based on complementarity. In order to achieve this, I have analysed the way in which memory is shown as an invitation to participation in a common set of meanings, values and actions. What I deem most significant is the way in which the memory of the Holocaust is constituted as a medium of action and of communion among humans in an act of mutual responsibility. Through this, the memory of the Holocaust obliges us to assume an ethics of responsibility and of action that rules out the possibility of a contemporary repetition of the events that took place in the death camps. I use *Night* to show how this narrative reveals several points that are important for understanding certain aspects of the relation between ethics, religion and the memory of the Holocaust. One of these is the understanding of memory as a way to bring man and God together in a relation of mutual communication, beginning with the experience of suffering of dehumanization and of God's absence from the death camp. Another is that the religious and cultural memory represented by Israel is the main target of extermination as a manifestation of radical evil. A third is that Israel's suffering has a paradigmatic value, and therefore the memory of the Holocaust becomes a special power that may be used as a tool to diminish the power of evil through the elimination of indifference and the assumption of responsibility.

Key Words: ethics, memory, Holocaust, responsibility, evil, death camp, *Night*, Elie Wiesel

Philosophical ethics, religion and memory

One can seize the complex relations between ethical and religious aspects in limit situations. Such a situation can be illustrated using Elie Wiesel's reflections on the Holocaust. Reading Wiesel's *Night* one could be tempted to believe that, due to the life conditions in death camps, man is driven away from his faith – and, according to some authors, one could find there an early form of a theology of the death of God. However, in his subsequent works, Wiesel brings more and more arguments in favor of a normal relation between doubt of or even rebellion against divinity and the affirmation of faith in limit situations. One of *Night's* most important contributions consists in the fact that the ethical interrogation of faith and the deconstruction of religion are achieved using religious tools. Furthermore, in *Night*, Wiesel succeeds to establish an ethics of responsibility towards otherness, without minimizing the importance of God's presence in history. One can see that the human component is important from a religious point of view precisely because it involves an ethics that presupposes the responsibility of man towards the other man with whom he has a face-to-face relationship. In this respect one must understand Wiesel's contention that: „Remember, God of history, that You created man to remember”.¹ From the very first meeting with Elie Wiesel's texts, the reader will note the central place of the necessity of keeping alive the memory of the holocaust. Beginning with this, I will attempt to emphasize the way in which the memory of the Holocaust is constituted as a communication channel among humans and between man and God. At the same time, memory is more than a simple communication from past to future, it is also an ethical way of assuming responsibility for the horrors humankind experienced during the twentieth century.

I believe a good departure point is the fact that Wiesel assigns the memory a privileged status: the power of memory as Wiesel expresses it in *Night* has the capacity to pull victims out of the kingdom of death and integrate them into our present lives.² By using Wiesel's own reflections and those of his interpreters, I show how the memory of the Holocaust might act as a moral duty of any human being, as a factor of interpersonal solidarity and of community cohesion. Being interested by the deep human, ethical and religious signification of memory, I will simultaneously assign to it the role of a background for affirming an ethic of human responsibility toward the other, which implicates responsibility toward God, and of God towards humanity. This ethic of responsibility may be understood as similar to that found in Emmanuel Levinas. I believe that both originate in a detailed understanding of the Talmudic texts. It is common knowledge that Levinas and Wiesel, without knowing each other, were at the same time students of the same Talmudic master, Chouchani.

Their common Biblical and Talmudic experience may explain the presence in both of them of affirming the necessity of an ethic of responsibility.³

We can note two perspectives on the relation between religion, ethics, and memory. On the one hand, and especially in the post-Holocaust situation, I believe that a key aspect of Wiesel's works is that memory is the means by which man and God confirm each other into existence. Memory is God's attribute and the human created in His image bears the seal of memory as a sign of human agency. This is why, in the post-Holocaust period, Wiesel feels compelled to pull God out of the forgotten, while bringing the victims of extermination into the reality of memory. He reminds God of Israel's experience, because God is a God of truth and memory, the God of Israel's testimony.⁴ On the other hand, being a living document of the memory of the Holocaust, *Night* talks about presence and absence, about silence and the necessity of testimony, about the condition of humanity and God, about the two-way responsibility that they share, and about the necessity of questioning both with regard to what happened inside the extermination camps.

Despite the fact that the narratives in *Night* presents us with a universe from which any aspect of God seems to be excluded, the act of remembering has the force of a reinvestment with meaning of a world that lost its meanings. In this context, invoking God's presence or absence cannot have a theological value or motivation, but it functions as a mechanism for establishing memory as a source of agency, as an archetype of creation, as a presence of those who are absent, as the power of truth, and also as the bond between humanity and God. I believe this is why the refusal to forget is, for Wiesel, a normalizing force that reestablishes the balance between life and death. As for restoring agency, each person's duty is to follow the spirit of the law, which is to remember—even when a person feels forsaken by God. To forget is to abandon. Thus, in the post-Holocaust period, one of the fundamental laws of Judaism is to remember the victims, not abandoning those who passed away, not condemning them to absence and destruction.⁵

Wiesel is well aware that sometimes memory is malicious, that it can lead to hatred. But, even so, he believes memory has a purifying nature: it can liberate us from the temptation to repeat past mistakes and it can bring us to enter a dialogue that helps us understand the consequences of violence towards another. Wiesel is well aware that memory does not promise a total answer to the problems of the present, but he remains convinced that memory is an important component of building a common future. Memory can have a negative effect, when in remembering we stop at the simple act of recollection. Today, certain communities use religion (which is meant to celebrate life) to promote death, using memory as a weapon against others.⁶ And so in remembering we must move a step further. Memory must bring us together to solve our common problems.

Wiesel urges us not to allow memory to turn into a source of violence and anguish.⁷

Memory as Restoration of God and Man

By analyzing *Night*, as well as Wiesel's other writings, we discover a picture in which, in the conditions of the death camps, humans enter a process of full dehumanization, and seems God totally absent from history. I believe that today, retrospection enables us to see the Holocaust as a special force that holds the power to contribute to the restoration of the human condition and of God's presence in history. Through these lenses, I think one may understand the apparent inadequacy between, on the one side, several instances of Eliezer's behavior that look like signs of rebellion against God in the circumstances of the death camp, and, on the other side, Wiesel's openness to faith and his refusal to be associated in any manner with the theologies of the Death of God.

Several aspects of the role that memory plays in the dynamics of human-to-God relations should be emphasized. The first of these, which I believe should inform the way in which we read *Night*, is affirming that memory holds a central place in Wiesel's thought, in large part because it has the power to bring people together. In the field of memory, life in community can be restored, escape from isolation is possible, and thus a bridge towards dialogue can be built.

I believe that this is the perspective in which we may understand Wiesel's affirmation: "Memory is my homeland ... it is because I remember that I could remain human."⁸ In this way, it becomes obvious that the memory of the Holocaust acts as a protector, as a shield against despair and madness, as a reason to stay alive. But most importantly, for Wiesel memory plays an essential role in the conservation of human integrity. This emphasis on the sphere of memory is connected to and grows out of the experience of the death camp, to the need to resist the temptation to allow the tragic experience of the European Jews to be forgotten. *Night* invites us to remember the absolute evil experienced by the inhabitants of death camps in order to work together in finding a way to rebuild what seems irretrievably lost in humanity. Wiesel's writings are not just a mirror that shows us the images of the corpses left in Auschwitz. The darkness *Night* wraps us in is the background that shows us at the same time the image of those who are gone, the totally unfamiliar images the survivor contemplates in the mirror, and also the image of the reader who is called upon to look at humanity and its resources from a new angle. This expiatory and conciliatory force is what the author refers to when he says:

"We remember Auschwitz and all that it symbolizes because we believe that, in spite of the past and its horrors, the world is worthy of

salvation; and salvation, like redemption, can be found only in memory.”⁹

I would emphasize again that the issue of dehumanization is a central one in reflecting on the Holocaust. There is a meaningful fragment in *Night* that helps us understand the human condition in the death camp. The agonized father calls for Eliezer, and is violently struck by an SS officer who wants to quiet him. Eliezer does not react because he is afraid of being struck himself. In his memory, he will always have the image of his father helplessly trying to whisper his name with his lips shivering, his head cracked open, and his face bleeding. This image represents a whole community: all those who have suffered solely for being born Jews.

It is significant that Wiesel retells, in the foreword to the 2006 translation of *Night*, this scene of the beaten and defenseless father abandoned by others acting under the pressure of fear and the instinct of self-preservation.¹⁰ The crowd is unmoved by the dying man's cries for help and the gratuitous acts of violence against him. Moreover, not getting any response from people in general, the desperate father calls for his son but, in spite of all the devotion he had shown until that moment, not even the son reacts. This terrible description of the father's situation thus is also meant to show us the son's tragedy. At the same time it suggests the way that suffering and helplessness transfigure the character. Eliezer becomes a representative for the many anonymous people who lack the power to react, to carry out their desire to help others. The character struggles with the competing interests of self-preservation and conscience, of accepting the dehumanization or obeying his father. Inside Eliezer faces a super-human battle between two desires: the desire to keep his humanity and the desire to survive. The laws of survival in the death camp inevitably overcome the desire to protect his dying father. In spite of the man's cynical tone, Eliezer cannot ignore the advice given to him by a *Blockälteste*:

“Listen to me, kid. Don't forget that you are in a concentration camp. In this place, it is every man for himself, and you cannot think of others. Not even your father. In this place, there is no such thing as father, brother, friend. Each of us lives and dies alone. Let me give you good advice: stop giving your ration of bread and soup to your old father. You cannot help him anymore.”¹¹

We can understand the whole meaning of this episode only if we remember that Eliezer's only way of keeping his humanity, which Wiesel finds essential, is through his relationship with his father. His father is his strongest tie to his lost past, the person who animates his desire to live and gives him strength to do so. In *Night*, the ethical order and all human situations are filtered through his powerful relationship with his father. It

is obvious that Eliezer's father's death represents all those who were lost in the extermination camps: for those who died alone, for those who were sacrificed in the dark flames of Planet Auschwitz in total isolation. Eliezer finds himself alone—his father, finally, simply absent. Absent like God, humanity, and life inside death camps.

A second aspect, of equal importance, concerns God's absence and the way in which this absence may be understood in light of the memory of the Holocaust. Michael Berenbaum offers a powerful analysis of the consequences of life in the death camp for Wiesel's vision. Berenbaum shows the way in which Wiesel builds on this background, as an alternative to the traditional Jewish vision, a theology of absence:

Wiesel's theological vision is of void. Where previous Jewish theologians found some security in God and His revelation, in man and his creaturely status, and in Israel and its divine mission, Wiesel now finds an abyss of chaos, madness, and radical insecurity. Wiesel's fundamental experience is one of absence in a world that was once pregnant with Presence. Where Wiesel formerly experienced God, he has come to encounter the void.¹²

However, leaving aside Berenbaum's powerful analysis, I maintain that it is irrefutable that Wiesel's vision also contains a compensating element, an ethic of responsibility before the void, with the void defined as rupture within community and of interpersonal relations. The void must be filled with responsible action towards the other. In his construction, Wiesel finds the best instrument of responsibility to be the power of memory. Thus he says: "I have said it so many times: To forget the victims means to kill them a second time. We couldn't prevent the first killing, but we are responsible for the second one if it takes place."¹³

From Wiesel's numerous texts we can understand that this is first and foremost the responsibility of survivors of the Holocaust.¹⁴ But it is also about each person's responsibility for others. Wiesel addresses this broader responsibility in an interview with Richard Heffner entitled "Am I My Brother's Keeper?"¹⁵ In the biblical context, this is the question with which Cain answers God's inquiry regarding his missing brother Abel. And Wiesel's answer to this question, as a survivor of the contemporary genocide against the Jews, is: "of course ... we are all our brother's keepers. Why? Either we see in each other brothers, or we live in a world of strangers. I believe that there are no strangers in God's creation."¹⁶

The experiences of the Holocaust brought Wiesel to the conclusion that we should take our interpretation of Cain's exchange with God further and say, "whoever kills, kills his brother." Moreover, he argues, violent action has devastating effect not only on the victim but also on the victimizer. In the commission of a violent act, one's humanity is harmed to

the core. In killing another, the murderer kills him- or herself. "It's possible, as I interpret it, that Cain and Abel were only one person. Cain killed Abel in Cain."¹⁷

A third aspect that I wish to draw attention to is that of the superimposing images of God and humanity in the suffering experienced by the Jews during their extermination. A representative scene that describes the condition of humanity and of God in the Kingdom of Night is the execution of the angel-faced young man, which is one of the most commented upon scenes in the book. Wiesel tells the story of a boy, beloved by the guards as well as the prisoners, who are sentenced to death, eliciting the compassion of everyone who must witness the scene.¹⁸

This scene has been interpreted a number of ways, the common thread being the problem of destiny and God. Leaving aside the poignancy and drama of the scene, I would like to emphasize the answer to the question "where is God?": "this is where." I wish to highlight that, beyond the theology of the death of human being and the death of God, for Wiesel in this scene divinity is the same as humanity in suffering, the same as an innocent being persecuted for no fault, ultimately sharing Israel's destiny in the death camps. God is there because Israel is there. Together with the boy, He is hanging from the gallows. This is the deep message in this episode. It is not a story about God's silence and, like Wiesel's others works, it is not about God's total absence or death. It is about humanity and the atrocities human beings are capable of committing against one another, about the Jew and Israel's suffering. I do not believe it is by chance that this is one of the few scenes in *Night* where the people participate in the suffering of the victim of extreme violence. This participation is the source of the emotional force that all of the witnesses share towards the innocent victim. I must stress the fact that this superimposing of the image of the suffering man and the suffering God establishes a correlation between man and God; it opens itself towards a place of encounter where the human being is removed from the status of anonymous dehumanization and is placed in the hypostasis of a being inhabited by God. The memory of the Holocaust appears in a new light, which emphasizes this dynamics of restoration and of inhabitation in a common responsibility toward the suffering of the other. Thus, we see that questioning God's existence entails certain answers concerning the moral condition of the human being, the fracture instituted by each individual in relation to his others, and the absence of minimal elements that might suggest respect for the human condition. Where man as man is absent, neither God can be perceived as presence.

Evil and the war against the memory of Israel

In order to grasp why Wiesel commends us always to keep a living memory of the Holocaust, I believe we need to understand the ultimate

signification Wiesel attributes to the Nazis' action as a manifestation of the radical evil in history.

Wiesel describes the Holocaust in terms of the manifestation of absolute evil: "The progression into inhuman transcends the exploration of the human. Evil, more than good, suggests infinity."¹⁹ Thus the event is about the basic human drive that causes one person to end the existence of another. The manifestation of the infinitude of Evil goes beyond the boundaries of ethics; it creates an image of an apocalyptic universe. Wiesel's description of nocturnal processions from the death camps supports this interpretation:

There was something solemn about the way they converged over there, something mystical, all those men and women and children, families and strangers, friends and relatives walking with the same steady gaze in their burning eyes. They did not cry nor did they shout, nor did they ask pity or compassion. They walked quietly, not ever looking back. And so numerous were that they suggested the infinite. One had the impression that they would go on walking, walking forever, until the end of time.²⁰

From the outside, these images can appear mystical, religious, transforming. But there is nothing uplifting about them: they speak of forced labour, of gratuitous violence, of the tragedy of extermination. There is nothing human left; the apparently mystical nature of the scene derives solely from the awareness that these victims are still among the living.

Wiesel illustrates the problem of suffering and surviving in the final march from the camp, a march that was supposed to lead to salvation. The Nazis and their victims are deserting the Buna death camp under the pressure of the retreating German eastern front. When compelled by the Soviets to abandon the death camps, the Nazis leave behind only the ill and those unable to walk. Although they could have stayed with the ill, Eliezer and his father choose the retreat march, convinced by the logic of the death camps that those left behind will be killed. Eliezer later finds out that, in the Nazis' rush to get out, those who remained in the camp were left alive and were later liberated by the Soviet army.²¹ Among those who leave the death camp, the majority died on the road.²²

I want to highlight the fact that this death march is presented to us not so much as an exterminating march, but more as one of life that defeats the violence of death. The voice is no longer the voice of the victim, but the voice of the survivor. Apart from its horrific reality, I believe this march might be understood as a metaphor of the attempt to escape the world of radical evil. This deliverance, however, seems to

potentiate the dehumanization, the void, the absence, because wherever man does not manifest himself as a man, equally absent are humanity and God. Individuals manifest themselves as a blind force that facilitates Evil's action. Without disregarding the fact that this triumph of survivors is built on corpses, what is essential is that life defeats death. This victory is the personal victory of the individual against one's own death. But one is not a victory in relation to one's persecutors; one cannot leave one's condition of victim.

We should not neglect that victory over death is always relative in the concentration camps.²³ The biggest challenges to survival are the most unexpected. A scene that portrays the end of the march, when the victims settle into a new location suggests the calvary of survival:

My father and I were thrown to the ground by this rolling tide. ...

I tried to rid myself of my invisible assassin. My whole desire to live became concentrated in my nails. I scratched, I fought for a breath of air. I tore at decaying flesh that did not respond. I could not free myself of that mass weighing down my chest. Who knows? Was I struggling with a dead man?²⁴

This image, beyond the violent reality it shows, suggests the situation of a person confronted by what Wiesel labels *absolute evil*. We cannot understand what happened in the concentration camps without confronting the presence of evil there. As a member of the Hasidic community, Wiesel was familiar with various means in the Jewish tradition of addressing the problem of evil. For him, explaining evil is about the status of divinity and the complex ethical relations between God and humanity:

“God is one; He is everywhere. And if He is everywhere, then He is in evil and injustice too, and also in the supreme evil: death. It is the man task to free God of this evil. Every time we extirpate a part of evil, we hasten the coming of the Messiah.”²⁵

In this formulation, evil cannot be separated from the human nature or from God's nature. There is always the possibility that in the ongoing struggle to choose between good and evil, one might choose to remain on the side of evil. The great problem is to consistently and successfully differentiate good and evil. For Wiesel the experience of the Holocaust adds urgency to this problem, because he is convinced that evil is not only surpassing ethical principles, is not a mere absence of good or of love as the Western tradition often claims. On the contrary, evil has ontological reality and can overwhelm human beings. Wiesel does not think that the Nazis killed six million people because they did not have the capacity to

love. They undoubtedly loved and many certainly enjoyed a good family life. But there is no doubt that, at the same time, they hated with unusual intensity.²⁶ This hatred was not simply harmful, but devastating. It is evidence that "Evil is not passive, but active. It is self-assertive, and it strives to conquer. If it is not halted...it can triumph, just as desert can triumph over fertile land, or the sea over a sandy beach."²⁷

Wiesel rejects the classical ways of explaining evil's presence that are current in the Jewish tradition. Berenbaum notes that Wiesel rejects traditional explanations because, in relation to the events of the Holocaust, they have only theoretical and speculative value. They render those in the death camps helpless, and they leave us even more helpless today as we try to understand what happened there. Our helplessness is not about the limits of language and the impossibility of fully expressing a reality that cannot be put into words. Rather it is because in the conditions of the death camp evil was a destructive force at an existential level and, as Berenbaum argues,

"none of these defenses ultimately worked for Wiesel on an existential level, and it is on the existential level that the religious problem of evil must be faced.... Through the incidents and reflections presented in *Night*, Wiesel undermines the traditional strategies for explaining and handling the presence of evil."²⁸

Without doubt, such an overwhelming presence of evil does not however lead Wiesel to a theology of the death of God. The fact that God is absent in the conditions of the camp leads him instead to an utter mutiny against the means by which the Jew traditionally relates to God. But the relationship between God and humanity is retrieved by the individual's desire to survive and to testify. Through testimony, one can maintain the hope of a future possibility, even of finding oneself and perhaps even finding God. Berenbaum reads Wiesel's work through the lens of Rubenstein's theology. Even if we agree with his assessment with regard to Wiesel and Rubenstein, there is something that must be added to Berenbaum's interpretation. This is not to say that Wiesel has refused to be associated with the theology of the death of God, but we must acknowledge that the transforming power of faith is also central to his vision. Even if faith is constructed as mutiny against faith, it is still key in Wiesel's thought. The appeal to faith seems to me inevitable in understanding the meaning of memory in Wiesel.

To adequately understand the range of undercurrents in Wiesel's writings, we must keep in mind the relationship he shows between his theology and the historical events described in *Night*. In an interview with Philippe-Michael de Saint-Cheron, Wiesel discusses a very important moment in which the first reaction of the survivors upon being released

from the death camp was to pray. Thus, the first wish the rescuers granted them was “to say *kaddish*: *yitgadal vyitkadash chemeh rabba!* (may His name be magnified and sanctified!).” Wiesel states that this was the *first* impulse, these were the *first* words. The victims’ initial attitude was one acceptance; rebellion only came later. At first we accept and then we ask, he tells us.²⁹

This episode tells us that the victims felt a need for presence: a transcendent presence to constitute a bond for a possible reconstruction of the community of humanity. It is worth remembering, here, that Wiesel has said that in the years after his liberation he tried constantly to retie the knot with the past, to continue his life from the point where the thread of existence was cut. After a time, though, he realized that this would be possible only through recollection. One of his great memories is for the two sacred places, Sighet and Jerusalem,³⁰ which together constitute a single, privileged place of communal gathering, fasting, and prayer. From the perspective of this testimony, we can better understand Wiesel’s refusal to fast and to pray in the circumstances of the concentration camp as a refusal to accept abandonment as well as mutiny against the dissolution of community and the dehumanization of the Holocaust.

Berenbaum emphasizes and generalizes the sense of void, silence, and absence in Wiesel’s work based on his comparison of Wiesel with Richard Rubenstein. I believe that, while Berenbaum’s conclusions about *Night* hold when the book is read in isolation from Wiesel’s other works, they do not when we read *Night* in the context of Wiesel’s other works where he consistently emphasizes the importance of faith as well as his belief in a universe governed by the awareness of God’s presence. This presence offers Israel the power of memory because, as we have already seen, Wiesel’s God is a God of memory.

I want to place emphasis on the fact that ethics, faith and memory act as a common force that may result in the annihilation of evil. In the extreme circumstances of the concentration camp, and especially immediately after liberation, it becomes clear that for Wiesel faith and memory, by themselves, cannot defeat evil, but may lead to an ethic of responsibility. Thus, the memory of the Holocaust could infuse meaning into the necessity of each individual assuming responsibility for Israel’s suffering, which means for each individual’s suffering.

But this risks becoming a meaningless abstract conclusion if it is not informed by the fact that in the conditions of the death camp, what Wiesel calls “absolute evil”, is manifest as a force that could not be overcome by faith, by the interventions of man, or by the interventions of God. One of Emil Fackenheim’s questions further illustrates the extreme nature of the experience of the camps: “We ask: what will limit the power of the devil if existence itself is a crime?”³¹

In *Night*, absolute evil is the basis for the fundamental purpose of the death camps: the total extermination of the Jewish people. The Holocaust

is constructed as an assault on humanity and an act of defiance against divinity, but the main objective was the extermination of Jewish history and tradition. It was not, however, a cultural war or what we would now call a “clash of civilizations,” but an attempt by one of the most civilized nations people of the 20th century to eradicate an entire people and, with them, their culture. When asked for his opinion concerning the murderers’ motive for attempting to exterminate the Jews, Wiesel’s response was simple: “Memory. It was essentially a war against memory.... They were killing the Jews in order to kill their memory.”³² Wiesel does not intend to minimize the other people who have suffered as a result of the Holocaust. In fact, one of the most illuminating, empathetic, and compassionate of his texts is a review of Stefan Kanher’s *The Eighth Sin*. In this review, entitled “Gypsy’s Tale, A Still Burning Ember of the Holocaust,” Wiesel empathizes deeply with the tragedy of extermination, referring pointedly to “the night of the gypsies.”³³ But he remains convinced that the Nazis’ main purpose was “to annihilate the memory of Israel.”³⁴

Wiesel finds war against memory even in the period after Holocaust, calling it a contemporary war against “Jewish memory, mainly on Jewish memory of the Holocaust.”³⁵ Denials of the Holocaust come in various forms: from the wholesale denial of its entire existence to the minimization of its effects; from the attempt to discredit survivors to arguments that their testimonies are much too subjective to be reliable historical documents. Others consider the magnitude of the phenomenon of denial to be exaggerated, accusing the Jews of attempting to build a religion of the Holocaust. In the deniers’ view, the intention is to replace Jewish religion, particularly in the United States, and redefine Jewish identity through the Holocaust.³⁶

One of Wiesel’s responses to this accusation is that the memory of the Holocaust does not have an ideological function, but rather an existential one. Memory performs a special function, potentially giving access to a new resignification of the values of life. But this regeneration of daily life must always acknowledge the real condition of contemporary humanity. It is in this sense that Wiesel’s affirmations must be read: “Jewish memory is something special. Human memory in general is something special, but as a Jew I speak of Jewish memory. Memory wants to bear reality in mind, commemorate it, both the painful and the less painful.”³⁷ Wiesel understands this commemoration as an affirmation of life – life not as a philosophical or theological concept, but the experience of living day by day with the ones around us.

Towards a dialogue of mutual responsibility

As has become obvious, by analyzing Elie Wiesel’s work we realize that the memory of the Holocaust is a means through which people

belonging to different generations participate in a dialogue of mutual responsibility. In this respect, we may say that memory is a sign of human agency. Wiesel expresses this belief most often in questions that dare us to find our own questions and not to give a definite answer. In one passage, Wiesel pleads the importance of memory:

Never fight against memory. Even if it is painful, it will help you; it will give you something; it will enrich you. Ultimately, what would culture be without memory? What would philosophy be without memory? What would be love for a friend without remembering that love the next day? One cannot live without it. One cannot exist without remembrance.³⁸

Once more, we may understand that memory reaches a special ontological status. Memory becomes an antidote against evil and violence. The memory of the Holocaust brings to our attention the extermination of a great part of the European Jewry. It also receives a universal value through the alarm it sounds for the human condition in general.

In *Night* Wiesel tells us stories about people, about the meaning of life, about radical evil, about survival, and about joy and blessing. All these stories ultimately focus on the imperative of ending the indifference that turns a deaf ear to the call to common responsibility for all humanity, for each particular individual, and for the individual in relation to community. This means that each individual must be a messenger of authenticity. We may invoke in this sense the way in which Alan L. Berger synthesizes Wiesel's vision on the relation between the memory of the Holocaust and action: "Memory requires one to act in a way that seeks at least a partial tikkun (repair) of the world, while simultaneously asking questions of both the divine and human covenantal partners."³⁹ In this way the memory of the Holocaust is no longer just a Jewish problem, or at least not just a problem of Jewish memory. The event speaks of the necessity of cultivating in each person a consciousness of responsibility in the face of terror, violence, and the attempt to use religion or ideology against other individuals or communities. The Holocaust teaches us of the need to overcome indifference and to recognize and respect what is authentic in each person.

When dealing with a profound problem about the quality of life and the human condition, Wiesel always reminds us of the necessity of keeping alive the memory of the Holocaust, and of assuming a conscience that is responsible toward evil and violence. *Night* tells us that each person has the duty to overcome indifference and to act to improve the present state of the world. While it is an illusion, according to Wiesel, that evil can be totally eradicated, it is in each person's power to respect another person's dignity. That the memory of the Holocaust may potentiate this power of

ending indifference and of assuming responsibility for the human condition of each individual and, implicitly, of God, is clearly shown. This could well bring us to an ethics of responsibility that surpasses the boundary of Judaism or of Jewry. This ethics must be oriented against all manner of atrocities, as well as indifference towards crimes, injustices, and suffering that people perpetrate against other innocent humans. Against the background of this special power of memory, ending indifference appears to us as a means of communication among humans.

References:

Berenbaum, Michael. *The Vision of the Void: Theological Reflections on the Works of Elie Wiesel*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1979.

Berger, Alan L. "Transfusing Memory. Second-Generation Postmemory in Elie Wiesel's *The Forgotten*." In: *Obliged by Memory: Literature, Religion, Ethics. A collection of essays honoring Elie Wiesel's Seventieth Birthday*. Eds. Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006.

Bolovan, Ioan, Sorina Bolovan. "Transylvania until World War I: Demographic Opportunities and Vulnerabilities (II)". In: *Transylvanian Review*. Vol. XVIII, No. 2, Summer 2009, 133-145.

Brusin, David. "The God of Mordecai Kaplan". In: *Judaism*. Vol. 29 Issue 2 (Spring 1980), 209-220.

Cuceu, Codruța. "Identity under (Re)Construction. The Jewish Community from Transylvania Before and After the Second World War". In: *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*. Vol. 7, Issue 19 (Spring 2008), 30-43. www.jsri.ro

Fackenheim, Emil L. "Midrashic Existence after the Holocaust: Reflections Occasioned by Work of Elie Wiesel." In: Rosenberg and Greenberg, eds. *Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978.

Fackenheim, Emil L. *God's presence in history: Jewish affirmations and philosophical reflections*. New York: New York University Press, 1970.

Fackenheim, Emil L. *The Jewish return into history: reflections in the age of Auschwitz and a new Jerusalem*. New York: Schocken Books, 1978.

Finkelkraut, Alain. *The future of a negation: reflections on the question of genocide*. translated by Mary Byrd Kelly, with an introduction by Richard J. Golsan. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998.

Friedman, Maurice. „Witness and Rebellion: The Unresolved Tension in the Works of Elie Wiesel”. In: *Judaism*. Vol. 28 Issue 4 (Fall 1979): 484-491.

Frunză, Sandu. “Elie Wiesel and the Nostalgia for a Lost Paradise”. In: *Transylvanian Review*. Vol. XVIII, No. 2, Summer 2009, 101-105.

Frunză, Sandu. “Philosophy and Judaic Pattern in the Thinking of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas”. In: *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, Issue No. 1, Spring, 2002, 42-52. www.jsri.ro

Ghitta, Maria. “ L’écrivain et son identite ou «comment peut-on etre écrivain roumain juif »”. In: *Transylvanian Review*. Vol. XVIII, No. 2, Summer 2009, 124-132.

Gyemant, Ladislau. «Les Juifs de Transylvanie a l’époque du dualisme (1867-1918)». In: *Transylvanian Review*. Vol. XVIII, No. 2, Summer 2009, 42-50.

Jitianu, Liviu. “Die sprachverbundene existenz”. In: *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai. Bioethica*, LVI, 1, 2009, 25-38.

Langer, Lawrence L. *Preemting The Holocaust*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

Lazo, Caroline. *Elie Wiesel*. New York: Dillon Press, 1994.

Levi, Primo. *If This is a Man*. trans. Stuart Woolf, introduction by Karl Miller. London: Everyman’s Library, 2000.

Lipstadt, Deborah E. *Denying the Holocaust: the growing assault on truth and memory*. New York: Free Press ; Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan Canada ; New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1993.

Littell, Franklin H. *A Christian Response to the Holocaust. Selected Addresses and Papers (1952-2002)*. Merion Station, PA: Merion Westfield Press International, 2003.

McAfee Brown, Robert. *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity*. Revised edition. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989.

Roth, John K. *A Consuming Fire. Encounters with Elie Wiesel and the Holocaust.* prologue by Elie Wiesel. Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1979.

Schuster, Ekkehard and Reinhold Boschert-Kimmig. *Hope against Hope: Johann Baptist Metz and Elie Wiesel Speak Out on the Holocaust.* Trans. J. Matthew Ashley. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, Inc., 1999.

Schwarz, Daniel R. "The ethics of reading Elie Wiesel's 'Night'". *Style*. Summer 1998: 221-243.

Shafir, Michael. *Between Negation and Comparative Trivialization: Holocaust Denial in Post-Communist East-Central Europe.* Jerusalem: SICSA, 2002.

Sherwin, Byron L. "Wiesel's Midrash: The Writings of Elie Wiesel and Their Relationship to Jewish Tradition." In: Alvin H. Rosenberg and Irving Greenberg, eds. *Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel.* Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978.

Vidal-Naquet, Pierre. *Assassins of memory: essays on the denial of the Holocaust.* Translated and with a foreword by Jeffrey Mehlman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.

Wiesel, Elie and Philippe-Michael de Saint-Cheron. *Evil and Exile.* Trans. Jon Rothschild. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990.

Wiesel, Elie and Richard D. Heffner. *Conversations with Elie Wiesel.* Ed. Thomas J. Vinciguerra. New York: Schocken Books, 2001.

Wiesel, Elie. "Hope, Despair, Memory." In: *The Nobel Peace Prize, 1986.* New York: Summit Books, 1986.

Wiesel, Elie. "Snapshots." In: *One Generation After.* New York: Pocket Books, 1970.

Wiesel, Elie. "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration." In: Elie Wiesel, Lucy S. Dawidowitz, Dorothy Rabinowitz, and Robert McAfee Brown. *Dimensions of the Holocaust: Lectures at Northwestern University.* Annotated by Elliot Lefkowitz. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1977.

Wiesel, Elie. *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel.* Vol. II. Ed. Irving Abrahamson. New York: Holocaust Library, 1985.

Wiesel, Elie. *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences*. New York: Schocken Books, 1990.

Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. Trans. Marion Wiesel. New York: Hill and Wang, 2006.

Wiesel, Elie. *The Forgotten*. Trans. Stephen Becker. New York: Summit Books, 1992.

Wiesel, Elie. *Toate fluviile curg în mare*. Traducere de Felicia Antip. București: Hasefer, 1997.

* **Acknowledgments:** This paper was supported from the project ID_2265, financed by UEFISCSU-CNCSIS. I wish to thank to Steven T. Katz, Moshe Idel, Leon Volovici, Michael Finkenthal, Christine T. Hutchinson-Jones, Pagiel Czoka, Monica Finkenthal, Michael S. Jones, Theodora Văcărescu, for all of their help. Finally, I can never thank my family enough.

Notes:

¹ Elie Wiesel, *The Forgotten*, trans. Stephen Becker (New York: Summit Books, 1992), 11–12.

² Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), vii. Daniel R. Schwarz considers that *Night* “is an eloquent testimony depending on human agency and ethical commitment”. Daniel R. Schwarz, “The ethics of reading Elie Wiesel’s ‘Night’”, *Style*, Summer 1998: 221–243.

³ Elie Wiesel, *Toate fluviile curg în mare*, Traducere de Felicia Antip (București: Hasefer, 1997), 117. On Levinas, see also Sandu Frunză, “Philosophy and Judaic Pattern in the Thinking of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas”, in *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, Issue No. 1, Spring, 2002, 42–52. www.jsri.ro; or Liviu Jitianu, “Die sprachverbundene existenz”, in *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai. Bioethica*, LVI, 1, 2009, 25–38.

⁴ Elie Wiesel, *The Forgotten*, trans. Stephen Becker (New York: Summit Books, 1992), 11–12.

⁵ Inspired by Wiesel, Emil Fackenheim made this commandment the basic principle of his philosophy. See for example Emil L. Fackenheim, *God's presence in history: Jewish affirmations and philosophical reflections* (New York: New York University Press, 1970); Emil L. Fackenheim, *The Jewish return into history: reflections in the age of Auschwitz and a new Jerusalem* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978).

⁶ Elie Wiesel and Richard D. Heffner, *Conversations with Elie Wiesel*, ed. Thomas J. Vinciguerra (New York: Schocken Books, 2001), 145.

⁷ Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences* (New York: Schocken Books, 1990), 229.

⁸ Elie Wiesel and Richard D. Heffner, *Conversations with Elie Wiesel*, ed. Thomas J. Vinciguerra (New York: Schocken Books, 2001), 148.

⁹ Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences* (New York: Schocken Books, 1990), 201.

¹⁰ Elie Wiesel, Foreword to *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), xii.

¹¹ Elie Wiesel, *Night* (2006), 110.

¹² Michael Berenbaum, *The Vision of the Void: Theological Reflections on the Works of Elie Wiesel* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), 7. A good intuition of the signification of God's absence is to be found in Maurice Friedman: „Here is no denial of the existence of God but an unshakable resolve to hold out against any affirmation that might be built on the dimming of the memory of what happened.” Maurice Friedman, „Witness and Rebellion: The Unresolved Tension in the Works of Elie Wiesel”, *Judaism*, Vol. 28 Issue 4 (Fall 1979): 486.

¹³ Elie Wiesel and Richard D. Heffner, *Conversation with Elie Wiesel*, 166.

¹⁴ John K. Roth, *A Consuming Fire. Encounters with Elie Wiesel and the Holocaust*, prologue by Elie Wiesel (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1979), 78.

¹⁵ Elie Wiesel and Richard D. Heffner, “Am I My Brother's Keeper?”, in *Conversations with Elie Wiesel*, 3–15.

¹⁶ Wiesel and Heffner, *Conversations with Elie Wiesel*, 3.

¹⁷ Wiesel and Heffner, *Conversations with Elie Wiesel*, 10.

¹⁸ Wiesel, *Night* (2006), 64–65. Obviously, this scene does not tell us that God is hanging on the gallows. Of importance here is the introduction of the religious dimension, particularly in the context of a world of dehumanization and of apparent absence of God. The meaning of this scene must be acknowledged in what David Brusin thought to be religion's purposefulness: „provide insight into the human condition, provide insight into the world around us, the world within us, and the world between us.” David Brusin, “The God of Mordecai Kaplan”, *Judaism*, Vol. 29 Issue 2 (Spring 1980): 210.

¹⁹ Elie Wiesel, “Snapshots,” in *One Generation After* (New York: Pocket Books, 1970), 62.

²⁰ Elie Wiesel, “The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration,” in Elie Wiesel, Lucy S. Dawidowitz, Dorothy Rabinowitz, and Robert McAfee Brown, *Dimensions of the Holocaust: Lectures at Northwestern University*, Annotated by Elliot Lefkovitz (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1977), 17. Wiesel remembers, in *Night*, the exhaustion of the march: “I continued to run, not feeling my numb foot, not even realizing that I was still running, that I still owned a body that galloped down the road among thousands of others. When I became conscious of myself again, I tried to slow my pace somewhat. But there was no way. These human waves were rolling forward and would crush me like an ant.... The road was endless.... We were the masters of nature, the masters of the world. We had transcended everything—death, fatigue, our natural needs. We were stronger than cold and hunger, stronger than the guns and the desire to die, doomed and rootless, nothing but numbers, we were the only men on earth.” Wiesel, *Night* (2006), 87.

²¹ Primo Levi describes this tragedy and victory in the face of death in *If This is a Man*, trans. Stuart Woolf, introduction by Karl Miller (London: Everyman's Library, 2000).

²² Wiesel, *Night* (2006), 87.

²³ „If the closing image of *Night* affirms anything, it is that the face in the mirror is a corpse, not a miracle of renewal”, writes Lawrence L. Langer, *Preempting The Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 142.

²⁴ Wiesel, *Night* (2006), 93–94.

²⁵ Wiesel and de Saint-Cheron, *Evil and Exile*, 25.

²⁶ Wiesel and de Saint-Cheron, *Evil and Exile*, 191.

²⁷ Elie Wiesel cited in Caroline Lazo, *Elie Wiesel* (New York: Dillon Press, 1994), 5. Franklin H. Littell offers a similar assessment, albeit from a very different perspective: "In human history, the story of the Holocaust is a warning of the continuing power of evil at large and of wickedness in the unchastened human heart; a warning that progress is not inevitable; a warning that technological advance by no means guarantees the elevation of the human spirit; a warning that Man – called to be a partner in creation – instead may be the author of his own destruction". *A Christian Response to the Holocaust. Selected Addresses and Papers (1952-2002)* (Merion Station, PA: Merion Westfield Press International, 2003), 167.

²⁸ Berenbaum, *Vision of the Void*, 12.

²⁹ Wiesel and de Saint-Cheron, *Evil and Exile*, 128.

³⁰ Sandu Frunză, "Elie Wiesel and the Nostalgia for a Lost Paradise", in *Transylvanian Review*, Vol. XVIII, No. 2, Summer 2009, 101-105. About Jews in Transylvania see also: Ladislau Gyemant, «Les Juifs de Transylvanie a l'époque du dualisme (1867-1918)», in *Transylvanian Review*, Vol. XVIII, No. 2, Summer 2009, 42-50. Ioan Bolovan, Sorina Bolovan, "Transylvania until World War I: Demographic Opportunities and Vulnerabilities (II)", in *Transylvanian Review*, Vol. XVIII, No. 2, Summer 2009, 133-145. Maria Ghitta, "L'écrivain et son identité ou «comment peut-on être écrivain roumain juif»", in *Transylvanian Review*, Vol. XVIII, No. 2, Summer 2009, 124-132. Codruța Cuceu, "Identity under (Re)Construction. The Jewish Community from Transylvania Before and After the Second World War", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 7, Issue 19 (Spring 2008), 30-43. www.jsri.ro

³¹ Emil L. Fackenheim, "Midrashic Existence after the Holocaust: Reflections Occasioned by Work of Elie Wiesel," in Rosenberg and Greenberg, eds., *Confronting the Holocaust*, 106.

³² Elie Wiesel and Philippe-Michael de Saint-Cheron, *Evil and Exile*, trans. Jon Rothschild (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 155.

³³ Elie Wiesel, *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, vol. II, ed. Irving Abrahamson (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 333-335.

³⁴ Wiesel de Saint-Cheron, *Evil and Exile*, 156.

³⁵ Wiesel and Heffner, *Conversation with Elie Wiesel*, 158.

³⁶ Wiesel and Heffner, *Conversation with Elie Wiesel*, 158, 159. A complex perspective over this denial may be found in Michael Shafir, *Between Negation and Comparative Trivialization: Holocaust Denial in Post-Communist East-Central Europe* (Jerusalem: SICSA, 2002). See also Alain Finkielkraut, *The future of a negation: reflections on the question of genocide*, translated by Mary Byrd Kelly, with an introduction by Richard J. Golsan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: the growing assault on truth and memory* (New York: Free Press; Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan Canada; New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1993); Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Assassins of memory: essays on the denial of the Holocaust*, translated and with a foreword by Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

³⁷ Ekkehard Schuster and Reinhold Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope against Hope: Johann Baptist Metz and Elie Wiesel Speak Out on the Holocaust*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, Inc., 1999), 90.

³⁸ Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope against Hope*, 68.

³⁹ Alan L. Berger, "Transfusing Memory. Second-Generation Postmemory in Elie Wiesel's *The Forgotten*," in *Obligated by Memory: Literature, Religion, Ethics. A collection of essays honoring Elie Wiesel's Seventieth Birthday*, Eds. Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 117–118. See also Robert McAfee Brown, *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity*, revised edition (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).