

# Interview with Elie Wiesel, February 23, 2006

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ALB: Our conversation is being held against the backdrop of a world in turmoil, an increase in state-sponsored anti-Semitism, an existential threat made to Israel, terrorism in the name of God, genocide in Darfur among other places. What are your thoughts at this moment in history?

EW: I am feeling rather melancholy because I have, together with so many millions and millions of people, hoped that the twenty-first century would be a better and surely not a worse one. There was so much hope and so much fervor and so much enthusiasm. It was burning in us, and you felt it throughout the planet. Here we are in the sixth year of the century, and hatred is ravaging the human heart, there are more and more conflicts, fanaticism is reigning over hundreds of millions of people, and there are open threats to each other and, especially, to Israel, the oldest scapegoat. Anyone who needs a target turns against us, and, as you mentioned, for the very first time a head of state came out and said that he wants Israel to be wiped off the surface of the earth. The madness of his statement! Does he think of what it would do to the Jewish people and what it would do regarding

humanity as such? So, I am skeptical of my own work. I feel, when I say I, I mean the witness in me, was convinced that the world would be a better world because of those of us who bear witness. We try to bear witness. Surely, the last year, many of us have tried to warn people, the world, to say, “look: whatever happened to the Jewish people is only the beginning.” And the witnesses’ testimony was not received. Otherwise, the world would be a safer world.

ALB: Our discussion also coincides with the appearance of the fiftieth-anniversary edition of *Night*<sup>1</sup> and the publication of your recent novel *The Time of the Uprooted* (2005). Can you comment on the connection that you see?

EW: What I say in my preface is true: had it not been for *Night*, I would not have written anything else. If there had been no war, I would have stayed in my *shtetl*, my small village, and become a local *Rosh Yeshivah*. That was my goal. And here I am. Together with you, we teach and we write and try to communicate. Certain experiences cannot be communicated, but still we try. As you know—you know my work better than many others, Alan—it is a mosaic. One brings the other; one is linked to the other. And if you remove one from this body of work, the whole edifice can collapse. But the fundament, the foundation, is *Night*. In *The Uprooted*, I felt a whole century was uprooted, as was history itself. I felt the divinity of God was uprooted, which is a mystical concept. We call it the *galut* of the *Shekhinah*: the exile of the *Shekhinah*. Therefore, I wrote it like that. But then I just finished another novel, because it takes me four or five years to write a novel.

ALB: And what is it called?

EW: In French it is called *Un désir fou de danser* (2006), *A Mad Desire to Dance*. It is about madness. I always have a madman in

<sup>1</sup>*Night* (1960) was originally published under its Yiddish title, *Un die velt hot geshvign*, in 1956.

every one of my books. In my other books he is usually a secondary character. In this one he is the principle protagonist. It came out in France in May. I have always been obsessed with the notion that history *can* go mad, just as history could be uprooted and everything else with it. The “time of the uprooted” is the twentieth century.

ALB: Indeed it is.

EW: And as for *Night* the difference is that my wife re-translated it. It is amazing what one woman could have done. I mean Oprah. The book appeared in 1956 in Yiddish, nearly fifty years ago in Argentina. In two or three weeks, the new version sold more than a million copies and all of a sudden, was on the bestseller list. Oprah has extraordinary power, extraordinary moral power.

ALB: You once wrote in *One Generation After* (1970) that one of the Just men, a *Lamed Vav Zaddik*, comes to Sodom to save its inhabitants, and despite his preaching nothing changes, and a child, moved by compassion, asks the preacher why he continues since his words have no visible effect. And the just man replies, “In the beginning I thought I could change man.” Today, he knows he cannot. “If I continue to shout and scream it is,” he attests, “to prevent man from ultimately changing me.”

EW: I am the same person who wrote that story then, and I would write it again now the same way. I would not change a word. The tale is still valid. I remain the same. I consider myself the same Hasid of my town, a *Yeshiva Bucher*. I did not change much. If the experience *then* did not change me, does anybody think that a Nobel Prize can change me?

ALB: But the world has yet to learn completely.

EW: Of course. My worry is that *they* try everything. They try sometimes to change you by seduction. In one of my novels, *The Oath* (1973), a preacher comes and speaks. Instead of screaming and

shouting at him, they applaud him. It is the worst compliment they can give him.

ALB: I want to pursue this issue. What is the role of the witness in these turbulent and terror-filled times? I am thinking of Moshe the Beadle: is he the paradigm of the plight of the witness destined to be unheard?

EW: To me he was the first, and therefore he was the most tragic of all. He tried to tell the tale. He tried to tell the tale, and I remember it because he told it to me. Nobody wanted to listen, and I myself did not believe him. As I say in my memoir, people did not believe him. And I love stories. And I felt sorry for him. I did listen. But I did not believe. And then I saw him: he was part of the first transport. In retrospect, I remember his face; he started shaking his head as if to say, "I warned you. I warned you."

ALB: And you wrote about that in *Night*.

EW: In retrospect, if someone else had warned us, had Churchill, Stalin, or Roosevelt sent a message on the radio—at that time we listened to the BBC—"Jews of Hungary, do not go. Do not board the trains," many of us would have gone into hiding. There were people who were Christians. Our maid pleaded with us. She implored us with tears in her eyes to accompany her to the mountains where she had a hut, but again we did not know. Nobody warned us. But later on, I remember Moshe the Beadle. So he, of course, is to me the first witness. But since then, I believe that his tragedy was that he was not believed. When a witness comes and speaks and nobody listens, woe to him.

ALB: You wrote about *Night* that it was the end of everything and the beginning of everything, and I want to ask about then and now. What has changed and what remains the same? One thing that has changed is the recognition of the Holocaust by the culture at large. Education, of course, has improved. So it seems that at least part of the witnesses' testimony is being heard.

EW: It is, and it is not. Take Darfur today. Our protests worked. It did not help the people there, but at least there is a lot about their suffering in the media. I was one of the first to sound the alarm on Darfur. Did it help much? I am not sure, but Colin Powell and Kofi Annan went there. United Nations observers are there. More military will come. In Rwanda nobody cared. Nobody. 600,000 or 800,000 people could have been saved and were not.

ALB: Why do you think that is?

EW: Maybe because it was the end of the century. People were tired or became numb.

ALB: Which is a danger.

EW: Which is a danger. When it comes to our own subject that you and I are so involved in, reminding the people of what happened in the past, the danger is numbness.

ALB: Can this pitfall be avoided?

EW: That is why I stopped. I could not teach this subject. I admire you for doing it. I cannot. I taught it for two years, and it was difficult, very difficult. Therefore, I was spared the danger of numbness. But I can imagine the high-school teacher who teaches this course every single day. That teacher must at one point become numb. One cannot repeat the same poem and cry; one simply cannot. Maybe some do; I do not know how. Therefore, there is a danger there. And if I protested the T.V. docudrama "Holocaust," it is for that reason: because it appeals to what is cheap in people. I would like our destiny to appeal to what is purest and most noble, generous, and compassionate in a human being, not what is kitsch.

ALB: Some things remained the same since *Night*: anti-Semitism, prejudice, contempt for the other. Concerning anti-Semitism, you once observed that at Auschwitz its victims died, but the disease

remained. Do you see an end to this bi-millennial pathology which is the crutch on which tyrants perpetually lean?

EW: Alan, I said in the same context, “if Auschwitz didn’t cure the world of anti-Semitism, what will?” (Evans-Pritchard). But there will always be anti-Semites. At the least, we should protest against those anti-Semites and surely against the system that condones anti-Semitism. In France there was a young Jew, Ilan Halimi, who was kidnapped. He was caught by a band of twenty so-called “Barbarians.” They were convinced that because he was a Jew, they would get money; stereotypically, all Jews are rich. They tortured him and they killed him. In the beginning the police simply said, “It is a matter of ransom.” Then, they realized that it was an anti-Semitic act. In France they have laws against anti-Semitism. So, things are changing in some places.

ALB: I think that the French president went to his funeral. Is that true?

EW: It is possible. I would not be surprised.

ALB: It is a terrible scandal and a personal tragedy.

EW: Every murder is a tragedy. Last year, French Jews were worried. The wave of anti-Semitism hit France. Jews were afraid to wear a kipa on the street.

ALB: Do you foresee in the near future a massive aliyah of French Jews?

EW: This I do not know. But all over Europe, wherever I would go, people would come to me asking something that should worry me even more. They did not ask, should we leave? They asked, *when* should we leave? That is more traumatic.

ALB: That is very frightening.

EW: But then, the French government, I must say, did everything it could to take measures, extraordinary measures, against anti-Semitism and the anti-Semites. That quieted down the situation.

ALB: So the measures had some effect?

EW: Yes, they had an effect.

ALB: You write in the introduction to the new edition of *Night* that the *Shoah* was a war against Jewish memory. Yet again, we are hearing the ominous rantings of deniers. I know it is a complex question, but what is it about the Jewish historical presence that our enemies wish to extirpate?

EW: They cannot leave the Jews alone. These people cannot let the Jews live in peace. I say the world is a world for all of us. God created the world; He was not the God of the Jews. God in *Bereyshit* is God of all people, not only of the children of Israel.

ALB: That message is frequently ignored.

EW: But they also say, we cannot live *with* you. This means you do not deserve to live, and therefore we do whatever we can to deprive you of the taste for living, of the passion for living and of life itself. Sometimes, I am asked at international conferences, “Why are you Jews hated so much?” And I say, “Why do you ask *me*? Why should I make the hater’s task easier? Ask the hater.”

ALB: I want to return briefly to the Oprah show. Your decision to appear, like many things associated with the *Shoah*, brought some controversy in its wake. I assume that you viewed it as a teaching moment, an occasion to educate a new generation.

EW: I did not ask to appear. I did not realize that the controversy about James Frey had implicated, though lightly, *Night*. Some articles said that she wanted to atone for defending Frey.

ALB: I read that.

EW: That was the controversy. But was there a controversy about my appearing on it? I did not see it.

ALB: Let me suggest one.

EW: Please.

ALB: There are many junior scholars hoping to gain a reputation by attacking the giants. They are looking for discrepancies in the two translations.

EW: I am the one who said it in my memoir, *All Rivers Run to the Sea* (1995).

ALB: You brought it out, I know.

EW: I put it in the memoir myself, of course. That is why I did not wait for them to say so.

ALB: Your readers understand this.

EW: I quoted and wrote full passages which came out in 1994.

ALB: The careful reader is aware of this fact.

EW: It came out in 1994 in France and here in '95. But I am the one who revealed it. We must be honest about these kinds of things.

ALB: Precisely.

EW: You said that there was controversy about my appearance on "Oprah," but I have not heard anything.

ALB: For example, some might emphasize a disparity which appears on a certain page in the two editions. But, more importantly, are you concerned that the necessary dialectic between speech and silence and the insufficiency of language itself which you emphasize in the introduction to *Night* are nuances which will be lost in popular culture?

EW: It is quite possible, but who knows? Look, I have to be I. Come back to the story of the Just man. I cannot let others govern my life, or my writing, or my attitude toward writing, or what I think. I am not the sole possessor of truth. I write and write, and yet I am drawn to silence. That is what I do: I cut and cut.

ALB: And it is very effective. Have you taken Oprah to Auschwitz yet?

EW: Yes.

ALB: What was that experience like?

EW: She is a great lady. Some ten or twelve years ago, she already had a program on *Night* and interviewed me.

ALB: I read about that. It is a remarkable story.

EW: It was Oprah's idea to go with me to Auschwitz. She actually came to Auschwitz on her birthday. She gave up her birthday in Chicago, and we went there. She has tremendous sensitivity. I will give you an example. I came from a conference. She was there already, and she told her people that she did not want to see me before. The first meeting must be in Auschwitz. She did not want to have small talk. That is the truth. And the way she behaved there, in that place, was admirable.

ALB: You may not feel comfortable commenting on this, but do you think she had done much reading in preparation?

EW: She had to. When she interviewed me the first time, she knew *Night* by heart. And again now, she has read a lot, she knows a lot, she wants to learn more. I have great admiration for her.

ALB: I want to switch to *The Time of the Uprooted*, which I find a richly complex novel that raises many philosophical and religious issues. It also appears to be a departure from your earlier writings in that the female characters are more fully drawn, and at least two of them, Ilonka and Dr. Lilly Rosenkrantz, play salvific roles. Would you comment on this?

EW: I have been criticized in the past that all of my main heroes are men. In every novel of mine the feminine presence is there, but this time more than before. Life is mixture. Art seeks to discern what makes the two one, and literature is a refined word for the metamorphosis of that artistic endeavor. The women here, of course, are actually great—even Gamaliel's unhappy wife. His wife wishes to help him. What did she want? To make him happy. And because he could not be happy, she could not understand him.

ALB: And she was unable to succeed.

EW: So it was her failure *and* his failure; it was a double failure. The book is a despairing book. But the story is not an appeal of despair. It is a desperate appeal for hope. Everyone wants hope. But it is also uprooted—the writer who writes for other people, under their names, and finally, when he writes his own book, he does not finish it.

ALB: Why not?

EW: Because the Messiah has not come. So how does he finish it? By personal redemption. Everyone has a tragedy there, and the only way for this tragic character to find any redemption is through others. So at the end, of course, it is more hopeful. It remains a question mark: who was that woman?

ALB: We do not know her identity.

EW: We do not know, except I hint: is that the two Shabbat candles? Maybe it is another woman—but who knows—maybe not.

ALB: It could refer to the universality of the Jewish experience.

EW: Of the Jewish experience, exactly.

ALB: Gamaliel's identity is clearly an issue. Forced to change his name because of the *Shoah*, he becomes Peter, he has to learn Christian rituals, he must hide his whereabouts and remain silent. He clearly emblemizes the plight of the refugee and all those who, as you say, have been uprooted in that terrible century. Do you think he represents the state of post-Auschwitz humanity?

EW: Absolutely. I believe that whatever happened to humanity in general happened to Jews first. It is not a statement of superiority. It is simply the universality of our experience. Never before has an entire people been not only uprooted but out-rooted the way we were during the Second World War. Since then, it happened to others. It is not the same event though. I never compare. But these things happen to others. Supposedly, “uprooted” is a condition that is a twentieth-century product. Never before have so many people been uprooted, become refugees, immigrants, and illegals. No one here in America is illegal; they are uprooted. So therefore, Gamaliel represents all of them, and therefore he and his three friends—what did they do? They became a self-appointed United Nations to try to help those immigrants with papers or with social help or even to find a husband for the poor woman who needs a husband for her daughter.

ALB: They were the shining example of humanity.

EW: Absolutely they were, yes.

ALB: For me this novel raises a disturbing question about the future of Holocaust memory. Gamaliel has two estranged daughters. But unlike *The Forgotten* (1992) in which you portray a loving relationship between Elhanan and Malkiel, both of whom are committed to embrace memory, although on different levels, *The Time of the Uprooted* suggests that Gamaliel's memory or a portion at least would be committed to paper in *The Book of Secrets*, but what about the second generation?

EW: We do not know. We do not know. They may come back. But for the moment we are seeing among the young people an attraction to India mainly, to Nepal, to the Orient in general. To leave western culture behind.

ALB: Among Israelis as well.

EW: It is almost a rule in Israel that soldiers at the end of their military service go to India or Tibet. I try to understand why. Why Tibet? And the only answer I could find is that the Orient had nothing to do with the Holocaust. All the other countries had somehow a relationship to it, except the Orient. Therefore, they want to go away. The Dalai Lama, my friend, is a great hero to them. It is because Tibetan monks have nothing to do with the Holocaust.

ALB: But yet you write in your autobiography that you went to India.

EW: But I left it. I studied the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*—extraordinary texts. But they weren't for me.

ALB: Why weren't they for you?

EW: I am a Jew. It is through Jewishness that I find universality, not through denying it.

ALB: Gamaliel loves stories, and I am reminded of your father's unfinished story in *Night*, but Gamaliel's literary efforts are on two

levels. He is a ghostwriter for a “famous novelist.” But his own authentic meditations are contained in *The Book of Secrets*. What are the secrets? Is he also the ghost of either himself or those murdered in the *Shoah*?

EW: He is not that ambitious, not that pretentious. But he seemed to believe he must find the words. That is what I felt all my life: the need to find the words. I am not sure I found them, but I try. That is why for others it is easy to write, or in another’s name, whatever they want, but for oneself, in one’s name it is different. But to come back to what you say about the two daughters, it is the most tragic chapter in the novel. The two daughters denied their father. And therefore, Gamaliel may have another child with Rosenkrantz.

ALB: She is also a healer.

EW: I hint that hope is not to be excluded.

ALB: I wonder if we could switch for a moment to the issue of Jewish-Christian relations. In a *Beggar in Jerusalem* (1970), you have Shlomo reporting on an imagined meeting with Yeoshua: “you think you are suffering for my sake and for my brothers, yet we are the ones who have been made to suffer for you because of you” (56). After hearing what the future held in store for the Jewish people, Jesus attests that he wants his heritage to be a gift of compassion and hope, not punishment in blood, but it was already too late. How do you see contemporary interfaith dialogue?

EW: I am much more optimistic now than before. It has to do with Pope John XXIII. He was the great man in Christianity. He was the first to open the Catholic church, to admit its failings, and to correct the liturgy, omitting all the insulting sentences. And then he was followed by John Paul II.

ALB: Pope Paul VI and then John Paul the II.

EW: Paul VI was not our friend.

ALB: No indeed. John XXIII intervened, as you know, to have the word *deicide* removed from *Nostra Aetate* (1965).

EW: But the next pope, John Paul II, was good, though not in the beginning. I had big problems with him in the beginning. Why? Because the first thing he did was go to Auschwitz, which I liked. He managed to be there and deliver many homilies, but he did not once mention the word “Jew” there. Never. He went only to see the graves of Edith Stein, a Jewish woman who became a Carmelite, and Maximilian Kolbe, an anti-Semitic Polish priest who did a heroic thing when he chose to die in place of a cellmate. But I must say that, afterwards, John Paul II improved a lot. He changed. He was the first pope to go to a synagogue. He was the first pope to visit Israel, Jerusalem—the Kotel—and Yad Vashem; and he had a musical commemoration of the *Shoah* in the Vatican. But never have Jewish-Christian relations been as good as they are now.

ALB: Yet the Vatican continues to send mixed signals concerning the Holocaust—the Beatification of Edith Stein that you mentioned and the, I think, completely inexplicable beatification of Pius IX.

EW: There are so many groups there and so many currents, trends, influences, policies, bureaucracies, and theologies; it is not one monolithic institution.

ALB: Jules Isaac, when he went to see John XXIII, as you know, requested that “a voice from the summit” speak.

EW: But John XXIII did. Jules Isaac knew him from before; that is why he sought him. They spent three days and three nights together. “May I leave you with hope,” he asked, and the Pope said, “You deserve more than that.”

ALB: Anecdotally, there is a story about John XXIII being asked how many people work in the Vatican, and his response was, “about half.”

EW: And the question should be, which half? Now the new Pope, let us wait and see. For the moment I think he is following in the footsteps of John XXIII.

ALB: Several of your works refer to the *Hasidei Umot ha-Olam* (Righteous Gentiles), beginning with *Night* and the police inspector who perhaps tried to warn your father, *The Gates of the Forest* (1966) certainly, *The Trial of God* (1979), and your autobiography. Two questions: What do you think motivated the moral minority, and why so few?

EW: These are the questions I ask them. When I was chairman of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, I organized a conference called *The Courage to Care*.

ALB: I remember attending that conference.

EW: I brought people together—those who saved and those whom they saved. I would go from one of the rescuers to the other, asking, “What made you heroic?” And they said, “Oh come on, we are not heroes. Do not call us heroes.” One of them said, “When you see a child running in the street from pursuers, do you not open the door? If your neighbor is hungry, will you deny him a slice of bread?” I remember George Schultz, the Secretary of State, was at the opening ceremony. He was a very close friend. That is when I said in those times, “Woe to us, it was enough to be human to become a hero” (“Against”). There is one story which I heard, a beautiful story. A woman in Berlin was honored as a Righteous Gentile because she saved a family—a simple woman, just like our maid. And the journalists asked “Why did you do it, why did you do it?” She pulled herself up and said, “I will tell you why: out of self-respect.”

ALB: Kol Hakavod.

EW: Therefore, I do not know why they think there was no choice. When you hear about the onlookers, the bystanders, who said, "We could not do a thing," I say: nonsense. There *was* a choice. Always.

ALB: To go to the other end of that continuum, what do you think the uproar over the Mel Gibson movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, tells us about Jewish-Christian dialogue?

EW: I call it the Second Crucifixion of Jesus. I did not want to enter the polemic then. It is not for me; it is undignified. I saw the film; I thought it was a bad film. But it *was* anti-Semitic. And why? He showed his hand at the end. All of a sudden, you noticed far away the Jewish Temple burning, and whom do you see then? The devil among the Jews. What does it mean? The Temple was burning because we Jews did not recognize Christ, because we crucified Christ. This is exactly what Christian anti-Semitism has been repeating for centuries and centuries. The film is anti-Semitic, but I did not want to enter the debate.

ALB: Many many others did, and I think that what it showed was that despite how much distance we have come, we still have a ways to go.

EW: Right.

ALB: Elsewhere, you have commented about the difference between the Crusades and Auschwitz.

EW: I felt for a long time and I still do that Christianity, because of what has been done to the Jews, lost many of its values in Auschwitz. In a way it was a defeat of Christianity, because it happened in the heart of Europe, which was a Christian continent. Both Catholics and Protestants were baptized. Hitler himself was baptized.

But to compare it to the Crusades, no. The Crusades were in a way actually worse because they did whatever they did in the name of Christ. The crusaders carried a crucifix. They went and killed and killed in the name of Christ. In Germany they did *not* kill in the name of Christ. They did it for Germany, for German power, for German glory, for German interests; what they said was for the sake of Germany and not for Jesus. To make things easier for the Catholics? No I do not think so. They have enough to atone for, and Christians have enough to reflect on. And by the way, the fact that the Christians were killers, that hurts the good young Germans. They do not sleep at night. The killers were Christians, but only the killers are guilty.

ALB: Do you see a certain irony in the fact that when the Christians were going on the Crusades, they viewed the Jews and the Muslims as infidels? Now, the Muslims view the Christians and the Jews as infidels.

EW: For Jews nothing changed. Nothing changed because this hatred of the Jews is so deeply rooted in so many nations' memories. For some reason they need it. Why should the president of Iran need that? His problem is not with Israel; there are no common borders between Iran and Israel. His problem is not with Jerusalem under Jewish control. But he feels he cannot live otherwise, except when he preaches hatred toward the Jewish people.

ALB: One wonders about the Jewish community in Iran and what will happen to them.

EW: There are two thousand Iranian Jews.

ALB: Two thousand hostages.

EW: They are. When the Shah left, so many left and went to Israel and to America. I am worried, but I am a worrier.

ALB: But you are also a doer.

EW: I try, I try, but I am a worrier.

ALB: How do you interpret the response in much of the Muslim world to the cartoons depicting Mohammed that were published in a Danish newspaper?

EW: Obviously, a cartoon is disrespectful to Mohammed. What was the disrespect? In Islam the image of Mohammed should not be shown. We Jews do not have that attitude. For us only God's image should not be shown. There were so many images of Moses made afterwards. Michelangelo made a sculpture. Did we protest? Did we organize demonstrations in the street against it? But the Muslims have a right to their belief, and we should respect each others' beliefs. I believe in such respect. As you know, we are duty bound to respect the others, and the Jew in me has respect for Christians who are really believing Christians, who respect others. I have the same respect for Muslims who are Muslims and respect others for what they are. Therefore, those who printed the cartoon should acknowledge their disrespect. But from there to organize world-wide demonstrations with violence and with burnings is too much. And the attacking of embassies, beating up people, that is outrageous. It is out of order. Is *that* their religion? Is this what Mohammed taught them? Is *that* what the Koran teaches them? At the same time I am worried about who is organizing this. This is like a wildfire lit by the fanatics. Does it mean that Islam is now seeking to conquer what it lost? With what they are trying to do to Israel, who knows? I do not know. I am worried about the reaction. As distasteful as the cartoon was, the reaction to it was equally out of place. It was uncivilized; it was a protest against civilization, against the other, against humanity, against their own beliefs. I hope that some of them know that. A religion which preaches only violence must become a victim of that violence, and I hope it is not so. There are a few journalists there who write articles urging Islam to stop the bloodshed. Good for them. I would give these journalists prizes for

they need courage to say that or do that, but they are so few, so terribly few.

ALB: What do you say about the double standard here? Certain Arab newspapers print very offensive images of Jesus and publish the noxious forgery, *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.<sup>2</sup>

EW: What they show on television, my God, what they show on television: Rabbis drinking blood and killing children for Passover to bake matzoh. Where do we live now? If we Jews had used the same method, can you imagine what would have been after the Holocaust? We would have turned the whole world into a flame.

ALB: You mean we would have incinerated the world?

EW: Absolutely. What we *could* have done, but we did not. We don't believe in that kind of response. We believe in trying to find an answer. The only answer must be a humanizing one.

ALB: You wrote in *Somewhere A Master* (1982) that the Besht<sup>3</sup> was the first to publicly proclaim that "the way to God leads through your fellow man" (151). This Islamic fury is in fact killing in the name of God.

EW: They do not realize that when they do that, they turn their God into a killer. That is a fanatic; that is what we see in history. The fanatic is making God at least an accomplice when he invokes God's name. He turns his God into a killer.

ALB: How can we Christians and Jews reach out to Islam, when the tradition does not appear to have undergone a period of self-critical theological reflection?

<sup>2</sup>Originally published by Serges A. Nilus in 1905 as an appendix to his *The Great and the Small* (1901), this work has been consistently considered a hoax by historians, yet its influence persists.

<sup>3</sup>Besht is an acronym for Baal Shem Tov, founder of eighteenth-century Hasidism.

EW: Education, only by education. Do not use violence to stop violence. Whatever the answer, and I must have said it elsewhere, education must be its major component.

ALB: Are there voices on the other side willing to listen?

EW: Not for the moment. Most of them are afraid, but I am not giving up hope.

ALB: What is the role of the writer today? You share Rebbe Nahman of Bratzlav's aspiration that your tales should be understood as prayers. You wrote in *Paroles d'étranger* (1982) that "hopefully no one will be able to distinguish between the ones, stories, and the others, prayers. Not even myself. And, myself less than anyone else" (180, my translation).

EW: Yes. But I wrote about prayer a lot in *The Town Beyond the Wall* (1964), which is one of my earliest novels. It is divided not into four chapters but four prayers. I think our capacity for prayer, our need for prayer, our ability to pray, and our hope—there is hope in prayer—mean the prayers will be received. As always, since my childhood, we would pray, and therefore, like Rebbe Nahman of Bratzlav of whom I am a great admirer, as you know, would like his stories to be turned into prayers, I would like my prayers to be told, to be turned into stories. The question is, why should God need our prayer? Why should God need our flattery? How come He is not really repulsed by all that? And there is only one answer I have: God does not need our prayers. We need them. We need to be able to pray in sincerity and beauty, and the prayer should not be against somebody but always for somebody. That is a true prayer—when it is for someone else, not for yourself.

ALB: Who is listening to these prayers and will it help?

EW: Has it helped? Has it accomplished anything? I do not know. I am not sure. I write about it in my memoirs. Inside the camp I one

day discovered teffilin that somebody brought in, probably paying many portions of bread. Every morning, my father and I would get up early and say the prayers. Today, when I say these prayers, I wonder how I could have said that then? It was hypocrisy. It was a lie to say *there* that our God is a God of mercy. There is a sentence, *Ahava rabbah Ahavtainu*, with great love You have loved us; what great love You have given us and You loved us, and Your compassion was not only great but excessive. *There?* Yet we said it.

ALB: And you did not lose faith there, unlike Akiba Drummer whom you write about in *Night*.

EW: But he did not either. He asked for Kaddish. He wanted us to say Kaddish. He did. He did. Yes. We knew. We saw the smoke.

ALB: A final question about the role of literature, what is hope? You observed that readers should consider Sisyphus happy. Do you still believe this?

EW: Actually, it comes from Camus.

ALB: But I have the feeling you endorse that.

EW: Is Sisyphus happy? Yes and no, which means that he is not happy. I say I would like him happy. But when he is happy, I would want him to be unhappy. But how could he be happy? Which means to accept not this ambiguity, but this conflict in us. Saints have no conflicts. They have surpassed, they have vanquished, they have resolved their conflicts. I am not a saint, nor do we believe in saints. A human being is not a saint. He always oscillates. I talked about the oscillation between good and evil. Therefore, he is still oscillating. When he is on top of the mountain, maybe he is one thing, and then below he is another thing. But he is not the same anymore, except if he forgets and he is down. Maybe he has done it so often that he forgets that he will go up.

ALB: What role do you see literature playing in a culture that seems obsessed by television, movies, and the Internet. People seem to have stopped reading. Are you concerned?

EW: I am not an Internet person, so I do not know. I do know literature today should not be what it used to be. In the nineteenth century there was literature to entertain. Then afterwards, it was to offer knowledge. I think in the twenty-first century the moral dimension should be there, which means it should humanize or at least sensitize the reader. That should be the role of the writer today. I say to humanize or at least sensitize the readers to the subject, to the theme, to the implications, to the hopes of the character or the despair in the story, not to the story itself. If a person reads my books and does not become sensitive to pain, other people's pain, then I have failed.

ALB: Well, you certainly have not failed.

EW: I hope not—not always.

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