

Excerpt from Elie Wiesel's

NIGHT

pp. 26-32

The following excerpt is from an autobiographical account of a young boy, Eliezer's, experience as he arrives at the concentration camp in Auschwitz.

“Everybody get out! Everyone out of the wagon! Quickly!”

We jumped out. I threw a last glance toward Madame Schächter. Her little boy was holding her hand.

In front of us flames. In the air that smell of burning flesh. It must have been about midnight. We had arrived— at Birkenau, reception center for Auschwitz.

The cherished objects we had brought with us thus far were left behind in the train, and with them, at last, our illusions.

Every two yards or so an SS man¹ held his tommy gun trained on us. Hand in hand we followed the crowd.

An SS noncommissioned officer came to meet us, a truncheon in his hand. He gave the order:

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

Eight words spoken quietly, indifferently, without emotion. Eight short, simple words. Yet that was the moment when I parted from my mother. I had not had time to think, but already I felt the pressure of my father's hand: we were alone. For a part of a second I glimpsed my mother and my sisters moving away to the right. Tzipora held Mother's hand. I saw them disappear into the distance; my mother was stroking my sister's fair hair, as though to protect her, while I walked on with my father and the other men. And I did not know that in that place at that moment, I was parting from my mother and Tzipora forever. I went on walking. My father held onto my hand.

Behind me, an old man fell to the ground. Near him was an SS

¹ SS: a unit of Nazis created to serve as bodyguard to Hitler and later expanded to take charge of intelligence, central security, policing action, and the mass extermination of those they considered inferior or undesirable (Webster)

man, putting a revolver back in its holster.

My hand shifted on my father's arm. I had one thought— not to lose him. Not to be left alone.

The SS officers gave the order:

“Form fives!”

Commotion. At all costs we must keep together.

“Here, kid, how old are you?”

It was one of the prisoners who asked me this. I could not see his face, but his voice was tense and weary.

“I'm not quite fifteen yet.”

“No. Eighteen.”

“But I'm not,” I said, “Fifteen.”

“Fool. Listen to what I say.”

Then he questioned my father, who replied:

“Fifty.”

The other guy grew more furious than ever.

“No, not fifty. Forty. Do you understand? Eighteen and forty.”

He disappeared into the night shadows. A second man came up, shouting oaths at us.

“What have you come here for, you sons of bitches? What are you doing here, eh?”

Someone dared to answer him.

“What do you think? Do you suppose we've come here for our own pleasure? Do you think we asked to come?”

A little more, and the man would have killed him.

“You shut your trap, you filthy swine, or I'll squash you right now! You'd have done better to have hanged yourselves where you were than come here. Didn't you know what was in store for you at Auschwitz? Haven't you heard about it? In 1944?”

No, we had not heard. No one had told us. He could not believe his ears. His tone of voice became increasingly brutal.

“Do you see that chimney over there? See it? Do you see those flames? (Yes, we did see the flames.) Over there— that’s where you’re going to be taken. That’s your grave, over there. Haven’t you realized it yet? You dumb bastards, don’t you understand anything? You’re going to be burned. Frizzled away. Turned into ashes.”

He was growing hysterical in his fury. We stayed motionless, petrified. Surely it was all a nightmare? An unimaginable nightmare? I heard murmurs around me.

“We’ve got to do something. We can’t let ourselves be killed. We can’t go like beasts to the slaughter. We’ve got to revolt.”

There were a few sturdy young fellows among us. They had knives on them, and they tried to incite the others to throw themselves on the armed guards.

One of the young men cried:

“Let the world learn of the existence of Auschwitz. Let everybody hear about it, while they can still escape....”

But the older ones begged their children not to do anything foolish:

“You must never lose faith, even when the sword hangs over your head. That’s the teaching of our sages....”

The wind of revolt died down. We continued our march toward the square. In the middle stood the notorious Dr. Mengele (a typical SS officer: a cruel face, but not devoid of intelligence, and wearing a monocle); a conductor’s baton in his hand, he was standing among the other officers. The baton moved unremittingly, sometimes to the right, sometimes to the left.

I was already in front of him:

“How old are you?” he asked, in an attempt at a paternal tone of voice.

“Eighteen.” My voice was shaking.

“Are you in good health?”

“Yes.”

“What’s your occupation?”

Should I say that I was a student?

“Farmer,” I heard myself say.

This conversation cannot have lasted more than a few seconds. It had seemed like an eternity to me.

The baton moved to the left. I took half a step forward. I wanted to see first where they were sending my father. If he went to the right, I would go after him.

The baton once again pointed to the left for him too. A weight was lifted from my heart.

We did not yet know which was the better side, right or left; which road led to prison and which to the crematory. But for the moment I was happy; I was near my father. Our procession continued to move slowly forward.

Another prisoner came up to us:

“Satisfied?”

“Yes,” someone replied.

“Poor devils, you’re going to the crematory.”

He seemed to be telling the truth. Not far from us, flames were leaping up from a ditch, gigantic flames. They were burning something. A lorry drew up at the pit and delivered its load—little children. Babies! Yes, I saw it—saw it with my own eyes... those children in flames. (Is it surprising that I could not sleep after that? Sleep had fled from my eyes.)

So this was where we were going. A little farther on was another and larger ditch for adults.

I pinched my face. Was I still alive? Was I awake? I could not believe it. How could it be possible for them to burn people, children, and for the world to keep silent? No, none of this could be true. It was a nightmare.... Soon I should wake with a start, my heart pounding, and find myself back in the bedroom of my childhood, among my books....

My father’s voice drew me from my thoughts:

“It’s a shame... a shame that you couldn’t have gone with your mother... I saw several boys of your age going with their mothers....

His voice was terribly sad. I realized that he did not want to see what they were going to do to me. He did not want to see the burning of his only son.

My forehead was bathed in cold sweat. But I told him that I did not believe that they could burn people in our age, that humanity would never tolerate it....

“Humanity? Humanity is not concerned with us. Today anything is allowed. Anything is possible, even these crematories....”

His voice was choking.

“Father,” I said, “if that is so, I don’t want to wait here. I’m

going to run to the electric wire. That would be better than slow agony in the flames.”

He did not answer. He was weeping. His body was shaken convulsively. Around us, everyone was weeping. Someone began to recite the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead. I do not know if it has ever happened before, in the long history of the Jews, that people have ever recited the prayer for the dead for themselves.

“*Yitgadal veyitkadach shmé raba....* May His Name be blessed and magnified....” whispered my father.

For the first time, I felt revolt rise up in me. Why should I bless His name? The Eternal, Lord of the Universe, the All-Powerful and Terrible, was silent. What had I to thank Him for?

We continued our march. We were gradually drawing closer to the ditch, from which an infernal heat was rising. Still twenty steps to go. If I wanted to bring about my own death, this was the moment. Our line had now only fifteen paces to cover. I bit my lips so that my father would not hear my teeth chattering. Ten steps still. Eight. Seven. We marched slowly on, as though following a hearse at our own funeral. Four steps more. Three steps. There it was now, right in front of us, the pit and its flames.² I gathered all that was left of my strength, so that I could break from the ranks and throw myself upon the barbed wire. In the depths of my heart, I bade farewell to my father, to the whole universe; and, in spite of myself, the words formed themselves and issued in a whisper from my lips: *Yitgadal veyitkadach shmé raba....* May His name be blessed and magnified.... My heart was bursting. The moment had come. I was face to face with the Angel of Death....

No. Two steps from the pit we were ordered to turn to the left and made to go into a barracks.

I pressed my father’s hand. He said:

“Do you remember Madame Schächter, in the train?”

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed.³ Never shall I forget the smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

² Jewish texts contain many images of “The Pit,” often signifying some form of purgatory or condemnation.

³ In the Torah and Judaism in general, the number seven recurs in numerous fashions. It is considered a sacred number, particularly in the study of Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism, which teaches that the number “7” represents wholeness and completeness.

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.