

“A PLEA FOR THE SURVIVORS”



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by

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From: *A Jew Today*, Random House, New York City, 1978.

At first glance it seems insane: a plea for the survivors? Now, so many years after the event? For them the war has been over for a long time, just as it has for you. The gates of hell are shut. The executioner's laws abolished. For the survivors, as for everyone else, the nightmare belongs to the night and its mysterious kingdom. Death no longer lies in wait for them. The enemy no longer has a hold on them. The past? Carried away by the dead, entombed in what is already considered ancient history. For what possible reason would the survivors need to be defended?

And yet—they do need to be defended, as much as the victims long ago. With one difference: for the victims, it is too late.

For the survivors, too, it is getting late. Their number decreases. There are not many left, fewer and fewer. These days they most frequently meet at funerals. Their ranks are thinning rapidly. Surely, a matter of age. But there is something else as well. Is it possible to die more than once? Yes, it is. Those who have come out of Maidanek and Belzec die again and again, every time they join the silent processions they never really left. In this, in this as well, they constitute a separate, doomed, rapidly disappearing species. An isolated and tragically maligned species.

While it is fashionable these days to soothe the sensibilities of all minorities—ethnic, social, religious and others—few seem to worry about offending that particular minority. Its suffering is exploited, distorted, monopolized, embellished or debased, according to the need of the moment. And the helpless and distraught survivors have no alternative but to submit, let it happen—and say thank you.

Do you have any idea of how many survivors die of heart attacks? Or is it despair? Do you have any idea how many resign themselves to sorrow and solitude? Or how many regret having survived?

In London the Polish writer Michael Zylberberg told me shortly before his death: "It is worse than in 1945." A woman in Oslo echoes his feelings: "In 1945," she says, "I had a purpose; it has been turned into ridicule." In Brooklyn the great Talmudic jurist Rabbi Menashe Klein smiles: "If I had known, in liberated Buchenwald, what the outside world was going to be like, I would have refused to leave."

Some writers and poets chose death: Joseph Wulf in Berlin, Tadeusz Borowski in Poland, Paul Celan in Paris, Benno Werzberg in Israel. Their decision condemns society, for it carried out the task that the killers did not have time to complete.

I speak without bitterness and even without anger. I feel only sadness. For you, for all of us. Together we have bungled a story unlike any other. An event that by itself should have brought about a greater sense of awareness, an all-encompassing metamorphosis, was reduced to the level of anecdote. As for us, we were too numb, too weak, and perhaps too timid to object to what was happening before our eyes.

The Holocaust no longer evokes the mystery of the forbidden; it no longer arouses fear or trembling, or even outrage or compassion. For you, it is one calamity among so many others, slightly more morbid than the others. You enter it, you leave it, and you return to your ordinary occupations. You thought yourselves capable of imagining the unimaginable; you have seen nothing. You thought yourselves capable of discussing the unspeakable; you have understood nothing, you have retained nothing.

You have retained nothing of its blinding truth. You prefer imitation, embellishment. For you, all these horrors, all these atrocities undoubtedly are terrible but not extraordinary phenomena, possibly the result of mental aberration. Auschwitz? The decadence of an ideology. Treblinka? To be demystified, demythified. Dachau and Mauthausen? Nothing but a tremendous and tremendously convenient theme to bolster the theories of thinkers and the ambitions of politicians. Once robbed of its sacred aspect, the Holocaust became a fashionable subject: good to impress or shock. Recommended to anyone

seeking a vehicle to climb, succeed, create a sensation. You thought that you could face the agony of a people; you have felt nothing.

One reaches the point of longing for the days when only a few people dared speak of it; now everybody does. Too much. And too lightly. Without any reticence. One disinters the dead in order to question, mutilate or silence them. No matter if it offends the survivors. No matter if it hurts them. Survivors are ordinary men, like all the others. And perhaps worse. No need to spare them, to censure oneself when talking to them or about them. The special consideration extended to them yesterday is gone. And if that displeases them, that is their problem. Why do they have to listen, why do they have to watch? Let them go away. If they ask questions, if they make trouble, you will have to still their voice and put them in their place. They are entitled to no privileges; their past no longer protects them.

You will tell me that they are not saints, that there are among them, as among you, men and women who are less than perfect. That they are not all messengers. You will tell me that there are among them, as among you, ambitious, envious, jealous men, men who can be ruthless. Perhaps. But there are also among them, and in far greater number, sensitive and warm people who are loyal friends and generous comrades. And then, too, who gives you the right to judge them? They owe you no accounting; they owe you nothing. Let their well-being not fool you; they know better than you the transitory nature of earthly possessions and the emptiness of promises.

Oh yes, more than ever—or at least as much as ever—they need to be defended.

I remember the spring of 1945. Rescued almost against their will, the few survivors realized how old and lonely they were. And how useless. Nothing but frightening ghosts.

They did not know how they had eluded the enemy and cheated death. They knew they had had nothing to do with it. The choice had not been theirs. Intelligence, education, intuition, experience, courage—nothing had counted. Everything had been arranged by chance, only chance. A step toward the right or the left, a movement begun too early or too late, a change in mood of a particular overseer, and their fate would have been different. In the ghettos the question had been whether it was wiser to hold on to the yellow certificates or,

rather, to the red attestations? Whether to hide in the attics or in the cellars? In the camps, would it have been better to take initiatives and call in sick? To stand up straight, or to make oneself so small as to disappear in the amorphous mass? Invented and perfected by the killers, the pattern of concentration-camp rules eluded their victims, who, submissive and stunned, were in no condition to discern the traps, the warning signals of death. Every survivor will tell you that he could easily have stayed *there*, and in a way that is where he still is.

Time does *not* heal all wounds; there are those that remain painfully open. How can one forget the passion, the violence a simple crust of moldy bread can inspire? Or the near-worship evoked by a slightly better dressed, better nourished, less beaten inmate? How can one repress the memory of the indifference one had felt toward the corpses. Will you ever know what it is like to wake up under a frozen sky, on a journey toward the unknown, and to record without surprise that the man in front of you is dead, as is the one before him and the one behind you? Suddenly a thought crosses one's mind: What if I, too, am already dead and do not know it? And this thought also is registered with indifference. Will you ever know the nature of a world where, as in Moses' time in the desert, the living and the dead are no longer separate? Will you ever know what a survivor knows?

Tainted, haunted, diminished, gnawed by doubt and remorse, the "liberated" men and women lead a private existence. They stay among themselves, closed and uncommunicative, in a kind of invisible ghetto, relating to the outside world with difficulty. They do not join in our celebrations, they do not laugh at our jokes. Their frame of reference is not ours. Neither is their vocabulary. Their vocabulary is their code; their memory is their initiation.

You will not find it easy to understand them. Indeed, you never did understand them. In spite of appearances, they are not of this world, not of this era. Ask them whether they are happy. No matter what they answer, it will not be true. Ask them whether the future tempts them or frightens them. No matter what they answer, that, too, will not be true.

Ask them whether on the day of their liberation they experienced joy. Permit me to answer in their stead. It is a day I remember as an empty day. Empty of happiness, of feeling, of emotion. Empty of hope. We no longer had the strength even to weep. There were those

who recited the Kaddish in an absentminded sort of way, addressing an absent God on behalf of the absent.

We were all absent. The dead and the survivors.

During the turmoil the victims were naïve enough to feel certain that the so-called civilized world knew nothing of their plight. If the killers could kill freely, it was only because the Allies were not informed.

“If only the Allies knew . . .” people said to one another in the ghettos and in the camps. If only Roosevelt knew. If only Churchill knew. If only the Pope knew. If only the American Jews knew, and the English, the Palestinian, the Swedish, the Swiss Jews, if only they knew . . . The victims steadfastly believed that when they knew, the situation would change immediately. There was logic in their reasoning: Hitler and Himmler were operating the death factories without any interference *because* the Allies were not informed. If only the Allies were to know of Auschwitz, Auschwitz would cease to exist.

They were wrong. The proof is definite, irrefutable. People knew—and kept silent. People knew—and did nothing. Fortunately, the survivors found out only after the Liberation. Their so-called defenders on the outside did not even have the excuse of ignorance. One merely has to consult the newspapers and magazines of the period: it was all there, it is all there. From late 1942 on they printed detailed plans of the Final Solution. The names Treblinka and Auschwitz were known in New York and Stockholm much earlier than in Bialystok and Sighet. Three days after the start of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, *The New York Times* gave full coverage to the rebellion. It was all there: the Germans’ onslaught, the spectators’ glee and the rebels’ bravery. And the suicides and the fires. Covered also were the liquidation of other ghettos, the Babi Yar massacre, the gas chambers. Yes, the free-world press did its duty, but the majority of its readers refused to believe. They knew it all and believed none of it. And those who had risked their own lives and freedom to alert the universal conscience—those daring inmates who inside Auschwitz had succeeded not only in building a radio transmitter but in using it, those nocturnal heroes of the Sonder Kommando who had succeeded not only in photographing hell but in smuggling the photographs out to Cracow, whence they were transmitted to London and on to Washington—

had done it all in vain. The Allied governments knew as much if not more than they. It is no longer a secret to anyone that when the Allied leaders were asked to bomb the railroad tracks leading to Birkenau, they unanimously and categorically refused—and this during a period when in Birkenau alone more than ten thousand Jews were exterminated, day after day.

At that time, as far as the Allies were concerned, the victims were already counted as dead. No effort was initiated, no political or military operation undertaken to save them. Among the thousands and tens of thousands of strategic and diplomatic plans elaborated in Allied headquarters, you will not find many designed to rescue the Jews from death: they were not considered worth the effort and surely not the risk. Not one commander shifted his troops in order to liberate this or that camp ahead of schedule. The living dead did not warrant such action.

It was an amazing display of detachment, of *laissez faire*, demonstrating an attitude shared, in fact, by the leaders of the free Jewish communities. Why not admit it? Their behavior in those times remains inexplicable, to say the least. Yes, we are all guilty, declares Nahum Goldmann, speaking of himself and his former colleagues: Yes, we did know everything, we were informed, and we kept silent. Does this mean that they, too, were insensitive to their captive brothers' tragedy? I refuse to believe it. But then, how is one to understand, to rationalize their inaction, their passivity, their lack of vision and daring, of anger and compassion? How can one conceive of such collective weakness and how can it be justified? Was the Jewish heart paralyzed—was Jewish conscience stifled?

Before this century we survived thanks to the solidarity and interaction of Jewish communities living geographically and chronologically apart. After they were expelled from Spain, the Jews were sheltered by their brothers in the Netherlands. When they were driven from Russia, they were received by their coreligionists in Germany. The shipwrecked could always count on a haven elsewhere, somewhere. Persecuted Jews could always count on other Jews.

An absolute, hereditary rule that did not hold during this latest ordeal. For the first time secure Jewish communities took no interest in their distressed brothers' plight.

In Palestine, as in the United States, life continued as though

Auschwitz did not exist. People celebrated Shabbat, the Holy Days. There was dancing in the kibbutzim in Galilee, there were elaborate affairs in New York. It was business as usual. Not one function was canceled, not one reception postponed. While Mordecai Anielewicz and his comrades fought their lonely battle in the blazing ghetto under siege, while Arthur Zygelbaum committed suicide in London to protest the complacency of the free world, a large New York synagogue invited its members to a banquet featuring a well-known comedian. The slaughterers were slaughtering, the mass graves were overflowing, the factories of Treblinka, Belzec, Maidanek and Auschwitz were operating at top capacity, while on the other side, Jewish social and intellectual life was flourishing.

Jewish leaders met, threw up their arms in gestures of helplessness, shed a pious tear or two and went on with their lives: speeches, travels, quarrels, banquets, toasts, honors. As usual. Unquestionably, they were preoccupied by the fate of European Jews, perhaps even worried, but their lives were written off as lost anyhow; surely it was best not to undertake any action that was doomed from the start. Why waste the effort? Until August of 1943 they were not even able to agree on the need for enunciating a common policy. Finally an "American Jewish Conference," supposedly representing almost all the major Jewish Organizations, was born in the elegant halls of the Waldorf-Astoria. Many speeches were delivered, followed by as many debates. And what did one speak about? Jewish objectives for . . . the postwar period. What to request from whom. And for whom. And who was to do the requesting. Still, one meeting *was* devoted to the fate of European Jewry. A few tears were shed, a few pathetic platitudes delivered. A few lies were uttered—for example, that certain young Jews had left the security of their homes—in Palestine?—to join the Warsaw ghetto rebels. After the usual resolutions were adopted, the participants came away with a soothed conscience, and that was it. There was no discussion of rescue plans, of emergency measures to influence public opinion and rouse the government into action.

How can one help but wonder what would have happened if . . . if our brothers had shown more compassion, more initiative, more daring . . . if a million Jews had demonstrated in front of the White House . . . if the officials of all Jewish institutions had called for a day of fasting—just one—to express their outrage . . . if Jewish notables had started a hunger strike, as the ghetto fighters had requested . . .

if the heads of major schools, if bankers and rabbis, merchants and artists had decided to make a gesture of solidarity, just one . . . Who knows, the enemy might have desisted. For he was cautious, the enemy. Calculating, realistic, pragmatic, he took one step at a time, always waiting to measure the intensity of the reaction. When it failed to materialize altogether, he risked another step. And waited. And when the reaction was still not forthcoming, he threw all caution to the wind.

A university friend who was a former Roosevelt adviser confessed to me: "We were a group of Jewish high officials in Washington and we customarily gathered once a week . . . Yes, we knew what was happening in the camps . . . Why didn't we do anything? Because the Jewish political leaders never asked us. It was not one of their priorities. As a result, it was not ours either."

There is reason to be ashamed. The leaders of the free world, Jews and non-Jews alike, were concerned exclusively with the situation at the front. The overall global war and what would happen afterward. For them, European Jews, *though still alive*, no longer were part of the problem.

When, soon after victory, the survivors discovered the betrayal, there were those—and among them, adolescents—who deliberately let themselves slide into death. They had no desire to be a part of a society capable of so much hypocrisy.

Until then, fortunately, they did not know. On the contrary, they had felt wanted. To the extent that they could imagine the future, they saw it as a series of sunny, joyous days. They told themselves that if by some miracle they survived, people would go out of their way to give them back their taste for life. People would refuse them nothing.

They were convinced that to make amends, to clear their conscience, people everywhere would treat them as important visitors, guests of honor. That they would try to console them, heap kindness on them. Appease them. To restore to them, however partially and foolishly, for one day or one night, that which had been taken from them: their zest for life, their faith in man.

The disappointment came almost at once. As they reentered the

world, they found themselves in another kind of exile, another kind of prison. People welcomed them with tears and sobs, then turned away. I don't mean parents or close friends; I speak of officialdom, of the man in the street. I speak of all kinds of men and women who treated them as one would sick and needy relatives. Or else as specimens to be observed and to be kept apart from the rest of society by invisible barbed wire. They were disturbing misfits who deserved charity, but nothing else.

True, the French returned to France and the Italians to Italy. But the great majority, those from Central Europe, the stateless of all descriptions, had no homes, no families to go to. All those broken, trampled men, those exhausted, humiliated women, those lonely adolescents for whom nobody was waiting in their little towns, in their little hamlets without Jews, where could they find refuge? Left to fend for themselves, they vegetated for years in camp barracks designated for "displaced persons." From time to time they were exhibited for the purpose of "moving" certain wealthy visitors or influential committees. They were considered subhumans. Nobody wanted them. Just as nobody had wanted them before.

The gates of Palestine, still under British mandate, were shut. The Western European governments grudgingly admitted small numbers of refugees. I shall not soon forget my frequent trips to the police station every time my "residence permit," my student card or my travel papers needed to be renewed; only rarely did I come across a clerk who did not make me feel my status of undesirable alien. The United States, as in the thirties, distributed its visas parsimoniously and with shockingly bad grace. To obtain a visa, one was subjected to innumerable examinations and investigations; only healthy candidates, armed with voluminous attestations and certificates, could hope to be admitted. Only those who were "normal," robust, productive, capable of work. Or the cousins of the rich . . . And the others? The sick, the wretched, the weak, the hopeless—what was to become of them? Let them go elsewhere, said the consuls in their respective languages, citing their respective laws. Let them wait, said the princes, through various intermediaries; not everyone may enter The Castle.

The refugees with the gravest problems, physical or other, those who needed help more than their comrades, were welcomed only by Norway. But Norway is a small country with limited resources. And so hundreds of thousands of "displaced persons" were forced to remain

in the crowded camps. The affluent civilized states considered them too embarrassing, too cumbersome. Better to keep them on the sidelines, away from the fine people, away from the sensitive souls. Better to keep them and their heavy shadows on the far side of the border, in neatly defined enclosures, preferably in the very places where, not much earlier, isolation had been absolute. And those survivors had expected to be received with open arms . . .

Of course, people sent them packages and postcards, speakers and philanthropists. Their material needs were taken care of. They were watched over; their rooms were inspected, their menus carefully established. They were treated as beggars, or ill-adjusted children. Their leisure, their demands, their hopes were all programmed. Condescendingly, used clothing, shoes with holes, mended suits collected from charitable families were distributed among them. No need to give them new shirts, dresses in good condition—that was the consensus in America—those poor devils will be well content with our leftovers. It occurred to none of those charitable organizers that these were people who had once upon a time been more accustomed to give than to receive, and that they could be offended. They were thought to be without dignity. Worse: incapable of dignity. They were thought to be devoid of taste, insensitive to beauty—born vagrants. People tossed them alms and turned their backs.

Do you know that when a lethal epidemic ravaged the liberated camp of Bergen-Belsen, its Jewish leaders had to appeal to German doctors, some of whom still wore the hated uniform? Not one Jewish doctor in New York, Zurich, Stockholm or Tel-Aviv felt it his duty to leave his practice to tend to his brothers in distress. For weeks and weeks the patients saw only doctors whose very presence—not much earlier—had inspired them with terror. The war was over for everybody, except for them.

Do you know that not one rabbi offered to lead the High Holy Day services, that not one volunteered to spend Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur with the men and women of Bergen-Belsen? They were swamped with prayer books and ritual objects—and more or less politely told to shift for themselves. With the exception of salaried officials of specialized international organizations, nobody felt the need or took the time to be with them and share their joys, as well as their mourning.

People took advantage of them for political purposes; expressing

indignation on their behalf, using them to influence votes, to start press campaigns, organize conferences. Obedient and disillusioned, they complied. People made speeches about them—without them.

Do you know that not one survivor was asked to be a member of the special council in charge of the financial reparations negotiations with West Germany—not one survivor was given a chance to air his views on the distribution of funds—not one survivor sat on the international council of the famous Claims Conference? Others expressed themselves on behalf of the dead, not they. Others managed their inheritance; they were not considered qualified even to plead their own cause, in their own behalf. Recluses, outcasts, that was how people saw them. Incompetent all. Misfits all. Troublemakers, kill-joys, carriers of disease. To be dealt with only with caution. It was perfectly proper to give them sympathy, but from afar. Let them stay in the background, where they could do no harm or attract attention. Tell me, were you afraid or ashamed of them? Did they make you feel guilty, though you were guilty only by omission? Is that why you dreaded their presence, why you could not look them in the eyes?

The time may have come to tell you outright what we have been repeating to one another in whispers: that the survivors were considered intruders and treated everywhere without affection, and surely without love. There may have been pity, but no tenderness and particularly no brotherly warmth, which was what they needed most of all.

How can we not be angry with you for that? How can we not remind you of it? Perhaps one day you will be forgiven for what you did or did not do during the Night, but not for what you did or did not do *after*. During the catastrophe you could invoke attenuating circumstances: you did not know, you refused to believe, you were in the midst of a war. After the catastrophe none of these excuses were valid. You knew. And you did nothing to change. Surely not toward the survivors. They embodied a yearning, the purest and most beautiful of yearnings, and you ignored them and their feelings.

In the beginning they tried to raise their voices—however shyly, however clumsily. In vain. People turned away, and shrugging their shoulders, muttered, “Poor devils, they are exaggerating, for they want our pity.” No, they did not want your pity. Or your charity. Or your good deeds. Or your tears or your money. They asked for nothing, demanded nothing from you or anybody; they claimed no rights. All

they wanted was your attention. They wanted to transmit a message to you, a message of which they were the sole bearers. Having gained an insight into man that will remain forever unequalled, they tried to share their knowledge with you, their contemporaries. They were not asking for anything in return. Anyway, your gratitude, your medals were meaningless to them. As were the goals you were pursuing. They merely hoped to justify their survival by accomplishing a mission that mattered more to them than their survival. And for years and years you, their contemporaries, refused to listen, refused to believe, refused to understand. You disclaimed their testimony.

And so they began to feel superfluous in a society that continued to repudiate them, thus forcing them into cynicism or despair.

But, you will tell me, a literature on their ordeals does exist. What about the so-called literature of the Holocaust? Novels, poems, films, plays, documentaries seem to indicate that the public is interested and that it wants to be informed.

Well, at the risk of shocking you, I will tell you that as far as I am concerned, there is no such thing as Holocaust literature—there cannot be. Auschwitz negates all literature as it negates all theories and doctrines; to lock it into a philosophy means to restrict it. To substitute words, any words, for it is to distort it. A Holocaust literature? The very term is a contradiction.

Ask any survivor. He will confirm to you that it was easier for him to imagine himself free in Auschwitz than it would be for you to imagine yourself a prisoner there. Whoever has not lived through the event can never know it. And whoever has lived through it can never fully reveal it.

The survivor speaks in an alien tongue. You will never break its code. His works will be of only limited use to you. They are feeble, stammering, unfinished, incoherent attempts to describe a single moment of being painfully, excruciatingly alive—the closing in of darkness for one particular individual, nothing more and perhaps much less. Between the survivor's memory and its reflection in words, his own included, there is an unbridgeable gulf. The past belongs to the dead, and their heirs do not recognize themselves in its images and its echoes. The concept of a theology of Auschwitz is blasphemous for both the non-believer and the believer. A novel about Auschwitz is

not a novel, or it is not about Auschwitz. One cannot imagine Treblinka, just as one cannot reinvent Ponar.

If you have not grasped it until now, it is time you did: Auschwitz signifies death—total, absolute death—of man and of mankind, of reason and of the heart, of language and of the senses. Auschwitz is the death of time, the end of creation; its mystery is doomed to stay whole, inviolate.

The survivor knows it; he alone knows it. Which accounts for his obsessive helplessness coupled with guilt.

True, his survival imposes a duty on him: the duty to testify. Offered to him as a reprieve, his future must find its *raison d'être* as it relates to his past experience. But how is one to say, how is one to communicate that which by its very nature defies language? How is one to tell without betraying the dead, without betraying oneself? A dialectical trap which leaves no way out. Even if he were to succeed in expressing the unspeakable, his truth would not be whole.

And yet . . . In the very beginning, on a continent still in ruins, he forced himself to relent enough to at least lift the veil. Not to free himself of the past; on the contrary, to assert his loyalty. To him, to forget meant a victory for the enemy. The executioner often kills twice, the second time when he tries to erase the traces of his crimes. Have you read the autobiographical documents of the Sonder Kommando members at Birkenau, Janowska and Treblinka? Those were the places where the dead were killed, where the corpses were disinterred to be burned, and their ashes dispersed. The purpose must have been to expel them from history. Worse, to deprive them of their history. To prevent their lives and deaths from becoming part of human memory. And so the survivor told himself that not to remember was equivalent to becoming the enemy's accomplice: whosoever contributes to oblivion finishes the killer's work. Hence the vital necessity to bear witness lest one find oneself in the enemy's camp.

The task was arduous and unrewarding, and it led to nothing but darkness and madness. Those words, those staccato sentences lined up by the chroniclers, those crisply demented images breathlessly drawn, all seem pale in relation to their content, whose essence defies expression and remains unarticulated. What they did not say surpasses—in intensity, in truth—everything they thought themselves capable of verbalizing. To be believable, their tales had to tell less than the

truth. If we were to say it all, they thought, nobody would believe us. If we told it all . . . But who could tell it all?

The killers' laughter and the hallucinatory silence of the condemned; the distant look of old men who knew; the dull lament of children afraid to know; the screams, the moaning, the beatings; the thirst inside the sealed wagons; the terror inside the barracks during the *selections*; the silent, almost solemn processions marching toward the mass graves or the flames; the lucidity of some, the delirium of others; the rabbi raising his voice in song, the madman reciting, laughing while reciting, the Kaddish; the little girl undressing her little brother as she tells him gently, so very gently, not to be afraid, not to be afraid, for one must not be afraid of death; and the woman who on the edge of hysteria begs the killer to spare her three children, and receives this response: Very well, I shall take only two, tell me which two; and the father who watches, watches his little girl disappear in the distance, swept away by a silent and gentle, so very gentle, wave; the torpor, the despondency, the distress and shame of people who pray to God for a crust of bread, who think of bread more than of God, more than of honor, more than of life . . . How is one to speak of such things and not lose one's mind, and not beat one's fists against the wall? It is as impossible to speak of them as not to speak of them. Too many corpses loom on our horizon; they weigh on every one of our words, their empty eyes hold us in check. One would have to invent a new vocabulary, a new language to say what no human being has ever said.

Have you read, reread, attentively read, the survivors' testimonies? They seem to have been written by one man, always the same, repeating a thousand times what you, the reader, even if you are his contemporary, will never understand.

Reticent, suspicious, captious, careful not to lapse into grandiloquence or sentimentalism, not to be making literature, not to play at being philosophers or moralists, they left us spare statements, factual reports. Their writing is austere, arid, cutting. Their sentences are terse, sharp, etched into the stone. Every word contains a hundred, and the silence between the words strikes us as hard as the words themselves. They wrote not with words but against them. They tried to communicate their experience of the Holocaust, but all they communicated was their feeling of helplessness at not being able to communicate the experience. As keepers of invisible cemeteries, shrouded

in smoke, they trembled as they addressed the living, conscious of being watched and judged.

In the beginning the theme evoked a kind of sacred awe. It was considered taboo, reserved only for the initiated. The great novelists of the period—from Camus to Silone, from Mauriac to Faulkner—took great care not to grapple with it. Out of respect for the dead as much as for the living. Also out of a concern for truth. In that unique domain, imagination does not match reality: the tale of a carpenter escaped from Treblinka is more powerfully evocative than the product of the most prolific imagination. Here imagination becomes obstacle; the dream trails behind reality. The intellectual honesty of a Malraux, the human sensitivity of an Agnon kept them from treading on ground haunted by so many ghosts and covered with ashes.

The works that were published in the beginning? Witness accounts, individual stories, autobiographical documents—their restrained tone contrasts sharply with the atrocities they describe. One plunges into them as into a bad dream, with an odd sensation of loss and anguish. Obviously one is dealing not with literary creations but with a genre that transcends literature: with *something else*. And so one follows the protagonist into his madness, into his inevitable fall, trying as one goes along to share retroactively in his pain if not his solitude. That is all one can do, that is the only thing one can do.

For in those days the literature of testimony still commanded a certain respect. As yet, nobody was explaining to the dead how they should have gone to their deaths, or to the survivors how they should be living their lives. One did not pass judgment. Not yet.

As the years went by, the outlines became fuzzy, less defined. The Holocaust? A desanctified theme, or if you prefer, a theme robbed of its passion, its mystery. Eventually people lost all shame. Today anybody can say anything on the subject and not be called to order, and not be treated as imposter. Novelists use it to add a dimension to their fiction and politicians use it to please. Do they realize that they are cheapening the event? That they are emptying it of its substance? Are they aware of how the parodies of their experiences affect the survivors? To forestall any possible objections, they even deprive them of their wretched right to their “title.” Suddenly everybody declares himself a “Holocaust survivor,” reasoning that everybody *could* have

become one. Today it is possible never to have had to confront the sadists of Mauthausen and the overseers of Sachsenhausen, never to have suffered torture and agony, and yet to present oneself as a “camp survivor.” Simply because Hitler and Eichmann waged war on *all* Jews, *all* liberals, *all* non-Aryans, *all* men and *all* women dedicated to justice, liberty and peace.

How many political, psychological, historical or pseudo-historical arguments have I not had to listen to . . . How is one to answer? Of course, in a way “we are all survivors.” But only in one way, and in a way that should evoke humility. It all depends on who says it—and how it is said. But what is the good of launching into useless debates? On this theme, polemics can bring only dishonor. My advice to all those “survivors” is to read and reread the great Yiddish poet H. Leivick’s eerily tender poem: “*In Treblinka bin ich nit gewen . . .* As for me, I have *not* been in Treblinka . . .” It speaks of his pain and remorse at not having experienced the Holocaust, at not being one of its survivors. It speaks of his inability to speak of it. How pitiful I find those “survivors” who talk . . . and talk.

Let no one misunderstand me: in no way do I suggest that the concentration-camp phenomenon ought not to be studied. On the contrary, I say that it must be studied more and more, in all its forms and all its expressions.

There is no more urgent theme for this analytical and self-analytical generation. But it must be approached with fear and trembling. And above all, with humility. Some writers have shown that this is possible. The subject transformed them into more genuinely intense artists. They are few, but they are there. Thinkers, educators and novelists, they are there and their impact is real. Which proves that even those who have not experienced the event may learn to be worthy of it.

But then there are all those others who are recognizable by their self-righteous, arrogant demeanor; we resent them for having placed their stamp of vulgarity and obscenity on the victim’s universe.

All those films, those works, those spectaculars that attract a wide audience by showing occupation, collaboration, deportation, martyrdom, slow death, instant death, all the sordidness of war. They may appear to prove that finally people are taking an interest, that they refuse to forget and want to know. Perhaps. But they also show some-

thing else—the need to think that the Holocaust was only an accident of history. Nothing more. The Holocaust—an imposing word, and so convenient to use as background for anecdotes in which Fascism and eroticism struggle for front stage.

Yesterday people said, “Auschwitz, never heard of it.” Now they say, “Oh yes, we know all about it.” We are surprised—and hurt—by the attitude of well-intentioned people who presumably share our feelings. In their desire to explain the event, they distort it. As one reads what they write, as one listens to them, watches their films, one might think that the Holocaust was a terrible but beautiful story. That there were actually people who enjoyed themselves . . . in a kind of cops-and-robbers game. Sure, people were hungry, sure, people were afraid . . . but that, too, was part of the game. A game in which both killers and victims stepped in and out of their roles with ease. Each had its own grotesque, artistic or spiritual aspect.

The days when people held their breath at the mention of the Holocaust are gone. As are the days when the dead elicited meditation rather than profanation.

And to think that this is happening in a time when countless executioners are still alive, as are many witnesses and victims. What do the survivors feel, knowing that the murderers live among them in peace? How do the survivors react when they read that their past is nothing but sheer fabrication? What do they feel when *you* tell *them* their story? When you claim to know more about it than they?

There are commentators who simply advise them to close the book on the past, to turn away from it and put an end to their “unhealthy obsessions.” They say it, they write it, they print it: “Turn the page, look toward the future.” Yes, I have actually read that. And also: “You must stop putting salt on your wounds.” Yes, I have read that too. And also: “You must stop indulging in your memories; you were not the only ones who suffered. Besides, you exaggerate. After all, there was music even in Auschwitz . . .” Yes, I have read that too. I could quote you sources and names, but what good would that do? The problem transcends individuals.

They are the very ones who dare set themselves up as moralists with regard to the survivors. They are the ones who exploit the Holocaust in their own way, for their own ends. Their unavowed goal is quite simply to speak *for* and *instead* of the survivors. Indeed, they would prefer to be the only ones to speak, to analyze, to put together

words that for them are nothing but words: words to be measured, to be rented, to be sold, to be twisted to satisfy who knows what thirst, what vanity, what intrigue. Let them continue unhampered and the world will eventually see the Holocaust through their eyes. And Auschwitz will be nothing but a huge spectacle for future generations.

Sometimes their intentions are good and even honorable, but that is not enough. Do you remember Job's false friends, and why God and thus the reader hold them in contempt? Job was the one who suffered, but they were the ones who spoke of his suffering. Worse: Job was the one who suffered, but they were the ones who presumed to explain his suffering to *him*.

Does so much insensitivity in so many people, intellectuals, both Jews and non-Jews, shock you? It should not. By now you must have accepted the evidence that the fate of the survivors never really concerned you, that you never considered them your peers.

No sooner were they among you than you began to question and criticize. Fierce discussions and debates took place in newspapers, magazines and drawing rooms: Why the *Judenräte*? Why a Jewish police? Why Jewish Kapos? Why did the victims march to the slaughterhouse like cattle? Why this and not that? The height of irony and cruelty: the dead victims needed to be defended, while the killers, dead and alive, were left alone.

Then the questions became more brutal, the heckling more brazenly offensive: Why did *you* survive? Why did *you* remain alive, *you* and not another? Was it because you were more cunning? Or hardier? More tenacious? More selfish? Questions and insinuations that sickened us. We could only repeat over and over again: You do not understand, you cannot understand. You who were not there will never understand . . .

At that point their tone became even more accusatory. They accused us, often by implication, of having willingly endured the concentration-camp experience, perhaps even of having brought it upon ourselves. Of having accepted it, therefore, of having desired it. They accused us of making a public show of ourselves, of having commercialized our experience. Suddenly the roles were reversed. While people who had not lived through it took the liberty of saying, writing, showing whatever they chose on the Holocaust, its survivors found themselves forced to explain themselves, to justify themselves.

The real accused? The survivors. They were placed in the position

of having to defend their honor and that of the dead. It was enough to drive one mad. They were forced to tell and tell again, and to explain why they needed to tell: to fulfill their mission, to discharge their debt. Those were the true reasons why they agreed to break their silence and resuscitate the past and its horrors, though they knew few people would understand. They told how those who escaped from the death trains returned to the ghettos because no Christian doors opened to receive them. They told how those wretched, starving, totally helpless Jews, forgotten by God and man, never had a chance . . . And then they questioned whether people really understood that this had been neither a riot nor a pogrom, but a war, a full-fledged war—and what a war! A war in which the enemy had at his disposal generals, soldiers, tanks, scientists, technicians, engineers, theoreticians, psychologists and millions and millions of sympathizers—while the Jews had nothing but their bare hands.

They admitted: Yes, it is true, we were naïve, too naïve. Yes, we refused to believe, yes, we were shortsighted, yes, we were unrealistic. They confessed: Yes, at the very last moment, even as we approached the fires, we still believed that it was not, that it could not be, the end.

And they pleaded: Don't be so harsh with the victims. You wish to praise the heroes, fine, but please don't do it at the expense of the victims; don't separate them in the flames and the ashes. Even the heroes were victims and the victims, too, were heroes.

But their words fell on deaf ears. At best, you were prepared to admire the members of the underground, the fighters, the rebels. Certainly they deserved it, but was it really necessary to show such contempt for the weak, the victims?

I use the terrible word "contempt" deliberately. It was contempt that sometimes led you so far as to confuse the victims with their killers. You argued that the boundaries were not clearly defined: that after all, all the victims were not innocent, just as all the killers were not guilty; that after all, under different circumstances, the victims might have turned into killers. I have heard this more than once, from more than one intellectual. I consider it an unfair, unworthy and despicable hypothesis, one that slanders the dead posthumously and attempts to dishonor the survivors. Only a man who *has* killed is a killer. The victims killed no one. A million children, a million dead Jewish children killed no one. The old, the sick, the rabbis and their disciples, the sages and their followers—whom did they kill before

they died? The emaciated, maimed survivors—whom did they strike, whom did they kill before waking up miraculously free?

These are indecent discussions, obscene polemics. As we listen to them we feel outraged, sullied. Go on talking. We pity your certainties, your victories. Your poisoned arrows no longer reach us. Go on, play your games without us.

I will not tell you that you are driving the survivors to seek death—though in some cases you have done just that—but I will tell you that you frequently succeed in driving them into madness and despair.

And yet, if you only knew. If you knew how the survivors felt about you.

At first they felt gratitude. They blessed you day and night, so grateful were they to you for having lived outside the cursed universe, outside its laws, far from the abyss.

They were grateful to you for living and for letting them live normal lives: eat, drink, walk, sleep, read, sing and cry. They did not begrudge you your freedom, your happiness. Quite the opposite. They thanked you for every breath of fresh air. For every affectionate gesture. For every meal proffered or shared. For every friendly word. They never stopped thanking. Thank you, men. Thank you, women. Thank you for smiling, thank you for making us smile. Thank you, forest and clouds. Thank you, bread. Thank you, fruit. Thank you, quiet nights without screams or the sound of guns. Thank you, silence.

You did not know it, you could not guess it, but the survivors bore you no ill-feeling; they felt neither anger nor envy. On the contrary, they loved you for having led a human existence during the catastrophe. Oh yes, they loved you for not having suffered.

Then came the moment of disillusionment. And of remorse. Perhaps it would have been better if they had disclosed nothing, said nothing, if they had wrapped themselves in a protective and cleansing silence . . . We began to have doubts then, and now these doubts are turning into obsessions. They question every one of their joys, live in perpetual anxiety: are they speaking out so as not to go mad or because they are mad already?

Perhaps Adorno was right. After Auschwitz, poetry may no longer be possible. Or literature. Or friendship. Or hope. Or anything. Maidanek signifies the end. All that remains from the fire is the taste of

ashes. Nothing more, nothing else. People will not understand the stammerings of the survivors, who thought they had taught mankind its most fiery lesson. They went unheeded. And they were punished for having tried.

For them, the Holocaust continued beyond the Holocaust.

A plea for the survivors? I know, it seems insane. It is not.

Because they are decreasing in numbers and because they themselves feel misunderstood and unloved, and also because they have locked themselves into their sorrow, I thought it important to make this plea for them—for all of us. And for our children. So that they shall know. So that they shall remember.

This, then, is their request: ignore them, don't speak of them, grant them some respite. If you cannot communicate with them on their level, do not try to bring them down to yours.

Accept the idea that you will never see what they have seen—and go on seeing now, that you will never know the faces that haunt their nights, that you will never hear the cries that rent their sleep. Accept the idea that you will never penetrate the cursed and spellbound universe they carry within themselves with unfailing loyalty.

And so I tell you: You who have not experienced their anguish, you who do not speak their language, you who do not mourn their dead, think before you offend them, before you betray them. Think before you substitute your memory for theirs. Wait until the last survivor, the last witness, has joined the long procession of silent ghosts whose judgment one day will resound and shake the earth and its Creator. Wait . . .

(1975)

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by

Elie Wiesel

From: *A Jew Today*, Random House, New York City, 1978.

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