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ALAPSZAKOSZ ZÁRÓDOLGOZAT

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ALAPSZAKOS ZÁRÓDOLGOZAT

*Haszidizmus és Holokauszt: az emlékezés egymást metsző narratívái
Elie Wiesel műveiben*

*Hassidism and the Holocaust: Intersecting Narratives of Memory in
Elie Wiesel's Fictions*

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Hassidism and the Holocaust: Intersecting Narratives of Memory in Elie Wiesel's Fictions

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Date: May 14, 2010

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Abstract

My Thesis examines how the intersecting narratives of memory characterize Elie Wiesel's "*Night Trilogy*" and how these narratives serve as a tool to liberate the memories of the Holocaust. I start with giving a broader perspective of the different approaches of identity starting from the philosophical definition followed by the psychological and cultural explanations. I focus on three books to demonstrate the various stages of this process and to discover what role does identity and cultural background play in interpreting the events of the Holocaust. Furthermore, I also explain the three novels from the perspective of recurring motives standing for the different events of the Holocaust. For the purpose of exploring the three novels from various aspects of memory I use Wiesel's personal recollections of memories found in the trilogy. In order to ground my discussion in a rich collection of texts, I have used journals, interviews, published overviews of the topic and the Internet. I followed the guidelines and requirements of the Modern Languages Association.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1.
1.The question of post-Holocaust Jewish Identity	3.
1.1.Jewish identity and the roots of Hassidism	5.
2.Wiesel’s Night Trilogy and the Intersecting narratives of memory	8.
3.The place of Jewish-American literature in Post-War American literature with special emphasis on the works of Elie Wiesel	20.
Conclusion	25.
Works Cited	27.

Introduction

In my Thesis I attempt to show the intersecting narratives of childhood and Holocaust memories appearing in Elie Wiesel's *Night Trilogy*. Wiesel is one of the most important representatives of Jewish-American literature; he plays an important role in interpreting and writing on the Holocaust, its influence on later generations, both Jewish and non-Jewish. He openly undertakes his Hassidic roots and commitment. In the centre of his interest are the Hassidic Masters, the Hassidim, their teachings on life, religion, and God. In the first part of my Thesis I will give a short but comprehensive overview of the concept of identity with relevant references to Jewish and Hassidic identity. My aim is to bring about a better understanding of those significant theses that contribute to Wiesel's ideology and his views on identity and memory.

In the second part, I will focus on the three books of the *Night Trilogy*. I will examine how childhood and Holocaust memories are present in these books and how they represent those Hassidic teachings that I introduced in the first part of my Thesis. I will examine the question of how the writing of these books after the Holocaust serves as a tool to help liberate the memories of the war. I will explore the many ways the pictures of the war and childhood memories intersect with each other. I will also investigate how the new memories and the realization of human cruelty change the old remembrance. I will follow the process of intersections throughout the pieces of fiction and investigate the development and recreation of memory. I will point out the main stages of how old Hassidic teachings live on with new experiences and how they influence one another.

In the third part of my Thesis I will consider the time Wiesel has spent in the United States. I will attempt to place him and his works in Jewish-American literature and in the American literary canon. I will examine the processes with which Jewish literature and ideology became part of American literature within which Wiesel himself occupies a

significant role. I will also try to give a short overview of how Jewish identity appears in contemporary American literature with regard to Wiesel's influence on contemporary Jewish writers.

1. The Question of Post-Holocaust Jewish Identity

I would like to investigate how the relationship between Wiesel's Hassid identity and the overwhelming experience of the Holocaust have changed the writer's basic view on life, God, people, and the idea of good due to his first hand experience in the Nazi concentration camps. I would also like to explore how the Holocaust has remained in the centre of Wiesel's interest and thoughts sixty years after the endured anguish. In this chapter I will focus on the concept of identity and its close relationship with memory. With a more thorough investigation into the different aspects of identity I will consider the philosophical, psychological, and cultural definitions and I will highlight the significance of these aspects from a much closer perspective, that is the Jewish and Hassidic approach. For a thorough analysis of the problem I will start with situating the question into historical and cultural context through which this world view that is present in Wiesel's books unfolds and leads to a better understanding of the following chapter in which I examine the three books and try to support my theory.

According to the Lithuanian born French thinker and philosopher, Emmanuel Lévinas, identity is an inevitable bond between one and the self :

‘Identity is not an inoffensive relationship with itself, but an enchainment to itself; it's the necessity of being occupied with itself’. (Lévinas 55)

This bond that we call identity can be approached from different perspectives. To give a broader description we can say that identity is an individual's comprehension of him or herself as a discrete, separate entity. This term can be further specified by the disciplines of philosophy, psychology, and can be explained in cultural context as well. In philosophy identity (also called sameness) is whatever that makes an entity definable and recognizable, in terms of possessing a set of qualities or characteristics that distinguish it from entities of a different type. Identity refers to both group self-awareness of common unique characteristics and individual self-awareness of inclusion in such a group. In the subsequent chapter I will

show how this set of characteristics have influenced Wiesel's thoughts and what changes they went through under the influence of the brutality of the concentration camps in Auschwitz, Monowitz, and Buchenwald.

Psychology investigates the question of how the personal self relates to the social environment, and it focuses on explaining an individual's actions within a group in terms of mental events and states. According to the Swedish psychologist Erik Erikson, identity is

a subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image. As a quality of unself-conscious living, this can be gloriously obvious in a young person who has found himself as he has found his communality. In him we see emerge a unique unification of what is irreversibly given that is, body type and temperament, giftedness and vulnerability, infantile models and acquired ideals with the open choices provided in available roles, occupational possibilities, values offered, mentors met, friendships made, and first sexual encounters (Erikson, 11-22).

This concept will be important in the following chapter in which I will make an attempt to highlight those factors in Wiesel's life that led to the writing of the three books in question.

The loss of the community and the gradual downfall of the teachings he had received from this community set a drastic contrast between Wiesel's Hassidic identity and wartime reality. One's identity is inseparable from the culture in which one was born, thus one if not the most important aspect of this concept has to be taken into consideration and be placed into cultural context. Cultural identity is the identity of a group or culture or of an individual as far as one is influenced by one's belonging to a group or culture. Culture as a social practice is not something that individuals possess. Rather, it is a social process in which individuals participate, in the context of changing historical conditions. Culture is an important factor in shaping identity. Wiesel's Hassid-Jewish background in his hometown, "Szigeth" serves as

the above mentioned culture. That is what determines his thoughts and ideas about life and God; it is this strong community that shatters under the horrors of the concentration camps and destroys the continuity in which Wiesel once believed.

The other important scenes of Wiesel's life where his Hassidic identity had to face the most dramatic changes were the camps of Auschwitz, Monowitz, and Buchenwald where he spent the last two years of the war after being deported from Szigeth together with hundreds of other Hassid-Jews of his community. To provide a better understanding of the subject of this Thesis, I would like to point out some of the central aspects of this Jewish context, starting with Jewish identity and giving a more detailed description of Hassidism and Hassidic identity. By doing so, I aim at emphasizing the importance of the difference between the traditional Jewish approach and Hassidism.

1.1. Jewish Identity and the Roots of Hasidism

Jewish identity is the objective or subjective state of perceiving oneself as a Jew and as relating to being Jewish. Jewish identity can be separated into three independent elements: ethnic, religious and cultural. Ethnic Judaism indicates those of Ashkenazi, Sephardic, Mizrahi or other Jewish ancestry, while religious Judaism refers to those who follow the tenets of Jewish religion. Jewish identity can also be cultural with religious and cultural components, just as there are religious and cultural elements of Christian or Muslim identity. However, Jewish identity has a strong ethnic component to it, absent in the Christian identity.

On the subsequent pages I would like to introduce Hassidism as the main source and inspiration of Wiesel's works. To be able to better understand the connection between the novels in question and Wiesel's Hassid identity, I will give a short overview of the history of the Hassidic movement in Eastern Europe, its origins, main characters and fundamental theses.

The Hassidim, or the "pious ones" in Hebrew, belong to a special movement within Orthodox Judaism, a movement that, at its height in the first half of the nineteenth century, claimed the allegiance of millions in Eastern and Central Europe perhaps the majority of East European Jews. Soon after its founding by mystics in the mid-eighteenth century, Hassidism rapidly gained popularity in all strata of society, especially among the less educated common people, who were drawn to its charismatic leaders and the emotional and spiritual appeal of their message, which stressed joy, faith, and ecstatic prayer, accompanied by song and dance. Like other religious revival movements, Hassidism was at once a call to spiritual renewal and a protest against the prevailing religious establishment and culture. The history of Hassidism, which encompasses a variety of sometimes conflicting views, is a fascinating story. The movement survived a century of slow decline during a period when progressive social ideas were spreading among the European Jewry and then near-total destruction in the Holocaust. After World War II, Hassidism was transplanted by immigrants to America, Israel, Canada, Australia, and Western Europe. Especially in New York and other American cities, it is now thriving as an evolving creative minority that preserves the Yiddish language and any of the religious traditions of pre-Holocaust Eastern European Jewry. The Hassidic ideal is to live a hallowed life, in which even the most mundane action is sanctified. The Hassidim live in tightly-knit communities (known as "courts") that are spiritually centred around a dynastic leader known as the rebbe, who combines political and religious authority. Hassidism is not a denomination but an all-embracing religious lifestyle and ideology, which is expressed somewhat differently by adherents of the diverse courts (also called "sects"). The Hassidic way of life is visually and musically arresting, with rich textures, unusual customs, and strong traditions of music and dance. Hassidic tales are intriguing and memorable doorways into a complex world of Hassidic thought, its religious themes and humour are fruits of a long and continuing oral tradition. Popularized in the non-Hassidic world by writers such as Martin

Buber, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and the subject of this Thesis, Elie Wiesel, they are famous for their particular wisdom and wit. Hassidism forms a separate entity within Judaism with its strict rules and a very different view on life and God. The main characteristics can be summarized in the basic principles of Hassidism: it emphasizes joyful spirituality and Divine perception, a renewed emphasis on prayer, camaraderie, deeds of kindness, and the study of tangible mystical texts. It offers the unlearned closeness to God through joy and fervour in daily life. Hassidic Judaism is not one movement, but a collection of separate individual groups with some commonality.

To conclude this chapter I would like to highlight the main ideas that I have introduced so far. I took into consideration the concept of identity from different perspectives with which I aimed at providing an overall view on one of the major terms of my Thesis. Identity as a complex and unique characteristic of the individual and it serves as the basis of the following chapter in which I will put Wiesel's *Night Trilogy* into the focal point. I will try to provide examples of Wiesel's lost and re-found Hassidic identity through his memories of the Holocaust.

2. The Night Trilogy and the Intersecting Narratives of Childhood and Holocaust Memories

One must write out of one's own experience, out of one's own identity. One must cater to no one; one must remain truthful. If one is read, it's good; if one is not read, it's too bad. But that should not influence the writer (Cargas 34).

In the previous chapter I focused on the different approaches of identity and their relationship with memory. I tried to give a broad overview on various approaches starting from philosophy, followed by psychology. I took into consideration the role that culture plays in the formation of identity and I also highlighted the most significant factors in which Jewish culture and Jewish identity differs. Finally, I pointed out the characteristics of Hassidism, the principles of which will fulfil a substantial part in the analysis of the three novels under discussion.

Now, I will aim at giving a general overview of the *Night Trilogy*, its main concepts and significant characteristics which may help understand the deeper meaning and message of Wiesel's probably most essential work. I will also touch upon Wiesel's main concept as a writer and Holocaust survivor, the role of the messenger he took on after he left Buchenwald, the last camp he was kept as a prisoner during World War II.

Wiesel's work induced one reviewer, Mayo Mosh to bring to mind Isaac Bashevis Singer's description of Jews as "a people who can't sleep themselves and let nobody else sleep" (Mohs 81). He continues: "While Elie Wiesel lives and writes, there will be no rest for the wicked, the uncaring or anyone else" (81).

Since the publication of *Night* in 1958, Wiesel, a Jewish survivor of the Nazi death camps, has become a desperate literary witness to the Holocaust. All of his works have the same intention that is to keep the conscience of Jews and non-Jews in an unrelenting focus on

the dreadfulness of the Holocaust and to make this, the worst of all evils, impossible to forget. As Wiesel says to become “a messenger of the dead among the living”.

In the previous chapter raised attention to the fact how important culture is and the community one is brought up in the formation of one's identity. In Wiesel's case, his Hassidic background and his faith in the Torah and in Talmudic teachings play a key role in his works. “How is it possible to believe in God after what happened ?”(Wiesel 194), he asks, but this question in *Night* due to the dreadful experiences he went through in the death camps is more than just a bitter cry out. It rises from the unquestionable and solid faith in God and from the confidence he has in his Hassidic background. His work is a fervent effort to break through the barrier the teachings might mean under these new circumstances towards new understanding and faith. He neither withdraws to atheism nor does he retreat to some kind of blind optimism offered by faith. What Wiesel cries out for is a stern and insolent battle with the Holocaust, and his trilogy with all his other works embark upon a much harder question: how is it possible *not* to believe in God after what happened? (194) This struggle with faith is the dominant conflict in his trilogy and it serves as the basis of all the other clashes.

Wiesel and through him, the faith of his three protagonists is a product of his studies in Jewish mysticism which taught him that God is everywhere in the world, that nothing exists without God, that in fact everything in the physical world is an emanation or reflection of the divine world. He grew up believing that everything on Earth reflects God's holiness and power. His faith is grounded in the idea that God is everywhere, all the time, that his divinity touches every aspect of his daily life. Since God is good, his studies teach him, and God is everywhere in the world, the world must therefore be good. These main theses of Hassidism are the foundations of his faith and the way he views the world around him.

His faith in goodness however, is irretrievably ruined by the brutality and wickedness he witnesses during the Holocaust. He cannot imagine that the incredible and revolting cruelty

could possibly mirror divinity. He speculates how a benevolent God could be part of such immorality and how an invincible God could allow such viciousness to happen. His faith is equally broken by the mercilessness and selfishness he experiences among the prisoners. If all the prisoners were to fight the pitiless repression of the Nazis, he believes, he would be able to identify the Nazi threat as a manifestation of Evil. Then it would be possible for him to sustain the belief that mankind is fundamentally good. But he sees that the Holocaust evokes the selfishness, evil, and brutality of which all of them not only the Nazis, but also his fellow prisoners, his fellow Jews, even himself is capable. If the world is so filthy and brutal, he ventures that God either must be filthy and brutal himself or cannot exist at all.

However, it is crucial not to be misled by these ideas or revelations. It is clear from the three novels that although, Wiesel is struggling with God and his faith, but does not abandon either of them completely. In the first passage of *Night*, Wiesel recalls a conversation with Moishe the Beadle about God and prayer. In this conversation the old man reveals an important concept that accompanies Wiesel throughout his life, or from our perspective, throughout the three books. He says:

Man comes closer to God through the questions he asks Him, he likes to say. Therein lies true dialogue. Man asks and God replies. But we don't understand his replies. We cannot understand them. Because they dwell in the depths of our souls and remain there until we die. The real answers, Eliezer, you will find only within yourself.

And why do you pray, Moishe?" I asked him.

"I pray to the God within me for the strength to ask Him the real questions" (23).

From this little passage one of the key concepts is unravelled. Questioning is primary to the idea of faith in God. The Holocaust urges Wiesel to ask terrible questions about the nature of good and evil and about whether God exists. "My anger rises up within faith and not outside it", Wiesel says, and this statement and the very fact that he asks questions can be

taken as a proof that despite the horrors he had to live through, he still maintains his faith and is still committed to his religion.

Wiesel's early works are overwhelmed by black despair and anguish, which also shows in the later recurring motive of night, though by slow degrees some forms of hope succeed this darkness and desperation. Even the titles of his early books show signs of such progress: *Night*, *Dawn* and *Day*.

The first book, *Night*, is a gloomy, heart-rending memoir of his faith-destroying experience in the concentration camps. In Harry James Cargas' *In Conversation with Elie Wiesel* he says the following of his first book:

Night, my first narrative, was an autobiographical story, a kind of testimony of one witness speaking of his own life, his own death. All kinds of options were available: suicide, madness, killing, political action, hate, friendship. I note all of these options: faith, rejection of faith, blasphemy, atheism, denial, rejection of man, despair and in each book I explore one aspect.

In *Dawn* I explore the political action; in *The Accident*, suicide; in *The Town Beyond the Wall*, madness; in *The Gates of the Forest*, faith and friendship; in *A Beggar in Jerusalem*, history, the return. All the stories are one story except that I build them in concentric circles. The centre is the same and is in *Night* (Cargas 86).

The *Night* metaphor stands not only for the book but, of course, for the Holocaust. The book poses the problem and depicts the appalling darkness out of which Wiesel has struggled to free himself. In *Night* his faith is devoured in the fires of the crematoria. God dies, and Wiesel's life is cursed. This moment is beautifully depicted in the following few lines in *Night*:

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 condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never (52).

Wiesel is a witness, a teller of tales, and a writer, in that order. Each of these roles is determined by the Holocaust. As a survivor, Wiesel has no choice but to tell all who will listen to what the silenced victims would tell if they could speak. He is a self-appointed witness on their behalf. In one of his addresses published in the *Jewish Digest* he says:

I remember; during those years, when we were dreamless old children in a kingdom called Night, we had but one wish left but it was a burning desire: to bear witness (40).

Wiesel deeply believes that he owes this work to the victims. He testifies for them with his novels, with the recollection of the way they lived and died in the camps. His testimony has been a means of coming to terms with the events themselves.

On the one hand, Wiesel's witness as a survivor is twofold. There is a witness he must bear, certainly, to the non Jew, the *executioner*. But, as well, he must witness to the Jew, the *victim*. On the other hand, however, he is more than just a bearer of testimony. He is an artist a storyteller, a writer, who being true to his Hassidic roots, believes in the power of the tale. Wiesel's work renders the tale of the Holocaust into literary art, but because of the subject, the art is more than art and his role as witness governs his role as a writer that he must continue to write whether his testimony meets with any response or not.

So far, I have tried to shed light upon Wiesel's main motivating source that is his personal experience of the Nazi concentration camps. I also emphasized another important factor in connection with his recollection of the events and that is his determination to stand for all of those Jews who lost their lives during the horrors of the extermination camps.

This constantly recurring desire not to allow the events to be forgotten results in intersecting narratives of memory in most of his novels, but most importantly in the trilogy that I wish to discuss in my Thesis.

Beginning with the publishing of *Night* in 1958, which can be viewed as the basis of all the books which Wiesel has written ever since with a special emphasis on the two other volumes, Holocaust is present in all of Wiesel's books.

Night was the foundation; all the rest is commentary. In each book, I take one character out of *Night* and give him a refuge, a book, a tale, a name, a destiny of his own.

(Cargas 3)

The memories of the sufferings and of those who did not have the chance to survive the war continuously reappear in the three books. The memories of the past are intersecting present events, and the thoughts Wiesel puts on paper are mixed with past recollections.

However, only two volumes out of the three are based on real events that Wiesel lived through; *Dawn*, the second in the series is only an assumption. In the preface of his second book Wiesel asks himself the question what he would have done if he had been in the same situation as Elisha, a recruited member of the Resistance and "a young survivor of the death camps; an orphan bereft not only of his father and mother, but of hope..." (143). Despite the fact that the main events of *Dawn* are only fictional, its purpose is the same as the other two bear: to keep the memories alive and not let them to be forgotten; to try to take on the role of the messenger and let the world know about the horrors Wiesel and millions of other Jews had to experience; to act as a witness again.

The witness begins with his testimony. In Wiesel's case testimony relates to the Holocaust. He becomes a true writer when his testimony is a tale, a story. The art of the witness, then, is a turning of testimony into story. The complexity of this lies in the attempt to place past events with the present situation in a story which is truly artistic: that is, not purely beautiful, but morally considerable. On the one hand, though, Wiesel is isolated from the victims whose tale he tells because he survived. On the other hand, he is separated from his readers because they have not seen what he has seen. The immense errand which Wiesel has

attempted has been to assemble in his tales the desperate worlds of the Holocaust victims in the past and of his post-Holocaust readers in the present. Wiesel lives in both worlds, I would say, he might belong to the past of the Holocaust. His effort has been to force into an imaginative form, into a story, these disjunctive worlds.

To take a step further from this basic concept, we will see that the three books form a close unit by not only having the same idea and purpose that is to raise awareness of the Holocaust itself, but by having the same motives and set of means to express despair, sorrow, disbelief, lost hope, inhumanity, religion, tradition, determination, and horror. Wiesel uses triad of concepts of night, silence, and fire which are present in all the three the novels.

First among the three concepts, I would like to examine “night”. This metaphor is indisputably among the most important ones. Right at the beginning, in the title of the first book we find night. This repeating allegory, as I have already referred to it at the beginning of this chapter, stands for the Holocaust, and it is among the most frequently used concept throughout the three books to express the darkest and cruellest of all terrors mankind has ever seen.

As the title of the first novel, night is in itself an open and direct reference to the event, however more approaches are possible to be given to explain the importance of the motive and to make it more perceptible to the reader. First among these approaches I would like to consider the Biblical allusion Wiesel makes. With the concept of night, Wiesel captures and prolongs the very beginning of the process of Creation. In the King James’ Version of the Bible it is written: “1. In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. / 2. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face the deep” (Gen. 1:1-1:2) God’s first act to create light and dispel darkness; darkness and night, thus stand for a world without God’s presence. Wiesel exploits this concept further by creating night when suffering is the worst, and its presence echoes Eliezer’s belief that he lives in a world without God. The

first time Eliezer mentions that “night fell” is when his father is interrupted while telling stories and informed about the deportation of Jews. Similarly, it is night when Eliezer first arrives at Auschwitz-Birkenau, and it is night, specifically “pitch darkness”, when the prisoners begin their dreadful run from Buna.

The metaphor of night, however has a somewhat different but still overwhelming meaning and significance in *Dawn*. In this fictional story most of the important conversations take place during the night with which Wiesel not only refers to a world in which God is not present; it is also an allusion to a state when Elisha and his friends from the Resistance form an underground movement in which everything is secret. And as secrets cannot be revealed, night of this kind cannot be lit by light. He writes in *Dawn*:

Midnight, I reflected, the hour when the dead rise out of their graves and come to say their prayers in the synagogue, the hour when God Himself weeps over the destruction of the Temple, the hour when a man should be able to plumb the depths of his being and to discover the Temple in ruins. A God that weeps and dead men that pray.

(Dawn 178)

In *Day*, the third piece in the trilogy, Wiesel returns to reality, to his own experiences. Night is present again, but not only in the recurring memories of the Holocaust but also with a different meaning. Night, as a matter of fact, is an allusion to death itself. And since Wiesel considers himself dead from the perspective of having lost his belief in a benevolent God and he feels ashamed of having survived the Holocaust despite the fact of being young, weak, and small, in a strange way, he finds reconciliation when night falls. The accident itself, which originally gave the title of the book, happens in the evening and the protagonist’s first encounter with Kathleen takes place at nightfall, as well.

The first line of the above quoted passage from *Night* brings along another important concept that is present in all three books, that is silence. This silence in the novels, however,

has a much greater significance: it stands for the lack of divine response as it is shown in the previous quote to which I shall return again: “Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live” (52).

Throughout the three novels, silence gains an important role. It always accompanies night and darkness, turning the horrible events into even more deserted memories. Silence is always present. Eliezer in the first book, Elisha in the second and Eliezer again, in the third do not speak, only when it is necessary. In the camp it could be dangerous to speak, though when he did so, most of the time he spoke to his father.

The rare dialogues of the three protagonists come in the form rather of a monologue; a monologue with themselves and with the family and old friends. Eliezer encounters his old friends through his memories, all the people he once knew and who are now dead. These silent conversations let us enter his thoughts and relive the terrible events beginning with the deportation and ending in the concentration camps. Elisha in *Dawn* continues this practice, though his fictional character speaks more than Eliezer in *Night*. Probably, most of the conversations are heard in *Day*. The dialogues with the doctor, the nurse, Kathleen and Gyula, the painter, almost outnumber the conversations he carries out silently through his memories. The gradual increase in the number of spoken dialogues can be considered as a sign; a sign of trying to find peace and perhaps the sign of slow reconciliation. Here, I would like to take a short digression and touch upon another aspect of the above cited lines of the third section.

This passage occurs just after Eliezer and his father realize that they have survived the first selection in Birkenau. It is most probably among the most famous passages of the book in which Eliezer breaks out of the continuous narrative stream with which he tells in his tale. As he reflects upon his horrendous first night in the concentration camp and its lasting effect on his life, Wiesel introduces the theme of Eliezer’s spiritual crisis and his loss of faith and God.

In its form, the passage resembles two significant pieces of literature: Psalm 150, from the Bible, and French author Emile Zola's 1898 essay "*J'accuse*." Psalm 150, the final prayer in the book of Psalms, is an ecstatic celebration of God. Each line begins, "Hallelujah," or "Praise God". Here, Wiesel constructs an inverse version of that Psalm, beginning each line with a negation: "Never." Both the form and the content of this passage reflect the inversion of Eliezer's faith and the morality of the world around him. Everything he once believed has been upside down, in the same way that this passage's words invert both the form and the content of Psalm 150.

Another comparison can be made between the passage in question and Zola's heated and passionate essay, "*J'accuse*", "*I Believe*". It was written as a response to the Dreyfus Affair, an incident in which a Jewish army officer was unjustly convicted of treason and was sentenced to penal servitude for life. The anti-Semitic context and the defiant tone invite comparison between the two texts. Just as Zola's piece, Wiesel's passage is also an impassioned polemic, but its target is God Himself. Zola's *J'accuse* is directed at corrupt army officers who have betrayed an innocent Jew; here, Eliezer's "never" is directed toward God. His hard words reflect more than anything else the degree of despair over the fact that his faith has been irreversibly shaken.

To continue the analysis of the three concepts, from which night and silence has been already examined, I would like to touch upon the use of the word "fire". Throughout *Night* fire plays an important role. It not only stands for the idea of death like night, for example, but it has a deeper significance that can be better understood by taking into consideration the Biblical aspects of the word.

In the Bible and in the Jewish tradition fire represents God and thus good. When God appears in front of his people in the form a burning thorn, he reveals Himself for Moses and gives him the two tables with the Ten Commandments. Fire is also used as a means to punish

the evil in Hell or Gehenna in Jewish tradition, and that is one of the darkest contradictions in *Night*. In the death camps fire is the means of destruction, the operating force of the crematoria. Thus, it is not the evil that is punished but the innocent who meet their death in the fire. The reverse of religious concepts can be viewed as the manifestation of Wiesel's world in which everything but most importantly the basic concepts and values turn upside down, signifying the irreversible inconsistency that the Holocaust means to the Jews and to the modern world.

Religious observance and tradition that provide the basis of Wiesel's trilogy and of the three protagonists play a major role in the books. In the first section of *Night*, there are frequent mentions of religion and religious observance. Eliezer begins his story mentioning the Talmud and his Jewish studies and prayer rituals. By the end of *Night*, however, the presence of Jewish observance is almost vanished from the text. By specifically avoiding Jewish terminology, Eliezer implies that religious observance has ceased to be a part of his life. Eliezer's feelings about this loss are ambiguous: he has claimed that he has lost all faith in God, yet there is clearly regret and sadness in his tone when he discusses the lack of a religious memorial for his father. Although Eliezer's explicit mentions of religion vanish, religious metaphor holds *Night's* entire narrative structure together.

So far, I tried to give a closer and more detailed analysis of Wiesel's *Night Trilogy*. To summarise the main ideas of this chapter, let me give a short overview of the most important concepts I have so far examined.

First, I took into consideration Elie Wiesel's religious background, highlighting the Hassidic roots he has followed as a writer and which guided him through the time he spent in death camps. However, when taking into account this religious attachment one faces the first destruction in the *Trilogy*: the questioning of God, His benevolence and faithfulness to His people, in consequence of the horrors Wiesel and through him, his protagonists experience in

Nazi occupation and in the exterminating camps. This disappointment and anger Eliezer feels serves as the major moving force of the three novels.

Second, I touched upon the three main concepts of the *Trilogy*, that are night, silence and fire-that are used by Wiesel to express the dreadfulness of the events during the Holocaust. The three metaphors have significance not only in the first volume of the series, *Night*, but also in *Dawn* and *Day*. Here, they serve as a means with which the events and memories become more perceptible to the reader. They also have an important role in keeping the unity of the three novels by providing the same concepts and ideas.

Finally, I mentioned religious observance through which Wiesel and his characters view the events in each of the three books. As the main recurring theme of the novels is the loss of faith in God, this religious approach reassures not only the protagonists and Wiesel but the readers as well that, though the horrors annihilated the innocence of Wiesel's belief in and benevolent and omnipotent God, the questions he asks Him show the unrelenting wish and desire to gain back at least something from past.

With his the *Night Trilogy*, Wiesel established himself not only as an appreciated writer and survivor of the Holocaust but as a messenger and story teller as well. Through his memories and his determination not let the most horrible event of mankind be forgotten, he provided reconciliation and support for many of those who, like him, survived that dreadful period of humanity and according to his belief, to those who never had the chance to experience freedom again. His works also serve as a constant reminder for all of us not to let such degree of inhumanity happen again.

3. The Place of Jewish-American Literature in Post-War American Literature in Consideration of Elie Wiesel

Post-war American literature is particularly difficult to classify. As Bollobás points out in *Az amerikai irodalom története* it is due to the diversity of cultures in that time. Therefore, the classification of Jewish-American literature is also rather indefinable as we have to deal with a variety of expressions that are apparently secondary, but they indicate different readings nonetheless. While, for example, American-Jewish literature entails a certain pan-Jewish literature that unites Jews of different nationalities and is applied for writers of the pre-World War II era, Jewish-American literature is regarded as a legitimate component of American literature. Yet, the question evolves: what precisely makes this kind of literature Jewish? (Bollobás 605)

Bollobás regards those authors Jewish-American who reiterating their cultural legacy relate to Jewish religion, culture, history, and memory and subsequently they represent their affiliations in their work. Therefore, Jewish writers who do not deal with Jewish identity in their works do not belong here, according to this classification. (605)

In his review of American-Jewish literature Mark Schecher argues that in the period following World War II the children and grandchildren of the first generation immigrants came of age. Particularly in literature, Jews at last had the chance to grow to the privileged few, but other professions also became available for them due to the fall of social bounds following the World War.(3) According to Schecher again, the Holocaust bequeathed these Jewish authors in confusion. Similarly to many other intellectuals, he claims that the Holocaust affects everyone who is Jewish. As their own people were murdered, part of their selves died with them, no matter whether or not actually witnessed, experienced or heard about these horrors. As a result, many Jewish writers became alienated from their roots and their culture. The reason why these writers did not write about the Holocaust, Schecher

suggests, is that it was a buried wound for most of the following generations and not because they were apathetic. (5)

However, in his work, Leslie Fiedler also draws attention to the crisis of the Jewish-American writer, in terms of being stuck between two cultures. Furthermore, Fiedler argues that the current positive reception has to do with the terrors of the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel. Jews were no longer regarded as the number one slot among the insulted (65-66). By this time, Jewish-Americans have become an integral part of American culture, and as Fiedler suggests, their impact and presence can be felt not only in literature but in other areas in life as well. Without doubt it can be said that Jews form an important part of popular culture (65).

According to Fiedler, this kind of achievement is what the Jewish-American author has wished for. He also claims that the concept of a Jewish-American literature embodies a dream of assimilation which will end in triumph or with other words personal success and a defeat as well in form of Jewish Survival. Fiedler indicates that the old nightmares of the immigrants such as anti-Semitism and prosecution were substituted by new areas as their integration to America moved from the social to psychological level (71).

For the first generation of the immigrants who arrived to the United States with the great Jewish immigration wave after the pogroms of the 1910's, had not the least chance to integrate into society, let alone assimilate. Burdened with their traditions and habits brought with them from Europe, they were overwhelmingly and irreversibly alienated from previous generations. Due to the completely new environment, they either proved to be unable to make a good living or they had to desert their old habits completely to be able to invent new identities.

However, the second generation of immigrants identifies itself as American already. Their children reject even that little part of Jewish tradition that the parents have maintained. Besides, they clearly fulfil the American dream and become very successful in society.

The second generation is the transitory one and halfway house between two continents. They are American, yet they are closer to their European roots. It is a tension for this generation of writers as well, thus Jewish-American literature can be viewed as a transition. Similarly to the changes and to the integration and assimilation of Jewish immigrants into society, the formation of Jewish-American literature is a result of integration and assimilation into the American literary tradition.

As the direct consequence and side-effect of assimilation, it is important to touch upon the concept of secularization. It is a gradual loss of the importance of religion in the individuals' life. For the European Jewry, assimilation and the will to integrate were the main reasons of secularization. Religion in the formation of Jewish identity is a very sensitive field. Their notion of being the chosen people was originally a religious concept. What was going on in the 20th Century's secularized communities was the shifting of this feeling of shared roots and calling from God to something else. One cannot be sure that the shared cultured ethos will be enough to keep this minority group together.

To the writers, religion is an anachronism and something they fail to understand. Judaism stops being a part of their lives. As secularization becomes a fact for the late 20th century, the Jewish-American community has to define itself as 'chosen' on different grounds; grounds not yet unanimously defined.

Similarly to European Jewry, the Holocaust has played a significant role in Jewish-American literature. Due to the first immigration wave in the first decade of the 20th century, personal experiences of life in the concentration camps among American Jews were hardly possible. However, for those who fought in the war and most importantly those Jews who

arrived after the liberation of the camps memories were overwhelming and heartrending. Americans have confronted the Holocaust through the eyes of others, with only immigrant survivors and some soldiers having had direct contact with its horror.

The first American encounter with the Holocaust can be found in the writings of returning American soldiers. Their encounters first appeared in literature in such as John Hersey's *The Wall* in 1950, Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant*, and Lewis Wallant's *The Pawnbroker*, published in 1961. In addition to the short list above, best-selling writers, Jews and non-Jews, have used the Holocaust or the Nazi camps as a theme in their works, too. Among them are Saul Bellow (*Mr. Sammlers's Planet*, 1972), William Styron (*Sophie's Choice*, 1979), Cynthia Ozik (*The Shawl*, 1989), Louis Begley (*The Man Who Was Late*, 1993), Pat Conroy (*Beach Music*, 1996), and Belva Plain (*Legacy of Silence*, 1998). In the two decades following the Eichmann Trial, a kind of "fascination with Nazism" led to the flourishing of the American literature on the Holocaust; around this time, but more so in the mid-1970s onward, the voices of the survivors began to be heard.

Preceding these personal encounters, Elie Wiesel was among the firsts who put their memories of past experiences of the Holocaust on paper and somehow found reconciliation in writing. With his first book published more than ten years after the liberation of the Nazi death camp where he was kept as a prisoner, Wiesel built his reputation as a Holocaust survivor. He works and fights for not letting the memories of those millions who died be forgotten.

His works are probably the best known pieces of Holocaust literature (written in French, and later translated into English), written by a Jewish writer. Wiesel's literary productivity has been vast. He is a man clearly possessed of a force to justify every second of his existence. His literature is all of a piece with his life. His books, even his novels, are autobiographical and each of them is an essential part of the montage formed by his past experiences and his

spiritual growth. They reflect his own soul, and they were written in completion of a calling which encompasses not only his writing, but his other roles he has taken on as a messenger. Elie Wiesel, whose works were translated into English, has arguably made the greatest impact on the American public.

He became a U.S. citizen in 1963 after having worked in Paris, the Far East and in Palestine as a journalist. Due to his work and his influence on other writers, he constantly keeps awareness of probably the most terrible event in the history of mankind. In the last decade of the twentieth century the impact of Holocaust literature has been so great that its study has become a staple course at many universities and colleges in the United States.

His works are courageous protests against indifference. He has overcome the Holocaust by defining it and by refusing to give up the human. His witness to the Holocaust, by its very defiance, has broken the stranglehold of despair on him. Whatever may its impact be on mankind, it has allowed Wiesel himself to remain human.

Conclusion

The twentieth century was characterized by one of the cruellest and most incomprehensible events of human history that is World War II and the Holocaust. Millions of people, including Jews, Romani and other political prisoners died in the Nazi concentration camps leaving the rest of the world silent and ashamed. As one of the main countries in history providing shelter to asylum seekers, the United States became the home of the many who survived the horrors of the concentration camps. In my thesis I aimed at approaching the question of the Holocaust a different perspective that is through the novels of Jewish-American Holocaust survivor. I placed one of the most significant of Jewish writers, Elie Wiesel in the focus of my paper who, starting from the little Romanian town of Szigeth and being a Holocaust survivor himself, has become a messenger of the one of the most tragic and dreadful events in human history.

First, to provide support for my ideas unfolded in the second and third part of my thesis, in the first chapter I tried to give a broader overview on the different explanations on the concept of identity. That is to say, I touched upon the philosophical and psychological approach and in close connection with the formation of identity I emphasized the importance of culture. I also provided an overall view on Jewish identity as one of the fundamental issues of my thesis and finally I restricted the concept in question to Hassid identity.

Second, in the second part of my thesis I tried to give a comprehensive overview on Elie Wiesel's autobiographical trilogy from a perspective of the recurring motive of intersecting narratives of memory. I aimed at examining the question of identity and its role in processing the experience of the Holocaust. I used Wiesel's personal recollections found in the novels and several journals and published papers on Wiesel's works. Through the recurring motifs of fire, night and silence I tried to give a solid background to my assumption that the three books form a close unity and serve as a tool to liberate the memories of the Holocaust.

Third, I tried to examine Jewish-American literature itself from a perspective of Holocaust literature. By giving an overview on the history of Jewish presence in the United States and from the decades after the Holocaust in American literature I aimed at demonstrating the importance of Jewish writers in American literary canon. With exploring the existence of the concept “Jewish-American literature” I intended to draw attention to the important role Jewish writers, among them survivors of the Holocaust play in keeping the public awareness alive and not let the Shoah be forgotten.

By placing Elie Wiesel in the American literary canon I aimed at raising the attention of the reader towards the significance of his novels and of his voluntarily undertaken role of the messenger; a role that has lifted him above the everyday concept of the “writer”.

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