

REVIEW ARTICLE:

Ben Eilbott

Ben Eilbott received his M.A. degree in English Literature from Columbia University and is presently associated with the New York educational system.

REPRESENTATIVE WORKS OF THE HOLOCAUST LITERATURE

Insofar as they deal historically and in fiction with the humanity and bestiality of man, and, the death and life of Europe's Jews, *The Holocaust Kingdom*,¹ *I Cannot Forgive*,² *Night*,³ and *Soul of Wood*⁴ share a common agony. Insofar as it deals with the continued torture of the questions (and its victims) does *The Town Beyond the Wall*⁵ share in the agony of the others. And no review examining the facts and the problems can be either objective or conclusive.

Donat's book, in many ways journalism more than narrative, a report more than a memoir, must surely be one of the grimmest travelogues on record. Warsaw, Maidanek, Auschwitz, Radom, Birkenau, Ravensbruck, Dachau — names among the death centers that were home for him and his wife, as, at first together and then in separate horrors, they existed through the Warsaw Ghetto and beyond, to be reunited in some miraculous manner after the war not only with

each other, but also with the young son they had smuggled out of the Ghetto before the uprising. The story is Donat's, counterpointed by sketches of the ordeals of wife and child.

The miracle of *The Holocaust Kingdom* is compounded by the predictable, recurring tragedy of man as chronicled in *I Cannot Forgive*. Vrba's story is the documented narrative of one who not only existed in Auschwitz's non-world for years, but who in 1944 became one of that handful that had ever escaped alive. It was then that he was catapulted into the greater tragedy of disbelief and silence, and, in the ultimate instance by those who did believe, concern with self and family alone. It is here that *The Deputy* and the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials are adumbrated, as Vrba addresses himself to the latter in an epilogue that reviews and examines how the horror of being disbelieved could have been turned against his shouts of warning by

¹*The Holocaust Kingdom*, Alexander Donat. Holt, Rinehart & Winston, New York, 1963, 1965.

²*I Cannot Forgive*, Vrba & Bestic. Grove Press, Inc., New York, 1964.

³*Night*, Elie Wiesel. Hill and Wang, New York, 1960.

⁴*Soul of Wood and Other Stories*, Jakov Lind. Grove Press, New York, 1964.

⁵*The Town Beyond the Wall*, Elie Wiesel. Atheneum, New York, 1964.

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the many, at the same time as capital gains were made by the few who listened and believed. At a time when mass resistance was still possible, the mass of Jews did not listen, while many of their leaders — specifically among the Hungarians, and specifically Rudolf Kastner — planned selectively. And where, on the other hand, do we place the latter? Surely not lower than those — murderers and murdered — who in the embrace of death expunged from their consciences all but the thoughts of self and its physical existence. So there are those who submitted, with or without a prayer; there are those who in deafness and blindness — or again in submission — refused to listen while still there may have been time; and there are those who heard and saw and helped themselves. Where then does the guilt lie? Where then was the stand to be made, and against and by whom?

There are those who submitted, with or without a prayer. Although *The Holocaust Kingdom* gives us a survivor's memory of the Ghetto uprising, the fully committed stand of the Jew no longer submissive, it fills more of its pages with accounts of those who did submit, and, in submitting, betrayed others and themselves.

Donat, himself the chronicler of the Ghetto uprising, and himself the living testimonial to one man's tenacious will to survive, speaks of submission.

We had the souls of slaves, of cowards; we were crippled by two thousand years of pogroms and ghettos, two thousand years of the Sixth Commandment had tamed

and blunted in us that natural virile impulse of revenge. The sublime words, "Thou shalt not kill," which had been our shield against murder and persecution became the shield and protector of a nation of murderers and our alibi for our own cowardice and weakness.

Although *I Cannot Forgive* is by its very existence a book of resistance and a call for revenge, it too speaks of docility, blindness, concern with self, and submission: Submission by the mass; submission by the individual; resistance in submission; resistance direct, futile or, once in a million instances, successful; resistance only by the individual, never by the mass. And always the question of God, in and through and everywhere in submission and resistance.

Night, a short, lucid, tremendously moving personal record, covers in stark, very simple prose the same ground, the same terror, the same murders. It is the story of a young boy and his father and their struggle to be alive together; and though gradually God dies in the soul of the boy, still the boy does not let go, even through torture, and still the father thinks of his son and for him. Yet even so there are limits beyond which neither can go despite the years of agony shared alive and being still alive, together.

There was silence all round now, broken only by groans. In front of the block, the SS were giving orders. An officer passed by the beds. My father begged me: "My son, some water . . . I'm burning . . . My stomach . . ." "Quiet, over there!" yelled the officer . . . The officer came up to him . . . and The officer came up to him . . . and

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dealt him a violent blow on the head with his truncheon. I did not move. I was afraid. My body was afraid of also receiving a blow. Then my father made a rattling noise and it was my name: "Eliezer." I did not move . . .

I awoke on January 29, [1945, three months before liberation] at dawn. In my father's place lay another invalid. They must have taken him away before dawn and carried him to the crematory. He may still have been breathing. There were no prayers at his grave . . . His last word was my name. A summons, to which I did not respond . . . And in the depths of my being, in the recesses of my weakened conscience, could I have searched it, I might perhaps have found something like — free at last!

Though the symbolic title is *Night*, though death does inevitably come between father and son, resistance is in the boy even after he has begun to believe. Resistance in the refusal to die. Resistance in the playing of Beethoven's violin concerto in a cattle car, sealed, with decaying and near-corpses crushed in embrace. Resistance after a voice within had said, "Where is God now? Here He is — He is hanging here on this gallows with that child still alive after half an hour, swollen, blue tinged." Resistance in the refusal to die unless killed. Was there then really a dying of God?

There are those who heard and saw and believed, and helped themselves. *Soul of Wood*, a grotesque, scarring collection of short stories, distorts and invents, but it too deals with the same common denominators. The Austrian servant who has promised to watch over the paraplegic son of his employers in re-

turn for the apartment they willed him as they were deported, this servant, with his soul in his wooden leg and his obedience stretched between the Viennese experimenter on Jewish invalids and the physician who routinely and, according to program and schedule, pumps fresh country air into his Jewish patients' carotid arteries, knows he will be redeemed after the holocaust if only he can find and hug the Jewish skeleton of his Jewish paraplegic, who, hidden on a mountain-top, is no longer paraplegic, not a skeleton, and fought over by those who also believed and planned for themselves.

So, in some way, though absurd and grotesque and bizarre, every story in the collection fits into *The Holocaust Kingdom* and *Night* and *I Cannot Forgive*. For without great effort we can fit in the refugees who, naked, beget children incestuously and then eat them; the pious brother, whose memories of the Jewesses he has helped to kill, in the forgotten, not-to-be-forgotten near past, excite him in his contacts now; and the helpless victim in the railroad carriage about to let himself be eaten by his fellow passenger.

So we come full circle to *The Town Beyond the Wall*, Wiesel's most recent book. Full circle, for we start again as though nothing had ever ended, as of course it never did, and as of course it never will. The way of writing is a Kafka way of writing at times, and the message in many ways is that kind of message.

In flashbacks connected to the Nazi "torment" and its sequels, the

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tale leads beyond the Iron Curtain physically and to Communist tortures that equal in their inventiveness death-dealing Auschwitz and all the experimenters' experiments. But there is more, for the tale also leads back into a young boy's memory, and to the symbol of all those who did not believe or resist, and, finally, to the "face in the window" that watched while "victim and executioner" went obediently through their paces.

For seven days the great courtyard of the synagogue filled and emptied. He, standing behind the curtains, watched. The police beat women and children; he did not stir. It was no concern of his . . . a spectator, that's what he was. He wanted to live in peace and quiet . . . The face is neither Jewish nor anti-Jewish; a simple spectator, that's what it is . . .

After the face in the window has been confronted at war's end, so that the explanation that never came throughout the long death years can finally be found, even if at the expense of capture by those who would never understand why one returned to this old home town beyond The Wall in order to find out, the confrontation ends badly.

"I remember."

"With shame?"

"No."

"With remorse?"

"No."

"With sadness?"

"No. With nothing at all. There's no emotion attached to the memory."

I leaned forward slightly. "What did you feel then?"

"Nothing." . . .

"Coward!" I shouted . . . "You're a shameful coward! You haven't got the courage to do either good

or evil! The role of spectator suited you to perfection . . .

"You hate me, don't you?" . . . His voice had suddenly taken on a human tone . . .

"No," I said. "I don't hate you."

A pause; then: "I feel contempt for you . . . You don't feel contempt for the executioner; you hate him and you want him dead . . ."

"Ah," he said. "You won't do it. You won't humiliate me." . . .

No man shouts his scorn and disgust at another with impunity. At the corner of the street . . . a car braked sharply . . . two arms flashed out like lightning to drag me inside. In the front seat sat the spectator. I had barely left his house when he was off to warn the policeman on the corner. Our eyes met. "Now you'll have to hate me!"

Did you spit in his face?

No.

The man turned you in, and you didn't spit in his face?

No, my friend. I smiled at him. I smiled at the man to whom I had played God.

That's crueler.

So it has come full circle, and he is on his way to be tortured and to play the game again as he had played it before. Only this time he plays it in a different barracks, with other executioners, and this time he does not see his body escape. Though he can pass on his resistance as he brings words and recognition to the child-like companion of his cell, who, beaten and degraded and deprived, will live while he will succumb, still it is no more than continuing the tale to the next teller — and the next spectator.

Of course, we died for real, but that wasn't the point. The way in which we die is what counts . . . And we went at it as if we were playing a game. Without protesting, without fighting back . . . we let ourselves be cast as victims . . .

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The victims were exemplary victims. Of course, they did not know. They did not know how the story went on, how it ended. They should have known. They could have known. They could have known. There were a few who knew, who had seen . . . The others shut them up. Stopped their mouths . . . Those were the rules of the game . . .

Is it a game, then? Has it always been a game? A tale of holocaust

kingdom, and night, and a town beyond the wall? Who is the victor — the executioner or he who forces him to swing the axe?

“You must hate me,” said the face.

“Like a dog,” thinks K. in *The Trial*, as, with faltering eyes, he watches his executioners watch his death. “Like a dog.” as if the shame of it would survive him.