OF BOOKS, MEN AND IDEAS

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OUT OF THE DEPTHS . . .

I.

That all would not be silence on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the fateful revolution which has radically altered the history of mankind is certain. If the sequence of events in Russia in 1917 and its causes will continue to be the subject of learned debate among historians and political scientists, the sequence of events that led to the inhuman existence of the Jews in that country would inevitably be the subject of even greater scrutiny by analysts of Jewish affairs.

And much has been written in recent years about the Jews in Russia. Historians, political scientists, correspondents, and travelling rabbis have recorded their impressions of that enigmatic country which, a half century ago, was supposed to create a new paradise for mankind, including, of course, Jews. And if the revolutionaries, repressed both by the Tsar and by the Church, were able to ameliorate their woes by turning left, the same could not be said for the Jew living there. Theirs was and is the suffering of silence.

But, however truthfully the pages of these historians and reporters bristle with the convulsions, revolutions, and experiments that have come and gone in modern Russia, ultimately they only teach and, at times, preach. What is needed is not only the facts and their interpretation but also the revelation of history, for, as Henry James once observed, "the reporter, however philosophic, has one law, and the originator, however substantially fed, has another." And the "originator" can reveal, with as much passionate eloquence as the historian, the essence of personae and events. "For what is the historical sense after all," James added, "but animated, but impassioned knowledge seeking to enlarge itself."

One such "originator" is Elie Wiesel. Having previously recorded his tragic complaint against the absurd of our times in *Night, Dawn, The Accident, The Town Beyond the Wall,* among other works, he inevitably sought, one day, a faithful dialogue with the embodiment of woe in our times — the Jews in Russia. The result is *The Jews of Silence.** This little book, beautifully designed and printed, is a moving, impressionistic and highly personal account of a visit to Russia. Originally written as a series of articles for the Israeli newspaper

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* *The Jews of Silence* by Elie Wiesel. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966.

Yediot Achronot, it is here superbly translated by Neal Kozodoy, who also provides an "Historical Afterword," giving this small volume the quality of combining history and art.

Mr. Wiesel's art is dramatic. He writes with passion and eloquence. Drawn by "the silence of the Jews," he went to Russia just prior to the High Holy Days of 1965, and "brought back their cry." To his amazement, however, he learned that this cry came not from their throats but, of all things, from their eyes. For the eye, he rapidly discerned, can cry without tears. Nowhere is this phenomenon more powerfully — and painfully — expressed than in that frightening passage with which he opens this personal report:

> Their eyes — I must tell you about their eyes. I must begin with that, for their eyes precede all else, and everything is comprehended within them. The rest can wait. It will only confirm what you already know. But their eyes — their eyes flame with a kind of irreducible truth, which burns and is consumed. Shamed into silence before them, you can only bow your head and accept the judgment. Your only wish is to see the world as they do. A grown man, a man of wisdom and experience, you are suddenly impotent and terribly impoverished. Those eyes remind you of your childhood, your orphan state, cause you to lose all faith in the power of language. Those eyes negate the value of words; they dispose of the need for speech.

II.

In Russia — before and after the Revolution — the value of words was, indeed, negated. As early as March 1914, Lenin, drafting a thesis on nationality, clearly defined the future legal status of the Jewish community by providing for the "repeal of all restrictions upon the rights of Jews and, in general, of restrictions based on a person's national descent." And for a while — at least until 1948 — Jews enjoyed, to be sure, a cultural life of their own, with newspapers, books, journals, publishing houses, schools, professional theaters and research institutions. (The language of instruction permitted by the government was always Yiddish, never Hebrew, which was considered reactionary and an instrument of Zionism.) Yet, despite the Soviet Constitutions of 1918 and 1925 providing that "oppression of national minorities in whatever form, [or] any restriction of rights . . . is wholly incompatible with the fundamental laws of the Republic," and despite the U.S.S.R. ratification of the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education in 1962, "there is today in the entire length and breadth of the U.S.S.R. not a single Yiddish school or single Yiddish class."

What the Soviet regime is really after is the complete destruction of all forms of Jewish cultural life. Prior to his trip, Mr. Wiesel shrank from the thought that the Russians, who had themselves lost some twenty million lives in their struggle against Hitler, could still believe it possible to destroy the spirit of a people — any people. Such an idea struck him as anachronistic and absurd. "One must, after all, learn *something,*" he thought, "from his-

tory." But he learned differently. Ethnic groups of far smaller size than Russia's Yiddish-speaking community are, we know, provided with hundreds of book titles annually and have their own theaters and periodicals. But for the Jewish community — of whom some half a million claimed Yiddish as their mother tongue in the offlcial Soviet census of 1959 — "the total output of books for the entire post-Stalin period amounts to fewer than ten titles, mostly classics." No wonder, he is forced to conclude, that "the Russian government has embarked on a clear and relentless policy of spiritual destruction."

But Russian destruction, as regards Jews, is not limited to the "spirit"; it concentrates equally and as savagely on the "body." The plain, woeful fact is that Jews, who have been living in Russia for centuries, are still treated as aliens. "As a people they are identified with Judaism, a hostile ideology, and both in turn are identified with the State of Israel, an 'imperialist puppet.' " Judaism, according to the Russian mind, kills love for the Soviet motherland. Thus, in the early fifties, nine Jewish doctors, respected and honored in the Soviet medical profession, were suddenly arrested and "wildly charged with prying on the highest echelon of Soviet government and military leadership — at the direction of Jewish-American-British intelligence." Known as the "doctors plot," it cast serious doubt, for example, in the minds of many foreign obesrvers, especially Harrison Salisbury, the *New York Times* correspondent then in Moscow, as "to the health and safety of the members of the Soviet government."

The government, of course, survived; but not the doctors. They were swiftly "removed" from office. Many were later "restored"; some, alas, were beyond restoration. And Stalin, that unholy god of terror whose "health" was at that time in grave danger, finally met his death from what must be assumed as natural causes. Things ought to be, some Jews thought, better. Nothing, alas, changed. Kurshchev, despite the devastating denunciation of his predecessor and the "removal" of some of the previous restrictions on the life and freedom of the Russian people, continued to follow the same policy of virulent anti-Semitism.

Consider, for example, the widespread judicial abuses, begun with such intensity in May, 1961, against Jews for "economic crimes." One need only recall the cases of Morris Bukhbinder, R. A. Frekhtman, and Nay Moishevich Treibman — of Stavropol, Chernovtsy, and Kiev respectively — who, together with a disproportionate number of other Jews, were falsely accused of embezzlement, bribery, and currency speculation. They were, of course, put to death. The reintroduction of capital punishment for economic crimes, the false accusations, the mobilization of all major state, party, and public organs, the massive virulent propaganda in the press of the entire U.S.S.R. — all reveal, as Moshe Decter cogently concludes, dismay and disgust, that, despite constitutional provisions and criminal statutes, there exists in this decade, as

in former ones, "not only an atmosphere of illegality, arbitrariness, and arrogance but also that 'anything goes' when Jews are accused of crimes."

Or, take the latest case, under the present regime, of Solomon Borisovich Dolnik. As reported in *Izvestia* of February 24, 1967, this elderly Jew, a retired engineer-geodesist who frequented the synagogue, is accused of collecting espionage data and slander against the state for the Israeli Embassy. From the "testimony" recorded in this newspaper, it is quite obvious that, as regards evidence, "anything goes," indeed. One can only lament with A. Gorkin, Chairman of the U.S.S.R. Supreme Court — equivalent to our Chief Justice — who found, among the many serious violations of law in Soviet courts, the following: "Unsubstantiated convictions, punishment disproportionate to the crimes, infringement of the right of defense in court . . . verdicts and sentences based not on evidence produced in court, but on presumption of guilt based on preliminary investigation and indictment, exaggeration of the validity of an accused's confession, precise minutes of trials not recorded making it impossible to determine whether the trial verdict and sentence were fair . . . and undue and improper attention paid, in the conduct of trials and in imposing sentences, to statements appearing in the press."

Little wonder, therefore, that the "eyes" of Russian Jews "told" Mr. Wiesel, among other things, that not only do they feel insecure but unwanted. "From all sides they are made to believe that Russia can get along quite nicely without them; in fact, that Russia without them would be a better place. And the ugly truth is that the authorities do nothing to contradict this impression." Unwanted, and denied civil and religious rights, the Jews are made to suffer even more by being deprived of the chance, let alone the right, to leave. The borders seem forever closed. Ultimately, the visitor concludes, "it is only the Jews who live in permanent fear, in this infectious mystery."

III.

Denied everything, the Jews in Russia — at least a good many of them — hold on to something: their own identity. Though impoverished spiritually and economically, they cannot, as Maurice Friedberg has correctly observed, really assimilate because "complete assimilation is possible only under conditions of tolerance." Though the fact that they are neither allowed to be Jews nor to assimilate brings intense pain and despair, it also "brings about, as a natural reaction, a feeling of revulsion toward the hostile Gentile world and a reversion to values once abandoned." Denied, too, the elemental right to feel at home in a country they have inhabited for ages, they rekindle "a renewed interest in the Jewish heritage, and very often a feeling of strong ethnic identity."

That feeling finds expression in their abiding love for Israel and, for some, tradition. Ever since Golda Meir, Israel's first ambassador to Russia, took her now famous walk

on the High Holy Days to Moscow's Central Synagogue, and was followed by some ten thousand fellow religionists, the Jews there have regarded the fledgling State of Israel "as a distant dream filling the veins of reality with sacred blood." And now, whenever a visitor listens carefully to the cry that echoes thrice from the multitude of worshippers at the close of Yom Kippur services, "Next year in Jerusalem!", he will realize that it is more than a cry: it is an oath of fidelity.

Thus, Mr. Wiesel comes to the startling but justified, it would appear to him from what he had seen, conclusion that "if Israel had been established solely for the sake of the Russian Jews, it would have fulfilled its purpose. If it existed solely to demonstrate to them that they must not despair, that a dream is indeed capable of becoming reality, that would have been sufficient." Be that as it may, what is, indeed, certain is that, given the opportunity, they would flee the fear and discrimination which pursue them.

Unable, as yet, to flee, some of them find strength in tradition. To be sure, Judaism, unlike other recognized religious bodies, has lacked any semblance of a coordinating structure since 1926. In that year, a Conference of Rabbis of the Soviet Union, consisting of some 25 local rabbis and 90 more rabbis as invited guests was held for the last time. As William Korey observes, "the absence of a central federative Jewish structure results, naturally, in the fragmentation of religious life and limits effective resistance to the anti-religious campaign." Given such conditions, who would have thought that laws and customs, discredited and disallowed by fiat and fear, would still be practiced? Carried out clandestinely, these practices indicate the irrepressible strength of the Jews and their traditions.

That such strength exists is certain. Mr. Wiesel relates two stories he heard during his trip: one, an act of communal heroism; the other, an example of individual piety. Both are set in Georgia. The first deals with Jews who, refusing to allow their synagogue to be razed in order to house a new Komsomol Club, blocked the bulldozers by lying down in the street and refusing to move. The authorities, anxious to avoid a riot, revoked their decision to destroy the house of worship.

The second is as inspiring as it is chilling. Mr. Wiesel tells it best:

> One morning there was a knock at the door of a man who for some years had secretly and at great risk brought dozens of children into the covenant of Abraham. His wife opened the door, and was confronted by a Russian colonel. "Does Comrade K. . . . live here?" Terrified, she answered yes. The officer demanded to speak to her husband. "I have heard that you are a *mohel;* true or not?" the man tried to deny it. "Don't waste your breath." The officer commanded the man to get dressed; his wife packed his personal belongings in a satchel. "Take your 'instruments'," the colonel ordered.
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> They got into an army vehicle, and the man was blindfolded. They rode for about half an hour, then got out; the colonel opened a door and removed the blindfold. They were standing in a well-furnished apartment. A woman lay in bed, a

> crib by her side. "You must circumcise my son," the colonel said. The ceremony took five minutes. The father asked the price, but the *mohel* refused to take money. The colonel would not hear of it. He gave the man 25 rubles and two bottles of vodka, blindfolded him again, and drove him home.

However moving, this powerful tale pales before the author's most thrilling experience of the entire visit, an experience which, it would appear, affects all foreigners, of whatever conviction, fortunate enough to be present on that occasion: the night of *Simchat Torah*. Under the vigilant eyes of the secret police, some thirty thousand youngsters — some third generation after the Revolution — assembled in front of Moscow's Central Synagogue to dance all night, borne along in the crush of humanity by their defiant resolve to identify with their past and future. At least once during the year these people are allowed to declare, without fear or shame, their inner Jewishness. With laughter, song, and hand-clapping, they proclaim the eternity of the Jewish people.

The imapct of this experience taught Mr. Wiesel, as it must all others, that "young Jews in Russia want to return to Judaism, but without knowing what it is. Without knowing why, they define themselves as Jews. And they believe in the eternity of the Jewish people, without the slightest notion of the meaning of its mission. That is their tragedy." And what is even more tragic, perhaps, is their feeling of being abandoned by the Jews outside Russia. Granted that conditions may no longer be similar to those under Stalin, they are still sufficiently ominous to make the Jews of Russia question whether their brethren beyond the Iron Curtain really care. "Why aren't they doing something?" they ask. "Don't they know what is happening here? Or don't they want to know? Why do they continue to ignore our suffering, to act as if we didn't exist?" And even if we assume "that protests are useless to change Kremlin policy, they do change the spiritual climate for the Jewish population."

Thus does Mr. Wiesel end his personal, if not startlingly new, account of an unforgettable visit. He is left uneasy, uncomfortable. Haunted by the eyes of those he left behind, his book is a Jeremiad about a people languishing in despair. Warned not to forget, not to remain silent, not to slumber, not to forsake the forsaken, the author issues a lament to a world frozen into indifference. What torments him most, he concludes, "is not the Jews of silence I met in Russia, but the silence of the Jews I live among today."

IV.

But all is not, cannot be, lost. There is a faith, we know, that looks beyond death. There is a soothing thought that springs out of human suffering. That thought came to Mr. Wiesel on his second trip to Russia a year later, in October 1966. Moved by an intense desire to confirm that what he had seen there the first time was not "a momentary dream ignited by his imagination," he came back to find that nothing had changed but the

spirit: the spirit of Jewish youth that absolutely refuses to die.

He arrived on the sixth day of Succot and, like everyone else, waited for *Simchat Torah*. Again they came: thousands of Jewish youth streamed into the streets surrounding the Central Synagogue, which was filled to overflowing. Again the singing, the dancing, the hand-clapping. And when the lights were suddenly and unexpectedly extinguished at midnight, "thousands of newspapers were lit at once and within a matter of moments the celebation had become transformed into a weird procession of people bearing flaming torches." The singing stopped; there was only silence, and "the crackle of burning paper."

What impressed Mr. Wiesel most on this second visit was that "not only were more young people present, but they had given a more open and straightforward expression to their Jewishness." And even more than that: these youngsters became angry when the lights went out: "Now they were demanding both to see and be seen." It became obvious to this visitor that the Jewish consciousness of these youngsters had taken even deeper root. "Judaism," he states, "is no longer a matter of apologetics with them. Unlike many of their counterparts in the West, they are not defensive about their Jewishness, but regard it as a basic fact of life which is not open to discussion or philosophical debate."

To be sure, what is also not debatable is the fact that these youngsters return to Judaism because of anti-Semitic coercion. This revival is the result of external, rather than internal, pressures. While these pressures undoubtedly have their positive effects on the increase of Jewish consciousness among the young, they create simultaneously a situation which remains as petrified as ever. Life for the Jews, young and old, is still unbearable. Fear is everywhere. Ubiquitous informers lurk in every background. Men still speak only with their eyes.

And yet Mr. Wiesel is convinced that "no amount of interference will succeed in dampening the new spirit of awakening that breathes in Soviet Jewry, especially among the young." A Jew, it has become increasingly obvious even to the authorities, cannot live in Russia as a non-Jew. Assimilation is, therefore, rejected as a solution to the Jewish problem.

And all this, sad to relate, without outside help. To our own shame, young Russian Jews have been forced to conclude, because of our indifference and "criminal negligence, that their salvation can only come from within themselves, their own resistance to spiritual oblivion. To rely solely on the help and sympathy of people outside their borders is, indeed, futile. They are, therefore, taking destiny in their own hands. Thus, on meeting these unfortunate but determined youth, one is bound to hear, ever louder, ever stronger, the chant that gives a clear beat to the public cry of their generation on *Simchat Torah*, and their silent tear the rest of the year: "The people Israel lives!" And we, engaged, while standing aside, in petty nothingness, live in silence.