

Elie Wiesel and Nostalgia for a Lost Paradise

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“Sighet and Jerusalem—at times it seems to me as though I have written all my life about one or the other, about one within the other.”

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ELIE WIESEL was born on September 30, 1928 in Sighet, in Transylvania, Romania, and he came to live the experience of deportation to the death camps. The melancholy caused by the loss of the life from before the Holocaust drove him to remember and testify to those events. Wiesel may be regarded as a character with a destiny that remains paradigmatic for the exile experienced by the Jewish community throughout history and especially during the Nazi persecutions. He is a storyteller who speaks about the deportation of innocents and about the universe of his childhood, in contrast with the cruelty of the exterminators and of the death camps. From the various aspects revealed by Elie Wiesel we shall examine here those concerning the symbolic construction in which he integrates the place of his childhood.

Within each person's memory there is a special place, a place we view as an original and authentic structure, like the Happy Isles or Paradise Lost. In religious and symbolic terms, one may say that in his books Wiesel speaks like a beloved son exiled from Paradise. His exegetes already identified the presence of this aspect in his earliest

work: “*Night* is a passageway to exile. This text is the experience of Wiesel’s expulsion from paradise.”¹ The hostile world in which he must live is scarred by another world, lost too soon and forever. In this context, memory and testimony become principles that nurture both the nostalgia for a lost world and its restoration in the living conscience of generations to come.

In order to give shape to nostalgia and action, in his work Wiesel often turns to the metaphor of the two cities. His symbolic journey posits a permanent setting on the road between Sighet, destroyed after the deportation of the Jews, and the luminous holy city of Jerusalem, with its destroyed temple on the verge of renewal through the creation of the new Israel in the post-Holocaust period. He tells us: “Sighet and Jerusalem—at times it seems to me as though I have written all my life about one or the other, about one within the other.”²

“In the beginning there was Jerusalem,” writes Wiesel.³ The author claims that, in fact, every time he speaks he speaks of Jerusalem, the place that, due to his religious tradition, he knew even before he knew his own town of Sighet. The first story, the first prayer, everything authentic in his life is rooted in Jerusalem, the place where all the meanings of Jewish life meet. Wiesel’s journey to Jerusalem is a return to his origins. He is a silent witness, but in his silence he speaks of a whole destiny of exile, suffering, love, and hope, embodied in the Wall. Wiesel remembers his first visit to the Western Wall, during the Six-Day War, as an opportunity to find his origins, to confirm his allegiance, and to remember his family, especially his father, but also his mother, his teacher, and his friends. He describes this experience of communion as a journey to the world of dreams: “I shall dream my own dream, the dream of my people, which is the dream of mankind. I have never felt what I felt there.”⁴

This experience of communion with the loved ones becomes one of communion with the whole world, in a miracle of Jerusalem, because “everything in Jerusalem calls for miracles.”⁵ It is a miracle that blooms in every visitor to the city who is able to live it and love it. The holy city is marked by a reverie reminiscent of Wiesel’s Transylvanian hometown of Sighet. For Wiesel, in this town—as in Jerusalem—everything had a miracle in it: the deciphering of texts, the initiation into the Cabbala, and the experience of Messianic hope.

Sighet and Jerusalem are, for Wiesel, one and the same miracle: one of memory and testimony. Moreover, Jerusalem is a symbol for overcoming the state of exile in which Wiesel found himself after he was taken away from Sighet. It offers the certainty of a place of refuge and fulfillment for the children of the chosen people, the security and joy of home. It is worth mentioning here that in *Night*, when the danger seems imminent, and after considering the situation in Poland and Hungary, the people of Sighet begin to understand the circumstances they are facing, and Eliezer asks his father to emigrate to the country

of hope and promise for the community of Israel.⁶ His father refuses to go, but Eliezer continues to hope that one day he will journey to Israel. But even as he yearns for Jerusalem, after the Holocaust Wiesel transforms Sighet, the former Transylvanian *shtetl*, into a metaphor for overcoming the state of exile or, more specifically, for the *need* to end the state of exile.

Seen through Wiesel's eyes, Sighet is a place that can offer all the richness a voyager might seek on a journey but, most of all, Sighet possesses memory.⁷ In Wiesel's memory, his birthplace, before entering the Kingdom of Night, was: "a little Jewish city, a typical *shtetl*, rambunctious and vibrant with beauty and faith, with its yeshivas and its workshops, its madmen and its princes, its silent beggars and noisy big shots."⁸

Today, Sighet as described by Wiesel may seem like an idealized image. One might suspect that it has been transfigured by a nostalgia created by distance in time and space. But Wiesel's image rings true, evoking a small town's life and a vibrant community, with its inner rhythm and daily activities taking place at the crossroads of time and eternity. But the setting is not everything: Sighet is important to Wiesel primarily because of its people, who brought the town to life as a world full of simplicity and religiosity. These were people with real faces, with joys and sorrows, with candor and wisdom, and through them Sighet was a real *shtetl*, a world ruled by the Law, where every person was an important part of the chain. Nothing outside that world seemed to have the power to disturb its harmony. But Sighet, the luminous world of childhood paradise, was slowly overcome by the strange feeling that announces the heavy darkness of night.

Night relates the experience of being wrenched from this world, from this life shaped by tradition. The rupture turned out to be final; Eliezer would never be the same. He would simply be forced to live in another world: "The doors clanked shut. We had fallen into a trap, up to our necks. The doors were nailed, the way back irrevocably cut off. The world had become a hermetically sealed cattle car."⁹ Through this type of sentences, Wiesel recollects the way in which the great journey to the kingdom of death had begun for him, his family, and other European Jews.

The small Jewish town that Eliezer left behind no longer exists. With it, not only are its people lost, but the whole universe of Hasidism as well. A few years after the extreme experience of the death camps, returning to Sighet on an incognito visit, Wiesel found nothing of the world he had been forced to leave. The pressure of two totalitarian systems—first Nazi and later communist—irrevocably scarred the town. Ellen Norman Stern's remarkable biography tells us not only that the town had become alien to Wiesel, but also that he himself was seen as an alien. Nobody recognized him. He had become a character

exiled to another world, a world that bears the symbolic name of Auschwitz Planet. This change cannot be undone. There is no possibility of bringing back that world or of regenerating its former values. Nothing that has been lost can ever be found: “my journey to my source of all events had been merely a journey into nothingness,” writes Wiesel.¹⁰

There is nothing left but recollection. With its association to Jerusalem in Wiesel’s thought, Sighet becomes a living history of recollection: Paradise, once lost, is regained in the spiritual peace and hope that surround Mount Moriah. It is well known that, in his New York office, Wiesel keeps a photograph of his parents’ home in Sighet, as a constant reminder of his origins as well as of his hopes as embodied in the multiple meanings of Jerusalem. Those who are curious enough to travel to Sighet, to experience it as a geographic space, will notice that it still bears the signs of a place where *eternity was born*, but at the same time it is a place that could not escape the blind forces of history. Many travelers will be seduced not by the town itself but by the journey, as it occurs in Wiesel’s inner geography. He is constantly on the road to Sighet. More precisely, we always see him as a wanderer on the road between Sighet and Jerusalem, at the same time a resident of both. As Graham B. Walker notes: “The memory of Sighet and those lost in the Holocaust creates an almost unbearable tension in Wiesel’s writing as it does in his own life. For this reason, Wiesel is isolated on the island of his memory where he is perpetually searching for a passage that will link the past and the present together. Wiesel’s search for passage leads us over the depths of his experience which we cannot possibly fathom. Wiesel’s passage also leads us through openings, doorways of our own, if you will.”¹¹

Although this passage captures deep significations of memory in Wiesel’s vision, the use of the word “isolation” does not fully express Wiesel’s meaning. The term conveys a deep and abiding anger stirred by the experience of the death camps and by the situation of most of the survivors in the post-Holocaust period. But for Wiesel, memory obviously plays a restorative, integrative, and redemptive role. It is not simply that personal obsession prevents escape from the isolation of recollection. Rather, as an inhabitant of his own memory, built around the memories of others, Wiesel tries to emphasize elements that can tie the past to the present and further orient it towards the future. At the same time, he uses memory as a background on which communitarian life can be rebuilt, as a link between people searching for a new sense of life and the desire to live together. With this purpose in mind, he opens the gate of memory in a way that invites reciprocity. It is a process whereby he opens himself both to himself and to others, presupposing our acceptance of the invitation. In this way he attempts to escape—and to help others to escape—the

isolation that can result from forgetting the lost ones, but also to escape from the isolation brought about by indifference towards the ongoing suffering and towards the tragic experiences of others. For Wiesel, memory is the antidote to melancholy and despair. Memory is a place of encounter with those who are no longer present. Only memory could help him meet again those who disappeared together with his lost Paradise.



Notes

1. Graham B. Walker, Jr., *Elie Wiesel: A Challenge to Theology* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1988), 6.
2. Elie Wiesel, *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, ed. Irving Abrahamson, vol. 3 (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 1.
3. *Ibid.*, 10.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 11.
6. Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 8.
7. Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences* (New York: Schocken Books, 1990), 124.
8. *Ibid.*, 125.
9. Wiesel, *Night*, 24.
10. Ellen Norman Stern, *Elie Wiesel: Witness for Life* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1982), 148.
11. Walker, 5.

Abstract

Elie Wiesel and Nostalgia for a Lost Paradise

Born in the Transylvanian town of Sighet, a traditional Jewish *shtetl*, Elie Wiesel lived the tormenting experience of the deportation to Nazi death camps. The study discusses the ever present feeling of nostalgia for a lost paradise, as it appears in the writings of this author. Attention is also paid to the constant parallel between Sighet and Jerusalem, the two symbolic poles of Elie Wiesel's existence. Realizing the impossibility of actually returning to the lost world, Wiesel grants memory a restorative, integrative, and redemptive role, tying the past to the present and further orienting it towards the future. For him, memory is thus the antidote to melancholy and despair.

Keywords

Elie Wiesel, Holocaust, Sighet, Jerusalem, nostalgia, deportation