

# 92NY

## **THE DEATH OF MY MOTHER (informal translation from the French of Prof. Wiesel's essay published in 1985 in his book, *Signes d'exode*)**

My mother, my poor mother. I didn't see her die, I dare not imagine her dead. Is that why I bring her up so rarely? She lives in my eyes.

I see her constantly, not without anguish, as I saw her during our last hour together: silent, serious, lucid, a little frightened but without showing it. Her eyes enveloped us all as if to protect us: I didn't see them, I only felt them. It was dark in the wagon, which was rolling, rolling slowly, inexorably, towards the city of fire called Birkenau.

My mother knew, I'm sure of it. She must have known that for us the hour of separation, of rupture, was coming. Intuitive, on the lookout, she had to foresee the event. I can still hear her last words: "If we are separated, we will meet at home." I don't know if she screamed or whispered. I only remember that the next moment the car door was thrown open with a bang. And, under a rain of shouts, barks and baton blows, we rushed into the alien universe where death was made a factory product.

Even now, thinking about it, I feel an astonishment bordering on bewilderment: how is it possible that, tumbling in the blink of an eye into naked horror, did we not at the same time fall into madness?

Where did we get the courage, the mental strength, to go forward, to almost immediately become accustomed to the daily routine of continued "life"? Normally, we should have stopped being normal.

In the space of one night, we had undergone a metamorphosis on an absolute scale: the rich had lost their treasures, and the scholars their wisdom; we seemed to belong, suddenly, to a new human species. Without name or age, we all looked alike, we quickly learned to express ourselves through the same primitive gestures, to fear the same signs, to repeat the same words and to forget ideas, concepts, memories that had become useless and cumbersome burdens. We had learned all of this overnight, in an hour--and we hadn't lost our minds? These men who found themselves widowed, these children who woke up orphaned, these beings who breathed ashes in the shadow of the flames--how did they manage not to close their eyes and die?

As from afar, from afar, I saw my mother walking away, carried by the gray and red and black tide, watching--I was convinced of it--over my little sister, then over her other children, and over her beautiful mother-in-law, my paternal grandmother, who, a pious and shrewd woman, had put on her funeral shroud: how did I manage not to run after them, not to howl, not to implore God to make me blind, how was I able to obey, move on, stop, move on, live, yes, live again?

My mother . . . My poor mother. Modesty or cowardice? Afraid of bursting into tears? Afraid of not being able to stop them? I only mentioned her image once. In one of my novels, living an exceptional moment, in front of the Wall of Jerusalem, the character thinks of his mother--of my mother. "She had two faces," he recalls, "the everyday one, and the other: the Shabbat face." Indeed, mine had two faces; and now, since her disappearance, she has only one, and it is distant, impenetrable.

The youngest of six children, my mother had been pampered by her brothers and sisters. Became an orphan very early--I don't know at what age, she never spoke about it--she had been brought up in an atmosphere of nostalgia from which she could not detach herself. Often, I surprised her dreaming. As soon as she felt herself observed, she shook herself with a sudden and energetic movement.

Was she beautiful? All children say this about their mother. And no doubt they are right.

Of medium height, slender, elegant, serious, laughing, curious, she had a gait that caught the eye. Was she trying to please, to be attractive? Maybe. Although she feared God and scrupulously observed Jewish laws. She wore a wig, kept a strictly kosher kitchen, lit the candles at the appointed times, said her prayers, took care of her household and--strikingly enough in our society--was interested in modern literature. In town they said of her, "She's a cultured woman," just as they said of my father, "He's an intelligent man."

Hungarian poems, German novels, French classics: in the evening, after hours (we had a grocery store), or on Saturday afternoons, she would sink into reading like a hot bath; with visible voluptuous pleasure.

Like her own father, Reb Dodye Feig, she considered herself a follower of the Rebbe of Wizhnitz; she often took me to him to ask for his blessing. A rare privilege, she herself wrote the petitions she offered to the Rebbe, instead of having them written by the secretary, the gabbei. She was well known at the court of Wizhnitz. She was proud of her popularity in this world she loved.

As she busied herself in her kitchen, she hummed tunes she had brought home from the [Hasidic] court; and I sang with her. My happiest memories? On Friday nights at the table, when our songs rose and flew like messengers; when the whole family, enriched by the presence of my

grandfather, sang fervently. Not just the family: the street; and not just the street: the city, all the Jewish towns, all the Jewish villages, all the Jewish homes between the Carpathians and the Dnieper were carried away by song. As soon as Shabbat was over, my parents got back to work. We had to serve poor customers (most of our customers were poor) who needed a little flour, oil, sugar.

As a child, I thought I belonged to a wealthy family, free from worries. It wasn't until after the war, much later, that I found out the truth: my parents weren't much richer than our poor clients. They worked hard, sixteen hours a day, often helped by us children. In debt, overwhelmed, they were continually exposed to bullying and blackmail from the gendarme, the tax inspector: how many nocturnal searches did I attend in my childhood! . . .

A radical change took place on Friday afternoon, when we declared ourselves ready to welcome the Shabbat Queen. Our modest home was then transformed into a palace. We became princes. Thanks to Shabbat? Yes, but also, above all, thanks to my mother; it was she who gave the Shabbat its splendor and its serenity.

During the last years of her life, as the war approached our borders, my mother had revealed communist sympathies. Oh, I know: it seems impossible . . . No one could be Hasidic and communist at the same time . . . And yet, I remember her discussing politics on Saturday afternoon with a neighbor. This same neighbor was to be apprehended, tortured, imprisoned, condemned for his subversive activities. She explained to us in an emphatic tone: "He's a communist." We wanted to know more. So she added: "Imagine a just and free society, people who don't kill each other, crowds who don't amuse themselves by massacring Jews, that's a communist society." I cried out, "But it's like messianic times!" She replied with a simple smile.

In the evening, before going to bed, we listened to Radio-London and Radio-Moscow. Their Hungarian broadcasts brought us encouragement and hope. My mother, because of our imprisoned neighbor, preferred the news from Moscow.

She loved victims, my mother. The despoiled, the damned, the disinherited: their fate touched her. She had a special compassion for beggars. "No one should leave our house empty-handed," she kept telling us. For Shabbat meals, there was always a stranger at the table, otherwise she felt at fault.

I will never forget that Saturday in 1941 when the Hungarian army deported "stateless" Jews from our region to occupied Galicia. Leading our neighborhood relief operation, my mother was

everywhere at once, collecting fruit and cookies, clothes and pots, medicine and money. She could not have foreseen that, three years later, we would find ourselves at the same station, in similar cars, en route to places from which there is no return.

That Saturday we spent at the station; we children acted as porters. We helped the deportees with their suitcases, their bags, their saddlebags. Some were thirsty, we were looking for water for them. The old men staggered along; when they fell, we helped them up. That Saturday the synagogues were empty. That Saturday, mother said, a more urgent task was demanded of us.

Back home, waiting for nightfall to recite the Havdalah--a moving prayer on the separation of light and darkness--my mother asked us to stay together; she wished to speak to us: "Have you seen the bent men?" Yes, we had seen them. "What about sobbing women?" Yes, they had upset us. "What about the frightened children? What about the faces in the skylights? What about the goodbye cries? And the whistle of the train, did you hear it?" Yes, we answered, yes. My mother held her breath for a long moment and continued in a hoarse voice, "Well, now it's a matter of not forgetting anything."

Winter 1944. My mother takes me to spend Shabbat in the city of Nagyvarad. At the court of our Rebbe. A celebration like no other: it's as if we sense catastrophe near, so near. Endless songs, collective ecstasy, frenetic dancing, lit faces: this Shabbat will remain in my memory. I am happy. Happy to be with my mother. Happy to blend into the crowd. Happy to be a Hasid.

On Saturday, after the last meal, we are brought in to the Rebbe, who welcomes us with the warmth and grace reserved for the elect. "Ah," he said, "Sarah, daughter of David, there you are! So what did you write in your petition? He reads it quickly and then looks at mine; I don't know what my mother wrote about me . . . This brings me back to another plea, another visit . . .

I anticipate, open parentheses. We are at the beginning of 1960. I live in New York. A distant cousin, a doctor, calls me and asks me to come to his hospital urgently: "Do you remember Anshel? He is gravely ill; I have to operate on him, but he refuses; he wants to see you before consenting to the operation." I jump into a taxi, I arrive out of breath. The doctor takes me to the operating room. Anshel seems delirious: "Ah, are you here? Very good, very good. I'm not scared anymore. You are going to give me your blessing." "Are you crazy?" I said. "My blessing, and then what? Your connections up there are surely better than mine." "If you refuse, I won't let myself be operated on." He seems determined; this episode annoys me. I have known Anshel since childhood; my parents liked him. Does

he think he has rights over me? The doctor nudges me, "Go ahead, give him that blessing . . . every minute counts!"

Fine. I mutter a few inaudible words; I leave, giving way to the surgeon, thanks to whom Anshel will recover after a week. A few days later, having returned to visit him and finding him in a good mood, I tease him, "What was going on with you? Admit you didn't know what you were saying . . ." Anshel then smiled and said, "Perhaps you remember the last time the Rebbe of Wizhnitz visited our little town?" I jump. "Do I remember? Of course I remember!"

It was, I believe, in 1936. My mother had taken me by the hand and pushed me into the room where the old Master, beaming face and eyes flooded with kindness, sat in an armchair too big for him. He asked us about my grandfather's health, my father's situation, my studies. Intimidated, I answered awkwardly. Then the Rebbe asked that my mother go out; he wanted to be alone with me. I don't know what we talked about. I only remember the Rebbe's smile. And I also remember something else: he told me to go out and please send my mother back to him. She left shortly after, shaken by sobs. Frightened, I asked her, "Why are you crying? What did I do?" She refused to answer me.

For weeks and weeks she remained silent. "Do I remember the visit to the Rebbe?" I said to Anshel. "Like it was yesterday. I still see my mother crying, crying. And I never knew why she cried." "Well," remarks Anshel, "Then I have a present for you; I know why." I want to throw myself at him. "You know?" Yes, he knows. And he explains to me: "I was in the anteroom, I saw your mother crying, so I walked her home; and, in great secrecy, she repeated to me what the Rebbe had told her: "Sarah, he had said, your son will be someone of whom you will be proud, and so will I; but neither you nor I will be there to see it, that's why I'm telling you now . . ." And Anshel concluded triumphantly, "If the Rebbe thought that about you, I needed your blessing . . ." Anshel triumphs, and I weep.

The Rebbe died that same year--and my mother . . . When did my mother die? I see her entering the night, I see her giving her face to the night, I see her drowning in the night. And my throat tightens. I won't say what I feel when I think of her departure.

I know, in detail, the path she had to travel. A thousand times, in my thoughts, I strive to catch up with her: don't go, don't go, not without me! But she escapes me. The dark, mute crowd holds her prisoner; I can only watch her as she walks slowly, my little sister's hand in her hand, towards the door that leads to . . .

No. Let's stop. There comes a time when the imagination itself has no right to advance. Let's talk about something else.