

Elie Wiesel In Modern Times: Twilight

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) "I am going mad, Pedro. I feel it. I know it. I have plunged into madness as into the sea. And I'm about to sink into its depths.' Infinity cannot be challenged with impunity, and madness is infinite, down to its fragments, as is death, as is God. Cry for help. Here everybody cries for help. Our voices drown, resurface, merge, and this all while on the outside life goes on. What am I to do, Pedro? To whom shall I turn for a little light, a little warmth? Madness is lying in wait for me, [00:01:00] and I am alone.

"As a boy, Raphael feared madness but was drawn to madmen. In his hometown deep in the Carpathian Mountains there was an asylum. That was where he spent his Shabbat afternoons. Each week he would arrive bearing fruit and sweets, and each week he would find himself looking for a certain old man, an old man with veiled eyes. Raphael remembered that on his very first visit the old man had smiled at him gently and that he had been inexplicably moved. 'What is your name?' the old man had asked as the boy was leaving. 'Raphael, Raphael Lipkin,' he had answered timidly.

"'Will you come to see me again, Raphael?' 'Yes, sir, I'll come again.' 'Thank you. Thank you, my boy. You have earned my blessing. Would you like me to bless you?' 'Yes, sir, [00:02:00] I would.' But by then the old man had retreated into his dreams. Emerging briefly, he said, 'Next time, will you still be here?' 'Oh yes.' The old man's voice was sad, ironic. 'I'll be here even when I am no longer here.' Raphael did not understand. But how could he? The old man was mad, and madmen put little store in being understood. Madmen can say anything, do or undo anything without ever having to explain. Madmen are free, totally free. Perhaps that is why Raphael found the old man so appealing."

This is the opening of *Twilight*, a new novel to be published in May. You may have guessed that it is superbly translated (laughter) by the best and best paid translator [00:03:00] in the field. (laughter) My wife Marion, she gets all the royalties. The novel is skillfully and tactfully and forcefully edited by a very special Summit editor, a young person, beautiful, Eileen Smith, who is now blushing. (laughter) My wife Marion does not blush often. It is time she does.

Actually, translators and wives are not getting their due in our literary society. But when a wife is also a translator and a close collaborator and a critical advisor, what could one say about her? I could repeat what Rabbi Akiva said about Rachel, "*Sheli veshelachem, shela hu*. Many of the things that I am able to share with you we owe to her. I'm reminded of Flaubert, who, as you know, was a very, very, very conscientious writer.

[00:04:00] And he wrote slowly, being careful with every word, every sentence. And one day he wrote a letter to a friend of his. He said, this morning I spent the entire morning really writing a comma. (laughter) And then he said, I spent the entire afternoon erasing it. My wife is the one who makes me erase the comma.

Now the novel. It takes place now somewhere in the New York area in an institution for the mentally ill whose patients are rather singular. They all believe to be biblical characters. Some think they are prophets. Another one is convinced that he is the original scapegoat. The two high priests, the two sons of the high priest Aaron are there too and [00:05:00] Moses and Abraham and Isaac. They all speak to my hero, Raphael Lipkin, who came to find among them maybe someone who had known his very dear and close friend Pedro, Pedro who he and we have not seen

since *The Town Beyond the Wall*, a very special character who has been haunting me for some 25 books.

And Raphael Lipkin is going to find there some clue, some solution to the mystery, for Pedro had disappeared in a Russian prison. Raphael remembers Pedro, and he remembers, therefore, all that is connected with Pedro. And in remembering and in searching He goes through contemporary history and ancient history. And we find the link between the two. And now we are in Poland and in Germany and in Russia. My hero Raphael [00:06:00] remembers other people's memories. For instance, now it is Adam, our common ancestor, who is addressing himself to my hero.

And Adam actually says, "Listen, God, what I'm about to tell you is for your own good. Stop it. Yes, God, stop this senseless project. Believe me, it has no chance of success. In this even you who are omnipotent cannot succeed. You thought man would be your glory, the jewel of your crown. You make me laugh. Man is your failure. Face it. Give up your illusions. Wake up. Be considerate. Close the book before you turn the first page. Does it shame you to admit that I am right? Then forget its my idea. Let it be yours. It's my gift to you. [00:07:00]"

Legally, philosophically you will have fathered it. And you know what, theologically too.

"All you have to say is I tried. I was wrong. And lucky for the world I realized it in time. And so even in your dream you will be right, and even if your dream will have lasted but one day, one lifetime, mine, you will be applauded by your angels, by your seraphim, by the countless souls who will escape the curse of being born only to die, by the trees that will not be felled by man, by the animals that will not be slaughtered, by the earth that will not be despoiled. And all of creation, pure and resplendent, will say look how great is the lord, how admirable his honesty. He does not shrink from admitting his error. And yes, he can manage perfectly well without man.

"So tell me, God, do you accept my proposition? Will you take back your [00:08:00] design for man? It's not too late. Nobody knows. I guarantee you. As for me, I'll be discrete, I promise, cross my heart and hope to die. I shall never betray your secret, our secret. Nobody will bear you a grudge. Nobody will ever know. One day you will thank me. You will see. One must know how to admit failure, even if one is God."

So you see, Adam was trying, poor man. He was trying to convince God not to create creation, finished. We are going to read some more pages tonight, later. That has been our tradition, to devote our annual farewell encounter of the series to a work in progress or a book to be published. Why break traditions? In this place we celebrate them. We glorify them. We perpetuate them. There is something reassuring in continuity. It teaches us that the past does not die.

[00:09:00] And what was said may be heard again. There is a time for everything, said King Solomon.

There is a time to begin and another to renew, a time to rejoice, and a time to mourn. There is a time to build and a time to watch the destruction of what had been built. There's a time to speak and a time to remember or to be silent. There is a time to erect walls and another to tear them down. There is even a time for people who have no sense of time and are always a little bit late. (laughter) (applause) [00:10:00]

Well, the theme is madness, but the theme has been mine for many, many years and many, many books. There is always a madman in every one of my books, and why not bring them altogether? Furthermore, madness, as we all know, has been this century's main preoccupation, curse, or blessing. No wonder that

psychiatry has made such progress. At least in the exciting though frustrating field of research psychiatrists have a field day. Society has discovered the incommensurate threats in here and in madness just as poets have decided the incommensurate beauty in here and in madness.

But then our century [00:11:00] has been not only mad, it has violently mad. As for our generation, it's a very strange generation. Every year I try to make a *cheshbon hanefesh*, to take stock. And every year it's getting worse. Look at our own time. What a strange country we are, a democratic party cannot find the president, not even a candidate. The president cannot find a judge. (laughter) What's happening in the White House? When we heard, when we followed the Contra hearing I couldn't believe it. I had a feeling that I was listening to something which doesn't happen except in very bad books. (laughter)

A colonel became the hero of the country after having admitted that he was the secretary of state and secretary of defense all at the same time. (laughter) Had he been caught -- (applause) [00:12:00] Had he been caught anywhere else he would have, I don't know, been degraded. Here he became a hero. The president, of course, doesn't know. (laughter) (applause) What made me really amazed was when I heard during the hearings that

they had had \$10 million deposited in the wrong bank.

(laughter) No wonder the dollar is falling. (laughter)

The only good thing about it is when we think about the White House I feel that history has a good sense of irony and a good sense of justice. For two years ago we were all upset about Bitburg, and now we realize that all those who were involved in Bitburg are out of the White House. (applause) [00:13:00] Well, speaking of Washington, I hope that you have all received the leaflet outside and the question I hope you will answer yes, that we will all be in Washington to receive Gorbachev and tell him what we think with dignity. I think we should say it with honor and with dignity, say thank you for what he has done for the people that he has allowed to leave. And some have already been allowed to leave.

But -- and the but must be very forceful, as forceful as a thank you, if not a thousand times more -- but it's important for the demonstration to be a strong one. He should know and Reagan should know that we care, and above all there are thousands and thousands and thousands and tens of thousands of Jews in Russia who are still waiting. And we must not deceive them.

Speaking of madness, you read in the papers, as I have, that Chicago [00:14:00] has had a Kristallnacht. Monday there was apparently a Kristallnacht. The Nazis started Kristallnacht in Chicago. Synagogues were bludgeoned with swastikas, and what kind of madness is this? Well, I think that we have to remember, and if we remember, then we may defeat that madness.

It is because we want to remember that we meet here every year, 21 years. When I think of it, that there are among you some who are younger than the program, it makes me feel very wise. I would like to thank all those who, for the last month, came here in the afternoon to study with Reb Lavey the topics that later we were going to discuss here today.

So it is madness. Plato describes prophecy as a manifestation of madness. In *Phaedo* he writes, and I quote him, [00:15:00] "There exists a madness which is a divine gift and the source of the greatest blessing granted to man. For prophecy," says Plato, "is a kind of madness." As for Dostoyevsky, we have all quoted him, "I have a plan," he said, "to become mad." Strange though frequently used in biblical sources, the word madman, *meshuggah*, does not appear in the Talmud at all, never. But it is frequently used in Hasidic literature and especially in the stories of Rabbi Nachman, whom you have studied this afternoon.

Rabbi Nachman, who emphasized and privileged the question, and therefore for him the madman was the one who always had the question. But then I think it was a French philosopher Maurice Blanchot who said something very beautiful. He said the answer is the curse of the question. Nietzsche, who suffered from [00:16:00] mental disturbance, used to say that madness is a result not of doubts but of certainties. And how right he is at least now. This fanaticism, the fundamentalism, the extremism that we have seen occur all over the world, it is sheer madness.

Let's continue *Twilight*. Raphael is a young man, and in his hometown he goes to visit an old madman in the asylum. "And thus went their weekly visits. The patient would speak, and Raphael would listen. The more he listened the less he understood. The old man spoke of God and his attributes. He described an invisible palace surrounded by fiery walls where the creator of the world awaits the Shekhinah to restore his creation to the origins of innocence. And the eagles nest where alone [00:17:00] melancholy messiah prays for time to accelerate its rhythm, for words to open themselves to the word.

"Another Shabbat the old man told Raphael of the ten Sefirot, which together symbolized the king's crown and majestic power.

'The place I want to take you,' he said, 'is farther still. Will you always follow me?' 'Always,' vowed Raphael, entranced. 'If ever you are afraid to go forward,' said the patient, 'hold on to my vest. That way you won't fall. It's true, the road is treacherous. Satan is full of tricks. Sometimes he appears in the guise of a vicious black dog, a monster who spits fire. But bear in mind that he's afraid of courage, so you mustn't close your eyes.

"If you wish to accompany, promise you will keep your eyes open. Otherwise the black dog will attack you, and all will be lost. Remember, a madman is someone whose eyes [00:18:00] are always open.' Raphael opened his eyes but saw no dog. Then he closed his eyes and saw the old man laughing, laughing without a sound. 'I don't understand,' said Raphael. 'You cannot understand,' said the old man. 'You must not understand. If you understood you would already be mad.'

"Raphael meets many patients in the clinic, but whenever he is alone he is alone with his friend who is not there, Pedro. And he talks to him. 'I am going mad, Pedro. Now I am sure. There are times when I think the old man and I are one. Still, after the storm comes the calm. I vacillate between the two, and everywhere I see the black mouth of the vicious black dog, the

bottom of the abyss. I'm afraid, and yet I yearn to hurl myself into it. I move forward and backward at the same time with the same step, the same purpose. I speak when I am silent. I am silent when I shout. [00:19:00]

"I hear the doctor telling me, 'Be careful. Madmen are dangerous. You, Raphael Lipkin, are dangerous.' Me, dangerous? Why would I be dangerous? Because I know the truth? But I don't. Because I seek it? What a joke. It alludes me as reason alludes me. Outside the mild breeze is blowing towards the mountains, sweeping me back to my childhood. On the way it's you I find. You, Pedro, my friend, the source of my strength and of my anguish. It is still early, but the clinic is asleep. Down below the village too is asleep. As for me, I'm afraid to sleep. An old man is waiting for me in my dreams. I know, and I don't know. I no longer know who he is.

"In my sleep I seek someone with the courage to denounce reality's apparent order. I find the old madman who questions all my certainties. Sky slides over roof, stone over stone, [00:20:00] living over dead. Thought slides over dream, dream over memory, prayer of tears of the dying. Look, Pedro. I am moving closer to the wall. One more step, one more word, and I will be on the other side. And then I will think differently,

express myself in another mode, react in untried ways. I will take leave of my body. Reach for another self. Integrate it into a distant time and wrap it in garb that was never mine."

Farewell, Raphael. Farewell, Pedro. I have always been fascinated by the relationship between madness and creativity. Naturally I love madness, but I love mystical madness for mystical madness is a creative madness. It restores. It brings back a sense of beauty to a person who needs that sense in order to [00:21:00] be alive. Mysticism emphasizes beauty as much as it emphasizes truth, and therefore there is a mystical element in creation. And there is always, therefore, an element of madness in creation. All of a sudden to decide to write a book, what for? It's maddening. Why should write books? There are millions of books in the world, another one?

So madness and creation, is there creativity in madness? Is madness a component of creativity? Must one be mad in order to write about madness? Must one be boring in order to describe boredom? And are the two concepts mutually exclusive, or quite to the contrary, or they complimenting one another? For the creative person, writer, poet, artist, composer, madness could be divided in three categories: clinical madness, mystical madness, [00:22:00] and in this century surely, moral madness.

At times they may merge into one. Often they coexist in the same mind or in the same soul.

In cutting off his ear, Vincent van Gogh made a statement to the world, a statement not about his mental condition but about its moral or immoral standing, and the same applies to von Kleist or Antonin Artaud. The first two chose suicide, the latter turned to insanity as to prove a point, namely that they refuse to see the outside world as their own. I have been thinking a lot about writers who dealt with our tragedy. And I was trying to understand what moved them to do certain things. Treated for mental illness, Paul Celan, the great poet, whose name was Antschel, Paul Antschel, [00:23:00] a Jew from Romania, he committed suicide by drowning in the Seine.

On his desk was found a biography of Holderlin with this sentence underscored, and I quote him, "Sometimes this genius darkens and sinks into the bitter well of his heart," unquote. What pushed him to despair? Probably the same dark force that pushed so many other so-called Holocaust writers. Psychiatrists and psychologists have not paid enough attention to this tragic phenomenon. Brilliant novelists, great poets, skillful chroniclers somehow yielded to the seduction of death. And what

they had in common is that they all tried to deal with the unspeakable in their speech.

Tadeusz Borowski, Beno Wertzberger in Israel, Uri Tal, a theologian in Israel, [00:24:00] Piotr Rawicz, my friend, Yosef Wulff in Berlin, Rivka Gruber, and now a very close friend, Primo Levi, I have personally known some of these figures. Rivka was an elderly lady with a golden heart. She was called the mother of Israel since her two only sons were killed in the war of independence. With amazing courage, she transformed her pain in selfless activities on behalf of orphans everywhere. Then she wrote about her experiences, and there was a sense of fulfillment about her. But then she discovered a village called Kfar Ahim that was named after her two sons, the brothers.

To her astonishment, most of the inhabitants were Holocaust survivors. Some of them came from my region in the Carpathians. She began interviewing them for an oral history project, and it took her years to finish it. She [00:25:00] finished it. She came to see us many times, and I prefaced her book for publication. And then one day she jumped from a high floor. Why? Why has Piotr, my good and gentle friend from Lemberg, at the age 60, chosen to fire a bullet into his mouth without explaining his gesture?

Piotr, whose first book *Blood from the Sky*, ranks among the masterworks of our literature, was a sensitive man, sensitive to beauty, to joy, to sadness too. He could have offered so much to so many. Why has he taken refuge into death? And the latest, Primo, Primo Levi, my marvelous colleague from Torino. We met some years ago in Milano at a conference. And we had a feeling that we had known each other for years, since Auschwitz, where we had spent together, perhaps in the [00:26:00] same barracks, working in the same commando weeks and months until the evacuation of the camp.

His books are filled with truth and passion, with compassion too. People everywhere finally began reading them, admiring their author, covering him with praise. Why has he decided to reject what society had to give its witnesses? The suicide of Holocaust writers has obsessed me for years and still does. I tried to pierce the mystery, hoping to understand my friends better. Is it that they tried to prove that Auschwitz survivors can die in Auschwitz even after Auschwitz? Is it something that kept them behind within the walls, within the barbed wire? There may be other motives.

I believe they had to do with language or with madness, sublime, [00:27:00] mystical madness. The madness that made them experience the paralysis of the tongue, when they realized that the words that they could use are not the proper words. More than anyone a writer knows the limitations and the limits of language. Piotr Rawicz once told me, when I finished a book, I feel a taste of defeat in my mouth. We all do. We realize that what we say is not what we would have liked to say. What we feel we must say cannot be said.

If Paul Valery, the great poet, is right and a poet's language is quote, a language inside a language, unquote, then for a survivor writing is a way of trying to reach silence inside silence and reach it with words, hence the tension, the conflict, the explosion, the breakdown, the ultimate abdication. Farewell, world. [00:28:00] Goodbye, life. In researching madness I went back, of course, to the sources, meaning to the Bible. I always go back to the Bible. As we know here, I always start with the Bible, and then to the Talmud and then to Hasidism. But it begins with scripture.

So I was wondering, who was the first who could be described as a case of madness? And the first one actually was Cain. Having been rejected by God, who refused to accept his offerings, Cain

was overcome by melancholy. The text says so explicitly, vayiplu panav , his face fell. A psychiatrist will tell you this is precisely the expression one uses when describing the face of a melancholy, [00:29:00] depressed, deeply depressed person. It fell. It closed down. It attracted shadows rather than light.

And since Abel, his only brother, his only companion, his only peer, didn't notice or did notice but remained silent or absent or indifferent, Cain turned into a murderer. The violence was a result of melancholy. The second case is actually related to one who is first in everything. The second time we find an expression of melancholy, of sadness, almost despair in the Bible it refers no longer to man but to God. He too became melancholy, even depressed, and decided to destroy the world and start all over again.

Later we encounter many protagonists who have mental problems. Pharaoh suffers from uncontrollable dreams, Ahasuerus from insomnia, Saul from jealousy. [00:30:00] Jezebel is power-hungry. My favorite, of course, is Saul, so romantic, poetic, musical. The victim of God's fantasy, he became his own victim and committed suicide. Between King Lear's desire to remain sane and Dostoyevsky's to go mad, which is the path to follow?

Ezekiel's strength lies in his hallucinations, Jeremiah's in his memory, Elisha's in loyalty. Caught between creation and his creator, what is the role of the human being? How is he to reconcile forces that transcend him?

Perhaps that was the reason for so many victims. Resisting the temptation of madness, the choice was limited. It was not between sanity and madness but between one madness and another. And of course, I speak about the period of the last war. To some there was a choice. Goodness was an option, as was kindness. To remain human was also an option. To [00:31:00] share a piece of bread was an option which some have taken. To smile was an option, to join in prayer, to believe in God or in man or in history, to believe in anything, to offer a word of consolation, of hope, of faith was an option. And every option was actually an act of protest against madness.

It was madness then to make an effort of being human where humanism was mutilated and humanity assassinated. And yet the system was not perfect, for we know that in spite of what the enemy tried to do fathers and sons did stay together. Friends did not always betray one another. Small victories, yes, very small, but I can tell you of no greater ones.

I would like to stop now for a second, and since we speak about [00:32:00] modern times, recent past, what does one make of all that? I still don't understand what happened. I always say that. I always repeat it. Voltaire once said that God is telling us jokes, and we are afraid to laugh. But sometimes he's telling us other stories, and we are afraid to cry. Is it that he wants us to be afraid always? It happens that certain events are of such beauty that thanks to them fear vanishes. Some good things also happen. And in spite of the fact that we know that our generation will remain as the generation of those dark monuments, of monuments of darkness, we cannot ignore and we must not ignore that there were good things happening in our generation.

After all, again we must [00:33:00] emphasize that, there is Israel. In our lifetime a sovereignty of Israel is here, and we may appreciate it. We may help it become stronger. The awakening of Soviet Jewry is something. The fact that there is a renaissance among the young people in our own country who are returning to Jewishness is a source of great comfort to all of us. Things, good things can happen too. I believe, of course, that everything is connected with our past, both far away and recent. Problem that we have, especially now when the subject

of the Holocaust has become so fashionable, there is a danger in repeating our burning tales about our collective tragedy.

[00:34:00]

People may get tired and used to. The tellers themselves may get weary. From Joe Wiseman, my friend, once I heard a marvelous anecdote, that the Lunts, apparently there was a group, a couple of Lunts, great comedians, and they were performing in a comedy on Broadway. Every evening he would ask for a glass of tea, and he would do so in such a manner that the audience would burst out laughing. One evening nothing happened. Nobody laughed. "Why didn't they laugh?" asked Lunt at the intermission. "I'll tell you why," answered his wife. "Until now you would ask for tea. Tonight you were asking for a laugh." The same could be true of tears as well.

And yet, and yet, not to speak would be wrong. A mute memory may kill its own silence. There exists as part an epitaph over the 300 [00:35:00] dead at Thermopylae, quote, "Stranger, when you see the Lacedaemonians, tell them we lie here faithful to their orders." What could the epitaph be over the tombstones of our martyrs and our heroes? They have no tombstones. Ours is the first generation deprived of cemeteries, and so the tale must be told. Even if we sound like madmen. Even if we offer a

message of madness, we must continue. Ultimately, will be a message about madness, that we'll cure madness.

It is to tell this tale that some of us have devoted our lives for so many years or decades. Since last year, since '86 we have traveled a lot. And certain events do stand out, and I share with you so many things, why not share some of these [00:36:00] journeys as well? Since '86, the '86 lectures we were in Oslo, and the Shehecheyanu in Oslo stays with me, the silence preceding it, the visions, the visions that dominated me. Then a voyage to Lyon to testify at the Barbie trial. And there was something about that too, to try to speak to the judges about an event that they must evaluate not only in legal terms but in human terms.

We went to Hiroshima last June for two reasons. One, because we read that there is anti-Semitism in Japan, and I couldn't believe it. There are 500 Jews in Japan, all of them Americans. There's maybe one Japanese, maybe one by accident. I don't know what the accident is, but it was an accident. (laughter) And I tried to go and speak there [00:37:00] and give lectures and tell them, what are you doing? You don't need it. Maybe some countries need anti-Semitism, but you? Leave it to Europe where it belongs. But it's Japan, anti-Semitism without Jews. There

is an anti-Semitic literature there. There are books that have sold in millions of copies.

So everywhere -- and the same myths that the Jews control economy, the Jews control power, the Jews are everything. Rockefeller is a Jew. The IBM belongs to Jew. So every lecture I had to begin introducing myself, that Rockefeller is not my uncle. (laughter) But then we went to Hiroshima, and in Hiroshima both my wife and I were very, very moved. We went to see the museum there. And at one point all we saw was a stair, a stony stair. And we were told that that was part of a staircase to the entrance of a bank. [00:38:00] And a woman was there waiting for the door to open when the bomb fell. And she simply disintegrated. Only her shadow remained.

So I spent an entire hour watching the shadow, communicating something or entering into communion with that shadow, thinking that if we are not careful, really, not even a shadow would remain of our little planet. Then last -- what last? Two days ago I went to Berlin. I went with trepidations for obvious reasons. I feel, and I said so in Berlin, that it's not normal, it's not natural for a Jew to feel comfortable in Germany. There's something when a Jew is in Germany or meeting Germans. It's simply a matter of bringing memories [00:39:00] together.

I bring mine. They bring theirs. And we shouldn't feel comfortable. So why go?

But the thing is that last year I went on an official visit to Berlin, and it so happened, without really knowing why, it so happened that we arrived in Berlin last year on January 20. And while in Berlin I looked all of a sudden at the paper. I realized it's January 20. So I said to my host, the mayor and so forth, I said, do you know it's a historic day? Nobody knew what I was talking about. January 20 was the day, January 20, '42 when in the Wannsee villa on the highest level of government they decided on the Final Solution. And nobody knew. I asked. I spoke to members of parliament. I spoke to officials. Nobody knew what I was talking about.

So I said I want to see it. They didn't want in the beginning. Finally we went to see the villa. The villa [00:40:00] is exactly as it was then at the lake, a beautiful villa, which belonged once in the '30s to a Jew, a rich Jew. It was then confiscated by the Nazis. And I literally went with my ears open. I wanted to question the walls and the trees and the clouds. Since people don't speak, maybe they would speak. And I made some fuss about it. Then they wrote me saying that they decided to turn now the villa into a museum. And they had a

meeting of all kinds of scholars from Yad Vashem, from Jewish scholars from all over the world to decide what should be the museum.

Now, the question itself was silly because if there is one place where nothing else was discussed but Jews it's Wannsee. They didn't discuss about any other people, about any other group. They only came together to discuss the Final Solution of the Jewish Problem. I think we succeeded in [00:41:00] persuading them to make it only into a Jewish museum. But I felt, since they invited me to speak there at the Reichstag, that appealed to me. The Reichstag was the parliament then. To speak from the very spot where Hitler had spoken, I felt there is something there. It appealed to the poet in me. And I accepted the idea.

And I went there literally for a few hours, not festivities, no dinners, nothing, just to speak. And I decided everything must be symbolic. So you won't believe me. I began my speech in German. And I'm sorry, in Yiddish. (laughter) German, I don't even know German. But to the German audience I began speaking in Yiddish, and you should have seen the shock on their faces. [00:42:00] (laughter) Because the translators -- they had simultaneous interpretation -- only were ready to translate from

English. And all of a sudden, I spoke Yiddish. And I said why.
And this is what I did.

Shtiler, shtiler, lomir shvaygn

Kvorim vaksn do.

S'hobn zey farflantst di sonim:

Grinen zey tsum blo..

Shtiler, kind mayns, veyn nit, oytser,

S'helft nit keyn geveyn,

Undzer umglik veln sonim

Say vi nit farshteyn.

Azoy flegn farveynte Yiddishe mames in di getos vign zeyere
oysgehungerte, opgeshvakhte, goysesdike kinder.

Kvorim? Di kinder di beste di reynste di heylikste, vos undzer
folk hot farmogt, zenen afilu tsu keyver Yisroel nit gekumen.

Der soyne hot zeyere ash kvorim tsum himl aroyfgeschikt.

Shtiler shtiler lomir zey khotsh araynemen in undzer
gedekhenish.

Yiddish in the Reichstag, I said. There is symbolism in using
this warm, melancholy, and compassionate language in a place
where Jewish suffering and Jewish agonies not 50 years ago
aroused neither mercy nor compassion. Yiddish was the tongue of

many if not most of the Jewish victims who perished during the dark period when the Angel of Death seemed to have replaced God in too many hearts in this country. Yiddish too was their target and their victim. There is symbolism too and there is irony and justice in my speaking to you, I said there, this afternoon from this very rostrum [00:44:00] where my own death and the death of my family and the death of my friends and the death of my teachers and the death of my entire people was decreed and predicted by the legally elected leader of Germany.

I would betray the dead were I not to remind you that his poisonous words did not make him unpopular with his people. Most applauded with fervor. Some, very few, remained silent. Fewer still objected. How many Jews found shelter in how many German homes during the Kristallnacht, I asked them. How many Germans tried to help extinguish the flames that engulfed synagogues? How many tried to save holy scrolls? How many [00:45:00] cared? Everything human and divine was perverted then. The law itself had become immoral. Here in this city, I said, in this place, in this parliament it had become legal and commendable to humiliate Jews simply for being Jews and to hunt down children simply because they were Jewish children.

It became legal and praiseworthy to imprison, shame, and oppress and ultimately to destroy human beings, sons of daughters of an ancient people whose very existence was considered a crime. The official decision to implement the Final Solution was taken on the highest level of German hierarchy at the relatively brief but practical and congenial meeting that took place on January 20, 1942 in Wannsee. Those high officials who participated in the meeting knew that they [00:46:00] acted on behalf of their government and in the name of the German people that supported that government.

The atrocity it committed under the law, the law of the third Reich, must not and I tell you will not be forgotten. And I tell you that nor will they be forgiven. It is said, and it must be said, and I must repeat it. I have said it, I said then, last year. I have no right to forgive the killers for having exterminated six million of my kinsmen. Only the dead can forgive, and no one has the right to speak on their behalf. Still, I must also say that not all citizens who were alive then were guilty. As a Jew I have never believed in collective guilt. Only the guilty were guilty.

Children of killers are not killers but children. [00:47:00] I have neither desire nor authority to judge today's generation

for the unspeakable crimes that were committed by that of Hitler's generation. But we may and we must hold today's generation responsible not for the past but for the way it remembers the past and for what it does with the memory of that past. Memory is the key word. To remember is to create links between past and present, between past and future. To remember is to affirm man's faith in humanity in spite of itself. Memory means to confirm meaning on our fleeting endeavors. Memory is to restore to justify its dignity. Justice without memory is like silence without words.

It is in the name of memory, I said, that I address myself to Germany's youth. [00:48:00] Remember is the commandment that dominates the life of young Jews today everywhere. Let it dominate yours as well. Challenged by memory, we could move forward. If you oppose memory, then you are bound to remain eternally opposed to us and to all we stand for and to all humanity. Memory means to live in more than one world, to be tolerant and understanding with one another, to accept the mystery inherent in questions and the suspicion linked to answers.

Naturally, memory can also bring forth tensions and conflicts. But they would then be transformed into culture, art, education,

spiritual experiment, quest for truth, quest for justice.
Without memory, mankind's image of itself would be impoverished.
Of course, I said, I understand for you it is not easy to
remember. It may even be more difficult than it is for us Jews.
We [00:49:00] try to remember the dead. You must remember those
who killed them. Yes, there is pain involved in both our
attempts, not the same pain. Open yourselves to yours as we
have opened ourselves to ours.

You find it hard to believe that your elders had done those
things? So do I. Think of the tormentors as I think of their
victims. I remember every minute of their agony. I try. I see
them constantly. I am afraid if I stop seeing them, they will
die. I keep on seeing them, and they died nevertheless. I
remember 1942 January 20. I remember because it must have been
a day just like any other day. Winter somewhere in the
Carpathian Mountains Jewish children were playing, probably
building snowmen. Others like myself studied hard [00:50:00] at
school. They were dead already. They were dead here in Berlin.
And they didn't know it.

And there is something in all this I don't understand and never
will. Why such obstinacy on the part of the killer to kill so
many of our people? Why the old man? Why the children? Why

the women? Why the sages? Why the disciples? Why all of them? How was all that made possible? You young men and women in Germany must ask yourselves similar questions or maybe the same questions. A people that has produced Goethe and Schiller, Bach and Beethoven has suddenly chosen to put its national genius at the service of evil and erect a monument to its dark power named Auschwitz.

A community that has contributed to culture and education as few nations have has now recalled [00:51:00] culture and education into question. But now we know. Many killers had college degrees and were products of the best universities in Germany. Many came from distinguished families. And although I occasionally wonder about the theological implications of Auschwitz, I must also recognize the fact that Auschwitz was not sent down from heaven. Auschwitz was conceived, planned, constructed, managed, and justified by people. What human beings have done there to other human beings will affect future generations.

After Auschwitz, hope itself is filled with anguish. But after Auschwitz, hope is necessary. Where can it be found? In remembrance alone. How has remembrance been handled [00:52:00] after the war, I ask them? Admit it, it took too many Germans

too long to confront us. Teachers did not teach, and pupils did not learn the most tragic and important chapter in German and world history. Too painful, was the explanation. It took the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem for German courts to indict SS murders who after the war quietly returned to their homes and resumed their trades as if nothing happened. They were picked up from telephone books.

True, the situation in Est Germany remains worse. Unlike the federal republic, which did make serious attempts under Konrad Adenauer to compensate survivors and help Israel, East Germany is hostile to Israel, hostile to Zionism, and refuses to pay compensations. East Germany behaves like Austria, [00:53:00] without the slightest trace of remorse. The Federal Republic has chosen a more honest and enlightened course of action. You have succeeded, I told them, in a few decades in creating a transition from brutal totalitarianism to democracy. The freedom of the person is respected.

Your commitment to the Western alliance is strong. Furthermore, there are among you individuals and groups to whom we feel close, for they have been seeking atonement in word and in deed. Some have gone to work in Israel for Israel. Others are involved in religious dialogues. Writers, artists, poets,

novelists, statemen, there are among them men and women who refuse to forget. And make no mistake, the best books by German authors deals with the trauma of the past. And now the museum. I hope you will show, I said, only what was done to the Jewish people. Show pictures [00:54:00] of the Jews before they died. And then show the cold brutality of those who killed them, and show the passivity, the cowardly indifference of the bystander.

And I said that there are things in today's Germany that trouble me. The extreme left is violently anti-Israel. The extreme right is violently anti-Jewish. Furthermore, it is bad enough that we have so-called revisionists in our own countries. Must we encounter them in Germany too? I know it is illegal to publicly deny the Holocaust in Germany, but it is being done in a vulgar form by pro-Nazis and in a more subtle manner by some historians whose intent is to, quote, "normalize" and relativize and so vandalize and cheapen and trivialize the most painful event in Jewish history. Impudent, [00:55:00] arrogant, obscene.

Their attitude is one of insensitivity. Whether they want it or not, they will ultimately belong to the ugliest category of all, that of the revisionists, for they serve the same gods. The normalization of the historians helps the revisionists in their

fight against memory, against the Jewish people. But I wonder, what has been the general response to this so-called battle of the historians. I hope that you young Germans have taken part in it. I hope that you are and will be sensitive to Jewish pain, that you will speak up whenever Jewish feelings are hurt. I hope that you will commit yourself to defend Jews against anti-Semitism.

And I'm asking you, speaking of sensitivity, I asked them, was Bitburg really necessary? Was it essential for a Frankfurt theater to stage the anti-Semitic [00:56:00] Fassbinder play? Was it a must for your government to show friendship towards an Austrian chancellor with whom the Jewish community at large was and remains in open conflict? And how come that the Bundesrat has never found it necessary to official ask the Jewish people for forgiveness? The United States Senate has recently adopted a bill that expresses an apology to the Nisei, the Japanese Americans who were imprisoned in 1941 and '42. Why couldn't the German parliament offer a similar apology to the Jewish people? Germany would not be humiliated by such a move, just the opposite.

And so young Germans, I appeal to you. Be our allies. Justify the faith we have in your future. Fight forgetfulness. Reject

any attempt to cover up the past. Remember the Jewishness of the Jewish victims. [00:57:00] Remember the uniqueness of their tragedy. True, not all victims were Jews, but all Jews were victims. And thus it is incumbent upon you to be on guard. Be the conscience of your nation, and remember a conscience that does not speak up when injustices are being committed is betraying itself. A mute conscience is a false conscience. Remember the lessons, that words can kill just as they can heal.

Remember that it was possible to stop the machinery, to save lives. So few dared. Woe unto us. In those times it was enough to be human to be heroic. In remembering you will help your own people vanquish the ghosts that have been hovering over its history. Remember, a community that does not come to terms with the dead will continue to perturb and traumatize the living, and this can be achieved [00:58:00] through and in memory. Memory restores absence to presence and the dead to the living. It also involves pain. I welcome it. I think of the children walking slowly, almost peacefully to the flames, and I'm almost grateful for the pain that links me to them, the children, the children. Those of Lidice and those of Oradour and the Jewish children who were handed over to the killers, they will forever haunt us with their silent pleas for a spark of kindness and consolation.

How many of them could have helped human kind? How many of them could have assisted society and its struggle for survival? How many of them could have discovered a cure for cancer or a cure for AIDS? In killing them as children, the killers and their accomplices have at the same time punished themselves as they have punished [00:59:00] the world. And it will take centuries before humankind manages to recover from its wounds. And thus, in remember them we remember today's victims too. We remember our hunger so as to eliminate starvation now. We remember our anguish so as to proclaim the right of men and women everywhere to live without fear.

We remember our death so as to denounce the insanity of violence and the absurdity, the ugliness, the shame of war. We remember Auschwitz and all that it symbolizes because we believe that in spite of the past and its horrors, the world is worthy of salvation. And salvation, like redemption, can be found only in remembrance. So here we are, I said, back at my central obsession. But you may ask, isn't there a danger [01:00:00] that memory would provoke or perpetuate hatred? No, there is no such danger. Memory and hatred are incompatible. For hatred distorts memory. The reverse is true. Memory may serve as a powerful remedy against hatred.

An example, at the end of the war many Germans were afraid of Jews coming back to take vengeance. There was fear and trembling in German towns and villages. And the Jews could have come and could have unleashed retribution on a large scale, and nobody would have stopped them or even criticizes them. But it did not happen. Oh, I am not stating that there was no hatred in some Jews. There is a minority that hates Germans even today. Its members do not buy German products and refuse to set [01:01:00] foot on German soil. And they refuse to acknowledge that young Germans are not to be held responsible for the sins of their parents.

One of them, a Jew born in Berlin, went as far as urging me in a letter not to appear here today before you. But what I do maintain is that most Jews did not choose hatred as a response. Hatred has never been a Jewish option. Nor did they choose vengeance. It may be that they realize that the most feared punishment for the killer is the victim's memory. Is this why the killer so wanted his crimes to be forgotten? Is this why we must remember them? We must also remember them for the sake of our children and yours. They all deserve, from us, an offering, [01:02:00] an offering of hope. For my generation hope cannot be without sadness, but let our sadness contain hope too.

Well, you can imagine the impact. (applause) In conclusion, as we are about to part for another year, [01:03:00] let me just say, we always meet here to study. We always meet here to study ancient sources. And the purpose is always surely to defeat hatred. It is not to increase it. Our purpose and our goal have been always to bring people together. But it must be done on the basis of memory and truth. Nothing should be sacrificed, nothing, if that what we sacrifice is part of memory. Nothing is worth the sacrifice of memory.

What has been our goal also to sensitive people, to heighten his or her awareness, to help people see farther and think higher. And above all, the mission or the vocation [01:04:00] or the goal of teaching or writing or speaking or living is to reject the seduction of evil and complacency and to discard the option of indifference. Idiot in Greek means indifference, whereas justice, *elemosyn*, means compassion, pity. Just as we are trying to obtain from God, God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, to feel sorry of the mortals that we are, we are at times allowed, if not commanded, to feel sorry for him, for him who in his immortality must witness the silliness, the pettiness, the viciousness, the violence, the crimes, the murder of his

creatures who are out to destroy or pervert [01:05:00] his creation.

I believe that words can be prayers. I believe that human beings can restore the divine spark in them by remaining human. And this is probably the message that we have received from our teachers and theirs and theirs. And this is what Moshe kibeil miSinai, this is what our teacher and ancestors have received at Sinai. And so, if the messiah comes, we meet in Jerusalem next year. If not, we meet here. Thank you. (applause)

[01:06:00]

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