

WHY WAS I NEVER TOLD?

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Zion . . . has risen up again from the crematories and the charnel houses. The Jewish nation has been resurrected from among its thousands of dead. It is through them that it lives again. We do not know the worth of one single drop of blood, one single tear. All is grace. If the Eternal is the Eternal, the last word for each one of us belongs to Him.¹

Why did I come from a family of secrets? Why did I never know about my grandparents? I was told that they all died in the 20's and 30's, but the how, why and where were never told except with vague and conflicting generalities? Why did I not know their full names or where they were born? Where are the family pictures? Growing up, where were the uncles, aunts and cousins that I should have had? Growing up, I did not know any difference, so I did not ask. Fragments of stories were made up and faint references were made to a family history that never existed.

Why only now after my father's death and my mother's mental incapacity are these family secrets of a once proud Jewish family name, traceable at least to the 18th century, being revealed to me? Why are my grandparents, great-grandparents, great-uncles, great-aunts and distant cousins from Lithuanian towns that I cannot pronounce and the world of European Jewry that was unknown to me being revealed now?² The impact of this discovery at this time late in my life has created an internal struggle to understand, but it has brought much joy in finding my Jewish family that I did not know existed. It is said that a family's name is one's compass in life. Have I found my compass and why I am reading hundreds of books and writing these materials?

I now ask myself what is my obligation to my distant Jewish relatives that were murdered in the death camps of Europe and to being one of the few, a remnant, in the world to carry on the family's last name? What makes one Jewish or should I even care? David Ben-Gurion defined a Jew as someone who would have been Jewish enough to have been sent to Auschwitz. Under the Nazi Nuremberg laws in September of 1935, children from mixed marriages between a Jew and an Aryan were considered First Degree *Mischlings* (mixed-breeds) and were subject to all the Jewish restrictions with one exception: they were not deported to concentration camps until reaching the age of fourteen.³ However at the Wannsee Conference in 1941, Reinhard Heydrich as the organizer and leader of the Conference announced that first-degree *Mischlinge* (persons with two Jewish grandparents, or half-Jews, *Halbjuden*) were to be sent to the death camps to the East with the rest of the Jews.⁴

Rather than being defined by man, maybe the question is how I am seen in God's eyes. What is God's plan for my life after this revelation of identity? For God knows who is Jewish in their heart. Why do I have this desire to search for my *yiddishkeit*? During my readings, I have discovered that my intense and internal self-questioning, self-dialogue and inter searching for answers that are beyond our understanding, except by God, is typically Jewish.⁵ Of course, it is said that unless one

“engages in some kind of self-examination, not only is his life without meaning – it is impossible to live in search of any meaning.”⁶

In the Hall of Names at *Yad Vashem*,⁷ I have discovered many branches of my extended family from Germany, Lithuania, Poland and Hungary, which I did not know existed. They are the fortunately remembered ones, but what about the nameless family members gone forever? How does one commemorate the death of hundreds of unknown family members, who have no graves or testimonies of remembrances at *Yad Vashem*? How many candles should one light to their memory? How many times should one say *Kaddish*⁸ for the death of an unknown family?

Keil Maleh Rachamim

God, full of compassion, who dwells on high, grant perfect rest beneath the shadow of your Divine presence in the exalted places among the holy and the pure who shine as the brightness of the skies, to the souls of our brothers and sisters, children of Israel, the holy and the pure, who fell, whose blood was shed, at Auschwitz, Maidanek, Treblinka and the other extermination camps in Europe, murdered, burned, slaughtered or buried alive, suffering the cruelest of deaths, in the sanctification of God's name. As we now pray for their precious souls, may the Lord of compassion shelter them in the shadow of His wings for all eternity, binding up their souls in the bond of eternal life. The Lord is their inheritance. May they rest in peace, and let us say. Amen.

(From the Siddur, 813b [For Martyrs])

In *Dialogues I*, Elie Wiesel, the famous Holocaust⁹ writer and survivor, relates to the unknown victims of the Holocaust:

*Who are you? A number.
Your name? Gone. Blown away. Into the sky.
Look up there.
The sky is black, black with names.¹⁰*

Wiesel describes this cemetery in the heavenly skies, when writing of his father's death that he witnessed in Buchenwald:

*TO LIVE FAR FROM my father, my father who stayed behind, in the invisible cemetery of Buchenwald. I look up at the sky, and there is his grave. When I raise my eyes to heaven, it is his grave I see.
Don't leave me, Father. No, it is I who am leaving you.
From now on we will be together only in our dreams.
I often close my eyes just to see you.
You are going away, or I am, yet the distance between us is unchanging.
I am leaving the camp, going toward a new life.
And you remain, a fistful of ashes. Not even.¹¹*

Why today are the few surviving members of a family branch, representing a chain of up to three generations destroyed by the Holocaust, seek out distant relatives

from other family branches that have been separated by centuries and countries? Why does one, thinking they are the only surviving member of their family name, find a distant relative and it is consider a victory against the persecutors of the Holocaust? Why does that discovered 3rd cousin first removed seem as close as a brother or sister, even though they are connected only by some great-grandparent? What is this shared bond of being a remnant? Is it a bond of overcoming centuries of suffering? Did the Holocaust collapse the chain of generations among the surviving remnants to bring them close?

I can understand how Jewish parents may wish to protect their children and grandchildren, especially during the 1930's or anytime during the last two thousand years, if they can be lost into the non-Jewish world and no longer be the target of anti-Semitism. During the 1930s when my father arrived in Texas from Connecticut, there were the restricted elite schools, country clubs, the social clubs and the understood social separation between Jews and non-Jews with respect to types of employment, social gatherings and residential areas.

In the earlier Klan era of the 1920s in Texas, political offices, city clubs and country clubs were further restricted.¹² In 1922, Rabbi Rosinger of Beaumont blamed the religious prejudice that he evidenced on the "anti-Jewish account of the Gospel."¹³ He wrote: "Let a Christian and a Jewish child have a falling out, the first epithet the Christian child will throw at his Jewish antagonist is, 'You are a Christ-killer.'" Texas Governor James "Pa" Ferguson, the son of a Methodist preacher, would often declare in jest that a "mob" of Israelites had "lynched the Savior."¹⁴ Historian Jonathan Sarna quoted a 1938 poll showing that 20 percent of Americans at that time thought Jews should be deported, while Jews were being reduced to non-citizens and surplus people in Germany.¹⁵

As a second lieutenant in the US Army, landing at D-Day, joining the Office of Strategic Service (OSS)¹⁶ to discover German military positions before the Battle of the Bulge, traveling with the French resistance and the German underground into Bavaria as a spy to hunt down Göring, Streicher, and other Nazi criminals, acting as the Government Safety Officer for the OSS in Nuremberg and witnessing Dachau, I can understand why my father would want to separate his future family from Jewish suffering and to lose his religion.

After the American army liberated Dachau, the soliders locked the gates to prevent the survivors from spreading disease to the German population and the Allied soliders.¹⁷ Within weeks after liberation, the survivors were dying from the contagions from the dead bodies still unburied, those suffering from typhus and dysentery were placed in special barracks, surrounded by barbed wire, with almost no medical care and thousands died from food too rich for their weakened digestive systems.¹⁸ My father must have witnessed these continuing atrocities against people who were born Jewish, but he never spoke of what he saw.

Himmler's SS built Dachau in 1933 on the site of an abandoned World War I ammunitions factory as Hitler's first concentration camp a few miles northwest of Munich.¹⁹ The *Stars & Stripes* on May 2, 1945 described Dachau upon liberation of the camp:

*The extent of the horror at this camp is beyond description. There is no way to put into words the stench of thousands of corpses lying 50 to 100 deep in three large rooms in the crematorium or the death chamber. Buchenwald had just one block where 50 to 100 died each day. Dachau has six of these blocks. Only yesterday several thousand prisoners were killed by the SS and thrown into a water-filled ditch behind the camp. On the day of liberation 32,315 prisoners of thirty nationalities were still alive.*²⁰

The social anti-Semitism in the United States in the 1950s was still a factor that influenced many Jews to hide not only from their identity but from the Holocaust.²¹ The acceptance of Jewish identity means the willingness to be part of the tragic Jewish history of persecution and oppression. To raise a Jewish child is to bind the child and the child's children on the sacrificial altar as our father Abraham bound Isaac.²² Isaac's intense spiritual strength and fear of God were manifested in Isaac's readiness to sacrifice himself at Mt. Moriah.

V'hi Sh'am'da: The Promise

*It is this [promise] that has stood by our fathers and by us,
For it was not one alone who stood against us to destroy us,
But in every generation they stand against us to destroy us,
But the Holy One, blessed be He, saves us from their hand.*

(Haggadah)

Wiesel expressed that of all the pogroms, crusades, persecutions, massacres by sword and by fire, it was a repeat of Abraham leading Isaac to the altar and each time to the holocaust all over again.²³ Wiesel has commented that "Auschwitz represented a failure, a defeat for 2,000 years of Christian civilization."²⁴ The use of the word "Auschwitz" has come to symbolize the genocide of the Jews and the Holocaust.²⁵ Auschwitz, the symbol of the Crucifixion, where was heard the cry of *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

The Nazi architect Hans Stosberg, whose job was to design German Auschwitz from the Polish Oswiecim and bring back past German glories, wrote in his New Year's greeting card to friends in December 1941:

*In the year 1241 Silesian knights, saviors of the Reich, warded off the Mongolian assault at Wahlstatt. In that same century Auschwitz was founded as a German town. Six hundred years later the Führer Adolf Hitler fends off the Bolshevik menace from Europe. This year, 1941, the construction of a new German city and the reconstruction of the old Silesian market was planned and initiated.*²⁶

Oswiecim was an ordinary town in south-central Poland with an earlier history of German colonization during the Middle Ages, until the Nazi arrived to reclaim the legacy of their ancestors and create as Stosberg expressed a new German city, the greatest mass killing city ever invented by man.²⁷

Wiesel has lamented who among the Christian community actually studies the Word of God.

In Jacob's vision of the future, he wept together with his persecuted descendants. And this was how he addressed God: In Your Book, it is written that one may not slaughter an animal and her young on the same day. This law shall not be observed by the enemy; he will kill mothers and their children in each other's presence. I shall not ask You who will observe Your Law; I shall simply ask You to tell me who will study it.

In his dream Jacob saw a ladder whose top reached into heaven. It still exists. There are those who have seen it, somewhere in Poland, at the side of an out-of-the way railroad station. And an entire people [were] climbing, climbing toward the clouds on fire. Such was the nature of the dread our ancestor Jacob must have felt.²⁸

Wiesel described, while walking through Birkenau in 1995, "the immense altar of fire whose flames touched, must have touched, the celestial throne."²⁹ However, God assured Jacob that he would receive His protection and His promise to Abraham would eventually be completed through Jacob to give the Land to Jacob's offspring in *Genesis 28:15*.

The Jewish people are the only ancient people who have re-inhabited the same land, embrace the same God, study the same Torah, speak the same aboriginal language, Hebrew, and hear the same name, Israel, as they did 3,500 years ago.³⁰ If King David were to return to his city, he would understand the language of its inhabitants and more remarkable they would understand him.³¹ Languages change over time, such as the English of Chaucer's time compared to modern English, but not Hebrew. Why?

As Wiesel has remarked "the words of the Lord heard at Sinai still retain their full authority and freshness today."³² Only through God's divine plan can we understand this mystery, but what does it all mean? From *Genesis 28:10-15*, the commentators write that the Jewish nation is under the direct guidance of God and the *Torah*, given at Sinai, is the bridge from heaven to earth. Peoplehood was born at Mount Sinai. For the first time, the Jewish people came together as one, a nation, and accepted as one the covenant with God.

Why has anti-Semitism existed for more than two thousand years and it still exists with the same hatred today, although it may go by the disguise of anti-Zionism or anti-Israel? What turned anti-Semitism into the Holocaust, the systematic annihilation of one-third of the world's entire Jewish population? Why were Jews targeted for death by the simple reason that they were born Jewish? Why has there always been conflict between Judaism and Christianity and Judaism and Islam?

The Holocaust represents the most significant Christian tragedy of history.³³ How is it possible that people, who claimed to be Christians, could have perpetrated the crimes of the Holocaust or been absolutely silent, while these atrocities against God's laws were committed?³⁴ Will the Christian church change, so that a future Holocaust, the destruction of Israel, will never be possible?³⁵ Could Christians ever understand Jewish fears ingrained from centuries of religious persecution?

An image: A village somewhere in Poland. It is Sunday. The church must be full. The sound of its bells fill the countryside, as for a funeral. A room in a house at the edge of the woods. A bed, an old couch, two chairs. Books on a shelf, newspapers on the floor. A frustrated, unhappy little boy [of 6 years old]. Frightened, his senses on the alert. His father tells him to pay attention, to watch for the moment when, with a bit of luck, they'll have the right to go out into the street. And never to show he's frightened. Too many enemies, too many dangers threaten them outside. The sky is blue, cloudless. And under the fruit trees everything is so calm. The child wants to go out. Warm himself in the sun, play. Pluck an apple, some plums. No, says his father. Not today. Why not today? Because. When will he be able to go out? Tomorrow. "But tomorrow you'll say, Not today again." "No, tomorrow I'll say, Let's wait."³⁶

Like the Jewish people throughout history, why do the Jewish state and the Jewish people stand alone and must continually justify their own existence to the world? What is the secret of survival for the Eternal People, the People of the Book? Wiesel has stated that to be Jewish means to create links, a network of continuity, and to live with memory.³⁷

Whenever I walk up to the *Kotel* in Jerusalem, I stand in silence and gaze up at this Wall of stone and I can only think about the chain of generations of my ancestors who for centuries surely prayed "Next year in Jerusalem." I think of my distant family who died in the Holocaust and here I stand, why me? I will never earn that right, but do I stand for them? Have I been brought to Jerusalem to honor their faith in God? What do I say? What do I pray? *Kaddish*. Do I leave a *Kvitel*, a written prayer in a crevice of the *Kotel*? What is my obligation to them as a remnant? I did not know them and will never know them during my earthly life.

Behold, they are saying, Our bones are dried out and our hope is lost; we are doomed! . . . Behold, I am opening your graves and raising you up from your graves, My people, and I will bring you to the soil of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and when I raise you up from your graves, My people, and when I put My spirit into you, and you come to life, and I set you on your soil. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken and I have fulfilled – the word of the Lord. Ezekiel 37:11-14.

¹ Elie Wiesel, *The Night Trilogy: Night, Dawn, the Accident*, (2001), p. 11.

² More than 95 percent of Lithuanian Jewry had been destroyed in the Holocaust from which a prewar population of 235,000 was reduced to 8 to 9 thousand survivors. Walter Reich, *Hidden History of the Kovno Ghetto*, (1st ed. sec. printing 1998), p. 217.

³ Chava Pressburger, *The Diary of Petr Ginz 1941-1942*, (1st ed. 2007)(Petr Ginz, being a child of a mixed marriage, was deported to Theresienstadt at age fourteen and died at age sixteen in Auschwitz.), p. 6.

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- ⁴ Mark Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution” A Reconsideration*, (1st ed. 2002), p. 102.
- ⁵ Judea and Ruth Pearl, editors, *I Am Jewish, Personal Reflections Inspired by the Last Words of Daniel Pearl*, (1st ed. 2004), p. 219.
- ⁶ David Patterson, *Along the Edge of Annihilation: The Collapse and Recovery of Life in the Holocaust Diary*, (1st ed. 1999), p. 29.
- ⁷ *Yad Vashem* inspired from the passage of *Isaiah 56: 5* referring to a place of honor and renown – “monument” [yad] and a “name” [shem].
- ⁸ Mourner’s Prayer expressing praise for God in memory of people who have died.
- ⁹ This term, from the Latin word *holocaustum*, means a sacrificial offering burnt whole before the Lord. Elie Wiesel, *After the Darkness: Reflections on the Holocaust*, New York, 2002, p. 5.; *Shoah* (catastrophic destruction) is the Hebrew term. The use of the word “holocaust” for the genocide infers a redemptive, sacrificial theology of salvation; whereas, the use of the word “*Shoah*” in its biblical usage infers the absence of God’s creative hovering. Carroll, p. 11. However, *Shoah* denotes a natural cataclysm and this catastrophe was not natural but perpetrated by men. Elie Wiesel, *Evil and Exile*, (1st ed. 1990), p. 39.
- ¹⁰ Elie Wiesel, *One Generation After*, (1st English ed. 1970), p. 30.
- ¹¹ Elie Wiesel, *All River Run to the Sea, Memoirs*, (1st ed. 1995), p. 99.
- ¹² Hollace A. Weiner and Kenneth D. Roseman, editors, *Lone Stars of David: The Jews of Texas*, (1st ed. 2007), p. 14.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 274.
- ¹⁶ The Office of Strategic Services was America’s first wartime espionage service created in July 1942 by President Roosevelt with Col. William J. “Wild Bill” Donovan as its director. The OSS was dissolved after the war and was replaced by the civilian Central Intelligence Agency. Ib Melchior, *Case By Case: A U.S. Army Counterintelligence Agent in World War II*, (1st ed. 1993), pp. 7, 26-27.
- ¹⁷ Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays*, (2nd ed. 1998), p. 334.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 334-335.
- ¹⁹ Melchior, p. 167.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 168.
- ²¹ Tom Segev, *Simon Wiesenthal: The Life and Legends*, (1st ed. 2010), p. 342.
- ²² John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum, *Holocaust: Religious & Philosophical Implications*, (1st ed. 1989), p. 336.
- ²³ Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God, Biblical Portraits and Legends*, (1st ed. 2005), p. 95.
- ²⁴ Harry J. Cargas, ed., *When God and Man Failed: Non-Jewish Views of the Holocaust*, (1st ed. 1981), p. 179.
- ²⁵ Jocelyn Hellig, *The Holocaust and Antisemitism, A Short History*, (1st ed. 2003), p. 7.
- ²⁶ Debórah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt, *Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present*, (1st ed. 1996), p. 19.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-21.
- ²⁸ Wiesel, *Messengers of God, Biblical Portraits and Legends*, p. 138.
- ²⁹ Wiesel, *Sea Is Never Full: Memoirs, 1969-*, (1st ed. 1999), p. 193.
- ³⁰ Judea and Ruth Pearl, p. 13.
- ³¹ Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences* (1st ed. 1990), p. 30.
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ Cargas, p. ix.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. x.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ Elie Wiesel, *A Mad Desire to Dance*, (1st ed. 2009), p. 24.
- ³⁷ Elie Wiesel, *A Jew Today*, (1st ed. 1978), p. 6.