

Two books exemplify faith kept and lost in the Holocaust

HOLocaust from K1 violin longer and in a tone more heartrending than usual. Why did tears stream down his face into his bushy beard?
Alas, on that date the Germans had crossed the border, spelling doom for the Jews of Hungary. Not that the Hasidim of Sighet were unaware of the horrors on the other side of the Carpathians. Moshe the Beadle — whom Wiesl's readers have met before — had escaped from a 1941 deportation to Galicia and had come back over the mountains to tell Sighet of mass murders.

No one believed him, not even Wiesl.
On March 19, 1944, when Moshe tried once more to stir them, they called him a madman. Even thereafter, when the Germans already were in Sighet and Moshe sat at the Passover Seder in Wiesl's home, Wiesl's father would not let Moshe tell the family what awaited them. "No one in Sighet suspected," writes Wiesl, "that our fate was already sealed."

My father, imprisoned at Auschwitz, remembers the arrival of the Hungarian Jews at the camp. Well-dressed, well-groomed, many Hasidim among them, all still naive to their fate. "Is it good here, kinderlich?" they asked. Most, like Wiesl's mother and sister, would be killed within hours.

What is it about the Jewish faith that inspires such blind optimism among its adherents, such trust in humanity and in God, such a thirst for knowledge, such a hunger for life? And yet (Wiesl's favorite phrase) — and yet what is it that stirs such hatred against its people? What was it — as Wiesl recalls bitterly — that impelled the silence of priests, pastors and the Vatican, and the actions of Christian neighbors who descended like vultures to loot newly abandoned Jewish homes?

Wiesl, spokesman for the departed, never claimed answers. Still, he has not stopped seeking them.

After Auschwitz, how can one believe? This is still the central question, the question that haunts every survivor, the question that should weigh upon any writer brave enough — or foolish enough — to confront the tragedy. How

can one believe, after seeing, as Wiesl did, Jewish children thrown alive into the fire? He experienced the unrelenting evils of both Auschwitz-Birkenau and Buchenwald, not to mention the snow-battered death march and then the open cattle cars that brought them from the first hell to the second. Still, Wiesl writes: "I have never renounced my faith in God. I have risen against His justice, protested His silence and anger rises up within faith and not outside it."

It is easy to forget, 37 years after his classic, God-challenging, auto-



Leon Weliczker Wells looks back on the horrors he encountered in youth that cost him his faith.

biographical first novel, *Night* and now that he is a statesman, an adviser to presidents, a Nobel Peace Prize winner — indeed, the world's conscience — that Wiesl is first of all a writer of great depth and import. Illuminated as it is by acute memory, steeped in history, religion and mysticism, it once drips with painful irony and shimmering with humanity. *All Rivers Run to the Sea* is a profound treasure.

Here you will meet his influences — foremost among them his father, who survived with him through Auschwitz but perished soon after they had reached Buchenwald, who appears and reappears throughout the book; his maternal grandfather, his Kabalist master, Kalman, his Talmudist master, Rabbi Saul Lieberman; and Rebbe Israel of Wirtzitz, who foretold greatness for young Elie. You will follow him, after the war, through his studies in France, his early career as a journalist, the establishment of Israel, his travels to India, Canada, the United States and Brazil, the Six-Day War, his wedding in Jerusalem in 1969 and the promise of stories yet to come. This book should send readers scurrying to discover and rediscover Wiesl's previous 28 books, a cumulative testament to an indomitable love for his tradition, for his people and for all people.

And yet, and yet there is Leon Weliczker Wells, survivor of a Lowry brigade ordered to dig up and burn the bodies of the murdered — whose 1963 book about that experience, *The Janowska Road* (later retitled *The Death Brigade*), is, like *Night*, a classic.

By March 19, 1944, Wells long since had lost his entire family, about 79 people. And *Shattered Faith*, while more narrowly focused than Wiesl's memoirs, is no less ambitious nor less significant, a powerful document whose title speaks for itself. Wells, at 79 three years older than Wiesl, is not a world figure but a success-

ful physicist and optical inventor, and, as such, readers would not have been as interested in the details of his postwar life anyway. Instead, each man's synthesis is what bears comparison. Both recall happy childhoods in Hasidic environments, both were teenagers when they encountered the fires of hell, both look back from the comfort and freedom of America. But only one of the two remains a believer.

Wiesl chooses here to examine his faith through the prism of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the holiest day in the Jewish year. After introducing us to his shtetl of Sighet in Polish Galicia — across the Carpathians from Sighet — we share his Yom Kippur in 1942, 1943 and 1944, then in 1949, then "many years later" — and, finally, 1994.

The book begins in tears — "Our lives and thoughts centered around the affliction of being in diaspora" — and affirmation, as Wiesl recalls the scene in synagogues after services: "The opportunity to make a bracha, a blessing to God, was the center of our existence. The vodka was of the maximum strength allowed by the government, namely 90 percent alcohol (180 proof). We drank it in one gulp, closing our eyes, getting red in the face, screaming out as if our throats were on fire."

Shortly before Yom Kippur 1942, in a secret also recounted in his first book, Wells escaped from the Janowska camp in Lwow where he had been among 180 prisoners forced to dig their own mass grave. The others were shot. Returning to Sighet, he learned that his mother and four sisters had been murdered. He interceded before it was too late. On Yom Kippur Eve, "I sat in silence and stared at the pages of the open prayer book that lay across my knees. . . . One is numbed and does not feel anymore. . . . It was the most solemn and saddest day of my life."

By Yom Kippur Eve 1943, Wells had been recruited and was a member of the so-called Death Brigade at Janowska. That day, the corpses dug up by the brigade were those of the leaders of the Polish intelligentsia, who had chosen death over collaboration with the Germans. "Today on Yom Kippur, we, all of us, were united in Gehenna with these righteous Poles," he writes.

The book rushes to a powerful conclusion in the United States, where Wells' past marks him almost as an alien creature among proper synagogue Jews — but it was in Lwow, at his first Yom Kippur after liberation, that his masculinity crystallized.

"What was, was, and is no more."
For Wells, perhaps, Solomon was wrong: Some rivers run to the sea, and never return.

THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

Sunday, December 3, 1995

Sun. Dec. 3, 1995 Phila. Inquirer Book Review: Faith kept and lost in Holocaust (CONT'D.)

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Sun, Feb 28, 2021