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**In the Shadow of Birkenau:  
Ethical Dilemmas during and after the Holocaust**

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WASHINGTON, D.C.

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The Holocaust demands interrogation and calls everything into question. Traditional ideas and acquired values, philosophical systems and social theories—all must be revised in the shadow of Birkenau.

—Elie Wiesel

In his classic Holocaust memoir called *Night*, Elie Wiesel describes the deportation of Jews from Sighet, his hometown in Nazi-occupied Hungary, during the spring of 1944. That railroad journey reduced his world to “a cattle car hermetically sealed.”<sup>1</sup> Wiesel recalls “the heat, the thirst, the pestilential stench, the suffocating lack of air” but emphasizes that they were “as nothing compared with [the] screams which tore us to shreds.”<sup>2</sup>

The screams were those of a middle-aged woman whom Wiesel identifies only as Madame Schächter, although he adds that he knew her well. She was imprisoned in the cattle car with her ten-year-old son, but her husband and two older boys had been deported earlier. “The separation,” says Wiesel, “had completely broken her.... Madame Schächter had gone out of her mind.”<sup>3</sup> Her disorientation was revealed not only by moans and increasingly hysterical screams but also by the visions that provoked them.

Madame Schächter could not see outside, but on the third night of the seemingly endless journey she saw flames in the darkness. “‘...Listen, listen to me,’ she kept exclaiming, ‘I can see a fire! There are huge flames! It is a furnace.’”<sup>4</sup> At first the screams

led some of the men to look through the small windows that allowed a little air into their cattle-car prison, but they saw no flames. “There was nothing there,” reports Wiesel, “only the darkness.”<sup>5</sup>

Some took pity and tried to calm Madame Schächter. Others were less kind. Wanting her quiet, they bound, gagged, and even struck Madame Schächter—“blows,” Wiesel acknowledges, “that might have killed her.” Meanwhile, he observes, “her little boy clung to her; he did not cry out; he did not say a word. He was not even weeping now.”<sup>6</sup> Dawn’s arrival stilled the bewildered woman. She remained quiet throughout the next day, but the fourth night again brought her screaming visions of fire. On the following day, the train stopped at a station. None of Madame Schächter’s flames were to be seen, but signs indicated that the train had reached Auschwitz. “No one,” says Wiesel, “had ever heard that name.”<sup>7</sup>

For an afternoon and on into the evening, the train did not move, but with nightfall Madame Schächter’s mad cries were again renewed. At last the train began to move, and as it took the rail spur that had been recently constructed to facilitate the arrival of transports at Birkenau, the killing center at Auschwitz, Madame Schächter once more became quiet, but other voices echoed hers with terrible screams of their own. They accurately reported what could be clearly seen. “‘...Look! Look through the window! Flames! Look!’”<sup>8</sup> Lighting up the darkness as they reached skyward from Birkenau’s crematorium furnaces, these flames turned Jewish lives into smoke and ash.

With the transport’s arrival at Birkenau, the cattle cars opened, and the prisoners were rousted toward the selection process that determined their fate: a gas-chamber murder or the slave labor that eventually resulted in death for most of those who were chosen. The selection process began. It spared Wiesel and his father Shlomo but condemned his mother Sarah and his little sister Tsiporah. *Night* also indicates that Wiesel caught one last glimpse of Madame Schächter and the little boy who held her hand.

Madame Schächter and her son were of no use to the Germans. Birkenau’s furnaces soon consumed them. As for Wiesel and his father, their Auschwitz path took them toward a fiery pit in which little children were being burned. Wiesel recalls his father words: “‘Do you remember Madame Schächter, in the train?’”<sup>9</sup> The immediate response in *Night* does not contain an explicit answer to his father’s question, but the words that follow are among Wiesel’s most powerful:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never

shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.<sup>10</sup>

Initially studying Wiesel's *Night* some thirty-five years ago, I became a philosopher tripped up by Holocaust history. In my early thirties at the time, my American life was progressing well, and, despite the fact that my philosophical interests focused on questions about injustice, suffering, and evil, the Holocaust was not at the center of my attention. The experiences that Wiesel reported in *Night*, even his use of words and silences, were distant from my experience. Nevertheless, what had happened to Madame Schächter and her son, to Elie Wiesel and his family, had taken place during my lifetime. My life, their lives, indeed all of *our* lives, are realities of one world, and the resulting collisions of consciousness and concern would drive me to find out as much as I could about how and why the Holocaust happened. My study convinced me that Wiesel was correct when he went on to say that "the Holocaust demands interrogation and calls everything into question. Traditional ideas and acquired values, philosophical systems and social theories—all must be revised in the shadow of Birkenau."<sup>11</sup>

Those words, along with others that Wiesel has written, indicate that his memory of Madame Schächter has never left him. Decades after writing *Night*, Wiesel recalled her in his 1995 memoir, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*. "Certain images of the days and nights spent on that train invade my dreams even now," he wrote, "anticipation of danger, fear of the dark, the screams of poor Mrs. Schecter [*sic*], who, in her delirium, saw flames in the distance; the efforts to make her stop; the terror in her little boy's eyes."<sup>12</sup> Such recollections make Wiesel wonder: "And what of human ideals, or of the beauty of innocence or the weight of justice?...Why all these deaths?"<sup>13</sup>

Questions shape the Holocaust's legacy. "What happened to ethics during and after the Holocaust?" looms large among them. That question can be insightfully linked, I believe, to reflections produced by two other Holocaust survivors, namely, Primo Levi and Sarah Kofman. Consider where their inquiries about the shadow of Birkenau might lead.

### **The Gray Zone**

Especially in his book *The Drowned and the Saved*, the Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi explored what he called “the gray zone.” As Levi experienced and explored that Auschwitz region, he stressed that it contained surprises and shocks that revealed a “world” that was not only “terrible...but also indecipherable: it did not conform to any model.”<sup>14</sup> Levi did not mince words about the fact that the Holocaust epitomized wrongdoing, and never more so, in his judgment, than when the Germans created the *Sonderkommando*, those units of predominantly Jewish prisoners whose task it was to man the Auschwitz crematoria. “Conceiving and organizing [those] squads,” he said, “was National Socialism’s most demonic crime.”<sup>15</sup> Those clear and distinct moral judgments, however, mixed and mingled with two other dimensions of awareness that made Levi a much more complicated and profound ethical thinker.

First, Levi saw that gray-zoned behavior could not be neatly analyzed in terms of right and wrong, at least not as most ethical traditions might try to do. Arguably, those traditions could still be used to judge the National Socialist perpetrators of the Holocaust, but their relevance was less clear for judging those who were conscripted into the *Sonderkommando*, let alone for determining what those hapless men should do, condemned as they were to a fate of choiceless choices, before they too were murdered.

Next, Levi saw how the gray zone revealed a tragic dysfunctionality for ethics. That dysfunctionality had at least two parts. First, traces of idealism about treating one’s neighbor as oneself or of refusing to steal might remain in the gray zone, but within that region of experience such teachings lost their appeal. As Levi put the point: “The physiological reserves of the organism were consumed in two or three months, and death by hunger, or by diseases induced by hunger, was the prisoner’s normal destiny, avoidable only with additional food. Obtaining that extra nourishment required a privilege—large or small, granted or conquered, astute or violent, licit or illicit—whatever it took to lift oneself above the norm.”<sup>16</sup> Second, if the most basic ethical teachings lost their appeal in the gray zone, then that fact scarcely inspired confidence—then or now—that the world has a fundamental moral structure that can be trusted. True, Levi thought that, “At least sometimes, at least in part, historical crimes are punished,” and that the Nazi project had been suicidal.<sup>17</sup> But Levi’s book *The Drowned and the Saved* was written, overall, in a minor key, and its chapter on the gray zone ends as follows: “Willingly or not we come to terms with power, forgetting that we are all in the ghetto, that the ghetto is walled in, that outside the ghetto reign the lords of death, and that close by the train is waiting.”<sup>18</sup>

Levi knew that a kind of “logic” governed Nazi thinking. He did not unpack, however, something implied by his insight, something that others have underscored in ways that not only are consistent with Levi’s outlook but also create additional worries about and for ethics, especially after the Holocaust. In 1988, Peter J. Haas identified what he called “the Nazi ethic.”<sup>19</sup> Fifteen years later, the historian Claudia Koonz has written about “the Nazi Conscience.” That concept, she joins Haas to show, “is not an oxymoron.” On the contrary, Koonz argues persuasively, “The popularizers of antisemitism and the planners of genocide followed a coherent set of severe ethical maxims derived from broad philosophical concepts.”<sup>20</sup> Both Haas and Koonz help to show that ethical reasoning can take forms that are not only multiple but at lethal odds with one another. Koonz makes the point by referring to the German political theorist Carl Schmitt, who rejected universal human rights and argued in May 1933 that, in Koonz’s translation, “Not every being with a human face is human.”<sup>21</sup> One can and must argue that such reasoning is false and wrong, but arguments do not guarantee the triumph of rationality, especially when what counts as rational is not only arguable but also a factor in struggles for power and political control. Neither philosophy nor ethics can take much comfort from saying, after its devastation was wreaked, that the Holocaust was wrong.

In more ways than one, the Holocaust leaves ethics gray-zoned. As the existence of Primo Levi’s gray zone helps to show, the Holocaust signifies an immense human failure. It did enormous harm to ethics by showing how ethical teachings could be overridden, rendered dysfunctional, or even subverted to serve the interests of genocide. To the extent that philosophers—moral philosophers in particular—have paid close attention to the Holocaust (not many, unfortunately, have done so), a significant version of the dilemma that Sarah Kofman (1934–1995) identified in *Smothered Words* is definitely in effect: “How is it possible to speak,” she wrote, “when you feel...a strange *double bind*: an infinite claim to speak, a *duty to speak infinitely*, imposing itself with irrepressible force, and at the same time, an almost physical impossibility to speak, a *choking* feeling.”<sup>22</sup>

The Holocaust can create a duty to speak, an obligation to make ethics stronger and less subject to overriding, dysfunctionality, or subversion, an insistence not only to drive home the difference between right and wrong but also to influence action accordingly. Yet such an obligation can also produce a choking feeling, a sense that too much harm has been done for a good recovery to be made, a suspicion that ethics may be overwhelmed by the challenges it faces. The bind is double, for the sense of ethical responsibility, real though it is, remains hopelessly optimistic and naive unless it grapples with the despair

that encounters with the Holocaust are bound to produce. To be touched by that despair, however, scarcely encourages one to believe that ethical responsibilities will be accepted and met. Caught between the post-Holocaust need to speak for ethics and above all to speak ethically and boldly, on the one hand, and the feeling that the key elements of ethics—words, arguments, appeals to reason, persuasion through the example of moral action—may be inadequate, on the other, the question persists: Given what happened to ethics during the Holocaust, what can and should be made of ethics after Auschwitz?

### **Knotted Words**

The Holocaust produced what Sarah Kofman called “knotted words,” especially for the survivors. Such words, she suggested, are “demanded and yet forbidden, because for too long they have been internalized and withheld.” Knotted words, she went on to say, “stick in your throat and cause you to suffocate, to lose your breath;” they “asphyxiate you, taking away the possibility of even beginning.”<sup>23</sup>

Kofman understood all too well what she was saying, for this French philosopher was herself a Holocaust survivor. Like some other important writers who also endured that catastrophe—Primo Levi (1919–1987) perhaps among them—she took her own life.

Kofman is quite well known in many philosophical and literary circles, but in the field of Holocaust studies it has thus far been her fate to be overlooked and too little appreciated. True, she wrote less—or at least less directly—about the Holocaust than some survivors, including Charlotte Delbo (1913–1985), arguably the woman who has written the most impressively in French about the Holocaust.<sup>24</sup> Kofman’s explicit works about the Holocaust consist primarily of two small books, *Paroles suffoquées* (1987), a reflection focused on her father, Berek Kofman, a Parisian rabbi who was deported to Auschwitz in 1942, and *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* (1994), her memoir about antisemitism, family separation, and hiding during the German occupation of her native France.<sup>25</sup> This memoir, which Kofman began to write in the winter of 1992–93 at the age of sixty, takes its title from two Parisian streets, which, Kofman observes, were separated by one Métro stop.<sup>26</sup> The family home had been on Ordener Street, but everything changed when Kofman’s father was caught in the roundup of some thirteen thousand Parisian Jews that took place on 16–17 July 1942.<sup>27</sup> Subsequently Sarah’s mother, who survived the Holocaust, had to find hiding places for the children. Kofman’s turned out to be on Labat Street with a Christian widow named Mémé.<sup>28</sup>

Meanwhile Kofman never saw her father again. In *Smothered Words*, Kofman sums up the bare facts of her father's fate as follows:

My father: Berek Kofman, born on October 10, 1900, in Sobin (Poland), taken to Drancy on July 16, 1942. Was in convoy no. 12, dated July 29, 1942, a convoy comprising 1,000 deportees, 270 men and 730 women (aged 36–54); 270 men registered 54,153 to 54,422; 514 women selected for work, registered 13,320 to 13,833; 216 other women gassed immediately.<sup>29</sup>

The ending of the five-page chapter that contains those words mentions the memorial register created by Serge Klarsfeld, a French historian of the Holocaust and a hunter of Nazi war criminals. Kofman reproduces a portion of its double-columned, alphabetized list of the French deportees. There, in the left-hand column between the names of Simone Klempen and Grange Kohn, one finds Berek Kofman. Klarsfeld's memorial list, with "its endless columns of names...takes your breath away," says Kofman. "Its 'neutral' voice summons you obliquely; in its extreme restraint, it is the very voice of affliction, of this event in which all possibility vanished, and which inflicted on the whole of humanity 'the decisive blow which left nothing intact.' This voice leaves you without a voice, makes you doubt your common sense and all sense, makes you suffocate in silence: 'silence like a cry without words; mute, although crying endlessly.'"<sup>30</sup>

Her father's death suffocated Kofman, stifled her words. It did so, however, not simply because it was her father's death, grievous enough though a father's death can be for anyone. "Because he was a Jew," as her stifled voice expresses it, "my father died in Auschwitz."<sup>31</sup> Kofman's emphasis on smothered words, moreover, shows that her choking feeling was inseparable from the memory of how her father died in Auschwitz. "My father, a rabbi," she writes, "was killed because he tried to observe the Sabbath in the death camps; buried alive with a shovel for having—or so the witnesses reported—refused to work on that day, in order to celebrate the Sabbath, to pray to God for them all, victims and executioners, reestablishing, in this situation of extreme powerlessness and violence, a relation beyond all power. And they could not bear that a Jew, that vermin, even in the camps, did not lose faith in God."<sup>32</sup>

"Because he was a Jew, my father died in Auschwitz." Not just a father's death but a particular Jewish father's death in its Auschwitz specificity—that event, which Kofman calls "my absolute," made the suffocating difference. All she has left of her father, Kofman observes, is his fountain pen. "Patched up with Scotch tape," it can produce words no

more, but “right in front of me on my desk,” she says, that mute pen “makes me write, write.”<sup>33</sup> As she penned those words, Kofman was trying to do what she had not done overtly very much before. “Maybe all my books,” she observed, “have been the detours required to bring me to write about ‘that.’”<sup>34</sup> *That* included her father’s death, the Holocaust, the loss of humanity. Kofman had written about some of these matters already and in ways many and diverse, but a direct encounter with the Holocaust, unavoidably including the particularity of her father’s death and her own identity in relation to that disaster, led her to write what she felt most deeply.

As she thought about the idea of *humanity* after the Holocaust, for example, she saw that the value of a shared sense of humanity, of our belonging to a human species, depends on whether that belonging binds us together in mutual respect and caring, whether it draws people together in community. As Kofman sized up the situation, however, the connections between the unity implied by the word *humanity* and the senses of community that may or may not follow are tenuous and even problematic. First, she pointed out, “No community is possible with the SS.”<sup>35</sup> With a vengeance, Nazi ideology rejected the idea of an inclusively shared humanity. Regarding difference—especially alleged racial difference—as profoundly threatening, its genocidal impulses took the world to Treblinka and Auschwitz. Nazi Germany, of course, took pride in its own sense of community, which underscores that community is not necessarily humanity’s ally, especially if *humanity* is understood to be pluralistic and diverse. So Kofman made a second point: It is crucial to support “the community (of those) without community.”<sup>36</sup>

Those without community are outsiders, but Kofman’s thinking did not stop with a call to defend and protect those who are threatened and harmed because they are left out. More radically and fundamentally, she rejected all senses of community that are based on “any specific difference or on a shared essence” such as reason.<sup>37</sup> The right forms of community, she seems to be saying, are those that consciously accept a double-bind. This bind acknowledges that every community is particular, different, finite, even exclusive in one way or another, but no community should rest on assumptions about immutable superiority or inferiority. On the contrary, the particularity of one community ought to affirm, protect, and encourage the particularity of others.

Here Kofman’s words are not smothered or knotted, but they remain less than fully expressed. They remain hints, allusions, or signposts pointing to an ethical outlook that would not be the same as old humanisms that appealed to human nature, to the essence of humanity, or to reason as humankind’s most decisive characteristic. Instead, she suggests,

everyday realities and actions—things such as choices and keeping or betraying one’s word—reveal our humanity and make all the difference. The Holocaust reaffirmed that all of those caught in it—perpetrators, victims, bystanders, and more—were human. In some sense, humanity survived the Holocaust, if only to testify, as the French philosopher Maurice Blanchot put it, how human indestructibility reveals “that there is no limit to the destruction of man.”<sup>38</sup> But if humanity is to mean more than that, if humanity is to be what Kofman thought it ought to become, then the destruction of old humanisms would have to make possible the willful reconstitution of a “new kind of ‘we,’” even “a new ‘humanism’ one might say, if it were still acceptable to use this trite and idyllic word.”<sup>39</sup>

### **Unknotted Words?**

What about Kofman’s guarded hope, her hint of “community (of those) without community”? Kofman glimpsed the possibility of a new humanism and a new ethics, but the Holocaust scholar Raul Hilberg seemed to emphasize a different theme, even one that disagreed with hers, when in 1996 he spoke at a University of Oregon conference on ethics after the Holocaust.<sup>40</sup> Explaining that he did not consider himself a philosopher or theologian, Hilberg asserted that ethics is the same today as it was yesterday and even the day before yesterday; it is the same after Auschwitz as it was before and during the lethal operations at that place. Especially with regard to needless and wanton killing, he emphasized, ethics is the same for everyone, everywhere. Hilberg left no unclarity. Such killing is wrong. We know that “in our bones,” he said, for such knowledge is the heritage of many years.

Kofman, I think, would accept Hilberg’s claims only up to a point, and she would be right before conceding that Hilberg’s bold pronouncement unknots the words that ethics after Auschwitz needs to express. True, senses of right and wrong are real. The Holocaust helps to focus them. Even the SS leader Heinrich Himmler knew as much. He and the other perpetrators of the Holocaust were aware of the psychological turmoil created by their orders to kill. They did their best to make those tasks easier, more “humane,” by distancing the killers from their victims. Thus, they substituted mass gassings for the shootings of the *Einsatzgruppen*. But did Himmler and the other perpetrators know “in their bones” that what they were doing was wrong? In some cases, there is evidence that says so. The perpetrators covered their tracks as best they could. Many of the killers numbed themselves with alcohol. Some Germans refused orders to kill Jews, especially when children were the targets.

On the other hand, such evidence is mostly circumstantial. It was not very often enhanced by admissions of guilt or expressions of remorse. Far more common were excuses that referred to orders that must be obeyed or to fears of punishment if obedience was not forthcoming. For the most part, Nazi leaders and Holocaust perpetrators remained unrepentant. At the end of the day, their behavior does not show that they knew that their killing of the Jews was wanton, needless, and wrong. On the contrary, their behavior suggests that they believed their killing to be right and good, albeit extremely difficult, even loathsome to do. It would be comforting if Hilberg's convictions were true, but the Holocaust does not inspire confidence that all human beings know—in their bones or in any other way—that mass killing and genocide are wrong. Kofman was right: no community was possible with the SS because it did not know better than it thought it did. That knowledge, as Kofman also understood, depended on an entirely different approach to choosing and fidelity than Nazism required.

To the extent that knowledge of wrongdoing complicated the killing that the perpetrators carried out month after month, year after year, moral sensitivity did have to be overridden. Himmler and his henchmen could rely on an ally of vast authority: human consciousness itself.<sup>41</sup> Humanity's capacity to think is amazingly pliable, especially so in its ability to justify whatever the powers that be want done. The explanations offered by German industrialists to warrant their use of slave labor—for example, Germany was fighting for its life, what else could one do?—were only one strand in a web of rationalization and repression that did much to ensure that dissenting moral scruples would be subordinated to “higher” necessities or even that the dictates of morality and mass murder would coincide.<sup>42</sup> The Nazis were not totally successful in this regard. But when one remembers that the persons responsible for the Holocaust were a cross-section from virtually every profession, skill, and social class, then the persistence with which the Final Solution went forward without effective moral dissent is the more striking. Absent the force of will, nothing guarantees that ethics will not be smothered after the Holocaust as it was with such devastating results during that disaster.

If one wants to affirm the United Nations' declaration that “everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person,” one must realize that such claims are as frail as they are abstract. Rights, liberty, and security of person are real only in specific times and places, only in actual political circumstances. Apart from such concrete settings those ideals are only that. Granted, they are ideals that attract. They can bring out the best in people. They can rally powerful forces behind them. They may even have a transcendent

status ordained by God. To assume, however, that they are more than ideals until men and women take responsibility to make them a concrete reality may well be an illusion.

### **A Negative Absolute?**

In our pluralistic world, in which cultural, religious, and philosophical perspectives vary considerably, a widely held belief is that values are so relative to one's time and place that the "truth" of moral claims is much more a result of subjective preference and political power than a function of objective reality and universal reason. That relativistic outlook meets resistance in the Holocaust, for there is a widely shared conviction that the Holocaust was *wrong*. It was something that should not have happened, and nothing akin to it should ever happen again. Michael Berenbaum puts the point effectively when he emphasizes that the Holocaust has become a "negative absolute." Even if people remain skeptical that rational agreement can be obtained about what is right, just, and good, the Holocaust seems to reestablish conviction that what happened at Auschwitz and Treblinka was wrong, unjust, and evil—period.

Unfortunately, to identify the Holocaust as a negative absolute that reinstates confidence in moral absolutes is a step, as the gray zone reminds us, that cannot be taken easily. To reiterate an earlier point, the Holocaust signifies an immense human failure. It did harm to ethics by showing how ethical teachings could be overridden, rendered dysfunctional, or even subverted to serve the interests of genocide.<sup>43</sup> When Berenbaum calls the Holocaust a "negative absolute," the absoluteness involved means that not even ethics itself was immune from failure and, at times, complicity in the pathological conditions and characteristics that nearly destroyed Jewish life and left the world morally scarred forever.

The gray-zoned status of ethics after the Holocaust is far from settled. One might argue that Nazi Germany's defeat shows that right defeated wrong and that goodness subdued evil, thus showing that reality has a fundamentally moral underpinning. The Holocaust, however, is far too awesome for such easy triumphalism. The Nazis did not win, but they came too close for comfort. Even though the Third Reich was destroyed, it is not so easy to say that its defeat was a clear and decisive triumph for goodness, truth, and justice over evil, falsehood and corruption. Add to those realizations the fact that the Nazis themselves were idealists. They had positive beliefs about right and wrong, good and evil, duty and irresponsibility. The Final Solution was a key part of the Nazi ethic, perhaps the essence of its practice, which took place with a zealous, even apocalyptic, vengeance.<sup>44</sup> It

would be too convenient to assume that the Nazi ethic's characteristic blending of loyalty, faith, heroism, and even love for country and cause was simply a passive, mindless obedience. Defensible though the judgment would be, it remains too soothing to say only that the Nazi ethic was a deadly perversion of what is truly moral, or that the Nazi conscience had nothing to do with ordinary language references to that reality. Most people are unlikely to serve a cause unto death unless that cause makes convincing moral appeals about what is good and worthy of loyalty. Those appeals, of course, can be blind, false, or even sinful, and the Nazis' were. Nevertheless, the perceived and persuasive "goodness" of the beliefs that constituted the Nazi ethic—the dedicated SS man embodied them most thoroughly—is essential to acknowledge if we are to understand why so many Germans willfully followed Hitler into genocidal warfare.

As Sarah Kofman helped to show, our senses of moral and religious authority have been weakened by the accumulated ruins of history and the depersonalized advances of "civilization" that have taken us from a bloody twentieth century into what may become an even more problematic twenty-first. A moral spirit, a religious commitment, and a political determination that have the courage to persist *in spite of* humankind's self-inflicted destructiveness are essential, but the question remains how effective those dispositions can be in a world where power, and especially the power of governments, stands at the heart of that matter. To find ways to affect "the powers that be" so that their tendencies to lay waste to human life are checked, ethics after Auschwitz will need to draw on every resource it can find: appeals to human rights, calls for renewed religious sensitivity, respect and honor for people who save lives and resist tyranny, and attention to the Holocaust's warnings, to name only a few. Those efforts will need to be accompanied by efforts that build these concerns into our educational, religious, business, and political institutions.

Sarah Kofman never forgot what the Nazi assault meant, namely, that after 16 July 1942, she never saw her father Berek again. Nazism and its Holocaust were an assault on the values that human beings hold most dear when we are at our best. Resistance to protect them came too late then; hence resistance continues to be urgent now, and it begins perpetually with small deeds, the raising of critical questions among them. Sarah Kofman, her smothered words, the Holocaust's double binds—each and all, her hard-earned perspectives underscore that nothing human, natural, or divine guarantees respect for those values.<sup>45</sup> Nothing, though, is more important than our commitment to defend them, for they remain as fundamental as they are fragile, as precious as they are endangered.

## A Postscript

A postscript will sum up these reflections: About as far from Auschwitz as one can get, the town where my granddaughter lives is called Winthrop. It sits small in the Methow Valley, a place of spectacular beauty on the eastern slope of the majestic Cascade Range, far north in the state of Washington. Native Americans knew that valley and its glistening rivers long before it became one of the last places to be settled by white men and women in the American West. While I was thinking about the shadow of Birkenau, this Museum, and this lecture during a recent visit with my grandchild, I was also reading the words of a writer who was new to me, just as Elie Wiesel once had been some thirty-five years ago. As I discovered earlier this year, the American poet William Stafford, who died in 1993, is one of our national treasures.

Stafford's poems focus on the natural world, often on our abuse of it. Also drenched in history, his verse laments the carnage we human beings inflict and encourages resistance against it. Although the Holocaust was not Stafford's theme, he knew plenty about war and genocide—his Indian heritage saw to that—and in works such as *Traveling Through the Dark* and *The Darkness Is All Around Us*, he wondered, as Wiesel did in *Night*, whether, ultimately, only the darkness was there. In a poem called "Meditation," for example, he writes as follows: "Animals full of light / walk through the forest / toward someone aiming a gun / loaded with darkness. / That's the world: God / holding still / letting it happen again, / and again and again."<sup>46</sup> Such words are not ones of resignation and despair. They voice protest and the possibility of creative change instead.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum stands next to the headquarters of the United States Forest Service. So it is worth observing that two forest rangers contacted William Stafford one day. They had an unusual request: Would he help them create "poetry road signs" for the North Cascades highway? Winter snow buries that breathtaking road and the threat of avalanches closes it down for five or six months each year. But tonight seven of William Stafford's specially written poems are there to reappear and offer guidance when the road reopens and travelers are on their way through the mountains again.

One of those poems is called "Being a Person." It invites a reader/viewer to contemplate the Methow River as its clear, cold water rushes to the Columbia and then to the Pacific. Its reflections make a good ending and beginning for any stock-taking, but especially one that asks how we should respond to what happened to ethics during the Holocaust and what we should make of ethics in the shadow of Birkenau. "Be a person

here,” writes Stafford. “How you stand here is important. How you / listen for the next things to happen. How you breathe.”<sup>47</sup> Whatever else it may be, ethics after the Holocaust is about those things: what we hear as we listen for what is happening, how we breathe, how we stand. Nothing could be more important.

### Notes

1. Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Stella Rodway (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), p. 22.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
11. This statement is from Elie Wiesel's foreword to Harry James Cargas, *Shadows of Auschwitz: A Christian Response to the Holocaust* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), p. ix.
12. Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), p. 76.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
14. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, 1988), p. 38.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 41. In *Jewish Resistance during the Holocaust: Moral Uses of Violence and Will* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), James M. Glass shows how the Holocaust produced a disintegration of ethics akin to the outcomes that Levi witnessed in Auschwitz. He describes two types of Jewish resistance to that disintegration. One form, spiritual resistance, did not eliminate useless suffering and death, but it allowed the dying a modicum of dignity and perhaps helped to keep ethical hopes alive. The other form, violent resistance, developed an ethic of its own, one that gave priority to survival and legitimated what was necessary to improve the odds for it. Glass's lucid and realistic account helps to show how the status and content of understandings of right and wrong are

influenced by power configurations.

17. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 202.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

19. See Peter J. Haas, *Morality after Auschwitz: The Radical Challenge of the Nazi Ethic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988). For further discussion on this important theme, see also John K. Roth, ed., *Ethics after the Holocaust* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1999).

20. Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 1.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

22. Sarah Kofman, *Smothered Words*, trans. Madeleine Dobie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), p. 70

23. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

24. See especially Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, trans. Rosette C. Lamont (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995). Delbo was not Jewish, but her activity in the French Resistance led to her arrest and deportation to Auschwitz, which took place on 24 January 1943. She survived Auschwitz and Ravensbrück, a Nazi camp established especially for women.

25. For the English translations of these books, see Kofman, *Smothered Words*, and Sarah Kofman, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996). Kofman's memory of her father plays an important part in both. *Smothered Words* is dedicated to him and also to the philosophers Maurice Blanchot (1907–2003) and Robert Antelme (1917–1990). Blanchot's controversial career included the prewar articles that he wrote for right-wing, antisemitic publications, but also assistance to French Jews during the German occupation and post-war reflections on the Holocaust, particularly *L'Écriture du désastre* (1980), which influenced Kofman considerably. Antelme was arrested by the Germans because of his work in the French Resistance. His survival of Buchenwald and Dachau led to *L'Espèce humaine* (1957), a philosophical memoir that made an especially strong impression upon Kofman. "To have to speak without being able to speak or be understood, to have to choke," wrote Kofman in *Smothered Words* (p. 39), "such is the ethical exigency that Robert Antelme obeys in *The Human Race*." For the English translations of the books by Blanchot and Antelme, see Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986); and Robert Antelme, *The Human Race*, trans. Jeffrey Haight and Annie Mahler (Evanston, IL: The Marlboro Press/Northwestern University Press, 1998). All citations from Antelme

and Blanchot as well as from *Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat* and *Smothered Words* are from the English editions I have noted.

26. Kofman, *Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat*, p. 31.

27. Kofman adds the following information about her father:

On 16 July 1942, my father knew he was going to be picked up. It had been rumored that a big roundup was planned for that day. He was rabbi of a small synagogue on the Rue Duc in the 18<sup>th</sup> arrondissement. He had left home very early that day to warn as many Jews as he could to go into hiding immediately.

Then he came home and waited; he was afraid that[,] if he too were to hide[,] his wife and six young children would be taken in his place. He had three girls and three boys between two and twelve years old.

He waited and prayed to God that they would come for him, as long as his wife and children could be saved. (*Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat*, p. 5)

About eighty thousand Jews from France were killed in Nazi Germany's extermination camps, mostly at Auschwitz. Approximately one-third of them were French citizens; the majority were immigrants and refugees. Foreign Jews were first deported from France to Auschwitz on 27 March 1942. Facilitated by French police, the roundups and deportations intensified during the summer of 1942. For more background and detail, see David Weinberg, "France," in *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*, ed. Walter Laqueur (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 213–22.

28. Among the multiple double binds that the Holocaust created were the complex dilemmas of identity encountered by hidden children. Kofman illustrates an aspect of that bind when she briefly describes the journey that took her from Rue Ordener, her home street, to a place of hiding and relative safety on Rue Labat. Her reaction seems to run as deep as it was physical. Short in distance and time though it was, that journey "seemed endless to me, and I vomited the whole way" (*Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat*, p. 31). Kofman indicates that Mémé, her rescuer, was "not without anti-Semitic prejudices." She also detached Kofman from her mother and Judaism. Yet, Kofman says that she came to love Mémé "more than my own mother." Ending *Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat* with Mémé on her mind, Kofman writes, "I was unable to attend her funeral. But I know that at her grave the priest recalled how she had saved a little Jewish girl during the war" (*Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat*, pp. 47, 58, 85).

29. Kofman, *Smothered Words*, p. 10.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11. In this passage Kofman includes two quotations from Blanchot, whose words, along with Antelme's, are frequently quoted in *Smothered Words*. The first quotation is from "After the Fact," Blanchot's afterword to his *Vicious Circles*, trans. Paul Auster (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1985), p. 68. The second passage is from *The*

*Step Not Beyond*, trans. Lycette Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 61. Elsewhere Blanchot amplifies and complicates the point made in the first passage quoted by Kofman. “The disaster ruins everything,” he writes, “all the while leaving everything intact.” That relationship epitomizes another of the Holocaust’s double binds, which are so vividly illustrated in Kofman’s life and authorship. See Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. 1.

In “A Note on Translation,” which helps to introduce *Smothered Words*, Madeleine Dobie observes that Kofman’s frequent use of quotations, a style often found in her later writings, “may be seen to attenuate the mastery of the narrative voice through the interposition of the voices of others, and thereby of the Other, the style that Kofman, following Blanchot, calls ‘writing without power.’ ...*Paroles suffoquées*,” continues Dobie, “is at once a scholarly piece that develops arguments supported by quotations and footnotes, and a meditation in the style of Blanchot, in which the conventional privileging of the signified—arguments or ideas—over the signifier—form or the very process of writing itself—is called into question” (p. xxiv). My essay’s discussion of Kofman, replete with quotation of her words, modestly tries to emulate her style in that regard.

31. Kofman, *Smothered Words*, p. 9.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

33. Kofman, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, p. 9.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

35. Kofman, *Smothered Words*, p. 70.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*

38. Kofman ends *Smothered Words* with this quotation from Blanchot (see p. 73). The quoted passage comes from *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 135.

39. Kofman, *Smothered Words*, p. 73. Kofman adds an intriguing note to her allusion about a new “humanism.” She writes as follows: “In spite of everything that makes this word unacceptable for us today—after ‘the death of God’ and the end of man that is its correlate—I nonetheless want to conserve it, while giving it a completely different meaning, displacing and transforming it. I keep it because what other, new ‘word’ could have as much hold on the old humanism?” (pp. 89–90) Here one thinks of the Nietzschean theme of the revaluation of values.

40. The discussion in this part of my essay is adapted from the epilogue to Richard L. Rubenstein and John K. Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz: The Holocaust and Its Legacy*, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), pp. 365–77.

41. For instructive socio-psychological discussions about rationalizations and interpersonal dynamic that expedited the Holocaust and facilitate the potential for future genocides, see Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996); Ervin Staub, *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and James Waller, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

42. For a useful discussion of the various defense mechanisms employed by Nazis to justify their actions in the Holocaust, see Raul Hilberg, “The Nature of the Process,” in *Survivors, Victims, and Perpetrators: Essays on the Nazi Holocaust*, ed. Joel E. Dimsdale (Washington, DC: Hemisphere Publishing Corporation, 1980), pp. 5–54. See also Robert Wolfe, “Putative Threat to National Security as Nuremberg Defense for Genocide,” in *Reflections on the Holocaust*, eds. Irene G. Shur, Franklin H. Littell, and Marvin E. Wolfgang (Philadelphia: The American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1980), pp. 46–67. As he sized up the excuses that German industrialists offered, Benjamin Ferencz, an American prosecutor at the Nuremberg trials, added that as far as German businessmen were concerned, “it was only those who had nothing to be ashamed of who expressed a sense of guilt and culpability.” See Benjamin B. Ferencz, *Less Than Slaves: Jewish Forced Labor and the Quest for Compensation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 192.

43. On these points see Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); and Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

44. For an important discussion of these themes, see Haas, *Morality after Auschwitz*; and Roth, ed., *Ethics after the Holocaust*.

45. Even with respect to Berenbaum's appealing idea that the Holocaust is a negative absolute, this judgment remains valid. There is no guarantee that universal moral reason or intuition exists or that, if they do, they will automatically conclude without disagreement that the Holocaust is a negative absolute. In ethics, the human will is decisive in determining how good and evil, right and wrong are understood. Reason and intuition inform our willing and choosing, but without the latter, our senses of good and evil, right and wrong, lack the force that gives them full reality and makes them effective. Willing and choosing alone do not determine what is ethical, but in the fullest sense no

determination of right and wrong takes place without them. For a careful and important ethical study that emphasizes rationality in a more universalistic way, see David H. Jones, *Moral Responsibility in the Holocaust: A Study in the Ethics of Character* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).

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47. William Stafford, "Being a Person," in *Even in Quiet Places: Poems by William Stafford* (Lewiston, ID: Confluence Press, 1996), p. 89. Reprinted by permission of the publisher. This poem is one in a small collection called *The Methow River Poems*.

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