

NIGHT

By Elie Wiesel

THEY CALLED HIM Moishe the Beadle, always by his first name. A **beadle** is a helper in a Jewish **synagogue**, and that's what Moishe did better than anyone. He was the jack-of-all-trades in a Jewish house of prayer. The Jews of **Sighet**—the little town in **Transylvania** where I spent my childhood—were fond of him. He was a simple man, and lived in utter poverty. As a rule, our townspeople, while they did help the needy, did not particularly like them. Moishe the Beadle was the exception. He stayed out of people's way. His presence bothered no one. He had mastered the art of rendering himself insignificant, invisible.

Physically, he was as awkward as a clown. His shyness made people smile. As for me, I liked his wide, dreamy eyes, gazing off into the distance. He spoke little. He sang, or rather he chanted, and the few snatches I caught here and there spoke of divine suffering of the people of God.

I met him in 1941. I was almost thirteen and deeply religious. By day I studied the Bible, and by night I would run to the **synagogue** to weep over the destruction of the great Jewish Temple by the Romans in ancient times.

One day I asked my father to find me a teacher who could guide me in my studies of Kabbalah – the ancient Jewish religious book. "You are too young for that. First you must study the basic subjects, those you are able to comprehend."

My father was a cultured man, rather unsentimental. He rarely displayed his feelings, not even within his family, and was more involved with the welfare of others than with that of his own kin. The Jewish community of Sighet held him in highest esteem. There were

four of us children. Hilda, the oldest; then Bea; I was the third and the only son; Tzipora was the youngest.

My parents ran a store. Hilda and Bea helped with the work. As for me, my place was in school, or so they said. My father did not want me studying religion, so I succeeded on my own in finding a master for myself in the person of Moishe the Beadle. He was a great religious teacher: he explained to me that every religious question possessed a power that was lost in the answer.

Man comes closer to God through the questions he asks Him, he liked to say. Therein lies true dialogue. Man asks and God replies. But we don't understand His replies. We cannot understand them. Because they dwell in the depths of our souls and remain there until we die. The real answers, Eliezer, you will find only within yourself.

We spoke that way almost every evening, remaining in the synagogue long after all the faithful had gone, sitting in the semidarkness where only a few half-burnt candles provided a flickering light. And in the course of those evenings I became convinced that Moishe the Beadle would help me enter eternity, into that time when question and answer would become ONE.

AND THEN, one day all non-Hungarian Jews were expelled from Sighet. And Moishe the Beadle was a foreigner. Crammed into cattle cars by the Hungarian police, they cried silently as they were sent away. Behind me, someone said, sighing, "What do you expect? That's w a r. "

The **deportees** were quickly forgotten.

Days went by. Then weeks and months. Life was normal again. A calm, reassuring wind blew through our homes. The shopkeepers were doing good business, the students lived among their books, and the children played in the streets.

One day, as I was about to enter the synagogue, I saw Moishe the Beadle sitting on a bench near the entrance. He told me what had happened to him and his companions. The train with the deportees had crossed the Hungarian border and, once in Polish territory, had been taken over by the German Gestapo. The train had stopped. The Jews

were ordered to get off and onto waiting trucks. The trucks headed toward a forest. There everybody was ordered to get out. They were forced to dig huge trenches. When they had finished their work, the men from the Gestapo began theirs. Without passion or haste, they shot their prisoners, who were forced to approach the trench one by one and offer their necks. Infants were tossed into the air and used as targets for the machine guns. This took place in the **Galician** forest, near Kolomay. How had he, Moishe the Beadle, been able to escape? By a miracle. He was wounded in the leg and left for dead.

Day after day, night after night, he went from one Jewish house to the next, telling his story of Nazi murders. He spoke of Malka, the young girl who lay dying for three days, and that of Tobie, the tailor who begged to die before his sons were killed.

Moishe was not the same. The joy in his eyes was gone. Some even insinuated that he only wanted their pity, that he was imagining things. Others flatly said that he had gone mad.

As for Moishe, he wept and pleaded: "Jews, listen to me! That's all I ask of you. No money. No pity. Just listen to me!" he kept shouting in synagogue, between the prayer at dusk and the evening prayer.

Even I did not believe him.

"They think I'm mad," he whispered, and tears, like drops of wax, flowed from his eyes.

Once, I asked him the question: "Why do you want people to believe you so much? In your place I would not care whether they believed me or n o t, "

"You don't understand," he said in despair. "You cannot understand. I was saved miraculously by God. I succeeded in coming back. Where did I get my strength? I wanted to return to Sighet to describe to you my death so that you might ready yourselves while there is still time. Life? I no longer care to live. I am alone. But I wanted to come back to warn you. Only no one is listening to me."

This was toward the end of 1942. Thereafter, life seemed normal once again. London radio, which we listened to every evening, announced encouraging news: the daily bombings of Germany and Stalingrad, the preparation of the Second Front. And so we, the Jews of Sighet, waited for better days that surely were soon to come.

I continued to devote myself to my studies. My father took care of his business and the community. Thus passed the year 1943.

SPRING 1944. Splendid news from the Russian Front. There could no longer be any doubt: Germany would be defeated. It was only a matter of time, months or weeks, perhaps. The people were saying, "The Red Army is advancing with giant strides... Hitler will not be able to harm us, even if he wants to."

Yes, we even doubted his resolve to exterminate us. Annihilate an entire people? Wipe out a population dispersed throughout so many nations? So many millions of people! By what means? In the middle of the twentieth century!

But the next days brought really disquieting news: German troops had entered Hungarian territory with the government's approval. Finally, people began to worry in earnest. One of my friends returned from the capital city for **Passover** and told us, "The Jews of **Budapest** live in an atmosphere of fear and terror. **Anti-Semitic** acts take place every day, in the streets, on the trains. The Fascists attack Jewish stores, synagogues. The situation is becoming very serious."

The news spread through Sighet like wildfire. In less than three days, German Army vehicles made their appearance on our streets.

ANGUISH. German soldiers—with their steel helmets and their death's-head emblem. The Germans were already in our town, the Fascists were already in power, the verdict was already out—and the Jews of Sighet were still smiling.

The curtain finally rose: the Germans arrested the leaders of the Jewish community. From that moment on, everything happened very quickly. The race toward death had begun.

First **edict**: Jews were prohibited from leaving their residences for three days, under penalty of death. The same day, the Hungarian police burst into every Jewish home in town: a Jew was henceforth forbidden to own gold, jewelry or any valuables. Everything had to be handed over to the authorities, under penalty of death. My father went down to the cellar and buried our savings.

Three days later, a new decree: every Jew had to wear the yellow star. Some prominent members of the community came to consult with my father, who had connections at the Hungarian police; they wanted to know what he thought of the situation. My father's view was that it was not all bleak, or perhaps he just did not want to discourage the others: "The yellow star? So what? It's not lethal..." (Poor Father! Of what then did you die?)

But new edicts were already being issued. We no longer had the right to go to restaurants or cafes, to travel by rail, to attend synagogue, to be on the streets after six o'clock in the evening. Then came the ghettos.

TWO GHETTOS were created in Sighet. A large one in the center of town occupied four streets, and another smaller one extended over several alleyways on the outskirts of town. The street we lived on, Serpent Street, was in the first ghetto. We therefore could remain in our house. But, as it occupied a corner, the windows facing the street outside the ghetto had to be sealed. We gave some of our rooms to relatives who had been driven out of their homes.

People thought this might be a good thing. We would no longer have to look at all those hostile faces, endure those hate-filled stares. No more fear. No more anguish. We would live among Jews, among brothers...

Of course, there still were unpleasant moments. Every day, the Germans came looking for men to load coal into the military trains. Volunteers for this kind of work were few. But apart from that, the atmosphere was oddly peaceful and reassuring.

Most people thought that we would remain in the ghetto until the end of the war, until the arrival of the **Red Army**. Afterward everything would be as before. The ghetto was ruled by delusion.

And then Night fell. Some twenty people had gathered in our courtyard. My father was sharing some stories and giving his opinion of the situation. Suddenly, the gate opened, and Mr. Stern, a former shopkeeper who now was a policeman, entered and took my father aside. Despite the growing darkness, I could see my father turn pale.

"What's wrong?" we asked.

"I don't know. I have been summoned to a special meeting of the Jewish Council. Something must have happened. I'm going right now," he said. "I'll return as soon as possible. I'll tell you everything. Wait for me."

We were ready to wait as long as necessary. Neighbors, hearing the rumors, had joined us. We stared at our watches. What was the meaning of such a long session?

"I have a bad feeling," said my mother. "This afternoon I saw new faces in the ghetto. Two German officers, I believe they were Gestapo. "

It was close to midnight. Nobody felt like going to sleep, though some people briefly went to check on their homes. Others left but asked to be called as soon as my father returned.

At last, the door opened and he appeared. His face was drained of color. He was quickly surrounded.

"Tell us. Tell us what's happening! Say something..."

But one glance at my father's face left no doubt.

"The news is terrible," he said at last. And then one word: "Transports."

The ghetto was to be **liquidated** entirely. Departures were to take place street by street, starting the next day.

We wanted to know everything, every detail. We were stunned, yet we wanted to fully absorb the bitter news.

"Where will they take us?"

That was a secret. A secret for all, except one: the president of the Jewish Council. But he would not tell, or could not tell. The Gestapo had threatened to shoot him if he talked.

"There are rumors," my father said, his voice breaking, "that we are being taken somewhere in Hungary to work in the brick factories. It seems that here, we are too close to the **front**..." After a moment's silence, he added: "Each of us will be allowed to bring his personal belongings. A backpack, some food, a few items of clothing. Nothing else."

Again, heavy silence.

"Go and wake the neighbors," said my father. "They must get ready..."

The shadows around me roused themselves as if from a deep sleep and left silently in every direction.

THE GHETTO was awake. One after the other, the lights were going on behind the windows. Time went by quickly. It was already four o'clock in the morning. My father was running right and left, exhausted, consoling friends, checking with the Jewish Council just in case the order had been rescinded. To the last moment, people clung to hope.

The women were boiling eggs, roasting meat, preparing cakes, sewing backpacks. The children were wandering about aimlessly, not knowing what to do with themselves to stay out of the way of the grown-ups.

By morning, our backyard looked like a marketplace. Valuable objects, precious rugs, silver candlesticks, Bibles and other ritual objects were strewn over the dusty grounds—pitiful relics that seemed never to have had a home. All this under a magnificent blue sky.

By eight AM, weariness had settled into our veins, our limbs, our brains, like molten lead. I was in the midst of prayer when suddenly there was shouting in the streets. I quickly ran to the window. Hungarian police had entered the ghetto and were yelling in the street nearby.

"All Jews, outside! Hurry!"

They were followed by Jewish police, who, their voices breaking, told us:

"The time has come...you must leave all t h i s."

The Hungarian police used their rifle butts, their clubs to indiscriminately strike old men and women, children and cripples.

One by one, the houses emptied and the streets filled with people carrying bundles. By ten o'clock, everyone was outside. The police were taking roll calls, once, twice, twenty times. The heat was oppressive. Sweat streamed from people's faces and bodies. Children were crying for water. "Water, Mother, I am thirsty!"

Some of the Jewish police secretly went to fill a few jugs. My sisters and I were still allowed to move about, as we were destined for the last convoy, and so we helped as best we could.

AT LAST, at one o'clock in the afternoon came the signal to leave.

There was joy, yes, joy. People must have thought there could be no greater torment in God's hell than that of being stranded here, on the sidewalk, among the bundles, in the middle of the street under a blazing sun. Anything seemed preferable to that. They began to walk without another glance at the abandoned streets, the dead, empty houses, the gardens, the tombstones... On everyone's back, there was a sack. In everyone's eyes, tears and distress. Slowly, heavily, the procession advanced toward the gate of the ghetto.

And there I was, on the sidewalk, watching them file past, unable to move. Here came the Chief Rabbi, hunched over, his face strange looking without a beard, a bundle on his back. His very presence in the procession was enough to make the scene seem surreal. It was like

a page torn from a book, a historical novel, perhaps, dealing with the captivity in Babylon or the Spanish Inquisition.

They passed me by, one after the other, my teachers, my friends, the others, some of whom I had once feared, some of whom I had found ridiculous, all those whose lives I had shared for years. There they went, defeated, their bundles, their lives in tow, having left behind their homes, their childhood. They passed me by, like beaten dogs, with never a glance in my direction.

The procession disappeared around the corner. A few steps more and they were beyond the ghetto walls. The street resembled fairgrounds deserted in haste. There was a little of everything: suitcases, briefcases, bags, knives, dishes, banknotes, papers, faded portraits. All the things one planned to take along and finally left behind. They had ceased to matter.

WE HAD SPENT the day without food. But we were not really hungry. We were exhausted. My father had accompanied the deportees as far as the ghetto's gate. They first had been herded through the main **synagogue**, where they were thoroughly searched to make sure they were not carrying away gold, silver, or any other valuables. There had been incidents of hysteria and harsh blows.

"When will it be our turn?" I asked my father.

"The day after tomorrow. Unless...things work out. A miracle, perhaps..."

Where were the people being taken? Did anyone know yet? No, the secret was well kept.

Night had fallen. That evening, we went to bed early. My father said:

"Sleep peacefully, children. Nothing will happen until the day after tomorrow, Tuesday."

Monday went by like a small summer cloud, like a dream in the first hours of dawn. That evening, our mother made us go to bed early. To conserve our strength, she said.

It was to be the last night spent in our house.

I was up at dawn. I wanted to have time to pray before leaving.

At nine o'clock, the previous Sunday's scenes were repeated. Policemen wielding clubs were shouting: "All Jews outside!"

We were ready. I went out first. I did not want to look at my parents' faces. I did not want to break into tears. We remained sitting in the middle of the street, like the others two days earlier. The same hellish sun. The same thirst. Only there was no one left to bring us water.

I looked at my house in which I had spent years seeking my God, fasting to hasten the coming of the Messiah, imagining what my life would be like later. Yet I felt little sadness. My mind was empty.

"Get up! Roll call!"

We stood. We were counted. We sat down. We got up again. Over and over. We waited impatiently to be taken away. What were they waiting for? Finally, the order came:

"Forward! March!"

My father was crying. It was the first time I saw him cry. I had never thought it possible. As for my mother, she was walking, her face a mask, without a word, deep in thought. I looked at my little sister, Tzipora, her blond hair neatly combed, her red coat over her arm: a little girl of seven. On her back a bag too heavy for her. She was clenching her teeth; she already knew it was useless to complain. Here and there, the police were lashing out with their clubs: "Faster!" I had no strength left. The journey had just begun and I already felt so weak...

"Faster! Faster! Move, you lazy good-for-nothings!" the Hungarian police were screaming.

That was when I began to hate them, and my hatred remains our only link today. They were our first oppressors. They were the first faces of hell and death.

They ordered us to run. We began to run. Who would have thought that we were so strong? From behind their windows, from behind their shutters, our fellow citizens watched as we passed.

We finally arrived at our destination. Throwing down our bundles, we dropped to the ground:

The chaos was even greater here than in the ghetto. We settled in. I went looking for wood, my sisters lit a fire. Despite her fatigue, my mother began to prepare a meal.

“We cannot give up, we cannot give up,” she kept repeating.

People's morale was not so bad: we were beginning to get used to the situation. There were those who even voiced optimism. The Germans were running out of time to expel us, they argued. Tragically for those who had already been deported, it would be too late. As for us, chances were that we would be allowed to go on with our miserable little lives until the end of the war.

NIGHT came. No one was praying for the night to pass quickly. The stars were but sparks of the immense **conflagration** that was consuming us. Were this conflagration to be extinguished one day, nothing would be left in the sky but extinct stars and unseeing eyes. There was nothing else to do but to go to bed, in the beds of those who had moved on. We needed to rest, to gather our strength.

At dawn, we were in the street, ready to leave. This time, there were no Hungarian police. It had been agreed that the Jewish Council would handle everything by itself. Our convoy headed toward the main synagogue. The town seemed deserted. But behind the shutters, our friends of yesterday were probably waiting for the moment when they could loot our homes.

The synagogue resembled a large railroad station: baggage and tears. The altar was shattered, the wall coverings shredded, the walls themselves bare. There were so many of us, we could hardly breathe. The twenty-four hours we spent there were horrendous. The men were downstairs, the women upstairs. It was Saturday— the **Sabbath**—and it was as though we were there to attend services. Forbidden to go outside, people relieved themselves in a corner.

In the next hour, we were forced to walk to the station, where a convoy of cattle cars was waiting. The Hungarian police made us climb into the cars, eighty persons in each one. They handed us some bread, a few pails of water. They checked the bars on the windows to make sure they would not come loose. The cars were sealed. One person was placed in charge of every car: if someone managed to escape, that person would be shot.

Two **Gestapo** officers strolled down the length of the platform. They were all smiles; all things considered, it had gone very smoothly.

A prolonged whistle pierced the air. The wheels began to grind. We were on our way. But *where* were we going? Nobody knew.