

Elie Wiesel Recalls The Friends He Used To Have  
Elie Wiesel, July 7, 2016 The Forward

Editor's note: "My Friends" ("Mayne khaveyrim") by Elie Wiesel was published in the Forverts on February 21, 1966. At that time Wiesel was a staff correspondent for the newspaper, contributing news articles, book reviews and political commentary, as well as memoiristic pieces and personal essays. In "My Friends" he recalled his youth growing up in Sighet, then part of Romania, and his group of peers, most of whom were killed in the Holocaust.

My first friend was an orphan, and that's the only thing I remember about him. I forget his name, his appearance, and even the sound of his voice. Only the sadness that would come over me in his presence remains in my memory. He was the first one who made me feel like I was to blame.

I had just started going to school, and I felt like a stranger among the other children. It seemed that they yearned to go home less than I did. I didn't want to learn the alef-beys. I was afraid that the secret lying in the mysterious letters would one day tear me away from my parents and my childhood. Later I realized that the other students were preoccupied with the same worry. Only one of them gave our teacher any pleasure; he didn't cry, didn't call for his mother, and sticking to the bench in the dark schoolroom didn't bother him.

At first I was irritated: why did he want to be different from me? Later I realized: If he didn't try running to his mother, it was because he had no mother. His mother had died when she brought him into this world.

A change occurred in me. I became close to him. I would share the little gifts and sweets that I brought from home. I felt not only sympathy toward him, but also a strange guilt — just as if I had taken something from him, as if I was in debt to him. When he would say Kaddish in the Talmud Torah synagogue on a yortsayt, I would have to restrain myself with all my strength not to break out in a sob, not to run to him, and embrace him, and comfort him, and to repeat after him the words of praise to God, who knows what he does when he cuts down branches and trees and tears away young mothers from their children. Today I am no longer sure that he really knows what he does. Today I have lost the last certainty — about everything.

I also remember that my first friend was poor. He glowed constantly from hunger. Whatever I would give, he would take. My childish brain thought that an orphan must be poor; that the Angel of Death, just like flesh-and-blood, must respect the wealthy. When a few years later the father of a school friend died, a rich man and a philanthropist, it occurred to me that he had lost his potency, and that when fate comes knocking it can enter everywhere.

With time the little orphan disappeared from my horizon and I made new friends. But I cannot forget him, either. The guilty feeling he awakened in me remained rooted in my consciousness. Even today, when I find myself in the company of an orphan, it seems like he stands before me, and I want to give him everything so that his pain becomes lighter. And this, despite the fact that I belong to a generation of orphans, a generation of those who say Kaddish. The orphan of the past is no longer an exception. Yet he is still someone who opens the gates of mercy. I see him in each orphan, he who learned the alef-beys so fluently because he had no mother waiting for him at home. Today he wants to teach me the alef-beys anew.

My later friends I do remember. Hymie Cahan, Yitskhok Yunger, Yerakhmiel Mermelstein, Itzie Goldblatt. At 13 I founded with Hymie our own synagogue for yeshiva students, which we called Tiferes Bokherim. His father, Nokhem Hersh the gabbai (and the teacher of the rabbi of Sighet) would teach a class to us each morning. All of us believed that the Torah was our protection. So long as we learned Gemara and Tosafos, so long as we recited each day certain chapters of Psalms with fervor, nothing bad could happen to us. Events proved our mistake. When the Germans entered the city we had to immediately dissolve our movement. Nokhem Hersh was killed. Today I learn a page of Gemara and I remember his accomplishments. I know for certain there is sharp thinking and an ocean of beauty in the Talmud. But sadly, it is not a protection against death. The Torah itself has become an orphan.

With Itzie I would dream about bringing the Messiah to the world. We would fast and search for ways to merit the appearance of the Prophet Elijah. Each of our weekday prayers would last longer than those of Yom Kippur. Our intentions and kabbalistic incantations enflamed the brain and frequently, after certain dreams, we would imagine that soon we would hear the shofar and our enemies would no longer have any power over the Jewish people. We used to chase after mitzvos, as if the fate of the world depended on them. We could never have enough of saying "Amen," of singing Kedusha, of giving to charity. It didn't help. The Satan accused. The Germans marched into the city, before we could bring about our goal. We tore up our work. The Messiah is not coming, and somewhere in Polish forests human glorification of heaven and its sanctuaries was extinguished.

With Yerakhmiel Mermelstein I spun other dreams. He had long, curly peyes that framed his thin face. One fine day he discovered political Zionism, and after that he couldn't sit still. He used to drag me from house to house, collecting money for the Jewish National Fund. On Sabbath Afternoons, after the third meal, instead of saying words of Torah (in our own students' synagogue) he would deliver political speeches about the British mandate, about colonization, about immigration certificates. I understood little of the political aspects of his speeches. But whenever he would mention the Land of Israel, I trembled. Was it possible to build the Kingdom of David anew, not through the Kabbalah or asceticism, but through practical, everyday methods? Yerakhmiel's faith in Zionism convinced me to learn Hebrew. He had found a grammar book in Shlomo Weiss's bookstore called "Practical Grammar." He guarded it like his most precious treasure. He lent it to me to read for one week, not more. I had no choice and I taught myself the whole book in its entirety. Pages from it I can recite until today. But Yerakhmiel's way led him not to the shores of Haifa, not to the Western Wall, and also not to the kibbutzim in the Galilee. Together with many other Jews he went to Auschwitz. And I am certain that in his rucksack, together with his tefillin and food, he carried his "Practical Grammar."

Later, on the ruins on of the era, I discovered new friends with whom I went a piece of the way. In Israel, in Paris, in other countries. But the inner adventures that I made with my old friends, at the beginning of my life, I can no longer make. I have grown older. Today I already know the worth of prayers and the weight of words; all ways lead to man, and man wanders in the desert. One who says that he hears the footsteps of the Messiah hears only the steps of my old friends. Those who went into the pale night twenty years ago, and were engulfed in flames by the angels.

Today I know that the advice of our wise men — “acquire for yourself a friend” — is ironic. There is nothing with which to acquire them. Nothing any more. Our generation suffers a poverty of dreams.

Today I know that not every orphan is poor. Here too there are distinctions: between rich orphans and poor ones, openhearted and cruel, exposed and hidden.

Not every one of them wants to learn the alef-beys.

Translated by the Forward’s critic-at-large, Ezra Glinter.