

Mandate for a Lifetime

Reinhold Boschki

"It is good that you are here. As much as you will learn from me, I will learn from you." What? Could this person be mad? Hearing these words I was stunned. Never before had a teacher, either at school or at university, told me something like that. How could it be that a university professor could learn anything from his student? I came all the way from Germany to Boston University to learn as much as I could from a person whom I had adopted as teacher long before. So I was the one to learn, not he.

A few years before I first met Elie Wiesel, I had the strangest encounter of my life. I'd just started my studies of Roman Catholic theology and education at a university in a small town in the southern part of Germany called Tübingen. The river Neckar passed quietly through the midst of the old town. Hills surrounded the town, painted in soft green, promising calmness and harmony. I was full of ideas, idealism, but also

of naiveté. I wanted to change the course of the world: to protest against any war in order to abolish violence and militarism, against injustice, against degradation of the natural environment—so that every creature on this planet could live safely and peacefully. But one day, by coincidence, I met a fellow student who invited me for a cup of coffee. Immediately he started to talk about Auschwitz, the legacy for us Germans, and gave me the advice (Or was it a mandate?): “Read the book *Night* by Elie Wiesel!” Wiesel? I had never heard this name before. Who was this strange messenger? He disappeared and I never met him again. The student cafeteria was across the street from the university library. I remember as if it was yesterday. I left the café, crossed the street, entered the library, and got my first copy of *Night*.

The following night I couldn't sleep because I was trapped in the universe of *Night*. I knew it existed, somewhere far away, galaxies remote from my own world, locked and sealed, and it had nothing to do with me. The first pages of *Night* taught me, the young German, that this universe was at the center of my existence. I had been perfect in suppressing it, blocking out the thought of it and pushing it away as far as I could. All of a sudden, it was present and it has remained present until now, more than thirty years later, closer than ever.

Sometimes I hardly managed to turn the pages; sometimes I did not manage to read more than one page a day. But, page by page, *Night* became the ultimate turning point of my life. I wanted to know more from this Elie. I started to read the second book, then the third, fourth, and finally the twentieth, thirtieth. I became a schizophrenic person: Here I was studying Roman Catholic theology with its morality, dogmas, saints, and popes—there I was plunging into the world of Wiesel's books, the desperate plots of his novels, the mystical world of Biblical, Talmudic, Hasidic masters, the quest for humanism in his essays, the tragedy of his drama. Rashi? Nobody taught me about his theological brilliancy in my theological studies. Rabbi Nachman? Not worth mentioning in church history.

As I continued my studies at Münster University in the north of Germany, I had the chance to listen to a professor who spoke about the importance of a theology after Auschwitz. One day he mentioned en passant that he would soon meet Elie Wiesel at a conference in Germany. As if struck by lightning, my heart started beating faster and faster. After the lecture I ran to this theology professor, the famous Johann Baptist Metz, stopped him by grabbing his arm and shouted: "I must join you, I must meet him, there is no other way!" Metz

immediately realized that this was an emergency. A few days later he took me to the conference in his private car.

From narration theory we know that in the course of a novel or a drama it could happen that the main character, the hero, experiences a "call for adventure." He or she follows this call and it changes the whole plot. In this case I seemed to be the character but the story was not part of a novel, it was life. "I am always very happy when students from Germany join my classes at Boston University." A second lightning struck my heart. I was convinced that Elie Wiesel was speaking to me personally and not to the audience of very important professors and politicians. One year later I packed my suitcase.

At Boston University another shock was waiting for me. A small sign on the notice board of the office read: "Prof. Wiesel wants to see every student who is going to attend his classes personally." Was this necessary? I was used to just joining classes, sitting in the rear, listening, watching, thinking. Studying in silence: that was my way of learning and growing, so please, don't mention talking to a professor.

"It is good that you are here . . ." We started in silence, just looking at each other. One minute? A thousand minutes? "I will have plenty of

time for you." So it happened that I came to his office every week, asking questions, talking about the past, the present, the future. About Germany. About my responsibility facing history and the present. About God and man, religion, Judaism, and Christian theology. After my third session I brought along a small tape recorder to record our dialogues. Later, back in Germany, I translated and published them.

Why did I deserve such attention? There were many other students brighter and much more brilliant than me. Why did he take me to New York to his private apartment? Introduce me to his wife Marion and his son Elisha? Why did he invite my wife Astrid and me to an intense meeting at his home a few months later? Why did he come to Germany when I invited him twice, once for a huge youth meeting, where more than 1200 young people came to listen to him and to discuss with him and then to Stuttgart to join an international conference on his work and message? Write a forward to my PhD dissertation, "God and Man in the Work of Elie Wiesel"?

Looking back, I know why it was not only important for me to study and learn with him but also for him to be in contact with me: he wanted to see whether I would follow the mandate he gave me.

In my course of studies on Elie Wiesel's work at Boston University, I got to know a lot of wonderful people who were close to him. With some of them a miracle happened: We became friends, sharing our common passion for the message of our teacher, sharing time, questions, laughter, and despair. With some of them I'm still in contact, Martha Hauptman, Ruth Bergida, Janet McCord, but I lost track of others, like Cindy Margulis, Rabbi Josef Wask, Beniot from Paris, whose last name I've forgotten, and many whose first names I don't even remember. Years later I had the chance to visit some of my friends where they live now: Rabbi Joe Kanofsky in Toronto, Nehemia Polen in Boston, Alan Rosen in Jerusalem. Reunited, we immediately continued our being and studying together as though we had separated only a day before.

Back in Germany after my studies at Boston University, I began writing my PhD dissertation, giving lectures on Elie Wiesel, translating his books, teaching at various high schools. Of course, I read *Night* with my pupils. One of them, a boy of sixteen, said, "This will be the most important book until the end of my life." And a girl: "When I am older I will fight to see this book as part of the curricula of all schools in Germany." Have they kept their promises?

In the course of our dialogues, my teacher realized that I was fond of everything Jewish. I was so interested in Talmudic and Hasidic stories, Jewish theology, literature, and culture that one day he looked at me and said, "Reinhold, don't even think about becoming Jewish! Try to find salvation in your own tradition! Try to purify your own tradition!" This time it was not lightning. Rather, it was enlightening. From that very moment I have asked myself every day: What does salvation mean? What does purification mean? I feel these words, these concepts, are a strong mandate for me. They cannot be realized only in an intellectual manner. They can only be lived. And I have tried to live them every day since then. I have learned from Elie Wiesel that the only possible response to Auschwitz means responsibility.

Suddenly, the two lanes merged together—the study of Christian theology and Elie Wiesel. My question was and still is: What are the consequences of Wiesel's message for the Christian message? How can we start to purify a tradition that seems anti-Jewish from its very beginning? Are the deep roots of anti-Judaism present at each crossroad? Is anti-Semitism part of the theology of church fathers and church teachers? Of the so-called saints?

After some years of teaching at various schools I returned to university, first as a lecturer, and later, again like a miracle, I became professor of religious education for students who are going to become teachers, priests, or so-called lay theologians in the fields of pastoral care, adult education, journalism, publishing houses, media, etc. Now I have the opportunity to follow the mandate together with my students and colleagues. To teach a renewed relationship between Christians and Jews, to encounter revitalized Jewish life in Germany and Europe, to erase anti-Judaism in Christian theology, liturgy, and life of the church. To organize conferences on a renewal of Christian-Jewish and interfaith relationships. To publish books on the culture of remembrance.

A couple of months ago, I embarked on a courageous and adventuresome enterprise: Together with my friend and colleague Daniel Krochmalnik from the Hochschule für Jüdische Studien (College of Jewish Studies) in Heidelberg, I have started to collect, academically investigate, translate, and comment on the whole work of Elie Wiesel, more than fifty books, in order to edit the complete edition of Elie Wiesel Works (EWW). We think that we'll need at least twelve years, which means the rest of our university career. And even beyond. A mandate for a lifetime.

Reinhold Boschki, born in 1961, is a professor of Religious Education at Roman Catholic Theological department of Bonn University, Germany. He studied at Boston University under Professor Wiesel from 1988–1989 and wrote his PhD dissertation on Wiesel's work and message.