

Without Conscience

Elie Wiesel

This is one of those stories that invite fear.

Now we know. During the period of the past century that I call Night, medicine was practiced in certain places not to heal but to harm, not to fight off death but to serve it.

In the conflict between Good and Evil during the Second World War, the infamous Nazi doctors played a crucial role. They preceded the torturers and assassins in the science of organized cruelty that we call the Holocaust. There is a Talmudic adage, quite disturbing, that applies to them: *Tov she-barofim le-gehinom* — “The best doctors are destined for hell.” The Nazi doctors made hell.

Inspired by Nazi ideology and implemented by its apostles, eugenics and euthanasia in the late 1930s and early 1940s served no social necessity and had no scientific justification. Like a poison, they ultimately contaminated all intellectual activity in Germany. But the doctors were the precursors. How can we explain their betrayal? What made them forget or eclipse the Hippocratic Oath? What gagged their conscience? What happened to their humanity?

In all truth, the medical field was not the only one to subscribe to Hitler’s plan. There was the judicial profession. And in some ways, the church. Only the literary world retained its sense of honor: the great writers, for the most part, were exiled. Not only Jews — Thomas Mann and Bertolt Brecht were not Jewish, but they were unable to breathe in the stifling air of the Third Reich. Doctors, on the other hand, mostly stayed — not the Jewish ones, but the others.

We know the facts. The motives as well. One

Professor Wiesel was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986. He is a university professor of religion and philosophy at Boston University, Boston. Sixty years ago, on April 11, 1945, he was liberated from the Buchenwald concentration camp.

day, Hitler and Himmler’s health minister made it known to leaders in the medical field that, according to a secret decision made at the highest level, it was necessary to get rid of “useless mouths” — the insane, the terminally ill, children, and elderly people who were condemned to misfortune by nature and to suffering and fear by God. Few in the German medical profession believed it worthy or good to refuse.

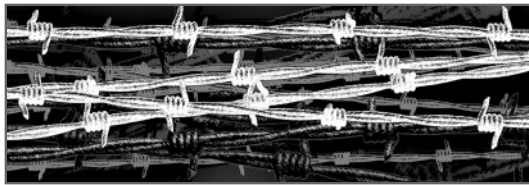
Thus, instead of doing their job, instead of bringing assistance and comfort to the sick people who needed them most, instead of helping the mutilated and the handicapped to live, eat, and hope one more day, one more hour, doctors became their executioners.

In October 1939, several weeks after the beginning of hostilities, Hitler gave the first order concerning the *Gnadentod*, or “charitable death.” On the 15th of that month, gas was used for the first time to kill “patients” in Poznań, Poland. But similar centers had already been created in Germany three years earlier. Now, psychiatrists and other doctors collaborated in a professional atmosphere exemplary for its camaraderie and efficiency. In less than two years, 70,000 sick people disappeared into the gas chambers. The *Gnadentod* program was going so well that the head of the Wehrmacht Hospital psychiatric ward, Professor Wurth, worried, “With all the mentally ill being eliminated, who will want to pursue studies in the burgeoning field of psychiatry?” The program was interrupted only when the bishop of Münster, Clemens August Graf von Galen, had the courage to denounce it from his cathedral’s pulpit; protest, in other words, came not from the medical profession, but from the church. Finally, public opinion was moved: too many German families were directly affected.

Like the fanatical German theorists, Nazi doctors did their work without any crisis of conscience.

They were convinced that by helping Hitler to realize his racial ambitions, they were contributing to the salvation of humanity. The eminent Nazi doctor responsible for “ethical” questions, Rudolf Ramm, did not hesitate to declare that “only an honest and moral person may become a good doctor.”

Thus, the doctors who tortured, tormented, and killed men and women in the concentration camps for “medical” reasons had no scruples. Human guinea pigs, prisoners both young and not so young, weakened or still in good health, were subjected to unspeakable suffering and agony in laboratories managed by doctors from the best German



families and the most prestigious German universities. As a consequence, after the war, there were survivors of occupied Germany who refused to receive care from German doctors. They were scared. They remembered other doctors — or the same ones — from elsewhere.

In Ravensbrück, Dachau, Buchenwald, and Auschwitz, German scientists operated on their victims without anesthesia in an effort to discover cures for obscure diseases. The researchers let them die of hunger, thirst, cold; they drowned them, amputated their limbs, suffocated them, dissected their still-living bodies to study their behavior and measure their stamina.

At the first trial of doctors before the international court at Nuremberg in 1946, 23 of the accused were charged with having initiated, directed, and organized criminal activities against prisoners. Acting under their authority, a number of well-respected doctors caved in to their orders. How did they turn into assassins?

I personally met only one: Josef Mengele, who was known best not as a doctor but as a criminal and a murderer. Like so many other deportees, I saw him the night of my arrival in Birkenau. I remember the thought that crossed my mind: he looked elegant. I remember his calm voice as he asked me my occupation and age (warned by an inmate,

I made myself older). And I recall his fateful gesture that separated the living from the soon-to-be dead. I learned his name only later. Morbid rumors went around about him. Wherever he sprang up, Death spread its shadow. It was known that he was always on the lookout for little twins and children with spinal problems. In the camp for Gypsies, he came across as likeable, warm, and tender toward one particular boy. He had the boy dressed in nice clothes, gave him the best food. This was his favorite prisoner. And on the night the Gypsies were liquidated, the doctor himself led this boy to the gas chamber.

Did I meet other doctors? In my barracks at Buna, some of them supervised the division of those permitted to live from those who were to die. I have described elsewhere the silence that preceded this event: it filled our being. We were afraid to look at one another. As on Yom Kippur evening, I had the feeling that the dead were mixed with the living. As for the doctors, I knew not who they were and have forgotten their faces.

Over the succeeding years, as I studied documents and archives about the Final Solution, I became familiar with the dominant role played by Nazi medicine and science. They were integral to the concentration-camp system and were as guilty as the various branches of Hitler’s armed services and police force of the monstrous crimes committed in occupied Europe out of hatred for the Jews and other so-called inferior races and groups. Yet after Germany’s defeat, with rare exceptions, criminal doctors calmly returned home to resume normal practices and ordinary life. No one bothered them at home, nothing threatened them. Only on the occasion of the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem did German justice suddenly remember their crimes. The police found their addresses in telephone books.

But if an Eichmann shocks us, a Mengele revolts us. Eichmann was a rather ordinary low-life, without education or culture, whereas Mengele spent a number of years at a university. The existence of an Eichmann casts doubt on the nature and mentality of the German people, but the possibility of a Mengele throws into question the very basis of German education and culture. If the former represents Evil at a bureaucratic level, the latter embodies Evil at an intellectual level. Eichmann denied having been anti-Semitic and pleaded not guilty: he was

only following orders. But the Nazi doctors? None among them acted under duress — neither those who presided over the nocturnal division of new arrivals, nor those who killed the prisoners in their laboratories. They could have slipped away; they could have said no. Until the end, they considered themselves public servants loyal to German politics and science. In other words, patriots, devoted researchers. Without too great a stretch, maybe even societal benefactors. Martyrs.

Must one conclude that, since a humane science exists, there was also a science that wasn't humane? I won't even consider racist theorists who tried to treat racism as an exact science. Their vulgar stupidity deserves nothing but disdain. But there were excellent physicians, well-informed chemists, and great surgeons — all racist. How could they seek truth and happiness for human beings at the same time that they hated some of them solely because they belonged to human communities other than their own?

One of the brutal shocks of my adult life came the day I discovered that many of the officers of the *Einsatzgruppen* — the death commandos in Eastern Europe — had received degrees from Germany's best universities. Some held doctorates in literature, others in philosophy, theology, or history. They had spent many years studying, learning the lessons of past generations, yet nothing kept them from killing Jewish children at Babi Yar, in Minsk, Ponar. Their education provided them with no shield, no shelter from the temptation and seduction of cruelty that people may carry within. Why? This question still haunts me.

It is impossible to study the history of German medicine during the Nazi period in isolation from German education in general. Who or what is to blame for the creation of the assassins in white coats? Was the culprit the anti-Semitic heritage that German theologians and philosophers were dredging up? The harmful effects of propaganda? Perhaps higher education placed too much emphasis on abstract ideas and too little on humanity. I no longer remember which psychiatrist wrote a dissertation demonstrating that the assassins hadn't lost their moral bearings: they knew how to discern Good and Evil; it was the sense of reality that was missing.

In their eyes, the victims did not belong to humankind; they were abstractions. The Nazi doctors were able to manipulate their bodies, play with their brains, mutilate their future without remorse; they tortured them in a thousand ways before putting an end to their lives.

Yet inside the concentration camps, among the prisoners, medicine remained a noble profession. More or less everywhere, doctors without instruments or medications tried desperately to relieve the suffering and misfortune of their fellow prisoners, sometimes at the price of their own health or their own lives. I knew several such doctors. For them, each human being represented not an abstract idea but a universe with its secrets, its treasures, its sources of anguish, and its poor possibilities for victory, however fleeting, over Death and its disciples. In an inhumane universe, they had remained humane.

When I think about the Nazi doctors, the medical executioners, I lose hope. To find it again, I think about the others, the victim-doctors; I see again their burning gazes, their ashen faces.

Why did some know how to bring honor to humankind, while others renounced humankind with hatred? It is a question of choice. A choice that even now belongs to us — to uniformed soldiers, but even more so to doctors. The killers could have decided not to kill.

Yet these horrors of medical perversion continued beyond Auschwitz. Traces may be found, for example, in the hellish Stalin and post-Stalin eras. Communist doctors betrayed their brethren. Psychiatrists collaborated with the secret police to torture prisoners.

And how can the recent, shameful torture to which Muslim prisoners were subjected by American soldiers be justified? Shouldn't the prison conditions in Iraq have been condemned by legal professionals and military doctors alike?

Am I naive in believing that medicine is still a noble profession, upholding the highest ethical principles? For the ill, doctors still stand for life. And for us all, hope.

This article has been modified by the author from an essay in his collection *D'où viens-tu?* (Editions du Seuil, 2001) and was translated from the French by Jamie Moore.