

Legacy Of Evil

THE 28TH DAY OF ELUL. By Richard M. Elman. 279 pp. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. \$4.95.

By ELIE WIESEL

"OUR disaster must be remote if we can set historians to work on it," says Shandor Yagudah. Unlike novelists and poets, they are uninhibited by the impotence of words when related to a holocaust. Yet, for the Jewish novelist today, assuming he does not repudiate his Jewishness, there can be no theme more urgent and meaningful than that of the suffering of his people in the Nazi era. All plots and parables pale and sound trivial by comparison: his is the awesome privilege to identify with a tale, unique in its shattering power.

This, of course, may be true for all contemporary writers, but it is more so for Jews: What was said about Sinai also applies to Auschwitz: those who were there belonged to more than one generation. God spoke in the past but is heard in the eternal present. One can enter the burning gates 20 years later. Whoever doubts that this is so ought to read "The 28th Day of Elul." Born and raised in New York City, Richard M. Elman was barely 10 when the nightmare ended in Europe. Yet he evokes some of its living, fragmentary images as though his voice came from within.

Partly factual, the story is that of a survivor, sitting in judgment on the world and himself. The novel opens in present-day Israel but is set in wartime provincial Hungary, where Shandor Yagudah, main protagonist and narrator, had lived until 1944, when—like everybody else in his family—he was transformed into a victim of God's injustice or his own.

Despite minor inaccuracies (deportees were not given tattooed numbers in the ghettos but received them in Auschwitz), the book reads like a genuine documentary. With amazing skill, the author brings to life the Transylvanian town of Clig—standing for Cluj or Kolozsvár—with its myths and complexities, its Jews and gypsies and gentiles and their ambiguous relationship. The first warnings, the first humiliations, the first blows: "The process observed laws of its own; it built on its own momentum," says Yagudah.

Most of Eastern Europe's Jews were already dead, but in Transylvania they were still unable or unwilling to read the handwriting on the wall. So successful was the Nazi psychological warfare that until the last phase the Jews did not know what was awaiting them.

"The fear and terror came upon us so gradually that we never knew

exactly when it was that we were first cowed." After a series of expropriations, "we were all asked to pay a ransom on our homes. A sum of fifty kilograms of gold was extorted, another sum, a third. We were ordered not to play our wireless after dark. We had to receive special permission to send telegrams. We had last priority on the trains. Still my father found himself arguing: Was it any different during the last war?" When he understood the difference, it was already too late.

For the survivor turned witness or accuser it is now too late for love, faith and hope. Yagudah's indictment is aimed at the human being as such, as well as at its creator: "Words are traps . . . I can no longer affirm that I am a member of the human race." As for God, he voices his blasphemous conclusion: "If not He, then who else was responsible? Was the death of six millions the work of anything else than a God?"

His fiancée Lilo was betrayed by his father, who then was abandoned by his son. Yagudah is bitter toward his father but is angriest at himself. For having been luckier than most others. For not having fought evil when it first manifested itself. For having chosen survival at the price of remorse, shame and unredeeming guilt. Unforgiving and unforgiven, he seeks expiation while knowing that there is no one left to offer it to him.

The book touches on the most important human and philosophical questions of our time, although as a novel it may suffer from certain weaknesses which grow out of its use of literary devices: Yagudah's confession, for example, would have gained in simplicity if it were straight narrative—instead of a letter to an American lawyer on complicated inheritance matters.

Also, some erotic digressions—Yagudah's love scenes with his cousin—seem unnecessary or, at least, over-descriptive. If they are to prepare and explain his subsequent homosexual incli- (Continued on Page 34)

THE cruelest fact of all may be that we who claimed to revere life, not as some petty abstraction, but for the sake of being alive, of choosing life—that we were the ones who were tricked into the behavior of sheep. Or swine!—

"The 28th Day of Elul."

MR. WIESEL'S most recent book, "The Jews of Silence," deals with the fate of Soviet Jewry.

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nations, the motivation strikes us as too obvious. An essayist and novelist of Elman's perception surely must know that Yagodah's problems carry weight only because of their metaphysical implications. His rebellion against nature covers more than his own instincts, more than his own past.

The strength of this book lies in its style, which is vivid, argumentative, poignant and moving. The author's ideas are provocative, his outcry uncompromising. Sparing no one, he provides disturbing insight into the traumatic psychology of certain survivors—who, caught in webs of universal betrayal, are forced into total alienation. They are characters in search of their dead.

Perhaps the author is excessively severe with his hero, who, in turn, is unduly harsh with all the others who have adjusted to the world and have accepted it as their own. But who would dare to blame Yagodah for his bitterness, and his confession for its lack in compassion? After all, that too is part of the tale.

Author's Query

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