

The Jews Of Silence

By Elie Wiesel

Play no. 254

Opening show: 11/11/1970

Hebrew by: Rina Sinai

Directed by: Peter Frye

Setting by : Arie Navon

Costumes by : Adina Reich

Music by: Yochanan Zarai

Lighting by: Michael Lieberman

The Cast

Zalman: Nissim Azikri

Rabbi: Nachum Buchman

Beri: Avraham Halfi

The Synagogue Committee:

Shmul: Leo Jung

Sender: Ari Kutai

Motke: Zalman Hirshfeld

Haim: Eliezer Jung

Doctor: Israel Rubintzik

President of the Synagogue: Israel Becker

Inspector: Shmuel Atzmon

The Head of the Gendameirie: I. Jung

The Janitor: I. Rubinstein

Students: Y. laacov, H. Furman

The Play

Elie Wiesel's play "The Jews Of Silence" is a work of dramatic fiction, only roughly based on his famous reportage of the same title.

The drama at its best is often prophetic.

It signifies not merely the dramatic solution of this or that particular tale of fiction, it also symbolizes the ancient Greek principle of Nemesis. The characters of the play loom large in our conscience and become as real as figures of history.

Similarly Elie Wiesel's play The Jews of Silence is a work of fiction which affects us by its compelling authenticity. His characters seem to step out of the pages of newspapers and journals.

They have the immediacy of figures accidentally caught in the sweep of a newsreel cameraman's lens.

We know that they are only characters in a play and yet they seem to say to us, "Believe me. This is the way it is. I am real. I am happening in Russia today". Three dramatic structures compose the warp and woof of Elie Wiesel's play. The first is the personal story of the Rabbi; his Faustian struggle with his Mephistophelian conscience personified by an imaginary character named Zalman. Perhaps Zalman is the Rabbi as he remembers himself in the days of his idealistic youth. Perhaps he is an older brother to the boy who was later to be the Rabbi of the last Jewish Synagogue in a small southern Russian city.

Perhaps this brother was one of those martyred Jews who disappeared in the holocaust. Perhaps the Rabbi feels guilty that Zalman, one of the last of the just, was a victim while he, the unworthy Rabbi, was a survivor.

"Be insane, Rabbi, as I am", says Zalman, "for once in your life be like me, be insane and that will give you the right to speak the truth. For sane sober men in our time dare not speak the truth, that would be much too dangerous".

The second structure comprises the relations of the Rabbi with members of the Jewish community: specifically with the President of the synagogue and his committee. The Rabbi is, perforce, the arbitrator when there are outbreaks of hostile argumentation between the President of the synagogue and the Doctor who is a committee member. These two personify opposing ideologies in the ceaseless battle with the Russian authorities to maintain the synagogue as a center of Jewish cultural and national existence in Godless Russia.

An official from the Ministry of Culture, Department of Religious Affairs, appears at the meeting of the synagogue committee to make sure that the Jews understand that they are to have no contact with the overseas tourists who shall be attending the Yom Kippur Kol Nidre service. He announces that secret police attached to the Ministry of Culture will attend the services in the guise of worshippers to ensure that no Russian Jew will seize this opportunity to spread invidious lies against the generous Soviet regime. The tourists are to be quarantined in a corner of the Synagogue, to be blocked off from the rest of the congregation and to be hurried out at the side entrance immediately at the end of the service.

Because they have no choice in the matter the Jews of the synagogue committee agree to this program.

Because he has no choice in the matter, the Rabbi is silent.

The third structure is the story of the Rabbi's remaining family, his daughter Manya, her husband Alexei Adamov, their son Mischa – the Rabbi's grandson Mischa. Alexie is a Communist, a respected member of the Party. Manya is torn between her love of her husband, and her duty to her father. The heart of the matter is the future of Mischa. Will Mischa be a Jew? Specifically, in immediate terms, will Mischa be barmitzvah in the synagogue?

That evening in the synagogue, despite the well planned collaboration of the synagogue officials with the secret police of the Ministry of Culture, the Rabbi finally succumbs to the promptings of Zalman, listens finally to the voice of his conscience. At the end of the Kol Nidre prayer, he adds his own Kol Nidre peroration in which for the first time in a long career of compromise he reveals the truth as he sees it: that the Soviet regime is guilty of extinguishing the light of the Jews of Russia, the Jews of Silence.

The second part of the play starts at the end of the Nee'lah service, the closing prayer of the Day of Atonement. The blowing of the Shofar and the fervent prayer. "Next Year in Jerusalem, Next Year in Jerusalem".

Immediately after this the synagogue is taken over by the official of the Ministry of Culture his, his recording Secretary, policemen and a high officer of the secret police attended by his aides. There is to be an Investigation. Obviously the Russians believe The Rabbi is merely the figurehead of a Jewish conspiracy to break the silence.

Each in his turn, all of the Jews whom we met in the first part of the play, are put through examination. The Russian officials are convinced that there is a great underground apparatus which has plotted the Rabbi's unwarranted

outbreak in the presence of the tourists. This fear of theirs, of course, is ludicrous. Their suspicions are paranoid. How can you explain to them that all that has happened is that the Rabbi has experienced a Faustian revelation? How can you explain that Rabbi has commerce with a Jewish Mephistopheles, a demon who urges him to betray his soul rather than to tell it? Each of the witnesses in his turn tries to save the Rabbi. Each feels guilty that he is one of the silent ones. Each offers himself as a victim in the Rabbi's place.

At the end the Russians are convinced that there has been no conspiracy. Will they punish the Rabbi? No, not really. He is a foolish old man who thought he could change the fate of Russian Jewry by crying out in the synagogue. His punishment is that he must continue in the duties as before, compromising his ideals as before, holding his tongue as before.

Elie Wiesel accuses all of world Jewry for its silence in the face of the Russian policy of cultural genocide.

The Jews of Russia are calling to the world for help.

The Jews of Silence, says Wiesel, are you and I.