

Excerpt from *The Sunflower* by Simon Wiesenthal

(2 pages of text from a 586 page anthology)

Brown, Jean E., et al. Images from the Holocaust: A Literature Anthology. NTC Pub. Group, 1997.

The children in the Ghetto grew up quickly, they seemed to realize how short their existence would be. For them days were months, and months for years. When I saw them with toys in their hands, they looked unfamiliar, uncanny, like old men, playing with childish things.

When had I first seen Eli? When did I talk to him for the first time? I could not remember. He lived in a house near the Ghetto gate. Sometimes he wandered right up to the gate. On one occasion, I heard a Jewish policeman talking to him and that is how I knew his name – Eli. It was rarely that a child dared to approach the Ghetto gate. Eli knew that. He knew it from instinct without understanding why.

“Eli” is a pet name for Elijah--Elijah Hanavi, the prophet.

Recalling the very name, awoke memories in me of the time when I too, was a child. At the Passover Seder, there stood on the table among the dishes a large, ornate bowl of wine which nobody was allowed to touch. The wine was meant for Alijah Hanavi. After a special prayer, one of us children was sent to open the door: the prophet was supposed to come into the room and drink the wine reserved for him. The children watched the door with eyes large with wonder. But, of course, nobody came. But my grandmother always assured me that the Prophet actually drank from the cup, and when I looked into the cup, and found that it was still full, she said: “He doesn’t drink more than a tear!”

Why did she say that? Was a tear all that he could be offered to the Prophet Elijah? For countless generations since the exodus from Egypt, we had been celebrating the Passover and its memory. And from that great event arose the custom of reserving a cup of wine for Elijah Hanavi.

We children looked on Elijah as our protector, and then in our fancy, he took every possible form. My grandmother told us he was barely recognizable; he might appear in the form of a village peasant, a shopkeeper, a beggar, or even just as a child. And then, in gratitude for the protection that he afforded us, he was given the finest cup in the house at the Seder service filled with the best wine – but he drank no more than a single tear from it.

Little Eli in the Ghetto survived, miraculously the many raids on the children, who were looked upon as “non working, useless mouths.” The adults worked all day outside the Ghetto, and when it was during their absence, the SS usually rounded up the children and took them away. A few always escaped the body snatchers, for the children learned how to hide themselves. Their parents built hiding holes under the floors, in the stoves, or in the cupboards with false walls, and in time they developed a sort of sixth sense for danger, no matter how small they were.

But gradually the SS discovered the cleverest hiding places, and they came out the winners in this game of hide and seek with death.

Eli was one of the last children I saw in the Ghetto. Each time I left the camp for the Ghetto--for a period I had an entry permit for it – I looked for Eli. If I saw him, I could be sure for that moment that there was no danger. There was already famine at that time in the Ghetto, and the streets were littered with people dying of hunger. The Jewish policeman constantly warned Eli's parents to keep him away from the gate, but in vain. The German policeman at the Ghetto gate often gave him something to eat.

One day when I entered the Ghetto, Eli was not by the gate, but I saw him later. He was standing by a window, and his tiny hand was sweeping up something from the sill. Then his fingers went into his mouth. As I came closer, I realized what he was doing, and my eyes filled with tears: he was collecting the crumbs which somebody had put out for the birds. No doubt he figured that the birds would find some nourishment outside the Ghetto, from friendly people in the city, who dare not give a hungry Jewish child a piece of bread.

Outside the Ghetto gate, they were often women with snacks of bread or flour, trying to barter with the inmates of the Ghetto, food for clothes, silver plates, or carpets. But there were few Jews, who left who possessed anything they could barter with.

Eli's parents certainly had nothing to offer an exchange for even a loaf of bread.

SS group leader, Katzman, the notorious Katzman – knew that there must still be children in the Ghetto, in spite of repeated searches, so his brutish brain conceived a devilish plan: he would start kindergarten! He told the Jewish Council that he would set up a kindergarten if they could find accommodation for it, and a woman to run it. Then the children he looked after while the grownups were at work. The Jews, eternal incorrigible optimists, took this as a sign of a more humane attitude. They even told each other that there was now a regulation against shooting. Somebody said that he had heard on the American radio that Roosevelt had threatened the Germans with reprisals, if any more Jews were killed. That is why the Germans were going to be even more humane in the future.

Others talked of an international commission, which was going to visit the Ghetto. The Germans wanted to show them a kindergarten – as proof of their considerate treatment of Jews.

An official from the Ghetto named Engels, a gray haired man, came with a member of the Jewish Council to see for himself that the kindergarten was actually set up in suitable rooms. He said he was sure there was still enough children in the ghetto, who would like to use kindergarten, and he promised an extra ration of food. And the ghetto did actually send tins of cocoa and milk.

Thus, the parents of the hungry children still left, were gradually persuaded to send them to the kindergarten. A committee from the Red Cross was anxiously awaited. But it never came. Instead, one morning three SS trucks arrived and took all the children away to the gas chambers. And that night, when the parents came back from work, they were heart rending scenes in a deserted kindergarten.

Nevertheless, a few weeks later, I saw Eli again. His instinct had made him stay at home on that particular morning.