Foreword

BY LEON WIESELTIER

THE GREATEST ENEMY OF ABSTRACTION IS SUFFERING. This is paradoxical, since suffering is also the most pressing occasion for thought. There is an old and honorable connection between theory and pain: the pain that may be eradicated from human existence, and so requires an idea that may serve as a foundation for action, and the pain that may not be eradicated from human existence, and so requires an idea that may serve as a foundation for wisdom. And yet pain is always endured in the particular. Suffering is always experienced concretely; and this experience of concreteness, this transforming encounter with facticity, humbles the mind, and disgusts it, and stimulates within it with the sobering suspicion that its most strenuous task is not the development of ideas, but the acknowledgment of realities. Certainly there is more courage in lingering over the punishing actual world than in leaving it. Before the brazenness of reality, moreover, the mind may be struck dumb. There may be very little to say about the sensation of the real, except that it is absolutely necessary. And since it is also fleeting, there is a lifetime's work for the mind in recovering it. There are times when the most significant service that the mind can perform is to say: *look*, and then to say nothing more. The sign of lucidity is sometimes silence.

The photographs in this crushing book make discourse of any kind seem impertinent. Even mourning would be too knowing. The pictures are supremely cruel documents of the reality of the world. I say supremely cruel, because they attest both to the world's evil and to the world's good. The evidence of the evil is sharpened by the

evidence of the good. We do not see the evil, we see only the good. There is goodness in every one of these pictures: they are images of love, and it was love that brought them to the cursed place where Ann Weiss discovered them decades later, when the grass had grown over the hell. But the evil in these photographs we must supply, by summoning the dreadful knowledge that we possess about what was done to the Jews in Auschwitz, and taking it back from the statistics and the methodologies and the generalizations, and attaching it to these faces, to these hearts. We must complete the story of every picture. We adhere these families to their fate. The finery in which these men and women displayed themselves begins to look like the early history of piles of clothes. The eyeglasses and the shoes seem to await each other. And the photograph of the young boy and his little sister standing before the firewood? One must turn away from it.

Regard these doomed and ferociously normal people. They were so unequipped for their apocalypse. (No, it was not their apocalypse; it was the apocalypse of their murderers. Apocalypse is always a cosmic program for the murder of somebody else.) Regard these picnics and dances, these gardens and beaches and schools, these skis and these pianos, these high collars and fur stoles and Purim crowns, these courtships and households and causes: this was a universe of robust well-being, a voluptuously quotidian universe, a glad, decent, busy universe of bourgeois dreams and Jewish dreams, a universe of sturdy sanctity and sturdy profanity, a universe pervaded by the feeling of futurity. The anxieties of these individuals did not include an anxiety about extinction. They believed the world. They were ingenuous about the world only in the way that people who make plans and make children are ingenuous about the world. They lived a life premised upon the continuity of the world. Who can

live otherwise? Who can live without long hopes? The people and things that we cherish must be durable. They cannot all come to an end. One way of describing the injury that history inflicted upon the Jews of Europe is this: it made their belief in the world into an illusion.

These photographs were brought to Auschwitz because they represented what the martyrs wished to remember. And that is precisely how martyrs must be remembered: for what they remembered. In this respect, martyrdom is a special sort of murder. An individual or a community is martyred when it is the objective of their murderers not only that they should not be remembered, but also that what they remembered should not be remembered. The Nazis and the other slaughterers of the Jews sought not a conquest, but an erasure. We do not know the names of the people in these photographs, but we know something just as precious, just as binding: we know the objects of their devotion, who and what they loyally loved. We have been initiated by their deaths into their intimacies. We remember what they wished to remember; and in the memory of their memory, they live.