

78 Night

Elie Wiesel

In *Night*, Elie Wiesel chronicles his life with a cinematic sensibility, starting in 1941 at the age of twelve, when he lived with his parents and three sisters in the tiny village of Sighet in Transylvania. We follow Wiesel and his family through the war years until the beginning of 1945. Detailing unimaginable horrors, made even more incomprehensible by their magnitude, this account cuts so deeply that the reader can't help but weep during Elie Wiesel's journey.

And the reader understands how Wiesel, the most reverent of boys, would lose his faith in God. A prisoner confides, "I've got more faith in Hitler than in anyone else. He's the only one who's kept his promises, all his promises to the Jewish people." The foreword, written by François Mauriac, is equally moving.

Wiesel opens with a description of Moshe the Beadle, a poor man who was "a past master in the art of making himself insignificant." He taught Wiesel Talmud ("He explained to me with great insistence that every question possessed a power that did not lie in the answer"), and spoke with him about Jewish mysticism. Then one day, many Jews were expelled: suddenly Moshe was gone. There was talk that the deportees were in Galicia, working and happy. Subsequently, Moshe the Beadle returned and told the truth: "The train full of deportees had crossed the Hungarian frontier and on Polish territory had been taken in charge by the Gestapo... to a forest. The Jews were made to get out... dig huge graves. Without passion, without haste, they slaughtered their prisoners. Each one had to go up to the hold and present his neck. Babies were thrown into the air and machine gunners used them as targets... How had Moshe the Beadle escaped? Miraculously. He was wounded in the leg and taken for dead."

Neither Weisel nor anyone else believed the unbelievable, which they hadn't witnessed. Moshe the Beadle went from household to household repeating the story. He is mistaken for a madman. The power of denial is never again seen so innocently. "I have been saved miraculously," he tells Wiesel. "I managed to get back here. Where did I get the strength from? I wanted to come back to Sighet to tell you the story of my death. So that you could prepare yourselves while there was still time."

Life returned to normal temporarily until the Fascists came to power; soon after, German troops entered Hungary. At first, the Germans didn't appear brutish; they seemed well-mannered, sometimes even gracious. But soon, all pretense of cordiality ended abruptly. Jewish leaders were arrested and Jews were quarantined.

On the occasions when Wiesel's fate could have been different, each option seemed too extreme in the context of disbelief: the young Wiesel asks his father to emigrate to Israel, and an old servant tearfully pleads for the family to join her in her village where they could find a safe refuge.

The Germans load the Jews of Sighet, including the Wiesels, aboard cattle cars bound for Birkenau and Auschwitz. At the camps, Wiesel is separated from his mother and sister: "For a part of a second I glimpsed my mother and my sister moving away to the right. Tzipora held Mother's hand. I saw them disappear into the distance; my mother was stroking my sister's fair hair, as though to protect her, while I walked on with my father and the other men. And I did not know that in that place, at that moment, I was parting from my mother and Tzipora forever."

Elie and his father continue on, as prisoners at Birkenau ("reception center for Auschwitz"), on to Auschwitz, and then Buna. Upon his arrival at Auschwitz, Wiesel saw: "Babies! Yes, I saw it—saw it with my own eyes... those children in the flames... Was I still alive? Was I awake?... How could it be possible for them to burn people, children, and for the world to keep silent?" His eloquence heightens the pain: "Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky... Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever... Never shall I forget that

nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.”

At Auschwitz Wiesel became number A-7713, which was tattooed into his arm. At Buna he encountered the infamous Dr. Mengele, but was not singled out by him for medical experiments conducted on live prisoners. He had his crowned tooth removed with a rusty spoon because the foreman wanted the gold, and he was whipped repeatedly until he fainted. He witnessed hangings, including that of a young boy, so light he didn't die right away, but struggled “between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face.”

Leaving Buna, as the Russians approached, Wiesel tells of running in the snowy night, along with his father, whose presence helped keep him alive. He forgot his body; if he couldn't keep up he knew he would be shot by the S.S. or trampled on by the “thousands of concentration camp inmates running behind them. Reaching Buchenwald, death permeated everything: “We trod on wounded faces. No cries. A few groans. My father and I were ourselves thrown to the ground by this rolling tide.

“You're crushing me...mercy!”...

“...That voice had spoken to me one day...I struggled to disengage myself beneath the weight of other bodies. I could hardly breathe. I dug my nails into unknown faces... Suddenly I remembered. Juliek! The boy from Warsaw who played the violin in the band at Buna!”

The journey weakened his father so that he was on the verge of death. A few days later “... I had to go to bed. I climbed into my bunk, above my father, who was still alive. It was January 28, 1945... I awoke on January 29 at dawn. In my father's place lay another invalid. They must have taken him away before dawn and carried him to the crematory. He may still have been breathing.”

Death, both of individuals and of human morality, make this haunting recollection our story of loss as well, which is what the Holocaust truly is.

Elie Wiesel was liberated from Buchenwald by the Allies, then lived and wrote in France before moving to the United States. A Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, his articles and books are now read and studied throughout the world.