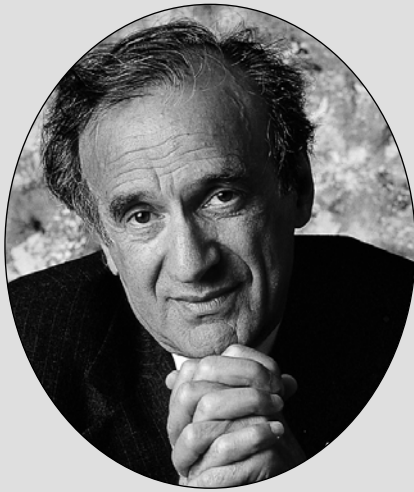


Meet Elie Wiesel



Look, it's important to bear witness. Important to tell your story. . . . You cannot imagine what it meant spending a night of death among death.

—Elie Wiesel

The obligation Elie Wiesel feels to justify his survival of a Nazi concentration camp has shaped his destiny. It has guided his work as a writer, teacher, and humanitarian activist; influenced his interaction with his Jewish faith; and affected his family and personal choices. Since World War II, Wiesel has borne witness to persecution past and present. He has sought to understand humankind's capacity for evil, halt its progress, and heal the wounds it has caused.

Wiesel did not expect to be a novelist and journalist when he grew up. His early writings focused on the Bible and spiritual issues. The studious and deeply religious only son of a Jewish family in the village of Sighet, Romania, Wiesel spent his childhood days of the 1930s and 1940s studying sacred Jewish texts. Wiesel's mother, an educated woman for her time, encouraged her son's intense interest in Judaism. Wiesel's early love of stories, especially those told by his grandfather, may explain why he became a storyteller himself.

In 1944 during World War II, Wiesel's life took a profoundly unexpected turn when

Germany's armies invaded Sighet. He and his family were sent to concentration camps at Auschwitz and at Buna, both in Poland. His imprisonment, which he describes in horrifying detail in *Night*, forever changed Wiesel as a man and as a Jew.

Wiesel was freed in April 1945, when he was sixteen years old. He went to a French orphanage and was later reunited with his older sisters. Wiesel completed his education, working as a tutor and translator to fund his schooling. Before long, Wiesel was writing for both French and Jewish publications. Still, he did not—and vowed he would not—write about the Holocaust, saying years later, “You must speak, but how can you, when the full story is beyond language.” He did not break this vow until he began writing *Night*, his own memoir.

Wiesel settled in the United States in 1956. He continued to write about the Holocaust. Wiesel's largely autobiographical novels, *Dawn* and *The Accident*, further explore his role as a survivor. His novels *The Town Beyond the Wall* and *The Gates of the Forest* focus on other aspects of the Holocaust. Wiesel's play, *The Trial of God*, challenges God to provide an explanation for allowing so much suffering to occur.

Wiesel, who married Holocaust survivor Marion Erster Rose in 1969, has worked against oppression and persecution around the world. He feels a special obligation to speak out against injustice. Toward that end, he teaches humanities at Boston University and contributes his energies to a range of humanitarian organizations. Wiesel helped organize and found the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. He hopes to broadcast his belief that persecution is an experience all people must recognize and protest. In accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986 for his activism and courageous works, Wiesel summed up his call to action:

*Sometimes we must interfere . . .
Wherever men or women are persecuted
because of their race, religion, or political
views, that place must—at that moment—
become the center of the universe.*

Introducing the Memoir

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.

—Elie Wiesel in *Night*

These are the author's own words, describing his arrival at the concentration camp that would claim the life of his mother and younger sister. According to critic Kenneth Turan, Wiesel's memoir commands readers to feel "the inexpressible nausea and revulsion that a simple recitation of statistics never manages to arouse."

Night begins in 1941 in Wiesel's Eastern European village of Sighet. As World War II consumes Europe, Wiesel and the other Jews of Sighet still feel safe. An intensely religious young man, Wiesel spends his days studying sacred Jewish texts. By 1944, however, the Germans occupy Sighet and Wiesel's struggle to survive begins. Wiesel is deported to a Nazi concentration camp where he faces terrifying brutality, the tormenting losses of family and friends, a changing relationship with his father, and an intense challenge to his religious faith. Through young Wiesel's eyes, readers travel into the hell of Hitler's death camps and into the darkness of a long night in the history of the human race.

Wiesel wrote *Night* nearly ten years after the end of World War II. In an interview with noted French Catholic writer and humanitarian François Mauriac, he was inspired to break an earlier vow of silence he had made about the Holocaust. Mauriac urged Wiesel to tell his tale, to hold the world accountable. The resulting 800-page Yiddish manuscript, *And the World Remained Silent*, was the material from which the considerably shorter *Night* evolved. In its shorter version, Wiesel's memoir was published first in France and later—after much resistance due to its distressing subject—in the United States. Slowly, it gathered force and has since been read by millions.

Though the story is written in narrative form, it is not a novel. As a memoir, *Night* is a brief autobiographical work in which the author

recounts events he has witnessed and introduces people he has known. It is the first of many attempts Wiesel has made to honor these people, many now long dead, and to tell their horrible stories. With *Night* Wiesel also begins an attempt to find some human or divine explanation for the events he witnessed. For a man raised with deep religious faith, reconciling Nazi actions with Judaism has been a life-directing task.

Since *Night*'s American publication in 1960, Elie Wiesel's willingness to share his own story has helped turn the tide of world discussion. After the end of World War II, many people—Jews and non-Jews alike—did not want to think or talk about the horrible events that had occurred. They wanted to avoid the responsibility that might fall on individuals, governments, and organizations who knowingly, or unknowingly, allowed the Holocaust to happen. Some even tried to deny that the Holocaust actually took place. The works of Elie Wiesel ring out in protest against that absurdity and demand that people remember. As he said in a *People* magazine interview:

the only way to stop the next holocaust . . . is to remember the last one. If the Jews were singled out then, in the next one we are all the victims.

THE TIME AND PLACE

Night takes place in Europe (Romania, Poland, and Germany) during World War II (1939–1945). This war, sparked by German aggression, had its roots in the ending of an earlier war. With Germany's defeat in World War I, the nation was left with a broken government, a severely limited military, shattered industry and transportation, and an economy sinking under the strain of war debts. Many Germans were humiliated and demoralized.

The Nazi party—in German *NAZI* stands for National Socialist German Workers Party—came to power in the late 1920s. The party, through its leader Adolf Hitler, offered to restore German pride. At large rallies Hitler spoke of Germany's long military tradition, its national character, and its entitlement to greatness. To explain Germany's

fallen state, Hitler blamed the Jews and others whom he said were not true Germans. Many Germans responded enthusiastically to Hitler's ideas, and in 1933 he became chancellor, or leader, of the country.

Once in power, Hitler was able to restore Germany's economy and its military. He used that progress to support his expansion efforts, unchecked by Allied countries struggling with the worldwide Great Depression. In 1938 Hitler

began invading the lands around Germany. Britain and France declared war in 1939. The United States did not enter the war until 1941.

In 1941, when *Night* begins, Hitler seemed unstoppable. By 1942 he controlled or was allied with most of Europe, including Wiesel's Romania, which was pro-German. As the story progresses, Wiesel is confined in a total of three concentration camps, Auschwitz and Buna, in Poland, and later Buchenwald, in central Germany.

Did You Know?

Hitler's treatment of the Jews was more than a political strategy. He was an anti-Semite (hater of Jews) who viewed the Jews as an inferior race. In fact, Judaism is not a race, but rather a religion. Soon after taking control of Germany, Hitler began persecuting German Jews. They lost their citizenship and often their right to work, were barred from public schools and gathering places, could no longer marry non-Jews, and suffered frequent physical attacks to their homes and businesses.

Hitler defined as Jews those with at least one Jewish grandparent, whether or not they observed their religion. By 1938, before the War spread beyond Germany, Hitler and his secret-police organization, the Gestapo, had

already imprisoned more than 30,000 Jews. In keeping with his goal of achieving German racial "purity," Hitler also attacked and imprisoned Gypsies, people with handicaps, and homosexuals. Those who disagreed with Hitler's political views—Communists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Soviet and Slavic prisoners of war—were also mercilessly imprisoned, enslaved, and murdered. As Hitler's control of Europe spread, more and more innocent people were imprisoned or killed. Some were forced to live in ghettos, enclosed areas within cities, where they often starved. Others were executed or sent to the rapidly expanding camp system. By the end of the war, at least six million Jews and five million non-Jews had

Before You Read

Night chapters 1 and 2

FOCUS ACTIVITY

What events can suddenly change the course of a person's life?

Discuss

In a small group, discuss events that unexpectedly change people's lives—a natural disaster or death of a loved one, for example. Discuss possible effects and emotional reactions you or others might have to each event.

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out how young Elie Wiesel's life is profoundly and forever changed.

BACKGROUND

Time and Place

The town of Sighet, where *Night* begins, has been part of both Romania and Hungary at various times. During Wiesel's childhood, Sighet was home to 15,000 Jews. Most were devout Hasidic Jews whose lives focused on family, religion, and learning. Like most of their Jewish neighbors, the Wiesels were poor but intensely committed to education. For young Elie that meant spending his days and evenings studying sacred Jewish texts such as the Torah and Talmud. At the age of twelve, Wiesel began exploring *cabbala*, or Jewish mysticism—an approach to Bible study that analyzes hidden meanings in the text.

As World War II progressed, Wiesel's father Chlomo began helping Jews escape from Poland, risking his life to help others escape Nazi persecution. Chlomo continued to believe that he and his family would not be separated.

Did You Know?

Judaism dates back nearly 4,000 years. It shares many ideas with—and in fact is an ancestor to—both Christianity and Islam. These three religions all originated in the same part of the world, the area we now call the Middle East. The sacred texts of all three religions overlap in several ways. The Hebrew Bible is what Christians call the Old Testament. Many of these Bible stories also appear in the Islamic sacred text, the Qur'an.

Two important Jewish holy days are Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year and usually occurs in September. Ten days later comes Yom Kippur, which is a day of fasting and atonement. Passover is a springtime ritual that celebrates the Jews' escape from slavery in Egypt.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

compatriots [kəm pə'trē əts] *n.* fellow countrymen

edict [ē'dikt] *n.* official statement; law

expound [iks paund'] *v.* to set forth in detail

firmament [fur'mə mənt] *n.* the sky, or heavens

hermetically [hur met'ik lē] *adv.* completely sealed; airtight

pestilential [pes'tə lən'shəl] *adj.* filled with disease; contagious

phylacteries [fi lək'tər ēz] *n.* small boxes containing scripture; worn by some Jewish men for daily prayer

pillage [pil'ij] *v.* to rob with open violence

premonition [prē'mə nish'ən] *n.* anticipation of an event, usually negative, even without actual warning

truncheon [trun'chən] *n.* a police officer's stick