

# **Night Study Guide**

## **Night by Elie Wiesel**

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# Plot Summary

In 1944, Elie Wiesel is a Jewish adolescent who devotes much time and emotion to studying the Talmud and Jewish mysticism under the tutelage of Moché the Beadle in the tiny village of Sighet, Transylvania (Romania). After being expelled by the Hungarian police because he was a foreigner, Moché the Beadle returns to the village, narrowly escaping an ambush by the Gestapo, to warn his Jewish brethren of the grave threat posed to them by the coming Nazi invaders. Nevertheless, Jewish leaders in Sighet remain relaxed and ambivalent, even after the Jewish people are shuffled into supervised ghettos. The following spring, German and Hungarian authorities begin shipping Jews via cramped trains to the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex. Elie and his family are shipped as part of the final convoy. Scores of villagers are crammed together into boxcars with scarcely any food and water to share between them. Madame Schächter, one of the deportees, becomes hysterical with (prophetic) visions of flames and furnaces.

Late into day three of the deportation, the group of captives sees terrifying flames rising above huge furnaces and recoils at the stench of burning flesh. Guards armed with clubs and guns separate Elie's group in to two groups: those fit for labor camps and those damned to the furnaces. Elie and his father, Chlomo, lie about their ages and are moved to the concentration camp at Auschwitz with other able-bodied men. Elie's mother and three sisters disappear into Birkenau, the death camp. Elie never sees any of them again. After viewing infants being tossed in a fiery pit, Elie abandons his faith in a God he accuses of remaining silent and indifferent to the atrocities.

Every day, Elie and his father struggle to maintain their strength in order to remain in the "Fit to work" group. Cruel guards impose sadistic and erratic punishments. After three weeks, Elie and his father are forced to march to Buna, a factory in the Auschwitz complex, where they sort electrical parts in an electronics warehouse. The cruelty culminates with the guards hanging an adolescent. Elie watches as he dies in a torturously slow manner.

Despairing, Elie becomes increasingly depressed during Rosh Hashanah services. At the next selection, the doctor chooses his father. Chlomo, however, passes a second physical exam and is spared from the furnaces. Elie undergoes surgery to repair his foot that has swollen with pus.

Because Russian liberation forces are moving ever closer to the Nazi camp, the guards evacuate Buna in January 1945. The captives are herded through the European forests during the night in bitter cold over forty miles en route to Gleiwitz. Elie wraps his bleeding foot in strips of blanket. Jews who falter are shot. Elie prays for strength to save his father from death. Those who survive the arduous trek pile together in a crammed cabin. Surviving for three days on only fistfuls of snow, the remaining captives are packed onto a train for a week-and-a-half long ride to Buchenwald in central Germany. In the end, Elie and Chlomo are among the only twelve captives who survive the entire ordeal.



Elie tries to nurse his father back to health. Dysentery, malnutrition, and vicious violence gradually rob Chlomo of the few days of life he has left. Elie degenerates into a minor frenzy after the deterioration of his father. When he recovers, his father is gone. Elie fears he was sent to the fiery furnaces while he was still clinging to life. Resistance breaks out in Buchenwald. In the springtime, American forces liberate the camp. Elie is so devastated by his tribulations he stares at himself in a mirror and can discern only the reflection of a corpse.



# Chapter 1

## Summary

At the opening of the story, Elie Wiesel, adolescent son of a devout Romanian shopkeeper and brother to three girls (two older and one younger), pursues Hasidic Judaism and Jewish mysticism through study of the Talmud and the cabbala. Elie turns to the affable Moché the Beadle, a very poor and pious recluse, to mentor him in religious studies. After other parishioners depart the synagogue, Moché shares private time with Elie. He wisely encourages the impressionable youth to pursue God through questions, but to expect no understanding of God's answers, which remain unanswered in the soul until death. Moché insists each seeker must rely on innate intuition that will open the way to intelligible answers pertinent to the individual believer.

Inexplicably, Hungarian police arrest Moché and other foreigners and take them away aboard cattle cars. Elie weeps for the loss of his tutor. The citizens of Sighet accept exile as a natural burden of war and resign themselves to the idea that the deportees are working in Galicia. Later, Moché returns to report the exiles were systematically machine-gunned in the forests outside of Poland. The malicious murderers made sport of tossing babies into the air and taking target practice. Moché survives because he was shot in the leg and left for dead. Elie and inhabitants of Sighet assume Moché has gone crazy.

In the spring of 1944, the success of the Russian front lures the people of Sighet to minimize the immediate threat posed by the Germans. Knowing Hitler's fierce hatred for Jews, the villagers doubt Hitler can remain in power long enough to kill an entire race. Nevertheless, Elie pleads with his father to sell out and immigrate to Palestine; Chlomo insists he is too old to start over. Radio reports from Budapest warn that fascism is gaining momentum. Although rumors of anti-Semitism begin to spread, the villagers remain optimistic that their daily lives will be unaffected. Less than three days later, German troops infiltrate Sighet.

Initially, German officers live in private homes and behave politely and peaceably among the Jews. Worshippers must pray at the homes of rabbis during Passover week because synagogues are closed. On the seventh day of the festival, Germans detain Jewish leaders. The officers hold the Jews under house arrest for three days and seize all of their gold and valuable possessions. The Jews are forced to identify themselves by wearing a yellow cloth star, symbolic of the Star of David. Attempting to alleviate the fears of his fellow Jews, Chlomo makes light of the restrictions. The Germans impose more anti-Semitic legislation, banning Jews from restaurants, cafes, trains, and synagogues. The laws also restrict the villagers to their homes after 6 P.M. and mandates that they cover their windows.

The Germans drive Sighet Jews into two ghettos surrounded by barbed wire. Elie and his family live on Serpent Street in the larger settlement in the center of town and take in



relatives Germans have expelled from their homes. Slightly unaware and hopeful in their private commune, the Jews attempt to normalize activities. The Saturday prior to Pentecost, an officer named Stern summons Chlomo to a council meeting. He returns from the meeting near midnight visibly disturbed announcing they all will be deported the next day. Each person will be permitted to take a few personal items and minimal food. The president of the Jewish Council knows their destination but is not allowed to divulge it; rumors circulate stating they're headed for Hungarian brick factories.

The following morning, a compassionate inspector knocks at the window to warn Chlomo of danger. Families begin to prepare food for the journey. Hungarian police order the Jewish people outside and strike them indiscriminately with clubs and rifle butts. Hours pass before the first convoys begin their march out of Sighet. Elie's family fasts all day on Monday. They believe they will be deported on Tuesday, but to their relief they are forced to resettle in the small ghetto. The small ghetto is littered with possessions the first deportees abandoned in the turmoil. Elie's family moves into his uncle's rooms for four nights. Finally, on Saturday, the Wiesels are deported aboard railway cattle cars—crammed eighty to a car.

## Analysis

Elie Wiesel reveals much about himself in his description and judgment of others. Though his father insists he is too young as a twelve-year-old to study the cabbala, Elie seeks out Moché the Beadle for guidance in the study of Jewish mysticism. Elie disappointedly observes the passive naïveté of the adults in his village as the anti-Semitism in the area grows, insisting his father move the family to Palestine before it's too late. He also notes the villagers' casual dismissal of Moché's warnings after surviving the ambush as indicative of his people's penchant and history for not heeding the cautionary prophecy of those around them. Elie turns to Jewish mysticism to try to reconcile and interpret the romanticism of Judaism against the backdrop of anti-Semitism and genocide prevalent in the history of the Hebrew people. This internal struggle within Elie begins the theme of the viability of faith versus the power of gross evil that continues throughout the entirety of the book.

## Vocabulary

surname, synagogue, insignificant, deliverance, cabbala, Zohar, indulgently, frontier, bombardment, Zionism, liquidate, emigration, verdict, dishearten, ghetto, Gestapo, sanitary, truncheons, candelabra, inquisition, pillage



## Chapter 2

### Summary

For three days the eighty Jews of Sighet are forced to stand up in insufferable, cramped quarters. They have scarce amounts of water and food, and they struggle to find space to sit or rest. At a stop at Kaschau, they realize the train has entered Czechoslovakia. German officers seize the convoy, demanding the deportees turn over all valuables or be shot. The Germans also threaten to slaughter the entire trainload if anyone attempts to escape. Nobody is able to rest, due largely to the hysterical screams of Madame Schächter, who is possessed by terrifying visions of flames. The others tie her in restraints, force a gag into her mouth, and beat her to control the frenzy, a frenzy which would prove to be prophetic.

When they finally arrive at Auschwitz, Poland, the captives are deceived, told that families will stay together. They are led to believe those who are young and strong will work in the factories and those less physically capable will work in the fields. Instead, they are taken to Birkenau, the reception center for Auschwitz, where the air reeks of the stench of incinerating flesh and the sky is charcoaled with the flames emitting from tall chimneys. As the doors of the cars open, attendants in striped uniforms force everyone out of the boxcars, bullying them with clubs.

### Analysis

This second partition highlights Elie Wiesel's dismay at another missed opportunity for the Jews of Sighet to escape or rebel. Just like his memory of the town's indifference to Moché the Beadle's warnings, Elie's accounts of Madame Schächter's visions and the response of the others punctuates the text with a dramatically intense foreshadowing of figures viewed as outcasts. Yet, it is these supposed outcasts who, in Elie's mind, have much more insight to the true peril awaiting the Jews than any of the established citizens and leaders of the village. Up to this point, Elie's family has discounted Moché the Beadle's testimony of Nazi machine-gun executions, had been too late to respond to the cautionary knocking on the window of the Hungarian policeman, and were now dismissive of Madame Schächter. Wiesel implies these missed opportunities were a result of fear by his people and their being too docile and willing to comply with cruel treatment from their oppressors. It is this same fear and desire for self-preservation, Elie intimates, that forces the captives to splinter and prevents them from forming a united front against their agitators; every deportee is concerned only with making it out alive himself.

### Vocabulary

provisions, lieutenant, hysterical, powerless, scouring, emptiness, convenience, barometer, wilted, indifferent, abominable



## Chapter 3

### Summary

Elie walks past armed SS guards. The Jewish deportees are separated: the men to the left, the women to the right. He never sees his mother or sister Tzipora again. A friendly insider advises Elie and Chlomo to lie about their ages to increase their chance of survival. Elie should claim to be eighteen, Chlomo should claim to be forty. A cynic from within the camp curses the Jews as being stupid, ignorant or the fact that Auschwitz is a death camp where they will be "burned." A few young, sturdy men speak of revolt; however, calming voices urge all to rely on faith. Dr. Mengele, an SS officer, surveys the men, sending the 'fit' to work assignments and the 'unfit' to the crematory. Elie claims to be a young farmer. He and his father follow the healthy men to work details. A truck delivers a cargo of babies that are tossed into a fiery pit. Elie considers throwing himself into the electric wire rather than be burned with the infants.

Chlomo realizes no external agency will rescue them and he begins to pray. Elie, however, starts to have real doubts about the power of his God. They are forced to strip for another selection. The strongest inmates become crematory workers. Elie remains with his father as the barber shaves their heads. Elie lapses into a meditation on self-preservation. Forced into the cold night to another barracks, they disinfect their bodies, and shower. At a third barracks, attendants toss them poorly fitting prison clothes, which they trade among themselves for a better fit.

At the gypsies' camp, Elie and his father enter a muddy barracks. A Kapo demands new shoes from anybody who has them; Elie hides his shoes in the mud because they are new and he wishes to hold on to them. An SS officer warns them inmates must work or go to the crematory. Divided from skilled tradesmen, Elie and Chlomo leave Birkenau and move toward a stone barracks. They march half-hour through electric fencing, arriving at another camp in Auschwitz, Block 17, greeted by armed SS officers and menacing canines. Approaching a garden plot, a compassionate young Polish prisoner-overseer alleviates some of the terror by wishing them "Good night," which are the first humane words Elie has heard uttered since his deportation from Sighet.

The new prisoners receive clothes and black coffee when they awake in the morning. Elie believes Auschwitz to be like a rest home in comparison to Birkenau; he's allowed to nap in the spring sun. That afternoon, however, Elie is tattooed with the number A-7713. At roll call, bands play martial music as officers log in returning workers by number. The days pass in a routine of work, food, roll call, and bed. Elie reunites with a distant relative, Stein of Antwerp, who worries about his wife and little sons. Elie lies to Stein, telling him before they left Romania his mother had received word from Stein's wife and that she and his kids were safe. Elie deceives Stein as a way to show compassion to his relative and give him some hope, albeit false. After three weeks, the authorities replace the not-ruthless-enough Polish overseer with a savage man assisted by "real monsters." Shortly thereafter, the one hundred ordinary workers are ordered out





of the block and are marched through Germans streets to a new camp in Buna. An ominous iron gate closes behind them.

## Analysis

The central theme of this partition is the transformation of the adolescent Elie from a loving, curious, and compassionate fourteen-year-old to a dispassionate survivor. After a Kapo beats Elie's father for asking permission to go to the toilet, Elie is ashamed of himself because he is incapable of making a move and saying anything in his father's defense. Elie judges himself harshly, assessing this reduction of his humanity as a selfish episode that proves his quest for his own survival is greater than his love for his father. This partition also speaks to the larger dehumanizing effects of such torturous conditions on the behavior of all people. They learn to preserve their lives at any cost—even in the face of pain and humiliation inflicted on a parent. Elie is a victim of this dehumanization; he cannot intervene on his father's behalf because it would threaten his own existence.

Elie has been stripped from his home, stripped from his family (save his father), stripped of his clothes—all of which lead to his being stripped of his faith. Though his faith in God has been severely fractured, Elie's compassion and humanity have not been totally eviscerated as evidenced by his dialogue with Stein of Antwerp. By extending a scrap of hope to Stein, Elie temporarily relieves Stein's two-year-long tension. The gracious motive behind this deception suggests Elie has developed some of his father's maturity and compassion, qualities that will undoubtedly be assets to him if he is to survive the trials that lie ahead.

## Vocabulary

cherished, swine, brutal, notorious, unremittingly, procession, humanity, Kaddish, convulsively, nocturnal, crematory, self-preservation, instinct, weariness, barracks, oppressive, lavatories, inscription, compulsory, formality, convoy, tormented, dreadfully, relentlessly, blandishments



# Chapter 4

## Summary

Buna is practically desolate. Elie and Chlomo receive showers and clothing, and are forced to wait, per usual. Their overseer seems humane, however, and veteran captives warn them to avoid the building unit. After a three-day quarantine, three doctors examine the hundred inmates, one of which searches for gold teeth. A band of merry Jewish musicians plays instruments as prisoners trudge to the warehouse to work. Elie enjoys the Hebrew chants and songs with other Zionist youth and discusses immigration to Haifa.

As the barbarism increases, the captives grow despondent. The camp dentist demands Elie's gold crown; he saves it by pretending to have a fever. Without warning or cause, Idek launches into a murderous rage, attacking Elie in the warehouse. Elie restrains himself and remains silent. A French Jewess who passes as an Aryan soothes his bloody face (Decades later, he encounters her in the Paris subway and they reminisce about their brief friendship and experiences at Buna). Franek, the foreman, torments Chlomo for marching out of step as a means of preying on Elie's feelings for his father's suffering and thereby extorting the gold tooth. In desperation at his father's torment, Elie allows a dentist from Warsaw to extract his gold crown with a rusty spoon. On a Sunday, Elie angers Idek by laughing after seeing him with a naked Polish girl in a room adjacent to the warehouse. For this indiscretion, Elie is forced to lie on a box and receive twenty-five strokes. He faints and is forced into consciousness to promise to keep Idek's dirty secret.

Another Sunday, block leaders secure prisoners as sirens blare. Elie remains unfazed by the American air raids that last over an hour. The following week, Elie and his fellow workers witness a pre-breakfast hanging of a young man from Warsaw who stole during the alert. Later, in retaliation for the sabotage of the camp power station, the SS torture a Dutch Oberkapo and hang three more people, including a cherub-faced thirteen-year-old. Elie is enraged the boy is so undersized that he takes over half an hour to die of strangulation. A prisoner demands to know where God is; Elie replies to himself, "He is hanging here on this gallows."

## Analysis

The style Elie Weisel uses in this section of the narrative is more matter-of-fact and simple than that he has employed up to this point. This change in style from more passionate and complex to more simplistic and basic mirrors the depletion of his physical body caused by malnutrition and cruelty. Elie describes himself as being ruled by, and only identifiable through, his most primitive of instincts: "I was a body. Perhaps less than that even: a starved stomach. The stomach alone was aware of the passage of time." The terse and skeletal sentence structures and depictions Weisel uses to



describe his time in Buna parallel the diminishing skeleton of his own physical existence. Wiesel skillfully gives “bare bones” accounts of his ordeal, without embellishment or glorification, to provide a realistic view of the primitive struggle for survival all the captives endured. Stripped of their possessions and outward vestiges of humanity, the deportees must satisfy their most basic and animalistic urges of hunger, instinct, and deception in order to survive. From the French Jewess’s deception to the battles to beg, borrow, or steal another morsel of bread, the captives have been systematically transformed into a degeneration of their former humane selves.

## Vocabulary

Haifa, epidemic, decayed, cynical, distinguished, comrades, sanctity, emigrate, cauldron, extraction, Kapo, imperceptibly, manacled, Oberkapo, Lagerkapo, gallows, raucous

# Chapter 5

## Summary

September 1944 marks the beginning of the new Jewish year. Collectively, a religious zeal and enthusiasm is alive in the camp as about ten thousand gather together to pray together. Elie accuses God of forsaking them. During the holy days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Jews are supposed to fast and pray. Chlomo forbids Elie from fasting as a means of survival, but Elie refuses to fast as an act of defiance against God.

After he and Chlomo survive yet another terrifying selection process, Elie is transferred to a building unit where he has to drag heavy blocks of stone. He grows increasingly fearful for his father's health. The captives have to run past Dr. Mengele to demonstrate their vitality to avoid being selected. Chlomo is initially chosen for selection and bequeaths his remaining possessions to Elie; however, he returns and reclaims his belongings after passing a second examination.

Authorities give the Jewish captives warmer clothes as winter hits, but work conditions and night temperatures torment them. In the middle of January 1945, Elie enters the hospital to undergo surgery to drain pus from the sole of his right foot. A Hungarian Jew warns Elie to leave the ward before the sickest patients are selected for death. The Jewish surgeon who performs the surgery assures Elie he'll recover within a fortnight. Two days after his surgery, rumors circulate that the Russian Army is near. The next day, the SS evacuate the camp to central Germany. Hindered by his swollen foot, Elie and his father deliberate whether to remain in the camp's infirmary or join the evacuations. They decide to evacuate and plod through the snow toward an unknown location. Elie later learns that two days after they left, the Russians freed prisoners who remained in the infirmary.

## Analysis

This section serves as the climax of Elie's increasing bitterness and resentment toward God. He describes the crushing emotional turmoil decrying the evil power over God, which Elie views as a mirage. The pace of his words crescendo into a hostile harangue against the deity he views as permitting his chosen people to be devoured day and night by crematories, even during the religious holidays.

It is one thing to ponder the eternal question of why God allows his people to suffer, but to actually experience such excruciating torture puts this question in a more sober, harrowing light. This section also continues the theme of unheeded prophecy. While in the infirmary, Elie is told the Russian Army is close to liberating the camp. To his defense, many such rumors had come and gone unfounded during his time at multiple camps. Should Elie remain and arrange for his father to pose as a patient or a nurse in



the infirmary in the hope of freedom when the Russians arrive, or should he go on the march of evacuation with so many others? In a way it is a test of his faith: Will he wait and trust God to finally deliver him from his hell on Earth. Elie cannot put his trust in God to save him. He is driven by his instinct to survive and by his hatred for the atrocities he's experienced and witnessed. He has more faith in Hitler's faithfulness to keep his promise of annihilating all the Jews than he does in the faithfulness of God's promises to protect and deliver His people.

## Vocabulary

afflicted, functionaries, crippled, officiant, profoundly, solitary, lamentation, countenance, musulman, wallowing, crucible, sleepwalking, din, derision, amputated, morphine, infirmary, masquerade, monochrome, buffoons, mountebanks



# Chapter 6

## Summary

The prisoners run manically through the night in bitter-cold snow. The SS shoot all prisoners who fall behind. Elie welcomes death as pain and cold settle in, but he fights to survive as his only means of defiance. Also, concern for his father motivates him not to give up. Elie's father encourages him to get out of the snow and into an abandoned factory. They take turns keeping each other awake to prevent themselves from freezing. Many men freeze to death under a blanket of snow and are trampled. An elderly rabbi Eliahou searches the factory for his son. Elie conceals the fact that his son tried to save himself by outrunning Eliahou, who had become a burden to him. Disturbed by the son's disloyalty, Elie prays to the same God he has rejected to prevent him from abandoning his own father.

Even the Germans grow weary of the endless and never-ending trek in snow. At Gleiwitz, Kapos assign inmates to barracks. Prisoners pile up against each other and Elie is nearly crushed but manages to escape by biting and clawing his way to some breathing space. Julieck, his musician friend from Buna, plays a snippet of a Beethoven concerto on his violin. By sunrise, Julieck lies dead beside his trodden-under-foot violin. For three days, the captives are given no food or water but some are hopeful of the Russian Army rescuing them because they hear the sound of their gunfire approaching.

At dawn on the third day, Elie rushes to rescue his father from another round of selection. The ensuing chaos mixes 'fit' and 'unfit,' Chlomo once again escapes selection through Elie's intervention. The inmates march to the rail lines and stand to eat their ration of bread. The SS guards are entertained at the sight of deportees scooping snow off each other's backs to quench their thirst. Late into the evening, the captives are still standing until the officers squeeze a hundred men into each car and they move out.

## Analysis

This partition presents two motifs at work: the all-corrosive nature of evil and the unity of father and son in contrast to the "every man for himself" mentality. The unity and loyalty of Chlomo and Eli stand in stark contrast to the selfishness of Eliahou's son. In fact, the behavior of Eliahou's son is only indicative of the deteriorating behavior and regression suffered by most of the people in captivity. The fact that so many of the people who do succumb to the "every man for himself" mentality die immediately and Chlomo and Elie have survived up to this point, promotes the idea that—despite our natural instincts—unity in the midst of terrible adversity is preferable to isolation or individualism.

Also, the fact so many fathers and sons end up betraying one another to save themselves highlights the power evil has to transform and disintegrate even the closest



of familial bonds. The symbolism of Julie's dead body lying beside his crushed violin just hours after his playing an uplifting Beethoven piece shows this level of evil is so potent as to snuff out all that is good around it.

## Vocabulary

automatons, skeletal, parched, famished, fatigue, indeterminate, petrified, agony, bereaved, privations, assassinated, conscientiously, gateway, disengage, extinguished, accumulated, spectacle, embarkation



# Chapter 7

## Summary

Crammed between dead and live bodies, Elie begins to lose hope of surviving. By morning, he locates his father's wilting body but gets no response from Chlomo. The train halts in a deserted field to dump several hundred corpses. Elie slaps Chlomo awake to save him from the "grave diggers," a euphemism for an unfeeling crew who abandons corpses on the ground. The prisoners live on snow for ten days traveling through the German countryside. A German workman instigates a stampede by tossing bread to starving men, who brawl with each other for scraps. Other Germans mimic the condescending gesture by initiating more deadly scrambles for vitals. A son named Meir beats his father and snatches a crust from his grasp; both men die as others join in the deadly scuffle for bread.

During an unprovoked attack on Elie, Chlomo and Meir Katz fend off a would-be strangler. Despite his strength, Meir Katz falls into despair over the selection of his son for death. Elie's father is unable to revive his spirit. Facing icy winds, the prisoners realize they will die if they don't keep active. Meir Katz prefers a bullet to continuing this painfully slow death. On arrival at Buchenwald late at night, only twelve out of the one hundred original prisoners have survived.

## Analysis

This brief partition carries the ghastly atmosphere to its pinnacle as scores of men deteriorate into death and are callously tossed aside. Wiesel's account of escalating violence, abject starvation, unbearable frost, and apathy magnifies the thin line between death and scant survival. The prevalent indifference to survival among the captives is demonstrated by the callous sport the Germans play by tossing bread to starving Jews. Wiesel seemingly condemns the indifference of the German workers who look upon the passing convoy and cruelty of the soldiers but show no concern.

The contrast between Meir Katz's hopelessness and the brawling mob of hungry captives illustrates the debased brutish existence that supplants normal human behavior under such extreme conditions. Wiesel describes it as the prisoners transforming into "wild beasts of prey, with animal hatred in their eyes." The unrestrained savagery of some captives opposed to the cadaverous inertia of others paints a portrait of action versus inaction.

## Vocabulary

huddled, indifference, deprived, stampede, vitality, spectators, undernourished, strangling, simultaneously, murderous, contagion





## Chapter 8

### Summary

Elie and Chlomo hold hands as they walk by the crematory. Chlomo collapses among corpses on the way to the showers. Elie shouts at his father who is defenseless and withering away in his slow descent to death. German soldiers force Elie to the block as sirens wail and the camp grows pitch dark. In the morning he realizes he and his father have been separated. Hours later, Elie finds Chlomo begging for coffee and suffering from a fever. Elie discovers the guards are withholding food from Chlomo because he is on the verge of death. Elie gives him the remains of his soup.

Chlomo later contracts dysentery and suffers greatly. His mind and strength rapidly deteriorate. Days later, Chlomo fails to recognize Elie as he passes him. A few days thereafter, Chlomo whispers to Elie the location of hidden gold in the family cellar, having received a momentary burst of energy and clarity. Then, his father begins to immediately have trouble breathing. A surgeon refuses to treat him. Elie compares his own attitude toward Chlomo with that of Rabbi Eliahou's disloyal son.

The head of the block advises Elie to think of himself, eat both rations of food, and leave his father to die. Inwardly, Elie consents but quickly chastises himself with guilt. Because his father continues to call out to Elie, an officer whacks him with a billy club, shattering his skull. Elie, too weary to keep watch, goes to sleep in an upper bunk. On January 29, Elie discovers another invalid occupies Chlomo's bunk. He assumes his father has died or has been killed and disposed of in the crematory. Elie recalls his father's final word was "Eliezer." Too disillusioned to cry, Elie understands Chlomo's death freed him from the dangerous burden of looking after him.

### Analysis

Elie and Chlomo had shared a symbiotic relationship up to this point in their travails that had enabled each of them to survive. The young son had provided the physical support for the older father, retrieving food and water for him and protecting him from boorish guards and captives, while the father provides Elie with emotional support and a purpose for continuing to live and for not giving up. Had Elie lost his father at the very outset of his tribulation, the then fifteen-year-old captive might have succumbed to despair and hysteria immediately.

This chapter provides some perception into the psychology of a being whose body and spirit have been severely frayed. Elie, pushed beyond his emotional and physical capacities due to the fear, cruelty, hunger, cold, and disease he endures, loses his ability to focus and grows relieved by the finality of his father's death. He is vexed by the thought his father may not have stopped breathing before being tossed into the furnace. The unceremonious death of the kind and beloved humanitarian his father was gnaws



away at Elie. The absence of prayers and candles darkens the passage of his father's spirit from Buchenwald to its final destination. Chlomo's calling out "Eliezer" as his final word provides a cruel irony. The meaning of the name Eliezer is "God will help." However, Elie's reality is that God has not helped any of Buchenwald's victims and there's no reason to believe He will help them any time soon.

## Vocabulary

rage, hillock, emerged, vulnerable, assembly, gratitude, livid, tremors, invalids, feverish, saliva, dysentery, riveted, poison, rations, recesses, conscience, spasmodically

# Chapter 9

## Summary

Overcome by grief and trauma, Elie lies still, his spirit beyond feeling pain. Desensitized and disillusioned, he joins the six hundred inmates of the children's block and merely exists as he awaits the front to arrive at the camp. Thoughts of satisfying his hunger alone saturate Elie's mind. Rumors swirl that the Germans are planning a mass execution. On April 5, an organized resistance refuses orders to assemble. Elie returns to the block with the other rebels. The camp is systematically emptied of captives, thousands each day being released. No food is distributed to the twenty thousand remaining deportees for the next five days.

On April 10, camp officials plan to discharge 20,000 prisoners and blow up the buildings but the evacuation is delayed. The captives sustain life by eating grass and discarded potato peelings foraged from the ground. The following day, the resistance exerts pressure on their captors. The children lie on the ground while gunfire and grenades explode above them. Fleeing German officers abandon the camp to the rebels. At six in the evening, American tanks arrive at the gates.

The prisoners, distracted from revenge by starvation, relieve their hunger with rations of bread. Some young men travel into Weimar for potatoes, clothes, and intercourse with local girls. After liberation, Elie contracts food poisoning. He remains in serious condition for two weeks, after which he recovers enough to look at himself in the mirror for the first time since he was deported. He is unable to forget his corpse-like image.

## Analysis

The final scene of *Night* contrasts with what one might initially expect at the liberation of a war camp. There are no shouts of joy or relief or gratitude or even for revenge. There is only hunger and cold and disease—and the desire to alleviate those troubles. They are starving. Not only have their bodies become physically ravaged by years of deprivation and cruelty, their spirit has been crushed. They realize there is nothing for them to go back to. All that they knew and loved has been destroyed.

The nameless, faceless evacuees matter little to Elie (he matters just as little to them), who no longer clutches at friends or tends his father. Consumed by starvation, food poisoning, and guilt, Elie fights for life in its most primitive state.

Elie still recalls vividly the vision he witnesses in the mirror. He does not recognize himself. He is perhaps fortunate not just because he has survived, but also because of his age. He will in some way try to rebuild a different sort of life for himself. But, for many of the other survivors recovery is not possible. Many of the liberated are far too battered physically and mentally ever to recover. It is mainly those of Elie's generation who must bear witness to the atrocities suffered by the Jewish race.

## Vocabulary

idleness, organization, abandon, liquidated, upheaval, innumerable, deportees, evacuation, postponed, resistance, revenge, liberation



# Characters

## Eliezer “Elie” Wiesel

At the start of the story, Elie is an introspective schoolboy who immerses himself in religious studies. He is very much dependent on and loyal to his parents. His whole family is ripped away by force from their peaceful village of Sighet and exposed to the brutality of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. His account shows his experience during the Holocaust was both a fight for survival and a test of his faith. While Elie manages to win his battle for survival, he apparently fails the test of his faith.

## Chlomo Wiesel

A highly-esteemed grocer, religious leader, and person of interest in the village of Sighet, Elie’s father is his sole confidant throughout his exile and hardships at the hands of the SS. Unlike Elie, Chlomo’s faith consists of observing all the Jewish rituals and upholding the law without question or skepticism. Although his son’s faith is sorely tested, Chlomo keeps his faith throughout his ordeal.

## The Wiesel females

Mrs. Wiesel (mother), Hilda (oldest sister), Béa (middle sister), and Tzipora (youngest sister). They all work in the family grocery store in some capacity. Very little is said of any of them. Elie’s final vision of his female relatives was that of his mother reassuringly stroking Tzipora’s hair as the men and women are separated at the very beginning of their exile.

## Moché the Beadle

Moché the Beadle is Elie’s friend and mentor in Jewish mysticism. He is a poor, outcast Jew who lives in Sighet. He is deported from Sighet as a foreigner but escapes and returns to tell the town people of the Nazi atrocities. Tragically, the community dismisses Moché as a lunatic.

## Madame Schächter

She is a Jewish widow from Sighet who is deported in the same cattle car as Eliezer. Madame Schächter is assumed to be a lunatic because she screams she sees fire and furnaces in the distance. She proves to be a prophet as the trains soon arrive at the crematoria of Auschwitz.



## **Akiba Drumer**

Akiba is a captive who sings Hasidic melodies at bedtime in Buna as a means of boosting the morale of his fellow victims. Using cabbala numerology, he predicts they'll be freed in a matter of weeks, but he gradually loses his faith in God after a round of selections at Block 36. His fellow inmates forget his parting request for a Kaddish.

## **Stern of Antwerp**

Stein is a relative of the Wiesels who Elie meets in Auschwitz. He has been separated from his family for several years and is concerned about them. Elie lies to Stein in order to comfort him concerning his family.

## **Juliek**

He is a Polish musician and member of the Buna orchestra. He provides critical information about Idek, the mad Kapo, in the Gleiwitz barracks. He provides a final performance of a piece of a Beethoven concerto. The following morning he is found dead beside his trampled violin.

## **Idek**

An angry Kapo at Buna who suffers from uncontrollable, unpredictable fits of violence. He beats Elie during one his bouts of insane rage.

## **Franek**

Franek is Elie's foreman at Buna. He covets Elie's gold tooth and treats Chlomo very cruelly until Elie agrees to have a dentist in the camp pry it out with a rusty spoon.

## **Dutch Oberkapo**

The Dutch Oberkapo is a kind overseer who is accused of sabotage. The SS torture him for weeks after he is accused of stockpiling arms and bombing Buna's power station, yet he refuses to name co-conspirators and is transferred to Auschwitz and never seen again.

## **The French Jewess**

She works in the electrical warehouse, pretending to be Aryan using forged papers and speaking only in French. She comforts Elie after he receives a harsh beating by speaking encouraging words in German. She and Elie would reunite by chance in Paris

years after the liberation. They spend time together reminiscing about their time in Auschwitz.

## **Dr. Josef Mengele**

A cruel German officer who struts around with his truncheon and monocle and revels in the systematic selection process he manages, which decides those who are to live and those who are to be killed in the furnaces. He often forces the inmates to run in front of him while he looks for signs of weakness. He is an evil predator, preying on those who are weak and are of no use to him

## **Rabbi Eliahou and his son**

The Rabbi Eliahou is an elderly, respected Polish religious leader who provides great comfort by ministering to others in the camps. As he begins to weaken, his son deserts him to increase his own chances for survival. The disloyalty to his father horrifies Elie, who hopes he will never commit a similar act of unfaithfulness.



# Objects/Places

## Night

According to Jewish (and Christian) tradition, God's initial act in human history was to speak light into existence, eliminating the darkness. Darkness and night—the absence of light—therefore is the equivalence of a world without God's presence. In *Night*, Wiesel extends this metaphor. Nighttime is always when the worst suffering takes place. Its presence reflects Wiesel's belief that the world he experiences is one without God. When Elie initially refers to night, his father is being interrupted while telling stories to be briefed about the coming deportation of Jews. Also, night is the setting of Elie's first arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Nighttime in the bitter cold forests is also the scene of the torturous forty-two mile evacuation from Buna.

## Fire

In *Night*, fire is a symbol of the Nazis' cruel and vicious abuse of power. During the initial deportation, Madame Schächter receives a vision of fire that serves as a premonition of the future suffering. Elie witnesses the German soldiers burning babies in a ditch. Fire, most significantly, serves as the blistering force of murder in the crematoria.

Fire as a weapon of cruelty, and as used by the Nazis, inverses the role fire plays in Jewish and biblical tradition. In Old Testament fire is linked with God's divine wrath and just retribution of the wicked. Gehenna, which is a Jewish term for Hell, states that the evil are justly punished by fire. However in *Night*, the evil ones brandish the power of the flame, utilizing it as a means to unjustly torture the innocent. Such a reversal demonstrates how surviving the Holocaust has dramatically transformed Wiesel's entire concept of faith, religion, and an all-powerful and just God.

## Silence

One of *Night*'s most often quoted passages reads, "Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live." Elie believes God has remained silent in the face of so much injustice, and he finds God's silence alarming. Wiesel accentuates this sentiment in his retelling of the Gestapo hanging a young boy. He recalls, "Where is God? Where is He?" someone behind me asked... Total silence throughout the camp." At that same traumatic event, when the same question is posed again, Eliezer answers within himself, "Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows..." The existence of pervasive wickedness and the lack of a divine response convince the young Elie that God Himself must in fact be dead.

A secondary silence exists throughout *Night* as well: the silence of the victims and onlookers, and the lack of resistance to the Nazi threat. When his father is beaten at the end of his life, Elie remembers, "I did not move. I was afraid," and he feels ashamed by





his inertia. The silence of the German citizens who watched with calloused indifference as the Nazis beat and humiliated their victims on crammed trains also disheartens Eliezer. Throughout the autobiography Wiesel constructs a heart-wrenching indictment against the silence and passivity that allowed the Holocaust to continue. Night is itself an alarm to break the silence, to detail vividly and courageously the barbarism, in order to prevent anything so horrific from ever repeating itself.

## **Religious Tradition and Observation**

With the importance and abundance of international, written communication between the main characters throughout the novel, the local post offices and American Expresses serve integral roles as they are utilized by the characters to send, store, receive, and retrieve valuable letters and packages.



# Themes

## The Destructive Power of Evil

Evil has a tendency to deceive and seduce individuals by giving power over others that they would not normally experience. Hitler seemed to promise everything to a German people who had lost their identity and purpose after World War I, but many could not discern that he had a hideous, hidden agenda. Hitler's Third Reich implemented propaganda, fear and violence as weapons in order to gain complete control over supporters.

The reader discovers the Jews of Sighet thought their role would be to support the German war machine, by providing housing to their officers. They assumed the war would provide nothing more than a minor inconvenience to their daily routine. They soon learned they would experience gross brutality at the hands of Germans, who had been convinced they were the master race and had greater rights than 'inferior' races.

Once driven by this murderous ideology, soldiers were able to justify all the unattractive human behavior and degradation that transpired during the war. This common view spread to the extent that those under Hitler's command felt justified in treating prisoners horrifically and were able to use them for experiments, because they considered them to have no other value.

Being thus subjected to such excruciating inhumanity, many of the captives succumbed to the corrosive power of evil and began committing atrocities themselves against one another. The evil inside the concentration camps was so pervasive and infectious that fathers and sons began to betray one another for scraps of bread and dribbles of water. The events at Auschwitz and Buna are sobering accounts of evil begetting more and more evil.

## Father and Son Loyalty vs. Selfishness

Eliezer is disgusted with the horrific selfishness he sees around him, especially the severing of familial bonds. Three specific occasions stress sons selfishly mistreating their fathers: the pipel who abused his father, Rabbi Eliahou's son, and the son who beats his father to death over bread on the train to Buchenwald. All of these moments of cruelty are provoked by the conditions the prisoners are forced to endure. In order to save themselves, these sons sacrifice their fathers.

These tragic accounts are a stark contrast to the relationship of loyalty shared by Elie and Chlomo. Elie depends on his father for support, and his love for his father allows him to endure. During the long run to Gleiwitz, he admits, "My father's presence was the only thing that stopped me [from giving up]. . . . I had no right to let myself die. What would he do without me? I was his only support." Their relationship demonstrates that love and solidarity are stronger forces of survival than the instinct of self-preservation.



## Faith in God against the Presence of Great Evil

Growing up, Elie's faith is a product of his studies in Jewish mysticism, which teach him that God is everywhere in the world, that nothing exists without God, that in fact everything in the physical world is a reflection of the divine. Elie grows up believing everything on Earth reflects God's holiness and power. His faith is rooted in the belief that God is everywhere at all times, and His presence permeates every aspect of daily life. If God is good and God is everywhere in the world, therefore, the world must be good.

Elie's faith in the world's innate goodness is irreparably shaken, however, by the cruel evil of the Holocaust. He cannot imagine that the unbelievably reprehensible cruelty of the concentration camps could reflect divine nature in any way. The adolescent asks questions such as how a benevolent God could partake in such depravity or how an omnipotent God could permit such inhumanity. The brutality and selfishness among the captives also shatter the teenage Elie's faith. Eliezer believes if all the prisoners were to unite to oppose the Nazi oppression, then maybe he could rationalize the Nazis as an evil aberration. He could permit himself the belief that mankind is basically good. But the Holocaust exposes the selfishness, evil, and cruelty of which all humanity—the Nazis, the captives, fathers, sons, even himself—is susceptible of committing. If the world is so wretched and evil, then God must also be wretched and evil or He mustn't exist at all.

On the surface this sobering epiphany seems to annihilate Elie's faith, however, he manages to retain some of this faith throughout his ordeal. Elie has multiple inner conflicts with his faith, but his struggles should not be confused with a total desertion of his faith. His struggles don't eliminate his belief in God; rather, they are essential in working to validate that belief. According to his religious mentor Moché the Beadle, asking the proper questions to God about God was the integral element to faith in God. The Holocaust forces Elie to ask horrible questions about the nature of good and evil and about whether God exists. But the very fact that he asks these questions reflects his commitment to pursuing faith in God as he has been taught by Moché the Beadle.

The internal conflict in Elie's conscience provides no peace as the cruelties mount. Wiesel's admission of weakness should not cause one to doubt his uprightness; rather, the constant debate that earnestly pours out from his heart proves his sincerity toward pursuing God. The extreme reality of Elie's test of faith at Auschwitz is a microcosm of the universal question of gross suffering in the light of religious teaching of an all-powerful, benevolent God. The fact that Elie defiantly refuses to fast and forgets to say Kaddish for Akiba Drumer does not necessarily prove he had become a full-blown apostate; rather it speaks more to the fact that the explanation of faith and inhumane suffering is a complicated subject a teenage boy is ill-equipped to wrestle with.

Only in the weakest moments of his faith does Elie turn his back on God. Even when he says he has given up on God completely, Wiesel's constant use of religious metaphors betrays what he says he believes. Though denying his faith, Elie still makes ample reference to scripture. Fearing that he might abandon his father, he prays to God. After

Chlomo dies, Elie expresses regret that there was no religious memorial. Though forever changed by his experiences during the Holocaust, Elie appears to have maintained his faith, albeit dramatically challenged and forever altered.



# Style

## Point of View

This story is a first-person, autobiographical account of historical events. The author skillfully details the atrocious brutality of the Holocaust using terse sentence structures and matter-of-fact commentary. He provides candid insight into his personal fears and opinions of the events around him without ever being overly sensational about the cruelty or overly glorifying of the survivors.

## Setting

The setting of *Night* is in the height of WWII. When the reader is first introduced to twelve-year-old Elie, the story is set toward the end of 1941 (going into the spring of 1942) in the village of Sighet, Transylvania in Romania. By the story's end, Elie is being liberated from the Buchenwald concentration camp in April of 1945.

In between the start and finish of the book, Elie spends the majority of his time at Birkenau in Auschwitz and at Buna. The time period and place of the story set the tone and atmosphere of grim and gloom and inhumanity. The bare and debased descriptions of the living arrangements coincide with the debased and primitive acts that take place therein.

## Language and Meaning

The language is terse, precise, and devoid of any extraneous description or modifiers. The purpose of this account was to give a vivid and accurate account of the depravity of the Holocaust as witnessed through the eyes of a disillusioned teenager. As such, there is no room for any embellishments or poetic depictions of heroism or sensational portrayals. Also, the author understandably uses many words, phrases, analogies, and allusions steeped in Jewish culture, religion, tradition, and folklore. This reminds the reader of the inescapable fact that the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of the Nazi death camps were of Jewish identity.

## Structure

The novel is composed of nine unnumbered partitions, each of which masterfully portrays the ongoing struggle of the author to willingly embrace the certainty of death and to defiantly fight for survival in the face of savage oppressors.



## Quotes

I have been saved miraculously. 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. To live? I don't attach my importance to my life any more. I'm alone. No, I wanted to come back, and to warn you. And see how it is, no one will listen to me.

In front of us flames. In the air that smell of burning flesh. It must have been about midnight. We had arrived—at Birkenau, the reception center for Auschwitz.

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 the 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 dream to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.

That night the soup tasted of corpses.

I learned after the war the fate of those who had stayed behind in the hospital. They were quite simply liberated by the Russians two days after the evacuation.

I shall never forget Juliek. How could I forget that concert, given to an audience of dying and dead men! To this day, whenever I hear Beethoven played my eyes close and out of the dark rises the sad, pale face of my Polish friend, as he said farewell on his violin to an audience of dying men.

The days were like nights, and the nights left the dregs of their darkness in our souls.



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

Does Eliezer (the narrator) believe God is dead? Does Elie Wiesel (the author) believe that God is dead?

## Topic 2

Is choice or chance more important to Elie's survival?

## Topic 3

Who is more influential to Elie's worldview, Chlomo or Moché the Beadle? How would Elie have fared if he had been separated from Chlomo right away? Why does he neglect to say Kaddish for Akiba Drumer?

## Topic 4

Is Elie transformed for better or for worse by the Holocaust?

## Topic 5

Does Elie succumb to the corruptive nature of evil? Besides Chlomo, who has the greatest impact on Elie once he's in the camps? Which is the greater sin to Elie: moral atrocities or moral apathy? Explain why.