The autobiographical novel *Night* stands alongside Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* as a crucial Holocaust memoir. While Frank's *Diary* is set before she reaches the concentration camps, *Night* chronicles the horror of the camps themselves, as seen through the eyes of 15-year-old Eliezer. Ellen S. Fine explains that the title of the book "encompasses the overall Holocaust landscape—a world synonymous with methodical brutality and radical evil. . . . Wiesel uses the word 'night' throughout his writing to denote this strange sphere, unreal and unimaginable in its otherworldliness."

It is a short book, terse and lean. According to the scholar Simon P. Sibelman, *Night* is an example of "a paradox common to Holocaust literature. The survivor must bear witness to what has been; yet aspects of that reality cannot be told." He finds the theme of silence pervades the book. Eliezer's story depicts the silence enforced on the victims in the camps, the silence and indifference of the outside world, the silence of God, the final silencing of loved ones' voices. Through the large white spaces Wiesel inserts in the text, the reader recognizes that what he leaves out says just as much as what he put in.

Eliezer is a happy, pious, and loving boy when the German soldiers first arrive in his small town of Sighet, Transylvania, in present-day Romania, in the spring of 1944. The Jews are told to move to one small section of town. Warnings to escape go unheeded, as no one can believe he or she is really in danger. Soon they are all placed on railway cars, destination unknown. After a long, fearful ride, they arrive at Auschwitz, a huge complex of concentration and death camps in Poland. Eliezer watches in horror as children are thrown into a huge fire. Separated from his mother and sisters, Eliezer and his father are forced to put on prison uniforms and identification numbers are tattooed on their arms. They live on bread and water, always fearing that they will be the next victims of the unbridled cruelty of the SS guards.

Soon Eliezer and his father are sent to another camp, Buna, where they are put to work doing manual labor. By this point Eliezer has long forsaken God, and the only thing keeping him alive is his love and concern for his ailing father. Their relationship is all they have left, and they cling to it fervently. Every day they watch people being taken off to the gas chambers or hung in the middle of the camp. That winter, fleeing the approaching Red Army, Eliezer and his father are forced to trudge through the snow in the bitter cold to Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany. Most of their companions die along the way, and only a few days later Eliezer's beloved father is taken to the crematorium. Three months later, the 20,000 prisoners at Buchenwald are liberated by the Allied forces.

The scholar Irving Halperin considers *Night* to be a tale about one boy's loss of innocence and faith in God. Lea Hamaoui adds that it is also "a series of shattered expectations [both the character's and the reader's], and a quest for truth." Early in the story there is so much hope, most of it based on the victims' belief in the innate goodness of people and a strong faith in God's protection. For Eliezer, the shattering of these two beliefs leaves him feeling angry, empty, and betrayed. When his father is eventually taken away, the final thread linking Eliezer to his former relationship with humanity is severed and he is left feeling truly dead inside. By focusing on the bond between Eliezer and his father, Wiesel speaks for all the fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, who were taken from each other, and shows the importance of committing to each other as long as possible.

Wiesel, who decades later would win the Nobel Peace Prize, wrote, "Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp which has turned my life into one long night. Never shall I forget that smoke. . . . Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever." By telling his story, Wiesel is ensuring that readers will not forget either.

Further Information

Sources


Copyright © 2019 Infobase Learning. All Rights Reserved.