I. Elie Wiesel - Biography

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.

From Elie Wiesel, Night (New York: Bantam, 1982), p. 32. This quote also appears in the Permanent Exhibition of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Elie Wiesel was born in Sighet, Romania, on September 30, 1928.

A Nobel Peace Prize winner and Boston University professor, Wiesel worked on behalf of oppressed people for much of his adult life. His personal experience of the Holocaust led him to use his talents as an author, teacher, and storyteller to defend human rights and peace throughout the world.

A native of Sighet, Transylvania (Romania, from 1940-1945 Hungary), Wiesel and his family were deported by the Nazis to Auschwitz when he was 15 years old. His mother and younger sister perished there; his two older sisters survived. Wiesel and his father were later transported to Buchenwald, where his father died.

After the war, Wiesel studied in Paris and later became a journalist in that city, yet he remained silent about what he has endured as an inmate in the camps. During an interview with the French writer Francois Mauriac, Wiesel was persuaded to end that silence. He subsequently wrote La Nuit (Night). Since its publication in 1958, La Nuit has been translated into 30 languages and millions of copies have been sold. In Night, Wiesel describes his experiences and emotions at the hands of the Nazis during the Holocaust: the roundup of his family and neighbors in the Romanian town of Sighet; deportation by cattle car to the concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau; the division of his family forever during the selection process; the mental and physical anguish he and his fellow prisoners experienced as they were stripped of their humanity; and the death march from Auschwitz-Birkenau to the concentration camp at Buchenwald.

In 1978, President Jimmy Carter appointed him Chairman of the President's Commission on the Holocaust. In 1980, he became Founding Chairman of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council. Wiesel is also the founding president of the Paris-based Universal Academy of Cultures.

Wiesel's efforts to defend human rights and peace throughout the world earned him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the United States Congressional Gold Medal and the Medal of Liberty Award, the rank of Grand-Croix in the French Legion of Honor, and in 1986, the Nobel Peace Prize. He received more than 100 honorary degrees from institutions of higher learning.

Three months after he received the Nobel Peace Prize, Elie Wiesel and his wife Marion established The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity. Its mission is to advance the cause of human rights and peace throughout the world by creating a new forum for the discussion of urgent ethical issues confronting humanity.
His more than 40 books have won numerous awards, including the Prix Medicis for A Beggar in Jerusalem, the Prix Livre Inter for The Testament, and the Grand Prize for Literature from the City of Paris for The Fifth Son. The first volume of Wiesel's memoirs, All Rivers Run to the Sea, was published in New York (Knopf) in December 1995. The second volume, And the Sea is Never Full, was published in New York (Knopf) in November 1999.

Elie Wiesel was the Distinguished Professor of Judaic Studies at the City University of New York (1972-1976), and first Henry Luce Visiting Scholar in the Humanities and Social Thought at Yale University (1982-1983). He was the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Boston University where he also held the title of University Professor.

Wiesel died on the morning of July 2, 2016 at his home in Manhattan, aged 87.

*Information from The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum http://www.ushmm.org

II. Introduction to the Holocaust

The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. "Holocaust" is a word of Greek origin meaning "sacrifice by fire." The Nazis, who came to power in Germany in January 1933, believed that Germans were "racially superior" and that the Jews, deemed "inferior," were an alien threat to the so-called German racial community.

During the era of the Holocaust, German authorities also targeted other groups because of their perceived "racial inferiority": Roma (Gypsies), the disabled, and some of the Slavic peoples (Poles, Russians, and others). Other groups were persecuted on political, ideological, and behavioral grounds, among them Communists, Socialists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and homosexuals.

WHAT WAS THE HOLOCAUST?

In 1933, the Jewish population of Europe stood at over nine million. Most European Jews lived in countries that Nazi Germany would occupy or influence during World War II. By 1945, the Germans and their collaborators killed nearly two out of every three European Jews as part of the "Final Solution," the Nazi policy to murder the Jews of Europe. Although Jews, whom the Nazis deemed a priority danger to Germany, were the primary victims of Nazi racism, other victims included some 200,000 Roma (Gypsies). At least 200,000 mentally or physically disabled patients, mainly Germans, living in institutional settings, were murdered in the so-called Euthanasia Program.

As Nazi tyranny spread across Europe, the Germans and their collaborators persecuted and murdered millions of other people. Between two and three million Soviet prisoners of war were murdered or died of starvation, disease, neglect, or maltreatment. The Germans targeted the non-Jewish Polish intelligentsia for killing, and deported millions of Polish and Soviet civilians for forced labor in Germany or in occupied Poland, where these individuals worked and often died under deplorable conditions. From the earliest years of the Nazi regime, German authorities persecuted homosexuals and others whose behavior did not match prescribed social norms. German police officials targeted thousands of political opponents (including Communists, Socialists, and trade unionists) and religious dissidents (such as Jehovah's Witnesses). Many of these individuals died as a result of incarceration and maltreatment.
ADMINISTRATION OF THE "FINAL SOLUTION"

In the early years of the Nazi regime, the National Socialist government established concentration camps to detain real and imagined political and ideological opponents. Increasingly in the years before the outbreak of war, SS and police officials incarcerated Jews, Roma, and other victims of ethnic and racial hatred in these camps. To concentrate and monitor the Jewish population as well as to facilitate later deportation of the Jews, the Germans and their collaborators created ghettos, transit camps, and forced-labor camps for Jews during the war years. The German authorities also established numerous forced-labor camps, both in the so-called Greater German Reich and in German-occupied territory, for non-Jews whose labor the Germans sought to exploit.

Following the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Einsatzgruppen (mobile killing units) and, later, militarized battalions of Order Police officials, moved behind German lines to carry out mass-murder operations against Jews, Roma, and Soviet state and Communist Party officials. German SS and police units, supported by units of the Wehrmacht and the Waffen SS, murdered more than a million Jewish men, women, and children, and hundreds of thousands of others. Between 1941 and 1944, Nazi German authorities deported millions of Jews from Germany, from occupied territories, and from the countries of many of its Axis allies to ghettos and to killing centers, often called extermination camps, where they were murdered in specially developed gassing facilities.

THE END OF THE HOLOCAUST

In the final months of the war, SS guards moved camp inmates by train or on forced marches, often called “death marches,” in an attempt to prevent the Allied liberation of large numbers of prisoners. As Allied forces moved across Europe in a series of offensives against Germany, they began to encounter and liberate concentration camp prisoners, as well as prisoners en route by forced march from one camp to another. The marches continued until May 7, 1945, the day the German armed forces surrendered unconditionally to the Allies. For the western Allies, World War II officially ended in Europe on the next day, May 8 (V-E Day), while Soviet forces announced their “Victory Day” on May 9, 1945.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, many of the survivors found shelter in displaced persons (DP) camps administered by the Allied powers. Between 1948 and 1951, almost 700,000 Jews emigrated to Israel, including 136,000 Jewish displaced persons from Europe. Other Jewish DPs emigrated to the United States and other nations. The last DP camp closed in 1957. The crimes committed during the Holocaust devastated most European Jewish communities and eliminated hundreds of Jewish communities in occupied eastern Europe entirely.

* Information from The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum http://www.ushmm.org

III. Race and Antisemitism

By the 1700s and 1800s, even as the walls of the ghettos were coming down, a new idea was reviving the old myths and misinformation. That idea was race. Until the 1800s, the word referred mainly to people who shared a nationality or were related to one another in some way. Now many scientists used the term race to refer to those who shared a genetic heritage. Some were so certain that “race” explained all of the cultural differences they observed in the world that they distorted facts or made claims they could not substantiate. Many even ranked the “races.” At the top were the “Aryans,” a mythical people that left India in the distant past and carried its language
and culture westward.

A number of people took pride in tracing their ancestry to the “Aryans.” Increasingly, these Europeans and Americans believed that, as the descendants of the “Aryans,” they were superior to other “races,” including the Jewish or “Semitic race.” In the past, Jews were targeted for discrimination because of their religious beliefs. Now they were excluded because of their “race.” *Antisemitism*, which literally means “against Semites,” was coined specifically to describe this new hatred of Jews. Scientists who showed the flaws in racist thinking were ignored. In the late 1800s, the German Anthropological Society tried to determine whether there really were racial differences between Jewish and “Aryan” children. After studying nearly seven million students, the society concluded that the two groups were more alike than different. Historian George Mosse notes that the survey had surprisingly little impact: “The idea of race had been infused with myths, stereotypes, and subjectivities long ago, and a scientific survey could change little. The idea of pure, superior races and the concept of a racial enemy solved too many pressing problems to be easily discarded.”** George Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism* (Fertig, 1978).

By the early 1900s, “race” had become the distorted lens through which too many people viewed the world. And as racist thinking became “respectable,” attacks against Jews and other minorities intensified. These attacks were particularly virulent in times of stress and uncertainty, like the worldwide depression that began in the late 1920s and early 1930s. At such times, having a “racial enemy” who can be blamed for society’s problems offers an easy answer to complex problems.

In 1933, for example, a Protestant minister in Germany wrote, “In the last fifteen years in Germany, the influence of Judaism has strengthened extraordinarily. The number of Jewish judges, Jewish politicians, Jewish civil servants in influential positions has grown noticeably. The voice of the people is turning against this.” Yet government statistics paint a very different picture. In 1933, Jews made up less than 1 percent of the population. And of the 250 Germans who held prominent government posts between 1919 and 1933, only four were Jews. The myth of a Germany dominated by Jews was fostered by groups like Adolf Hitler’s National Socialist, or Nazi, party. In speech after speech, they maintained that the Jews were everywhere, controlled everything, and acted so secretly that few could detect their influence. The charge was absurd; but after hearing it again and again, many came to believe it.

*Information from Facing History and Ourselves [www.facinghistory.org](http://www.facinghistory.org)*

**IV. About the New Translation**

Elie Wiesel poses the question in the Preface to the new translation by Marion Wiesel, his wife and longtime translator, “Why this new translation, since the earlier one has been around for forty-five years?” His response is simple. Because he was an unknown author who was just getting started, he was simply pleased that his story was finally being published. He recalls thinking the original British translator’s version of his memoir “seemed all right,” but admits to never rereading it until now. Wiesel writes, “And so, as I reread this text written so long ago, I am glad that I did not wait any longer. And yet, I still wonder: Have I used the right words?”

What does Wiesel’s question open up for teachers and students to discuss in the classroom? What are the “right words” to express and document one’s experience in the camps? In the opening of the new Preface, Wiesel begins to respond to this important question by stating,
In retrospect I must confess that I do not know, or no longer know, what I wanted to achieve with my words. I only know that without this testimony, my life as a writer—or my life, period—would not have become what it is: that of a witness who believes he has a moral obligation to try and prevent his enemy from enjoying one last victory by allowing his crimes to be erased from human memory.

**The Rise of Hitler**

In January 1933, Adolf Hitler became chancellor, or prime minister, of Germany. Within weeks, he had set into motion a series of laws and orders that replaced a democratic government with a dictatorship based on “race” and terror. From the start, he targeted Jews as “the enemy.” Little by little, step by step, they were separated from their neighbors. Then in 1935, Hitler announced three new laws that stripped Jews of citizenship and made it a crime for Christians to have contacts with them.

Once he was firmly in control of Germany, Hitler turned his attention to neighboring countries. By 1940, he ruled much of Eastern and Western Europe. In one conquered nation after another, Jews were identified, isolated, and ultimately singled out for murder. By 1943, most European Jews were either dead or on the way to death camps.

Only one large group was still alive: the Jews of Hungary. They were safe chiefly because Hungary was an ally of Germany rather than a conquered nation. As an ally, Hungary had its own anti-Jewish laws, but Miklos Horthy and the nation’s other leaders were not willing to murder or expel Hungarian Jews. By 1943, Hitler was demanding that they do so. He wanted jurisdiction over Hungarian Jews. When the Hungarians refused to grant it, he took control of the government. By the spring of 1944, the Nazis were shipping twelve thousand Hungarian Jews a day to their death. *Night* is the true story of a teenager who was among the hundreds of thousands of Jews deported that spring. Fewer than one out of every four of them survived the Holocaust.

*Information from Facing History and Ourselves [www.facinghistory.org](http://www.facinghistory.org)*

**V. Literary Analysis**

In *Night*, Elie Wiesel uses a variety of literary techniques in telling his story. Many of the discussion questions, practice activities, and journal suggestions explore these techniques in greater detail.

**Genre:** *Night* is not an easy book to classify. In many ways, it defies labels. Although it is a book that reads like a novel, it is a true story. Although it is autobiographical, it is not an autobiography. Elie Wiesel has called *Night a memoir*—“an autobiographical story, a kind of testimony of one witness speaking of his own life, his own death.”* The witness speaks not in his own voice but as “Eliezer.” In structuring the book in this way, Wiesel suggests that *Night* is as close as he can come to the truth of his experiences.

Some critics have described *Night* as a series of vignettes that follow a pattern found in initiation stories and stories of journeys. In an initiation story, a youngster goes through difficult trials to discover something new about himself or herself, people in general, or the world. Books about journeys are organized in a similar way. They, too, are stories of discovery, growth, and change.

**Theme:** Of his first night at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Wiesel writes, “Never shall I forget that night, the first night in the camp, which has turned my life into one long
night….” The story that Eliezer tells is in effect a journey through a darkness that eclipses light. It is the darkness of Auschwitz, the darkness of the Holocaust itself. The quotation hints at other ideas explored in this teacher resource—remembrance and voice. Other themes include the following:

- Barriers to knowing
- The concept of “choiceless choices”—choices made in the absence of significant alternatives
- Survival
- The relationship between parent and child
- Dehumanization

**Point of View:** *Night* is written in the first person as an eyewitness account. It reflects Wiesel’s belief in the importance of giving public expression to one’s memories through personal testimony. This teacher resource explores why the telling of one’s own story in one’s own voice is important to both the storyteller and the reader.

**Style:** The original manuscript of *Night* was 862 pages long. Wiesel cut the manuscript to 245 pages for the first edition in Yiddish, the everyday language of the Jews of Eastern Europe. Later the manuscript was pared even further. The French edition is 178 pages long and the English edition, 109 pages. Wiesel says the following of his taut, concise writing style:

> All my subsequent works are written in the same deliberately spare style as *Night*. It is the style of the chroniclers of the ghettos, where everything had to be said swiftly, in one breath. You never knew when the enemy might kick in the door, sweeping us away into nothingness. Every phrase was a testament. There was no time or reason for anything superfluous…. If the violin is to sing, its strings must be stretched so tight as to risk breaking; slack, they are merely threads.

Critics suggest other reasons for Wiesel’s direct style. At the beginning of *Night*, Wiesel describes how Moshe the Beadle tells the townspeople of what he himself witnessed—the mass murder of thousands of Jews. No one pays attention to his story. Wiesel seems determined that, unlike Moshe the Beadle, he will be heard and believed. To accomplish that goal, he uses the techniques of a reporter. He writes with such directness and clarity that events speak for themselves. Each word is carefully chosen. Sentences are short and to the point. Some are just one or two words in length. The controlled language offers a sharp contrast to the reality about which it speaks—a reality that was beyond control.

**VI. Before 1933**

World War I (1914–1918) devastated Europe and created new countries. The years that followed saw the continent struggle to recover from the death or injury of tens of millions of soldiers and civilians, as well as catastrophic damage to property and industry. In 1933, over 9 million Jews lived in Europe (1.7% of the total population)—working and raising families in the harsh reality of the worldwide economic depression. German Jews numbered about 500,000 or less than 1% of the national population.

**1933–1938**

Following the appointment of Adolf Hitler as German chancellor on January 30, 1933, the Nazi state (also referred to as the Third Reich) quickly became a regime in which citizens had no guaranteed basic rights. The Nazi rise to power brought an end to the Weimar Republic, the German
parliamentary democracy established after World War I. In 1933, the regime established the first concentration camps, imprisoning its political opponents, homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and others classified as “dangerous.” Extensive propaganda was used to spread the Nazi Party’s racist goals and ideals. During the first six years of Hitler’s dictatorship, German Jews felt the effects of more than 400 decrees and regulations that restricted all aspects of their public and private lives.

1939–1941
The Holocaust took place in the broader context of World War II. On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland. Over the next year, Nazi Germany and its allies conquered much of Europe. German officials confiscated Jewish property, in many places required Jews to wear identifying armbands, and established ghettos and forced-labor camps. In June 1941, Germany turned on its ally, the Soviet Union. Often drawing on local civilian and police support, Einsatzgruppen (mobile killing units) followed the German army and carried out mass shootings as it advanced into Soviet lands. Gas vans also appeared on the eastern front in late fall 1941.

* Information from The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum http://www.ushmm.org

VII. 1942-1945
In a period marked by intense fighting on both the eastern and western fronts of World War II, Nazi Germany also intensified its pursuit of the “Final Solution.” These years saw systematic deportations of millions of Jews to increasingly efficient killing centers using poison gas. By the end of the war in spring 1945, as the Germans and their Axis partners were pushed back on both fronts, Allied troops uncovered the full extent of crimes committed during the Holocaust.

After 1945
By May 1945, the Germans and their collaborators had murdered six million European Jews as part of a systematic plan of genocide—the Holocaust. When Allied troops entered the concentration camps, they discovered piles of corpses, bones, and human ashes—testimony to Nazi mass murder. Soldiers also found thousands of survivors—Jews and non-Jews—suffering from starvation and disease. For survivors, the prospect of rebuilding their lives was daunting. With few possibilities for emigration, tens of thousands of homeless Holocaust survivors were housed in displaced persons (DP) camps. In the following years, many international and domestic courts conducted trials of accused war criminals.

* Information from The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum http://www.ushmm.org

The Context of the Story
Much of Night takes place within a single year, 1944–1945. It was the final year of what later became known as the Holocaust, a Greek word that means “complete destruction by fire.” Between 1933 and 1945, Adolf Hitler and his followers murdered about one-third of all the Jews in the world. Young and old alike were killed solely because of their ancestry.

*Information from Facing History and Ourselves www.facinghistory.org