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Never Forget: *Night* & my Pilgrimage to Poland

The Holocaust was one of the world’s most tragic events. It has an unprecedented historic importance that is only understandable when experienced firsthand. Besides that, visiting the sites and hearing a personal testimony can help in comprehension. Eliezer Wiesel’s *Night* is a great example of this type of personal testimony. Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, described his personal experience in the Shoah in his book, *Night*. He illustrates the fact that Jewish life thrived before the rise of Hitler in the 1930s.

Wiesel’s experience is representative of the entire Jewish people’s experience through the Shoah. The Shoah was unique in that everyone had both a very personal and universal experience. Wiesel captures this by telling others’ stories in the context of his personal narrative. A powerful example of this is his recounting of Madame Schächter’s reaction to the train ride from the ghettos to concentration or death camps. Victims were separated from their families, herded into overcrowded trains and often died on their way to the camps from malnourishment - part of the Nazi’s “Final Solution” of exterminating the Jews. Schächter started hallucinating and screaming things like, “Jews, listen to me! I can see a fire! There are huge flames! It is a furnace!” (23) Wiesel described her: “It was as though she were possessed by an evil spirit which spoke from the depths of her being.” (23) The others on the train had to gag and hit her to silence her, her young son standing idly by. This exemplifies the variety of ways people coped and reacted just among themselves. Wiesel’s entire experience - from ghetto to various work camps to his perilous journey running away from the war front - showed some of the many ways people could experience the Shoah, and each phase emphasized the feelings of the victims through their losses and resurgences of hope, fear, loved ones, faith, etc. Above all, Wiesel captured the death and pure terror.

Understanding the atmosphere of death and terror that Wiesel and millions of other experienced would be incomplete without the understanding that six million Jews (and many others) perished because of these atrocities. Reading Wiesel’s account of his ordeal and my visit to the camps at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek, and Plashov gave me a better idea of both the life and death of the victims. *Night* emphasized the nightmare of living in the camps, the fear of selection, the constant struggle for life, and, above all, the loss of humanity. Wiesel described a father getting attacked by his son for some bread: “Felled to the ground, stunned with blows, the old man cried: ‘Meir. Meir, my boy! Don’t you recognize me? I’m your father . . . you’re hurting me . . . you’re killing your father! I’ve got some bread . . . for you too . . . for you too. . . .’ He collapsed. His fist was still clenched around a small piece. He tried to carry it to his mouth. But the other one threw himself upon him and snatched it. The old man...died amid the general indifference. His son searched him...He was not able to get very far...next to me were two corpses, side by side, the father and the son.” (96) To me, this an extremely powerful way to demonstrate the lack of humanity these conditions and treatment created. Visiting the camps, especially Majdanek, forced me to face the reality of the Shoah. There are rooms filled with confiscated shoes, a large mausoleum filled with hundreds victims ashes, and more. The shoes are real. The furnaces are real. The *ashes* are real.

The reality of the Shoah creates a huge significance for the history of the Jewish people and of the world at large. It necessitates a level of awareness and understanding; understanding the Shoah is vital to understanding the Jewish people. More than just lives were lost; the thriving Jewish community that had existed for hundreds of years was put to an end. Beyond that, the Jews' reaction to the Holocaust is very characteristic: fighting to survive, Iberleben and large acts of defiance (like the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising), optimism and hope (e.g. "As long as I'm alive, I will keep living”), etc. Doing all of that even through the excessive suffering they were put through is nothing short of a miracle. The Shoah was a chapter of vital importance to the history of Jews, both emphasizing their character and causing the fall of the culture and civilization of European Jewry.

Wiesel’s personal and universal experience of death and terror, combined with our pilgrimage to the camps themselves enhanced my understanding of the suffering and reality of the Shoah, which led me to the conclusion that the Shoah has a huge amount of historic importance. This importance extends beyond just that of the Jewish people; it also applies to the world at large. The world stood by while the Nazis exterminated a civilization of Jews and countless others. As George Santayana once said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Works Cited

Wiesel, Eliezer. *Night*. New York: Bantam Books, 1960. Print.