Wiesel’s *Night*: A Biography

by

Jessica Krueger

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

Honors College

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in History and Philosophy
(Honors Scholar)

Presented August 7, 2023
Commencement June 2024
AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Jessica Krueger for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in History and Philosophy presented on August 7, 2023. Title: Wiesel’s Night: A Biography.

Abstract approved: __________________________________________________________

Kara Ritzheimer

Elie Wiesel’s Night has become a canonical work in the genre of Holocaust literature. This thesis examines the process by which Night achieved this status. An argument will be composed using, as evidence, analysis of Elie Wiesel’s life, the broad history of Holocaust literature, and the complexities surrounding Night’s publication and reception. More indirectly, though not to any lesser extent, I will consider the implications of language, culture, religion, and memory in the creation of Night.

Keywords: Elie Wiesel, Holocaust Literature, Night, Un di velt hot geshvign
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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

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Jessica Krueger, Author
Introduction

In January 2006, Oprah Winfrey selected Elie Wiesel’s *Night* for her book club—a “required reading,” she announced at the time, “for all humanity.”\(^1\) Winfrey traveled with Wiesel to Auschwitz a month later, where they discussed Wiesel’s experiences as a Holocaust survivor. A cold February day, videos of the interview exhibit trenches of snow and a colorless sky; there is an impenetrable silence in the air. Winfrey listens as Wiesel recounts the horrors of his youth, her usual zest replaced with a grieving solemnity. They speak in hushed tones. Winfrey holds on to Wiesel’s arm as if unable to process such an inhuman, godless dimension. To Wiesel, this dimension is well traveled. His witness to Nazi atrocities, to the murder of his parents and younger sister, is the driving force of his life; *Night*, Wiesel’s attempt to reconcile with God, grief, rage, responsibility, and hope.

During his interview with Winfrey, Wiesel goes so far as to humanize Auschwitz’s guards: “They had two eyes,” he says. “They had love for their families. They loved music and culture and paintings.” *Night*, of course, is not itself an optimistic piece. Its themes of silence, mortality, and desolation illustrate a harrowing landscape for which there is, perhaps, no possible consolation—*Night* does not urge forgiveness, nor does it offer any blatant form of redemption. Yet, *Night* is not inherently pessimistic either. Sprinkled throughout the text are undertones of

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hope and perseverance, active forms of resistance in and of themselves. “We cannot read
[Wiesel],” Terrence Des Pres writes,

without the desire to change, to lead better lives…If to listen to the witness is to become
one, then to approach Wiesel’s [writing] with sympathy and rigor…is to grow, to gather
power and move with cumulative force toward a vision which may be terrible in its
torment but which greatly enlightens and uplifts…To read his [writing] is to partake of a
sorrow that shall perhaps never subside but which gives hope the character of a cause.2

This general message, along with Night’s short length and unique literary style, has undoubtedly
led to the book’s enduring success; to its selection not only by Winfrey, but by generations of
school teachers and public officials as both an introduction to the Holocaust and as a means for
philosophical and theological discussion.

To focus strictly on Night’s present success and role in Holocaust literature, however, is
to neglect the book’s complicated history: its prior versions, its difficulties in achieving
publication, as well as its poor initial reception. I will attempt, in this work, to create a biography
of Night, piecing together and placing in conversation the multitude of variables which led to the
book’s prolonged success.3 In doing so, I will examine the most relevant aspects of Wiesel’s life,
the broad history of Holocaust literature in the United States, and the complexities surrounding
Night’s publication and reception. More indirectly, though not to any lesser extent, I will
consider the implications of language, culture, faith, and memory within these larger contexts.
Ultimately, I will argue that the long-term success and canonical status Night has achieved is due
to six central factors: Wiesel’s talent as a writer, the opportune timing of Night’s original
publication, François Mauriac’s mentorship, Wiesel’s prior writing of Un di velt hot geshvign,

2 Terrence Des Pres, foreword to Legacy of Night: The Literary Universe of Elie Wiesel,

3 The general framework of this thesis was inspired by Janet Browne’s popular 2007
monograph Darwin’s Origin of Species: A Biography.
Wiesel’s status as a public symbol of morality and peace, and lastly, Wiesel’s interpretation of the Holocaust as a “mystical” event.

**Elie Wiesel’s Life**

Just as any biography would be incomplete without mention of a person’s upbringing or parentage, a biography of *Night* would be incomplete without discussion of its author. If we are to have any hope of constructing a genuine biography of *Night*, therefore, we must first look to Elie Wiesel. His religious upbringing and internment shaped and inspired *Night*’s creation, and as would be the case with any true memoir, Wiesel’s experiences are directly embedded within the text itself. The first publication of *Night* was due in large part to Wiesel’s career as a journalist; the chance encounters and opportunities it provided Wiesel were a priceless advantage in refining and promoting his original manuscripts. *Night*’s ongoing success can be attributed to the quality of writing therein, as a work in and of itself, as well as to the publicized nature of Wiesel’s political and humanitarian efforts in the later stages of his career. This section will focus on aspects of Wiesel’s life that are most applicable to the study of *Night*’s creation, history, and reception: his youth and internment, his career as a journalist, and his extensive work in various political and humanitarian spheres.4

Wiesel was born on September 30, 1928, in Sighet, Transylvania, a small town in Eastern Europe with a flourishing, well-established orthodox Jewish community.5 At the time of Wiesel’s

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4 I have attempted to keep this section focused strictly on Elie Wiesel, so as not to confound the various factors leading to *Night*’s success. Nonetheless, given the centrality of *Night* in Wiesel’s life and in his career as a writer, this is difficult to do. There will be information that must be repeated in later sections of this work, though I will try to abstain as much as possible from dull repetition.

5 The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum estimates that roughly 10,500 Jews (likely 35-40% of the town’s entire population) lived in Sighet at the onset of World War II.
birth, Sighet was a part of Romania, though the vast majority of people living there would have been of Hungarian descent and thus impacted by the country’s ongoing political and cultural climate. Sighet is often referred to as a shtetl, a term that translates directly to ‘town’ in Yiddish, but is more accurately described in terms of culture and community; a shtetl is not just a town, but a rich and vibrant way of life deeply rooted in the Yiddish language. That Wiesel worked for the majority of his life with a photograph of Sighet posted to his desk, emphasizes the important role the town and its culture held in his life, even decades after he had left it. The photograph, undoubtedly, was a means for inspiration, in both Wiesel’s writing and in his pursuit of Holocaust representation—but the photograph would also have served as a constant reminder of the loss of Wiesel’s childhood, and the extinction of the shtetl community within which he was raised. For, within the comforts of familiarity and tradition lurked an ill-fated skepticism. Early warnings of Nazi atrocities were met with disregard, both by Wiesel’s family and the whole of Sighet’s Jewish population. Like so many others of their shtetl community, Wiesel’s parents remained, for the most part, optimistic in the wake of growing Nazi oppression, unaware of—or at

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6 This point may not seem incredibly relevant, but it is important for future discussion about the fate of Sighet’s Jews. To elaborate on the town’s geo-political history, Sighet was a part of Hungary until 1918, when the Austro-Hungarian monarchy was dissolved and ceded territory to Romania. Sighet stayed with Romania until 1940, when it was returned to Hungary under Nazi influence. In 1944, near World War II’s end, possession of Sighet transferred back to Romania where it has remained since.

7 For an exaggerated, though not all-together inaccurate example of shtetl life, see the 1971 film Fiddler on the Roof.


least unwilling to accept—the fate which would soon befall them. “Our Jews,” as Wiesel later wrote, “preferred to wait and see.”

Of course, the reluctance of Hungarian Jews to move away from or react to the impending Nazi threat was not simply a matter of obstinacy, nor was it a clear case of the common notion “like sheep to the slaughter.” More complex factors were at play. From their emancipation in 1867 until the end of World War I, Hungarian Jews enjoyed expanded rights, heightened social status, political power, and economic stability. The Hungarian ruling class allowed Jewish communities more influence and opportunity in society not out of compassion, but because they, too, benefited from it. With a large percentage of the population, i.e. Hungarian Jews, now allowed to engage with and contribute to the nation’s development, industry grew rapidly, as did the economic wealth and political prowess of the Hungarian elite. Unfortunately, this mutual benefit also led Jewish communities to believe, falsely, that their newfound status was a permanent fixture of Hungarian society: “the commonality of interests between the two groups was in fact limited, fragile, and based primarily on expediency.”

Faced with such immense defeat at the end of World War I, a radical revisionist party rose to the fore of Hungarian politics during the late 1910s and redirected attention to the so-called “Jewish Problem.” The “usefulness” of Hungarian Jews to the ruling class was no longer enough to protect them from the nation’s festering antisemitism; between the end of World War I and the beginning of World War II, Hungarian Jews lost most, if not all, the rights and privileges they had accumulated over the last fifty years.

Despite this, a large majority of Hungarian Jews remained loyal to their country. Fueled by visions of past prosperity and stature, many Jews considered the growing antisemitism to be, quite simply, a “passing phase.” But this was not to be. By the 1930s, a more conservative leadership had taken power in Hungary and formed a strong affiliation with Germany. The Hungarian government imposed increasingly harsh legislation on the Jewish community, mirroring the Nuremberg Race Laws of 1935. Such measures were a symptom of Hungary’s own flourishing antisemitism, but they were also enacted to appease Germany and to resist the pressures of Nazism. Hungarian Jews accepted the antisemitic laws, believing them to be the necessary form and function by which their communities would be protected from the greater Nazi threat. Hungarian Jews did not believe that they were in any physical danger, and were confident in their ability to “survive the war in a position strong enough to assure [the] quick rehabilitation [of their communities].” This illusion lasted for the majority of the war, only to fall through with the German occupation of Hungary in March, 1944.

A sheltered child enamored with the Jewish faith, Wiesel spent his early days studying sacred texts, developing, as he did so, a fascination with the written word and a more intimate relationship with God. Beyond the most universal elements of East European Judaism, Wiesel took a special interest in Hasidism, a religious revival movement that reached the height of its popularity in 19th century Eastern Europe, though it continued to influence later generations, such as Wiesel’s, throughout the early 20th century. A form of Jewish mysticism, Hasidism emphasizes the presence and supremacy of God in all facets of earthly existence. It also stresses

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the individual’s duty to act as an organ of God’s central “body,” i.e. the world. Under the assumption that each individual is a manifestation or “true correspondence” of God’s divine image, Hasidism encourages one to worship with feeling, to devote themselves to their faith with joy and enthusiasm rather than strict asceticism. Popular modes of Hasidic expression include folk tales, singing, and dance. Though usually reserved for men over thirty or even forty years of age, Kabbalah plays a significant role in Hasidic faith as well. Not so much an expression as a form of study, Kabbalah is a complex, esoteric discipline of Jewish mysticism which seeks to unveil hidden meanings within the fundamental nature of our existence, and by association, the divine realm. Wiesel was fascinated with both Kabbalah and the Hasidic faith as a whole, and the lessons he received as a youth in these subjects directly impacted not only his understanding of the world and of God, but his willingness to examine and explore theological questions, as they pertain to the Holocaust especially, throughout his writing generally and within Night specifically.

By early 1944, German defeat was on the horizon. The Soviet Union had pushed the majority of German troops out of Russia, and Allied troops were mounting successful offensives against Axis forces in various locations across Europe and North Africa. Sighet and its neighboring shtetls remained mostly untouched. German defeat, however, did not come soon enough. In March 1944, Germans occupied Hungary, “anxious to assure the absolute loyalty and


subservience of [its ally].”\textsuperscript{19} Occupation authorities established a ghetto in Sighet just a month later, and Wiesel and his family were among the thousands transferred to this open-air prison. In May, authorities liquidated the ghetto and Jews were forced out of their residences to await deportation to Nazi concentration camps. The homes and belongings left behind were quickly occupied or taken by non-Jewish neighbors and police. Wiesel and his family were transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where any last trace of naïveté was quickly shattered: Josef Mengele, prominent Nazi physician responsible for “the selection” at Auschwitz, deemed Wiesel’s mother and youngest sister incapable of work immediately upon their arrival to the camp. Wiesel’s mother and youngest sister were separated from the rest of their family and murdered—along with thousands of others deemed too young, weak, or old—in the Nazi’s gas chambers.

Having survived the preliminary selection, Wiesel and his father were sent to work and remained together, in Birkenau as in subsequent camps, laboring tirelessly and surviving off of little more than soup—that, and the will to keep one another alive. As the Soviet army drew closer in January 1945, Nazi troops evacuated concentration camps nearest the front. Wiesel and his father joined the death march to Gleiwitz, and were soon transported by freight train to Buchenwald.\textsuperscript{20} By this time, both Wiesel and his father were emaciated, ill, and barely alive. Their last reserves of strength had been consumed by Germany’s bitter cold and their spirits devastated by the intensifying normality of cruelty and loss. On January 28, not yet two weeks

\textsuperscript{19} Braham, \textit{The Politics of Genocide}, 53.

\textsuperscript{20} The death marches, which occurred from late 1944 into 1945, were a last ditch attempt by Nazi troops to keep camp prisoners—and the evidence of Nazi crimes they might provide—out of the hands of Allied forces. Nazi troops forced prisoners to walk hundreds of miles to concentration camps farther away from the Allied line. Nazi troops shot or beat to death any prisoners that could not keep up. Those that survived, such as Wiesel and his father, were taken to concentration camps such as Gleiwitz, a sub-camp of Auschwitz; and Buchenwald, one of the largest and longest-lasting concentration camps located just outside Weimar, Germany.
after their arrival at Buchenwald, Wiesel’s father was beaten to death by an SS officer, creating an absence which would both forever haunt Wiesel and form the basis of much of his writing. Had Wiesel’s father survived, as literary scholar Ellen Fine has implied, Wiesel’s motivation to write about his Holocaust experiences after liberation may have been completely transformed. Any writing that Wiesel might have produced, Night included, would have existed in a different context, in an altered literary and theological dimension.

Wiesel was liberated from Buchenwald’s “Little Camp” by American forces on April 11, 1945. He appears in one of the most widely circulated photographs taken by Allied forces during liberation to document Nazi crimes (See Figure 1, page 10). The photograph was originally featured in 1945 in the New York Times and in an exhibition in Washington, but it has been continually reproduced in various forms of media ever since.

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22 The conditions of the Little Camp were horrendous, and arguably the worst in Buchenwald’s entirety. There, the weakest and “least favorable” prisoners were kept: Jews, Roma, children, etc. Housed in rotting, infested barns, the mortality rate of prisoners was extremely high. Wiesel was technically liberated on April 11, though, as historian Robert Abzug maintains, many American troops avoided the Little Camp at first due to the appalling conditions of its barracks and the survivors within (this account is congruent with the date the photograph in Figure 1 was taken: April 16, five days after American troops had officially liberated Buchenwald). Robert Abzug, Inside the Vicious Heart: Americans and the Liberation of Nazi Concentration Camps (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 54-58.

23 Given the chronological structure of this section, it makes logical sense to mention the photograph here. The photograph is also relevant in discussions of Wiesel’s political celebrity and the Carter administration’s foreign policy, but this topic requires more in-depth discussion than is possible to include here and will thus be discussed at a later point.

Figure 1. This photograph was taken to be used as documentary evidence of Nazi crimes, and is one of the most widely circulated images of its kind. As noted by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Elie Wiesel is pictured in the second row of bunks, seventh from the left, next to the vertical beam.” Photograph by Harry Miller, U.S. Signal Corps, April 16, 1945. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. NAID: 535560. https://catalog.archives.gov/id/535560.

Wiesel’s seemingly coincidental appearance in the photograph is an interesting historical tidbit. What were the chances that Wiesel, now such a crucial figure in the United States (U.S.) and in discussions of the Holocaust, would be featured in one of the most iconic American liberation photographs, then just another gaunt, unknown face? Wiesel’s shriveled face and sunken eyes are evidence of the terrible conditions inflicted upon him by the Nazi’s concentration camp system.
It becomes even more clear with this visual—if it could be any clearer, that is—the themes that drew Wiesel to write. Above all, the photograph marks Wiesel’s first entrance into the American consciousness, even if he remained a nameless figure to its earliest viewers. The photograph immortalizes Wiesel as a victim and America as his savior, enduring roles that likely impacted Wiesel’s prominence, one way or another, in future political contexts.

After his liberation, Wiesel recuperated in Paris, assisted for some time by the Children’s Aid Society before renting a small studio of his own.25 During this period, Wiesel studied literature, psychology, and philosophy at the Sorbonne while working as a journalist for various newspapers such as *L’Arche* and *Yediot Ahronot*.26 In 1954, Wiesel traveled to Buenos Aires to report on the state of Jewish refugees. As he traveled, he crafted an early account of his life during the Holocaust. Written in Yiddish and 862 pages long, Wiesel later described the compulsion that drove him to write: “I wrote feverishly, breathlessly, without rereading. I wrote to testify, to stop the dead from dying, to justify my own survival. I wrote to speak to those who were gone. As long as I spoke to them, they would live on, at least in my memory.”27

Wiesel seems to have had no immediate intention, at least one that is evident, to publish the draft, disbelieving that there would be any interest in his “sad memoir,”28 and at the time in a

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25 The Children’s Aid Society, or *Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants* (OSE), was founded in 1912 by Jewish doctors and intellectuals. The society’s original purpose was to aid Jewish victims of Soviet persecution. During World War II, however, it transitioned itself into a resistance effort; members of the OSE rescued, cared for, and hid Jewish children at various group homes throughout France. After the war’s end, the OSE continued to provide housing and care for Jewish refugee children—many of whom were orphans, on a long-term basis.

26 *L’Arche* is a Jewish news magazine based in France that was established in 1950; *Yediot Ahronot* is a prominent Hebrew newspaper based in Tel Aviv, Israel that was established in 1939. Most of Wiesel’s journalist assignments were completed for the latter, *Yediot Ahronot.*

27 Wiesel, *All Rivers,* 239-240.

period of self-imposed silence. He was convinced otherwise, however, through a chance encounter with Yiddish book publisher Mark Turkov. In 1956, Turkov published Wiesel’s draft under the title *Un di velt hot geshvign* (And the World Remained Silent) at 245 pages in length. Today, copies of *Un di velt hot geshvign* are extremely rare. No direct English translations exist, which has helped the text remain in relative obscurity. *Un di velt hot geshvign* never achieved the success and critical acclaim that *Night* did, but is, nonetheless, a crucial mention in the context of Wiesel’s life and in the genre of Holocaust literature.

In 1954, Wiesel met with François Mauriac in Paris for an interview on behalf of *Yediot Ahronot*. Mauriac, born in 1885, was a prominent French Catholic theologian, writer, and public intellectual whose abundance of political connections attracted Wiesel. By interviewing Mauriac, Wiesel hoped to secure an interview with Prime Minister Pierre Mendés-France who had just recently ended the Indochina war. The beginning of the interview was uncomfortable and tense. Mauriac’s discussions of the Christian faith and his love for Jesus, juxtaposed with both the Nazis’ systematic genocide of European Jews and the world’s post-war silence on the Holocaust, irritated Wiesel. He was angry with the passivity, and in some cases direct involvement, of Christians in the suffering and genocide of Jews.29 Rather than match Wiesel’s anger, Mauriac responded with empathy and compassion; he asked Wiesel to share his experiences, and most importantly, encouraged Wiesel to continue writing.30 One year later, Wiesel sent Mauriac a manuscript of *La Nuit*—an account of his experiences now written in French. Mauriac wrote the

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29 Many German Christians were supporters and/or members of the Nazi party; some even joined the SS, whose units were particularly active within concentration camps and the “Final Solution.” A large majority of Wiesel’s neighbors in Sighet were Christian as well; after Wiesel’s community was deported, these neighbors took possession of houses and belongings Jews had been forced to leave behind.

preface for La Nuit, and used his influence to help the book reach publication. Wiesel never achieved his original intention to interview Mendés-France, but nonetheless attained something much more valuable. “It was thanks to [Mauriac],” Wiesel writes, “that, released from my oath [of silence], I could begin to tell my story aloud. I owe him much…That I should say what I had to say, that my voice be heard, was as important to him as it was to me.”

The English translation of La Nuit, Night, was published two years later in 1960.

Throughout the rest of his life, Elie Wiesel continued to write profusely, with the majority of his work centering on the Holocaust in some way. Wiesel taught at the City University of New York from 1972 to 1976, and at Boston University from 1976 onward, lecturing frequently about the Holocaust and the state of human rights. Wiesel’s outspoken support of Israel during the Six-day War (1967) and the Yom-Kippur War (1973) granted him increased national visibility as both a proponent of the “Jewish State” and as an advocate for peace. Wiesel’s involvement in other humanitarian and political affairs, of most importance to this work the President’s Commission on the Holocaust, the Bitburg Affair, and his receptance of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize, further cemented Wiesel’s role as both a representative of European Jewry and as the “world’s moral compass.”

In 1978, President Jimmy Carter invited Wiesel to be the chairman of his newly established President’s Commission on the Holocaust, tasked with “the establishment of a memorial to the victims.” Carter chose Wiesel as chairman because he believed that Wiesel was

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an uncontroversial figure whose involvement would be supported by all sects of American Judaism, both liberal and conservative as well as “fresh” refugees and their more established counterparts.\textsuperscript{34} After a seven month period of research, travel, and discussion, Wiesel and the commission’s appointed committee (composed of thirty-three various politicians, scholars, theologians, and Holocaust survivors) presented their report on how to best memorialize the Holocaust; they recommended that a museum be established, as well as an educational foundation and a “Committee on Consciousness.” Carter viewed the commission as a way to improve relations with Jewish communities in the U.S.\textsuperscript{35} More broadly, the commission served as an opportunity to raise public approval rates, and to demonstrate the Carter administration’s “rebranding”\textsuperscript{36} of U.S. foreign policy with a new emphasis on human rights. This latter purpose is reflected in the language Carter used at the final presentation of the commission’s report on September 27, 1979:

To memorialize the victims of the Holocaust, we must harness the outrage of our own memories to stamp out oppression wherever it exists. We must understand that human rights and human dignity are indivisible. Wherever our fellow beings are stripped of their humanity, defiled or tortured or victimized by repression or terrorism or racism or prejudice, then all of us are victims. As Americans, we must, and we also will speak out in defense of human rights at home and everywhere in the world.\textsuperscript{37}


\textsuperscript{35} As historian Deborah Lipstadt explains, the American Jewish community was angry at the Carter administration’s negotiations with the Soviet Union (who regularly espoused antisemitic beliefs and policies) in developing a Middle East peace agreement, as well as with the administration’s proposal to sell warplanes to Israel \textit{in addition} to Egypt and Saudi Arabia. A surge in neo-Nazi activity further contributed to Jews’ feelings of general animosity toward the U.S. during this time. Deborah Lipstadt, *Holocaust: An American Understanding* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 98-99.

\textsuperscript{36} This specific wording was suggested by historian Katherine Hubler during the defense of this thesis on August 7, 2023.

\textsuperscript{37} Jimmy Carter, “Appendix G: Remarks of the President at the Final Presentation of the Report of the President’s Commission on the Holocaust,” *Report to the President: President’s
Considering the context of the Holocaust and the commission’s task in memorializing the event, Carter’s focus on human rights and victimhood is to be expected, but this focus is also representative of the Carter administration’s larger efforts to rebrand U.S. foreign policy. Legal scholar and historian Samuel Moyn writes that, alongside Carter’s “domestic call from above,” “it was far-flung global actors who first made human rights percolate, and were embraced in America as victims.” By emphasizing “the victim” in his speech, Carter thus demonstrated his administration’s resituating of human rights as a fundamental American concern.

Discussion of the Carter administration’s rebranding of U.S. foreign policy is relevant to Wiesel’s role as chairman of the commission because Carter’s appointment of Wiesel was a direct result of the policy’s reformation—of the Carter administration’s new emphasis on human rights. Beyond his usefulness as a popular Jewish representative, Wiesel served, in terms specified by Moyn, both as “global actor” and “victim.” Wiesel was also directly representative of U.S. power in “prescribing” human rights, as exemplified by his early liberation photograph at Buchenwald (See figure 1, page 10). The image evokes a powerful symbolism: Wiesel and his fellow survivors are “poor” and “vanquished” peoples; behind the camera, the U.S. is their liberator and savior. Wiesel’s appointment as chairman was a strategic choice that benefited both the Carter administration’s political aims and helped to improve general outlook on U.S. foreign policy, both past and present.

Of course, Wiesel’s involvement with the commission did not solely benefit other historical actors. Wiesel’s role as chairman allowed him, as Mark Chmiel writes, to “offer his

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Commission on the Holocaust, September 27, 1979, 35-36,

testimony ‘valid on all markets,’ from op-eds in the Los Angeles Times and New York Times to appearance before the U.S. congress.”39 This is an important point, especially in the context of Night. Wiesel’s position was, in other words, a seal of approval and assurance that Wiesel “sold” a legitimate “product” in his crusade for Holocaust representation and remembrance.

After the commission’s presentation of the final report, Carter outlined the implementation of the commission’s recommendations in a written mandate, Executive Order 12169. Significant dispute arose over the mandate's definition of the Holocaust, which concerned not only the number and identity of its victims, but whose stories would be prioritized in the forthcoming museum. In the commission’s final report, Wiesel had emphasized repeatedly the “essentially Jewish”40 nature of the Holocaust. Wiesel’s insistence that there be a distinction between Jewish victims and everyone else frustrated Carter, who desired a more inclusive interpretation of the Holocaust recognizing all eleven million victims equally.41 Wiesel and Carter eventually reached a middle-ground: after a series of revisions, Executive Order 12169 came to define the Holocaust as “the systematic and State-sponsored extermination of six million Jews and some five million other peoples by the Nazis and their collaborators,”42 though Wiesel remained disappointed in the definition’s lack of true segregation.43 This battle to define


41 Chmiel, Elie Wiesel and the Politics of Moral Leadership, 120.


43 Chmiel, Elie Wiesel and the Politics of Moral Leadership, 121.
Holocaust illustrates Wiesel’s foundational understanding of the Holocaust as a primarily Jewish event. Though never explicitly stated, there is an implicit hierarchy in Wiesel’s interpretation of the Holocaust: Jewish superiority in the legitimacy and authority of their victimhood.

In 1985, Wiesel was involved in what has become known as the Bitburg Affair. In May, President Ronald Reagan had planned a visit to Bitburg cemetery in Germany that would serve as both a gesture of good will to West Germany, and as a way to honor victims of Nazism. The details regarding Reagan’s plan, however, resulted in controversy. Absent from Reagan’s initial agenda was a scheduled visit to a concentration camp. Reagan believed that by visiting a concentration camp, he would call attention, unnecessarily, to the most brutal elements of Germany’s Nazi past. As Charles Maier points out, mirroring Reagan’s likely perspective, “what good was served by harping on deeds that most West Germans had had no individual role in either perpetrating or even supporting?” Reagan’s evasive attitude and unwillingness to dredge the past, compounded with the discovery by American reporters that there were, alongside Jewish victims, Waffen-SS officers buried at the Bitburg cemetery, resulted in widespread backlash. Wiesel and various Jewish organizations called for Reagan to cancel his visit to the cemetery, though he did not.

In April, one month prior to Reagan’s planned visit to the Bitburg cemetery, and in the face of immense criticism, Reagan awarded Wiesel the Congressional Gold Medal in celebration of Jewish Heritage Week. During the ceremony, Reagan commended Wiesel’s activism,

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45 Maier, The Unmasterable Past, 10.
illustrating the powerful image Wiesel had come to achieve in the U.S. as a Holocaust representative and humanitarian:

No one has taught us more than Elie Wiesel. His life stands as a symbol; his life is testimony that the human spirit endures and prevails. Memory can fail us, for it can fade as the generations change. But Elie Wiesel has helped make the memory of the Holocaust eternal by preserving the story of the 6 million Jews in his works. Like the Prophets whose words guide to this day, his works will teach humanity timeless lessons. He teaches about despair but also about hope. He teaches about our capacity to do evil but also about the possibility of courage and resistance and about our capacity to sacrifice for a higher good. He teaches about death. But in the end, he teaches about life.\textsuperscript{46}

Wiesel thanked Reagan for the award and then proceeded to lecture the president about his proposed visit to the Bitburg cemetery:

I am convinced, as you have told us earlier when we spoke that you were not aware of the presence of SS graves in the Bitburg cemetery. Of course, you didn't know. But now we all are aware. May I, Mr. President, if it's possible at all, implore you to do something else, to find a way, to find another way, another site. That place, Mr. President, is not your place. Your place is with the victims of the SS.\textsuperscript{47}

Wiesel’s remarks embarrassed Reagan. “That night,” as Deborah Lipstadt writes, “the clip of Wiesel lecturing the president was among the lead stories on every network newscast. The next day it was a front-page story in virtually every major American newspaper.” Reagan’s complimentary remarks about Wiesel during the presentation of the Congressional Gold Medal—juxtaposed against the controversial Bitburg Affair within which Reagan was embroiled, and Wiesel’s role as a gadfly within this context—reveals the wide girth given to Wiesel by the U.S. government and American press to speak his mind; the political influence and social power


\textsuperscript{47} “Remarks on Presenting the Congressional Gold Medal to Elie Wiesel and on Signing the Jewish Heritage Week Proclamation.”
Wiesel wielded in American society was immense and unequaled by any other Holocaust survivor.

In 1986, the Nobel Committee in Sweden awarded Wiesel the Nobel Peace Prize for his activism. The year prior, the organization of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Controversy erupted when it was discovered by human rights advocates that a member of the organization, Yevgeny Chazof, had engaged in political attacks on the 1975 Nobel Peace Prize recipient Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov in 1972. Wiesel, therefore, seemed a “safe” and non-controversial recipient for the 1986 award. The committee’s press release on Wiesel reads:

Wiesel is a messenger to mankind; his message is one of peace, atonement and human dignity. His belief that the forces fighting evil in the world can be victorious is a hard-won belief. His message is based on his own personal experience of total humiliation and of the utter contempt for humanity shown in Hitler’s death camps. The message is in the form of a testimony, repeated and deepened through the works of a great author. 48

The committee’s characterization of Wiesel as a “spokesperson for humanity” demonstrates his role in the U.S. and around the world as a moral authority. That Wiesel contended for the 1986 award against Nelson and Winnie Mandela, and won, further confirms his esteemed status in American society and across the globe.

Though I have not included all of Wiesel’s achievements, awards, and civic activities in this section, I have done my best to encompass the events in Wiesel’s career which best illustrate his publicized role as a Holocaust survivor and representative. As Wiesel involved himself in various activist groups and endeavors following Night’s publication in 1960, he was increasingly respected for his moral outlooks and “services” to humanity. This status did not go unnoticed by

the U.S. government: by partnering with Wiesel, politicians could enhance their campaigns and
draw more support for their own political agendas. Of course, this also had a circular effect: in
partnering with a politician in some way, or engaging with their leadership, Wiesel enhanced his
status as both a Holocaust authority and “moral compass.” As this cycle continued, Wiesel’s
status in the U.S. became that of a symbol rather than a man. No other writer in the genre of
Holocaust literature achieved the same platform as Wiesel with which to share his experiences,
and this certainly impacted the long-term success of Night itself.

Broad History of Holocaust Literature in the United States

The first wave of Holocaust literature was published between 1945 and 1947.49 After
liberation, many survivors felt compelled to document and share their experiences, both for
personal catharsis and to bear witness of the Nazis’ brutality. Faced with the destruction of both
self and community at the hands of the Nazi regime, Holocaust survivors turned to writing; such
literature, en masse, was the first attempt to comprehend the seemingly incomprehensible.
Largely uninfluenced by post-war perceptions of the Holocaust and the evolution of collective
memory, these early works, as historian Na’ama Shik points out, offer more blatant,
straightforward descriptions of the Holocaust, consistently lacking philosophical interpretation
and deep analysis of the event and its actors.50 The immediacy with which survivors wrote and
published memoirs and accounts does not make them, in any sense, more or less valuable; rather,

49 Henry Greenspan, “Survivors’ Accounts,” in The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust
Studies, ed. Peter Hayes and John K. Roth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 417. There
was certainly a large amount of writing produced during or before this three-year period that, for
a myriad of reasons, did not get published. Given the futility of tracking such data, however, this
statistic accounts for published literature only.

50 Na’ama Shik, “Infinite Loneliness: Some Aspects of the Lives of Jewish Women in the
Auschwitz Camps According to Testimonies and Autobiographies Written Between 1945 and
1948,” in Lessons and Legacies VIII: From Generation to Generation, ed. Doris L. Bergen
(Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 127-129.
it subjects the reader to a different “literary ‘truth’” than literature composed after a longer period of time or perhaps with a different agenda.\textsuperscript{51} Holocaust literature, and memoirs more specifically, are not archival documents from which historians can easily and straightforwardly glean information, nor from which exclusive and unyielding declarations can be established. Holocaust literature must be read, as Henry Greenspan notes, with an understanding that the process of recounting as a whole, whereby narratives and testimonies are established, is fluid and ever-changing with time, hindsight, and intention.\textsuperscript{52} While there have been claims that Jews’ initial silence was due to trauma, historians Alan Mintz and Peter Novick have argued against this claim.\textsuperscript{53} This is not to say that the Holocaust was not traumatic; rather, it is to say that trauma was not the reason, or at least the primary reason, behind Jews’ silence. In the other words, “the avoidance of the Holocaust took place out-side the cycle of denial and grief rather than inside [of] it.”\textsuperscript{54}

Despite the zeal with which many survivors wrote after liberation, there was, as is argued by scholars Mintz, Novick, and Annette Wieviorka, little appetite for Holocaust literature in the decade following World War II. At the most basic level, people were simply not interested. The general public was more absorbed in celebrating the defeat of Nazism and the heroism of Allied troops than with Holocaust survivors themselves, perceptions of which tended further toward

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{52} Greenspan, “Survivors’ Accounts,” 415.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Alan Mintz, Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 7; Peter Novick, The Holocaust in American Life (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 3.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Mintz, Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America, 7.
\end{itemize}
collateral damage than actual victim status. The Holocaust survivors who did share their experiences were told to forget and move on with their lives, as if the Holocaust held in listener’s minds the same weight as a first break up. For Jews who immigrated to the United States (U.S.) specifically, discussion of the Holocaust was also a barrier to Americanization, the great “mixing pot” of culture which encouraged, and still does to a certain extent, the shedding of one’s foreign identity. Jews did not want to stand out lest it diminish their chances of fitting in and beginning a fresh start. As Greenspan notes,

Recounting emerges from what survivors anticipate will be both tellable by them and hearable by their audience; it constitutes a ‘double transaction’ comprising an ‘inner dialogue, always embattled, between survivors’ speech and survivors’ memories, and an outer dialogue, equally contested, between survivors and their listeners.

Seen this way, Jew’s silence was both the product of the practical elements of immigration, as well as the need for a listener, and thus lack there-of. Americans, as a whole, were not interested in what Holocaust survivors had to share.

Public receptivity to Holocaust literature and testimonies narrowed with the dawning of the Cold War in the immediate post-war years. As the alliance between the U.S. and the Soviet Union began to crumble, relations between West Germany and the U.S. began to shift. Despite American occupiers’ strong desire to punish Germans post-war, reframing Germans as victims of Nazism, rather than strictly as participants or instigators, was essential in combating the Soviet Union’s growing communist agenda. American occupiers feared that too harsh of punishment “would drive Germans toward the Soviets who tended to overlook past transgressions if present


loyalties were assured.” Aside from preventing a Communist spread, easing denazification efforts served a practical purpose as well: reincorporation of German citizens, even those with a “spotty” past, allowed Germany a faster resuscitation in organizing society and rebuilding infrastructure. Abandoning “their early views on ‘collective guilt’ in favor of salvaging administrative and technical expertise,” American occupiers released West Germany from their strict parental hold. The real threat, now, was the Soviet Union, whose communist agenda was considered by the U.S. to be the new embodiment of totalitarian evil. The Holocaust was “history” and to discuss the experiences of its survivors was unfashionable at best. At worst, it was to dredge up “anti-German feeling” and to counteract the U.S.’s anti-communist agenda.

After a decade of slow-up tick, the second wave of Holocaust literature appeared in the late 1950s. As Wieviorka notes, this surge follows the same pattern as memoirs published in the aftermath of World War I, in which there was an initial wave of publication immediately after the war’s end, followed by a second wave ten years later. In 1961, the trial of Adolf Eichmann revived discussion of the Holocaust and directed the American public’s attention to survivor testimony. Adolf Eichmann was a high-ranking Nazi official who worked at the Reich Security Main Office under the command of Reinhard Heydrich; with “careerism…at least as strong a motivation as antisemitism,” Eichmann took responsibility for organizing and directing the


60 Mary Fulbrook, German National Identity After the Holocaust (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 50.

61 Novick, The Holocaust in American Life, 86.

deportation of Jews to ghettos and concentration camps during World War II.63 After the war ended in 1945, Eichmann escaped capture by Allied troops and traveled to Argentina under the name Ricardo Klement, obtaining false papers with the help of Nazi-sympathizer Bishop Alois Hudal. Eichmann lived there, in hiding, until 1960. That year, having been made aware of Eichmann’s whereabouts by German prosecutor Fritz Bauer, and at the command of Israeli Prime Minister Ben-Gurion, Israeli secret service agents abducted Eichmann and transported him to Jerusalem to be tried for his crimes. The trial was headed by Israeli attorney general Gideon Hausner, though “architect” or “engineer” are perhaps better titles in this context. Hausner did not just lead the trial, he fashioned it into a major world event which utterly transformed public perceptions of the Holocaust and its victims.64

The Nuremberg Trials, which were held from 1945 to 1946, prosecuted major Nazi war criminals for crimes against peace, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.65 The trials were efficient, designed with two purposes in mind: “to contribute to the historical record and…to outlaw war.”66 While the Nuremberg Trials largely succeeded in these aims, they, as a whole, had little impact on the general public, for cultural reasons outlined previously, but also for lack of oral survivor testimony and sufficient visual broadcasting. A search within the New York Times archive for articles containing “Nuremberg Trial” dated between 1945 and 1949 results in a plethora of search results, but the articles are both comparatively small and mostly imageless. Every once in a while, one might come across a photograph of a stern-looking man in a suit, but

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66 Wieviorka, The Era of the Witness, 68.
that is all. And while much of the Nuremberg Trials were filmed and presented on television through newsreels, the cold and factual nature of the courtroom proceedings were not successful in developing an audience empathetic to survivors of the Holocaust. More emphasis was placed on obtaining justice against Nazi perpetrators rather than for victims themselves: “survivors felt marginalized and voiceless, and they worried that their fate had been subsumed under other crimes.”

Hausner sought to do with the Eichmann Trial what the Nuremberg Trials had not, to raise awareness and improve public reception of the Holocaust and its survivors through witness testimony. Hausner recruited one hundred carefully selected Jewish survivors to share their experiences in testifying against Eichmann: “[those] who appeared on the stand found meaning in their survival and fulfilled an imperative imparted by those dear to them; they spoke not just for themselves, but also in the name of their now destroyed families, communities, and towns.”

None of this was truly needed of course; in fact, most survivors' experiences had little to do with Eichmann, at least directly, as we might expect trial proceedings to relate in any other case. And as many scholars point out, prosecutors could have easily proven Eichmann’s guilt with just a few archival documents. The trial was designed, not with Eichmann as the central focus, but with the intention of re-awakening the world to the atrocities which had occurred just fifteen years prior–this time with Jewish survivors at the forefront. The impact of survivor testimony was compounded with a new style of filming in stark contrast to the Nuremberg Trials’ original footage:

67 Laura Jockusch. “Prosecuting ‘Crimes against the Jewish People.” In The Eichmann Trial Reconsidered, ed. Rebecca Wittmann (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 79.

68 Jockusch, “Prosecuting ‘Crimes against the Jewish People,” 87.

69 Jockusch, “Prosecuting ‘Crimes against the Jewish People,” 88.
For perhaps the first time in history, a trial was being recorded, not in the style of a newsreel, with its neutrally positioned single camera, but more like a feature film, with concealed cameras placed to cover several points of view — the witnesses’, the judges’, the attorneys’, the public’s, and of course, Eichmann’s. These were cut, one against the other, often in close-up, so that the drama became vastly more personal.70

Viewers were drawn in. As Novick writes, the Eichmann Trial “was the first time that what we now call the Holocaust was presented to the American public as an entity in its own right, distinct from Nazi barbarism in general.”71 All who viewed the trial were forced to reckon with the stories and images of victimhood it presented, as well as the notion of “Holocaust” itself.

The American public’s appetite for Holocaust literature increased again in 1978 when NBC first broadcast the four-part miniseries Holocaust. Network executives were hoping to match the success of 1977 miniseries Roots. Holocaust tells the story of a Jewish German family as they navigate increasing prejudice and persecution during the Nazi regime, the regime’s murderous policies during the Holocaust, and the twists and turns of World War II. The family is taken through various quintessential Holocaust “ordeals,” and by the series’ end, few characters are left alive. The show was, in many ways, a success. An estimated 120 million Americans watched either a part or the entire series,72 and it resonated with many people on a deep level. Viewers identified with the characters and empathized with their turmoil, thus opening up a new dialogue about the Holocaust and its victims which had previously not existed. The miniseries’ popularity amongst the general public, however, did not reach to the level of critics, the majority


71 Novick, The Holocaust in American Life, 133.

of whom, including Wiesel himself, accused the show of trivializing the Holocaust: “Untrue, offensive, cheap: as a TV production, the film is an insult to those who perished and to those who survived,” Wiesel wrote; “It transforms an ontological event into soap-opera.”

Nonetheless, the miniseries succeeded in drawing attention to the Holocaust as an event in and of itself, much like the Eichmann trial had done some years prior—an important step in gaining reception for the genre of Holocaust literature and books such as Night. This traction continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Un di velt hot geshvign (And the world remained silent…)

Missing from this broad history of Holocaust literature is discussion specifically relevant to Un di velt hot geshvign, Wiesel’s earliest account of his Holocaust experiences written in Yiddish. Un di velt hot geshvign is not just a memoir; it is—as Night is not—part of a larger Yiddish literary tradition (in existence prior to the Holocaust) tasked with memorializing the dead and commemorating one’s community; after the Holocaust, specifically, it also served to resuscitate Yiddish culture itself, so much of which had been destroyed and lost through Nazi genocide. This literary tradition is generally expressed in the form of Yizkor books or “memorial books.” Though the actual contents of Yizkor books vary quite a bit—some take the shape of memoirs, while others read more like historical accounts—common characteristics include photographs, a list of those who have died, as well as the names and locations of towns in which people and communities lived. With the extinction of the shtetl post-war, Yizkor books became the primary manner by which Yiddish Jews commemorated the past and preserved the


memories of prior generations. Yizkor books exist as a separate category (though not a strict one) from Holocaust memoirs, the latter of which recount one’s experiences, but do not serve, as Yizkor books generally do, as proverbial “gravestones” for communities and the dead; unlike memoirs, Yizkor books are not intended for a wider audience beyond a Yiddish readership. Whether Un di velt hot geshvign is a true Yizkor book is debatable. Wiesel never labeled it a Yizkor book himself, though it certainly follows a similar literary framework and style to other books identified as such. That Un di velt hot geshvign was never translated directly into English nor widely discussed by Wiesel in a public setting, signifies, if nothing else, its niche status in the realm of Yiddish Holocaust literature. I do not think it far-fetched to consider Un di velt hot geshvign a Yizkor book as well.

Un di velt hot geshvign was published in 1956 by Mark Turkov as volume 117 in his series Dos poylishe yidntum. By the series’ end in 1966, it contained 175 books, each published in a run of 3,000 to 5,000 copies. “A significant number of books were Holocaust memoirs, diaries, and testimonies,” though the series included cultural histories, memoirs, and poetry as well. While there were other Yiddish publishing companies in existence, Turkov’s series was the only of its type to achieve significant recognition. “The series imparted a sense of Yiddish cultural renaissance…[and] recreated the idea of a secular Yiddish culture following the destruction of its heartland in Poland. It signaled a Yiddish cultural rebirth through its consistent output over two decades.”

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76 Schwarz, Survivors and Exiles, 98.

77 Schwarz, Survivors and Exiles, 92-93.

78 Schwarz, Survivors and Exiles, 99.
Both *Night* and *Un di velt hot geshvign* share the same basic details; they are both factual accounts and thus stick to the most fundamental aspects of Wiesel’s experiences. What is different is the way in which Wiesel describes his experiences and the style with which he writes. In comparing the differences between *Night* and *Un di velt hot geshvign*, I will discuss the work of several prominent scholars: Naomi Seidman, Annette Wievorka, Jan Schwarz, Alan Astro, and Rachel Ertel.\(^\text{79}\) I begin with Seidman because her analysis of *Un di velt hot geshvign* and *Night* is by far the most controversial; thus, it provides a useful extreme with which to begin conversation.

In comparing *Un di velt hot geshvign* and *Night*, Seidman accuses Wiesel of suppressing his rage and his desire for retribution in the latter. Seidman describes *Un di velt hot geshvign* as angry and accusatory; *Un di velt hot geshvign*, she writes, “indicts the world that did nothing to stop the Holocaust and allows its perpetrators to carry on normal lives.”\(^\text{80}\) This is in contrast to *Night*, which Seidman describes as a suppressed version of the Yiddish title, a “mythopoetic narrative” that “names no human or even divine agents in the events it describes.”\(^\text{81}\) Seidman utilizes several scenes within *Un di velt hot geshvign* and *Night* to support her argument. She writes that in *Un di velt hot geshvign*, Wiesel depicts a scene in which “Jewish boys ‘run off’ to steal provisions and rape German girls,” whereas in *Night*, the scene is paired down: “young men

\(^\text{79}\) As their scholarship relates to this work, Naomi Seidman, based in Toronto, specializes in literature, religion, psychoanalysis, and translation studies; Annette Wievorka, based in France, studies a wide range of topics pertaining to Judaism and the Holocaust; Jan Schwarz, based in Sweden, focuses on Holocaust testimony, and Yiddish language, culture, and literature; Alan Astro, based in Texas, specializes in languages and literature; and Rachel Ertel, based in France, specializes in translation studies and Yiddish culture.


\(^\text{81}\) Seidman, “Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage,” 5.
[go] off to the nearest city to look for clothes and sex.”82 And where Night ends, with Wiesel staring at his emaciated reflection through a mirror, Un di welt hot geshvign continues on: Wiesel smashes the mirror, “breaking the image that lived within it.”83 Seidman writes:

Night and the stories about its composition depict the survivor as a witness and as an expression of silence and death, projecting the recently liberated Eleizer’s death-haunted face into the postwar years when Wiesel would become a familiar figure. By contrast, the Yiddish survivor shatters that image as soon as he sees it, destroying the deathly existence the Nazis willed on him. The Yiddish survivor is filled with rage and the desire to live, to take revenge, to write.84

According to Seidman, then, there are “two” Wiesels: A Yiddish version who is authentic in his desire for vengeance, and a second version, alive in the French and English editions, who suppresses this desire and exploits his victimhood for a chance at commercial success and widespread recognition.85 Seidman believes this transformation to be disingenuous–deceitful even–a viewpoint she makes clear with the posit of several closing questions:

Was it worth it? Was it worth translating the Holocaust out of the language of the largest portion of its victims and into the language of those who were, at best, absent, and at worst, complicitous in the genocide? Was it worth ‘unshattering’ the mirror the Yiddish Elie breaks, reviving the image of the Jew as the Nazis wished him to be, as the Christian is prepared to accept him, the emblem of suffering silence rather than living rage? In the complex negotiations that resulted in the manuscript of Night, did the astonishing gains make good the tremendous losses?86

Seidman, it appears, thinks not.

Wieviorka does not disagree with Seidman’s claim that there are two versions of Wiesel as a survivor; she does, however, disagree with Seidman’s claim that the transformation from one

86 Seidman, “Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage,” 16.
to the other, epitomized in *Un di velt hot geshvign* and *Night*, is the product of “a conscious desire… [and] calculated strategy.”

87 “Seidman belongs to that category of historians,” Wieviorka writes, “who track down the ways testimony changes, how it deviates from ‘the truth,’ without ever seeking to understand the role of testimony in the psychological evolution of the witness and of the collective conscience.”

88 Where Seidman accuses Wiesel of deliberately revising his narrative, Wieviorka accuses Siedman of misconstruing Wiesel's work and the nature of testimony itself. Seidman’s analysis does not take into account the contexts in which Wiesel wrote *Un di velt hot geshvign* and *Night*, nor does it take into account the evolving nature by which Holocaust testimonies are written and presented, told and re-told.

89 “As a noun, recounting is a fixed and finished thing”; as a verb, however (as is most applicable in our comparison of *Un di velt hot geshvign* and *Night*), recounting is a process.

90 “When those first words were poured onto paper,” Wieviorka writes, “there was probably no thought of writing a book, there was simply the compulsion to be free of certain elements of one’s experience and to reclaim, through these scribblings, one’s own identity.”

91 Seen in this light, the changes from *Un di velt hot geshvign* to *Night* seem less calculated and more so the product of inevitable evolution and organic process.

Schwarz takes a similar approach, though he emphasizes, in particular, the importance of language and rhetoric. He writes that “a work’s original language and audience must always be

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89 Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, 44.
91 Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, 44.
the point of departure for any serious interpretative practice.”\textsuperscript{92} Un \textit{di velt hot geshvign} and \textit{Night} can be understood, then, as products of the language and culture within which they were produced. He points out, as an example, that the genre of Holocaust literature, as a whole, is primarily an English language phenomenon. Had Wiesel attempted to publish \textit{Un di velt hot geshvign} in the United States (U.S.) or France, as it was originally written, there would have been few readers interested. The reason Wiesel rewrote the account of his Holocaust experiences in French, and never translated \textit{Un di velt hot geshvign} into English as he did \textit{La Nuit}, is because \textit{Un di velt hot geshvign} did not follow the typical formula by which Holocaust literature was written and published in France and the U.S.; the descriptive and nuanced writing within \textit{Un di velt hot geshvign}, exemplative of the Yiddish literary tradition, would not have made for an easy or successful translation. That there remains no English translation of \textit{Un di velt hot geshvign}, even as knowledge of its existence has increased, suggests that the Yiddish account is either extremely difficult, if not impossible to translate, or that Wiesel’s foundation has disallowed its translation altogether.

Alan Astro’s comparison of \textit{Un di velt hot geshvign} and \textit{Night} is perhaps the most efficient in identifying the flaws within Seidman’s analysis and the true intentions behind Wiesel’s writing. Astro discusses Seidman’s work at length, whose analysis he labels a “strong misreading.” “Seidman’s argument,” he writes, “pushed to its limit, would entail reproaching Wiesel for not having translated the untranslatable, ” for not having translated, one to the other, languages that exist in two distinct worlds. Astro is also quick to comment on Seidman’s lack of evidence; her work is based only on translations of the first and last sections of \textit{Un di velt hot geshvign} rather than its entirety. Astro points to Rachel Ertel’s work as a accurate basis for

\textsuperscript{92} Schwarz, \textit{Survivors and Exiles}, 113.
understanding and assessing the differences between *Un di velt hot geshvign* and *Night*; he cites a specific passage of hers that I include below:

> Reading Wiesel in French and reading him in Yiddish are two different experiences, because the states of the two languages are so different…Whereas French classicism imposes moderation, understatement, a mere outline, Yiddish produces excess, hyperbole, reiteration.93

Seidman’s analysis is controversial and provocative, but this does not mean that it is correct. As Ertel and the other scholars point out, there is much more to the story than it might appear from Seidman’s analysis. The changes occurring from *Un di velt hot geshvign* to *Night* are due to a confluence of factors pertaining to language, culture, and literature; as well as the formalities and practical necessities of getting one’s book published within another language and culture. *Night* achieved its canonical status precisely because it was able to overcome the limitations and niche status of *Un di velt hot geshvign* to reach a larger audience.

**Night’s Publication and Reception**

All editions of *Night* and *La Nuit* begin with a foreword by François Mauriac in which he describes his first meeting with Elie Wiesel and the circumstances of their visit. Mauriac immediately situates the memoir in a theological context, christening Wiesel as “one of God’s chosen,” and comparing him to a “Lazarus risen from the dead.”94 In the foreword’s final passage, Mauriac poses a rhetorical question, hinting at the possibility of hope beyond inevitable despair: “And I, who believe that God is love, what answer was there to give my young

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interlocutor whose dark eyes still held the reflection of…angelic sadness…?“

To Mauriac, the only possible answer is one that appeals to God: “If the Almighty is the Almighty, the last word for each of us belongs to Him.”

The actual content of Night begins with an introduction to Moishe the Beadle, a poor transient Jew who introduced young Wiesel to Kabbalah. When foreign Jews who are not citizens of Hungary are deported from Sighet, Moishe is taken to a death camp, but he escapes. Moishe returns to Sighet and warns the community about the terrible things he has witnessed. It was only by luck, he tells those that will listen, that he managed to save himself. Despite his desperate pleas that the Jews of Sighet pay attention to his warning, however, Moishe is not taken seriously, even by Wiesel himself. The Jews of Sighet carry on with their lives as if nothing had happened, “[waiting] for better days that surely were soon to come.”

When Nazi troops finally arrive in the spring of 1944, Wiesel expresses a growing sense of unease, though the community of Sighet as a whole remains hopeful of forthcoming Allied victory. This optimism continues even as the Jews are pushed into ghettos by occupation authorities, surrounded by barbed wire and men with guns: “the atmosphere,” as Wiesel writes, “was oddly peaceful and reassuring. Most people thought that we would remain in the ghetto until the end of the war, until the arrival of the Red Army. Afterward everything would be as before.” Nazi defeat, however, does not come soon enough. One month after the ghettos’ establishment, Hungarian police begin convoys to Auschwitz. The Jews of Sighet are packed into cattle cars by the police with no water, no ventilation, and little food. Officials transport

95 Wiesel, Night, xxi.
96 Wiesel, Night, xxi.
97 Wiesel, Night, 8.
98 Wiesel, Night, 12.
Wiesel and his family to Auschwitz on the last convoy—along with a neighbor, Mrs. Schächter. Crazed with grief over the loss of her husband and two sons in an earlier transport, Mrs. Schächter screams as if possessed. She warns of an impending fire, though there is no evidence of one to be seen. Only when the train arrives at Birkenau do the other Jews see fire too: “In front of us, those flames. In the air, the smell of burning flesh.”  

Those deemed unable to work, including Wiesel's mother and youngest sister, are sent directly to the crematorium by Josef Mengele. Nazi authorities send Wiesel and his father, who lie about their age, to the work camp together. Wiesel writes:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed.
Never shall I forget that smoke.
Never shall I forget the small faces of the children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent sky.
Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever.
Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live.
Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes.
Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God himself.
Never.

Wiesel and his father are stripped and given inmate uniforms. Their hair is shaved. They disguise themselves as simple laborers and are able to avoid further transport for several weeks. They are then transported to Buna, where they work in an electrical warehouse. Deemed a “good camp” by fellow prisoners, Wiesel and his father are “entitled to a blanket, a washbowl, and a bar of soap.” Nonetheless, they still face the trials of selection, beatings, and starvation. Along the

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99 Wiesel, Night, 28.
100 Wiesel, Night, 34.
101 Wiesel, Night, 51.
way, Wiesel describes losing his faith. A particularly noteworthy topic, on which Wiesel spends a
great deal of time, is the hanging of several young boys. One morning in Buna, there is a black
gallows in the middle of the camp. SS officers bring out a young boy from Warsaw who is
accused of stealing during an air raid that occurred the previous week. The boy is hung, and the
gallows are left up.

Sometime later, a pipel with “the face of an angel in distress” is brought to the gallows.
He is a young child who is condemned to death for his supposed involvement in sabotage. The
prisoners are horrified that a boy so young would be hanged; even the Lagerkapo, who is
responsible for executions, refuses to act. SS officers take his place. The young boy’s chair is
tipped, but he is too light and he does not die immediately. Wiesel writes:

And so he remained for more than half an hour, lingering between life and death,
writhing before our eyes. And we were forced to look at him at close range. He was still
alive when I passed him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet extinguished.
Behind me, I heard the same man asking:
‘For God’s sake, where is God?’
And from within me, I heard a voice answer:
‘Where He is? This is where—he’s hanging here from this gallows…”
That night, the soup tasted of corpses.102

As this occurs, Wiesel begins to question God and all that he was raised to believe. How could
God allow this?

Wiesel and his father make it through the summer and winter of 1944, but slowly get
weaker and weaker. About a year after their initial transport, Wiesel develops a foot infection and
is taken to the hospital wing. He is told to stay, but leaves prematurely for fear that he might be
killed. Not long after, Nazi troops began to evacuate the camp. Wiesel and his father have the
choice to stay at the hospital, but decide to leave. They join the death march instead. By this
point, the relationship between Wiesel and his father has shifted. Wiesel is now the burdened

102 Wiesel, Night, 65.
caretaker; his father is now the child. Yet Wiesel tries to not to let the inhumaness surrounding him invade his mind; he supports his father and they eventually make it to Buchenwald. Near death, however, Wiesel’s father is beaten and dies. Wiesel describes his existence after his father’s death as that of a ghost; nothing mattered to him anymore.

Liberation eventually comes in April 1945. On April 10, Allied forces succeed in entering Buchenwald and the SS staff flee. The last scene of the book is of immense significance. Wiesel stands in front of a mirror, looking into his own emaciated face and sad eyes. Wiesel writes: “From the depths of the mirror, a corpse was contemplating me. The look in his eyes as he gazed at me has never left me.” This passage signifies the death of Wiesel’s innocence and younger self.

Night was first published as La Nuit in 1956 under Les Editions de Minuit, a French Publishing House at the time headed by Jérome Lindon. This new version was 178 pages long and the first run consisted of 900 copies. Fresh resistors formed Les Editions de Minuit in 1941 as an underground publishing company to usurp censorship policies under Nazi occupation. After World War II ended, the publishing house became “above-ground” and focused on publishing works with an intellectual or philosophical basis. It seems fitting that Night found its first home with a publishing company who made their business rebelling against Nazi policy, though it is also no coincidence. Mauriac was published under the same company during the war, and without his direct influence, it seems less likely that La Nuit would have been

103 Wiesel, Night, 65.

104 Georges Borchardt, “How Night was Published in America,” Cultural Services French Embassy in the United States, https://frenchculture.org/books-and-ideas/3790-how-night-was-published-america.

accepted given its dismissal by other publishing companies at the time.

Francois Mauriac pushed to get La Nuit published in the United States (U.S.), but was initially unsuccessful; the Eichmann trial had not yet occurred, nor had the impacts of the Cold War on perceptions of the Holocaust begun to diminish. “After months and months of personal visits, letters, and telephone calls,” Mauriac finally found a publisher. In 1960, La Nuit was translated by Stella Rodway and published with Hill and Wang under the title Night. It was reduced to 116 pages, down from La Nuit’s 178. Actual publication statistics are difficult to find, though as many sources note, more and more copies of Night were sold with each passing year after its original publication in 1960. Biblio, a company specializing in the selling of rare and collectible books, writes that “[Night] initially sold very slowly, with only 1,046 copies selling in the first 18 months at $3 each. It took three full years before the first print run of 3,000 copies sold out. By 1997 Night was selling 300,000 copies a year in the United States.”

La Nuit and Night received positive reviews by critics at their initial release dates in 1958 and 1960, respectively. Getrude Samuels, writing for the New York Times in 1960, called Night a “slim volume of terrifying power,” and “a remarkable close-up of one boy’s tragedy.” Night’s initial reception by the general public left much to be desired, though its popularity, as I have mentioned, grew over time. Wiesel’s literary style is simple enough that younger readers can easily understand the basic elements of the story. Yet, there is enough nuance and depth with which to captivate and interest older readers. Night is only 116 pages and can be ready quickly;

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106 Wiesel, Night, x.


read slowly, however, it offers vast opportunities for analysis. Perhaps of greatest importance is that Night finds balance between despair and hope; it is not so dark as to “scare” the reader away, yet it does not intoxicate the reader with hope and promises of redemption either.

Although Night has undergone various cover changes, the actual content of the book has remained largely the same. The only change truly worth mentioning is that which occurred in 2006, when Hill and Wang released a new edition of Night translated by Wiesel’s wife Marion Wiesel. The book’s plot remained the same, though a preface written by Wiesel was added, as were nuances from Un di velt hot geshvign and La Nuit that had been edited out of the original 1960 English translation. These nuances include, in particular, more personal—and sometimes darker—discussions of Wiesel’s liberation and of his father’s death.\textsuperscript{109} A change was also made to correct Wiesel’s age at the time of his deportation in the spring of 1944: Wiesel was not fourteen, as the original translation of Night recalls, but fifteen. In response to criticism for these changes, and to questions regarding the legitimacy of Night’s original translation, Jeff Seroy, president of Hill and Wang’s parent company Farrar, Straus & Giroux, stated that “some minor mistakes crept into the original translation that were expunged in the new translation…But the book stands as a record of fact.”\textsuperscript{110} Nonetheless, questions still arise: why is it that darker discussions of Wiesel’s liberation and his father’s death, in particular, were not included to begin with? Were they simply “lost in translation”? Or did Rodway, Night’s original translator, not consider such details suitable for a general American audience? And, why did it take over forty years to make these changes? Did Wiesel consider them only after Night’s success had been assured? Whatever the

\textsuperscript{109} Wiesel, Night, xi.

case, it is worth considering how the absence of such details in the original English translation of *Night* may have impacted the book’s popularity in the U.S., even if only to a minor extent.

Wiesel’s preface to the new translation of *Night* summarizes many of the aforementioned changes, but it also clarifies a fundamental aspect of Wiesel’s interpretation of the Holocaust: his belief that the Holocaust was a “mystical” event, incomprehensible to anyone who did not witness it themselves, and impossible to accurately describe in any written work—even his own. Reflecting on the process of his early accounting, Wiesel writes:

> I would pause at every sentence, and start over and over again. I would conjure up other verbs, other images, other silent cries. It was still not right. But what exactly was ‘it’? ‘It’ was something elusive, darkly shrouded for fear of being usurped, profaned. All the dictionary had to offer seemed meager, pale, lifeless…Only those who experienced Auschwitz know what it was. Others will never know.\(^{111}\)

“It,” in this context, equates to “the Holocaust,” and Wiesel’s aesthetic choice both to leave the event unnamed and to describe it using the terms “elusive” and “shrouded” denote his belief that the Holocaust is something sacred, transcendent, and utterly unique. That the dictionary, as Wiesel implies, had “nothing to offer,” indicates his belief that no words—known to man, that is (as opposed to God)—can accurately portray the event. The last sentence, of course, needs no interpretation. Wiesel makes his claim absolutely clear: “Others will never know.”

Wiesel testified his belief that the Holocaust was a mystical event throughout his career, time and time again, in both his writing and in his political and humanitarian endeavors. I would argue, in fact, that Wiesel’s understanding of the Holocaust as an “essentially Jewish” event conforms to this narrative as well. Asserting the superiority of Jewish victims bolstered Wiesel’s understanding of the Holocaust as a sacred event, all while maintaining the event’s supposed religious “purity.” “Gatekeeping,” for lack of a better word, the Holocaust in this way provided

\(^{111}\) Wiesel, *Night*, ix.
support for Wiesel’s claim that the Holocaust is incomprehensible to anyone who was not–to put it bluntly–part of the club, i.e. anyone who did not experience the Holocaust directly, and to some extent, anyone who is not, or was not, a member of the Jewish faith.

Many scholars and Holocaust writers have found Wiesel’s mystification of the Holocaust to be troubling, if not an entirely incorrect interpretation of the event. In mystifying the Holocaust and declaring it incomprehensible, how can we come to understand its relevance in a historical and worldly context? What good does it do to shroud the Holocaust in secrecy? Wiesel might claim, in response, that the Holocaust is not to be truly understood, that shrouding the Holocaust is, in fact, precisely the point; that it is enough simply to remember, pay tribute, and, of course, make sure that an event of the Holocaust’s magnitude never happens again. How can one even attempt to comprehend, Wiesel asks,

the last journey in sealed cattle cars, the last voyage toward the unknown? Or the discovery of a demented and glacial universe where to be inhuman was human, where disciplined, educated men in uniform came to kill, and innocent children and weary old men came to die? Or the countless separations on a single fiery night, the tearing apart of entire families, entire communities?

Wiesel's belief is that one cannot, one should not—though, his is not the only opinion on the matter. Of arguably comparable writing stature was Holocaust survivor Primo Levi, who achieved particular acclaim for his 1947 memoir *Survival in Auschwitz* (If This Is a Man). In *Night* and *Survival in Auschwitz*, respectively, Wiesel and Levi discuss their Holocaust experiences at length, though the way they go about it is strikingly different: Wiesel’s writing draws heavily on emotion and revolves around his foundational interpretation of the Holocaust

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113 Wiesel, *Night*, ix.
as a mystical event; Levi’s work, in contrast, reads more like “sober historiography and documentary writing.”¹¹⁴ These differences are evident even in the titles of Wiesel and Levi’s memoirs: “Night” has emotional and metaphysical connotations, whereas “Survival in Auschwitz” or “If This Is a Man” implies a more stoic, scholarly examination of the Holocaust. That Levi’s memoir never achieved the canonical status and widespread acclaim that Night did, despite Levi’s talent as writer, points to an important conclusion regarding Night’s success. In asking why Wiesel's memoir has, among all others, achieved such canonical status in the genre of Holocaust literature, perhaps Wiesel’s mystification of the Holocaust, as compared to Levi’s more rational approach, is where our answer lies.

Conclusion

I fear that this work has become, to some extent, a biography of Wiesel rather than Night, although this raises an important question: can the two truly be separated? Wiesel, from the universe that he so vividly and intimately created? As is perhaps made evident by my lengthy account of Wiesel’s life, I would argue that to do so is, indeed, an elusive if not unattainable feat. Wiesel’s life endeavors are certainly not the only relevant factors in discussions of Night and its success, however; so too are the impacts of language, culture, faith, and memory. The broad history of Holocaust literature and the complexities surrounding Night’s publication and reception must also be given their due. From these various factors, we have sufficient evidence to reflect upon the ways in which Night has achieved its canonical status in the genre of Holocaust literature.

Wiesel’s early life and Holocaust experiences were incredibly tragic. This is certainly not unique to Wiesel among other survivors, though the way he composed his thoughts and

experiences was: his writing is both alluringly simple and rich with emotion. Wiesel was a
talented writer, and his ability to describe the most brutal elements of his Holocaust experience
with such eloquence, and in such a way that is accessible to a vast majority of readers, is an
essential ingredient of Night’s long-term success. Night has sustained its popularity simply
because it is the book that it is, by all accounts, a good one.

Night was published at an opportune time, just one year before the Eichmann Trial in
1961, and after the greatest impacts of the Cold War on Holocaust reception had begun to
subside. NBC’s release of Holocaust in 1978 aroused further interest in the Holocaust which, in
all likelihood, increased Night’s general readership. We know from publication statistics that
Night did not have much initial success. With a certain measure of luck and timing, however,
ongoing cultural factors and political events facilitated Night’s popularity on a large scale.

Unlike the vast majority of Holocaust writers, perhaps even a large percentage of writers
in general, Wiesel had a mentor. François Mauriac guided Wiesel’s writing of Night to assure its
success in French and English. Without Mauriac’s influence, it is unlikely that Wiesel would
have been able to find a publisher for his work. Un di velt hot geshvign “disappeared” in the few
years after it was published and its existence was not widely uncovered until the 1990s. Written
in Yiddish and catering to an Eastern European Jewish audience, Un di velt hot geshvign was not
accommodating to a larger, more diverse readership. Mauriac made certain that Night was.

This is not to say that Un di velt hot geshvign was a useless exercise–actually, it was quite
the opposite. Writing an early account of his experiences, and in Yiddish, allowed Wiesel an
outlet with which to release his feelings of anger and frustration, as well as an outlet with which
to wrestle with the loss of his culture and community. Without writing Un di velt hot geshvign, it
seems unlikely that Wiesel would have been prepared to create a more neutral work such as
Night, and even more so, to receive guidance in this pursuit by a Christian writer such as Mauriac.

Night greatly owes its success to Wiesel’s status as a symbol of morality and peace. Thanks to Wiesel’s involvement with the President’s Commission on the Holocaust and in the Bitburg Affair, as well as his receptance of, among many awards, the Congressional Gold Medal and the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize, Wiesel has become a common household name. No other Holocaust survivor has achieved such a platform. I believe that in the latter half of Wiesel’s life, especially, the initial success of Night and the publicized nature of Wiesel's humanitarian and political efforts created a feedback loop. When Night increased in popularity, Wiesel likely achieved more attention for his activism, and vice-versa.

I believe the central reason behind Night’s long-term success and canonical status is Wiesel’s interpretation of the Holocaust as a “mystical” event. Highlighting the essentially Jewish nature of the Holocaust allowed Wiesel a foundation by which to establish subsequent claims regarding the event’s sacred stature, transcendent quality, and religious purity. By declaring, further, that the Holocaust is incomprehensible to anyone who did not witness it directly, Wiesel created the perfect conditions for Night’s long-term success. By claiming that the Holocaust is impossible to fully understand, while also asserting, paradoxically, the public’s responsibility in learning about the Holocaust and preventing its erasure from history, Wiesel has situated Night as the only viable “solution” to his own widely disseminated contradictions.
Bibliography


