

# Trauma and dignity in night



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Upon arrival in Auschwitz, Elie Wiesel and his companions are shocked by unspeakable atrocities, and quickly are reduced to instinct. " We no longer clung to anything. The instincts of self-preservation, of self-defense, of pride, had all deserted us" (36). The lack of humanity shown to the prisoners strips them of the basic roles they once held in civilized society, and forces many to commit unbearable acts in order to survive. The men are torn from the lives they previously led, and no longer work or hold leadership positions; the sense of autonomy they once held over their lives has vanished. The innocent men are shaved, starved, beaten, and treated as " filthy dogs," all while performing forced labor (85). They witness children being systematically burned alive, and many of their family members are murdered. The physical and psychological trauma of the camps reduces the prisoners' self-worth. The overwhelming horror of Wiesel's experience, combined with shame perpetuated by the SS officers, results in a chilling disconnection from his previous self. In *Night*, Elie Wiesel manages to communicate the nearly ineffable loss of human dignity that arises from the trauma of war and violence.

The Nazis structured the concentration camps in a way that deliberately dehumanized the prisoners and tested their limits of endurance. Bruno Bettelheim, a survivor of Dachau and Buchenwald, wrote extensively about his psychoanalytical observations of the camps. He observed himself, his fellow prisoners, and the SS Officers, and analyzed the different motivations each. The SS officers' goals included " to break the prisoners as individuals and change them into docile masses...to provide the Gestapo with an experimental laboratory in which to study effective means for breaking

civilian resistance, as well as the minimum nutritional, hygienic, and medical requirements needed to keep prisoners alive..."(Bettleheim 49). The Nazis wanted to push the limits of human endurance for their own political means. The calculated nature of the camps is reflected in Wiesel's account of their arrival, as the prisoners are stripped of their clothing and belongings. The men lose the individual signifiers that demarcate their individuality and their status in society. In the camps, the prisoners are only known by a number tattooed on one arm. Wiesel recalls, " I became A-7713. From then on, I had no other name" (42). The stripping of this essential element instills a further feeling of worthlessness in the men, perhaps more than starvation or brutality. Psychologist Judith Hassan, when discussing working with the long-term impact of trauma in Holocaust survivors, wrote that " No name, only a number, deprives a person of a basic human right - to have an identity... Once ' liberated', their identity as survivors did not facilitate a sense of belonging or status in the outside world" (Hassan 185). The reduction of one's identity was psychologically traumatic for the prisoners, in addition to the physical horrors they witnessed. The symbolism of the simple act of removing one's name reveals the Nazi's intent to truly erase the lives of the prisoners.

Smaller indignities, in many cases, were more harmful to the prisoners than other punishments. Through observing his fellow prisoners, Bettleheim suggests that " One felt deeper and more violent aggressions against particular SS men who had committed minor vile acts than one felt against those who had acted in a much more terrible fashion" (Bettleheim 66). Men resented verbal abuse or a slap in the face more than serious physical injury;

these insults wounded the prisoners deeply. The loss of pride in their lives was one of the Nazi's goals for the prisoners upon arrival. In *Night*, Elie's father asks where the restrooms are located, and the kapo "slapped my father with such force that he fell down and then crawled back on all fours" (39). This lack of decency shocks Elie; it is one of the first moments that begin to take his father's dignity, and by extension, Elie's dignity. He is ashamed at his lack of defense for his father, and cannot respond as he would in a normal environment. Bettelheim acknowledges that keeping his pride was essential to his psychological survival. "...if the author should be asked to sum up in one sentence what, during all the time he spent in the camp, was his main problem, he would say: to safeguard his ego in such a way that, if by any good luck he should regain liberty, he would be approximately the same person he was when deprived of liberty"(Bettelheim 62). By keeping his experiences separate from his view of himself, Bettelheim attempts to remain sane. In contrast, Elie Wiesel's memoir demonstrates an almost total loss of self that is tied to trauma. This is not surprising. Judith Hassan writes, "Life was no longer governed by the same set of values that had existed up until the onset of the trauma" (Hassan 18). Thus, the camps were not civilized environments, and the indignities they suffered pushed the prisoners away from their former selves.

The instinct to survive often contradicts Elie's filial instincts. When his father is punished for weakness, Elie's anger is sometimes directed at his father rather than at the SS officers who caused the original pain. As his father is being beaten for working too slowly, Elie writes, "I had watched it all happening without moving. I kept silent. In fact, I thought of stealing away in order not

to suffer the blows...Why couldn't he have avoided Idek's wrath?" (54). While the traditional father-son dynamic provides structure and hope upon arrival, Elie struggles to support his father in the camps. He tries to give his rations to his sick father, or to train him to march correctly. However, subconscious resentment grows in Elie's heart, further dehumanizing his civilized self.

When he is searching for his sick father, he thinks to himself, "If only I didn't find him! If only I were relieved of this responsibility, I could use all my strength to fight for my own survival...Instantly, I felt ashamed, ashamed of myself forever" (106). Elie's complex relationship with his father is of immense love and guilt. He tries to help him, but does so in fear for his life.

While he clings to his father as a remnant of his previous life, the trauma of the camps shifts his relationship in ways that would never occur in normal society. Bettlheim interpreted this disconnection from life in the real world and life in the camps by observing his fellow prisoners. "The prisoners' feeling could be summed up by the sentence: "What I am doing here, what is happening to me, does not count at all; here everything is permissible as long and insofar as it contributes to helping me survive in the camp""

(Bettleheim 63). The extreme danger forced the men to adapt and adopt new modicums of living. While in civilized society the parent-child bond seems unbreakable, the Nazis created an environment that deliberately destroyed those bonds. Other prisoners in the camp experienced similar struggles. One of the first acquaintances Elie and his father encounter from home was forced to feed his father's body into the furnace. On the transport train, a man kills his father for a single piece of bread, and he is then killed. As the prisoners are forced to run in the snow for hours, Elie runs alongside a Rabbi's son, remembering later, "...his son had seen [his father] losing

ground...and he had continued to run in front, letting the distance between them become greater" (91). The Rabbi's son tried to save his own life, even if it meant abandoning his connection to the real world. Additionally, Wiesel particularly emphasizes the relevance of these events situated in the context of the holocaust, as each shifted father-son relationship took away the dignity of the men involved. When his father is ill and near death, Elie struggles with helping him or protecting his own life. He instinctually resents giving his food ration to his father, even as he does so, stating, " Just like Rabbi Eliahu's son, I had not passed the test" (107). The test is one of ethics, but also a deep analysis of how trauma changes instinct. In any other situation, one would theoretically be proud of helping a parent, but the camps twisted the prisoners' perception of pride and destroyed their socially learned instincts. Elie's relationship with his father can be likened to an Oedipal complex where the son must kill the father to survive. In his father's final hours, Elie ignores his father's pleas for help, and states his awareness of the impact his instincts had on his psyche. " I shall never forgive myself. Nor shall I ever forgive the world for having pushed me against the wall, for having turned me into a stranger, for having awakened in me the basest, most primal instincts" (xii). The trauma of his father's death and Elie's own perceived role in it takes away any dignity that remained from his civilized life. Elie's changed relationship with his father demonstrates the Nazi's systematic model of genocide. The Nazis took away their victims' sense of self in an attempt to entirely decimate the Jewish civilization, as well as any others who opposed their regime. In analyzing how concentration camp groups responded as a whole, Bettelheim wrote, " The main goal of the Nazi efforts seemed to be to produce in their subjects childlike attitudes and

childlike dependency on the will of the leaders...it was very difficult not to become subject to the slow process of personality disintegration..." (83). The Nazis destroyed people's individuality in their attempt of systematically reordering the population through eugenics. The loss of power over one's life, and the loss of control over one's reactions, produced severe traumatic results in the prisoners once the concentration camp prisoners were released. After he is liberated from Buchenwald, Wiesel has no thoughts of joy or revenge. His dignity was systematically, deliberately taken from him, and he lost his parents and younger sister. The result is that he is transformed forever. "...I decided to look at myself in the mirror on the opposite wall. I had not seen myself since the ghetto. From the depths of the mirror, a corpse was contemplating me. The look in his eyes has never left me" (115). After the trauma he experienced as a teenager in the camps, Wiesel's entire sense of self has 'died', and he is changed forever.

### Bibliography

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