

Survival and Identity: A Study of Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*

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Abstract: The Nazis sought to exterminate the entire Jewish race by resorting to unprecedented dehumanization which did not limit itself to corporeal destruction but sought to annihilate their intellectual and spiritual existence. Holocaust literature in the form of memoirs and autobiographies has offered a powerful perspective on human suffering through unadorned, ruthless facts and uninflected historical accounts. It also portrays the efforts of the survivors to comprehend the meaning of the Holocaust. The paper seeks to study two memoirs written by holocaust survivors – *Night* by Elie Wiesel and *Survival in Auschwitz* by Primo Levi. Wiesel's emotional and thought-provoking memoir deals with the issues of survival, identity, death, morality and religious faith. Primo Levi's account is a subtle blend of compassion and detachment. The paper explores the endurance and indefatigability of humanity in the face of dismal, inhuman conditions. Any strict matter-of-fact retelling of the experiences will inevitably be compromised since memoirs are filtered through fickle and unreliable memories. However, these two memoirs have tried to reconstruct the past and make it coherent. I maintain that these two books are a poignant testimony of Holocaust survivors, reaffirming their will to live. The literature depicting the historical experience of Nazi crimes has been instrumental in creating awareness among the masses regarding the magnitude of its fiendishness and the need for establishing standards of human rights, incorporating them into international law.

Keywords: Memoirs, survival, identity crisis, religious faith, human rights awareness.

Holocaust is one of the most thoroughly documented events in world history and yet remains incomprehensible and unrepresentable. The word 'Holocaust' evokes images of stacked corpses, mass graves, horror-stricken faces of helpless victims uncertain about the impending doom awaiting them, and the incinerators reducing human bodies to smoke. The Nazis sought to exterminate the European Jews by resorting to unprecedented dehumanization which did not limit itself to corporeal destruction but sought to annihilate their cultural, intellectual and spiritual existence. Elie Wiesel writes, "It is obvious that the war which Hitler and his accomplices waged was a war not only against Jewish men, women, and children but also against Jewish religion, Jewish culture, Jewish tradition, therefore Jewish memory" (*Night* ii). Had it not been for writers like Wiesel, Anne Frank, Primo Levi and others, the Holocaust would have become a historical event that mankind did not want to acknowledge or remember because of the pain, and the vicarious shame and guilt it evoked. It was not until much later that things began to change and the proclivity to shake off self-induced amnesia set in.

Holocaust literature in the form of memoirs and autobiographies has offered a powerful perspective on human suffering by presenting unadorned, ruthless facts and uninflected historical accounts. The present paper seeks to study two memoirs written by Holocaust survivors – *Night* by Elie Wiesel and *Survival in Auschwitz* by Primo Levi. Their postwar lives belong to a completely different order of reality and hence are not dealt with in memoirs which limit themselves to experiences and memories inside the deadly concentration camps.

Memory is the key concept in the writing of memoirs. An offhand approach towards the concept of memory makes it seem static and rooted in past - a memory of something that has happened and banded in time. However, researchers Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann have addressed the dynamic character of memory which connects the three temporal dimensions: recollection in the present, it addresses the past, but always points towards the future. Jan speaks of the durability and symbolic aspects of cultural memory, emphasizing their role in the construction of identities. He defines cultural memory as “the faculty that allows us to build a narrative picture of the past and through this process develop an image and an identity for ourselves” (Meckien). Cultural memory, according to him, refers to objectified and institutionalized memories in the form of texts, rites, monuments, celebrations, objects, sacred scriptures and other media that can be stored, transferred and reincorporated throughout generations (Meckien). Taking the concept of cultural memory in the Israeli-Jewish context, it can be said that these memoirs help in crystallizing the collective traumatic experiences of the Jewish past and the construction of twentieth-century Jewish identity.

Any form of literature gives in to artistic demands, slackens off narratives, and compromises the details of actual events. However, the horrors of Auschwitz, Buchenwald or any other concentration camp defy any artistic amplification since this seems ethically unacceptable, even sacrilegious to under-represent or misrepresent the atrocities of the Holocaust. David Patterson, the author of a recent study of Holocaust memoir literature, argues that even the reading of such works has a sacred function: the reader “must become not an interpreter of texts but a mender of the world, a part of the recovery that this memory demands” (12).

The present study explores the commonalities as well as divergence in the experiences, religious beliefs and stylistic techniques adopted by two veteran writers, Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi in dealing with the Holocaust. These are individual as well as representative accounts of the collective experience of all victim Jews. The literature depicting the historical experience of Nazi crimes has been instrumental in creating awareness among the masses regarding the magnitude of its fiendishness, stressing on the crying need for the establishment of human rights standards and their integration into international law. Wiesel once said, “I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented” (Wiesel, “Acceptance Speech”).

Wiesel's first book, *Night* is a somber, moving memoir of his faith-shattering experience in the death camps. It was published first in France and later—after much resistance due to its painful subject—in the United States. Slowly, it was catapulted to fame and has since been read by millions of readers. Wiesel says of this book, “*Night* was the foundation; all the rest is commentary. In each book, I take one character out of *Night* and give him a refuge, a book, a tale, a name, a destiny of his own” (Cargas 3). Though Wiesel was skeptical about the reception of the book, yet the urge to share his experience is an overriding determinant in the writing of the book. He says, “I am not so naive as to believe that this slim volume will change the course of history or shake the conscience of the world. Books no longer have the power they once did. Those who kept silent yesterday will remain silent tomorrow” (*Night* v-vi).

Wiesel along with his parents and three sisters was deported to Auschwitz, Buna, and Buchenwald in 1944 at the age of fifteen. Wiesel was a deeply religious Jew who studied Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) and the Cabbala (a doctrine of Jewish mysticism). There he and his father were separated from the mother and the girls. Early on, Wiesel's mother and youngest sister were killed by the Germans, and before the prisoners were liberated by the Allies, his father died of malnourishment and mistreatment.

The gruesome conditions inside the camp are minutely drawn by Wiesel. Jewish arrivals are stripped, shaved, disinfected, and ill-treated with almost unimaginable brutality. Sonder-Kommandos, the Kommandos working in the crematoria, are forced to place their own fathers' or brothers' bodies into the furnaces. The prisoners are forced to run through snowy nights in bitter cold over a forty-two mile route to Gleiwitz. Elie binds his bleeding foot in strips of blanket. Inmates who falter are shot. The gold crown of Elie's tooth is extracted using a rusty spoon in the lavatory, throwing to the wind any human concern or rules of hygiene. Constant persecution robs people of their human and moral values. Corrosion of ethics and morality is the inevitable side-effect of such cruelty. Human comradeship, friendship, filial love, and piety seem to be crumbling under the weight of appalling human conditions. *Night* reflects his struggle to come to terms with his father's regression into childhood. Wiesel is too afraid of the guards who wield clubs indiscriminately. When his father is beaten mercilessly at the end of his life, Elie remembers that he had not moved because he was afraid. It is implied throughout the text that silence and passivity are what allowed the Holocaust to continue. However, Wiesel's writing of *Night* is an attempt to break the ice of silence and to endow the reader with a sense of 'what' happened in order to prevent anything so horrible from ever happening again.

It has been often been said of the Holocaust that any language is insufficient to explain the 'unimaginable' and 'unspeakable' dehumanization that took place inside the walled spaces of Auschwitz, Buna, Buchenwald and other death-producing camps. The rules inside Auschwitz defy all logic and rationality; driven by cruelty, whims, and fancies of SS officers. Wiesel maintains, “Hunger—thirst—fear—transport—selection—fire—chimney: these words all have intrinsic meaning, but in those times, they meant something else” (*Night* iii). Levi also maintains, “Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence,

the demolition of a man” (*Survival* 26). The language falls short in explaining the excruciating trauma the inmates suffered where words used in common parlance acquire utterly different meanings and connotations. Nevertheless, the inmates try to hold on to their own language as a vehicle to defy the Nazis and retain their cultural and human identity.

Wiesel’s experiences in the camp garrote his understanding of the nature of God, who, apparently refuses to rescue or imbue theological significance to the seemingly surreal event. The frustration and helplessness in the wake of imminent death compel an inmate to recite Kaddish, the prayer for the dead. Wiesel laments, “I don’t know whether, during the history of the Jewish people, men have ever before recited Kaddish for themselves” (*Night* 33). Elie Wiesel’s faith was grounded in the idea that God is all pervasive and that his divinity touches every aspect of our lives. However, Elie’s belief in an omnipotent, benevolent God keeps wavering in the camps. He struggles with the question of fasting on Yom Kippur. He also writes, “As for me, I had ceased to pray. I concurred with Job! I was not denying His existence, but I doubted His absolute justice” (*Night* 45). He expresses regret when he forgets to say Kaddish (a mourner’s prayer) for his deceased friend Akiba Drumer. He calls himself “an observer, a stranger” (*Night* 68) when watching others pray. Refusing to fast on Rosh Hashanah, he turns eating “into a symbol of rebellion, of protest against Him” (*Night* 68). Hence, the predicament of using religion as a defining characteristic of Jewish identity is one of the major components of *Night*.

Despite Wiesel’s self-professed disbelief in God at various instances, his constant use of religious metaphors undercuts what he says. When Wiesel prevaricates having to forego his new mud-smeared shoes which escape the attention of the guards, he says, “I thanked God, in an improvised prayer, for having created mud in His infinite and wondrous universe” (*Night* 38). Elie even refers to biblical passages when he denies his faith. At the death of his father, he bemoans that there were no prayers at his grave and no candles were lit in his memory. His thoughts imply that faith and doubt rest in his heart simultaneously and keep wrestling with each other. In an interview in 2012, when Oprah Winfrey had asked Wiesel about God’s silence and the world’s silence, Wiesel remarked, “God’s silence. At least God can say, “Who are you to understand me?” But the world’s silence is different. I don’t understand it to this day”.

Among other horrors, Wiesel and his fellow prisoners are forced to walk past the fresh corpses still hanging and watch the hanging of a young boy by the Germans. The child is still alive when he files past the scaffold and hears someone behind him wonder aloud, “Where is God? Where is He?” And I heard a voice within me answer him: “Where is He? Here He is — He is hanging here on this gallows. . . . That night the soup tasted of corpses” (*Night* 65). The executed child may be symbolic of God himself who has perhaps chosen to remain lifeless and silent in the midst of deadening violation of human dignity.

According to Gary Henry, the work of Elie Wiesel is a courageous, sustained protest against indifference. And, whatever may be its impact on mankind, it has allowed Elie Wiesel himself to

remain human. Wiesel has been honored with the Nobel Peace Prize, an appointment to the President's Commission on the Holocaust, and the Congressional Gold Medal of Achievement. Elie Wiesel and his wife, Marion, established The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity and the official website of Elie Wiesel's Foundation states that mission of the foundation, rooted in the memory of the Holocaust, is to combat indifference, intolerance, and injustice through international dialogue and youth-focused programs that promote solidarity, understanding and equality. Wiesel helped organize and found the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. He hopes to broadcast his belief that persecution is an experience all people must recognize and protest against.

Though Wiesel and Levi narrate their memories of the Holocaust sincerely, yet there are differences in the treatment of the memoirs considering their different social, economic, geographical backgrounds, and also due to the difference in their age at the time of detention in the camps. Levi renders his memoir comprehensible in lucid, unpretentious prose without floundering into sentimentality whereas Elie's account is more personal and compassionate. Levi insists that his role as a scientist, chemist, and technician was complementary and not contradictory to his status as a writer and humanist. As he remarked in an interview with American writer Philip Roth, "In my own way I have remained an impurity, an anomaly, but now for reasons other than before: not especially as a Jew but as an Auschwitz survivor and an outsider- writer, coming not from the literary or university establishment but from the industrial world" (*Survival* 185). Whereas Wiesel's memoir reflects ambivalence though leaning more towards belief in God's existence in the midst of atrocities afflicted by the Nazi perpetrators, Primo Levi's memoir can be seen as a work penned by an agnostic. He is set apart from the other Jews in the Lager and does not really identify as a Jew, rather as an Italian of Jewish descent. He does not participate in the religious or cultural activities unlike other inmates who somehow attempt to affirm their heritage in the forms of storytelling or reciting Jewish religious prayers. Nevertheless, despite Levi's secularism, his humane essence still remains alive which manifests itself in the way he along with Alberto and Lorenzo helps other inmates.

Primo Levi was a twenty-four-year-old Italian Jew when the Fascist Militia captured him on December 13, 1943. He had joined Italian Resistance Movement against Fascism before being deported to Auschwitz. Levi was imprisoned there for 11 months until the camp was liberated by the Red Army in 1945. Levi writes, "This is hell. Today, in our times, hell must be like this. A huge, empty room: we are tired, standing on our feet, with a tap which drips while we cannot drink the water, and we wait for something which will certainly be terrible, and nothing happens and nothing continues to happen" (*Survival* 22). Levi explains how shoes become a vehicle of persecution because inmates are deliberately forbidden to put on the sizes that fit them properly. The poorly fitted shoes cause immense pain later as Levi writes, "Death begins with the shoes; for most of us, they show themselves to be instruments of torture, which after a few hours of marching cause painful sores which become fatally infected" (*Survival* 34).

The cultivation of an understanding of difference with others and nurturing the bonds of friendship prove very fragile under conditions of adversity, a situation that Levi laments very much in the memoir. Besides describing day-to-day atrocities, Levi's description of the ten days left in that camp before the Red Army arrived seems to be the most harrowing part of this book. The camps are abandoned, the Germans are gone. There is no ration and all around are stacks of corpses piled high. People are still dying. It is during this time that Levi also falls acutely ill but manages to survive and return to his home in Turin. According to Frederic D. Homer:

For Levi, the Lager remains an irrational universe, for it cannot be reconciled with the existence of God. Levi, in several of his short stories, creates a god who is trying to devise man as an intelligent creature at home in his surroundings. This god, Levi's inventive surrogate, is always devising experiments with human nature. "God" continually fails before the material conditions of existence (33.)

Levi does not believe that God intervened on behalf of any of the survivors; as he says in *The Drowned and the Saved*, the best people were not the survivors. To encapsulate, Auschwitz was a death camp in which the prisoners would not last more than three months. When all was done, none of the prisoners would be left alive, and nobody would know what had happened there. Levi writes that "the entire history of the brief 'millennial Reich' can be reread as a war against memory, an Orwellian falsification of memory, falsification of reality, negation of reality" (qtd. in Homer 28). Also, the façade of civilization is very flimsy and there is a sadistic and instinctive tendency toward violence, but Levi believes that at the same time powerful influences can be built in by the strength of education and civilization. Levi obviously believes that reinforcing civilization and education against violence is crucial; the battle must be fought. Levi himself was fortunate to have made strong bonds with some inmates which were not selfish or opportunistic rather based on true solidarity. The Italian bricklayer Lorenzo Perone, finding himself in the camp as a slave laborer, befriends Levi and refuses to build shoddy walls. He slips Levi and Alberto extra rations of bread and soup for six months and becomes a model of pure and uncontaminated humanity. Levi writes:

I believe that it was really due to Lorenzo that I am alive today; and not so much for his material aid, as for his having constantly reminded me by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that there still existed a just world outside our own, something and someone still pure and whole, not corrupt, not savage, extraneous to hatred and terror; something difficult to define, a remote possibility of good, but for which it was worth surviving. (*Survival* 121)

Levi's memoir has profundity enough to make readers aware of the existential angst common to entire humanity. Frederic D. Homer writes, "Whether we are attacked by life as Levi was, or live lives of quiet contemplation as an ascetic, we are constantly faced with agonizing choices. Levi's work prepares us to think about possible futures as well as how to face the everyday trials of life—so ordinary to others and often so desperate to ourselves" (4). However, Levi never forgot

the void and derangement of his camp experience which probably resulted in his eventual suicide. All the same, his works inspire a voluminous stream of scholarly studies and academic conferences in all the major languages of the world. His influence can be found in such disparate places as pop music and literature, films and theater. The title of Tim Blake Nelson's 2001 film *The Grey Zone* comes from a chapter in the book *The Drowned and the Saved*. The film narrates the story of the Jewish Sonderkommando in the Auschwitz death camp in October 1944. Despite his apparent suicide, the following lines of Levi seem to sum up his philosophy of life and his continuing legacy in the world: "Now nobody can know for how long and under what trials his soul can resist before yielding or breaking. Every human being possesses a reserve of strength whose extent is unknown to him, be it large, small or nonexistent, and only through extreme adversity can we evaluate it" (qtd. in Homer 17).

While the devastation and the illegitimate annihilation of millions of human lives can never be edifying or constructive, the literature generated in response to the Holocaust, particularly the memoirs of survivors, explores the fortitude and indefatigability of humanity. It is sad but true that throughout history many breakthrough advancements in the arena of international human rights have been the result of catastrophic wars claiming millions of lives. However, all prior developments in this regard seem diminutive considering the impact of the Holocaust on the creation of the international law of human rights (Buerghenthal 3). More and more international tribunals and institutions have been and continue to be created to give autonomy to individuals to assert their international human rights directly against state-sponsored machinery that has violated them. This paper concludes on a note of hope and optimism through a quote by Margaret Atwood: "I hope that people will finally come to realize that there is only one 'race' – the human race and that we all are members of it" (qtd. in Brown 24).

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