

6.1. Excerpt from *Night* by Elie Wiesel

Elie Wiesel, a survivor, was born in Sighet, Transylvania, in 1928. Imprisoned as a young teen in Birkenau, Auschwitz, Buna, Gleiwitz, and finally liberated from Buchenwald, Wiesel writes about his experiences in Night.

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At four o'clock in the afternoon of the same day, as usual the bell summoned all the heads of the blocks to go and report.

They came back shattered. They could only just open their lips enough to say the word: evacuation. The camp was to be emptied, and we were to be sent farther back. Where to? To somewhere right in the depths of Germany, to other camps; there was no shortage of them.

“When?”

“Tomorrow evening.”

“Perhaps the Russians will arrive first.”

“Perhaps.”

We knew perfectly well that they would not.

The camp had become a hive. People ran about, shouting at one another. In all the blocks, preparations for the journey were going on. I had forgotten about my bad foot [Note: Wiesel had recently had an infection on the sole of his foot drained]. A doctor came into the room and announced:

“Tomorrow, immediately after nightfall, the camp will set out. Block after block. Patients will stay in the infirmary. They will not be evacuated.”

This news made us think. Were the SS going to leave hundreds of prisoners to strut about in the hospital blocks, waiting for their liberators? Were they going to let the Jews hear the twelfth stroke sound? Obviously not.

“All of the invalids will be summarily killed,” said the faceless one. “And sent to the crematory in a final batch.”

“The camp is certain to be mined,” said another. “The moment the evacuation’s over, it’ll blow up.”

As for me, I was not thinking about death, but I did not want to be separated from my father. We had already suffered so much, borne so much together; this was not the time to be separated.

I ran outside to look for him. The snow was thick, and the windows of the blocks were veiled with frost. One shoe in my hand, because it would not go onto my right foot, I ran on, feeling neither pain nor cold.

“What shall we do?”

My father did not answer.

“What shall we do, father?”

He was lost in thought. The choice was in our hands. For once we could decide our fate for ourselves. We could both stay in the hospital, where I could, thanks to my doctor, get him entered as a patient or a nurse. Or else we could follow the others.

“Well, what shall we do, father?”

He was silent.

“Let’s be evacuated with the others,” I said to him.

He did not answer. He looked at my foot.

“Do you think you can walk?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Let’s hope that we shan’t regret it, Eliezer.”

I learned after the war the fate of those who had stayed behind in the hospital. They were quite simply liberated by the Russians two days after the evacuation. ...

[The next day]

Two o’clock in the afternoon. The snow was still coming down thickly.

The time was passing quickly now. Dusk had fallen. The day was disappearing in a monochrome of gray.

The head of the block suddenly remembered that he had forgotten to clean out the block. He ordered four prisoners to wash the wooden floor. . . .An hour before leaving the camp! Why? For whom?

“For the liberating army,” he cried. “So that they’ll realize there were men living here and not pigs.”

Were we men then? The block was cleaned from top to bottom, washed in every corner.

At six o’clock the bell rang. The death knell. The burial. The procession was about to begin its march.

“Form up! Quickly!”

In a few minutes we were all in rows, by blocks. Night had fallen. Everything was in order, according to the prearranged plan.

The searchlights came on. Hundreds of armed SS men rose up out of the darkness, accompanied by sheepdogs. The snow never ceased.

The gates of the camp opened. It seemed that an even darker night was waiting for us on the other side.

The first blocks began to march. We waited. We had to wait for the departure of the fifty-six blocks who came before us. It was very cold. In my pocket I had two pieces of bread. With how much pleasure could I have eaten them! But I was not allowed to. Not yet.

Our turn was coming: Block 53 . . . Block 55. . .

Block 57, forward march!

It snowed relentlessly.