*Night,* by Elie Wiesel, documents the consequences of prejudice and hate, and it raises important questions about how to best live our lives.

Consider the following questions this text asks us to answer:

What is the source of hate? What is the essence of love? What does it mean to be spiritual or have faith? What does it mean to have an identity? What is the value of family?

How did you react to these texts? How can they help us rethink the world we live in? What passages impacted you the most? What did you learn from reading these texts? What is the value of reflecting on the past through writing and art?

How can we live in a world that is free, just, and safe? Why is it important to be not just empathetic, but compassionate? How can we stand up for something or someone? What act of love have you read about or heard of and how did it affect you? Why are these texts still important to read today? How do genocides happen? What valuable lessons do these texts contain about how we think politically and converse about politics? How do our conceptions regarding race, history, religion, sexuality, geography, age, and gender influence our conversations? Did this text make you think about patriotism?

What is the kindest thing someone has done for you? What is the kindest thing you have done for someone else? Does being kind sometimes mean being brave? What act of love have you witnessed and how did it affect you? Did you have any conversations about these texts with your family or friends? What did you talk about?

DIRECTIONS:

Pick one passage from the list on the back of this sheet. You may work individually or with one other person. Two groups may not present on the same passage. Create a digital essay with a voiceover, images, or videos. One person should submit a 3-minute digital essay and two-person groups should submit a 6-minute digital essay. Follow these directions for the digital essay (you should write an essay or outline before recording your voice):

1. Introduce yourself and provide the context of the passage, including the title of the book.

2. Read the passage out loud.

3. Describe your emotional reaction to the passage and describe how the passage relates to the entire text.

4. Answer at least one of the questions above.

5. Find historical, political, and personal images, and create video clips that relate to your words.

6. Bring your files to class, where you can use iMovie or WeVideo to create a video essay. Then, upload your digital essay to the Google Drive shared folder or share it with me.

7. Play the video essay in class and discuss other video essays.

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4-5

One day I asked my father to find me a master who could guide me in my studies of Kabbalah. "You are too young for that. Maimonides tells us that one must be thirty before venturing into the world of mysticism, a world fraught with peril. First you must study the basic subjects, those you are able to comprehend." My father was a cultured man, rather unsentimental. He rarely displayed his feelings, not even within his family, and was more involved with the welfare of others than with that of his own kin. The Jewish community of Sighet held him in highest esteem; his advice on public and even private matters was frequently sought. There were four of us children. Hilda, the eldest; then Bea; I was the third and the only son; Tzipora was the youngest. My parents ran a store. Hilda and Bea helped with the work. As for me, my place was in the house of study, or so they said. "There are no Kabbalists in Sighet," my father would often tell me. He wanted to drive the idea of studying Kabbalah from my mind. In vain. I succeeded on my own in finding a master for myself in the person of Moishe the Beadle. He had watched me one day as I prayed at dusk. "Why do you cry when you pray?" he asked, as though he knew me well. "I don't know," I answered, troubled. I had never asked myself that question. I cried because because something inside me felt the need to cry. That was all I knew. "Why do you pray?" he asked after a moment. Why did I pray? Strange question. Why did I live? Why did I breathe? "I don't know," I told him, even more troubled and ill at ease. "I don't know." From that day on, I saw him often. He explained to me, with 4 great emphasis, that every question possessed a power that was lost in the answer… Man comes closer to God through the questions he asks Him, he liked to say. Therein lies true dialogue. Man asks and God replies. But we don't understand His replies. We cannot understand them. Because they dwell in the depths of our souls and remain there until we die. The real answers, Eliezer, you will find only within yourself. "And why do you pray, Moishe?" I asked him. "I pray to the God within me for the strength to ask Him the real questions." We spoke that way almost every evening, remaining in the synagogue long after all the faithful had gone, sitting in the semidarkness where only a few half-burnt candles provided a flickering light. One evening, I told him how unhappy I was not to be able to find in Sighet a master to teach me the Zohar, the Kabbalistic works, the secrets of Jewish mysticism. He smiled indulgently. After a long silence, he said, "There are a thousand and one gates allowing entry into the orchard of mystical truth. Every human being has his own gate. He must not err and wish to enter the orchard through a gate other than his own. That would present a danger not only for the one entering but also for those who are already inside." And Moishe the Beadle, the poorest of the poor of Sighet, spoke to me for hours on end about the Kabbalah's revelations and its mysteries. Thus began my initiation. Together we would read, over and over again, the same page of the Zohar. Not to learn it by heart but to discover within the very essence of divinity. And in the course of those evenings I became convinced that Moishe the Beadle would help me enter eternity, into that time when question and answer would become ONE.

6-7 Moishe’s experience at the camp

AND THEN, one day all foreign Jews were expelled from Sighet. And Moishe the Beadle was a foreigner. Crammed into cattle cars by the Hungarian police, they cried silently. Standing on the station platform, we too were crying. The train disappeared over the horizon; all that was left was thick, dirty smoke. Behind me, someone said, sighing, "What do you expect? That's war… " The deportees were quickly forgotten. A few days after they left, it was rumored that they were in Galicia, working, and even that they were content with their fate. Days went by. Then weeks and months. Life was normal again. A calm, reassuring wind blew through our homes. The shopkeepers were doing good business, the students lived among their books, and the children played in the streets. One day, as I was about to enter the synagogue, I saw Moishe the Beadle sitting on a bench near the entrance. He told me what had happened to him and his companions. The train with the deportees had crossed the Hungarian border and, once in Polish territory, had been taken over by the Gestapo. The train had stopped. The Jews were ordered to get off and onto waiting trucks. The trucks headed toward a forest. There everybody was ordered to get out. They were forced to dig huge trenches. When they had finished their work, the men from the Gestapo began theirs. Without passion or haste, they shot their prisoners, who were forced to approach the trench one by one and offer their necks. Infants were tossed into the air and used as targets for the machine guns. This took place in the Galician forest, near Kolomay. How had he, Moishe the Beadle, been able to escape? By a miracle. He was wounded in the leg and left for dead… 6 Day after day, night after night, he went from one Jewish house to the next, telling his story and that of Malka, the young girl who lay dying for three days, and that of Tobie, the tailor who begged to die before his sons were killed. Moishe was not the same. The joy in his eyes was gone. He no longer sang. He no longer mentioned either God or Kabbalah. He spoke only of what he had seen. But people not only refused to believe his tales, they refused to listen. Some even insinuated that he only wanted their pity, that he was imagining things. Others flatly said that he had gone mad. As for Moishe, he wept and pleaded: "Jews, listen to me! That's all I ask of you. No money. No pity. Just listen to me!" he kept shouting in synagogue, between the prayer at dusk and the evening prayer. Even I did not believe him. I often sat with him, after services, and listened to his tales, trying to understand his grief. But all I felt was pity. "They think I'm mad," he whispered, and tears, like drops of wax, flowed from his eyes. Once, I asked him the question: "Why do you want people to believe you so much? In your place I would not care whether they believed me or not… " He closed his eyes, as if to escape time. "You don't understand," he said in despair. "You cannot understand. I was saved miraculously. I succeeded in coming back. Where did I get my strength? I wanted to return to Sighet to describe to you my death so that you might ready yourselves while there is still time. Life? I no longer care to live. I am alone. But I wanted to come back to warn you. Only no one is listening to me …" This was toward the end of 1942.

11-12 the ghetto

TWO GHETTOS were created in Sighet. A large one in the center of town occupied four streets, and another smaller one extended over several alleyways on the outskirts of town. The street we lived on, Serpent Street, was in the first ghetto. We therefore could remain in our house. But, as it occupied a corner, the windows facing the street outside the ghetto had to be sealed. We gave some of our rooms to relatives who had been driven out of their homes. Little by little life returned to "normal." The barbed wire that encircled us like a wall did not fill us with real fear. In fact, we felt this was not a bad thing; we were entirely among ourselves. A 11 small Jewish republic…A Jewish Council was appointed, as well as a Jewish police force, a welfare agency, a labor committee, a health agency—a whole governmental apparatus. People thought this was a good thing. We would no longer have to look at all those hostile faces, endure those hate-filled stares. No more fear. No more anguish. We would live among Jews, among brothers… Of course, there still were unpleasant moments. Every day, the Germans came looking for men to load coal into the military trains. Volunteers for this kind of work were few. But apart from that, the atmosphere 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. The ghetto was ruled by neither German nor Jew; it was ruled by delusion.

16-17 leaving

AT LAST, at one o'clock in the afternoon came the signal to leave. There was joy, yes, joy. People must have thought there could be no greater torment in God's hell than that of being stranded here, on the sidewalk, among the bundles, in the middle of the street under a blazing sun. Anything seemed preferable to that. They began to walk without another glance at the abandoned streets, the dead, empty houses, the gardens, the tombstones… On everyone's back, there was a sack. In everyone's eyes, tears and distress. Slowly, heavily, the procession advanced toward the gate of the ghetto. And there I was, on the sidewalk, watching them file past, unable to move. Here came the Chief Rabbi, hunched over, his face strange looking without a beard, a bundle on his back. His very presence in the procession was enough to make the scene seem surreal. It was like a page torn from a book, a historical novel, perhaps, dealing with the captivity in Babylon or the Spanish Inquisition. They passed me by, one after the other, my teachers, my friends, the others, some of whom I had once feared, some of whom I had found ridiculous, all those whose lives I had shared for years. There they went, defeated, their bundles, their lives in tow, having left behind their homes, their childhood. They passed me by, like beaten dogs, with never a glance in my direction. They must have envied me. The procession disappeared around the corner. A few steps more and they were beyond the ghetto walls. The street resembled fairgrounds deserted in haste. There was a little of everything: suitcases, briefcases, bags, knives, dishes, banknotes, papers, faded portraits. All the things one planned to take along and finally left behind. They had ceased to matter. Open rooms everywhere. Gaping doors and windows looked out into the void. It all belonged to everyone since it no longer belonged to anyone. It was there for the taking. An open tomb. A summer sun.

23 the train

LYING DOWN was not an option, nor could we all sit down. We decided to take turns sitting. There was little air. The lucky ones found themselves near a window; they could watch the blooming countryside flit by. After two days of travel, thirst became intolerable, as did the heat. Freed of normal constraints, some of the young let go of their inhibitions and, under cover of darkness, caressed one another, without any thought of others, alone in the world. The others pretended not to notice. There was still some food left. But we never ate enough to satisfy our hunger. Our principle was to economize, to save for tomorrow. Tomorrow could be worse yet. The train stopped in Kaschau, a small town on the Czechoslovakian border. We realized then that we were not staying in Hungary. Our eyes opened. Too late. The door of the car slid aside. A German officer stepped in accompanied by a Hungarian lieutenant, acting as his interpreter. "From this moment on, you are under the authority of the German Army. Anyone who still owns gold, silver, or watches must hand them over now. Anyone who will be found to have kept any of these will be shot on the spot. Secondly, anyone who is ill should report to the hospital car. That's all." The Hungarian lieutenant went around with a basket and retrieved the last possessions from those who chose not to go on tasting the bitterness of fear. "There are eighty of you in the car," the German officer added. "If anyone goes missing, you will all be shot, like dogs." The two disappeared. The doors clanked shut. We had fallen into the trap, up to our necks. The doors were nailed, the way back irrevocably cut off. The world had become a hermetically sealed cattle car.

24-25, 28 Mrs. Schachter’s vision

THERE WAS A WOMAN among us, a certain Mrs. Schächter. She was in her fifties and her ten-year-old son was with her, crouched in a corner. Her husband and two older sons had been deported with the first transport, by mistake. The separation had totally shattered her. I knew her well. A quiet, tense woman with piercing eyes, she had been a frequent guest in our house. Her husband was a pious man who spent most of his days and nights in the house of study. It was she who supported the family. Mrs. Schächter had lost her mind. On the first day of the journey, she had already begun to moan. She kept asking why she had been separated from her family. Later, her sobs and screams became hysterical. On the third night, as we were sleeping, some of us sitting, huddled against each other, some of us standing, a piercing cry broke the silence: "Fire! I see a fire! I see a fire!" There was a moment of panic. Who had screamed? It was Mrs. Schächter. Standing in the middle of the car, in the faint light filtering through the windows, she looked like a withered tree in a field of wheat. She was howling, pointing through the window: "Look! Look at this fire! This terrible fire! Have mercy on me!" Some pressed against the bars to see. There was nothing. Only the darkness of night. It took us a long time to recover from this harsh awakening. We were still trembling, and with every screech of the wheels, we felt the abyss opening beneath us. Unable to still our anguish, we tried to reassure each other: "She is mad, poor woman …" Someone had placed a damp rag on her forehead. But she nevertheless continued to scream: "Fire! I see a fire!" Her little boy was crying, clinging to her skirt, trying to hold her hand: "It's nothing, Mother! There's nothing there…Pleas e sit down… " He pained me even more than did his mother's cries. Some of the women tried to calm her: "You'll see, you'll find your husband and sons again…I n a few days… " She continued to scream and sob fitfully. "Jews, listen to me," she cried. "I see a fire! I see flames, huge flames!" It was as though she were possessed by some evil spirit. We tried to reason with her, more to calm ourselves, to catch our breath, than to soothe her: "She is hallucinating because she is thirsty, poor woman … That's why she speaks of flames devouring her … "

28

We had forgotten Mrs. Schächter's existence. Suddenly there was a terrible scream: "Jews, look! Look at the fire! Look at the flames!" And as the train stopped, this time we saw flames rising from a tall chimney into a black sky. Mrs. Schächter had fallen silent on her own. Mute again, indifferent, absent, she had returned to her corner. We stared at the flames in the darkness. A wretched stench floated in the air. Abruptly, our doors opened. Strange-looking creatures, dressed in striped jackets and black pants, jumped into the wagon. Holding flashlights and sticks, they began to strike at us left and right, shouting: "Everybody out! Leave everything inside. Hurry up!" We jumped out. I glanced at Mrs. Schächter. Her little boy was still holding her hand. In front of us, those flames. In the air, the smell of burning flesh. It must have been around midnight. We had arrived. In Birkenau.

29 Elie’s family separates

THE BELOVED OBJECTS that we had carried with us from place to place were now left behind in the wagon and, with them, finally, our illusions. Every few yards, there stood an SS man, his machine gun trained on us. Hand in hand we followed the throng. An SS came toward us wielding a club. He commanded: "Men to the left! Women to the right!" Eight words spoken quietly, indifferently, without emotion. Eight simple, short words. Yet that was the moment when I left my mother. There was no time to think, and I already felt my father's hand press against mine: we were alone. In a fraction of a second I could see my mother, my sisters, move to the right. Tzipora was holding Mother's hand. I saw them walking farther and farther away; Mother was stroking my sister's blond hair, as if to protect her. And I walked on with my father, with the men. I didn't know that this was the moment in time and the place where I was leaving my mother and Tzipora forever. I kept walking, my father holding my hand.

32 the truck

He seemed to be telling the truth. Not far from us, flames, huge flames, were rising from a ditch. Something was being burned there. A truck drew close and unloaded its hold: small children. Babies! Yes, I did see this, with my own eyes … children thrown into the flames. (Is it any wonder that ever since then, sleep tends to elude me?) So that was where we were going. A little farther on, there was another, larger pit for adults. I pinched myself: Was I still alive? Was I awake? How was it possible that men, women, and children were being burned and that the world kept silent? No. All this could not be real. A nightmare perhaps…Soo n I would wake up with a start, my heart pounding, and find that I was back in the room of my childhood, with my books…

34 “the first night in camp”

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.

36-37 “We were incapable of thinking”

Suddenly someone threw his arms around me in a hug: Yehiel, the Sigheter rebbe's brother. He was weeping bitterly. I thought he was crying with joy at still being alive. "Don't cry, Yehiel," I said. "Don't waste your tears …" "Not cry? We're on the threshold of death. Soon, we shall be inside… Do you understand? Inside. How could I not cry?" I watched darkness fade through the bluish skylights in the roof. I no longer was afraid. I was overcome by fatigue. The absent no longer entered our thoughts. One spoke of them—who knows what happened to them?—but their fate was not on our minds. We were incapable of thinking. Our senses were numbed, everything was fading into a fog. We no longer clung to anything. The instincts of self-preservation, of self defense, of pride, had all deserted us. In one terrifying moment of lucidity, I thought of us as damned souls wandering through the void, souls condemned to wander through space until the end of time, seeking redemption, seeking oblivion, without any hope of finding either.

37 “withered trees”

The night had passed completely. The morning star shone in the sky. I too had become a different person. The student of Talmud, the child I was, had been consumed by the flames. All that was left was a shape that resembled me. My soul had been invaded—and devoured—by a black flame. So many events had taken place in just a few hours that I had completely lost all notion of time. When had we left our homes? And the ghetto? And the train? Only a week ago? One night? One single night? How long had we been standing in the freezing wind? One hour? A single hour? Sixty minutes? Surely it was a dream.

NOT FAR FROM US, prisoners were at work. Some were digging holes, others were carrying sand. None as much as glanced at us. We were withered trees in the heart of the desert. Behind me, people were talking. I had no desire to listen to what they were saying, or to know who was speaking and what about. Nobody dared raise his voice, even though there was no guard around. We whispered. Perhaps because of the thick smoke that poisoned the air and stung the throat.

42 “A-7713”

We left the block around ten o'clock so it could be cleaned. Outside, the sun warmed us. Our morale was much improved. A good night's sleep had done its work. Friends met, exchanged a few sentences. We spoke of everything without ever mentioning those who had disappeared. The prevailing opinion was that the war was about to end. At about noon, we were brought some soup, one bowl of thick soup for each of us. I was terribly hungry, yet I refused to touch it. I was still the spoiled child of long ago. My father swallowed my ration. We then had a short nap in the shade of the block. That SS officer in the muddy barrack must have been lying: Auschwitz was, after all, a convalescent home… In the afternoon, they made us line up. Three prisoners brought a table and some medical instruments. We were told to roll up our left sleeves and file past the table. The three "veteran" prisoners, needles in hand, tattooed numbers on our left arms. I became A-7713. From then on, I had no other name. At dusk, a roll call. The work Kommandos had returned. The orchestra played military marches near the camp entrance. Tens of thousands of inmates stood in rows while the SS checked their numbers. After the roll call, the prisoners from all the blocks dispersed, looking for friends, relatives, or neighbors among the arrivals of the latest convoy.

47-48 “head of the camp”

THE CAMP looked as though it had been through an epidemic: empty and dead. Only a few "well-dressed" inmates were wandering between the blocks. Of course, we first had to pass through the showers. The head of the camp joined us there. He was a stocky man with big shoulders, the neck of a bull, thick lips, and curly hair. He gave an impression of kindness. From time to time, a smile would linger in his gray-blue eyes. Our convoy included a few ten- and twelveyear-olds. The officer took an interest in them and gave orders to bring them food. We were given new clothing and settled in two tents. We were to wait there until we could be incorporated into work Kommandos. Then we would be assigned to a block. In the evening, the Kommandos returned from the work yards. Roll call. We began looking for people we knew, asking the "veterans" which work Kommandos were the best and which block one should try to enter. All the inmates agreed: "Buna is a very good camp. One can hold one's own here. The most important thing is not to be assigned to the construction Kommando…" As if we had a choice… Our tent leader was a German. An assassin's face, fleshy lips, hands resembling a wolf's paws. The camp's food had agreed with him; he could hardly move, he was so fat. Like the head of the camp, he liked children. Immediately after our arrival, he had bread brought for them, some soup and margarine. (In fact, this affection was not entirely altruistic; there existed here a veritable traffic of children among homosexuals, I learned later.)

52-53 patience

"All right, son. Come back to see me when you feel better. But don't wait for me to call you!" I went back to see him a week later. With the same excuse: I still was not feeling better. He did not seem surprised, and I don't know whether he believed me. Yet he most likely was pleased that I had come back on my own, as I had promised. He granted me a further delay. A few days after my visit, the dentist's office was shut down. He had been thrown into prison and was about to be hanged. It appeared that he had been dealing in the prisoners' gold teeth for his own benefit. I felt no pity for him. In fact, I was pleased with what was happening to him: my gold crown was safe. It could be useful to me one day, to buy something, some bread or even time to live. At that moment in time, all that mattered to me was my daily bowl of soup, my crust of stale bread. The bread, the soup— those were my entire life. I was nothing but a body. Perhaps even less: a famished stomach. The stomach alone was measuring time.

IN THE WAREHOUSE, I often worked next to a young Frenchwoman. We did not speak: she did not know German and I did not understand French. I thought she looked Jewish, though she passed for "Aryan." She was a forced labor inmate. One day when Idek was venting his fury, I happened to cross his path. He threw himself on me like a wild beast, beating me in the chest, on my head, throwing me to the ground and picking me up again, crushing me with ever more violent blows, until I was covered in blood. As I bit my lips in order not to howl with pain, he must have mistaken my silence for defiance and so he continued to hit me harder and harder. Abruptly, he calmed down and sent me back to work as if nothing had happened. As if we had taken part in a game in which both roles were of equal importance. I dragged myself to my corner. I was aching all over. I felt a cool hand wiping the blood from my forehead. It was the French girl. She was smiling her mournful smile as she slipped me a crust of bread. She looked straight into my eyes. I knew she wanted to talk to me but that she was paralyzed with fear. She remained like that for some time, and then her face lit up and she said, in almost perfect German: "Bite your lips, little brother…Don't cry. Keep your anger, your hate, for another day, for later. The day will come but not now…Wait. Clench your teeth and wait … "

65 “where is God?”

But the third rope was still moving: the child, too light, was still breathing… 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—hanging here from this gallows… " That night, the soup tasted of corpses.

69 faith

YOM KIPPUR. The Day of Atonement. Should we fast? The question was hotly debated. To fast could mean a more certain, more rapid death. In this place, we were always fasting. It was Yom Kippur year-round. But there were those who said we should fast, precisely because it was dangerous to do so. We needed to show God that even here, locked in hell, we were capable of singing His praises. I did not fast. First of all, to please my father who had forbidden me to do so. And then, there was no longer any reason for me to fast. I no longer accepted God's silence. As I swallowed my ration of soup, I turned that act into a symbol of rebellion, of protest against Him. And I nibbled on my crust of bread. Deep inside me, I felt a great void opening.

72 “abandoned by the whole world”

Yes, we were ready. So were the SS doctors. Dr. Mengele was holding a list: our numbers. He nodded to the Blockalteste: we can begin! As if this were a game. The first to go were the "notables" of the block, the Stubenalteste, the Kapos, the foremen, all of whom were in perfect physical condition, of course! Then came the ordinary prisoners' turns. Dr. Mengele looked them over from head to toe. From time to time, he noted a number. I had but one thought: not to have my number taken down and not to show my left arm. In front of me, there were only Tibi and Yossi. They passed. I had time to notice that Mengele had not written down their numbers. Someone pushed me. It was my turn. I ran without looking back. My head was spinning: you are too skinny…you are too weak…yo u are too skinny, you are good for the ovens … The race seemed endless; I felt as though I had been running for years…Yo u are too skinny, you are too weak … At last I arrived. Exhausted. When I had caught my breath, I asked Yossi and Tibi: "Did they write me down?" "No," said Yossi. Smiling, he added, "Anyway, they couldn't have. You were running too fast.… I began to laugh. I was happy. I felt like kissing him. At that moment, the others did not matter! They had not written me down. Those whose numbers had been noted were standing apart, abandoned by the whole world. Some were silently weeping.

87 “We were masters of nature”

When I became conscious of myself again, I tried to slow my pace somewhat. But there was no way. These human waves were rolling forward and would have crushed me like an ant. By now, I moved like a sleepwalker. I sometimes closed my eyes and it was like running while asleep. Now and then, someone kicked me violently from behind and I would wake up. The man in back of me was screaming, "Run faster. If you don't want to move, let us pass you." But all I had to do was close my eyes to see a whole world pass before me, to dream of another life. The road was endless. To allow oneself to be carried by the mob, to be swept away by blind fate. When the SS were tired, they were replaced. But no one replaced us. Chilled to the bone, our throats parched, famished, out of breath, we pressed on. We were the masters of nature, the masters of the world. We had transcended everything—death, fatigue, our natural needs. We were stronger than cold and hunger, stronger than the guns and the desire to die, doomed and rootless, nothing but numbers, we were the only men on earth. At last, the morning star appeared in the gray sky. A hesitant light began to hover on the horizon. We were exhausted, we had lost all strength, all illusion.

94-95 Juliek’s violin

"FATHER, ARE YOU THERE?" I asked as soon as I was able to utter a word. I knew that he could not be far from me. "Yes!" a voice replied from far away, as if from another world. "I am trying to sleep." He was trying to sleep. Could one fall asleep here? Wasn't it dangerous to lower one's guard, even for a moment, when death could strike at any time? Those were my thoughts when I heard the sound of a violin. A violin in a dark barrack where the dead were piled on top of the living? Who was this madman who played the violin here, at the edge of his own grave? Or was it a hallucination? It had to be Juliek. He was playing a fragment of a Beethoven concerto. Never before had I heard such a beautiful sound. In such silence. How had he succeeded in disengaging himself? To slip out from under my body without my feeling it? The darkness enveloped us. All I could hear was the violin, and it was as if Juliek's soul had become his bow. He was playing his life. His whole being was gliding over the strings. His unfulfilled hopes. His charred past, his extinguished future. He played that which he would never play again. I shall never forget Juliek. How could I forget this concert given before an audience of the dead and dying? Even today, when I hear that particular piece by Beethoven, my eyes close and out of the darkness emerges the pale and melancholy face of my Polish comrade bidding farewell to an audience of dying men. I don't know how long he played. I was overcome by sleep. When I awoke at daybreak, I saw Juliek facing me, hunched over, dead. Next to him lay his violin, trampled, an eerily poignant little corpse.

100-101 tossing bread

WE RECEIVED no food. We lived on snow; it took the place of bread. The days resembled the nights, and the nights left in our souls the dregs of their darkness. The train rolled slowly, often halted for a few hours, and continued. It never stopped snowing. We remained lying on the floor for days and nights, one on top of the other, never uttering a word. We were nothing but frozen bodies. Our eyes closed, we merely waited for the next stop, to unload our dead.

THERE FOLLOWED days and nights of traveling. Occasionally, we would pass through German towns. Usually, very early in the morning. German laborers were going to work. They would stop and look at us without surprise. One day when we had come to a stop, a worker took a piece of bread out of his bag and threw it into a wagon. There was a stampede. Dozens of starving men fought desperately over a few crumbs. The worker watched the spectacle with great interest.

YEARS LATER, I witnessed a similar spectacle in Aden. Our ship's passengers amused themselves by throwing coins to the "natives," who dove to retrieve them. An elegant Parisian lady took great pleasure in this game. When I noticed two children desperately fighting in the water, one trying to strangle the other, I implored the lady: "Please, don't throw any more coins!" "Why not?" said she. "I like to give charity…"

IN THE WAGON where the bread had landed, a battle had ensued. Men were hurling themselves against each other, trampling, tearing at and mauling each other. Beasts of prey unleashed, animal hate in their eyes. An extraordinary vitality possessed them, sharpening their teeth and nails. A crowd of workmen and curious passersby had formed all along the train. They had undoubtedly never seen a train with this kind of cargo. Soon, pieces of bread were falling into the wagons from all sides. And the spectators observed these emaciated creatures ready to kill for a crust of bread. A piece fell into our wagon. I decided not to move. Anyway, I knew that I would not be strong enough to fight off dozens of violent men! I saw, not far from me, an old man dragging himself on all fours. He had just detached himself from the struggling mob. He was holding one hand to his heart. At first I thought he had received a blow to his chest. Then I understood: he was hiding a piece of bread under his shirt. With lightning speed he pulled it out and put it to his mouth. His eyes lit up, a smile, like a grimace, illuminated his ashen face. And was immediately extinguished. A shadow had lain down beside him. And this shadow threw itself over him. Stunned by the blows, the old man was crying: "Meir, my little Meir! Don't you recognize me … You're killing your father… I have bread…for you too … for you too… " He collapsed. But his fist was still clutching a small crust. He wanted to raise it to his mouth. But the other threw himself on him. The old man mumbled something, groaned, and died. Nobody cared. His son searched him, took the crust of bread, and began to devour it. He didn't get far. Two men had been watching him. They jumped him. Others joined in. When they withdrew, there were two dead bodies next to me, the father and the son. I was sixteen

112-113 father’s death

When I came down from my bunk after roll call, I could see his lips trembling; he was murmuring something. I remained more than an hour leaning over him, looking at him, etching his bloody, broken face into my mind. Then I had to go to sleep. I climbed into my bunk, above my father, who was still alive. The date was January 28, 1945. I WOKE UP AT DAWN on January 29. On my father's cot there lay another sick person. They must have taken him away before daybreak and taken him to the crematorium. Perhaps he was still breathing.… No prayers were said over his tomb. No candle lit in his memory. His last word had been my name. He had called out to me and I had not answered. I did not weep, and it pained me that I could not weep. But I was out of tears. And deep inside me, if I could have searched the recesses of my feeble conscience, I might have found something like: Free at last!…

I REMAINED IN BUCHENWALD until April 11. I shall not describe my life during that period. It no longer mattered. Since my father's death, nothing mattered to me anymore. I was transferred to the children's block, where there were six hundred of us. The Front was coming closer. I spent my days in total idleness. With only one desire: to eat. I no longer thought of my father, or my mother. From time to time, I would dream. But only about soup, an extra ration of soup.

115 Elie looks in the mirror

The resistance movement decided at that point to act. Armed men appeared from everywhere. Bursts of gunshots. Grenades exploding. We, the children, remained flat on the floor of the block. The battle did not last long. Around noon, everything was calm again. The SS had fled and the resistance had taken charge of the camp. At six o'clock that afternoon, the first American tank stood at the gates of Buchenwald.

OUR FIRST ACT AS FREE MEN was to throw ourselves onto the provisions. That's all we thought about. No thought of revenge, or of parents. Only of bread. And even when we were no longer hungry, not one of us thought of revenge. The next day, a few of the young men ran into Weimar to bring back some potatoes and clothes—and to sleep with girls. But still no trace of revenge. Three days after the liberation of Buchenwald, I became very ill: some form of poisoning. I was transferred to a hospital and spent two weeks between life and death. One day when I was able to get up, 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 as he gazed at me has never left me.