

## **TREADING BEYOND THE REMINISCENCES OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVALS AND UNFOLDING THE BARBARIC TALES: AN EXPEDITION THROUGH THE CHIMNEYS OF THE NIGHT**

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### **Abstract**

This research delves into the profound reflections of Elie Wiesel and Olga Lengyel, two distinguished Holocaust survivors, transcending their artistic expressions and the realistic portrayals of the Holocaust and concentration camps within literature. The choice of selecting this specific topic underscores the imperative to articulate the anguished cries of the voiceless, the suffering endured by European Jews, alongside the depiction of genocide and barbarism as presented in Wiesel's "Night" and Lengyel's "Five Chimneys" during World War II. Furthermore, this paper aims to investigate and analyze an air of sophistication while offering a comprehensive understanding of the historical context that highlights both the similarities and differences between the two texts. The memoirs serve as a lens through which the role of gender is examined, emphasizing experiences that are complex and providing a vivid representation of life and survival in ghettos. Readers are drawn into the harrowing depths of hell where individuals were compelled to survive in the dire consequences. These literary works exemplify the atrocities of war, the brutality and destruction, the haunting silences, and the encounters of millions, alongside the unsettling array of physical and psychological conditions experienced during their deportations and transfers to the camps. Through a meticulous analysis and a close reading of both the texts, this essay scrutinizes the atmosphere of Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and Birkenau. Additionally, the authors contrast these elements with more personal and autobiographical narratives. Thus, the synthesis of textual origins facilitates a comparison and a striking contrast when viewed from a broader perspective that emphasizes the elements of authenticity.

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**Keywords:** Holocaust Literature, Elie Wiesel, Olga Lengyel, Holocaust, Survivors, Concentration Camps, Auschwitz, Personal Narratives, Gender and Survival, Genocide, Human Cruelty, Memoirs, Historical Backdrop, Authenticity in Testimony, Trauma and Resilience.

### **Introduction:**

The incorporation of the Holocaust into mainstream discourse highlights Hitler's insurrection as a catastrophic calamity directed at the Slavic East. Furthermore, the psychology of self-deception, employed as a fundamental mechanism by the Nazis, facilitated the development of a distinctive ideology centered around cataclysms. The reign of terror persisted from 1939 to 1945. Indeed, the term 'Holocaust' signifies the extensive and systematic extermination of a large number of Jews by the Nazis in their attempt to cleanse Europe. Undoubtedly, this may represent the most atrocious and horrific act perpetrated by the Nazis during World War II. In addition, their relentless efforts to exterminate numerous gypsies, homosexuals, and individuals with mental disabilities further contributed to the unrestrained horrors of warfare.

As pointed out by a Holocaust Historian, Joan Miriam Ringelheim: "Every Jew, regardless of gender, was equally a victim in the holocaust" [1]. Wiesel's and Lengyel's poignant recollections provided detailed insights necessary for understanding life within the camps. Neither Wiesel nor Lengyel shied away from depicting the appalling brutalities experienced in the camps. Both acknowledged men, women, and children, regardless of their gender, and discussed how they were subjected to indiscriminate deaths. 'Night' by Elie Wiesel is set during World War II in the small town of Sighet, vividly portraying the predominant struggles and survival of a young boy and his personal experiences of the Holocaust alongside his father at Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Olga Lengyel's 'Five Chimneys' recounts her experiences and survival as a prisoner in the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz. Each narrative highlights several common themes, including the horrific events during deportation in cattle cars, the indoctrination of prisoners within the camps, and the shared inevitability of death. The bullets from the guns of the powerful Nazis, the gas in the chambers, and the flames of the crematorium all welcomed death with equal

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efficiency. However, on contrary to this, the crucial factors of age, gender, and sexuality are also significant.

The memoirs reveal inconsistencies in the perceptions of the experiences recounted by both authors. As noted by Joan Ringelheim: "if in the gas chambers or before the firing squads all Jews seemed alike to the Nazis, the path to this end was not always the same" [1]. The survivors recognized commonalities in their initial perceptions of Auschwitz and Birkenau. The dreadful conditions and the horrific atmosphere of the camps compelled both Wiesel and Lengyel to express their emotions after they eventually sought refuge from it all. Shortly after, once the relief had diminished, each survivor chronicled the fears and turmoil they faced while observing the fire and smoke rising from the chimneys around them at Birkenau, describing it as "A wretched stench floated in the air" [Wiesel: 28]. Wiesel, in *Night*, specifically observed the flames rising from a tall chimney into the dark sky. He further commented: "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" [Wiesel: 28].

### **In the Shadow of Injustice: Exploring Shared Horrors, Divergent Narratives And Fragments of Humanity in Wiesel's and Lengyel's Memoirs of Suffering And Survival**

Wiesel and Lengyel articulated a similar observation about a structural method in the categorization of prisoners within the camp, thereby validating their narratives to present these recognizable details in a manner that facilitates cross-referencing. Wiesel recounted the prisoners, illustrating: "Not far from us, prisoners were at work. Some were digging holes, others were carrying sand" [Wiesel: 37]. The Nazis did not appear to exhibit significant benevolence or additional brutality towards either gender during the initial stages. Both authors described a scene in which Nazi officials were segregating and dividing the incoming population from the train; men were directed to one side and women to the other. Each group was further instructed to separate again; to the left indicated death, while to the right suggested a harsh and likely brief existence, a notion conveyed by both Wiesel and Lengyel. At that moment, Wiesel contemplated suicide, as death seemed to him an unavoidable reality.

Lengyel also reflected on suicide, though this occurred later in her time at the camp when she understood that her family had been sent to the left, towards their deaths. As a doctor prior to her arrival at the camp, her husband had provided her with

a dose of poison, which exacerbated her dire circumstances. The sight of smoke and ash emanating from the chimneys prompted her to consider suicide as a means of sacrificing her life for her son and parents. Despite this, she remained among the prisoners, compelled to engage in collective efforts within the camp. Those who were not sent to their deaths, like Wiesel and Lengyel, were coerced and herded through showers in large groups, where their hair was shaved or cut. The similar details shared by each memoir regarding their initial impressions in the camp indicate that, at both the beginning and the end, despite their differing genders, the Nazis viewed them as equals and sought to evaluate all of them as adversaries of the state, less than human, deserving of the impending horror.

The struggles faced by women in the camps prompted an inquiry into gender classification, as these women endured brutal and inhumane tortures solely due to their sex. Although Wiesel is male, he also articulated the indignities and sufferings experienced by women, albeit he found himself at a loss for words to fully convey the underlying reasons for this. The exposure of their bodies was particularly shameful for women, as maintaining female modesty is considered a vital aspect of religiosity among Jewish women. This sentiment not only became uniquely personal for Lengyel as a woman, but Ringelheim also noted that every female survivor she interviewed "referred to the humiliating feelings and experiences surrounding her entrance to the camp" [Ringelheim: 743-744]. In her work, *Five Chimneys*, Lengyel described a "...thorough examination" of each female inmate conducted in a Nazi manner, involving oral, rectal, and vaginal inspections [28], which represented a profound humiliation and degradation. Wiesel did not reveal the physical examinations of women that highlighted the severe afflictions they faced due to their gender. Consequently, from both perspectives, it is evident that the unique vulnerabilities of women can be interpreted distinctly. One aspect involves the systematic removal of religious expectations of modesty, which caused significant shame for these women. The other aspect is the Nazis' deliberate exploitation of these gender-specific expectations, which resulted in extreme embarrassment for females. Both Wiesel and Lengyel delineated similar hassles that the camp inmates had to withstand. Wiesel while explaining the brutality uttered:

"Around FIVE O'CLOCK in the morning, we were expelled from the barrack. The Kapos were beating us again, but I no longer felt the pain. A glacial wind was enveloping us. We were naked, holding our shoes and

belts. An order:

“Run!” And we ran. After a few minutes of running a new barrack” [36].

Assaults appeared to be a common occurrence for both males and females. Wiesel emphasized that the routine beatings resembled the way farmers would whip their cattle. The “men in charge”—including the SS officers, capos, or gypsy inmates—who exerted control over the Jews, were also accountable for whipping the Jewish men and driving them from one location to another, as Wiesel noted:

“Suddenly, the silence became more oppressive. An SS officer had come in and, with him, the smell of the Angel of Death. We stared at his fleshy lips. He harangued us from the center of the barrack:

“You are in a concentration camp. In Auschwitz...”

A pause. He was observing the effect his words had produced. His face remains in my memory to this day. A tall man, in his thirties, crime written all over his forehead and his gaze. He looked at us as one would a pack of leprous dogs clinging to life.

“Remember,” he went on Remember it always, let it be graven in your memories. You are in Auschwitz. And Auschwitz is not a convalescent home. It is a concentration camp. Here, you must work. If you don’t you will go straight to the chimney. To the crematorium. Work or crematorium- the choice is yours” [38-39].

Wiesel, throughout his narrative, emphasizes the cattle-like treatment and suffering endured, likely due to his frequent transfers from one camp to another, which made him feel as though he was being herded by the Nazi officials. He wrote: “We were herded into yet another barrack, inside the Gypsy camp. We fell into five ranks” [Wiesel: 37]. In contrast, Lengyel's experience was somewhat more stable, as most of her time in the camps was spent at Auschwitz-Birkenau, where she arrived in 1944 and was occasionally moved between barracks.

The daily struggles of hunger and food deprivation in the camps were commonly recounted by both authors. Their memoirs often highlighted the dubious quality of the food they were expected to subsist on. Lengyel referred to the liquid provided to them as “surprise soup,” which contained minimal nutritional value and an assortment of foreign objects such as “...buttons, tufts of hair...keys...even mice” [Lengyel: 37]. Wiesel described the soup he received in Auschwitz as “one bowl of

thick soup" [42]. He had to make do with black coffee in the mornings and bread with margarine in the evenings.

Both Wiesel and Lengyel recognized the hierarchy present in the camps and its impact on the relationships among inmates. They often mentioned the Kapos, who were prisoners granted a limited degree of authority to oversee others and perform various administrative duties. While some Kapos were humane, others were merciless. These experiences were shared by both survivors in relation to their camp existence.

The essay effectively provides a comprehensive viewpoint on elucidating the differences in the experiences that Wiesel and Lengyel encountered in the concentration camps. On one side, Wiesel was a fifteen-year-old boy upon his arrival at the camps, while on the other side, Lengyel was a thirty-six-year-old married woman with children. It is likely due to their age disparity that they focused on different aspects, highlighting their contrasting priorities during their time in the camps and in their subsequent memoirs. Wiesel exhibited a certain naivety regarding his environment and prioritized the survival of himself and his father. In contrast, Lengyel was afforded the opportunity to observe keenly, enabling her to articulate her perspectives on Auschwitz. A man she referred to as 'L' [Lengyel: 80] urged her to participate in a resistance movement. Furthermore, he encouraged her to leverage her position in a medical facility, which would serve a significant purpose in transmitting war documents to her fellow inmates, thereby preserving hope. Consequently, she became tentatively involved in a world beyond the confines of the camp. This indicates that Lengyel analyzed and observed more than Wiesel, who was primarily focused on mere survival. The presence of their families within the camps creates a stark contrast. As previously noted, although Wiesel was separated from his mother and sister, he remained with his father, whereas Lengyel was distanced from her husband, young children, and elderly parents. Despite sharing similar experiences at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Wiesel was later transferred to the labor camp Buna [Auschwitz III-Monowitz], which may have resulted in distinctly different living conditions.

The hair removal procedures imposed on the prisoners also signify a singular approach rooted in gender. As recounted by Wiesel, all the men had their hair shaved, as he described:

"Belt and shoes in hand, I allowed myself to be dragged to the barbers. Their clippers ripped out our hair, shaving every strand from our bodies. My head was buzzing; the same thought recurring incessantly: not to be separated from my father.

Once freed from the barbers' grasp, we began to navigate through the crowd, reconnecting with friends and acquaintances. Each encounter brought us joy—indeed, joy: Thank God! You are still alive!" [35]. Lengyel corroborated the observation that some women had their hair clipped while others received special treatment, thereby altering the process entirely. Lengyel recounts her experience as one of the women selected by the Nazis, who instructed her to retain her hair. A Nazi soldier pulled her aside and commanded that her hair remain uncut; however, Lengyel recognized the potential dangers associated with such favoritism and insisted that her hair be cut, thus no longer being considered "special". [28-29]. It can be inferred that the Nazi official perceived her as an attractive woman and might have subjected her to further humiliating acts. This serves as an illustration of the gender-specific suffering that women endured in the camps.

The differences observed between the two memoirs may not stem from gender, but rather from individual experiences. Lengyel had the chance to serve in the camp infirmary and hospital, where she observed the extreme brutality and barbarism that individuals had to face in the camps. Lengyel provided a wealth of information that Wiesel did not, detailing specific experiences of others in the camps. Having worked in the infirmary, she witnessed the horrific atrocities and the intensely cruel scientific experiments that the Nazis conducted on the inmates, both male and female. She characterized these as "cruel games rather than serious quests for truth" [Lengyel: 185], as the experiments were chaotic, convoluted, and almost invariably resulted in death. Some of the gender-neutral experiments included: "inoculation of a group of inmates with a germ disease...[testing] how long a human being could exist on nothing but salt water..." [Lengyel: 186] and subjecting inmates to prolonged ice baths to examine the effects on their internal temperature adaptation. Both men and women faced the horrors of barrenness and castration. This is likely one of the rare instances where the sexual vulnerability of men was exploited in the camps, reflecting the Nazis' perception of the prisoners as human guinea pigs.

Ringelheim began his research by highlighting how women experienced a distinct form of victimization characterized by "sexual humiliation, rape, sexual exchange, pregnancy, abortion, and vulnerability to their children" [Women and Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research: 743]. The helplessness and coercion of women were indeed exploited in the camps, as noted by Lengyel. She revealed personal experiences involving a male inmate who offered to provide rations of potatoes to women in return for sexual favors. She upheld her ethics and integrity, refusing his proposition while examining the straightforward exchange that occurred among her fellow inmates.

Lengyel's inspections, observations, and interactions with her fellow inmates were significantly more militant and confrontational compared to Wiesel's experiences on the men's side of the camp. Initially, the women displayed indulgence and consideration towards one another while on the train; however, this compliance was fleeting. Throughout her time on the train and in the camp, the women exhibited a remarkable ruthlessness towards each other. She articulated that "it seemed as though the Germans constantly sought to pit us against each other, to make us competitive, spiteful and hateful" [Lengyel: 35-36]. This stands in stark contrast to the guidance provided to Wiesel and the men by the "man in charge," who advised, "let there be camaraderie among you. ...Help each other. That is the only way to survive" [41]. Wiesel noted a prevailing sense of solidarity among the male inmates, who shared their rations of bread and assisted one another in locating lost friends or relatives amidst the turmoil. In contrast, the women's camp, as depicted in Lengyel's narrative, was characterized by a bohemian and unyielding atmosphere. Women who were granted even a minor authoritative position within the barracks often seized luxuries, such as bowls for their personal use. "The washrooms would have made a fine field for a moralist's observations" [Lengyel: 35], as women resorted to stealing clothes from one another while bathing. Lengyel found that the women were provided with only the barest of necessities, including blankets ("one for every ten persons") and bowls ("twenty...for 1500 women"), which were shared among them. The combination of starvation, exhaustion, and the relentless threat of death eroded the inmates' morality, driving them to adopt feral behaviors in their desperate struggle for survival.

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According to Doris Leanna Bergen, this was not solely a female experience. She observed numerous instances of how the Nazis "reinforce divisions among prisoners" [Bergen: 121] by establishing a hierarchical system among the inmates and employing humiliation techniques targeted at specific "victim groups".

This essay has also focused on the most significant aspects in Lengyel's memoir concerning the female experience. The argument emphasized how gender has influenced the experiences of individuals in the concentration camps. Lengyel stated: "Quieted by such cunning subterfuges, we allowed ourselves to be stripped of our belongings and marched docilely to the slaughterhouses" [Chapter II: 23]. Lengyel's narrative highlighted the distinct female experiences that appeared to supplement the general camp experiences of all inmates, as portrayed in Wiesel's work. This is not intended to belittle or mock Wiesel's contributions, as he too provided a thorough analysis and perspective of a young boy grappling with his faith and moral dilemmas due to the adversities he encountered in the concentration camps.

"I shall never forget the flames that forever destroyed my faith" [Wiesel: 34]. The survivors provided a personal perspective on the experiences of millions of Jews and other victims of the Holocaust. Isolated from their homes and families, deprived of their identities and belongings, and subjected to appalling treatment and hardships were experiences common to every inmate, irrespective of gender or age. A significant factor that often rendered the experience of women in the concentration camps somewhat distinct was their sexuality, as evidenced by the memoirs of Wiesel and Lengyel, which detail their gender-specific experiences during the Holocaust. Although the experiences of men and women in the camps rarely differed, in death, they were regarded as remarkably equal to the flames of the chimneys at night.

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