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Elie Wiesel

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

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Elie Wiesel grew up in the small Romanian town of Sighet. Located in historic Transylvania, a region alternately claimed by Romania and Hungary for centuries, Sighet was known for its linguistic and cultural diversity. Wiesel’s father ran a local grocery store, where he frequently conducted business in German, Hungarian, and Romanian. Ukrainian and Russian were also commonly spoken in Sighet at the time. At home, however, the Wiesels primarily spoke Yiddish, a language traditionally spoken by Jewish people in central and eastern Europe.

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Religion was a central part of Wiesel’s early life. His mother, Sarah, was descended from a well-known family of Hasidim, a Jewish sect that emerged in Ukraine in the mid-18th century. She inspired her son to study the Hebrew scriptures, called the Torah, as well as Jewish religious law. The young Wiesel was especially fascinated by Kabbalah, a form of Jewish mysticism and folklore from which many Hasidic traditions originated. Meanwhile, his father, Shlomo, encouraged Wiesel to learn Hebrew while also pursuing a secular education.

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Notes

Though *Night* is now revered as one of the most important works of Holocaust literature, it took years for Wiesel to even consider documenting his story. For almost a decade after the war, Wiesel refused to discuss or write about what he had endured in the concentration camps. He feared he could not accurately depict the true extent of the atrocities he had witnessed. But in 1954, the French novelist François Mauriac convinced Wiesel to break his silence. During an emotional exchange, Mauriac told Wiesel that the world needed to know what had happened to him and to the millions who did not survive until liberation.

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Night began as a nearly 900-page manuscript written in Yiddish, titled *Un die Welt Hot Geshvign* (And the World Kept Silent). After several years of revisions, Wiesel edited the text down to under 200 pages. He kept the writing similarly concise, using short sentences and straightforward language throughout. The book's simple style serves to emphasize the horrors it describes, allowing each event to speak for itself. It also reflects the difficulty of putting such atrocities into words. Wiesel even referred to the book as a deposition. It was first published in France in 1958 under the new title *La Nuit* and, subsequently, in English as *Night* two years later.

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Following the publication of *Night*, Wiesel became a world-renowned expert on the Holocaust. He went on to write more than 40 books, many of them about the Jewish experience in Europe during World War II. He taught religion and philosophy at major universities and traveled the world as a speaker. In 1978, President Jimmy Carter appointed him to lead the President's Commission on the Holocaust. The commission's job was to research and recommend an appropriate commemoration for Holocaust victims. The final report, authored by Wiesel, advised the federal government to establish a memorial in the nation's capital. Its goal, the report stated, would be to encourage visitors to confront hate and prevent future genocides. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum opened in April 1993 with Wiesel as its Founding Chairman.

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Though Wiesel's human rights activism was inspired by his experiences as a Jewish Holocaust survivor, he advocated for oppressed people of all backgrounds. He spoke out in support of Cambodian refugees, victims of South Africa's apartheid regime, political prisoners in Latin America, and many others who had been deported or displaced. In his 1986 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Wiesel said, "Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant."

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