



Elie Wiesel (b. 1928) is a teacher, writer, and Nobel Peace Prize winner. Born in Romania, Wiesel, along with his family, was among millions of European Jews deported to concentration camps during the Holocaust. In 1944, the Nazis sent the family to Auschwitz, where Wiesel's mother and sister perished. Months later, when Wiesel and his father were moved to Buchenwald concentration camp, his father also died. Buchenwald was eventually liberated, and Wiesel went on to write about his experience. His many works include *Dawn* and *The Accident*, both sequels to *Night*.



AS YOU READ Pay attention to how the descriptions of life in the concentration camp compare to what you already know about the topic. Write down any questions you generate during reading.

The SS^[1] offered us a beautiful present for the new year. We had just returned from work. As soon as we passed the camp's entrance, we sensed something out of the ordinary in the air. The roll call was shorter than usual. The evening soup was distributed at great speed, swallowed as quickly. We were anxious.

I was no longer in the same block as my father. They had transferred me to another Kommando,^[2] the construction one, where twelve hours a day I hauled heavy slabs of stone. The head of my new block was a German Jew, small with piercing eyes. That evening he announced to us that henceforth no one was allowed to leave the block after the evening soup. A terrible word began to circulate soon thereafter: selection.

We knew what it meant. An SS would examine us. Whenever he found someone extremely frail—a “Muselman” was what we called those inmates—he would write down his number: good for the crematorium.

After the soup, we gathered between the bunks. The veterans told us: “You’re lucky to have been brought here so late. Today, this is paradise compared to what the camp was two years ago. Back then, Buna^[3] was a veritable hell. No water, no blankets, less soup and bread. At night, we slept almost naked and the temperature was thirty below. We were collecting corpses by the hundreds every day. Work was very hard. Today, this is a little paradise. The Kapos^[4] back then had orders to kill a certain number of prisoners every day. And every week, selection. A merciless selection . . . Yes, you are lucky.”

“Enough! Be quiet!” I begged them. “Tell your stories tomorrow, or some other day.”

They burst out laughing. They were not veterans for nothing. “Are you scared? We too were scared. And, at that time, for good reason.”

The old men stayed in their corner, silent, motionless, hunted-down creatures. Some were praying.

One more hour. Then we would know the verdict: death or **reprieve**.

And my father? I first thought of him now. How would he pass selection? He had aged so much. . . .

Our *Blockälteste*^[5] had not been outside a concentration camp since 1933. He had already been through all the slaughterhouses, all the factories of death. Around nine o’clock, he came to stand in our midst:

“*Achtung!*”^[6]

There was instant silence.

“Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you.” For the first time, his voice quivered. “In a few moments, selection will take place. You will have to undress completely. Then you will go, one by one, before the SS doctors. I hope you will all pass. But you must try to increase your chances. Before you go into the next room, try to move your limbs, give yourself some color. Don’t walk slowly, run! Run as if you had the devil at your heels! Don’t look at the SS. Run, straight in front of you!”

He paused and then added:



40

50



“And most important, don’t be afraid!”

That was a piece of advice we would have loved to be able to follow.

I undressed, leaving my clothes on my cot. Tonight, there was no danger that they would be stolen.

Tibi and Yossi, who had changed Kommandos at the same time I did, came to urge me:

60 “Let’s stay together. It will make us stronger.”

Yossi was mumbling something. He probably was praying. I had never suspected that Yossi was religious. In fact, I had always believed the opposite. Tibi was silent and very pale. All the block inmates stood naked between the rows of bunks. This must be how one stands for the Last Judgment.

“They are coming!”

Three SS officers surrounded the notorious Dr. Mengele,^[7] the very same who had received us in Birkenau. The *Blockälteste* attempted a smile. He asked us:

70 “Ready?”

Yes, we were ready. So were the SS doctors. Dr. Mengele was holding a list: our numbers. He nodded to the *Blockälteste*: we can begin! As if this were a game.

The first to go were the “notables” of the block, the *Stubenälteste*,^[8] 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.

80 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 . . . you are too skinny, you are good for the ovens . . . The race seemed endless; I felt as though I had been running for years . . . You 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?”

90 “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.

THE SS OFFICERS left. The *Blockälteste* appeared, his face reflecting our collective weariness.

“It all went well. Don’t worry. Nothing will happen to anyone. Not to anyone . . .”

100 He was still trying to smile. A poor **emaciated** Jew questioned him anxiously, his voice trembling:

“But . . . sir. They *did* write me down!”

At that, the *Blockälteste* vented his anger: What! Someone refused to take his word?

“What is it now? Perhaps you think I’m lying? I’m telling you, once and for all: nothing will happen to you! Nothing! You just like to wallow in your despair, you fools!”

The bell rang, signaling that the selection had ended in the entire camp.

110 With all my strength I began to race toward Block 36; midway, I met my father. He came toward me:

“So? Did you pass?”

“Yes. And you?”

“Also. ”

We were able to breathe again. My father had a present for me: a half ration of bread, bartered for something he had found at the depot, a piece of rubber that could be used to repair a shoe.

The bell. It was already time to part, to go to bed. The bell regulated everything. It gave me orders and I **executed** them blindly. I hated that bell. Whenever I happened to dream of a better world, I imagined a universe without a bell.

120

A FEW DAYS passed. We were no longer thinking about the selection. We went to work as usual and loaded the heavy stones onto the freight cars. The rations had grown smaller; that was the only change.

We had risen at dawn, as we did every day. We had received our black coffee, our ration of bread. We were about to head to the work yard as always. The *Blockälteste* came running:

“Let’s have a moment of quiet. I have here a list of numbers. I shall read them to you. All those called will not go to work this morning; they will stay in camp.”

130

Softly, he read some ten numbers. We understood. These were the numbers from the selection. Dr. Mengele had not forgotten.

The *Blockälteste* turned to go to his room. The ten prisoners surrounded him, clinging to his clothes:

“Save us! You promised . . . We want to go to the depot, we are strong enough to work. We are good workers. We can . . . we want . . .”

He tried to calm them, to reassure them about their fate, to explain to them that staying in the camp did not mean much, had no tragic significance: “After all, I stay here every day . . .”

140

The argument was more than flimsy. He realized it and, without another word, locked himself in his room.

The bell had just rung.

“Form ranks!”

Now, it no longer mattered that the work was hard. All that mattered was to be far from the block, far from the crucible^[9] of death, from the center of hell.

I saw my father running in my direction. Suddenly, I was afraid.

“What is happening?”

150

He was out of breath, hardly able to open his mouth.

“Me too, me too . . . They told me too to stay in the camp.”

They had recorded his number without his noticing.

“What are we going to do?” I said anxiously.

But it was he who tried to reassure me:

“It’s not certain yet. There’s still a chance. Today, they will do another selection . . . a **decisive** one . . .”

I said nothing.

He felt time was running out. He was speaking rapidly, he wanted to tell me so many things. His speech became confused, his
 160 voice was choked. He knew that I had to leave in a few moments. He was going to remain alone, so alone . . .

“Here, take this knife,” he said. “I won’t need it anymore. You may find it useful. Also take this spoon. Don’t sell it. Quickly! Go ahead, take what I’m giving you!”

My inheritance . . .

“Don’t talk like that, Father.” I was on the verge of breaking into sobs. “I don’t want you to say such things. Keep the spoon and knife. You will need them as much as I. We’ll see each other tonight, after work.”

170 He looked at me with his tired eyes, veiled by despair. He insisted:

“I am asking you . . . Take it, do as I ask you, my son. Time is running out. Do as your father asks you . . .”

Our Kapo shouted the order to march.

The Kommando headed toward the camp gate. Left, right! I was biting my lips. My father had remained near the block, leaning against the wall. Then he began to run, to try to catch up with us. Perhaps he had forgotten to tell me something. . . . But we were marching too fast . . . Left, right!

180 We were at the gate. We were being counted. Around us, the **din** of military music. Then we were outside.

ALL DAY, I PLODDED AROUND like a sleepwalker. Tibi and Yossi would call out to me, from time to time, trying to reassure me. As did the Kapo who had given me easier tasks that day. I felt sick at heart. How kindly they treated me. Like an orphan. I thought: Even now, my father is helping me.

I myself didn’t know whether I wanted the day to go by quickly or not. I was afraid of finding myself alone that evening. How good it would be to die right here!

190 At last, we began the return journey. How I longed for an order to run! The military march. The gate. The camp. I ran toward Block 36.

Were there still miracles on this earth? He was alive. He had passed the second selection. He had still proved his usefulness . . . I gave him back his knife and spoon.

COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION With a partner, discuss two unexpected details from Wiesel’s description of life in the concentration camp. Explain why they were surprising, citing specific passages in your discussion.