

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Night by Elie Wiesel

## Book Information

Elie Wiesel, Night  
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This book chronicles the true and terrifying story of the author and his life as a Jew under the Nazis.

**Topics:** Biographies/Autobiographies, Biographies/Autobiographies (All); Family Life, Growing Up; History, Holocaust; People, Jewish; People, Nazis; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 9+; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Recommended Reading, Oprah's Book Club; Recommended Reading, Orbis Pictus; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks

## Main Characters

Akiba Drumer a religious man who encouraged his fellow prisoners to keep their faith in God

Chlomo Wiesel Eliezer's fifty-year-old father, who is determined to protect his son

Eliezer Wiesel the narrator of the story; a thoughtful fifteen-year-old boy who struggles to keep his humanity and his father while living in a concentration camp

Eliezer's mother Eliezer's mother, who dies in the concentration camp

Franek the intelligent Polish foreman who occasionally lets his greed get the better of him

Idek the Kapo of the warehouse Eliezer is assigned to in Buna; he is prone to bouts of violent anger

Juliek a Polish musician who cherishes his violin

Madame Schachter a middle-aged woman who is haunted by premonitions of the crematory during the train ride to Auschwitz

Meir Katz a large man who tries to help others survive in the concentration camp

Moshe the Beadle a deeply religious man who tries to warn the Jewish community of Sighet about the Germans

Rabbi Eliahou's son a young man who Eliezer remembers as running faster to rid himself of his father during the march to Gleiwitz

the Buchenwald head of the block a man who warns Eliezer that he must take care of himself in the concentration camp

the Dutch Oberkapo a kind supervisor who is accused of plotting revolt

the French girl a kind-hearted young Jewish girl who is posing as an Aryan in the concentration camp

the Jewish dentist a dentist who is punished for using gold teeth extracted from prisoners for his own gain

the little servant the gentle and loyal servant of the Dutch Oberkapo

Tzipora Wiesel Eliezer's fair-haired, seven-year-old sister, who does not survive the concentration camp

## Vocabulary

**deportation** the removal of a person or group of people from a geographical area

**exhaustion** a state of great tiredness or weariness

**inadequate** not enough

**invalids** people whose physical activity is limited due to failing health

**ration** a set amount of food or supplies

**slacken** slow down

## Synopsis

When Moshe the Beadle, a man who has been teaching young Eliezer Wiesel the mysteries of the Jewish cabbala, returns from a deportation of foreign Jews in Hungary, he reports that Jews are being murdered by the Gestapo. The community of Sighet refuses to believe him, and several years pass until the year is 1944.

In 1944, the Hungarian government becomes

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Fascist. Soon the Germans arrive and begin restricting the activities of Jewish citizens. Moshe flees. Most of the Jewish citizens are moved into two ghettos, and they are eventually deported on a densely packed train. On the third night of the train ride, a woman named Madame Schachter begins having visions of fires. The passengers are unnerved, and some beat her to silence her. Around midnight the train arrives at Birkenau, and everyone can now see the flames of the furnaces.

When Eliezer and his family disembark from the train, Eliezer's sisters and mother are quickly separated from Eliezer and his father. It is the last time Eliezer sees his mother and youngest sister. A prisoner warns Eliezer and his father to lie about their ages, and they are sent to the barracks instead of the crematory. After they are stripped of clothing, shaved, and disinfected, they are assigned to new barracks, where Eliezer's father is struck for asking where the lavatories are. Soon they are taken to Auschwitz and numbers are tattooed on their wrists.

After three weeks, Eliezer and his father are moved to Buna to work in a warehouse. Julieck, a Polish musician, explains that even though Idek the Kapo is given to bouts of violent rage, the warehouse has better conditions than many others. Soon after their arrival, Eliezer is sent to the dentist to have his gold crown pulled out. He delays the dentist for many days, and eventually the dentist is thrown into prison for taking gold for his own purposes. Eliezer's trials continue, however, when Idek targets him for a severe beating. Afterwards a young French girl comforts him. Later, when Eliezer witnesses his own father being struck by Idek, Eliezer feels frustrated with his father for not knowing how to avoid Idek's anger. Others can see that Eliezer can be hurt through his father. When Franek the foreman notices Eliezer's gold crown, he beats Eliezer's father on a daily basis until Eliezer agrees to let him have the gold-filled tooth. Soon afterward, Eliezer has another encounter with Idek, who has Eliezer whipped because Eliezer accidentally witnesses him with a girl.

One Sunday, the air-raid siren goes off. Two

cauldrons of soup are left unguarded while everyone flees for cover. The prisoners all watch with envy while one man crawls through the camp to reach the coveted food. He is killed just as he reaches the cauldron, and then the prisoners hear Buna being bombed. A week after the bombing, a boy is publicly executed. The prisoners are beyond the point where they can weep, and the only time Eliezer remembers being overcome by similar executions is when a beautiful and well-loved, young servant of a Dutch Oberkapo is hanged.

At the end of summer comes the Jewish holiday of Rosh Hashanah, and Eliezer finds himself berating the God he once loved. When Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, arrives, Eliezer and several others forego the traditional Jewish fasting. They feel that starving themselves further is life-threatening. Soon afterward a selection, or culling out of prisoners who are considered too weak to be useful, is announced. Eliezer runs fast enough to pass the test, but Eliezer's father is chosen. Eliezer goes to work at the warehouse wondering if he will ever see his father again, but at the end of the day he learns that his father has passed the second test and has been spared.

In the middle of January, Eliezer is afflicted with a painful swelling. He is forced to go to the hospital where the doctor operates on his foot. After the surgery, Eliezer is relieved to learn that his foot was not amputated, but merely drained of pus. Two days after the operation, rumors begin circulating that the Russians are advancing on Buna. Eliezer's neighbor at the hospital convinces him that anyone staying behind at the hospital instead of evacuating with the Germans will be annihilated. Still suffering from his wound, Eliezer joins his father and the other prisoners in a march to Gleiwitz. After the war, Eliezer learns that those who stayed behind in the hospital were freed a few days later.

For many miles Eliezer and his father struggle to keep up with the march. Many die along the way. When they stop to rest, Eliezer's father warns against sleeping lest they freeze to death. They crowd into a shed for shelter, and there Eliezer is

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questioned by Rabbi Eliahou, who is searching for his son. After Rabbi Eliahou leaves, Eliezer remembers seeing the son deliberately desert his weak father during the march. Eliezer quietly prays that he will never do the same to his father. When the prisoners finally reach Gleiwitz, they are packed into barracks. Many are crushed, and Eliezer finds himself on top of Juliek but cannot get up to help him. Later that night, Eliezer hears the sound of Juliek playing his violin, but in the morning he finds Juliek dead and his instrument crushed.

After three days at Gleiwitz, the prisoners are crowded onto a train. When the train halts along its journey to throw out the dead, Eliezer has to slap his nearly frozen father to prove to the other passengers that he is not a corpse. The prisoners are given no food on the train, and Eliezer sees men kill one another for scraps of bread. When the train arrives in Buchenwald, twelve men out of the hundred that boarded the car are able to get out. The rest are left for dead.

At Buchenwald, Eliezer finds it particularly difficult to help his weak father. When they become separated, Eliezer is horrified to find himself secretly wishing not to find him again. He finally finds his father burning with fever and remorsefully tends to his needs. For days Eliezer's father struggles with dysentery. The other prisoners steal his food and abuse him. The head of the block advises Eliezer to stop wasting his own meager rations on a man who is going to die. One night Eliezer's father begins crying out for water. An officer comes and clubs him in the head to silence him. After the attack, Eliezer hears his father say his name one last time. When Eliezer checks on him, he sees that his father's skull has been shattered, but he is still breathing. By morning Eliezer's father has been removed, and Eliezer never sees him again. Two and a half months later, Buchenwald is liberated. Although Eliezer is still alive, all he sees when he looks in the mirror is a corpse.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

During the period of time between his father's death and the liberation of Buchenwald, what feelings does Eliezer have?

*He feels that this was a time when he no longer possessed the ability to feel. He says that nothing mattered, and he only briefly describes his life. He is in a dreamlike state where all that matters to him is eating. He cannot even let himself feel grief for his father's death. A few days before the liberation of Buchenwald, the head of the block announces that the concentration camp is going to be liquidated. Eliezer feels devoid of hope and tormented by hunger. Even when liberation finally occurs, he can only let himself feel the desire to find food.*

### Literary Analysis

What reasons might the author have for titling this story *Night*?

*Night represents many things in this book. As a metaphor, night symbolizes the dark times that the author lives through and a time in history when the world seemed full of evil and darkness. The author also uses night as a motif throughout the novel. Near the beginning when his father's storytelling is interrupted, the author says that night fell to show that the dark times have truly begun. When the family learns they are being moved to the little ghetto, the author reiterates that night had fallen, both in the physical sense and in the metaphorical sense. On the train, Madame Schachter's visions of the fires make the night unbearable. The author goes on to say that his life turns into one long night, and even the final loss of his father occurs in the night.*

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## Inferential Comprehension

Just before Buna is liberated, a man at the hospital tells Eliezer, "I've got more faith in Hitler than in anyone else. He's the only one who's kept his promises, all his promises, to the Jewish people." What did the man mean by these words?

*The man is referring to the fact that Hitler promised to destroy the Jewish people and then systematically began putting people in concentration camps where millions of Jewish people were killed. During this time other people reassure the Jewish people that they are safe and the rumors of people being murdered are false. The man feels that Hitler is more determined in exterminating the Jewish people than other people are in protecting the Jewish people. This makes him feel that the situation is hopeless since the threats of harm from Hitler seem to be the only reality.*

## Constructing Meaning

Eliezer feels guilty because he believes that his actions are similar to those of Rabbi Eliahou's son, who deserts his father during the march to Gleiwitz. Do you agree or disagree with Eliezer's judgment against himself? Why or why not?

*Answers will vary. Some students will note the number of times that Eliezer makes sacrifices for his father, such as giving up food he needs himself, standing up to the men who want to throw his father off the train as a corpse, fighting crowds to bring his father the coffee, going with his father when he was marked as one of the weak ones, and trying to stop the other prisoners from abusing him at Buchenwald. Others may remark on the number of times that Eliezer feels burdened by his father's weakness and the responsibility of helping him survive. They may comment on the times when Eliezer has to force himself to think of his father's interests and the time he secretly hopes that he will not find his father again. Finally, they may feel that Eliezer's passivity during his father's final night of suffering is not unlike Rabbi Eliahou's son running to escape his own weak father.*

**Comparing and Contrasting** At the beginning of this story, Eliezer describes his community's unwillingness to believe the Germans could hurt him. Have the students read about the responses of other communities to the threat of the Nazis. Instruct them to write a paper showing how the reactions of other communities were similar to those of Sighet and how they were different.

**Recognizing Cause and Effect** Rumors and lack of information frequently keep Eliezer and his father from knowing how to act. Ask the students to make a list of the times that Eliezer and his father decide how to act based on the advice of others and the times that they decide to ignore the advice of others. Have the students explain what effect the response or lack of response to others had on the lives of Eliezer and his father.

**Responding to Literature** This book is filled with frightening and traumatic events. Have the students detail which event is most disturbing to them. Ask them to explain how they felt when they read about their chosen event and why they think the event is so troubling.

## Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors

Throughout this story, Eliezer is only vaguely aware of what is going on outside the concentration camp, but these events clearly affect what is happening in the camps. Instruct the students to make a timeline that shows the important events in the war from spring of 1944 to April of 1945. Have them include those events that Eliezer specifically mentions, such as the liberation of Auschwitz and Buchenwald.

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## Teachable Skills