

Pre-Reading Preparation**Historical Background—Auschwitz Concentration Camp**

Although Auschwitz is best known as a Death Camp for Holocaust victims, it was built originally for a different purpose. As Hitler's dream of the Nazi takeover of Europe began to unfold, Auschwitz was to have been built to house Polish political prisoners, or anyone who was considered a threat to the German occupation of Poland. The Nazis wanted to make the Poles a nation of slaves. Rudolph Höss, Kommandant at Auschwitz who had worked in concentration camps since 1934, knew he needed to build a "terror to the Poles."

Because of the proximity to lime, water and coal, the main ingredients used in the manufacture of synthetic rubber and fuel for the war effort, the IG Farbenin Company was easily recruited to a location near the Auschwitz concentration camp. In addition, the camp would provide slave labor for their factories. Heinrich Himmler had visions of ethnic Germans living in the town of Auschwitz, a model German settlement, in accordance with the basic Nazi principles of *Lebensraum* (*living space*). Hitler believed that Eastern Europe must be conquered to give Germany more physical space which would allow for a greater population and new territory to supply raw materials and food.

Hitler's plan for Auschwitz was much further-reaching. He had plans to invade Russia and exterminate large sections of the Soviet population. Within nine months of the invasion, three million Soviet prisoners were taken and two million were killed. One million were sent to Auschwitz to work.

Hitler blamed the Jews for losing WWI, and by spreading propaganda in the daily news, he encouraged the Germans to rise up against them. As the Jews began to arrive at Auschwitz, the Nazis felt no qualms about killing them because they hated them and believed the Jews had cheated the Germans and their families.

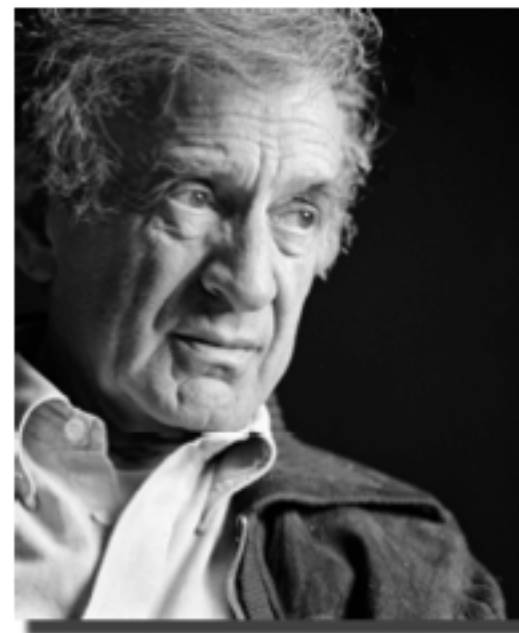
Himmler visited the Soviet Union, where he watched the Jews being executed—men, women, and children—shot in cold blood. He wanted a better way to kill them—one that was less traumatic for the murderers. A rather bizarre practice, the "euthanasia" of mentally and physically disabled adults was soon brought to Auschwitz. This "gassing" was such an efficient method of killing that it was soon used to dispose of unwanted prisoners. Because it was so expensive, the carbon monoxide that was used for euthanasia was replaced with Zyklon, a crystalline material also used to kill lice and vermin.

Adolf Eichmann, who organized the mass murder of the Jews, ordered a new rail built, terminating inside of Auschwitz-Birkenau, for easy movement of the prisoners. There were four crematoria with gas chambers attached to facilitate the extermination and disposal of great numbers of victims. The stench of burning bodies permeated the air for months on end. Kommandant Höss estimated that so many people would be exterminated that the crematoria alone would not suffice, so crematory pits were also dug at the sides of the roads. Unfortunately, his estimations were correct.

Also at Auschwitz were "standing cells," where many prisoners were crammed into one cell leaving only enough room to stand, and "starvation cells," where they were locked up until they died of starvation. The prisoners also knew that if they resisted or attempted to escape, their entire family would be tortured or murdered, so they made no attempt to resist. They often found themselves wishing, as they looked up at the aircraft overhead, that the planes would drop their bombs.

Because of the escape of a few Auschwitz prisoners and the Polish Underground, the Allies knew about the crematoria of Auschwitz and what they were used for. They would not, however, step forward to destroy them or the railways that led there, claiming their planes were needed elsewhere. The Americans did bomb the IG Farbenin factories nearby, however.

By the end of World War II, a total of ten million people had been murdered at Auschwitz and the other concentration camps. Six million were Jews.

Pre-Reading Preparation**Author Biography: Elie Wiesel**

Eliezer Wiesel (We-**ZELL**) was born on September 30, 1928 in Sighet, Transylvania, which is now part of Romania in Eastern Europe. He was the only son in a family of four children, with two older sisters, Hilda and Béa, and a younger sister, Tzipora. Having begun his study of Hebrew at the age of three, his world revolved around family, religious study, community, and God. He was a profoundly religious young man, who spent most of his time studying the Talmud and cabbala, with his mother's encouragement, and learning literature and Hebrew in deference to his father.

All Jewish inhabitants of his village were deported when Elie was just 15. Wiesel and his family were taken to Auschwitz concentration camp, where he became known simply as A-7713, the number tattooed on his arm. Elie was separated from his mother and sisters immediately on arrival at

Auschwitz, but he was able to stay with his father for a year until his father died of dysentery, starvation, and exhaustion at Buchenwald—just months before liberation. During his years in Nazi confinement, Wiesel spent time in the Auschwitz, Buna, Gleiwitz, and Buchenwald concentration camps.

After the war, Wiesel moved to Paris, France, where he mastered the French language and attended Sorbonne University, studying literature, psychology, and philosophy. He later became a reporter for the French newspaper, *L'Arche*, and spent the 1950's traveling the world as a reporter.

In 1955, Wiesel broke his self-imposed vow of silence, finally putting into words his experiences from the Holocaust. His 900-page book, *And the World Kept Silent*, published in Argentina, was later compressed into a 127-page book, *La Nuit* (Night) and published in both French and English in 1958. He has since published over forty books, among them, *Dawn* (1961), *The Accident* (1961), *The Town Beyond the Wall* (1962), *The Jews of Silence* (1966), *A Beggar in Jerusalem* (1970), and *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs, Vol. 1, 1928-1969* (1995).

Wiesel has held numerous teaching positions, and since 1976, he has been Andrew Mellon Professor of Humanities at Boston University. He has received numerous awards for his literary and human rights activities, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the U.S. Congressional Gold Medal, and the Medal of Liberty Award. Wiesel also won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, and soon afterward, he and his wife established the Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity, whose mission is to counter intolerance and promote equality and acceptance through international dialogue.

Wiesel became an American citizen in 1963, and in 1969, married Marion Erster Rose from Austria, who has translated most of Wiesel's books into English. They have one son together, Elisha (Shlomo Elisha Wiesel), whom they named after Elie's father. Marion has a daughter, Jennifer, from a previous marriage. They make their home in New York City.