

Selected Poems and Songs from *Beneath White Stars:* A Companion to Elie Wiesel's *Night*

by Holly Mandelkern

Poems and songs from *Beneath White Stars* convey themes Elie Wiesel shares so masterfully in *Night*, his account of his last days in his hometown and his time at Auschwitz. Some of these themes include:

- children leaving their parents
- children packing for trips to destinations unknown
- hunger in the ghettos and camps
- the struggle to stay alive at Auschwitz

Poems from *Beneath White Stars* are provided below. Songs based on these poems (except for “Taking Sides”) can be found on the album *Beneath White Stars: Holocaust Profiles in Song*.

➤ **Children Leaving Their Parents**

Children leaving their parents and the separation of parents and children recur often at different points and places during the Holocaust, even before the start of war. In 1944 Elie Wiesel experiences this separation as his family arrives at Auschwitz, his mother and sisters sent to the right and he and his father to the left.

In a poem from *Beneath White Stars*, a boy leaves his hometown in Essen, Germany, on a train in January 1939 for the safety of Great Britain. In this situation parents have chosen to send their children away to get them out of harm's way. The children on the *Kindertransport* travel with other children, not with their parents, and most will live with strangers in Britain. Ten thousand Jewish children will leave Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia for the safety of Britain in this way.

In this poem, the impact of a son's departure is told through the eyes of the parent saying goodbye as the son leaves on the train. This boy, Fritz Westfeld, is a real person who will reunite with his family and later become a professor of economics at a university in Nashville, TN. Most of the children on the *Kindertransport* are not so fortunate; most will not see their parents again because the parents do not survive.

“Watching Myself Watch My Son”

I watched myself watch my son
board a train to Britain,
cardboard tag draped around his neck,
his identity number written.

My hands cradled his bowed head;
my mouth asked God to bless him,
keep him close and grant him peace
so far away from Essen.

I left him there as we were told,
instructed not to cry.
I heard myself say I’d soon come;
my lips then said good-bye.

I felt my legs walk me away;
they took me to our home.
The silence of his bedroom meant
the meaning of alone.

The weeks endured, his letter came;
he’s well but hoped I’d follow.
Our *Kinder* turned into letters—
my heart felt full yet hollow.

I watched my eyes reread his words,
lips blessed a distant stranger.
Though out of sight I felt the light
that kept him far from danger.

Kinder: children (Yiddish and German)



Questions:

- Have you ever experienced this feeling of being in the moment and yet observing yourself from a distance?
- Do you think this journey from Germany to Britain, the *Kindertransport*, which involved the child leaving on a train alone, was harder for the child or the parent?
- Imagine yourself as a Jewish child in Great Britain writing a letter to your parents in Germany. What would you say? What would you refrain from saying?
- Imagine yourself as a parent responding to a letter from your child in Great Britain. Likewise, what would you write and what would you refrain from writing?
- How can a parent's heart feel simultaneously “full yet hollow”?

➤ Children Packing for Trips to Destinations Unknown

This rush to leave one's hometown without knowing a destination appears in *Night* when Elie Wiesel's family and other Jewish families forcibly leave Sighet, Romania, for a destination unknown to them. Elie Wiesel himself delivers the cryptic news about this journey to his father's friend who asks, "What are you saying? Get ready for the journey? What journey? Why? What is happening? Have you gone mad?"

Uprootings and relocations begin with the start of war—or even before—and continue throughout the war, and after. Many Jews will leave their hometowns, often forcibly, taking the bare minimum of material possessions with them. As Elie Wiesel's family leaves Sighet, he notices "The women were boiling eggs, roasting meat, preparing cakes, sewing backpacks." He views valuable objects left behind in his backyard: "precious rugs, silver candlesticks, Bibles and other ritual objects were strewn over the dusty grounds—pitiful relics that seemed never to have had a home."

“Packing Her Bag” shows the hurried and uninformed way in which one Jewish girl from Frankfurt packs her most important things on October 20, 1941, not knowing where she is going.

Packing Her Bag

Frankfurt, October 20, 1941

Forced to leave her Frankfurt home,
she's summoned to the train
with only hours to pack a bag,
no one to explain

how long the trip, the weather there,
belongings she would need;
Mother packed some candlesticks,
fresh-baked bread to feed . . .

Yes, she said to ballet shoes,
doubted *pas de deux*,
but left behind her warmest boots,
without the proper clues,

tossed her frayed and favorite dress,
no room in her small bags;
“relocating to the east,”
she’d soon be wearing rags.

She held her piano music sheets,
nocturnes, Beethoven, Brahms,
picked her slimmest book of prayers,
not leaving without Psalms,

Rainer Maria Rilke's poems,
Goethe for the rail,
not knowing all she'd really need
were water and a pail.

Wrapped in woolen winter skirt
to cover her bare knees,
she wore her coat, a warm-up suit
for dying by degrees.

She buried asthma medicine,
the scant supply prescribed;
she’d learn to breathe a lethal air
with treatment improvised.

In truth she’d need a dose of luck,
skills to measure food,
a sleuth to get her slice of bread,
a star that named her *Jude*.

She pressed her life into a satchel
filled with precious stuff,
but to survive in Ghetto Łódź,
things were not enough.

Jude: Jew (German)



Questions:

- What can we tell about the life of this girl and how she identifies herself based on her choices of things to pack?
- What clues do we have that she treasures both her German and her Jewish heritage?
- Why don't the Jews of Frankfurt know they are bound for a ghetto in Poland?
- This poem about packing is essentially a list. How can a list become poetry or a song? How do the choices of things to pack convey emotion?
- The poem mentions the word *belongings* in the line “belongings she would need.” What is the difference between words that sound similar: *belongings* and *belong*?

➤ Hunger in the Ghettos and Camps

Elie Wiesel and the other prisoners are barely fed and are hungry all the time. In *Night* he shares his thoughts about hunger at Auschwitz:

“Bread, soup— these were my whole life. I was a body. Perhaps less than that even: a starved stomach. The stomach alone was aware of the passage of time.”

In his book *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs*, he shares:

“There in the camp, I had neither the strength nor the time for theological meditation or metaphysical speculation about the attributes of the Master of the Universe. The daily bread ration was the center of our concerns.”

In “Bowl of Soup,” a poem about a brother feeding his sister in the Warsaw Ghetto, we see some of the hardships awaiting the Jews in the ghettos in Poland. Children often scavenge for food for their families, and this is true for the brother in this poem.

“Bowl of Soup” is based on a photo of a brother feeding his little sister in the Łódź Ghetto. This photo was taken by Mendel Grossman, the photographer of the Łódź Ghetto Council in Poland, who hid his camera beneath his coat and illegally took more than ten thousand photographs.

Bowl of Soup

This bowl of soup is dear to her—
death, the going price:
potato peels, bones, and broth,
simmered without spice,

peels through guarded ghetto walls,
bones from stolen meat,
heated up and watered down,
barely fit to eat.

Brother does the foraging
to feed the four of them—
he’s only nine yet hopes to find
an extra root or stem.

With the spoon from silver chest,
a trace of family's past,
he ladles stock into her bowl
to break the daily fast.

On freezing Warsaw Ghetto days
his broth sustains her soul.
A brother loses childhood here—
it seeps through cracks in bowl.



Questions:

- Why is documenting conditions in the ghetto through photographs important?
- What does this poem suggest about the importance of family?

- How can attachment to family be used by the Nazis in ghettos and death camps to undermine Jewish resistance?
- Why is it important for the young sister in the ghetto to eat this soup though it was not what we would consider very nutritious?
- Why are children often the ones to smuggle food into the ghetto?
- In Auschwitz and other death camps individuals, including teens, assigned to work in the “kitchen” are often willing to risk stealing food to help with the constant problem of hunger. What often happens to those in both the ghetto and death camps who “organize” extra food that is not officially allotted?

➤ **The Struggle to Stay Alive at Auschwitz**

Both Elie Wiesel and Norbert Wollheim experience the death of family members at Auschwitz, and both serve as slave laborers at the same subcamp of this death camp. Both men will share their personal stories to document their experiences at Auschwitz.

Before being deported to Auschwitz, Norbert Wollheim from Berlin helped organize the *Kindertransport*, the voluntary movement of 10,000 children to Britain described in “Watching Myself Watch My Son.” In early 1943 he and his wife and young child were brought to Auschwitz. There Norbert Wollheim was separated from his wife and child, and Norbert was assigned to be a slave laborer at the work camp of Buna/Monowitz, the same camp where Elie Wiesel worked.

On a teachers’ study trip to Auschwitz in 1991, survivor Norbert Wollheim shared his personal struggles and losses as a prisoner at this death camp. His story reveals the complexity of survival, both at that time and after the war. As the teachers were leaving, he paused at the railroad tracks, probably recreating and recalling those painful memories.

No Art

Pausing near the railroad tracks,
Norbert Wollheim on a teachers' trip,
sits at Auschwitz,
looking back.
Through his mind pictures whip
welded by I. G. Farben's grip,
and retells history,
details, facts:

partings, factory metalwork,
hangings, shootings, betrayals, fears,
shadows where the sadists lurk,
barracks, comrades, brothers, peers,
heads held up
above the jeers,
birth dates changed as *der Blockschreiber*, clerk.

He recalls debarking from the train
when his family arrived
and stands where commands of Cain
left him forever twice deprived—
his wife, his son, just he survived,
a daily
dose of pain.

Ready to depart,
this gentle man recounts, relives,
teaches with a stalwart heart
the story that he freely gives,
says will and luck
are why he lives—
survival is no art.

der Blockschreiber: the barracks clerk, secretary, recordkeeper (German)



Questions:

- What experiences related in this poem sound similar to those in Elie Wiesel's account?
- How do the words below from "No Art" about Norbert Wollheim's time at Auschwitz also describe the experiences of Elie Wiesel as related in *Night*?

"partings ...
hangings, shootings, betrayals, fears,
shadows where the sadists lurk,
barracks, comrades, brothers, peers"

- Why do you think both Norbert Wollheim and Elie Wiesel dedicated their lives to sharing their experiences at Auschwitz, especially with students?

➤ A Poem about Elie Wiesel

Because of Elie Wiesel's passionate dedication to taking his story and message into the hearts of millions, many of us know something about him. Most of us know about him and his Holocaust experience from *Night*, but he also wrote more than fifty books and two cantatas. Until his health was failing, he spoke whenever he was asked. And he insisted that we speak up when we see injustice.

Taking Sides

In memory of Elie Wiesel (1928-2016)

No gesture or ornament distracts us
as you speak,
though night vision dims
our view of ourselves.
You forbid
despair-breeding silence,
for silence still
serves the foe.
You call us to take sides
with the victim,
to stand in his place
in the center of the universe.

Only a fall of hair
and story lines folded into your face
soften steely words.
Sowing seeds,
you tell of things that hover in the air,
linking the tragedy of you and yours
with them and theirs
and us.

Question: Elie Wiesel relied solely on the power, pacing, and inflection of his words to convey his experience—and his warning to us.

- How do you convey your most important stories to others?