

## The Power of Memory

Most, if not all, Holocaust survivor stories are told and written with two main goals. One is to retell the events leading up to, during, and sometimes after the Holocaust from the perspective of a victim of the genocide. The second goal, which is closely intertwined with the first goal, is to make sure the readers and listeners of the story never forget the Holocaust. Forgetting the Holocaust would mean forgetting, and by extension ignoring, the tragedies that befell so many, and also forgetting all the crucial lessons that the Holocaust taught to the world. Memory has the power to immortalize and the power to prevent tragedy from repeating itself. Both *Night* by Elie Wiesel and *I Still See Her Haunting Eyes* by Aaron Elster and Joy Erlichman Miller certainly succeed in both of these goals. Both Elster's and Wiesel's stories are told masterfully, and also implore the reader to never forget what they have just read.

Elster's plight began like many other Jews during the 1930s and 40s, with the gradual restrictions of rights until he and his family were eventually forced to relocate to a ghetto. Eventually, the Nazis liquidated the ghetto, and all of the ghetto's residents were loaded into cattle cars and shipped to a concentration camp. Elster managed to avoid ever seeing the inside of a camp, however, by escaping through the ghetto's sewers during the confusion of the liquidation and later crawling under a hole in the barbed wire fence that surrounded the ghetto. He survived at first by eating from the fields of farmers, and eventually was allowed to live in the attic of the Gorski family. They gave him just enough to survive on, but nothing more. The Gorski matriarch, Francesca Gorski, also made an effort to verbally attack Elster whenever possible, telling him such things as "Your mother is a shrew, a Jew shrew who talked me into taking in your sister and jeopardizing my safety as well as my husband's. You two are a curse to

me. This war is never going to be over. The Germans are going to conquer the whole world, and I'll never be rid of you.” (Elster, 76) Despite this, he successfully hid there until the war's end.

Memory as a theme plays a dual role in *I Still See Her Haunting Eyes*. It affects Elster deeply because he cannot rid his mind of the image of his little sister Sara looking at him with intense panic and fear in her eyes during the liquidation. (Elster, 55) As the book's title states, that image haunts him. It followed him during the war, it followed him when he came to America, and he says that it will continue to follow him until the day he dies. He has said, not in his book but in a speech, that he has been able to accept the death of all his family except his little sister, and that he will never be able to come to terms with her death. Memory has the power to do this to him, and to undoubtedly do similar things to thousands of other Holocaust survivors.

Elie Wiesel's story is different from Elster's in that Wiesel was actually put inside a concentration camp and had to survive in there for almost an entire year. While Elster's story is more so about his escape from the ghetto and hiding, as that was his experience, Wiesel tells in *Night* of the horrors and happenings inside the various camps he was in during his year as a prisoner. *Night* also contains more details about the intangible aspects of the Holocaust, such as religion, and emotion. Those aspects are also present in *I Still See Her Haunting Eyes*, but less so than in *Night*. Of course, *Night* contains the call to action present in all Holocaust survivor narratives. And again, that charge calls upon memory for its completion.

*I Still See Her Haunting Eyes* also has its own section in which the book charges the reader to never let its story, and the story of the Holocaust as a whole, die. It also tells the reader that even though they might not think that they can change the world, they can. Elster writes:

“Don’t underestimate the strength and power you possess. You can accomplish great things. I believe this with all my heart. I could never imagine that a young boy of 10 could have survived and done so much because he wanted to live. Nothing is impossible, not if you want it badly enough.” (141) After introducing the section with a short retelling of one of his experiences speaking at a high school, Elster tells the reader that “It is a painful fact that more survivors of the Holocaust die each year. In a short time there will be none left... Who will tell the story? I pray the answer is you! Never forget!” (139) Memory has the power to keep the Holocaust and its lessons alive forever. As the reverse to that concept, lack of memory would mean that not only the suffering and tragedy of so many would be forgotten, but history would repeat itself, causing even more genocide and horror in the future. The Holocaust gives leaders and inhabitants of the present and future a concrete example of what happens when prejudice runs rampant, as well as a historical reference point that provides all of the warning signs of a society heading down the path of post-WWI Germany. Instead of waiting to let the genocide happen and afterwards looking at the dead wondering how it all could have possibly happened, the Holocaust shows exactly how such a thing happens. It shows that scapegoating can convince a desperate society with any prejudice to do just about anything, including supporting the extermination of entire religions and races. But this lesson and example can only be put to use if they are remembered.

Memory is an incredibly powerful tool that Holocaust survivors try to invoke in people in order to make sure that the Holocaust is never forgotten. Memory is the only way to make sure that the Holocaust has exactly the same legacy and lasting impact in 100 years as it did immediately after it happened. Without the memory of the Holocaust, history will repeat itself

again and again until either tyranny rules completely or there is nobody left to oppress or be oppressed. The survivors of the Holocaust realize this and try to do anything to stop another Holocaust, which is why memory is such a strong component of their stories. Memory is the only thing that can possibly accomplish the task of immortalizing the Holocaust that the survivors charge each listener and reader of a story to do.

#### Works Cited

- Elster, Aaron, and Joy Erlichman Miller. *I Still See Her Haunting Eyes: the Holocaust and a Hidden Child Named Aaron*. BF Press, 2008.
- Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. Hill and Wang, 2006.

