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## The Power of Memory

Throughout the history of mankind, countless genocides have occurred, and treaties have been signed. When signing a treaty, it is the presidents, prime ministers, or any other officials' job to communicate with leaders, and forge new friendships and partnerships. Yet, the survivors have the most important job, continuing to remember the tragic suffering of their own people. It must be noted, that having the position of having to speak for thousands, is the challenge of a lifetime.

Many memoirs and autobiographies have been written, when discussing genocide. Two famous examples of autobiographies written about genocides are *Night*, written by Elie Wiesel, and *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers*, written by Loung Ung. Although, these memoirs are set two drastically different settings, they still answer the question of what is the power of memory. The answer is of what is power of memory is to let one represent an experience which traumatized thousands, or even millions.

*Night* written by Elie Wiesel, recounts Wiesel's experience in the Holocaust. In order to understand Wiesel's experience, one must have knowledge about the Holocaust. The Holocaust lasted from 1933-1945 (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). Besides the Jews, the Nazis did target other people: "Gypsies, the disabled, some of the Slavic people, communists, socialists, Jehovah's witness, and homosexuals" (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). During the Holocaust, Jews were targeted for mass extinction. With the rise of Nazism in

German, the Nazis were able to oppress the Jews through various methods. First, the Nazis began their oppression by prohibiting Jewish businesses (History.com). In November of 1938, Kristallnacht occurred, in which “German synagogues were burned and windows in Jewish shops were smashed”(History.com). As time went on, the oppression continued, and increased to great lengths. Such as, Jews were forced to move into various ghettos across the country. With concentration camps, Jews and other minorities were forced to leave their homes, and live in forced labor camps. Upon arrival at the concentration camps, the people were then divided into groups. A Nazi officer would select those, who were deemed suitable enough for the labor camps. Those that weren’t selected, were sent to their death, by gas chamber. With these camps, the Jews were turned into prisoners, where “thousands of prisoners died from exhaustion, starvation, and exposure” (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). It is reported that “six million Jews” (United States Holocaust Memorial) died in the Holocaust. However, “as more documents come to life, estimates of human losses may change” (United States Holocaust Memorial).

In the beginning of *Night*, Wiesel recounts his life before the Holocaust. Wiesel lives in the town, Sighet, with his family. Specifically, Wiesel discusses one of his passions in life, which is Judaism. Despite his father’s dismissal, Wiesel finds a teacher to teach him Kabbalah. Wiesel befriends Moishe the Beadle, “jack-of-all trades in a Hasidic house of prayer” (Wiesel 3), and Moishe agrees to teach him. As the lessons went on, his passion only furthered. Quite abruptly, his lessons were put to pause, when Moishe the Beadle was forcibly captured from Sighet, along with “all foreign Jews” (Wiesel 6). They were then forced to dig trenches, and once they had finished, the Gestapo began murdering them. Miraculously, Moishe the Beadle survives this

ordeal and returns to the town. With his return, Moishe the Beadle warns the town about their impending danger, “Jews, listen to me! That’s all I ask of you.”(Wiesel 7). Sadly, no one listened to this foreshadow, and went on with their lives.

Wiesel’s life drastically changed, when German soldiers occupied Sighet. At first, the Jewish residents were apprehensive of the supposed oppression, “What did we tell you? You wouldn't believe us. There they are, your Germans. Where is their famous cruelty” (Wiesel 10). Soon, synagogues were destroyed and “Jews were prohibited from owning gold, jewelry, or any valuables” (Wiesel 11). With these laws and the creation of ghettos, Wiesel was able to lose any control in his life. Most importantly, Wiesel was able to remember the loss of peace. Afterward, Wiesel and the people of Sighet were forced to leave their town, and board trains which led them to Auschwitz-Birkenau. From there, Wiesel and his father were deemed strong enough to work in the labor camp, and they were separated from the rest of their family. With this separation, Wiesel begins his journey into complete darkness, night.

Another genocide that plagued millions is the Cambodian Genocide. The Cambodian genocide occurred from “April 17, 1975 to 1979” (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). The Khmer Rouge ruthlessly took over the government of Cambodia, and created their own regime. First, “The Khmer Rouge began their reign with the murder of surrendering officials of the former government” (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). Horrifically, the regime “began emptying the city’s population into labor camps in the countryside, where physical abuse, disease, exhaustion, and starvation were extremely prevalent” (United to End Genocide). Often, “Cambodia’s elderly, handicapped, ill, and children became targets due to their inability to undertake harsh manual labor” (United to End Genocide). Additionally, the Khmer Rouge

abolished many aspects of the former government: “schools, religious practices, and foreign styles of clothing”(United to End Genocide). The regime also targeted “anyone with an education, and ethnic or religious minorities” (United to End Genocide). With the destruction of families and rise of chaos, “child soldiers were a huge tool of the Khmer Rouge” (United to End Genocide). Vietnam invaded Cambodia on January 7, 1979 (United to End Genocide). With this invasion, the regime collapsed and the genocide was over.

In *First They Killed My Father: A Child of Cambodia Remembers* written by Loung Ung, Ung recounts her experience in the Cambodian Genocide. In April of 1975, Ung lives with her family in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia. Her family consists of her father, mother, her brother Khouy, her sister Keav, her brother Kim, her sister Ghou, and her youngest sister Geak. It must be noted that her father is an employee of the former government. In the beginning of the memoir, Ung is five years old. Ung vividly describes her privileges in Phnom Penh. Specifically, being able to shop every day at the market or riding a cyclo with her mother. Overall, Ung lives a quiet and normal life with her family. However, this life is disrupted when the Khmer Rouge’s regime invades. When Ung asks her father about the danger, he responds by saying, “Cambodia is fighting a war that I do not understand” (Ung 11).

On April 17, 1975, the Ung family were greeted by Khmer Rouge trucks stormed into the Phnom Penh (Ung 17). Immediately, the Ung family packed their necessities and left their home. This would be the last time, Ung ever saw her family home intact. While trying to leave the city, Ung witnesses the hostile Khmer Rouge for the first time, “They holler for people to close their shops, to gather all guns and weapons, to surrender the weapons to them. They scream at families to move faster, to get out of the way, to not talk back” (Ung 21-22). Ung’s childlike

perspective is apparent, “Yesterday I was playing hopscotch with my friends. Today we are running from soldiers with guns” (Ung 27). Unexpectedly, the Ung’s truck runs out of petrol, which causes them to now carry their bags and walk. As the journey continues, the struggle to survive drastically increases. For instance, the family’s food quantity drastically decreases to “only a few pounds of rice” (Ung 34). After walking for seven days, the family meet their Uncle Keang, who takes them to live with him in his village, Krang Truop.

With their new home, Krang Truop, Ung exchanges her middle class lifestyle for a poor farming lifestyle. This Ung’s first interaction with labor. Yet, Ung does not forget her past, and often reminisces about Pheno Penh, “I will never see Phnom Penh again, drive in our car, buy food from carts” (Ung 40). Due to concerns that her father’s identity will be uncovered, the family decide to leave the town, and go to Battambang. The family boards a Khmer Rouge truck, but does not take them to Battambang, instead it took them to Ro Leap, a labor camp. The camp leaders gave the people various strict rules, such as “children in our society will not attend school just to have their brains cluttered with useless information”(Ung 61). The children were not safe from hard labor, “They will have sharp minds and fast bodies if we give them hard work...Hard work is good for everyone” (Ung 61).

Additionally, the soldiers begin look for “young, able-bodied men to recruit into their army. If recruited, you must join.”(Ung 69). The soldiers then take Loung’s two oldest brother, Khouy and Meng, and Khouy’s wife, Laine, to labor camps. Afterwards, the soldiers request for Keav, Loung’s oldest sister, to go to a different labor camp. Sadly, Keav later dies from food poisoning at a makeshift hospital. Subsequently, Ung’s father is asked by the soldiers to help them fix a wagon, but he is never seen or heard from again. Ung’s father presumed death, rapidly

deteriorates the spirit of the family. “My stomach hurts so much I want to cut it open and take the poison out”(Ung 107). Ultimately, Ung’s mother tells the Loung, Chou, and Kim to walk to different camps, and claim that each of them are orphans. She also claims, that if the family “stays together, we will die together” (Ung 121). The most heartbreaking moment of the memoir is Ung’s mother shouting to her children, “I don’t want you here! You are too much work for me! I want you to leave!”(Ung 122). Chou and Loung are unable to separate and become child soldiers.

Both *Night* and *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers*, recount the experiences of children in a genocide. Although, the two memoir also differ in areas, such as motifs, perspective, lessons that each book teaches. Loung Ung’s memoir has a perspective of a young girl in a Cambodian Genocide. Whereas, Elie Wiesel’s experience in the Holocaust has the perspective of an adolescent. A recurring motif in *First They Killed My Father* is food. Throughout the memoir, Loung records the amount of food she has received, her family’s dwindling storage of food, or her dreams about eating food from her past. With the genocide, Ung’s desires has diminished to only wanting a basic necessities, being only food. Yet, there are different types of hunger, and Wiesel’s is Judaism. In the beginning of *Night*, Elie states one of his passion in life is his religion. However, after some time in the labor camps, Elie’s faith deteriorates. For instance, “Blessed be God’s name? Why, but why would I bless Him? Every fiber in me rebelled. Because He caused thousands of children to burn in His mass graves?”(Wiesel 67).

Wiesel and Ung have lived through such traumatic events, and the only thing left to aide them is their memory. With Ung’s memory, she explicates the traumatic effects of youth in

genocide. Often, the youth are regarded as unintelligent and vapid. Nevertheless, Ung's account of the Cambodian genocide proves that children are not vapid, and will truly remember the horrors of life. The given lesson is the first victims of genocide are children, because they are ones who will most vividly remember their experiences in genocides. With Wiesel's memory, he explicates the power of silence. Silence is represented by the lack of international opposition against the Holocaust. If opposition was widely active and apparent, millions of lives would have been saved. Yet, there was none, and the Wiesel was left in the darkness of cruelty, or rather the night. With these, memories, Ung and Wiesel are able to speak for the millions of lives that have been lost, and show the new generations the atrocity of genocide.

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