

Taylor Peterman  
Grade 11  
Ridgewood High School  
Norridge, Illinois  
Teacher: Ms. Pamela Mundy

## Numbers

There is a certain quality about numbers. They have a kind of objectivity, a kind of apathy that allows a person to address a subject from a distance. It is difficult to empathize with numbers. When a person hears “one million”, they likely do not stop to think about the “one”: the one person. The horrors of the Holocaust go beyond words, beyond numbers. An attempt to confine a definition of a genocide within those limits may result in the Holocaust being “the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators” (“Introduction to the Holocaust”). A definition like that is far from inaccurate, but also far from impassioned. Even the term itself, “Holocaust”, evokes a more vivid image of the plight so many people faced: “sacrifice by fire” (“Introduction to the Holocaust”). On top of those six million are millions more, millions that lived, but were no longer the same. Ultimately, death and deportation tolls can be recorded and read, but they each escape the very purpose of their recitation. A person can hear a number without thinking about what constitutes it. A number will not make a person cry. When lives are only listed as numbers, the power of their stories, their memories, and their experiences are disparaged. Numbers do not shed light on something so dark. It takes a real person to bring humanity to an event defined by dehumanizing hatred. It takes a real person to say what numbers cannot.

Elie Wiesel was one. He was fifteen years old when he became one of a number. He had lived in a ghetto with his family and other Sighet Jews, comforted only by his unabashed faith in God. Soon, Elie and his family were transported by cattle car to Birkenau, where he was forced to say goodbye to his mother and sister, unaware it would be forever. In Auschwitz, Elie and his

father shared one goal: to live... for each other. This will to live was quickly shaken, as Elie grew disillusioned by the cruelty of his persecutors, his fellow prisoners, his God, and even himself. To Elie, each moment was “one more stab to the heart, one more reason to hate... one less reason to live” (Wiesel, “Night” 109). The inhumanity engulfed him in flames and nearly suffocated him. He witnessed the very worst of mankind: men hanging a young boy too small to wrench the rope, a son murdering his own father over a piece of bread, officers shoveling babies into flames (Wiesel, “Night”). And finally, like those same flickering flames, thoughts came to mind that forced him to see the capacity for cruelty and desire for self-preservation that he had inside. As he watched his father cry out for him on his deathbed, he was unable to answer. So much had been taken away from him... most of all: his ability to live as human.

Among the millions, there was another one: Janine Oberrotman. Like Elie, Janine was only fifteen years old when the Germans invaded her hometown in Poland, forcing her into hiding. A young girl, the Nazis tried to take more from her than just her freedom; they tried to take away her dreams, her sense of the world, her normalcy. It is unimaginable to learn “how hard it is to die / not knowing what love means / not knowing what life is / at 16” (Oberrotman “In August of 1942”). Janine was forced to confront the very question she posed: “How does one deal with one’s own finiteness, especially as a teenager who is not streetwise?” (Oberrotman, “The Teacher” 44). To escape mentally what she could not escape physically, Janine read anything she could find. As she read history book after history book, she hoped, “If we could last long enough, we would be able to witness a page in history where a tyrant was destroyed” (Oberrotman, “The Teacher” 44). Ultimately, Janine’s hiding place was found, and, clinging to her mother, she was deported to Stuttgart for forced labor. In 1945, she was liberated and moved to Paris, before immigrating to the United States. The page in history she had longed for was

finally written, but not without consequence. She had lost her parents in the Holocaust, something she did not think she could survive, writing, “No candles will ever be lit again / By my mother / In the house on Kasztelanska Street” (Oberrotman, “The Balcony Off Kasztelanska Street” 40).

Elie and Janine are among the millions whose stories can easily be forgotten when numbers are spoken in place of memories. But there is a power to their stories, a power no number can ever yield. To go back to the 1930s and relive something no one should ever have to live through *once* takes strength. To share this experience with future generations takes courage. And to articulate those thoughts in such a way that evokes both empathy for their struggles and awe for their perseverance takes *humanity*. Both Janine and Elie lost their innocence, their families, and their happiness, but, despite their young age, they recognized what the Nazis wanted them to lose most: their humanity. In Janine’s words, “The Nazis are not only killing us, they are depriving us of humanity, of our dignity as people. They are demonizing us, slowly, gradually, and with joyful malice. Do I not know it?” (Oberrotman, “The Teacher” 44). And in Elie’s words, he and his fellow prisoners were “stronger than cold or hunger, stronger than the guns and the desire to die, doomed and rootless, nothing but numbers” (Wiesel, “Night” 87). The two resisted this evil agenda in their own ways. Janine “wanted to continue as long as it was possible as a human being with plans for the future” (Oberrotman, “The Teacher” 44). She wanted to deprive the Nazis of power, by maintaining a sense of normalcy for a teenage girl with dreams of life and love. Elie, after witnessing a son unburden himself of his father, prayed to the same God he felt had betrayed him, “My God, Master of the Universe, give me the strength never to do what Rabbi Eliahou’s son has done” (Wiesel, “Night” 91). Elie stayed with his father

to his dying breath, shaking thoughts of survival and self-preservation. The two guarded their intrinsic humanity, no matter how many *inhumanities* they faced.

Today, the world is tasked with something painful. There is no doubt that it is easier to reflect on the past objectively... to view the events in facts and figures. However, as the stories of Janine and Elie show, only human experiences have the power to shed light on things so dark. There are still Holocaust deniers, those that would rather contest the existence of evil than confront it directly (Feldman 385). After all, the Holocaust, like any genocide, reveals something about humanity that the world would like to forget. It unveiled a kind of barbarity that is entrenched within us, showing that human beings have the capacity for atrocities that surpass articulation. But it is that very reason that we cannot forget. Our past says something about who we are and who we will become. We must learn about survivor stories to understand the impact these incomprehensibly vile events have not only on our past, but on our future. We must not view lives as numbers, as it takes away our ability to empathize and remember. Memories teach us that we are not left without choice. Within us, there is also an innate sense of humanity, a kind of morality that is not easily shaken. Elie remarked of his first moments in Auschwitz, "Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never" (Wiesel, "Night" 34). The survivors will never forget, and neither must we.

Of course, the power of memory transcends simple remembrance. Our memory grants us a kind of wisdom that millions suffered for us to obtain. It implies action. To not take action would be to allow those massive numbers to have died in vain. Elie questioned both God and humanity for their absence, leading him to conclude that "the opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference" (Wiesel, "About Us"). To ignore the past and to not act in the presence of

oppression, racism, or cruelty is to be indifferent. And to be indifferent is to side with the tormentor. Neutrality is not an option when the lives of millions today and the consciences of millions tomorrow are at stake. Genocide is still possible today; we would be foolish to think otherwise. Even so, it is not inevitable (Bauer 369). We cannot view the Holocaust as some sort of anomaly, but rather as an example of what can happen when apathy and persecution reign over activism and morality.

The power of memory grants us the power of choice. Humanity controls the path it takes, the side it chooses, and the legacy it leaves behind. The numbers do not lie. Janine, Elie, and the millions of other survivors have given us a compass. We must use it.

## Works Cited

Bauer, Yehuda. *A History of the Holocaust*. Franklin Watts, 2001.

Feldman, George. *Understanding the Holocaust*. II, UXL, an Imprint of Gale, 1998.

“Introduction to the Holocaust.” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*,

[www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005143](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005143).

Oberrotman, Janine. “The Balcony Off Kasztelanska Street.” *In Our Voices, II: Stories of*

*Holocaust Survivors*, Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center, 2016, pp. 40–41.

Oberrotman, Janine. “The Hiding Place.” *In Our Voices, II: Stories of Holocaust Survivors*,

Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center, pp. 46–47.

Oberrotman, Janine. “In August of 1942.” *A People's History of the Holocaust and Genocide*,

[remember.org/witness/janine](http://remember.org/witness/janine).

Oberrotman, Janine. “The Teacher.” *In Our Voices, II: Stories of Holocaust Survivors*, Illinois

Holocaust Museum and Education Center, 2016, pp. 42–45.

Wiesel, Elie. “About Us.” *The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity*,

[eliewieselfoundation.org/about/](http://eliewieselfoundation.org/about/).

Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. Translated by Marion Wiesel, Hill and Wang, 2006.