

Background Vocabulary for Elie Wiesel's Night

Jewish Terminology

- **Cabbala:** The Jewish mystical tradition.
- **Hasidic:** A branch of Orthodox Judaism that maintains a lifestyle separate from the non-Jewish world.
- **Kaddish:** A prayer in Aramaic praising God, commonly associated with mourning practices.
- **Rabbi:** A religious teacher and person authorized to make decisions on issues of Jewish law. Also performs many of the same functions as a Protestant minister.
- **Rosh Hashanah:** The new year for the purpose of counting years.
- **Sodom:** Wicked Biblical city that suffers God's wrath.
- **Synagogue:** The most widely accepted term for a Jewish house of worship.
- **Talmud:** The most significant collection of Jewish oral tradition interpreting the Torah.
- **Torah:** The entire body of Jewish teachings.
- **Yom Kippur:** A day set aside for fasting, depriving oneself of pleasures, and repenting from the sins of the previous years.
- **Zohar:** The primary written work in the mystical tradition of the Cabbala.

Nazi and Holocaust Terminology, Miscellaneous words

- **Anti-Semitism:** Systematic prejudice against Jews.
- **Aryan:** In the Nazi ideology, the pure, superior Germanic (Nordic, Caucasian) race.
- **Auschwitz (Birkenau, Buna, and Gleiwitz):** Concentration camp and extermination camp in Upper Silesia, Poland. By 1942, it consisted of three sections: Auschwitz I, the main camp; Birkenau, an extermination camp; and Buna, a labor camp. Gleiwitz was a subcamp in Auschwitz.
- **Beethoven, Ludwig van:** German composer (1770-1827). Linked only to the Holocaust by race and the fact that Jews were forbidden to play the music of German composers.
- **Buchenwald:** Concentration camp in Germany, between Frankfurt and Leipzig. Although not a major extermination center, it was equipped with gas chambers and a crematorium. More than 100,000 prisoners died there.
- **Concentration camp:** Immediately upon their assumption of power on January 30, 1933, the Nazis established concentration camps for the imprisonment of all "enemies" of their regime: actual and potential political opponents (e.g. communists, socialists, monarchists), Jehovah's Witnesses, gypsies, homosexuals, and other "asocials." Beginning in 1938, Jews were targeted for internment solely because they were Jews. Before then, only Jews who fit one of the earlier categories were interned in camps. The first three concentration camps established were Dachau (near Munich), Buchenwald (near Weimar) and Sachsenhausen (near Berlin).
- **Crematory:** The place that contained the ovens, furnaces, and chimneys where Nazi victims were burned dead or alive.
- **Death camp:** A concentration camp, the distinct purpose of which was the extermination of its inmates. Almost all of the German death camps were located in Poland: Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec, Chelmo, Madjanek, Sobibor, Treblinka.
- **Death's head:** Nazi skull symbol worn on SS uniforms.
- **Dysentery:** An intestinal disorder causing blood and mucus in the stool.
- **Fascist:** One who supports a political movement that advocates a nationalist dictatorship, private ownership of property, but state controlled economy. Primarily, Fascism is linked to the regime of Italy's Benito Mussolini, but Naziism is an example of a Fascist government.
- **Flat:** A European term for apartment.
- **Gestapo:** The German internal security police—secret police. The Gestapo was organized in 1933 to protect the regime from political opposition.
- **Ghetto:** The ghetto was a section of a city where all Jews from the surrounding areas were forced to reside. Surrounded by barbed wire or walls, the ghettos were often sealed so that people were prevented from leaving or entering. The ghettos were characterized by overcrowding, starvation and forced labor. All were eventually destroyed as the Jews were deported to death camps.
- **Gross-Rosen:** A subcamp of concentration camp Sachsenhausen, which prisoners were destined for hard work in local quarry of granite. On May 1, 1941, Gross-Rosen gained the status of self-reliant concentration camp. In the course of its first two years of existence, Gross-Rosen was a small camp still set service of quarry. Murder, twelve hours of work in the quarry, starving rations of food, lack of proper medical care, incessant maltreatment and terrorization of prisoners both by SS crew and functionary prisoners caused great mortality, and Gross-Rosen was reckoned as one of the hardest concentrations camps.

- **Gypsy:** A nomadic race persecuted by the Nazis.
- **Hitler, Adolf:** (1889-1945) Führer und Reichskanzler (Leader and Reich Chancellor). Although born in Austria, he settled in Germany in 1913. At the outbreak of World War I, Hitler enlisted in the Bavarian army, became a corporal, and received the Iron Cross First Class for bravery. Returning to Munich after the war, he joined the newly formed German Workers Party, which was soon reorganized, under his leadership, as the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP). In November 1923, he unsuccessfully attempted to forcibly bring Germany under nationalist control. When his coup, known as the “Beer-Hall Putsch,” failed, Hitler was arrested and sentenced to five years in prison. It was during this time that he wrote Mein Kampf. Serving only nine months of his sentence, Hitler quickly reentered German politics and soon outpolled his political rivals in national elections. In January 1933, Hindenburg appointed Hitler chancellor of a coalition cabinet. Hitler, who took office on January 30, 1933, immediately set up a dictatorship. In 1934, the chancellorship and presidency were united in the person of the Führer. Soon, all other parties were outlawed and opposition was brutally suppressed. By 1938, Hitler implemented his dream of a “Greater Germany,” first annexing Austria; then (with the acquiescence of the Western democracies), the Sudetenland (Czech province with ethnic German concentration); and, finally, Czechoslovakia itself. On September 1, 1939, Hitler’s armies invaded Poland. By this time the Western democracies realized that no agreement with Hitler could be honored and World War II had begun. Although initially victorious on all fronts, Hitler’s armies began suffering setbacks shortly after the United States joined the war in December 1941. Although the war was obviously lost by early 1945, Hitler insisted that Germany fight to the death. On April 30, 1945, Hitler committed suicide rather than be captured alive.
- **Holocaust:** The destruction of some 6 million Jews by the Nazis and their followers in Europe between the years 1933 and 1945. Other individuals and groups were persecuted and suffered grievously during this period, but only the Jews were marked for complete and utter annihilation. The term “Holocaust” literally meaning “a completely burned sacrifice” tends to suggest a sacrificial connotation to what occurred. The word Shoah, originally a biblical term meaning widespread disaster, is the modern Hebrew equivalent.
- **Lorry, lorries:** trucks
- **Kapo:** Prisoner in charge of a group of inmates in Nazi concentration camps.
- **Mengele, Josef:** (1911-1978?) SS physician at Auschwitz, notorious for pseudo-medical experiments, especially on twins and Gypsies. He “selected” new arrivals by simply pointing to the right or the left, thus separating those considered able to work from those who were not. Those too weak or too old to work were sent straight to the gas chambers, after all their possessions, including their clothes, were taken for resale in Germany. After the war, he spent some time in a British internment hospital but disappeared, went underground, escaped to Argentina, and later to Paraguay, where he became a citizen in 1959. He was hunted by Interpol, Israeli agents, and Simon Wiesenthal. In 1986, his body was found in Embu, Brazil.
- **Petrol:** Gasoline. Used by the Nazis to disinfect prisoners.
- **Pillage:** to rob using violence, especially in wartime
- **Phylactery, phylacteries:** a small leather box containing Hebrew texts on vellum, worn by Jewish men at morning prayer as a reminder to keep the law.
- **Red army:** Slang term for the Russian army.
- **Russian Front:** The line of conflict between the German and Russian armies.
- **Selection:** Euphemism for the process of choosing victims for the gas chambers in the Nazi camps by separating them from those considered fit to work.
- **SS:** Abbreviation usually written with two lightning symbols for Schutzstaffel (Defense Protective Units). Originally organized as Hitler’s personal bodyguard, the SS was transformed into a giant organization by Heinrich Himmler. Although various SS units fought on the battlefield, the organization is best known for carrying out the destruction of European Jewry.
- **Truncheon:** a short, thick stick carried as a weapon by a police officer
- **Yellow star:** The Nazis demanded that all Jews wear a yellow star on their clothing to distinguish them as Jews. In medieval times, yellow was a color that Jews identified with. The five-pointed star stands for the Star of David, the Bethlehem star that guided the wise men to Jesus’ cradle. Jews use the star of David to symbolize their religion, much as Christians use the cross.
- **Yom Kippur:** The most solemn religious fast of the Jewish year, the last of the ten days of penitence that begin with Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year). Also called Day of Atonement