

Chimneys in the Night: A Comparative Analysis of Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Olga Lengyel's *Five Chimneys*

Layla Leard

According to Holocaust historian Joan Ringelheim, "if in the gas chambers or before the firing squads all Jews seemed alike to the Nazis, the path to this end was not always the same."¹ This notion of differing experiences of the Holocaust is evident in the memoirs of Elie Wiesel and Olga Lengyel, two survivors of Auschwitz, Birkenau, and Buchenwald. Both authors provide a graphic depiction of the hell in which millions of men and women were forced to live in these concentration camps. Many of these voices were silenced as a result of being in the camps.

Wiesel and Lengyel's haunting memories offer a wealth of information from which to draw general conclusions about life within the camps. Although they both identified men, women, and children who were subjected to indiscriminate death during the Holocaust their descriptions also show differences. Using the lens of gender and sexuality, this essay will evaluate some of the similarities and differences in the experiences of these two survivors and explore why some of their experiences may have been different. The purpose of the essay is not to belittle the experiences of one gender or the other, but to identify how gender and sexuality shape their experiences. The two accounts offer valuable insight into the potential role that gender had on the experiences of concentration camp inmates. This essay explores how the experiences in concentration camps were uniquely torturous for women because of their sexuality.

Ringelheim emphasizes that, "Every Jew, regardless of gender, was equally a victim in the Holocaust."² Neither Lengyel nor Wiesel shied away from describing the brutality they experienced and witnessed in the concentration camps. Each memoir understandably focuses on the experiences of the gender the author belongs to with some observations of

¹ Joan Ringelheim, "Preface to the Study Of Women and the Holocaust," *Contemporary Jewry* 17, no. 1 (1996): 1.

² *Ibid*, 1.

and interactions with the opposite sex. Many commonalities can be seen between the two memoirs, including the horrific scenes in the cattle car transporting the 'enemies of state' to the camps, the systematic induction process of prisoners into the camp, as well as the process of death.³ In death, they were all equal. The fires of the crematorium, the gas of the chamber, and the bullets in the guns of the Nazis held neither bias nor discrimination and killed with equal effectiveness. However, the experience of the living was sometimes quite unique depending on gender and sometimes age, which influenced the way the Nazis treated the individual and the way in which the individual perceived their experience.

There are several explanations for similarities and differences in *Night* and *Five Chimneys* that are unrelated to gender that one should consider when comparing and contrasting the two memoirs. Wiesel was a fifteen year old boy when he entered the camps, while Lengyel was a thirty-six year old, married woman with children. It is possible that given their age difference, they focused on different details and had different priorities while in the camps and when writing their memoirs. Perhaps Wiesel was slightly naive about what was happening around him and was more focused on his and his father's survival. Lengyel was given the responsibility to make purposeful observations so that she may tell the world what really happened in Auschwitz. A man she called "L" invited her to partake in a resistance movement.⁴ He asked her to use her position in the infirmary to relay information about the war to her fellow inmates in order to preserve hope.⁵ She became cautiously involved and engaged in the goings on inside and outside the camp. Given this specific purpose, Lengyel witnessed more than Wiesel who focused more on simple survival. The other difference is the presence of their family in the camps. As mentioned before, Wiesel was in the camp with his father, whereas Lengyel was separated from her young children, her elderly parents, and her husband.⁶ Being on her own in the camp may have contributed to her ability to see more of the goings on throughout the camp while young Wiesel was focused on his and his father's survival. Another consideration is the different camps each author was present in. They both experienced Auschwitz-

³ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958), 23. & Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*, (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1947), 16.

⁴ Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*, (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1947), 80.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*, 24.

Birkenau but Wiesel was moved to the labour camp Buna (or Auschwitz III-Monowitz), which may have provided different living conditions and experiences.⁷ Inmates were separated into male and female barracks, which explains some of the differences in experiences of the concentration camps between Lengyel and Wiesel.

The initial impressions of Auschwitz and Birkenau were similarly conveyed by both survivors. The conditions on the trains were so awful that both Wiesel and Lengyel expressed sentiments of relief when they were finally free of that horror.⁸ After the relief had passed, both survivors revealed their fear and confusion upon seeing the fire billowing out of the chimneys at Birkenau, and the “wretched stench [that] floated in the air.”⁹ The similar details that each survivor provides about the systematic induction process of prisoners into the camp legitimize their portrayals because these common details can be cross referenced. The Nazis did not seem to favour or show more ruthlessness to either gender in the initial selection process. Both described a scene of Nazi officials separating the people as they came off the train; men to one side, women to the other. Then, each group would be separated again; to the left meant death, to the right meant a harsh and almost-certainly short life. This was equally expressed by both Wiesel and Lengyel. In that moment Wiesel considered suicide, for his death seemed inevitable.¹⁰

Lengyel also considered suicide; however, this was slightly later in her time in the camp, when she realized that her family had been sent to the left and to their deaths.¹¹ Her husband had been a doctor prior to entry into the camp and had provided her with a dose of poison should the situation become dire.¹² The realization that the smoke and ash billowing out of those chimneys could have been her sons and parents was almost enough for Lengyel to consider ending her life. However, she did not, and was therefore forced through the systematic induction process. Those who were not sent to their deaths, as Wiesel and Lengyel, were forced to strip, pushed through showers in massive groups, and had their hair shaved or cut. The similar details in each memoir about their initial

⁷ Wiesel, *Night*, 47.

⁸ Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*, 21. & Wiesel, *Night*, 27.

⁹ Wiesel, *Night*, 28.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 33.

¹¹ Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*, 42.

¹² *Ibid*, 44.

impressions of the camp suggests that at the outset and in the end, the Nazis considered them all equal to each other; they were all enemies of the state who were less than human and deserved the approaching torture and death. However, between their entrance into the camps and their final exit, the authors present various experiences of the poor souls who suffered the true extent of human cruelty.

In comparing and contrasting the two memoirs, it can be understood that women endured additional hardships in the camps because of their sex. Though both sexes were forced to strip in the same fashion, because Lengyel was a woman, she described this experience as her “... hour of shame...”.¹³ Wiesel expresses humiliation but does not explain the reason for this feeling. This nudity was especially humiliating for women because modesty was an essential aspect of their religiosity as Jewish women. This feeling was not unique to Lengyel. Ringelheim explains how every female survivor that she has interviewed or conversed with “referred to the humiliating feelings and experiences surrounding her entrance to the camp.”¹⁴ Lengyel outlines the “...thorough examination” of each individual, female inmate “in the Nazi manner, oral, rectal, and vaginal...” being extremely humiliating and degrading.¹⁵ Wiesel does not reference a physical examination of that intimacy, which suggests that the female experience was specifically degrading because of their gender. There are two perspectives to consider that make this distinction of female sexual vulnerability so unique. One is the religious expectation of modesty being forcefully removed, which caused great shame for the women. The other is that the Nazis chose to exploit this gender specific expectation because it would cause extreme humiliation.

In addition to the examination process being unique to female inmates, the hair removal process had unique procedures based on gender. While all the men’s hair was shaved in Wiesel’s account, Lengyel identifies how some women’s hair was clipped and some were given ‘special treatment’ and bypassed the process all together.¹⁶ Lengyel described how she was one of these women to be singled out and chosen to keep her hair.

¹³ Ibid, 26.

¹⁴ Joan Ringelheim, “Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 10, no. 4 (1985): 743-744.

¹⁵ Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*, 28.

¹⁶ Ibid, 28.

A Nazi soldier pulled her aside and ordered her hair not to be cut, but Lengyel recognized the risk of this kind of preference and ensured her hair was cut and she was no longer “special”.¹⁷ The assumption that can be made is that the Nazi official thought she was an attractive woman and would have subjected to other dishonourable acts. This was an example of a gender specific torment that women were subject to in the camps.

Both Wiesel and Lengyel describe similar physical hardships that camp inmates had to endure. Beatings were a common occurrence in both the male and female experience. Wiesel describes the routine beatings as being like farmers whipping their cattle. The “men in charge” - whether they were SS men, Kapos, or Gypsy inmates who held authority over Jews - would beat the Jewish men with clubs and whips to herd them from place to place.¹⁸ This cattle-like experience is present throughout Wiesel’s account, likely because he moved from camp to camp frequently and, therefore, felt herded by the Nazi officials. Lengyel’s experience was somewhat more stationary. She was brought to Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944 and remained there for the majority of her camp experience and occasionally moved individually from barrack to barrack. This distinction between the two memoirs may not be a result of gender, but more the individual’s experience.

Lengyel was given the opportunity to work in the camp infirmary and hospital, where she witnessed the true brutality of the physical hardships people had to endure in the camps.¹⁹ Lengyel offers a lot of information that Wiesel does not about specific experiences of others in the camps. Because she worked in the infirmary, she witnessed the grotesque and utterly cruel “scientific experiments” that the Nazis were performing on inmates (both men and women).²⁰ She described them as “cruel games rather than serious quests for truth” because the experiments were unregulated and almost always led to death.²¹ Some of the unisex experiments included: “inoculation of a group of inmates with a germ disease... [testing] how long a human being could exist on nothing but salt water...” and placing inmates in ice baths for long periods of time to test the effects of altering

¹⁷ Ibid, 28-29.

¹⁸ Wiesel, *Night*, 40.

¹⁹ Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*, 69.

²⁰ Ibid, 185.

²¹ Ibid, 185.

internal temperature.²² Both men and women were subjected to sterilization. This is one of the only examples of men's sexual vulnerability being exploited in the camps bringing commonality to the way in which the Nazis viewed the prisoners; as human guinea pigs.

The daily hardship of starvation was commonly acknowledged in both memoirs. Both authors frequently commented on the questionable "food" they were expected to survive on. Lengyel called the liquid they received "surprise soup" which contained little to no nutrients but an abundance of random objects such as "... buttons, tufts of hair... keys... even mice."²³ Wiesel describes the soup he was given in Auschwitz as a "bowl of thick soup..."²⁴ There are two points to make note of that differ in these two depictions. One is that the men were given a bowl each whereas Lengyel makes the specific distinction that women shared one bowl between almost seventy-five women.²⁵ The second is the difference in the description of the soup itself. Perhaps the Nazis provided men with a more substantial soup because they were going to be subjected to more extensive labour and therefore needed the sustenance. Another explanation for this could be that the minimal rations given to the women pushed them further towards starvation and therefore provoked a type of desperation. A desperation that would lead female inmates to turn on each other or to offer sexual favours in exchange for food rations.

Ringelheim's initial research suggested that women were subjected to a uniquely female victimization involving, "sexual humiliation, rape, sexual exchange, pregnancy, abortion, and vulnerability through their children."²⁶ This uniquely female vulnerability was indeed exploited in the camps and observed by Lengyel. She described a personal experience with a male inmate who offered rations of potatoes to women in exchange for sexual relations. She maintained her morality and dignity and refused, while observed the direct exchange occur with her fellow female inmates. She described how "the scene inside [the barrack where the exchanges occurred] was demoralizing..." because these previously dignified women were reduced to performing dishonorable acts in order to survive.²⁷ This

²² Lengyel, *Five Chimneys* 186.

²³ *Ibid*, 37.

²⁴ Wiesel, *Night*, 42.

²⁵ Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*, 38.

²⁶ Ringelheim, "Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsiderations of Research," 743.

²⁷ Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*, 61.

moral struggle was somewhat different for men, or at least for Wiesel. He describes an internal struggle around morality when it comes to protecting his father. When his father was beaten in front of him, he stood by and did nothing for the fear of repercussion against himself.²⁸ He felt ashamed of this but knew it was necessary for survival. He witnesses another inmate leaving his own father to die and struggles with the same fate when his father falls ill. He could either sacrifice his ration of food to help his father, or think selfishly and take his father's extra ration, and eventually settled on the latter. This shows that each gender was vulnerable to demoralization, but women's experience was specifically aimed at their sexuality and sexual vulnerability.

Lengyel's experience and observations of the interactions with her fellow inmates were significantly more hostile than that of Wiesel in the men's side of the camp. Women were initially accommodating to each other while on the train but the kindness was short lived and for the entirety of her experience on the train and in the camp, women were quite hostile with each other. She explained how "it seemed as though the Germans constantly sought to pit us against each other, to make us competitive, spiteful and hateful."²⁹ This is in direct contrast to the advice given to Wiesel and the men by the "man in charge" who said, "let there be camaraderie among you... Help each other. That is the only way to survive."³⁰ Wiesel describes a general sense of camaraderie among the male inmates who shared rations of bread with each other and who helped each other find or contact lost relatives or friends.³¹

By contrast, the women's camp described in Lengyel's account was ruthless and individualistic. Women who were given a minor authoritative role in the barrack would "commandeer" the few luxuries, such as bowls for herself.³² "The washrooms would have made a fine field for a moralist's observations" because women would steal clothes from other women while they bathed.³³ Lengyel identified that the women were only provided with minimal necessities such as blankets ("one for every ten persons") and bowls

²⁸ Wiesel, *Night*, 54.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 35-36.

³⁰ Wiesel, *Night*, 41.

³¹ *Ibid*, 43.

³² Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*, 35.

³³ *Ibid*, 56.

(“twenty... for 1500 women”) which had to be shared.³⁴ The combination of starvation, exhaustion, and the constant threat of death decreased the morality of the inmates and caused them to become animalistic in their attempts to survive. “If you do not want to die of hunger,” she was told, “there is only one thing to do; steal.”³⁵

According to Doris L. Bergen, this was not a uniquely female experience. She identifies many examples of how the Nazis “reinforce divisions among prisoners” through the creation of a hierarchy system within the inmates and implementing humiliation techniques to specific “victim groups.”³⁶ Both Weisel and Lengyel identify the hierarchy and its effects on the interactions between inmates. They frequently refer to the Kapos, the prisoners who were given a small amount of authority to supervise the other inmates and carry out various administrative tasks. Some Kapos were decent and others ruthless. These experiences were felt by both survivors and therefore gender did not have an influence on that aspect of camp life.

This essay has emphasized distinct features in Lengyel’s memoir regarding the female experience. The argument focuses on how gender affected the experience of the people in the concentration camps. Lengyel’s account describes uniquely female experiences that seemed to have been additions to the general experiences of all inmates as described in Wiesel’s book. That is not to belittle the work of Wiesel, for he has provided an in depth perspective of the young boy struggling with his faith and morality as a result of the hardships he faced in the concentration camps.

These survivor memoirs provide a personal perspective on the experience of millions of Jews and other victims of the Holocaust. Being torn from their homes and families, stripped of their identities and possessions, subjected to horrific treatment and hardships were common for every inmate regardless of gender or age. The key distinction that made the experience in the concentration camps for women somewhat unique was their sexuality. This distinction is made evident by analyzing the memoirs of Elie Wiesel and Olga Lengyel and their gender specific experiences in the Holocaust. Though the

³⁴ Ibid, 35.

³⁵ Ibid, 109.

³⁶ Doris L. Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2nd edition, 2009), 121.

experience of men and women in the camps differed at times, in death, they were considered equal to the flames of the chimneys in the night.

Works Cited

Bergen, Doris L. *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2nd edition, 2009.

Lengyel, Olga. *Five Chimneys*. Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1947.

Ringelheim, Joan. "Preface to the Study Of Women and the Holocaust." *Contemporary Jewry* 17, no. 1 (1996): 1-2.

Ringelheim, Joan. "Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. 10, no. 4 (1985): 741-761.

Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1958.