'Stay Together, Always'

The Nobel Prize winner, who spent 11 months in Auschwitz, offers a haunting reflection of his final night and day in the 'kingdom of death.' With no certainty of what lay ahead, he and his father prepared to march out of one concentration camp, bound for another.

By Elie Wiesel

"AT LEAST WE'LL BE TOGETHER," MY FATHER SAID, HIS voice hoarse yet soft. I didn't dare look at him. In any case it was pitch dark. But I sensed his anguish, and he surely knew mine. My left leg had just been operated on. It throbbed with pain. Would I be able to walk? We didn't know how long the trek would last or where it would end. We had been told only that we were being evacuated to Germany's heartland. The Red Army was very near. "Yes," I whispered to my father. "We'll be together. We won't be separated." And in my heart the words became a prayer to a heaven steeped in darkness: "May we remain together," for I was not at all certain we would. Weakened and bruised, I had no faith in my own body. I felt it would betray me. Would my father survive my death?

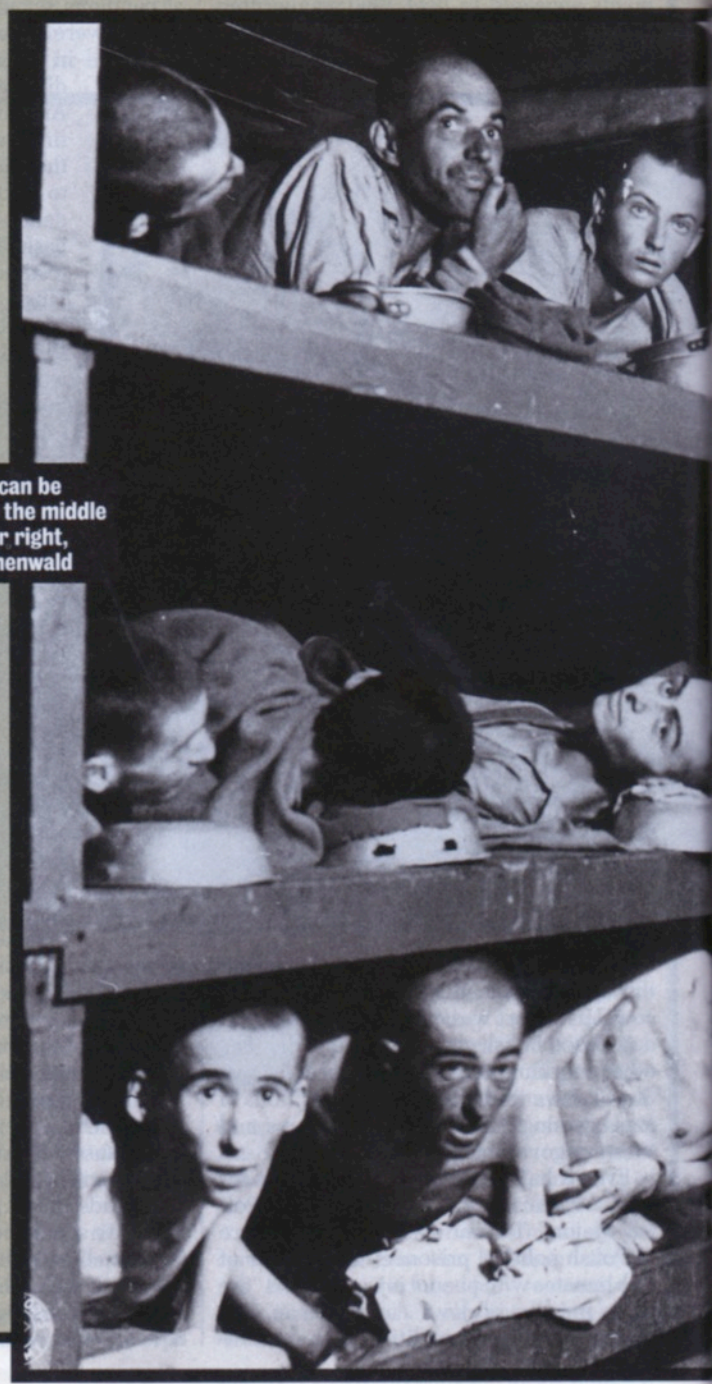
Those were my thoughts as we awaited the order to set out. The ten or twelve thousand silent prisoners, assembled by units as if for roll call, seemed to hold their breath.

It was Jan. 18, 1945. That day and night, the last I spent in the kingdom of death called Auschwitz III, otherwise known as Buna, haunt me even now. I often tell myself, as if in a bad dream, that we never should have left. Those who were sick, as I was, could have stayed in their "beds" in the infirmary and waited for the Russians. It had been suggested we do just that. In the general chaos my father could have taken an invalid's place, or a dead man's. Identity checks were a thing of the past. But there was a terrifying rumor that the SS would not forget us, that no witnesses would be left alive. It seemed inconceivable that the Germans would spare the very people they had designated as first in line for death.

My father hurried to the infirmary as soon as news of the evacuation spread through the camp. I can still see him, will see him always: crushed and powerless, his face ash gray, shoulders stooped, eyes desolate, full of pity for his 16-year-old son and for himself. He asked my advice. It hurt to see him so lost and belittled, infinitely humble, as though yielding his authority as a father to the absolute evil of Auschwitz.

"But you're sick," he said. "You just had surgery. Are you sure you can walk? The road before us will be long. Can you make it?" I reassured him. The important thing was not to be separated.

I left the infirmary and went back to my unit. There was feverish agitation in the camp—people running everywhere, bread and blankets being handed out, parents and friends coming together to talk things over, as my father and I had done. Words of encouragement, quick advice, silent handshakes. It was the last assembly. Evacuation would start soon. And afterwards? That word did not exist in the Auschwitz lexicon. It all depended. On the Germans, of course, and on the Russians, who were so very near. If only they launched an advance, they would arrive in a matter of hours. But they took their time. Eternities later, in 1979, I happened to be in Moscow, where I met General Petrenko, whose troops liberated Auschwitz. I told him of our last night in the camp, of how we waited for his troops the way religious Jews await the Messiah. Why were you so late, too late? You could have saved a hundred thousand human lives. The general cited technical factors I found unconvincing. One theory is that Stalin did not want to liberate Auschwitz too soon, for too many Soviet prisoners of war were still



Wiesel can be seen in the middle row, far right, at Buchenwald

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in the camp, and in his demented hatred he wished them dead. I have no idea if there is any truth to that. All I know is that although the Red Army was nearby, the SS was nevertheless able to celebrate its devotion to Death.

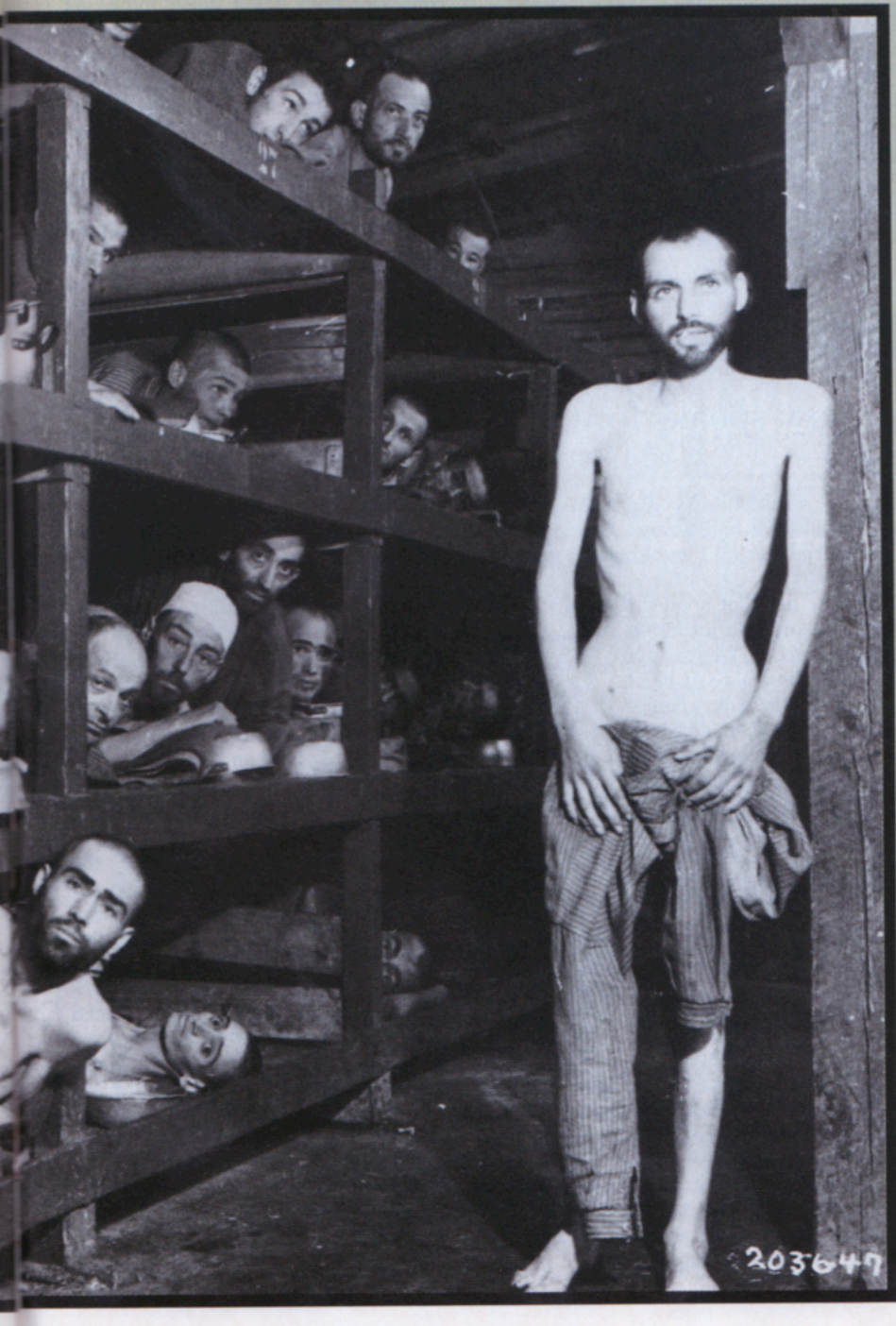
In those leaden hours of agonizing wait, we wondered, echoing the prophets: watchman, what of the night?

We waited for the compact mass to rouse itself, for time to begin to flow again. I tried to gather a few memories.

I recalled the first day, a beautiful, sun-soaked day in June. And the happiness—yes, happiness, wretched and pitiable, but happiness nonetheless, for my father and I were in the same unit and worked in the same detail. So long as he stood at my side, I could live despite it all—despite the barbed wire and the dogs, the watchtowers and the SS who ruled the heavens and the earth, despite the howling of the masters and the whimpering of their victims, despite the inmates brutalized by sadistic kapos, the hunger and the fear and the exhaustion, the icy savagery of some and the humble warmth of others. Where was humanity in all this?

Scenes of dread. The curfew during nights of "selections." The humiliations. The "Muselmänner"—those resigned, extinguished souls who had suffered so much evil as to drift to a waking death. Turning their backs on life and the living, they felt no further terror or pain. They were dead but didn't know it.

I thought of the astonishing, collective Rosh Hashana prayer on the *Appelplatz*, and of a friend of my father's who asked us to say *Kaddish* for him, and of the death of three "political" prisoners hanged together in Buna: the youngest was so light it took him long minutes to die. I described the scene in my first testimony, my memoir, "Night." An American Jewish critic recently had the temerity to write that he did not quite believe it really happened.



Fifty years later I returned to Buna. It is not far from the larger Auschwitz camp. Just a few minutes by car. I sought the past but failed to find it. The guide pointed to a neighborhood of Monowitz. That was it. And what remained of Buna? A small plaque. Nothing more, nothing else. But where was the iron gate? What had happened to the barracks, the parade ground, the infirmary, the storehouse, the prison where the SS tortured and mutilated inmates sentenced to death before hanging them in full view of the assembled prisoners? I saw only buildings with people living in them. I saw a window open, a door close. In a courtyard laughing children played a game whose rules eluded me. Did they know . . . ?

Two men, not young, were on their way home. I stopped them. Asked them questions. Yes, they knew. They lived close by. I hadn't realized how near the village was. I had thought of it as worlds distant from the camp. But the villagers could see what was happening behind the barbed wire, could hear the music as the labor details trudged to work and back again. How did they manage to sleep at night? How could they go to mass on Sunday, attend weddings, laugh with their children, while a few paces away human beings despaired of the human race?

. . . It was going to snow. The gloomy sky turned black and wicked, pressing down with its weight of blood and death on the ghost people preparing to leave Auschwitz.

I thought of those who were gone, and made their silence mine. I pondered the question lodged deep in that silence.

Watchman, what of the night?

Suddenly the human mass tensed and became a vast river. An SS officer issued one last order in this camp. Forward march! A strange, mad thought crossed my mind: that I never expected to leave this place alive.

"Stay together, always," my father said.

Two weeks later, after a tortured journey to Buchenwald, death, or life, finally separated us.

Translated from the French by Jon Rothschild