

2025 Elie Wiesel Competition
Special Commendation Senior Essay
Michael Long, 11th Grade
Norfolk Academy, Charlotte Zito

The Importance of Emotion in History

When learning about the past, there are two main options. The past can either be interpreted and then presented by an external source who researched its facts and details, or it can be told from personal experience. While both means of learning history are invaluable to the study and understanding of past events, I believe that learning from the direct experience of others can provide not only a fully accurate history, having no details left up to speculation, but also provide a much more powerful and impactful description of what happened. Elie Wiesel's *Night* is an example of first-hand experience proving its ability to confidently tell history in both a factual and extremely compelling manner, proving to be an immensely powerful history of the Holocaust.

Although hearing various interpretations of history is often the only means of learning about past events, it does not always provide the level of detail that comes from learning from someone's personal experiences. This is seen in the memoir *Night* as many details would be almost impossible to know if Elie did not tell the story from his own experience. There are myriad examples of this seen throughout the memoir, but one in particular comes not from one event, but the overarching emphasis of soup seen throughout Elie's experience. During his time in Buchenwald, soup was at the forefront of many inmates' minds. Something as simple as soup is seen as the most prevalent driving force in their life, even becoming more important than life for some. While Elie's camp is being bombed, a large portion of soup is left unguarded. Even though everyone in the camp knows taking the soup would result in their death, someone crawls to the cauldron. As Elie reflects on this event, he describes this man as a "Poor hero committing suicide for a ration or two or more of soup" (59). This powerful story illustrates how desperate for food the imprisoned Jews were, an important detail that would never be understood to this extent if someone who experienced it never shared what they saw. If the only viewpoints we had of life inside concentration camps during that time were from the interpretations of future people, insights into the details of everyday life, and the psychology of the imprisoned people would never be known to the level that is provided in first-hand recollections like in Elie's memoir.

Another benefit of learning about the past from personal experiences is seen in its ability to add emotion to the past. While learning about historical events from an outside perspective, usually the main focus is on events based on physical, factual evidence. While this is important, it can create problems, especially with the Holocaust. One dilemma faced was that the history was so harsh that many people refused to believe it ever happened, as people believed humans could never do anything so atrocious. By sharing personal experiences, these disbeliefs were able to be quelled while simultaneously adding the unique aspect of emotions to the past. This effect can clearly be seen in Elie's story with his continuous reference to the night. Elie describes his experience as being stuck in a never ending night, a personal detail that gives power to his experience. Using this word, Elie provides the reader a window into the deeper effects of the Holocaust on the Jews it affected, painting a picture of the endless darkness they felt trapped in. It gives the reader a sense of how victims of the Holocaust felt that there was an absence of any light in their lives, with Elie claiming that "The night seemed endless" (26). The raw emotion conveyed in Elie's words are able to give people a sense of the truth behind what

was actually happening to the Jewish people during the Holocaust, something that other interpretations struggle to do. If the only information we had about the Holocaust and its impacts came from an outside reflection on past events, beautiful and vivid thoughts such as this ceaseless night would not have been preserved for people to study, leaving the truth behind these events muddled.

The retelling of history is vital not only so that we may understand what happened, but so that we may do everything we can to avoid its recurrence. While both direct and indirect tellings of historical events are vital to our understanding of the past, I strongly believe that learning from a first-hand experience offers many unique benefits and perspectives that learning from someone else's interpretation cannot provide. While both may be able to inform readers of past events, there is certainly a large gap in knowledge between people who are simply inferring what happened versus people who experienced it. But more important than this, learning from first-hand experience gives emotion and life to the past, like with Elie Wiesel. Many people refused to believe that the Holocaust ever happened because they only learned about it with statistics and facts. But reading a memoir of someone's own unique thoughts, emotions, and hardships as they lived through this event gives not only the most accurate but also the most compelling history of the event, something that is extremely important to our understanding of it today.

Works Cited

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