For Dr. Thomas Sosnowski's Holocaust, 1938-1945 (HIST 41129) class, Ryan Bucher wrote a reaction essay in response to Elie Wiesel's *Night*. In this essay, Bucher describes how Elie struggled to maintain his faith in God throughout the physical and psychological trials of the Holocaust. Bucher also shows how Wiesel developed a close relationship with his father when they were imprisoned in the concentration camps together, and how this father/son bond changed Elie's perspective on life.

*Night*, by Elie Wiesel, tells the terrifying account of how the Nazi regime persecuted, tortured, and enslaved millions of Jews in the death camps. More specifically, however, this autobiography shows how the author changed, both mentally and physically, during his imprisonment in the concentration camps at Auschwitz, Buna, and Buchenwald. This horrific experience changed his relationship with God and his father, as well as changing his appearance to the point that from the strenuous labor, exhaustion, and starvation, he did not recognize himself in the mirror. The catastrophes he witnessed and the actions of the Nazi Soldiers and Jews changed his perspective on life.

Before coming to the concentration camp, Eliezer was a devout Jew. He constantly studied the Talmud and cabalistic books, such as the *Zohar*. In 1941, at the age of twelve, he had already asked his father to find him a master to guide him in his studies of the cabbala, which Jews did not begin to study until thirty years of age. Since he was too young and there were no cabbalists in Sighet, he went and found himself a master, Moshe the Beadle. Elie and Moshe the Beadle would talk for hours in the synagogue about the mysteries and prophecies of the cabalistic books. Elie wanted to follow God's word. It was in the concentration camps that Wiesel began to doubt God. He wanted to know why God was allowing the extermination of the Jews to happen. At the age of fifteen, he had been witness to many disturbing images, such as hangings and his father's slow death, as well as experiencing excruciating pain, exhaustion, and starvation. He began asking about God, "Where is he?" (62). On the eve of Rosh Hashanah, the prisoners gathered at the place of assembly to praise God. Elie thought to himself as the thousands of prisoners repeated, "Blessed be the Name of the Eternal:"

Why, but why should I bless Him? Because He had thousands of children burned in his pits? ... How could I say to Him: "Blessed art Thou, Eternal, Master of the Universe, Who chose us from among the races to be tortured day and night, to see our fathers, our mothers, our brothers, end in the crematory?" (64)

Elie did not know how these men, amidst all their suffering, could still pray to their God, who allowed this enslavement and persecution to happen. He knew what he was thinking was wrong, and he immediately asked God for forgiveness. Yet, he still felt like a stranger to the crowd of men praying to God. He felt alone, "terribly alone in a world without God and without man" (65). Whereas Eliezer grew farther away from God inside the camp, he grew closer to his father.

Elie Wiesel's father ran a shop and was one of the leaders of the Jewish community is Sighet. Members of the community would often consult him about public as well as private matters. He was more concerned with the other people in the community than his own family. He was not well versed in family matters because he was always helping the community. Elie tells about the time when a cousin came to visit them. "She had been staying with us and eating at our table for over a fortnight before my father noticed her presence for the first time" (40). Since Wiesel was studying the Talmud during the day and the cabbala at night, and his father, who never displayed any emotion, was consistently engaged with the problems of the community, he did not have a close relationship with his father. It was in the death camps that he grew closer to his father. Ever since Elie heard the SS officer give the order,
“Men to the left! Women to the right,” he knew that at all costs, he and his father must not become separated (27). As his father’s health began to fail, Wiesel concentrated most of his efforts on keeping his father alive with the hope that they would soon be liberated. At Gleiwitz, Elie saved his father from the selection. His father was told to go to the left, which is where the weak were being sent. Wiesel ran after him, and several SS rushed to bring him back. It created so much commotion that his father was able to sneak over to the right. As his father grew weaker, Elie would bring him coffee and bread, but when he saw other sons trying to get away from their fathers or killing them over a piece of bread, he began to think to himself, “If only I could get rid of this dead weight, so that I could use all my strength to struggle for my own survival, and only worry about myself” (101). As soon as he thought this, he immediately felt ashamed of himself. Upon his imminent death, Elie’s father pleaded Eliezer to stop giving his ration of bread and soup to him. Instead, Elie should take his father’s rations because in the concentration camps there are no fathers. Through all the beatings, the malnutrition, and exhaustion Wiesel continued to help his father fight against death. Even though Elie knew that the chance his father was going to make it was slim, he still had a glimmer of hope that they would be liberated and his father’s health would be rejuvenated. It was an enormous sacrifice, considering Elie’s own problems, such as his swollen foot he had operated on at Buna and his own survival.

Night, by Elie Wiesel, brings out reactions of anger and sorrow as the reader learns of the horrific events that changed the author from his forced entry into the death camps until his liberation from them. As one reads this novel, he must keep reminding himself that this is not fiction. Since the summer of 1944 until three days after he was liberated from Buchenwald on April 11 by the Americans, Elie had not seen himself in a mirror. It was in that mirror in the hospital that he saw the corpse he had become. Wiesel stated, “The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me” (109). He cherished life now, more than ever. Before the camp, he lived to study the Talmud and cabbala. In the camp, he lived just to survive. Now, he lived to tell others about his appalling encounter with the death camps. He had fought death and won.

Work Cited