

## Summary

**Section 1:** In 1941, Eliezer, is a 12 year old boy living in Transylvanian town of Sighet. Only son in an Orthodox Jewish family that strictly adheres to Jewish tradition and law. Parents are shopkeepers, and father is highly respected within Sighet's Jewish community. Eliezer has two older sisters, Hilda and Béa, and a younger sister named Tzipora.

Eliezer studies Talmud, Jewish oral law. He studies Jewish mystical texts of Kabbalah, a somewhat unusual occupation for a teenager, and one that goes against his father's wishes. Eliezer finds a sensitive and challenging teacher in Moshe the Beadle, a local pauper. Soon, however, the Hungarians expel all foreign Jews, including Moshe. Despite their momentary anger, the Jews of Sighet soon forget about this anti-Semitic act. After several months, having escaped his captors, Moshe returns and tells how the deportation trains were handed over to the Gestapo (German secret police) at the Polish border. There, he explains, the Jews were forced to dig mass graves for themselves and were killed by the Gestapo. The town takes him for a lunatic and refuses to believe his story.

In the spring of 1944, the Hungarian government falls into the hands of the Fascists, and the next day the German armies occupy Hungary. Despite the Jews' belief that Nazi anti-Semitism would be limited to the capital city, Budapest, the Germans soon move into Sighet. A series of increasingly oppressive measures are forced on the Jews—the community leaders are arrested, Jewish valuables are confiscated, and all Jews are forced to wear yellow stars. Eventually, the Jews are confined to small ghettos, crowded together into narrow streets behind barbed-wire fences.

The Nazis then begin to deport the Jews in increments, and Eliezer's family is among the last to leave Sighet. They watch as other Jews are crowded into the streets in the hot sun, carrying only what fits in packs on their backs. Eliezer's family is first herded into another, smaller ghetto. Their former servant, a gentile named Martha, visits them and offers to hide them in her village. Tragically, they decline the offer. A few days later, the Nazis and their henchmen, the Hungarian police, herd the last Jews remaining in Sighet onto cattle cars bound for Auschwitz.

## Section 2

Packed into cattle cars, the Jews are tormented by nearly unbearable conditions. There is almost no air to breathe, the heat is intense, there is no room to sit, and everyone is hungry and thirsty. In their fear, the Jews begin to lose their sense of public decorum. Some men and women begin to flirt openly on the train as though they were alone, while others pretend not to notice. After days of travel in these inhuman conditions, the train arrives at the Czechoslovakian border, and the Jews realize that they are not simply being relocated. A German officer takes official charge of the train, threatening to shoot any Jew who refuses to yield his or her valuables and to exterminate everybody in the car if anybody escapes. The doors to the car are nailed shut, further preventing escape.

Madame Schächter, a middle-aged woman who is on the train with her ten-year-old son, soon cracks under the oppressive treatment to which the Jews are subjected. On the third night, she begins to scream that she sees a fire in the darkness outside the car. Although no fire is visible, she terrifies the Jews in the car, who are reminded that they do not know what awaits them. But, as with Moshe the Beadle earlier in the memoir, they console themselves in the belief that Madame Schächter is crazy. Finally, she is tied up and gagged so that she cannot scream. Her child, sitting next to her, watches and cries. When Madame Schächter breaks out of her bonds and continues to scream about the furnace that awaits them, she is beaten into silence by some of the boys on the train, with the encouragement of the others. The next night, Madame Schächter begins her screaming again.

The prisoners on the train find out, when the train eventually stops, that they have reached Auschwitz station. This name means nothing to them, and they bribe some locals to get news. They are told that they have arrived at a labor camp where they will be treated well and kept together as families. This news comes as a relief, and the prisoners let themselves believe, again, that all will be well. With nightfall, however, Madame Schächter again wakes everyone with her screams, and again she is beaten into silence. The train moves slowly and at midnight passes into an area enclosed by barbed wire. Through the windows, everybody sees the chimneys of vast furnaces. There is a terrible, but undefined, odor in the air—what they soon discover is the odor of burning human flesh. This concentration camp is Birkenau, the processing center for arrivals at Auschwitz.

### Section 3

At Birkenau, the first of many “selections” occurs, during which individuals presumed weaker or less useful are weeded out to be killed. Eliezer and his father remain together, separated from Eliezer’s mother and younger sister, whom he never sees again. Eliezer and his father meet a prisoner, who counsels them to lie about their ages. Eliezer, not yet fifteen, is to say that he is eighteen, while his father, who is fifty, is to say that he is forty. Another prisoner accosts the new arrivals, angrily asking them why they peacefully let the Nazis bring them to Auschwitz. He explains to them, finally, why they have been brought to Auschwitz: to be killed and burned. Hearing this, some among the younger Jews begin to consider rebelling, but the older Jews advise them to rely not on rebellion but on faith, and they proceed docilely to the selection. In a central square, Dr. Mengele stands, determining whether new arrivals are fit to work or whether they are to be killed immediately. Taking the prisoner’s advice, Eliezer lies about his age, telling Mengele he is eighteen. He also says that he is a farmer rather than a student, and is motioned to Mengele’s left, along with his father.

Despite Eliezer’s joy at remaining with his father, uncertainty remains. Nobody knows whether left means the crematorium or the prison. As the prisoners move through Birkenau, they are horrified to see a huge pit where babies are being burned, and another for adults. Eliezer cannot believe his eyes, and tells his father that what they see is impossible, that “humanity would never tolerate” such an atrocity. His father, breaking down into tears, replies that humanity is nonexistent in the world of the crematoria. Everybody in the column of prisoners weeps, and somebody begins to recite the Jewish prayer for the dead, the Kaddish. Eliezer’s father also recites the prayer. Eliezer, however, is skeptical. He cannot understand what he has to thank God for. When Eliezer and his father are two steps from the edge of the pit, their rank is diverted and directed to a barracks. Eliezer interrupts his narration with a moving reflection on the impact of that night on his life, a night that forever burned Nazi atrocity into his memory.

In the barracks, the Jews are stripped and shaved, disinfected with gasoline, showered, and clothed in prison uniforms. They are lectured by a Nazi officer and told that they have two options: hard work or the crematorium. When Eliezer’s father asks for the bathroom, he is beaten by the Kapo (a head prisoner, in charge of the other inmates). Eliezer is appalled at his own failure to defend his father. Soon they make the short march from Birkenau to Auschwitz, where they are quartered for three weeks, and where their prison numbers are tattooed on their arms. Eliezer and his father meet a distant relative from Antwerp, a man named Stein, who inquires after news of his family. Eliezer lies and tells him that he has heard about Stein’s family, and that they are alive and well. When a transport from Antwerp arrives, however, the man learns the truth, and he never visits Eliezer again.

Despite all that they have seen, the prisoners continue to express their faith in God and trust in divine redemption. Finally, they are escorted on a four-hour walk from Auschwitz to Buna, the work camp in which they will be interned for months.

### Section 4

After the required quarantine and medical inspection—including a dental search for gold crowns—Eliezer is chosen by a Kapo to serve in a unit of prisoners whose job entails counting electrical fittings in a civilian warehouse. His father, it turns out, serves in the same unit. Eliezer and his father are to be housed in the musicians' block, which is headed by a kindly German Jew. In this block of prisoners, Eliezer meets Julie, a Jewish violinist, and the brothers Yosi and Tibi. With the brothers, who are Zionists (they favor the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, the holy land), Eliezer plans to move to Palestine after the war is over. Akiba Drumer, his faith still strong, predicts that deliverance from the camps is imminent.

Not long after Eliezer and his father arrive in Buna, Eliezer is summoned to the dentist to have his gold crown pulled. He manages to plead illness and postpone having the crown removed. Soon after, the dentist is condemned to hanging for illegally trading in gold teeth. Eliezer does not pity the dentist, because he has become too busy keeping his body intact and finding food to eat to spare any pity. Idek, the Kapo in charge of Eliezer's work crew, is prone to fits of violent madness. One day, unprovoked, he savagely beats Eliezer, after which a French girl who works next to Eliezer in the warehouse offers some small kindness and comfort.

The narrator then skips forward several years to recount how, after the Holocaust, he runs into the same girl—now a woman—on the Métro in Paris. He explains that he recognized her, and she told him her story: she was a Jew passing as an Aryan on forged papers; she worked in the warehouse as a laborer but was not a concentration camp prisoner.

The narration then returns to Eliezer's time at Buna. Eliezer's father falls victim to one of Idek's rages. Painfully honest, Eliezer reveals how much the concentration camp has changed him. He is concerned, at that moment, only with his own survival. Rather than feel angry at Idek, Eliezer becomes angry at his father for his inability to dodge Idek's fury.

When Franek, the prison foreman, notices Eliezer's gold crown, he demands it. Franek's desire for the gold makes him vicious and cruel. On his father's advice, Eliezer refuses to yield the tooth. As punishment, Franek mocks and beats Eliezer's father until Eliezer eventually gives up. Soon after this incident, both Idek and Franek, along with the other Polish prisoners, are transferred to another camp. Before this happens, however, Eliezer accidentally witnesses Idek having sex in the barracks. In punishment, Idek publicly whips Eliezer until he loses consciousness.

During an Allied air raid on Buna, during which every prisoner is supposed to be confined to his or her block, two cauldrons of soup are left unattended. Eliezer and many other prisoners watch as a man risks his life to crawl to the soup. The man reaches the soup, and after a moment of hesitation lifts himself up to eat. As he stands over the soup, he is shot and falls lifeless to the ground. A week later, the Nazis erect a gallows in the central square and publicly hang another man who had attempted to steal something during the air raid. Eliezer tells the tale of another hanging, that of two prisoners suspected of being involved with the resistance and of a young boy who was the servant of a resistance member. Although the prisoners are all so jaded by suffering that they never cry, they all break into tears as they watch the child strangle on the end of the noose. One man wonders how God could be present in a world with such cruelty. Eliezer, mourning, thinks that, as far as he is concerned, God has been murdered on the gallows together with the child.

## Section 5

At the end of the summer of 1944, the Jewish High Holidays arrive: Rosh Hashanah, the celebration of the new year, and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Despite their imprisonment and affliction, the Jews of Buna come together to celebrate Rosh Hashanah, praying together and praising God's name. On this solemn Jewish holiday, Eliezer's religious rebellion intensifies, and he cannot find a reason to bless God in the midst of so much suffering. Eliezer mocks the idea that the Jews are God's chosen people, deciding that they have only been chosen to be massacred. He comes to believe that man is stronger than God, more resilient and more forgiving. His denial of faith leaves him alone, or so he believes, among the 10,000 Jewish celebrants in Buna. Leaving the service, however, Eliezer finds his father, and there is a moment of communion and understanding between them. Searching his father's face, Eliezer finds only despair. Eliezer decides to eat on Yom Kippur, the day on which Jews traditionally fast in order to atone for their sins.

Soon after the Jewish New Year, another selection is announced. Eliezer has been separated from his father to work in the building unit. He worries that his father will not pass the selection, and after several days it turns out that Eliezer's father is indeed one of those deemed too weak to work: he will be executed. He brings Eliezer his knife and spoon, his son's only inheritance. Eliezer is then forced to leave, never to see his father again.

When Eliezer returns from work, it seems to him that there has been a miracle. A second selection occurred among the condemned, and Eliezer's father survived. Akiba Drumer, however, is not so lucky. Having lost his faith, he loses his will to live and does not survive the selection. Others are also beginning to lose their faith. Eliezer tells of a devout rabbi who confesses that he can no longer believe in God after what he has seen in the concentration camps.

With the arrival of winter, the prisoners begin to suffer in the cold. Eliezer's foot swells up, and he undergoes an operation. While he is in the hospital recovering, the rumor of the approaching Russian army gives him new hope. But the Germans decide to evacuate the camp before the Russians can arrive. Thinking that the Jews in the infirmary will be put to death prior to the evacuation, Eliezer and his father choose to be evacuated with the others. After the war, Eliezer learns that they made the wrong decision—those who remained in the infirmary were freed by the Russians a few days later. With his injured foot bleeding into the snow, Eliezer joins the rest of the prisoners. At nightfall, in the middle of a snowstorm, they begin their evacuation of Buna.

In the blizzard and the darkness, the prisoners from Buna are evacuated. Anybody who stops running is shot by the SS. Zalman, a boy running alongside Eliezer, decides he can run no further. He stops and is trampled to death. Malnourished, exhausted, and weakened by his injured foot, Eliezer forces himself to run along with the other prisoners only for the sake of his father, who is running near him. After running all night and covering more than forty-two miles, the prisoners find themselves in a deserted village.

Father and son keep each other awake—falling asleep in the cold would be deadly—and support each other, surviving only through mutual vigilance. Rabbi Eliahou, a kindly and beloved old man, finds his way into the shed where Eliezer and his father are collapsed. The rabbi is looking for his son: throughout their ordeal in the concentration camps, father and son have protected and supported each other. Eliezer falsely tells Rabbi Eliahou he has not seen the son, yet, during the run, Eliezer saw the son abandon his father, running ahead when it seemed Rabbi Eliahou would not survive. Eliezer prays that he will never do what Rabbi Eliahou's son did.

At last, the exhausted prisoners arrive at the Gleiwitz camp, crushing each other in the rush to enter the barracks. In the press of men, Eliezer and his father are thrown to the ground. Fighting for air, Eliezer discovers that he is lying on top of Juliek, the musician who befriended him in Buna. Eliezer soon finds that he himself is in danger of being crushed to death by the man lying on top of him. He finally gains some breathing room, and, calling out, discovers that his father is near. Among the dying men, the sound of Juliek's violin pierces the silence. Eliezer falls asleep to this music, and when he wakes he finds Juliek dead, his violin smashed. After three days without bread and water, there is another selection. When Eliezer's father is sent to stand among those condemned to die, Eliezer runs after him. In the confusion that follows, both Eliezer and his father are able to sneak back over to the other side. The prisoners are taken to a field, where a train of roofless cattle cars comes to pick them up.

The prisoners are herded into the cattle cars and ordered to throw out the bodies of the dead men. Eliezer's father, unconscious, is almost mistaken for dead and thrown from the car, but Eliezer succeeds in waking him. The train travels for ten days and nights, and the Jews go unfed, living on snow. As they pass through German towns, some of the locals throw bread into the car in order to enjoy watching the Jews kill each other for the food. Eliezer then flashes forward to an experience he has after the Holocaust, when he sees a rich Parisian tourist in Aden (a city in Yemen) throwing coins to native boys. Two of the desperately poor boys try to kill each other over one of the coins, but when Eliezer asks the Parisian woman to stop, she replies, "I like to give charity."

Eliezer then returns to his narration of the German townspeople throwing bread on the train. An old man manages to grab a piece, but Eliezer watches as he is attacked and beaten to death by his own son, who in turn is beaten to death by other men. One night, someone tries to strangle Eliezer in his sleep. Eliezer's father calls Meir Katz, a strong friend of theirs, who rescues Eliezer, but Meir Katz himself is losing hope. When the train arrives at Buchenwald, only twelve out of the 100 men who were in Eliezer's train car are still alive. Meir Katz is among the dead.

## **Section 8 and 9**

The journey to Buchenwald has fatally weakened Eliezer's father. On arrival, he sits in the

snow and refuses to move. He seems at last to have given in to death. Eliezer tries to convince him to move, but he will not or cannot, asking only to be allowed to rest. When an air raid alert drives everyone into the barracks, Eliezer leaves his father and falls deeply asleep. In the morning, he begins to search for his father, but halfheartedly. Part of him thinks that he will be better off if he abandons his father and conserves his strength. Almost accidentally, however, he finds his father, who is very sick and unable to move. Eliezer brings him soup and coffee. Again, however, Eliezer feels deep guilt, because part of him would rather keep the food for himself, to increase his own chance of survival.

Confined to his bed, Eliezer's father continues to approach death. He is afflicted with dysentery, which makes him terribly thirsty, but it is extremely dangerous to give water to a man with dysentery. Eliezer tries to find medical help for his father, to no avail. The doctors will not treat the old man. The prisoners whose beds surround Eliezer's father's bed steal his food and beat him. Eliezer, unable to resist his father's cries for help, gives him water. After a week, Eliezer is approached by the head of the block, who tells him what he already knows—that Eliezer's father is dying, and that Eliezer should concentrate his energy on his own survival. The next time the SS patrol the barracks, Eliezer's father again cries for water, and the SS officer, screaming at Eliezer's father to shut up, beats him in the head with his truncheon. The next morning, January 29, 1945, Eliezer wakes up to find that his father has been taken to the crematory. To his deep shame, he does not cry. Instead, he feels relief.

Eliezer remains in Buchenwald, thinking neither of liberation nor of his family, but only of food. On April 5, with the American army approaching, the Nazis decide to annihilate all the Jews left in the camp. Daily, thousands of Jews are murdered. On April 10, with about 20,000 people remaining in the camp, the Nazis decide to evacuate—and kill—everyone left in the camp. As the evacuation begins, however, an air-raid siren sounds, sending everybody indoors. When it seems that all has returned to normal and that the evacuation will proceed as planned, the resistance movement strikes, driving the SS from the camp. Hours later, on April 11, the American army arrives at Buchenwald. Now free, the prisoners think only of feeding themselves. Eliezer is struck with food poisoning and spends weeks in the hospital, deathly ill. When he finally raises himself and looks in the mirror—he has not seen himself in a mirror since leaving Sighet—he is shocked: “From the depths of the mirror,” Wiesel writes, “a corpse gazed back at me.”