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A Question of G-d: Jewish Theology and Memoirs of the Holocaust

Rebecca McClellan
Georgia Southern University

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By
Rebecca McClellan

Under the mentorship of Dr. Brian K. Feltman

ABSTRACT

The Holocaust, the systematic murder of the European Jews by the Germans, had massive impacts on the religious beliefs of those Jews who survived it. Nazi authorities and their accomplices stripped Jews away from their homes, their families, and everything they knew. Forced to work under inhumane conditions, many came to question the God they had followed and the religion they had practiced. This thesis investigates the memoirs of five Jewish survivors to analyze the impact the Holocaust had on their faith.

Thesis Mentor:_____

Dr. Brian K. Feltman

Honors Director:_____

Dr. Steven Engel

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Chapter I: Introduction

The Holocaust, the systematic murder of the European Jews by the Germans and their allies, claimed the lives of six million victims. Its effects spread across the world. As the Allies liberated the death camps and freed the victims who had been imprisoned for years, many moved around the globe in an attempt to move on with their lives. However, survivors' experiences changed them and greatly affected their faith. There are many debates over how the Holocaust affected the faith of Jews who went through and survived the experience: Why would God allow this to happen? Had someone done something wrong in order for this to happen? Regardless of differing stances and opinions, survivors' faith was clearly affected by the happenings of the Holocaust and conditions in the death camps.

According to Jewish theological tradition, God made a covenant with Abraham and the Jewish people. If they, who were His[1] chosen people, would follow the commandments that He laid out for them, then He would make them a great nation of many and He would lead them to the promised land, or Israel. Accordingly, many people who have questions about the Holocaust are left wondering if it ocurred because the covenant between God and His people, the Jews, was broken. If the covenant was broken, was the Holocaust God's way of punishing His people for their actions? This paper will explore several leading theological and scholarly arguments concerning how the Holocaust has been explained as God's abandonment of His people. It will look deeply

[1]For the purposes of this paper, I will be referring to God as "Him." These statements are in no way a claim to define God's gender.

into five memoirs of Holocaust victims and survivors to see how the Holocaust affected their faith and their view of God.

The Holocaust left many people trying to explain why it occurred or the reasoning behind why God would let this happen to his chosen people. For example, one of the arguments about faith and the Holocaust is that as humans, we do not have the right to question why God allowed it to happen because He is God and it is not for us to understand. Another argument is that humans were given the right to make good or bad decisions and God assigns punishment accordingly. Six million Jews died during the Holocaust and many others, though alive, went through such terrible events that they were changed for the rest of their lives. Their experiences impacted their children and grandchildren after them. People seek understanding for things that do not make sense, and everything that happened during the Nazi reign over Germany seemed incomprehensible. Why did God allow His people to be moved in ghettos, packed onto trains and finally taken to extermination camps to work as slaves, be experimented on, or horrifically murdered? In *Rethinking the Holocaust*, Yehuda Bauer outlines two arguments or theological explanations for the Holocaust. The first justifies God's decision by referring to Him as, "an all-powerful Being who cannot be asked for any explanation because humans are too puny to understand his leadership (*Hannagan*) of the world. His ways are not our ways."[2] This argument eliminates the need for human understanding of the Holocaust. It is not up to humans to question God or anything that He does. He can do as He wishes and does do what He wants, because He is God. That is the only explanation needed.

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[2]Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2001), 186.

Bauer's second claim offers a different explanation of the Holocaust. He states that, "all evil is grounded in the freedom that God has given humans to choose between good and bad."[3] This statement would mean that God gave humans a choice, and if they make bad decisions, evil will come as a result. If they make good decisions, evil will not come. This argument places the responsibility on human shoulders and takes God out of the equation. God informed humans of how they were supposed to live and warned them that straying from good would bring consequences, and after He did so, it was up to them. This view raises the question of what happens to the covenant, if these beliefs are true? Was the covenant broken and did this fracture lead to the events surrounding the Holocaust?

Both of the arguments discussed by Bauer in *Rethinking the Holocaust* are valid explanations for trying to understand why the Holocaust happened and God's role in it. One rests the cause or blame on humans due to their choices, and the other takes away the right for humans to question why it happened at all, due to God's sovereignty. If a survivor looked at the Holocaust and explained it using either of these arguments, it could help to understand how their faith might have changed during the Holocaust or how they view God because of it. If a Jewish Holocaust survivor believed that the Holocaust happened due to humans making a bad choice, their faith might not have changed, because they would believe that humans had known that there were consequences to making bad choices.

However, the arguments made by Bauer in *Rethinking the Holocaust* are not the only ones to be considered when looking at this topic. Jewish theologians and scholars

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[3]Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, 187.

present several responses in *A Holocaust Reader: Responses to the Nazi Extermination*, by Michael L. Morgan. The collection's authors bring up new perspectives and continue to explore the explanation for the Holocaust. Richard Rubenstein's "Symposium on Jewish Belief" makes a very strong argument that Jews can no longer believe in "an omnipotent, beneficent God after Auschwitz" [4] He discusses the tradition of Jewish theology to see adversity in Jewish history as punishment due to the sin of Israel. The Israelites, the Jewish people, were God's chosen ones and when they broke the covenant that they made with God, they were punished for it. However, if people see things from this point of view, Rubenstein argues, this frames Hitler and the Schutzstaffel (SS)[5] as being God's tools to punish the Jews. He states that there can be no purpose seen in the death camps without forcing traditional believers to take the "most demonic, antihuman explosion in all history"[6] and frame it as something that God used and meant to be purposeful. Rubenstein insists that he is not willing to accept this idea and he continues by outlining the continued importance of Judaism as a religion, even though God is no longer present as He once was.

Rubenstein's "Symposium" leaves no doubt as to his beliefs concerning God or what he thinks of the Holocaust. It is very evident from this essay that he believes God is

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[4]Michael L. Morgan, *A Holocaust Reader: Responses to the Nazi Extermination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 94.

[5]"The SS (*Schutzstaffel*, or Protection Squads) was originally established as Adolf Hitler's personal bodyguard unit. It would later become both the elite guard of the Nazi Reich and Hitler's executive force prepared to carry out all security-related duties, without regard for legal restraint...The SS was specifically charged with the leadership of the "Final Solution," the murder of European Jews." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "The SS," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*: https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ss. (accessed March 25, 2019).

[6]Morgan, *A Holocaust Reader*, 95.

no longer present and that humans are able to see this through what happened during the Holocaust in the extermination camps. Despite his stance on the matter, he states, "I do not think Judaism has lost its meaning or its power."[7] He believes that the dilemma that must be solved is learning, in a time when God is no longer present, how to continue on with religion and exist together in times such as these.

In "Faith after the Holocaust", Eliezer Berkovits argues that one can view and deal with the Holocaust in two different ways. An individual can choose "the attitude of pious submission to it as a manifestation of the divine will,"[8] or the individual can choose to question and doubt divine will as a result of the events of the Holocaust. Berkovits makes a distinction between those who actually experienced and lived through the Holocaust and those who choose to identify with the victims and respond based on what they have heard and read about it. He argues that those who have not truly experienced it because they were not a part of the Holocaust can never truly know what the others went through and cannot have the same kind of reaction to it due to this important distinction.

There are many who did not experience the Holocaust, but have chosen to doubt, question, and rebel, because they have decided that God is not looking out for the Jews or that He is no longer present. Yet there are also those who believe that going through the Holocaust was "an act of faith" and accept it as God's will, even though they were not there. Berkovits' argument is that those who did not live through the Holocaust do not

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[7]Richard Rubenstein, "Symposium on Jewish Belief," In *A Holocaust Reader: Responses to the Nazi Extermination*, edited by Michael L. Morgan, 94-95 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[8]Eliezer Berkovits, "Faith after the Holocaust," In *A Holocaust Reader: Responses to the Nazi Extermination*, edited by Michael L. Morgan, 96-102 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

have the right to accept or reject faith, because there were those who, even in the worst of times, kept their faith until the end. Yet, there were others who lost their faith in these times and we are unable to blame them, for their faith was destroyed and broken, leading to reasonable disbelief. Those individuals who were not a part of the Holocaust must support their people in their responses to this atrocity, even though some kept their faith and others lost it. Add another footnote here

Berkovits' argument is a strange one to consider, because it calls for people to respond in two ways that are very different and that contradict each other. How can an individual go about accepting faith in order to support those who went through the Holocaust and kept theirs, while also rejecting faith in order to respect those whose faith was rightfully destroyed by the experiences they were forced to have? It might be up to each individual themselves to decide how to properly execute this in their own life. However, whatever they decide to do with their faith, certainly no one could blame them for their response[9].

Lawrence L. Langer tears apart the way that we all view the Holocaust and attempt to put it into terms we understand in *Beyond Theodicy: Jewish Victims and the Holocaust*. The vocabulary that we have and use to describe and understand suffering and atrocities is not enough. It will never give us an accurate and fair depiction of what Holocaust victims went through and it does not help anyone to find meaning out of what Langer argues, "was for the Nazis an *expression* of good, supported by a political and moral value system totally alien to our orthodox minds." Langer makes it very clear that many people try to use theodicy and faith to explain or understand the events of the

[9]Berkovits, "Faith after the Holocaust," In *A Holocaust Reader*, 96-102.

Holocaust, but that doing so is not possible. We cannot use theological explanations to explain suffering that was not designed by a divine will. If humans and their nature are the source and nature of these evil tragedies, we cannot look to theodicy and its vocabulary to help us explain what happened[10].

Langer's example helps properly explain the moral dilemma that the Holocaust presents is a heartbreaking one. Abraham P., who had no possible way of knowing what was going to happen or where they were headed, sent his younger brother to follow his parents, who were headed straight to the gas chambers as soon as they entered Auschwitz. His guilt is undeserved, as no actions that he took were ultimately the direct cause of his brother's death. He did what many would do and decided that the best and maybe even safest place for his brother to be was with his parents. Despite his lack of knowledge for what happened and the fact that it was not his fault, Abraham P. must now live the rest of his life trying to sort through how to feel about the death of his brother that he feels responsible for.[11] His story is one that helps to depict the impossibility of what it must be like to sort through the horrors of what happened to Holocaust victims and survivors.

Langer argues that theodicy might not be relevant to the Holocaust in the way that everyone has always viewed that it is. He calls the Holocaust a "*secular* evil alone," stating that there is no explanation waiting in determining what divine will was through

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[10] Lawrence L. Langer, "Beyond Theodicy: Jewish Victims and the Holocaust," In *The Holocaust: Readings and Interpretations*, edited by Joseph R. Mitchell and Helen Buss Mitchell, 423-428 (Boston: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 2001).

[11] Langer, "Beyond Theodicy: Jewish Victims and the Holocaust," 423-428.

all of this[12]. There was no divine will in all of this, because the Holocaust was the result of humans and their choices. It happened because the Nazis made the decision to try to exterminate an entire group of people, along with countless others.

As the arguments explored in this paper show, there are many different paths of thought and ways that scholars and theologians go about trying to explain the Holocaust and the effects it had on faith. While some of these authors seem to have similar ideas to others, it is clear that there is not only one supported argument when it comes to faith and the Holocaust. It will be important to take examination of each individual and their experiences to see with which argument they align best. Looking into the memoirs and written experiences of individual Holocaust survivors will help to see how different people felt, what their times in the concentration camps were like, and how they felt about their faith during and after the Holocaust. Without question, the Holocaust has left a huge impact on the world and on both people that experienced it and those who came after to hear their stories.

This thesis examines the stories of several Holocaust victims, looking into each individual's testimony in order to see what their experiences were like, along with the experiences of others that they witnessed, and exactly the impact that the Holocaust had on their faith and religious life. The memoirs I will be analyzing will be those of Elie Wiesel, Gerda Weissmann Klein, Viktor E. Frankl, Primo Levi, and Adam Czerniaków.

[12] Langer, "Beyond Theodicy," 423-428.

Chapter II: The Memoirs

Elie Wiesel's Story

Elie Wiesel was only 15 years old when he and his family were loaded onto a train in the spring of 1944, and taken to a concentration camp from their home in Sighet, a small town in Transylvania, which was formerly a part of Hungary. His life before this point had been focused on his religious beliefs and on his family. His experiences in the concentration camp and with the Holocaust completely changed his life and his views on the world. A close reading of his memoir *Night* suggests that his faith diminished greatly and because his faith had been so important to him, he transformed as a person because of these experiences.

During the deportation of the Hungarian Jews in 1944, Wiesel was forced from his home and torn from his family, not knowing that when the men and women were separated, he would never see his mother and youngest sister again[13]. He then had to suffer through the harsh conditions and treatments of the camp, while watching his father struggle in his older age. In some ways, he continued on only because he felt that he must be there for his father. When forced to run on a march from one camp to another, Wiesel almost decided to just give up and die, but thought "I had no right to let myself die...I was his sole support."[14] Though he suffered immensely and lost the foundation of his life, his faith, he kept going for his father.

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[13]For more information on deportations and the Holocaust in Hungary, see Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000).

[14]Elie Wiesel, *Night* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012), 86.

Wiesel was placed in Auschwitz and then later in Buchenwald from 1944-1945. Auschwitz was a concentration and extermination camp located in German-occupied Poland, where at least 1.1 million inmates were killed. Buchenwald was a concentration camp in Weimar, Germany, where prisoners were used as forced labor. Wiesel was greatly impacted by his experiences during the Holocaust and it was evident in how his spiritual and religious beliefs were affected.

In the beginning of *Night*, Wiesel's story of what happened to him during World War II, he mentions that during the day he would study Talmud and at night he would, "run to the synagogue to weep over the destruction of the Temple."[15] One of his mentors inquired as to why he would cry every time he prayed and he answered that he did not know, he simply just felt the need to cry. It is easy to see that Wiesel found much of his identity in his religious beliefs, and that they meant a great deal to him.

When Wiesel was taken to the concentration camp and as he spent time working there and witnessing the horrors of the Holocaust, his faith is shaken more than ever before. Before he even reached the camp, he saw a woman that he had known from his hometown go crazy due to the loss of her husband and two oldest sons. She began screaming on the train, claiming there was a fire and angering everyone around her, until they were forced to tie her up.[16]Wiesel was also forced to watch his father be hit multiple times from the beginning of their time in camp until such blows ultimately resulted in the death of his father.[17] Another incident involved a young boy being hung due to not giving

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[15]Wiesel, *Night*, 3.

[16]Wiesel, *Night*, 24-25.

[17]Wiesel, *Night,* 39, 55, 111.

up information on where his father had smuggled in weapons from.[18] These were just a few of the horrific events that occurred right in front of Wiesel's own eyes.

Wiesel provides his readers with a view into his mind at the point when he began to question God and why He would allow this to happen to his people, people that have dedicated their lives to him. Wiesel is describing all of the moments that he will never forget and he says, "Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes."[19] At the very beginning of his time in Auschwitz, his father begins muttering under his breath, praising God. Wiesel becomes angry and questions, "Why should I sanctify His name? The Almighty, the eternal and terrible Master of the Universe, chose to be silent. What was there to thank Him for?"[20] It took only his first few hours in the camp for his faith to be shaken and for him to no longer trust the God he had served all his life.

When speaking of prisoners who were hanged for their various crimes, he tells a story of a child who they all cried for at his execution. He was so light, that it took him a long time to die and he suffered the entire time. People around Wiesel questioned where God was during this incident and Wiesel's response in his head was, "Where He is? This is where---hanging here from this gallows…"[21] The Holocaust and his experiences murdered the God he had once worshipped and in which he had placed his faith.

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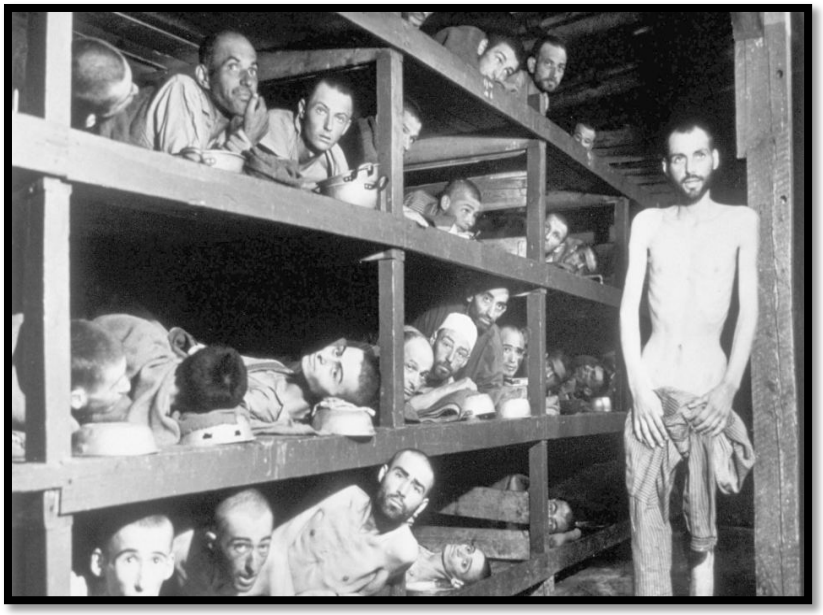
[18]Wiesel, *Night*, 62-65.

[19]Wiesel, *Night*, 34.

[20]Wiesel, *Night*, 33-34.

[21]Wiesel, *Night*, 64.



[22] *Former Prisoners of the "Little Camp" in Buchenwald.* April 16, 1945. National Archives and Records Administration, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, College Park, MD. March, 2019. Elie Wiesel is on the second bunk and is the seventh man from the left https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/photo/former-prisoners-of-the-little-camp-in-buchenwald

However, he was not the only one who started questioning his faith and began to wonder if God was even there or if he even cared. Wiesel spoke of a rabbi who he knew that had once had great faith and had been constantly praying and praising God. After a period of time, he lost his faith completely, claiming that God was no longer with those in the camps who were going through this time of suffering.[23] These trials that they were forced through had destroyed something as sacred and as personal as their faith. The Holocaust caused Elie Wiesel to question his faith and forced him to see examples of others questioning theirs. Placed right in front of him were people who had previously had solid and unwavering faith and the experiences that Wiesel and these others went through made them question their beliefs. Fear, anger, exhaustion, and multiple other

[23]Wiesel, *Night*, 76.

emotions played large roles in the way he thought and felt about things. The person he was before the Holocaust was drastically changed, and through his story, we can see others who were also changed in extreme ways because of what they were going through. Wiesel entered the concentration camp having been a very religious individual who was constantly seeking out more time studying about God and praying to Him and left having lost all belief that God existed and cared about anything that he had been through.

Gerda Weissmann Klein's Story

[24] Gerda Weissmann, who survived the Holocaust and later became a Klein when she married one of the soldiers who liberated her, Kurt Klein. Gerda Weissmann. *ID Cards*. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, College Park, MD. March, 2019. https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/id-card/gerda-weissmann

Gerda Weissmann Klein was only 15 years old when her town of Bielitz, Poland was taken over by the Germans. Her story is quite different from Wiesel's, as she was able to stay in in her home with all of her family, except her brother, for the majority of three years after the September 3, 1939, which is when her story began. Klein faced many

tragedies throughout the war and her time in various camps, such as losing her brother and parents, though their mortality was unknown, and losing her three closest friends, two within a week of their liberation and one after an amputation in the hospital in which they were they were recovering[25].

Klein was a girl of faith throughout her life and even during in her experiences in the war and her time in the concentration camps. Her faith seemed to be the driving force in her pure determination to survive, no matter what happened and even when those around her lost all hope and will to live. She always kept as good of an attitude as possible and tried to remain as optimistic as she could, which seemed to be a unique quality that no one around her possessed. One of her fellow prisoners remarked on this quality when she said to Klein, "Your spark has not gone out, it never will," shortly after telling her that she had given her belief in humanity.[26]

On many occasions, Klein looked at her situation and realized that it could have been worse or that it was better than previous conditions she had experienced. For example, Klein and her fellow prisoners were once at the Gross-Rosen camp in Märzdorf, where Klein was forced to work grueling night shifts unloading coal and even worse day shifts unloading flax, due to her unwillingness to service a supervisor. The Germans then moved her and many of her friends from Märzdorf to Landeshut, where they experienced much better working conditions and performed loom work that they were very familiar with. The conditions of this camp were still gruesome, but Klein was grateful for the

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[25]For more information on the German invasion of Poland, see Mary Fulbrook, *A Small Town Near Auschwitz: Ordinary Nazis and the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[26]Gerda Weissmann Klein, *All But My Life* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 197.

better conditions, saying, “we had learned one lesson well: we realized that our lot could be far worse. We would have been willing to stay in Landeshut until the end of the war.”[27] Her faith gave her the strength to get through.

In the year of 1941, when Klein was still living in her home with her parents, the conditions of her living arrangements and the wellbeing of her family members pushed her in her faith. At the very beginning of the war, Klein’s brother, Arthur, had been ordered to register, along with all men from the age of sixteen to fifty.[28] When Arthur left, it was the last time Klein and her parents would ever see him. Her father’s health had already been declining and her brother leaving pushed both her father and her mother into great sadness and stress over the loss of their only son. They were then forced to switch living quarters with the family living in their basement, and while they were living there, they were confined to small quarters and often did not have enough coal to heat the two rooms in the basement. These conditions were drastically different from the life that Klein had lived in before the war. “From that day on and for many days to come I placed all my hope in religion. I found a new source of strength,” Klein declared, after her father had almost died of a heart attack in the middle of the night.[29]

Klein relied on her religion to give her strength and hope to continue. She depended on her faith in this time to an extreme degree, even taking such measures as inflicting punishment on herself and choosing not to eat because she knew that her brother presumably did not have any food to eat for himself. She would sleep on the cold

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[27]Weissmann Klein, *All But My Life*, 154.

[28]Weissmann Klein, *All But My Life*, 16.

[29]Weissmann Klein, *All But My Life*, 47.

floor and would recite her prayers ten to twenty times a day, doing all that she could in order to find the will to continue on. Klein knew she felt differently about her religion, as she said, “For the first time in my life I felt I understood people who retire to convents and monasteries, who torture their bodies in humble poverty to attain eternal salvation.”[30]

There were times in which Klein struggled with prayer. Even though she claimed that she, “was closer to her Maker than ever”, she could not pray. She stated that, “through all the years I had prayed to God ardently and with hope. Now I prayed no more.”[31] The very end of her story about her time during the war ends with a death march, in which many of the girls that she marched with died. It was winter and the Germans forced them to march on for many hours at a time, with hardly any bread or water and with only the small amount of sleep they could get during the freezing nights. Those who could not keep up during the march or did not wake up in the morning were shot without warning: “We were no longer counted. They could not keep track of how many were shot or died during the night,” Klein said.[32] It was only then, after all of her years of suffering, that she could no longer find the will to pray.

Klein commented on the manner in which she had always prayed. She had been in a play in which many of the characters had prayed with selfish requests, all of which had cancelled each other out. Her character, however, prayed prayer of thanksgiving, which went straight up to God. God turned His face on her character because of the grateful prayers He received. Klein had modeled her own prayer life after the little boy which she

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[30]Weissmann Klein, *All But My Life*, 48.

[31]Weissmann Klein, *All But My Life*, 185.

[32]Weissmann Klein, *All But My Life*, 185.

played and, "had always thanked God for the gifts He bestowed upon me, and they were many."[33] The Holocaust took away Klein's ability to pray to God, something she had always been able to do. "There had always been something to be thankful for, even after 1939, but during that cold march, when we rested in the icy barns, hungry, afraid, I could pray no more."[34]

The Holocaust pushed Gerda Weissman Klein both to grow in her faith and depend on it in the hardest of times, and also broke her down to the point where she could not even pray, something that had been so important for her entire life. She used her beliefs to keep hope and to stay determined to live, even when those around her saw no point in continuing on. She might not have ever had to depend on her religion as much if the Holocaust had never happened, but she also might have never been made speechless when attempting to pray. Though she did not lose her belief in God like Elie Wiesel, she was certainly greatly changed from who she was before and how she viewed her religion because of her experiences in concentration camps and on the death march.

Viktor E. Frankl's Story

Viktor E. Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist from Austria who was taken to Auschwitz in 1944, where he remained until he was transferred to Türkheim, Germany after coming down with typhoid. He remained in Türkheim until the end of the war and liberation. While in Türkheim, Frankl, due to his medical knowledge, was placed in charge of fifty men who were sick with typhus. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl

[33]Weissmann Klein, *All But My Life*, 185.

[34]Weissmann Klein, *All But My Life*, 185.

wrote much about the psychology of how a prisoner dealt with each of the three phases of his experiences in a concentration camp, the phases being: "the period following his admission; the period when he is well entrenched in camp routine; and the period following his release and liberation."[35] Frankl discusses how prisoners clung onto life and includes himself and what was occurring in his mind as well as others during their time in Auschwitz and Türkheim.

Frankl recalled how many of the prisoners, including himself often found themselves thinking of their wives. One of his fellow inmates said, during a march to their work site, "If our wives could see us now! I do hope they are better off in their camps and don't know what is happening to us."[36] This comment turned Frankl's thoughts to his own wife and his musings led him to the conclusion that there is nothing greater than love. He states that love is a goal to which all men strive towards and wish to have for themselves and then finally decides that the truth of life and greatest secret is that, "*The salvation of man is through love and in love*."[37] Frankl found faith and some form of salvation in relying on the thoughts and memories and his beloved wife, from whom he had been separated upon arrival at Auschwitz.

Though it was easy for prisoners to feel completely empty and to suffer from a complete lack of spirituality while being held in a concentration camp, Frankl goes into the details of how individuals went to great efforts to deepen their inner lives, thoughts,

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[35]Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Pocket Books, 1984), 26.

[36]Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 56.

[37]Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 57.

and feelings[38]. Culture was not something that mattered in camp, except when it came to politics and religion. The prisoners would have "improvised prayers or services in the corner of a hut, or in the darkness of the locked cattle truck."[39] Frankl was invited to a spiritualistic seance, which he described in great detail. One man began praying a prayer in order to summon spirits, while another sat in front of a sheet of paper. After ten minutes of the summoning prayer, the man in front of the paper wrote "Vae V.," which is short for the Latin phrase, "vae victis," meaning woe to the vanquished.

[40] The entrance gates to the concentration and extermination camp, Auschwitz. The gate reads, "Arbeit Macht Frei," which means, "Work makes one free." Elie Wiesel, Viktor Frankl, and Primo Levi were all taken to Auschwitz during the Holocaust. *View of the entrance to the main camp of Auschwitz (Auschwitz I). The gate bears the motto "Arbeit Macht Frei" (Work makes one free).* May 11-15, 1945. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Institute Pamieci Narodowej. March 2019. https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1067785

[38] Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 58.

[39] Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 54.

Frankl did not take much from this incident, because even though the man who wrote it claimed he did not know Latin and had never heard the phrase, Frankl believes that he had heard it before and subconsciously written it down. He did not take it as a spiritual encounter or experience.[41] Frankl did not believe that the harsh conditions or experiences of the camp made it impossible for someone to strengthen their spiritual life or beliefs. He claimed that himself and others fell back on spiritual freedom and that this freedom allowed some who seemed weaker to be able to survive better than those who appeared stronger.[42] Remembering their past and falling back on these memories and dreams gave them something to cling to when it felt like everything else was slipping through their hands.

Frankl did not seem to rely on his faith in God to make it through the Holocaust, rather he found his salvation in something else: memories of his wife and mental conversations with her during his time in the camp. It did not matter that they were not together, and he was not sure if she was alive or dead. Thinking of her allowed Frankl to have faith and to push through to survive. He made many observations of others and how the Holocaust affected their beliefs and the psychological effects of what was happening to them. He was able to note, regardless of his own personal feelings concerning religion and God, that these things were very much present and important in the concentration camps to give prisoners something to hold on to in their struggles.

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[41]Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 55.

[42]Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 55-56.

Primo Levi's Story

Primo Levi was an Italian survivor of the Holocaust who was also imprisoned at Auschwitz after being arrested in mid-December 1943. He was only 24 years old at the time of his arrest. Levi had joined together with a group of friends and had fled into the mountains, forming a partisan group that they had hoped would become associated with the Italian resistance movement. They were arrested and interrogated, and then Levi was sent to join another group of Jews at a detention camp in Fossoli. It was soon taken over by the Germans, and they were all sent to Auschwitz.[43]

Levi was able to observe the changes in the religious beliefs of others from the very beginning of his journey. The night before they were placed on the transport to Auschwitz, one family finished their preparations and then, "they unloosened their hair, took off their shoes, placed the Yahrzeit candles on the ground and lit them according to the customs of their fathers, and sat on the bare soil in a circle for the lamentations, praying and weeping all the night."[44] Yahrzeit candles are memorial candles used in Judaism that are lit in remembrance of the dead. This family was not the only group that chose to mourn, as Levi described that many gathered in front of their door and "experienced a grief that was new for us, the ancient grief of the people that has no land, the grief without hope of the exodus which is renewed every century."[45] The emotions that they all experienced before they had even left or reached the camp were great and

[43]Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 13-14.

[44]Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 16.

[45]Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 16.

dreadful. Levi listed out the many emotions that overcame them, including religious abandon. Even the optimists had lost hope, as they were overtaken by fear and despair at what their future might hold for them. They had been ripped from their homes and they could only imagine the horrors lying ahead for them.

In the ninth chapter of *Survival in Auschwitz*, "The Drowned and the Saved," Levi describes two different states of being for an individual and looks at them in the context of his experiences and knowledge of the concentration camp. Levi states that normally, men are in possession of many resources, including spiritual resources, in order to keep them from being totally incapable of facing what life has to offer. In concentration camps, these resources are all stripped away. One is completely alone and must fight to stay alive. Others do not care and will do whatever it takes in order to save themselves. The drowned are those who do the bare minimum to get by and are not able to rise to positions of authority or make friends with power to help them. They do not learn how to survive in camp, "until their body is already in decay, and nothing can save them from selections or from death by exhaustion."[46] They make up the largest portion of inmates and even though many soon die, they are quickly replaced by the constant flow of new prisoners into the camp. Levi speaks of their sad existence; "the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer."[47]

Faith and belief are no longer something they possess and the lack of it in their lives helps lead them faster to their own end. The saved are those who have found something worth working towards or something that will allow them to stand out in

[46]Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 90.

[47]Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 90.

comparison to the mass of the drowned. He says, "We will try to show in how many ways it was possible to reach salvation with the stories of…" and then continues to share the specific stories of four prisoners.[48] Similar to how Frankl found salvation in his wife during his time in the camp, Levi was able to observe how some of these saved men were saved. However, of the four examples that Levi speaks of, not a single one relies on his faith or on religious strength in order to find salvation, rather they rely on their own strength or skills.[49] Faith did not help the drowned, nor the saved.

Levi did not depend on faith to get through the Holocaust. He never states if it is something that he lost when the war began or if he never really believed in anything in the first place. He is, however, able to look at others and see the changes in their faith, the grief and loss that they are experiencing. As with his explanation of the drowned and the saved, he makes it clear that the drowned have nothing divine within them, that anything divine has died or its light gone out. The reader can see at the beginning that many of the Jews in his transport group followed Jewish rituals until the last second possible with the lighting of the Yahrzeit candles. This lighting is symbolic for many in the death of their faith, as they lost all hope in the future. Levi gives his audience an important look into this world where so many lost their faith and many others their lives too.

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[48]Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 92.

[49]Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 92-100.

Adam Czerniaków's Story

Adam Czerniaków was a Polish Jew who was made head of the twenty-four-member Jewish council that was to enforce German orders in the Warsaw Ghetto[50]. Czerniaków was forced to work with the Germans and implement their orders, while also trying to look out for his people in the ghetto. He was forced to make decisions and be in charge of the Jewish Council, while watching his people suffer, starve, be exploited, and along with many other horrible things, he was forced to watch many die. Czerniaków committed suicide on July 23, 1942, after the expulsions of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto had begun. He realized that, not only had he calmed the fears of the people that the expulsions would not happen, but he would have to hand over orphans to be taken from the Ghetto. Czerniaków decided he could no longer take it and that suicide was all he could do. He felt powerless to do any more[51].

Czerniaków faced many problems, including standing up for the religious rights of all the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto. They faced German persecution in many ways, and the Germans closed down all synagogues, yeshivas, and mikvas in the Ghetto on January 20, 1940.[52] Yeshivas are educational centers that focus on teaching Jewish religious texts and mikvas are baths used in order for Jews to reach ritual purity. They closed these places under the premise that they were trying to contain and protect everyone from outbreaks of disease. By doing so, they stripped away all religious rights and practices of

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[50]For more information on the Warsaw Ghetto, see Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1985).

[51]Adam Czerniaków, *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniaków*, ed. Raul Hilberg, Stanislaw Staron, and Josef Kermisz (Chicago: Elephant Paperback, 1999), 9.

[52]Czerniaków, *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniaków*, 9.

Jews, for they could not attend worship, complete their rituals to be made pure, or continue to study and learn the Talmud and Torah. "Public prayer was forbidden...those who disobeyed risked imprisonment."[53] After a secret minyan, or gathering of at least ten Jewish men for public prayer, was caught, it was stated that anyone who was organizing or taking part in public prayer would be punished according to the government law.

Czerniaków fought for the religious rights and freedoms of his people, as he was one of the few who had the power, connections, and voice to do so. Despite the fact that he tried to institute changes to these prohibitions it was not until the end of April 1941, over a year later, when he finally received permission to open three synagogues. He went to efforts to raise funds to renovate and reopen one synagogue:

> Later I inspected the interior of the synagogue. The altar had fallen in. The capitals and parts of the architraves badly damaged. One column bared (of ornaments). The roof is pierced with holes. I issued instructions for the setting up of a committee to collect funds for the renovation and the opening of the synagogue.[54]

Even though Czerniaków went to great lengths to restore religion to the Jewish people of the Warsaw Ghetto, he could see a lack of passion from them, the longer that their imprisonment in the Ghetto and under the stifling rule of the Germans continued on. Though he had received permission to open three synagogues, when asked in January of 1942 for a grant to hire more staff and repair some things, he said, "The Jews are incapable of supporting even the three synagogues which we were permitted to open. It is reported that a non-Jew financed the roof repairs in one of the synagogues."[55] The Jews

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[53]Czerniaków, *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniaków*, 9.

[54]Czerniaków, *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniaków*, 226.

[55]Czerniaków, *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniaków*, 320.

were incapable of supporting the religious institutes that had been torn away from them at the beginning of their imprisonment.

In Czerniaków's diary, there are great examples of Jews losing the freedom to worship and behave as religiously as they would like to. Their religious practices were taken from them and when they were given back in small amounts, the Jews did not or could not even participate. The Germans oppressed them in such ways that not only did many lose passion for their faith, but they lose even the rituals and ceremonies through which they could practice them. Czerniaków and the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto were greatly mistreated when it came to their religion. What happened in the Warsaw Ghetto pushed Czerniaków to kill himself, which is a violation of Jewish law. This drastic act shows just how deeply Czerniaków and others were affected by the Holocaust.

Conclusion

Each of the Jews examined through their memoirs in this thesis responded differently when faced with the horrors of the Holocaust and what they and their loved ones went through. Gerda Weissmann Klein leaned harder on her religion, even though there were times she could not speak to God, while the others lost theirs or were reinforced in the fact that they did not possess any Jewish beliefs in the first place. However, each of them was able to see the effects of the Holocaust on the religious beliefs of those around them. They saw lives and faith destroyed, and watched those who had dedicated their lives to religious studies, practices, and God turn their back on Him. Some questioned how He could let this happen if He truly cared, while others just declared that He was dead and with them no more. The Holocaust made many people to whom the Jewish faith was precious believe that God could not exist if His people were subjected to the barbarism of Nazi persecution. People starved, were beaten, made into shells of their former selves, and resorted to actions that they never would have even considered in their former lives. The Holocaust stripped many of them of everything that they had, and in many cases their religious beliefs were no different. What happened to the Jews because of the actions of Hitler, the SS, and so many others involved has left an undeniable mark on the world, the Jewish people, and Judaism itself. Despite all that happened, there is hope, for there are survivors like Gerda Weissman Klein, who suffered and struggled, still clinging on to their faith. Though the Holocaust left a large mark on Jews and Judaism, it was not able to destroy it.

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