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## Finding Meaning Amidst Suffering: Applying Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy to Elie Wiesel's *Night*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the application of Viktor Frankl's logotherapy in Elie Wiesel's autobiography *Night*, focusing on the experiences of Holocaust survivors in concentration camps. Frankl, through his essay *Experiences in a Concentration Camp*, illustrates how prisoners, by holding onto dreams, memories, and a sense of purpose, found ways to cope with the extreme brutality they endured. Wiesel's *Night* recounts his firsthand experiences as a teenager surviving Auschwitz and Buchenwald, where he witnessed unspeakable atrocities and struggled to maintain hope amidst the chaos. This paper draws parallels between Frankl's logotherapy and Wiesel's journey, highlighting how Wiesel found meaning through his deep connection with his father, the moments of solace in prayer, and the small gestures of kindness from other prisoners. Wiesel's narrative reveals the ways in which survivors, like himself, clung to purpose—whether through family, faith, or the mere act of survival. Wiesel, like Frankl, struggled with the internal battle between survival and despair. By analyzing key moments in *Night*, such as Wiesel's relationship with his father and the brief instances of hope, this research shows how logotherapy helps us better understand the human ability to find meaning in suffering.

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Additionally, the paper explores Wiesel's post-liberation trauma, especially his struggle with PTSD, which left him unable to speak for five years. Through the lens of logotherapy, it becomes clear that writing was an important way for Wiesel to process his trauma and rediscover a sense of purpose by sharing his story. Ultimately, both Frankl's and Wiesel's experiences highlight how important it is to find meaning even in the darkest times, offering powerful insights into human resilience and the search for purpose.

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### **Introduction -**

During World War II, from 1941 to 1945, Adolf Hitler, the dictator of Nazi Germany, led the genocidal killing of around six million Jews in German-occupied Europe, known as the Holocaust. Jews were forcibly removed from their homes and sent to concentration camps, one of the most infamous being Auschwitz.

Viktor Frankl, an Austrian neurologist, psychologist, philosopher, and Holocaust survivor, founded a theory called "Logotherapy," which enables individuals to seek meaning even in adverse situations, as meaning is the central motivational force in life. Frankl developed the concept of Logotherapy before being sent to a concentration camp. His inspiration for this theory stemmed from his experience as a medical student, when he organized youth counseling centers between 1928 and 1930 to address the rising number of teenage suicides at the end of the academic year.

Frankl wrote *Man's Search for Meaning* (originally titled *A Psychologist Experiences the Concentration Camp*) in just nine days after his liberation. Initially, he intended to publish it anonymously, but later realized the significance of sharing his personal story and published it under his name. In the book, he recounts the horrors of the Holocaust, the brutality of concentration camps, and the dehumanizing treatment of Jews. He lost all his family members during this cruel journey. Despite the adverse conditions, Frankl observed that his fellow prisoners found solace and comfort in small pleasures.

The three main philosophical and psychological concepts central to Frankl's Logotherapy are:

- Freedom of Will
- Will to Meaning
- Meaning of Life

Elie Wiesel, similarly to Viktor Frankl, was a Holocaust survivor. However, he was a teenage boy when he entered the concentration camp with his father, while his mother and sisters were sent to other camps. Wiesel, a Romanian-born American writer, professor, and political activist, authored 57 books, most of which were written in French and English. He also helped establish the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

One of his most famous autobiographical novels is *Night*, published in 1960, where he details his struggles in the concentration camp from 1944 to 1945. The book was originally published in Yiddish under the title *Un di Velt Hot Geshvign* in 1956. Wiesel's friend, French novelist François Mauriac, encouraged him to write about his experience to let the world know about the horrors of the Holocaust. *Night* is a raw and authentic account, revealing Wiesel's inner conflict, struggles, and emotional turmoil as a fifteen-year-old boy enduring unimaginable suffering in the camps.

### **Finding Meaning Amidst Suffering : Applying Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy to Elie Wiesel's *Night***

Logotherapy can be effectively applied to Elie Wiesel's autobiography *Night*, where the writer recounts his experiences, struggles, and the horrors he endured in the concentration camps. Elie Wiesel was the third child of his parents, with two older sisters and one younger sister, all of whom he missed during his time in the camps. Initially, Wiesel lacked the courage to write about his experiences, as it required revisiting painful memories. However, François Mauriac, a friend of Wiesel, encouraged him to share his story. Wiesel realized that it was essential to convey the struggles and horrors of the Holocaust to the world and honor the Jewish people who were killed for no reason. Writing *Night* allowed him to provide a firsthand account of these atrocities. When analyzing *Night* through the lens of logotherapy, it becomes clear that many prisoners in the concentration camps found ways to derive purpose and meaning from their lives, even in the midst of unimaginable adversity. By sharing his experiences, Wiesel offers insight into how survivors coped with their suffering and found meaning amidst the chaos.

In the novel *Night*, Elie Wiesel faces an internal dilemma that can be compared to Viktor Frankl's experience in the concentration camps. Both, being mere prisoners, face a similar type of internal conflict: the purpose of life becomes driven by the instinct to safeguard oneself. In the concentration

camps, it does not matter if one has family members, friends, or relatives—ultimately, survival drives individuals to extreme measures to protect themselves. One poignant example from the novel, Wiesel recounts a horrendous day when his father is on the verge of dying and calls out to him while he is on roll call. Wiesel, afraid of being beaten, tries to ignore his father's voice:

*“I was afraid. Afraid of the blows. That was why I remained deaf to his cries.”* (Wiesel, Preface to the new translation, 1956)

Viktor Frankl, in his essay *Experience in a Concentration Camp*, argues that finding meaning amidst adversity is crucial for survival. He highlights that dreams, past memories, a sense of humor, and futuristic goals help individuals derive meaning in even the most horrific conditions. Similarly, in *Night*, the prisoners reflect on their own attempts to make sense of their suffering when they arrive at the concentration camp.

## **Dream**

Viktor Frankl, in his essay *Experience in a Concentration Camp* emphasizes the significance of dreams, which he believes help individuals escape from harsh reality. Frankl notes that when he interacted with other doctors, many of whom were also psychologists trained in psychoanalysis, they spoke of “regression.” Frankl defines this as

*“a retreat to a more primitive form of mental life”* (Frankl, p.12, 1956)

He believes that in dreams, an individual's desires and wishes often come true, offering them momentary relief from their suffering. These dream illusions provide a brief sense of comfort, helping prisoners survive the brutal realities of the concentration camps.

Similarly, in *Night*, there is an incident where Elie Wiesel longs for his mother and younger sister. As Wiesel, his father, and other inmates underwent an entrance examination, they were forced to stand for long periods. Due to exhaustion, Wiesel fell asleep while standing. In this moment, he dreams of home:

*“I dreamed of my bed, of my mother’s hand on my face.”* (Wiesel, p.38, 1956)

This passage reflects the comfort that dreams could offer prisoners, momentarily allowing them to escape the brutal conditions of the camps and find solace in memories of loved ones.

## Finding meaning and purpose in life's little pleasures

Frankl, in his essay, subtly illustrates how prisoners found moments of happiness amid the cruel and uncertain situation. He describes instances where prisoners, despite their dire circumstances, admired the natural beauty around them, though they felt a sense of regret for not being able to fully appreciate it. Frankl writes:

*“One evening, a prisoner rushed in and asked us to run out to the assembly grounds to see the wonderful sunset. Standing outside, we saw sinister clouds glowing in the west and the whole sky alive with ever-changing colors, from steel blue to blood red”* (Frankl, p. 15, 1956)

Another prisoner remarked,

*“How beautiful the world could be!”* (Frankl, p. 15, 1956)

In the novel *Night*, Elie Wiesel and his father encounter a relative named Stein Antwerp in the concentration camp Auschwitz. Stein, who arrived at the camp before Wiesel and his father, seeks information about his wife, Reizel, and their two small boys. Stein’s visits, during which he occasionally brings a portion of bread and food, offer some comfort to Wiesel and his father.

Wiesel, in the novel, becomes a scapegoat for an SS officer who vents his fury and frustrations on the fifteen-year-old Wiesel. This reflects Frankl’s description of the second reaction prisoners face in the camp: numbness. Similarly, Wiesel becomes accustomed to the harsh treatments and unpredictable beatings. During this time, Wiesel encounters a French girl who helps him by wiping the blood from his forehead. She reveals that she is Jewish but has passed as Aryan with false papers, which is why she was assigned to a forced labor unit. The woman, though briefly a comforting figure, encourages Wiesel to hold on:

*“Bite your lips, little brother...Don't cry. Keep your anger, your hate, for another day, for later. The day will come, but not now...wait, clench your teeth and wait”* (Wiesel, p.53, 1956)

The French woman’s presence demonstrates how prisoners in the concentration camp found hope to persist through their trials, envisioning a future. Another motivation for Wiesel to survive is his responsibility to his father. In the camp, his father is his only reliance, and Wiesel strives to keep both of them (his father and himself) alive, hoping they will one day experience liberation together. This relates

to Frankl's logotherapy concept of "Freedom of Will," which suggests that even in adverse situations, maintaining an optimistic perspective can help individuals overcome their challenges. Wiesel reflects:

*"I was thinking of my father. He would be suffering more than I"* (Wiesel, p.58, 1956)

Wiesel is brutally beaten by the SS officers, and this public punishment is intended to instill fear in other prisoners. His father witnesses these abuses but is powerless to protect him. The SS officers also occasionally beat Wiesel's father in front of him, aware that his only weakness is his father. Consequently, Wiesel's determination to survive is strengthened by his desire to protect his father.

*"I had made up my mind to accompany my father wherever he went"* (Wiesel, p.83, 1956)

These experiences highlight the power of "Freedom of Will" in adverse situations, demonstrating how a shift in perspective can impact one's resilience and survival.

## Art

Viktor Frankl, in his essay '*Experience in a Concentration Camp*', he discusses the significance of "Art" and its impact on the lives of prisoners in the concentration camp. He states,

*"it rather depends on what one chooses to call art"* (Frankl, p. 17, 1956)

He believes that the perception of art differs from person to person, and so does its impact. Yet, he maintains that art in any form can bring moments of ease, comfort, and solace to individuals. Frankl emphasizes how

*"art, songs, poems, jokes, and some underlying satire regarding the camp"* (Frankl, p. 17, 1956)

offered the prisoners solace. Similarly, in the novel *Night*, Wiesel, his father, and other inmates found comfort and solace through reading or reciting verses from the Talmud. This act of prayer shows their strong belief in God, with the hope that He would help them endure their sufferings and cruel circumstances. Occasionally, if an inmate was taken to the crematorium or killed, they would pray for that person's soul to rest in peace. Though unaware of who would be next to go to the gas chamber, they sought comfort and solace amid the horrors of reality.

Wiesel also describes being transferred to a new block, where he was no longer with his father. There, he learned about a person called “Muselman,” who was tasked with writing down the numbers of prisoners who were physically weak or on the verge of dying—their numbers noted for the crematorium. Wiesel, in the new block, felt a sense of happiness and even compared it to paradise. He says:

*“Today, this is paradise compared to what the camp was two years ago”* (Wiesel, p. 70, 1956)

*“Buna was a veritable hell. No water, no blankets, less soup and bread. At night, we slept almost naked, and the temperature was thirty below. We were collecting corpses by the hundreds every day. Work was very hard. Today, this is a little paradise”* (Wiesel, p. 70, 1956)

Through this, he emphasizes the cruelty they were surrounded by, their uncertain situation, and the pathetic living conditions, where they were treated as less than animals. Yet, amid these adverse and brutal circumstances, they found moments of peace and comfort when comparing the present to the past. This highlights Frankl’s concept of “Meaning in Suffering,” where an individual finds meaning and purpose in even the hardest and toughest times. Later, in the concentration camp, Wiesel passed a test to avoid the crematorium. When he successfully passed the test, his father gave him a gift of half a ration of bread. Wiesel asserts:

*“My father had a present for me: half a ration of bread, bartered for something”* (Wiesel, p. 73, 1956)

When winter ended and Christmas arrived, Wiesel noted that they did not have to work on Christmas or New Year’s. These small events contributed to their sense of solace and comfort amidst the horror of the concentration camps. He recalls:

*“We were entitled to good bread, a thicker soup. No more roll call, no more work. From time to time, I was able to send a piece of bread to my father”* (Wiesel, p. 79, 1956)

Therefore, as Frankl explains in his theory of logotherapy, “art,” regardless of its form, serves as a tool that enables inmates to momentarily escape from reality, finding solace and meaning through their experiences.

### **Freedom of Will**

*“We must do something. We can't let them kill us like that, like cattle in the slaughterhouse. We must revolt.”* (Wiesel, p.31, 1956)

This quote underscores the grim reality the Jews faced, where survival became their sole purpose. Prisoners held onto the hope of surviving the horrors of the concentration camps and reuniting with their families. This desire for survival was rooted in a futuristic vision of liberation, which motivated them to endure the daily atrocities. In the concentration camps, Jews were stripped of their humanity, reduced to mere numbers. They were no longer seen as people but as objects to be worked to death. Elie Wiesel was referred to as “A-7713” (Wiesel, p.51), a number stitched onto his clothing. Prisoners were even forced to lie about their age to fit the camp's labor requirements. For example, when Wiesel, who was only fifteen, arrived at the camp, he was told by SS officers to claim he was eighteen. His father, who was fifty, was instructed to say he was forty.

In the initial days of their imprisonment, Wiesel and his father encountered an existential vacuum, where they questioned the very purpose of their existence. This psychological state led to overwhelming discontent and a sense of meaninglessness. Wiesel describes his feelings during this time:

*“Father, I will run into the electrified barbed wire. That would be easier than a slow death in the flames.”* (Wiesel, p.33, 1956)

As Viktor Frankl explains in his essay *Experience in a Concentration Camp*, the first reaction to imprisonment is often shock. Similarly, Wiesel, as a teenage boy, was stunned by the brutality he witnessed. He struggled to understand why the Jews were imprisoned and treated with such inhumanity, to the extent that they were being sent to gas chambers. An SS officer bluntly explained the harsh reality of the camp:

*“You are in Auschwitz. And Auschwitz is not a convalescent home. It is a concentration camp. If you don't work, you will go straight to the chimney. To the crematorium. Work or crematorium—the choice is yours.”* (Wiesel, p.38, 1956)

Auschwitz was notorious for being one of the most dangerous and brutal concentration camps. The entrance to the camp featured an iron gate with the inscription "Arbeitmachtfrei," meaning "Work Sets You Free." Located in Poland, Auschwitz consisted of 22 buildings and had 40 sub-camps, all of which served as the concentration camps. When they heard about the upcoming liberation—that

*“the Red Army was racing toward Buna; it was only a matter of hours”* (Wiesel, p. 80, 1956)



Wiesel initially did not believe the news, thinking it was just a rumor. Later, he realized that inmates from each barrack were being taken out of the camp daily. Wiesel, anticipating liberation and hoping for a happy life with his father, held on to this hope. The next morning at six o'clock, they were asked to march. Wiesel had undergone surgery on his leg, and though he was advised by the infirmary doctor to rest because his leg had not fully healed, he promised to accompany his father on the march. In his hope and anticipation of liberation, he joined the march in the icy wind and cold weather. The SS officers ordered the prisoners to run; if they failed, they would be shot immediately. Amid the brutal situation, Wiesel notes:

*“Moving fast made us a little warmer. The blood flowed more readily in our veins. We had the feeling of being alive”* (Wiesel, p. 85, 1956)

This highlights how Frankl’s concept of “Freedom of Will” is effectively applied. Wiesel's optimistic response to the brutality allows him to derive meaning in his life. He reflects:

*“My father’s presence was the only thing that stopped me. He was running next to me, out of breath, out of strength, desperate. I had no right to let myself die. What would he do without me? I was his sole support”* (Wiesel, p. 87, 1956)

His father played a crucial role in giving him a sense of purpose and meaning in life. Therefore, throughout the novel, one can sense Wiesel’s desperation and the flicker of hope that he will be liberated and lead a happy life with his father. When he was finally liberated in April 1945, Wiesel was sixteen years old. However, he was unable to speak to anyone for five years—the trauma and the impact of his experiences left him mute for that period. The most significant event contributing to his trauma was the loss of his father, who died just a day before liberation. Wiesel stood alone, the sole Holocaust survivor from his family. His father, mother, and sister all perished, which deepened his trauma. He suffered from PTSD—Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder—a common condition among survivors of the concentration camps. Logotherapy is highly recommended and effective for treating traumatic experiences. It involves constructing meaning in one’s life, which can gradually reduce symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression. PTSD is one of the predominant aftereffects that Wiesel experienced after his release from the concentration camp. It was a condition that affected many survivors. Francois Mauriac, who played a significant role in Wiesel’s life, encouraged him to write about the horrors of the Holocaust and his experiences, providing an outlet for his trauma through writing.

## Conclusion -

In conclusion, Viktor Frankl's logotherapy gives us a powerful way to understand how people can find meaning even in the worst of times, as shown through Elie Wiesel's experiences in *Night*. Both Frankl and Wiesel went through terrible suffering in Nazi concentration camps, but their stories highlight the strength of the human spirit. Wiesel's bond with his father, moments of comfort in his faith, and his survival show how Frankl's ideas—like finding purpose in pain—can help us understand Wiesel's story. This paper has explained how *Night* reflects key parts of logotherapy, especially the ideas of "Freedom of Will" and "Meaning in Suffering." Wiesel's trauma after being freed and his use of writing to heal also show how survivors can process their painful experiences. Overall, looking at Wiesel's story through the lens of logotherapy teaches us how people can face extreme hardships and still find a reason to keep going, offering a timeless lesson on the strength of the human will to survive.

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