

Submission through starvation: Hunger and social relations in the holocaust memoirs

Faiz Kattakath, Research Scholar, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh
Postal Address: Faiz Kattakath, Kattakath(H), G.N, Chandapura, Kodungallur -680664

Abstract

This paper is about hunger in memoirs in a totalitarian setting like the holocaust. Hunger was expected in holocaust camps or Nazi-occupied lands where food was insufficient or inadequate around the Second World War. This paper wants to investigate how hunger affected relationships in the light of the controlled totalitarian environment.

Keywords: Holocaust, memoirs, hunger, Totalitarian rule, Nazism

Introduction

“Hunger and homelessness have been systematically imposed on a population as part of a genocidal program driven by a totalitarian ideology, whether philosophical or theological” (Patterson, Hunger, and Homelessness 170). Holocaust memoirs are a genre of literature with deep historical, political and psychological significance. Historically, it vindicated the Second World War. Politically, it showed the operations of a totalitarian, genocidal state like Nazi Germany. Psychologically it is significant for studying authoritarianism and trauma. This paper will look at instances of hunger in memoirs by memoirists like Levi, Szpilman, Frankl, Hillman, Wiesel, and Salton. The physical and psychological torture discussed in this paper is the immense scarcity of food in the Concentration camps or Lagers. This scarcity may be unintentional as there was a war going on. It could also be intentional to purposely weaken and thin the number of prisoners in the Lager to settle the so-called Jewish problem.

“Carl G. Jung warned...that when our goals and motivations rely exclusively on environmental conditions ... our innate instincts and unconscious realities could be uprooted” (Podsiadlik 163).

If we consider the goals and motivation of an average prisoner to be just alive and well, such a goal is

challenging with the milieu of the Lager. Food is one of the most fundamental necessities in human beings. A starving prisoner does not have an easy job of staying alive. People do illogical and unconscionable things while under extreme duress or life-threatening conditions. They have to prioritise their survival and often forsake others. It does not mean that everyone in the Lager was always selfish about food. However, hunger is an integral part of the milieu of the Lager. The magnitude of the effect of hunger on the psyche of the prisoners needs to be deliberated. Fear is present in holocaust memoirs studied. They are afraid of being hungry or not being unsure of their next meal. However, the totalitarian control of the camp life and the Selections affected the prisoners most. It is difficult to find food other than what is offered to them, although they can influence other prisoners to procure more. They cannot beg for food in the Lager, where there are only prisoners in similar situations, and neither can they earn money.

Hunger Wiesel puts hunger in the list of things that mattered in the camps in his preface.

“Hunger—thirst—fear—transport—selection—fire—chimney: these words all have intrinsic meaning, but in those times, they meant something else”(Wiesel ix).

Interestingly, he put hunger first and the adverse consequences of the Selections for the gas chamber and its imminent death last. Death by starvation is slower and more painful than the actual gas chamber. It is also true that hunger meant something else in the Lager than for an average person. Hunger for an ordinary human being is a temporary phenomenon. Whereas in the camps, they are a chronic or a timeless condition.

Hunger is unsurprising because Ramondo described “starvation... an everyday occurrence” in the Lager (Ramondo36)

That is because they were always underfed and overworked. However, it could be because the prisoners

RESEARCH ARTICLE

must have come to terms with their demise even if they did not find it acceptable. Moreover, Selections are out of their control.

Wiesel and Hillman had expressed disdain over the lack of quality and quantity of food they received.

“Wiesel, a survivor of Buna and Auschwitz, records in his autobiography that he received black coffee in the morning, soup at noon, and 'bread [with] something' in the evening”(Young 69)

The comment “bread with something” (Wiesel 43) shows that Wiesel was discontent with the food he received. One can barely survive on just the list of things mentioned here. Hillman had a similar menu. She also did not feel the food was enough.

“When the food arrived, I was among the first to stand in line for the brown water that was supposedly coffee and a slice of bread with beet jam. It did little to satisfy my hunger” (Hillman 76).

Here the lack of quantity and quality of the food handed out to the prisoners is chronicled. These quotes bring us a picture of the Nazis deliberately undernourishing the prisoners and starving them. The objective was most likely to kill the prisoners slowly, one by one, by offering them little food and overworking them to death. Undernourishment and its subsequent preoccupation with food, according to Frankl, leads to the total lack of sexual urge. (Frankl 52)

According to Frankl In calories, this diet was inadequate, especially taking into consideration our heavy manual work and our constant exposure to the cold in inadequate clothing...muscles disappeared. Then the body had no powers of resistance left. One after another the members of the little community in our hut died. (Frankl 49-50)

This testimony affirms that Nazis might have had a deliberate tactic of keeping prisoners underfed. They knew it would break their spirit and keep them divided and disorganized. However, if they had denied the food entirely, it would have forced the prisoners to rebel. The problem with camps was not there was any food. The problem was that they were given inadequate nutrition, which was barely enough to be kept alive.

The Holocaust victim's experiences of physical torture reflect dehumanization as a Nazi tactic within the

concentration camps of Germany during World War II. Physical and psychological warfare are linked to many victims' visible symptoms of detrimental psychological states. This suggests psychological reasoning behind the general lack of resistance and stoic submission of the prisoners. (Young 68)

Food in small quantities would have meant that they had some way of compliance and leverage. They had enough energy to barely function and work, but not enough to defy the Nazis. The lousy food could also be a way to ensure profit over the maintenance of the prisoners. The Nazis may have felt that the cost of upkeep of the prisoners should not be above the gain from their labour.

However, hunger is not the only problem in the Lager. Frankl talks of “the delusion of reprieve” (28), where a person about to be executed “gets the illusion that he might be reprieved at the very last minute” (Frankl 28)

In the case with Salton's memoir: Patterson describes some of the prisoners upon "Reading Salton's memoir, one realises... was more than a victim of starvation and brutality" (Patterson, Through the Eyes 280).

“The crowded camp, hunger, brutality of the guards, constant exhaustion, and frequent illnesses left us all depressed and bad-tempered” (Salton and Eisen 96).

However, fear of starvation was a stark reality under Nazi occupation. They live in an environment where they have to strive for every morsel. Hunger due to lack of ration had other effects. Levi said:

“We have learned the value of food; now we also diligently scrape the bottom of the bowl after the ration, and we hold it under our chins when we eat bread so as not to lose the crumbs”(Levi 36).

This quote reminds us of the adage, necessity is the mother of inventions. Nothing is invented here. But there is some improvisation. If demand and supply are considered, there is a great need for food and is in short supply. Therefore, it has significant value. Nevertheless, this would inadvertently lead to food as a form of exchange for services in a barter system. They would have to suffer more hunger to get objects or give substances to reduce hunger. But because the quality is poor, prisoners would not mind trading with it. It would be a mistake to think that hunger was solely in the camp during the holocaust.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Szpilman remembers in the Jewish ghetto of Warsaw a grabber trying to steal a can of soup from a lady. The soup fell to the ground, and the person drank it from the ground.

"[H]e threw himself down full length in the slush, lapping the soup straight from the pavement, cupping his hands around it on both sides so that none of it would escape him" (Szpilman 78).

People were displaced when they moved into ghettos. Some could not find work or shelter, starving because they could not afford food. The populace was made refugees in their cities or countries. Hunger changes people. It makes them desperate and makes them do things that they would never do in normal conditions. Hunger brings about tough choices. One has to make a high-risk decision between starvation and being shot by the guards:

"Smack in the middle of the road, two cauldrons of soup with no one to guard them...But who would dare? Fear was greater than hunger" (Wiesel 59)

This incident was noticed by Howe et al.:

Wiesel (1981) describes several circumstances where subtle choices had to be made. One involved a trade-off between hunger and the risk of severe punishment during an air-raid that sent even the German guards into bunkers. (Howe and Cavalcante6)

There was one man who took the risk. But he was "shot" (60). The choice was not really to steal or not to steal food. The choice was either slow starvation, immediate restitution, or hunger at the risk of being shot. The vast majority chose the former, and that man chose the latter. Subjectively, it was either incredibly brave or foolish. In an objective sense, death was a certainty, either way. Life in the Lager was so unpredictable that there were innumerable ways to die. The survivors were mostly the ones who improvised to a certain extent.

Szpilman almost let down his guard when he was hiding. He was nearly lured into a trap with the promise of food:

"I was prepared to go with them, even if I was killed later. I wanted that soup; I just wanted enough to eat for once! But common sense prevailed"(Szpilman 178).

Szpilman shows the lack of judgment in people enduring extreme suffering such as hunger. Nevertheless, he also indicates that people can survive such situations. Szpilman had sense acute sense of intuition for these situations. He has understood that it is best to trust oneself and no one

else. One of the choices is about how to ration food and reduce hunger. Frankl described the discourse of rations and starvation as follows.

"One was in favour of eating up the ration immediately... safeguarding against possible theft or loss of the ration. The second group ... dividing the ratio up, used different arguments. I finally joined their ranks" (Frankl51).

There are two philosophies behind this. One is hedonist, where importance is given to pleasure, while the other is prudence, where priority is given to cautiousness. AS Jeremy Bentham said, "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure" (Bentham 14).

Not all choices related to hunger are difficult. Hillman had to bribe her Block Supervisor (Blockalteste) with her food ration to cover up that she escaped the selections for execution. "'It will cost you. You better are prepared to pay,'... I already knew that I would have to part with my bread ration. It was a small price to pay for my life." (Hillman 210)

The choice here was obvious. But Hillman already displayed ingenuity by her escape. Blockalteste probably thought she was smart enough to comply with the bribe. She might also have been afraid to be punished for her flight. When prisoners have made wise choices in difficult situations, they can make lesser decisions easily. Hillman had the sense to know when to improvise and take risks and when to give in. There are subtle instances in the holocaust memoirs studied where people can rise above their hunger. Levi once explained verses of Dante that reflected their situation to his friend Pikolo, who showed interest in the meaning of the poem.

Pikolo begs me to repeat it...he has felt that it has to do with him, that it has to do with all men who toil, and with us in particular; and that it has to do with us two, who dare to reason of these things with the poles for the soup on our shoulders(Levi 126-27).

This instance was while they were waiting for soup. It was a peculiar choice of action. It is a triumph for these prisoners to appreciate poetry in that environment. Patruno enumerates.

"When these words are placed in juxtaposition with the pervasive hunger that is manifest on the faces of the prisoners waiting in line for the soup distribution, one can comprehend... their longing for food" (Patruno39).

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Nevertheless, even in their eternal quest for food, they did not forget to appreciate life. There is a search for meaning even while they wait for food, make sense of their suffering, and find strength wherever they can. They could have chosen to complain, be depressed, or be grumpy about their suffering, including hunger. Yet they decided to discuss poetry, which must have raised their spirits.

Hunger and Relationships

Wiesel remembers a fight breaking out amongst starved prisoners on the transport train. A son killed his father for a piece of bread that he got in commotion.

"Meir, my little Meir! Don't you recognize me ... You're killing your father ... I have bread ... for you too" (Wiesel 101).

Other prisoners killed the son for the piece of bread. Furthermore, Wiesel himself got the advice as to: "stop giving your ration of bread and soup to your old father. You cannot help him anymore. And you are hurting yourself. In fact, you should be getting his rations ..." (Wiesel 110- 11)

There was a fair amount of patricidal emotion in the memoir to survive. It was as if there was a transference of Oedipal feelings towards food and survival and to remove the father who was blocking it. However, this does not have anything to do with sexual repression but with repression of hunger. One must have a severe need to kill one's father for some bread. It must be terrifying that one's kin and kith might betray.

Levi's friend Alberto said: "one's stomach is the securest safe against thefts and extortions" (Levi 84). No amount of prudence would be enough to guarantee one's food or trustworthy neighbours.

"those prisoners could keep alive who... lost all scruples... to use every means, honest and otherwise, even brutal force, theft, and betrayal of their friends... to save themselves... the best of us did not return" (Frankl 24)

This statement is one of the bleakest. This trust deficit was the case even with a short supply of food. Even then, when the food supply stopped towards the end of the war, it was surprising that Frankl said that "Cannibalism [of corpses] had broken out. I had left just in time" (Frankl 66). The people who have lost all scruples and are capable of anything would stoop to even this to survive.

However, this shows the level of relationship between prisoners. Their bond had become transactional and volatile. Their last bit of humanity was torn away from them. The Lager brought their most primitive nature. However, some instances brought out their humanity too. Ramanodo remembers an incident where prisoners were pressured to give up someone who stole food:

"The other inmates were then threatened to give him up, or they would miss out on their food ration for an entire day, as meager as it was" (Ramonodo 36).

One would think that someone in that group of prisoners would have given up as food was survival's ultimate source. However, Wiesel described the incident in this way:

A few days previously a semi-starved prisoner had broken into the potato store to steal a few pounds of potatoes. The theft had been discovered and some prisoners had recognised the "burglar." When the camp authorities heard about it, they ordered that the guilty man be given up ... Naturally, the 2,500 men preferred to fast. (Frankl 102).

This incident shows a rare sense of camaraderie and solidarity in the Lager. The prisoners all could empathize with the man who stole out of hunger as they were hungry themselves. Moreover, a day's food is not life-threatening and certainly not worth a man's life. Starvation had tested the most caring of siblings. However, there were still people who had a conscience. Salton wanted to save some food for his brother: "The small piece of bread did not satisfy my terrible hunger. I wanted to save some for later to share with Manek, but I could not resist eating it all" (Salton and Eisen 95-96). But at least he did not commit fratricide or leave his brother to die. His brother had his rations. Yet Salton wanted to care for him. He was the younger brother, and he wanted to give the elder brother's bread. Hunger surpasses brotherly instincts, though he did feel guilty for eating his food.

It would be a mistake to think that one would only withhold another's food to lessen their hunger. Szalas was entrusted with Szpilman to deliver food by Szpilman's friends. But he embezzled the money and let Szpilman starve for a long time. "I learned from her that Szalas had been collecting money for me all over Warsaw, and since no one would grudge it when a man's life was to be saved, he had amassed a handsome sum" (Szpilman 143)

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Salas was not starving himself. He was not on the run from the state or the Gestapo. It might be granted that he took a risk by helping Szpilman a little. But he made a profit for himself by starving a fellow human being. It was not just people like the Nazis that marginalised people should be wary of; it was also men like Szalas. He pretended to be a friend and betrayed him in the hour of need. It is probably not because he was desperate for money. He had employment, and so had a source of income. Hence it could be that he did not value Szpilman's life. He also tricked Szpilman's friends by manipulating their sympathy. Men like Szalas love material wealth more than they care about other human beings, making them heartless.

Interestingly hunger did not just break a relationship; it also helped to forge them. Hillman developed a relationship with Dick because he used to bring food for her secretly in a shed.

"To think, only a short time ago we were total strangers, and here you are now, risking being punished for bringing me these things. How can I ever thank you?"(Hillman 125).

Although this seemed a little transactional, food for love, Hillman did not think she was manipulated. As far as she was concerned, he did this out of love. She saw the selflessness of his actions and appreciated him for it.

Fasting

There is also the spiritual relationship between God and the prisoners. Some of the prisoners refused to take part in religious fasting.

Elie Wiesel's experiences further illuminate this shift when he recalls that

many men in his barracks decided not to fast for Yom Kippur . Therefore, even religion comes second to food in this shift of priority (Young 61)

Wiesel revolted and refused to fast:

"I did not fast. First of all, to please my father who had forbidden me to do so. And then, there was no longer any reason for me to fast. I no longer accepted God's silence" (Wiesel 69).

Wiesel's father was concerned about the already appalling conditions in the camp made it understandable that it was difficult to fast. But Wiesel had a crisis of faith. On the other hand, Salton was ready to fast but was convinced against it by his brother, who told him to fast when the war was over.

"I explained that it was Yom Kippur and that today I would fast. Manek looked at me with disbelief and urged me to eat the egg so that I would not starve. He had eaten the other one already and told me that to stay healthy..."(Salton and Eisen 99-100).

Both of them did not fast, but there is a significant difference in attitude. Wiesel's refusal to fast expresses his anger and frustration and signifies rebellion. Salton was merely acknowledging his weak status. He was willing to fast, but he did not have much choice. They were both undernourished and overworked. So, they could not afford to be in a further weakened state.

In a totalitarian setting, hunger destroys relationships with subjects. The fight for survival would make them more self-centred or selfish. It would lead them to betray or steal from their loved ones. But this tactic to divide and conquer will not work in all cases. But it would take a person of high integrity to be selfless and accommodating. The problem is that such an individual who does not steal or cheat will not last long in the Lager, especially when one cannot get food ethically in the Lager more than the given ration. They are also susceptible to theft and betrayal themselves.

Conclusion

One must always be on their guard to ensure that they have proper access to food and not to be in a working environment where it is dangerous for them. Hunger need not always lead to starvation and to becoming Musselman. Hunger was an effective tool of demoralisation and torture. While work, punishment, and selections happen during certain intervals, hunger was a chronic phenomenon. The constant anxiety and hustle to find a source of nourishment must have been exhausting them and draining their capabilities to adapt against the Nazis.

In war, famine and hunger are used as a tool of destruction. Soldiers would siege a city, starving its inhabitants until they yield. They would attack supply lines and destroy farmlands and depots to weaken the enemy. The Lager was nothing but an uneven battlefield where starvation and labour were used to kill the enemies of the state. Starvation in the Lager was a cruel act of war and crime against humanity. Therefore, hunger can become a tool for submission in an authoritarian or totalitarian setting.

The concentration camp was trying to physically and psychologically submit them to confinement and labour

RESEARCH ARTICLE

and ultimately genocide, using hunger as a tool. They did not have the energy or will to rebel, dissent, or even escape, which meant that they were easily imprisoned and used. The starvation meant they fought against each other rather than the Nazis, and the prisoners conveniently died due to disease and exhaustion. If they survived all of these, they would be sent to the gas chambers for being a Musselman.

Hunger was one of the tools; prisoners also needed other resources like clothing and shelters, which would make an interesting study. However, food as a basic necessity for humans had a powerful impact on the Lager. This importance of nutrition is why the food crisis due to war is regarded as a war crime.

REFERENCES

- Bentham, Jeremy. *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Batoche Books, 2000. Print.
- Frankl, Victor E. *Man's Search For Meaning*. Trans. Ilse Lasche. Washington Square Press, 1984. Print.
- Hillman, L. *I Will Plant You a Lilac Tree: A Memoir of a Schindler's Last Survivor*. Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2005. Print.
- Howe, Paul, and Marco Cavalcante. "Choosing Hunger." *The Social Science Journal* 52.2 (2015): 266–277. Web.
- Levi, P. *If This Is a Man. The Truce*. Trans. Stuart Woolf. Abacas, 1987. Print.
- Patruno, Nicholas. "Primo Levi, Dante, and the 'Canto of Ulysses.'" *The Legacy of Primo Levi*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2005. 33–40. Web.
- Patterson, David. "Through the Eyes of Those Who Were There *** Flares of Memory: Stories of Childhood During the Holocaust ***..." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 18.2 (2004): 274–290. Web.
- Patterson, David. "Hunger and Homelessness." *Genocide in Jewish Thought*. Ed. David Patterson. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2012. 169–195. Web.
- Podsiadlik, Edward. "Night As Metaphor: Night (Elie Wiesel)." *Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill*, 2014. 163–183. Web.
- Ramondo, Nick. "Man's Search for Meaning: Viewed through Another Lens." *Australian Journal of Clinical Hypnotherapy & Hypnosis* 39.2 (2017): 29–41. Print.
- Salton, George Lucius., and Anna Salton. Eisen. *The 23rd Psalm : A Holocaust Memoir*. U of Wisconsin P., 2002. Print.
- Szpilman, Wladyslaw. *The Pianist: The Extraordinary True Story of One Man's Survival in Warsaw, 1939-1945*. Trans. Anthea Bell. W&N, 2000. Print.
- Wiesel, E. *Night*. Trans. Marion Wiesel. Penguin Books , 2006. Print.
- Young, Kelly. "The Psychological Effects of Starvation in the Holocaust: The Dehumanization and Deterioration of Its Victims." *Augsburg Honors Review* 7.5 (2014): n. pag. Web. 30 Jan. 2022.