

Elio's Alphabet

Holly Adam

St. Vincent - St. Mary

Word Count: 924

My alphabet is not like yours. Though we most likely speak the same language, read the same books, and speak the same words, the way in which we categorize our letters is very different. You attest to 26 letters in the alphabet, whereas my alphabet consists of just eight essential letters. My alphabet is summed up by the experiences I've had; the only letters I know are the letters that created the words that shaped my life.

As most alphabets begin, A is for apple. A is for my favorite food, for the crisp and refreshing sweet treat I took for granted for the first seventeen years of my life. In the ghetto, there were no apples. My mother spent most of her waking hours cooking bland food for the family, food that would fill us up and last us a long time. I ate lots of bread and drank lots of soup, filling myself up for a journey I had no idea we were taking. I've yet to eat another apple.

B is for Buchenwald. B is for the camp we were taken to, for the frightening train ride and the sickening realization that once we left the horrid caravan, life would only get worse. I was once Elio Abeles, a seventeen year old boy living in a loving Jewish community who enjoyed playing soccer, teasing my little sister, and going out with my friends. I was now just a Jew, a person reduced to something less than human simply because of my religion.

D is for death. D is for the presence that lingered around us Jews at all times, reminding us to be cautious of the fate that awaited us; at that time, death was almost inevitable. Sometimes death appeared to the Jewish people as a German guard, other times as a fiery pit in the ground or as a disease spread through water. As time passed, death eventually came for my father, my mother, my younger sister. However, death spared me. To this day, I am not sure if that is a good thing.

H is for Hitler. H is for the man who changed the world with his words, the man who nearly eradicated an entire people through his hatred alone. Though I never met Hitler, he was

everywhere. It was Hitler I thought of when I labored mindlessly in the camp each day. It was Hitler I thought of when I saw my father take his last breath, his skeletal chest deflating one last time as the weight of life was finally lifted from him. It is Hitler I think of now, as I reflect on my life and what has become of it. It is Hitler who comes to mind when I think of the power of words.

L is for liberation. L is for the freedom I should've celebrated when Buchenwald was liberated by the United States Army. Though I felt relief, there was no sense of true release; it was impossible to believe that after so long, I was no longer a prisoner of fate. Instead, I was a man unmoored. I had no family, no place to call home, no sense of purpose other than survival. Though I was still Elio Abeles, I was no longer any of the things that once described me. I was twenty, rather than seventeen; I no longer had a younger sister to tease or friends to hang out with. I was free, and yet I remained imprisoned by my past.

M is for mercy. M is for my God and the ways in which he saved me. At first, I was angry at God; I couldn't comprehend why he would spare my life and kill the rest of my family. I mourned what could have been, if my life had ended when my father's did, or my mother's or my sister's. Though I felt unbearable grief at the thought of my dead family, I couldn't help but think I'd rather be dead than a survivor. God had shown me mercy, and yet I didn't recognize it as such. In that time, mercy was a rose covered in thorns.

P is for peace. P is for the feeling I struggled to find within myself, long after the torment of the Holocaust was over. I could not fathom how I was supposed keep living; how could I rebuild my life if I didn't even have a foundation? And yet, I rebuilt. I moved to the United States. I got married. I had three children. Eventually, I found inner peace. Though I would

certainly never forget, I was able to move on from the past. I could never escape what happened to me, but I could come to terms with it. In time, I could even tell my story.

S is for silence. S is for the absence of resistance in the face of oppression, adversity, and discrimination. Silent is what I will be no more. I use my alphabet to tell my story, in the hopes that those who hear it will learn. I hope they will learn to rise up against hatred, to crush oppression before oppression can crush innocent human lives. I don't need 26 letters to tell my story. I only need eight. The only letters I need are the letters that created the words that shaped my life. This time, however, I use the letters to shape other's lives. I use the letters to inform, to inspire, to teach. I use the letters to tell my story.