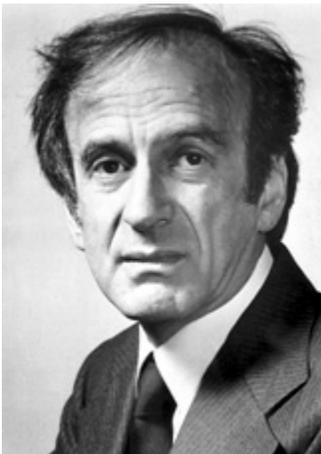


Eliezer Wiesel

1986

“Wiesel is a messenger to mankind; his message is one of peace, atonement and human dignity. His belief that the forces fighting evil in the world can be victorious is a hard-won belief. His message is based on his own personal experience of total humiliation and of the utter contempt for humanity shown in Hitler's death camps. The message is in the form of a testimony, repeated and deepened through the works of a great author.”



Not all Nobel Peace Prize laureates have wielded political or military power. These laureates demonstrate that power is manifest in many ways, some of them quite surprising. Eliezer “Elie” Wiesel (pronounced ‘vee•ZELL’) is one such laureate, who transformed the most horrible of experiences into a testament of faith, hope and strength.

Elie Wiesel was born into a time and place that promised little to him. Being a Jew in Central Europe, and indeed in most parts of Europe, was a guarantee of suspicion, legalized discrimination, and even violence. His parents Shlomo and Sarah raised their only son, along with three sisters, to embrace and respect their heritage. Elie read literature and learned the Hebrew language at the behest of his father, while his mother encouraged him to study the **Torah** and **Kabalah**.

During Wiesel’s youth and adolescence, the Nazis came to power in nearby Germany. Smaller states in the region allied with Nazi Germany, including Hungary. The Wiesel family lived in Sighet, which in 1940 became part of Hungary. This meant that their community, like thousands of Jewish communities, was under the rule of the Nazis and their allies.

Early in the war, Shlomo Wiesel was thrown in jail for helping Polish Jews escape to Hungary. From even before the war, the Nazis openly declared their hatred for Jews, blaming them for Germany’s humiliation after losing the First World War. Such ideas were in no way innovative; the Nazis used Jews as a **scapegoat**, inflaming the **anti-Semitism** that had festered for centuries in the region. Nor were the Jews the only targets.

The Nazis subscribed to a theory that categorized ethnic groups as superior or inferior. Of course, the Nazis themselves were part of the highest order, the so-called “**Aryan**

Born September 30, 1928

Birthplace: Sighet, Romania

Teacher, novelist, philosopher, humanitarian, political activist.

Famous words: “Indifference, to me, is the epitome of evil.”

race.” Other peoples (Jews, Slavs, Gypsies), or individuals with characteristics the Nazis considered weak or criminal (communists, gays, the disabled), were beaten, jailed, thrown into concentration camps, or killed.

Under the Nazis, traditional antagonism toward Jews rose to a fever pitch. With the Nazi war machine to support it, anti-Semitism became industrialized. Jews, who had already been robbed of their citizenship, property and possessions, were eventually forced into concentration camps throughout much of Europe. Unfortunately, Jewish pleas for help from the Allies fell largely on deaf ears.

In 1944, Elie Wiesel’s family and the entire Jewish community of Sighet was sent to the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp complex by Hungarian authorities.



At Auschwitz, Elie received the tattoo that all Jews in the camps were forced to bear—a number which became his entire identity in the eyes of his captors. Elie’s number was A-7713. He and his father were separated from his mother Sarah and sister Tzipora, who were murdered at Auschwitz. Elie and Shlomo were sent to various work camps, where they became slave

laborers for the Nazis.

The conditions were unimaginable in their hardship and cruelty.

In the winter of early 1945, Elie and Shlomo were moved yet again to the Buchenwald camp. Liberation by the American Third Army was only months away, but the Allied approach made the Nazis kill their victims that much faster. On January 28, Shlomo was beaten by a guard at Buchenwald. Already suffering, from starvation, **dysentery** and exhaustion, Shlomo died. His last word was the name of his beloved son.

The liberation of Buchenwald came that spring. Elie was sent to an orphanage in France, where he was reunited with his sisters Bea and Hilda, who had also survived the war. After learning French, Elie studied philosophy at the Sorbonne, a famous university in

Paris. Already a teacher, Wiesel taught Hebrew and was also a choirmaster, but decided to pursue the life of a journalist.

At that time, Jewish refugees and **émigrés** in the British Protectorate of **Palestine** were trying to create a Jewish homeland. Almost all the Jews of Europe had been exterminated by the Nazis and their allies, and the movement for a Jewish state was seen as a matter of survival. Wiesel acted on behalf of Jewish statehood by writing and translating in Paris for the underground Irgun movement. Irgun used sometimes violent tactics to force the British out of Palestine, including the infamous bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. Eventually, the British left Palestine, and in 1947 the Jewish

- **Wiesel prefers to avoid the term “Holocaust” because he says it doesn’t approach the magnitude of what happened to its victims and survivors.**
- **During World War II, Norway (the country responsible for the Peace Prize) was under a pro-Nazi puppet government.**
- **Wiesel recently visited Auschwitz with Oprah Winfrey for an American Television special. He said it would be his last visit to the camp.**

underground proclaimed that the area was now the State of Israel. Despite the protests of the Arabs living in Palestine and in neighboring countries, the United Nations recognized the State of Israel.

For eleven years after the Second World War, Wiesel could not speak of what he saw and experienced in the camps. Like many Holocaust survivors, the enormity and horror, along with

guilt over having survived when so many perished, made it impossible for Elie to talk about what he had lived through. Fortunately, Elie met with Nobel Literature Prize laureate François Mauriac in 1952, who persuaded him to share his story with the world.

Wiesel’s first manuscript, *Un di velt hot geshvign* was 900 pages long and written in **Yiddish**. He rewrote the book in French, condensing it to a mere 127 pages. But despite Mauriac’s intervention, *La Nuit* received little interest from publishers. When translated into English, *La Nuit* became simply *Night*.

Since that time, *Night* has become one of the most highly regarded works in all of modern literature. It describes the events of Wiesel’s life in the camps, and of the inhumanity that stripped Wiesel and many others of their faith in humanity and religion. *Night* is a testimony to the horrible truths that the world would rather forget. But Wiesel’s main point in writing about the Holocaust is to stop that from happening. He bears witness, in the hope that mankind will not be able to commit the same atrocities in the future. Here is a passage from *Night*:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.
Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.

In 1955, Elie Wiesel emigrated to the United States. He wrote for a Jewish Newspaper called *Yedioth Ahronoth*, but was still poor and unknown. When he was hit by a taxi the next year, the hospital refused to treat Wiesel without money or insurance. Luckily, a second hospital agreed to treat his injuries, but he still spent a year in a wheelchair.

In America, Elie continued writing. The English translation of *Night* was published in 1958. From that time, Wiesel has authored over forty books and won many literary honors and awards. He became a US citizen in 1963. The following year he returned to visit the town of Sighet, now part of Romania. In 1969, he married Marion Rose with who had a son in 1972. Together, Elie and Marion have also created the Elie Wiesel **Foundation** for Humanity. In 1978, he became chairperson of the Presidential Commission on the Holocaust, later renamed the US Holocaust Commission. The commission's most visible achievement was the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. Elie Wiesel and President Bill Clinton lit the eternal flame in the Museum's Remembrance Hall at the 1993 opening ceremony.

While principally focused on the mistreatment of Jews, Elie Wiesel has spoken out against **genocide** around the globe: in Darfur, Sudan; in the Kurdish regions of Turkey and Iraq; in Bosnia-Herzegovina; in South Africa under **apartheid**, and in Indian lands in Central America.

One group for whom Wiesel has not spoken out is the Palestinian Arabs who were displaced by the formation of the State of Israel. Fellow scholars and human rights activists such as Noam Chomsky have criticized Wiesel for his strong support of Israel and silence over the Palestinians. Christopher Hitchens has attacked Wiesel for not condemning Israeli attacks on the Palestinian refugee camps at Sabra and Shatila in 1982, going so far as to called him a "**poseur**" and "windbag." Wiesel's supporters are quick to denounce such criticism, offering multiple examples of his tireless efforts in many causes, and pointing out that the Israeli-Palestinian issue is so complex that no one has found a real solution to it in half a century.

Elie Wiesel's life and career are a testament to the power of memory and the courage of bearing witness to evil. It has been with these resources that Wiesel has sought to help alleviate repression, racism and injustice in many parts of the world. With his success has come a responsibility to work toward peace and justice, and for his efforts Elie Wiesel has won numerous awards, including the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1986. His work demands that one go beyond suffering, survival, and despair at the horrors of history. For those of us who have not perished, Elie Wiesel demands that we act as

caretakers of truth and memory, so that the deaths of millions will not have been in vain. In his own words;

“Let us remember, let us remember the heroes of Warsaw, the martyrs of Treblinka, the children of Auschwitz. They fought alone, they suffered alone, they lived alone, but they did not die alone, for something in all of us died with them.”

Vocabulary Terms

1. **Torah**
2. **Kabalah**
3. **Anti-Semitism**
4. **Scapegoat**
5. **Aryan**
6. **Dysentery**
7. **Palestine**
8. **Yiddish**
9. **Émigré**
10. **Foundation**
11. **Genocide**
12. **Apartheid**

Study Questions

1. What was life like for European Jews before the war?
2. Why did the Nazis in Germany choose Jews as their main target? Why was this tactic successful?
3. What did Elie Wiesel study as a boy?
4. What happened to each of Elie’s family members during the war?
5. Why did Elie Wiesel wait eleven years before writing and speaking of his experience?
6. Why do you think Elie and so many other European Jews chose to emigrate after the war, rather than return home?
7. What does Elie Wiesel ask that survivors like himself do? Why?
8. How do Elie Wiesel’s actions and experiences compare with other American Peace Prize laureates?
9. Does Elie Wiesel’s silence about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict cast doubt on his commitment to peace and justice? Who would agree or disagree with you?

Introductory and Extended Exercises

- A. Ask students to read “Night” and create a three-dimensional art project that symbolizes the book’s themes.
- B. Ask students to study the Holocaust, and try to answer the question: “Could the Holocaust ever happen again?” After students share their answers and discuss, present materials (newscast, article, etc.) about the Rwandan Genocide and the global response to it. Ask the students to interpret and explain the inaction on the part of world leaders. Then present materials on Darfur, and ask students what ought to be done about it.
- C. Following either of these exercises, ask students to do further research and create an essay outline on an important subject raised in the reading or subsequent discussion.

Technology Option

Watch Oprah Winfrey’s television special featuring Elie Wiesel on his last trip to Auschwitz.

Watch the PBS Special “Elie Wiesel: First Person Singular”

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