Elie Wiesel and his father, Shlomo, had already endured unimaginable suffering. In 1944, they'd been deported from their home in the small Transylvanian village of Sighet. They'd been transported to Auschwitz and transferred to the labor camp at Buna. Now it was winter 1945 and the Nazis were fleeing from the advance of the Allies. As they fled, the Nazis forced their prisoners to leave with them, including 16-year-old Wiesel and his father. Made to run more than 40 miles in one day, many of the prisoners died of exhaustion or were shot by the Nazis for stopping. Wiesel and his father continued to run, despite their exhaustion, despite the pain Wiesel felt in his foot, which was wrapped in rags. Only days before, Wiesel had been operated on—without anesthesia—for his severely infected foot. Wiesel wanted to stop, to sink into the soft snow and let his body rest from the pain and weariness, even if rest meant death. But his father would not let him.

At the end of the march, Elie and his father were loaded on to an open freight car, with no room to sit down, crammed in with other starving and dying prisoners. Given no food, the prisoners ate snow from the shoulders of the men standing in front of them. As men died, the Nazis ordered the other prisoners to toss the corpses off the moving train. Of the 120 men who had been in the freight car, only 12 were alive when they reached their destination: the concentration camp of Buchenwald. Wiesel and his father were among the survivors. But Wiesel's father died soon after.

Elie Wiesel was born on September 30, 1928, in the small town of Sighet, which was then in Romania. In 1940, Sighet became part of Hungary, and today it is again part of Romania. Wiesel's parents owned a grocery store. His grandfather was a Hasid, a devout religious man who loved telling stories. From the age of three Eliezer, as he was then called, studied in a Jewish religious school. He loved his studies and fervently believed in God. He believed that with prayer, good deeds, and fasting, he could hasten the arrival of the Messiah. At the age of 12, he wrote his own book about his views of the Bible.

In 1944, anti-Jewish legislation restricted the Jews of Sighet. They could no longer go to the movies or take public transportation. Their shops were closed. Jews who worked for the state were fired. In April 1944, the Nazis established a ghetto in Sighet. The people of Sighet knew nothing about the concentration camps where Jews had already perished.

A month later, all of the Jews of Sighet were deported. They believed the Germans, who told them that they were leaving the ghetto for a labor camp where families would be able to stay together. Instead, after a train trip of many days without water, they were taken to the death camp of Auschwitz. When they got off the train, men and women were separated. Wiesel had no way of knowing that he would never again see his mother or little sister, Tziporah. Most of the people of his town would be killed. In all, about seventy percent of the Jews of Hungary were killed during the Holocaust.

Wiesel survived Auschwitz and was sent to the Buna work camp with his father. From there they went to Buchenwald concentration camp, where his father soon died of dysentery. Wiesel was transferred to the children's block of Buchenwald. On April 11, 1945, the Nazis fled as American troops liberated Buchenwald.

After the war, a Jewish aid organization sent Wiesel and other children from Buchenwald to France to recuperate. Wiesel stayed in France and studied at the famous university, the Sorbonne. In 1963 he became a U.S. citizen, and in 1969 he married Marion Rose, who was also a Holocaust survivor. She has translated many of his books from French, the language in which he usually wrote, into English. They have one son.

Wiesel wrote more than 30 books. Most of them are related to the Holocaust. As a man who possessed a great faith in God and had it severely shattered during the Holocaust, he struggled to hold on to his faith in man, God, and humanity. But he was haunted by the misery and suffering he witnessed, including the heartbreaking death of his parents and sister. His work concerns itself with such questions as How could God could have let such suffering occur. How could men have committed such atrocities. How could others have stood by in silence?

In 1958, Wiesel published his first book Night. A masterpiece, it is a memoir of his life during the Holocaust. This slim book is terrifying in its power. The style is spare. Written in the first person, the book records Wiesel's horrifying ordeal of being taken
from his home and the subsequent humiliation and degradation of the concentration camp. Most of all the book describes his loss of belief in a meaningful universe. Wiesel once said, "It was not man who died at Auschwitz but the idea of man." The veneer of civilization was broken. What was uncovered was a brute beast in all its power.

The book is an anguished cry from a boy steeped in a faith that cannot sustain him in the face of unbearable atrocity. On his arrival at Auschwitz, 15-year-old Wiesel saw live babies being thrown on a fire. People, knowing they were going to die, began to recite the prayer for the dead. But Wiesel questioned his faith: "For the first time I felt revolt rise up in me. Why should I bless His name? The Eternal, Lord of the Universe, the All-Powerful and Terrible, was silent. What had I to thank him for?"

Wiesel's life turned into a nightmare: "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." The innocence and joy and faith in God and in the world that he had felt as a child were no longer possible: "I too had become a completely different person. The student of the Talmud, the child that I was, had been consumed in the flames."

The torture Wiesel endured was excruciating. At age sixteen, he helplessly watched his father die without medical care, food, or water. Wiesel describes how he woke one morning to see another man sleeping in his father's bed. His father was dead. "They must have taken him away before dawn and carried him to the crematory. He may still have been breathing." Wiesel admits to feeling a kind of relief at having his father gone. He had felt so helpless, unable to care for his father or to alleviate his suffering. But the shame he feels about his father's death is unbearable.

Wiesel records the details of the gruesome hanging of a young boy. One of the prisoners asks, "Where is God?" a voice within Wiesel answers: "Here he is—He is hanging here on this gallows." God, himself, is a young boy on the gallows, killed by the atrocity of Auschwitz.

Wiesel closes the book: "From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at me. The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me."

Wiesel's life work was an attempt to resuscitate that corpse and to give meaning back to life. His work is unique because it is the cry of a believer struggling to hold on to his faith. Although he does not doubt that God exists, he questions the justice of that God. His books explore the meaning of suffering and the meaning of life after the Holocaust.

In his second book, Dawn, published in English in 1961, an 18-year-old Holocaust survivor named Elisha is recruited to be part of the Jewish underground in Palestine and fight against the British who were then in control. When Elisha first learns of the Jewish underground activities, he is fascinated by the Jewish fighter who recruits him:

I saw in him a prince of Jewish history, a legendary messenger sent by fate to awaken my imagination, to tell the people whose past was now their religion: Come come; the future is waiting for you with open arms. From now on you will no longer be humiliated, persecuted, or even pitied.

Finally, it is the Jews who are fighting back, who inspire fear. But then Elisha is called upon to avenge the hanging of a Jewish fighter. He is told to kill a British soldier. When he accepts the job, he can feel the dead—his mother and father, his teachers—judging him. He kills the soldier, but he is changed by the encounter. "The shot had left me deaf and dumb. That's it, I said to myself. It's done. I've killed. I've killed Elisha." He has killed not just the soldier, but part of himself. After he shoots, the night lifts, but the darkness has his face. He is now part of the darkness, no longer innocent. Acting in history as a perpetrator and not a victim also has a price: the loss of traditional morality.

In the novel The Accident (1962), the main character is a survivor of the Holocaust struggling for a reason to continue living. He is haunted by the dead, haunted by what he has endured: "... man can become a grave for the unburied dead." All he cared for "had been dispersed in smoke." He can no longer live like other people. "Anyone who has seen what they [survivors] have seen cannot be like the others, cannot laugh, love, pray, bargain, suffer, have fun, or forget." Guilt and shame torment him.

While walking in New York City with the woman he loves, he steps out in front of a cab and is knocked down. It is during his healing from the accident, in his encounters with the woman he loves and with friends who care about him that he finds the strength to continue. He learns that "suffering is given to the living not to the dead. ... It is man's duty to make it cease, not to increase it."
It is up to him to choose life.

Both Legends of Our Time (1968) and One Generation After (1970) are collections of stories and recollections in which Wiesel returns to the stories that obsess him: the destruction of his hometown and of his family, and the need to recreate them, to rescue their memory in prose. In Legends of Our Time, Wiesel writes: "But for me writing is a matzeva, an invisible tombstone, erected to the memory of the dead unburied. Each word corresponds to a face, a prayer, the one needing the other so as not to sink into oblivion." Wiesel's haunted words serve as markers for the dead.

Wiesel rescues the characters that the world has forsaken, the characters the world did not believe, the characters the world did not listen to. He brings back to life the characters the world wanted to obliterate.

Hasidic Jews such as Wiesel's grandfather, Jews who stressed a mystical connection to God, were among the first killed in the camps. In Souls on Fire (1972), Wiesel brings these communities back to life, telling the stories of their leaders. He tells us,

Ext: In their communities, no beggar ever went hungry on Shabbat. In spite of their poverty, their misery, they asked nothing of others. And were endlessly surprised by and grateful for the smallest expression of warmth, of generosity. . . . Therefore, they could not survive in a society ruled by cold cruelty, a cruelty both impersonal and absurd.

Wiesel often turned to silence as the most appropriate response to the tragedy of the Holocaust. For Wiesel, there was a truth in silence. In Wiesel's novel The Gates of the Forest, Gregor, a Jew in hiding during the Holocaust, is saved by pretending to be unable to speak. When he gives up speech, Gregor realizes, "It's in the silence after the storm that God reveals himself to man. God is silence."

For Wiesel, there was also truth in madness. In his work, it is often the mad who see the world most clearly. In Night, the beadle of the synagogue, deported before the rest of the town, returns to tell the people about the murder of the Jews. The people, however, don't believe him and think he is mad. Similarly, a woman on the transport from Sighet to Auschwitz keeps screaming about a vision that she is having: flames shooting into the sky. The people try to silence her, thinking she is crazy. But in the evening, they arrive at Auschwitz. There, they see the shooting flames of the crematoriums. A later novel, Twilight (1988), is set in an insane asylum and opens with the epigraph: "The world couldn't exist without madmen."

But neither madness nor silence ultimately suffice. Anguished silence becomes a cry. Wiesel must speak, must try to understand and express that which cannot be understood. Some of Wiesel's books, such as the Gates of the Forest, question the role that historical Christian anti-Semitism played in the eruption of anti-Jewish fervor during the Holocaust.

In Wiesel's later works, the children of the survivors continue to speak and to question. Both The Fifth Son and The Forgotten are books in which the children of survivors return to Europe and confront their fathers' past. In The Forgotten, the son says: "I will bear witness in his place; I will speak for him. It is the son's duty not to let his father die." In The Fifth Son, the son says: "I carry within me his past and his secret." The sons must tell the story. The work of witnessing, of speaking out, continues.

For Wiesel, witnessing took on a worldwide scope. He was our most prominent spokesman on the Holocaust. But Wiesel became a passionate spokesman for humanity—a peacemaker and activist—concerned about human suffering wherever it occurs. He was a tireless speaker and campaigner who traveled to Cambodia, South Africa, Russia, and Bosnia in his work against injustice. Wiesel's 2010 novel The Sonderberg Case, a novel that characterizes the post–World War II generation.

In 1986, Wiesel received the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in human rights. In his acceptance speech he said, "I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation."

Wiesel was an advocate for the oppressed. In his work, he faithfully remembered the dead. He endeavored to ensure that their memory serve as a reminder of the immorality of which humans are capable so that atrocity be stopped in the world. By remembering the dead, Wiesel hoped to redeem them, to transform their memory into a blessing.

Elie Wiesel died on July 2, 2016.

Further Information
Elie Wiesel's Works

Essays


*One Generation After.* Translated by Lily Edeman and Elie Wiesel. New York: Random House, 1970. Twenty-five years after the war, Wiesel speaks out on issues of Jewish concern and questions the meaning of Auschwitz.


Memoirs:

*All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs.* New York: Knopf, 1995. The author recounts the people, places, and events that shaped his life as a writer and humanitarian.

*Night.* Translated by Stella Rodway. New York: Bantam, 1982. The author's account of the Nazi destruction of his native town and of his concentration camp experience while still a teenager. Considered a masterpiece by many.

Novels:


Works About Elie Wiesel


essays concentrate on theological topics.


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