Meet Elie Wiesel

Look, it's important to bear witness. Important to tell your story. ... You cannot imagine what it meant spending a night of death among death.
— Elie Wiesel

The obligation Elie Wiesel feels to justify his survival of a Nazi concentration camp has shaped his destiny. It has guided his work as a writer, teacher, and humanitarian activist; influenced his interaction with his Jewish faith; and affected his family and personal choices. Since World War II, Wiesel has borne witness to persecution past and present. He has sought to understand humankind's capacity for evil, halt its progress, and heal the wounds it has caused.

Wiesel did not expect to be a novelist and journalist when he grew up. His early writings focused on the Bible and spiritual issues. The studious and deeply religious only son of a Jewish family in the village of Sighet, Romania, Wiesel spent his childhood days of the 1930s and 1940s studying sacred Jewish texts. Wiesel's mother, an educated woman for her time, encouraged her son's intense interest in Judaism. Wiesel's early love of stories, especially those told by his grandfather, may explain why he became a storyteller himself.

In 1944 during World War II, Wiesel's life took a profoundly unexpected turn when Germany's armies invaded Sighet. He and his family were sent to concentration camps at Auschwitz and at Buna, both in Poland. His imprisonment, which he describes in horrifying detail in Night, forever changed Wiesel as a man and as a Jew.

Wiesel was freed in April 1945, when he was sixteen years old. He went to a French orphanage and was later reunited with his older sisters. Wiesel completed his education, working as a tutor and translator to fund his schooling. Before long, Wiesel was writing for both French and Jewish publications. Still, he did not—and vowed he would not—write about the Holocaust, saying years later, "You must speak, but how can you, when the full story is beyond language." He did not break this vow until he began writing Night, his own memoir.

Wiesel settled in the United States in 1956. He continued to write about the Holocaust. Wiesel's largely autobiographical novels, Dawn and The Accident, further explore his role as a survivor. His novels The Town Beyond the Wall and The Gates of the Forest focus on other aspects of the Holocaust. Wiesel's play, The Trial of God, challenges God to provide an explanation for allowing so much suffering to occur.

Wiesel, who married Holocaust survivor Marion Erster Rose in 1969, has worked against oppression and persecution around the world. He feels a special obligation to speak out against injustice. Toward that end, he teaches humanities at Boston University and contributes his energies to a range of humanitarian organizations. Wiesel helped organize and found the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. He hopes to broadcast his belief that persecution is an experience all people must recognize and protest. In accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986 for his activism and courageous works, Wiesel summed up his call to action:

Sometimes we must interfere . . .
Wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must—at that moment—become the center of the universe.
Night
Elie Wiesel

The SS gave us a fine New Year’s gift. We had just come back from work. As soon as we had passed through the door of the camp, we sensed something different in the air. Roll call did not take so long as usual. The evening soup was given out with great speed and swallowed down at once in anguish.

I was no longer in the same block as my father. I had been transferred to another unit, the building one, where, twelve hours a day, I had to drag heavy blocks of stone about. The head of my new block was a German Jew, small of stature, with piercing eyes. He told us that evening that no one would be allowed to go out after the evening soup. And soon a terrible word was circulating—selection.

We knew what that meant. An SS man would examine us. Whenever he found a weak one, a musulman as we called them, he would write his number down: good for the crematory.

After soup, we gathered together between the beds. The veterans said: “You’re lucky to have been brought here so late. This camp is paradise today, compared with what it was like two years ago. Buna was a real hell then. There was no water, no blankets, less soup and bread. At night we slept almost naked and it was below thirty degrees. The corpses were collected in hundreds everyday. The work was hard. Today, this is a little paradise. The Kapos had orders to kill a certain number of prisoners every day. And every week—selection. A merciless selection…. Yes, you’re lucky.”

“Stop it! Be quiet!” I begged. “You can tell your stories tomorrow or on some other day.” They burst out laughing. They were not veterans for nothing. “Are you scared? So were we scared. And there was plenty to be scared of in those days.” The old men stayed in their corner, dumb, motionless, haunted. Some were praying. An hour’s delay. In an hour, we should know the verdict—death or a reprieve. And my father? Suddenly I remembered him. How would he pass the selection? He had aged so much….

The head of our block had never been outside concentration camps since 1933. He had already been through all the slaughterhouses, all the factories of death. At about nine o’clock, he took up his position in our midst:

“Achtung!”

There was instant silence.

“Listen carefully to what I am going to say.” (For the first time, I heard his voice quiver.) “In a few moments the selection will begin. You must get completely undressed. Then one by one you will go before the SS doctors. I hope you will succeed in getting through. But you must help your own chances. Before you go into the next room, move about in some way so that you give yourselves a little color. Don’t walk slowly, run!”
Run as the devil were after you! Don’t look at the SS. Run, straight in front of you!”

He broke off for a moment, then added:

“And, the essential thing, don’t be afraid!”

Here was a piece of advice we should have liked very much to be able to follow.

I got undressed, leaving my clothes on the bed. There was no danger of anyone stealing them this evening.

Tibi and Yossi, who had changed their unit at the same time as I had, came up to me and said:

“Let’s keep together. We shall be stronger.”

Yossi was murmuring something between his teeth. He must have been praying. I had never realized that Yossi was a believer. I had even always thought the reverse. Tibi was silent, very pale. All the prisoners in the block stood naked between the beds. This must be how one stands at the last judgment.

“They’re coming!”

There were three SS officers standing around the notorious Dr. Mengele, who had received us at Birkenau. The head of the block, with an attempt at a smile, asked us:

“Ready?”

Yes, we were ready. So were the SS doctors. Dr. Mengele was holding a list in his hand: our numbers. He made a sign to the head of the block: “We can begin!” As if this were a game!

The first to go by were the “officials” of the block: Stubenaelteste, Kapos, foremen, all in perfect physical condition of course! Then came the ordinary prisoners’ turn. Dr. Mengele took stock of them from head to foot. Every now and then, he wrote a number down. One single thought filled my mind: not to let my number be taken; not to show my left arm.

There were only Tibi and Yossi in front of me. They passed. I had time to notice that Mengele had not written their numbers down. Someone pushed me. It was my turn. I ran without looking back. My head was spinning: you’re too thin, you’re too weak, you’re too thin, you’re good for the furnace…. The race seemed interminable. I thought I had been running for years…. You’re too thin, you’re too weak…. At last I had arrived exhausted. When I regained my breath, I questioned Yossi and Tibi:

“Was I written down?”

“No,” said Yossi. He added, smiling: “In any case, he couldn’t have written you down, you were running too fast…."

I began to laugh. I was glad. I would have liked to kiss him. At that moment, what did the other matter! I hadn’t been written down.

Those whose numbers had been noted stood apart, abandoned by the whole world. Some were weeping in silence.

The SS officers went away. The head of the block appeared, his face reflecting the general weariness.

“Everything went off all right. Don’t worry. Nothing is going to happen to anyone. To anyone.”

Again he tried to smile. A poor, emaciated, dried-up Jew questioned him avidly in a trembling voice:

“But… but, Blockaelteste, they did write me down!”
The head of the block let his anger break out.
What! Did someone refuse to believe him!
“What’s the matter now? Am I telling lies then? I tell you once and for all, nothing’s going to happen to you! To anyone! You’re wallowing in your own despair, you fool!”

The bell rang, a signal that the selection had been completed throughout the camp.

With all my might I began to run to Block 36. I met my father on the way. He came up to me;

“Well?” So you passed?
“Yes. And you?”
“Me too.”

How we breathed again, now! My father had brought me a present - half a ration of bread obtained in exchange for a piece of rubber, found at the warehouse, which would do to sole a shoe.

The bell. Already we must separate, go to bed. Everything was regulated by the bell. It gave me orders, and I automatically obeyed them. I hated it. Whenever I dreamed of a better world, I could only imagine a universe with no bells.

Several days had elapsed. We no longer thought about the selection. We went to work as usual, loading heavy stones into railway wagons. Rations had become more meager: this was the only change.

We had risen before dawn, as on every day. We had received the black coffee, the ration of bread. We were about to set out for the yard as usual. The head of the block arrived, running.

“Silence for a moment. I have a list of numbers here. I’m going to read them to you. Those whose numbers I call won’t be going to work this morning; they’ll stay behind in the camp.”

And, in a soft voice, he read out about ten numbers. We had understood.

“THOSE WHOSE NUMBERS I CALL WON’T BE GOING TO WORK THIS MORNING; THEY’LL STAY BEHIND IN THE CAMP.”

These were numbers chosen at the selection. Dr. Megele had not forgotten.

The head of the block went toward his room. Ten prisoners surrounded him, hanging onto his clothes:

“Save us! You promised…! We wandered to the yard. We’re strong enough to work as good workers. We can…we will….”

He tried to calm them to reassure them about their fate, to explain to them that the fact that they were staying behind in the camp did not mean much, had no tragic significance.

“After all, I stay here myself every day” he added.

It was a somewhat feeble argument. He realized it, and without another word went and shut himself up in his room.

The bell had just rung.

“Form up!”

It scarcely mattered now that the work was hard. The essential thing was to be as far as possible from the block, from the crucial death, from the center of hell.

I saw my father running toward me. I looked frightened all of a sudden.

“What’s the matter?”

Out of breath, he could hardly open his mouth.
“Me, too…me, too…! They told me to stay behind in the camp.”
They had written down his number without his being aware of it.
“What will happen?” I asked in anguish.
But it was he who tried to reassure me.
“It isn’t certain yet. There’s still a chance of escape. They’re going to do another selection today…a decisive selection.”
I was silent.
He felt that his time was short. He spoke quickly. He would have liked to say so many things. His speech grew confused; his voice choked. He knew that I would have to go in a few moments. He would have to stay behind alone, so very alone.
“Look, take this knife,” he said to me.
“I don’t need it any longer. It might be useful to you. And take this spoon as well. Don’t sell them. Quickly! Go on. Take what I’m giving you!”
The inheritance.
“Don’t talk like that, Father.” (I felt that I would break into sobs.) “I don’t want you to say that. Keep the spoon and knife. You need them as much as I do. We shall see each other again this evening, after work.”
He looked at me with his tired eyes, veiled with despair. He went on:
“I’m asking this of you…. Take them. Do as I ask, my son. We have no time…. Do as your father asks.”
Our Kapo yelled that we should start.
The unit set out toward the camp gate.
Left, right! I bit my lips. My father had stayed by the block, leaning against the wall.
Then he began to run, to catch up with us.
Perhaps he had forgotten something he wanted to say to me….

But we were marching too quickly… left, right!
We were already at the gate. They counted us, to the din of military music. We were outside.

The whole day, I wandered about as if sleepwalking. Now and then Tibi and Yossi would throw me a brotherly word. The Kapo, too, tried to reassure me. He had given me easier work today. I felt sick at heart. How well they were treating me! Like an orphan! I thought: even now, my father is still helping me.

I did not know myself what I wanted—for the day to pass quickly or not. I was afraid of finding myself alone that night. How good it would be to die here!

At last we began the return journey. How I longed for orders to run!
The military march. The gate. The camp.
I ran to Block 36.
Were there still miracles on this earth? He was alive. He had escaped the second selection. He had been able to prove that he was still useful…. I gave him back his knife and spoon.
Your Majesty, Your royal highnesses, Your Excellencies, Chairman Aarvik, member of the Nobel Committee, ladies and gentlemen:

Words of gratitude. First to our common Creator. This is what the Jewish tradition commands us to do. At special occasions, one duty-bound to recite the following prayer: “Barukh shehekhyanu vékiymanu vehigianu lazman haze” – “Blessed be Thou for having sustained us until this day.”

I am moved, deeply moved by your words, Chairman Aarvik. And it is with a profound sense of humility that I accept the honor – the highest there is - that you have chosen to bestow upon me. I know your choice transcends my person.

Do I have the right to represent the multitudes who have perished? Do I have the right to accept this great honor on their behalf? I do not. No one may speak for the dead, no one may interpret their mutilated dreams and visions. And yet, I sense their presence. I always do – and at this moment more than ever. The presence of my parents, that of my little sister. The presence of my teachers, my friends, my companions…

This honor belongs to all the survivors and their children and, through us to the Jewish people with whose destiny I have always identified.

I remember: it happened yesterday, or eternities ago. A young Jewish boy discovered the Kingdom of Night. I remember his bewilderment, I remember his anguish. It all happened so fast. The ghetto. The deportation. The sealed cattle car. The fiery altar upon which the history of our people and the future of mankind were meant to be sacrificed.

I remember he asked his father: “Can this be true? This is twentieth century, not the Middle Ages. Who would allow such crimes to be committed? How could the world remain silent?”

And now the boy is turning to me. “Tell me,” he asks, “what have you done with my future. What have you done with your life?” And I tell them that I have tried. That I have tried to keep the memory alive, that I have tried to fight those who would forget. Because if we forget, we are guilty, we are accomplices.
And then I explain to him how naïve we were, that the world did know and remained silent. And that is why I swore never to be silent whenever wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must – at that moment – become the center of the universe.

Of course, since I am a Jew profoundly rooted in my people’s memory and tradition, my first response is to Jewish fears, Jewish needs, Jewish crises. For I belong to a traumatized generation, one that experienced the abandonment and solitude of our people. It would be unnatural for me not to make it Jewish priorities my own: Israel, Soviet Jewry, Jews in Arab land… But others are important to me. Apartheid is, in my view, as abhorrent as anti-Semitism. To me, Andrei Sakharov’s isolation is as much a disgrace as Joseph Begun’s imprisonment and Ida Nudel’s exile. As is to the denial of solidarity and it’s leader Lech Walesa’s right to dissent. And Nelson Mandela’s interminable imprisonment.

There is so much injustice and suffering crying out for our attention: victim of hunger, of racism and political persecution - in Chile, for instance, or in Ethiopia – writers and poets, prisoners in so many lands governed by the Left and by the Right.

Human rights are being violated on every continent. More people are oppressed than free. How can one not be sensitive to their plight? Human suffering anywhere concerns men and women everywhere. That applies also to Palestinians to whose plight I am sensitive but whose methods I deplore when they lead to violence. Violence is not the answer. Terrorism is the most dangerous of answers. They are frustrated, that is understandable, something must be done. The refugees and their misery. The children and their fear. The uprooted and their hopelessness. Something must be done about their situation. Both the Jewish people and the Palestinian people have lost too many sons and daughters and have shed too much blood. This must stop, and all attempts to stop it must be encouraged. Israel will cooperate, I am sure of that. I trust Israel for I have faith in the Jewish people. Let Israel be given a chance, let hatred and danger be removed from their horizons, and their will be peace in and around the Holy land. Please understand my deep and total commitment to Israel: if you could remember what I remember, you would understand. Israel is the only nation in the world whose existence is threatened. Should Israel lose but one war, it would mean her end and ours as well.

But I have faith. Faith in God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and even in His creation. Without it no action would be possible. And action is the only remedy to indifference, the most insidious danger of all. Isn’t that the meaning of Alfred Nobel’s legacy? Wasn’t his fear of war a shield against war?
There is so much to done, there is so much that can be done. One person – a Raoul Wallenberg, an Albert Schweitzer, Martin Luther King, Jr. – one person of integrity, can make a difference, a difference of life and death.

As long as one dissident is imprisoned, our freedom will not be true. As long as one child is hungry, our life will be filled with anguish and shame. What all these victims need above all is to know what they are not alone; that we are not forgetting the, that when their voices are stifled we shall lent them ours, that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs.

This is what I say to young Jewish boy wondering what I have done with his years. It is in his name that I speak to you and that I express to you my deepest gratitude as one who has emerge from the Kingdom of Night. We know that every moment is a moment of grace, every hour an offering; not to share them would mean to betray them.

Our lives no longer belong to us alone; they belong to all those who need us desperately.

Thank you, Chairman Aarvik. Thank you, members of the Nobel Committee. Thank you, people of Norway, for declaring on this singular occasion that our survival has meaning for mankind.

Questions:

1. What was the “fine New Year’s gift”? How is this an example of verbal irony?
2. What advice did the head of the block give to the prisoners before they went before the SS officers?
3. Who are Tini and Yossi?
4. Why did Elie’s father try to give him his knife and spoon? Explain the significance of this moment.
5. Why do you think Elie entitled his memoir *Night*?
6. In the acceptance speech, Elie says, “Our lives no longer belong to us alone; they belong to all those who need us desperately.” How might Alfred from *The Contender* reply to this statement? Would he agree or disagree?