

Editorial

Elie Wiesel, 1928-2016

I.

No Jew since Theodor Herzl has had a greater impact on Jewish society and the world than Elie Wiesel. His loss is incalculable. The layers of the loss will be unfolded for generations to come.

A teenager, skin and bones, barely alive, bereft of family, wounded of soul, speaker of no Western language, educated in nothing beyond Jewish lore, witness to the flames of the crematoria, the hangings, the beatings, the *musselmen*: how did this most unlikely candidate for world fame and influence emerge?

Who will replace his voice of conscience?

Who will demand memory of the Holocaust?

Who will bring to life the “souls on fire” and the “legends of our time” and the madmen and mystics that populated his universe, which he made our own?

Who will speak up to presidents and make, not a person’s day, but a person’s life, just for sharing an hour with him?

Who will define conscience in the decades and centuries to come?

Who will write with the concision, the power, the allure, to bring the Jewish message and the message of the State of Israel to mankind?

To whom will the presidents and prime ministers, and the editors of the leading newspapers of the United States and of Europe, turn when they need to call on an authentic Jewish voice?

Who will call to task the indifference of a world too self-absorbed in its electronic universe to notice, nay, to be pained by, the ever widening murder of innocents?

Who will argue more persuasively for the uniqueness of the Holocaust while also speaking out against genocide wherever it may occur?

II.

After a bout with typhus immediately following liberation, Elie Wiesel was bound over to an orphanage in France. There, under the wise, tough love of Judith Hemmendinger, he and his fellow child survivors — there were hardly any children who survived the camps — learned to care once again. Learned to go to school again. Learned to look to a future for themselves.

Wiesel found his future in journalism, and in travel. Like Ernest Hemingway before him, Elie Wiesel’s early experience as a journalist taught him the art of concise expression, a skill that would eventually carry him far in his short pieces, short novels, short portraits of chasidic and biblical personalities, and in his public advocacy.

In France Wiesel also discovered his great gift for languages. By the time he was but a few years out of the orphanage he was publishing in Hebrew, French and Yiddish. Like Abraham Joshua Heschel, he would master languages that were not his mother tongue in a way that astonished.

He promised himself not to write about the Holocaust for 10 years. He would need that time before he could put a word on the page. His first and still most famous and influential work, *Night*, germinated in Yiddish. It was first published, some three-to-four times as long as its current form, in Buenos Aires in 1954, under the title, *And the World Kept Silent*.

It was not just the cruelty of the Nazis that wounded him so deeply. It was the cruel indifference of the world. It was leaders such as President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who would not bomb the rail lines to Auschwitz. It was the European citizenries who turned in their Jewish neighbors to the Gestapo. It was the populace who watched the trains to the death camps speed by, and who said nothing, did nothing. It was the residents of the towns with Jewish ghettos, who smuggled in no food, who turned a blind eye.

It was indifference, as much as hate, that churned at the insides of Elie Wiesel. *And the world kept silent*.

III.

Already in the early 1970s there appeared a volume of bibliography on the writings and the person of Elie Wiesel. Already by his early forties, his voice, his witness, his novels were so influential that it took a book just to list the literature he had generated. Today that list, if it could even be compiled, would be (who knows?) 10 or 100 times as long, in who knows how many languages.

Elie Wiesel was the first to give voice to the Holocaust in a disciplined, literary way. His early novels, set in various places around the world, with characters of varying nationalities, really came down to one novel, in one place, with one theme: the mystery of the descent of man, the need to grapple with this, the need to move beyond it, somehow, without forgetting it and without flattening or explaining it away.

Hence, his novels struck a powerful cord, way beyond their literary merit (about which critics differed). His novels, mostly populated by madmen and characters who could never be grasped other than on many levels, kept raising the same question: How could humanity unveil the levels of inhumanity that civilization, to be true to itself, must never forget?

As prolific a writer as Wiesel was, as disciplined a writer as he remained, his written words never could be read or judged strictly on their own merits and meaning.

For Elie Wiesel, the written word had no right to exist on its own. It needed action. It needed articulation.

IV.

The publication of a Wiesel book became an event. For it was intended to be an event, not just a literary exploration.

Wiesel’s writings became events because he united the passions of his life — his passion for humanity — with his writings.

Yes, events, such as his protest against the imprisonment of Soviet Jewry (*The Jews of Silence*, 1966). Events such as the unexpected, miraculous liberation of Jerusalem (*A Beggar in Jerusalem*, 1968). For Wiesel, to write, and only to write, would be to risk the indifference that condemned his family and his people to the oblivion of Nazism.

Wiesel had to speak up, and it was not only his pen that he used to that end.

He had to speak up, quite literally. He summoned a speaking style as powerful as anyone’s in the past century. His lectures at the “Y” in New York City attracted hundreds and thousands. They became events themselves. His haunting voice, his elusive accent, his crisp formulations, his delving deep, his humor, his agony, his expressive face and tragic eyes, all combined in a way impossible to describe or to duplicate or to classify. He sounded like one of the madmen/prophets/sages that he so frequently summoned in his writings. The line between novel and autobiography and biblical and chasidic personality in the written work and oral presentation of Elie Wiesel always remained blurred.

He began to tour the country. And to tour the world. He attracted audiences of every Jewish stripe, and of every religion and nationality. He had a way of formulating and expressing truths about suffering with great pith and power. He developed a Jewishly inflected universal language. The fees he commanded spoke to the level to which he rose.

His oratorical power — in English, French, Hebrew, Yiddish, Hungarian — brought him to the attention of presidents. It was he who could persuade President Jimmy Carter to found a Holocaust Memorial Museum. It was he who could admonish President Ronald Reagan for visiting the cemetery in Bitburg, with its graves of SS members. It was he who urged President Clinton to defend Bosnia and Kosovo. It was he to whom President George W. Bush gave the blueprints of the rail lines to Auschwitz. It was he who gave President Obama a tour of Auschwitz — and to whom he strongly denounced the Iran nuclear deal. It was he who could personally meet any Israeli prime minister from Golda Meir forward. It was he whom Benjamin Netanyahu practically begged to

become president of Israel.

V.

One doesn’t reach that high, doesn’t acquire that level of influence, even with a great soul, a great pen and a great voice. One must also be a great politician. And that Elie Wiesel was. There have been other writers, other orators, other activists. Wiesel added to all these qualities a keen understanding of the levers of power. When to assert himself, when not to. When to push, when not to. When to be seen to use his influence, when not to. How to be tough, how to be soft. When to put himself at the center, when to step back. When to ask for a favor, when to give a favor.

Wiesel had a keen understanding of how to formulate an issue, a keen sense of timing, an instinctive sense for the psychology of the people who were the keys to what he wanted to achieve. Behind his gentle and kind demeanor was a steely determinaton, since above all he was driven by a sense of mission: *Never forget. And never let it happen again*. He knew how to marshal all of his talents in the service of this mission.

He knew something else, very different, very internal, even private: his roots in the study of Torah, his roots in chasidic song. He sought out teachers even in Auschwitz, then after the war in France, then in New York City. The text — the Torah — the Word — written and sung, too — were his version of “I think, therefore I am.” Without Yiddishkeit, he could not exist, could not be.

VI.

It was he who bestrode the 20th century as no other Jew. It was he, a damaged teenage survivor who, in a certain sense, never left the camps and never stopped mourning the death of his parents, who left us all with his question: How many other Elie Wiesel, Albert Einsteins, Andy Groves, did the flames of the crematoria consume?

That question, for which there is no answer, and the memory of all that goes into that question and its aftermath, constitute the command and the legacy of Elie Wiesel: *Never forget!*

For those of us privileged to have seen him, heard him, or known him — privileged to have seen with our own eyes the connection so integral to him, the connection between his life and his writings — for that privilege, we ourselves will become the messengers to the next generation, which will know Elie Wiesel only by reputation and via his written word.

Be a messenger.

Thus we might sum up the anguished quest and command of this multifaceted, revelatory and mysterious giant, Elie Wiesel, who no longer walks among us.