

Author, Teacher, Witness

Holocaust Survivor Elie Wiesel speaks for the silent

In 1944 a 15-year-old boy was taken from his home in Sighet, Hungary, and sent to a Nazi death camp. This spring, after a joint resolution of Congress, President Reagan will present him with a gold medal at the White House "in recognition of his humanitarian efforts and outstanding contributions to world literature and human rights."

There can be no longer journey than the one Elie Wiesel, 56, has taken from a cell in Auschwitz to the corridors of Washington. "How can you measure it?" he asks. "In the suffering of a people? In the recesses of history?" The questions are rhetorical. No gauge exists; no one has ever made the trip before. The voyage is charted in three words inscribed on his medal: AUTHOR, TEACHER, WITNESS.

The witness was born in the charred world of the Holocaust. "Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night," he recalls in his first book. "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."

As World War II came to a close, the gaunt and dolorous child was liberated at yet another death camp, Buchenwald. His parents and a sister had been murdered. How had he survived two of the most notorious killing fields of the century? "I will never know," he says. "I was always weak. I never ate. The slightest wind would turn me over. In Buchenwald they sent 10,000 to their deaths each day. I was always in the last hundred near the gate. They stopped. Why?"

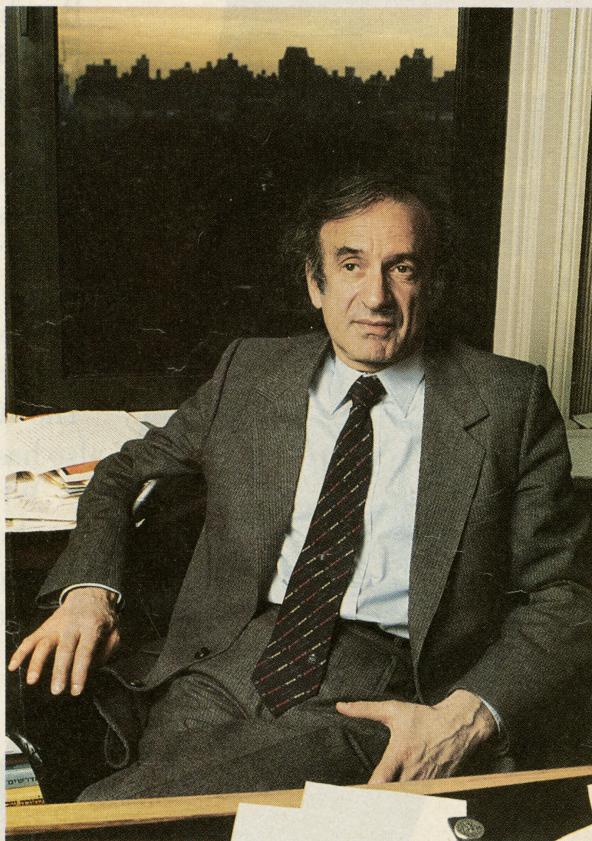
The inquiry was a burden as ineradicable as the number, A-7713, tattooed on his arm by a German official. "So heavy was my anguish," he remembers, "that in the spring of 1945 I made a vow: not to speak, not to touch upon the essential for at least ten years. Long enough to unite the language of humanity with the silence of the dead."

The boy refused repatriation and found his way to France, where he worked as a choir director, translator and, eventually, journalist. It was during an interview in 1954 with Roman Catholic Novelist François Mauriac that literature took an abrupt turn.

"He spoke so much about Christ," says Wiesel. "I was timid, but finally I said, 'You speak of Christ's suffering.

What about the children who have suffered not 2,000 years ago, but yesterday? And they never talk about it.'" Mauriac was to recall the look in the speaker's pained eyes, "as of a Lazarus risen from the dead, yet still a prisoner within the grim confines where he had strayed, stumbling among the shameful corpses . . . I could only embrace him weeping."

Four years later, *Night* appeared in France with an introduction by Mauriac.



Elie Wiesel: grieving in a book-clogged study

"*Silence is the worst thing, worse than mere hate.*"

The little book set the Wiesel style: austere, tense phrases articulating the unspeakable—the murder and torture of the innocent, the martyrdom of faith itself as a child watches the hanging of another child: "Where is God? Where is he?" . . . And I heard a voice within me answer: "Where is he? Here he is—he is hanging here on this gallows."

Some 20 American publishers rejected *Night*. "The Holocaust was not something people wanted to know about in those days," the author remembers. "The diary of Anne Frank was about as far as anyone wanted to venture into the dark." *Night*, finally published in the U.S. in 1960, drew them far deeper, into an abyss that was ap-

alling to contemplate and impossible to ignore. It was as if a thousand tongues had suddenly become unstuck.

Volumes by other writers, films, television programs followed *Night*, tracing the origins and consequences of genocide. Some of them were legitimate, but many were full of the now familiar Holocaust cant about survivor guilt or the complicity of the victims. Ironically, it was Wiesel who brought the term Holocaust out of scholarly usage into common parlance in a *New York Times* book review some 25 years ago: "I used it because I had no other word. Now I'm sorry. It's been so trivialized and vulgarized. Today one must ask, 'Do you mean the show or the event?'"

Yet despite the docudramas and paperback page turners with barbed wire on the covers, Wiesel has kept to his private tasks of organizing memory and troubling a deaf world with his cries. Although he has been called the voice of the 6 million killed in the "Final Solution," few of his more than 20 books directly confront the events of Auschwitz. Often they discuss the testamental prophets (*Five Biblical Portraits, Messengers of God*), ancient legend (*The Golem*) or contemporary Eastern Europe (*One Generation After*). His study of the Soviet Union (*The Jews of Silence*) was a new jeremiad, going beyond the crimes of the past. "People who didn't read the book thought it referred to the religious Russians no longer able to study Hebrew or to pray in public," he says. "But what it really referred to was the American Jews who knew of the situation in the Soviet Union and said nothing. Indifference . . . it is something I know about." His grieving voice, marked with the intonations of the exile, trails off. "Silence is the worst thing, worse than mere hate. If we ignore the suffering, our true literary prophecy will not be *The Trial* or *The Stranger* but Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. This is what I fight against."

The battle has long since extended from Jewish themes to a concern for children everywhere. "The specter of starvation is not something consigned to the '30s and '40s," he says. "I look at the screen and see the swollen bellies and haunted eyes of the very young in Cambodia, in Ethiopia, in South America. I could have been that child. I was that child. And I must make a gesture."

Sometimes the gesture is a book, but often it is a journey to the side of the sufferers. Four years ago, Wiesel went to Cambodia to aid refugees and, a year ago, to Nicaragua to help the abused Miskito Indians. He plans to leave soon for Ethio-