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## ***Night* by Elie Wiesel**

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### **ELIE WIESEL, A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY**

Elie Wiesel was born in 1928 in Sighet, a small village in northern Transylvania, Romania, an area that was part of Hungary from 1941 to 1945. Wiesel was the only son of four children of Shlomo, a grocer and his wife, Sarah (Feig) Wiesel. He was devoted to the study of the Torah, the Talmud and the mystical teachings of Hasidism and the Cabala.

The Nazis, led by Adolf Eichmann, entered Hungary in the spring of 1944 with orders to exterminate an estimated 600,000 Jews in under six weeks. Wiesel was 15 years old when the Nazis deported him and his family to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

His mother and younger sister died in the gas chambers on the night of their arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau. He and his father



*Elie Wiesel, age 15, shortly before deportation*

were deported to Buchenwald where his father died before the camp was liberated on April 11, 1945. Wiesel did not learn until after the war that his two older sisters, Hilda and Bea, also survived.

After receiving medical treatment, Wiesel went to France with other orphans but he remained stateless. He stayed in France, living first in Normandy and later in Paris working as a tutor and translator. He eventually began writing for various French and Jewish publications. But Wiesel vowed not to write about his experiences at Auschwitz-Birkenau and Buchenwald because he doubted his ability to accurately convey the horror.

Wiesel's self-imposed silence came to an end in the mid-1950s after he interviewed the Nobel Prize-winning French novelist François Mauriac. Deeply moved by Wiesel's story, Mauriac urged him to tell the world of his experiences and to "bear witness" for the millions of people who had been silenced. The result was *Night*, the story of a teenage boy who survived the camps and was devastated by the realization that the God he once worshiped had allowed his people to be destroyed. The *Nation's* Daniel Stern has described *Night* as "undoubtedly the single most powerful literary relic of the Holocaust."

*Night* was originally written in Yiddish as an 862-page work called *Un die Welt Hot Geshvign (And the World Kept Silent)*. He pared this manuscript down to an intense first-person account of his experiences. Wiesel translated the manuscript from Yiddish into French and retitled it *La Nuit (Night)*. It was published in 1958 and the English edition was published in 1960. *Night* is written in a taut, spare style. Wiesel's controlled language allows the events to speak for themselves and is in sharp contrast to the reality about which it speaks.

Since the publication of *Night*, Wiesel has written more than 40 books. He became an American citizen in 1963. In 1969, Wiesel married Austrian-born writer and editor Marion Erster Rose, also a survivor of the Holocaust. His wife has edited and

translated many of his works. They have a son, Shlomo Elisha, born in 1972. They live in New York.

Since 1976, Wiesel has been the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Boston University, where he also holds the title of University Professor. Previously, he served as Distinguished Professor of Judaic Studies at the City University of New York (1972—76) and the first Henry Luce Visiting Scholar in Humanities and Social Thought at Yale University (1982—83).

Wiesel has received numerous awards for his literary and human rights activities. These include the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the U.S. Congressional Gold Medal and the Medal of Liberty Award and the rank of Grand Officer in the French Legion of Honor. President Jimmy Carter appointed Wiesel Chairman of the United State Holocaust Memorial Council in 1978. In 1986, Elie Wiesel won the Nobel Prize for Peace. Shortly thereafter, Elie Wiesel and his wife established The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity.

Wiesel has defended the cause of Soviet Jews, Nicaragua's Miskito Indians, Argentina's "disappeared," Cambodian refugees, the Kurds, South African apartheid victims, famine victims in Africa and more recently the victims and prisoners in the former Yugoslavia.

In presenting the Nobel Peace Prize, Egil Aarvik, chair of the Nobel Committee, said this about Wiesel:

"His mission is not to gain the world's sympathy for victims or the survivors. His aim is to awaken our conscience. Our indifference to evil makes us partners in the crime. This is the reason for his attack on indifference and his insistence on measures aimed at preventing a new Holocaust. We know that the unimaginable has happened. What are we doing now to prevent its happening again?"

Sources: *A Teacher's Resource for Night by Elie Wiesel*, Boston: Voices of Love and Freedom, Inc. and Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, 1999.

*Current Biography Yearbook 1986*. New York: H.W. Wilson Co., 1986.

Wilson, Kathleen, ed. *Major 20th-Century Writers: A Selection of Sketches from Contemporary Authors*. Detroit: Gale, 1999.

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## **ELIE WIESEL'S ACCEPTANCE SPEECH FOR THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE**

It is with a profound sense of humility that I accept the honor you have chosen to bestow upon me. I know: your choice transcends me. This both frightens and pleases me.

It frightens me because I wonder: 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. That would be presumptuous. No one may speak for the dead, no one may interpret their mutilated dreams and visions.

It pleases me because I may say that 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 the 20th 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 him that I have tried. That I have tried to keep 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 naive we were, that the world did know and remained silent. And that is why I swore never to be silent when and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always 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. Whenever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion or political views, that must—at that moment—become the center of the universe . . .

Yes, I have faith. Faith in God 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 this the meaning of Alfred Nobel's legacy? Wasn't his fear of war a shield against war?

There is much to be done, there is much that can be done. One person . . . of integrity can make a difference, a difference between life and death. As long as one dissident is in prison, our freedom will not be true. As long as one child is hungry, our lives will be filled with anguish and shame.

What all these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them, that when their voices are stilled we shall lend them ours, that while their

freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs.

This is what I say to the young Jewish boy wondering what I have done with his years. It is in his name that I speak to you and I express to you my deepest gratitude. No one is as capable of gratitude as one who has emerged 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.

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## **ELIE WIESEL: RECENT QUOTES**

"Education is the key to preventing the cycle of violence and hatred that marred the 20<sup>th</sup> century from repeating itself in the 21<sup>st</sup> century."

– *Chicago Sun-Times*, November 5, 2001

"I say fear must be followed by hope. Hope – you do something about it. It's a call to action.

– *Chicago Tribune*, February 11, 2002

"They were going to die. They knew it, and their last words to their families were "I love you." Even in great pain, their last words were of love... People who could have saved themselves and they ran back in to save others instead. If humanity is capable of that, how can I lose hope in humanity?"

– *Chicago Sun-Times*, November 5, 2001

"I have no doubt that faith is only pure when it does not negate the faith of another. I have no doubt that evil can be fought and that indifference is no option. I have no doubt that fanaticism is dangerous. And of all the books in the world on life, I have no doubt that the life of one person weighs more than them all."

– *O Magazine*, November 2000

"I've gone everywhere, trying to stop many atrocities: Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia. The least I can do is show the victims that they are not alone. When I went to Cambodia, journalists asked me. "What are you doing here? This is not a Jewish tragedy." I answered, "When I needed people to come, they didn't. That's why I am here."

– *O Magazine*, November 2000

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