



Wiesel receives the U.S. Congressional Gold Medal from President Ronald Reagan, left. Wiesel's seminal work, above, has sold more than 7 million copies.

The Fight Not to Forget

Elie Wiesel has spent decades bearing witness to his 'walk among the dead'

BY MARIA BLACKBURN

Elie Wiesel lost his family, his town, his entire history in World War II. Imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp as a teenager, Wiesel was issued the number #A7713, and he was starved, beaten and forced to watch as the people around him, including his parents and 7-year-old sister, were murdered because of their heritage.

"Forget where you came from, forget who you were," Wiesel and his fellow prisoners were told in the camps. "Only the present matters."

Some 6 million Jewish people were killed in the Holocaust. Wiesel survived. Afterward, he could have chosen to erase the experience from his

memory. Instead, beginning in 1958 with his groundbreaking book, *Night*, he has written more than 40 books, taught hundreds of classes and delivered thousands of speeches to remind us of the atrocities of the Holocaust.

"I have tried to keep memory alive ... I have tried to fight those who would forget," he said when he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986. "Because if we forget, we are guilty. We are accomplices."

In bearing witness, Wiesel encouraged others to do the same. And in broadening his message beyond the Holocaust and speaking out against human suffering and injustice all over

the world—from Cambodia to Darfur to South Africa—Wiesel, 81, has worked tirelessly over the last half century to ensure that the Holocaust will never be repeated. For his dedication, he has been heralded as a "messenger to mankind" and awarded not just the Nobel Peace Prize, but the U.S. Congressional Gold Medal and the French Legion of Honor.

Eliezer Wiesel was born in 1928 in Sighet, Romania, the only son of a grocer. Religion and education were at the center of his family's life and Wiesel pursued studies in Judaism, modern Hebrew, and contemporary literature. In 1943, his world was turned upside down when his family and neighbors in Eastern Europe were sent to death camps in Poland. Wiesel, his parents and his three sisters were transported to Auschwitz in 1944, and he saw his mother and little sister

sent to the gas chamber (his two older sisters escaped death and were later reunited with him). Life in the camps was unbearable. "Men and women from every corner of Europe were suddenly reduced to nameless and faceless creatures desperate for the same ration of bread and soup, dreading the same end," Wiesel said in his Nobel lecture in 1986. "Walking among the dead one wondered if one was still alive."

In January 1945, soon after Wiesel and his father were marched to Buchenwald, the elder Wiesel died of dysentery and starvation. Weeks later, the camp was liberated by the American Third Army. The teenage Wiesel was sent to France to study with other Jewish orphans. There he became a journalist. While interviewing French author Francois Mauriac, the 1952 Nobel Laureate in Literature, Wiesel became inspired to write about his experiences. So in

1955, a decade after his liberation, he began writing *Night*.

"Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed," Wiesel writes. "Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the small faces of the children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent sky. Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes. Never shall I forget those things, even if I were condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never."

Originally written and published in French, *Night* has been translated into 30 languages and has sold more than 7 million copies. In the decades since it was published, Wiesel married,

became a father and an American citizen, and built a career as a well-respected university professor of literature and philosophy. He is currently on the faculty at Boston University. His many works range from essays and memoirs to plays and novels; the most recent, *A Mad Desire to Dance*, was published in 2009.

Not one to rest on his laurels, Wiesel used proceeds from *Night* to establish an Orthodox Jewish school in Israel in memory of his father. With his Nobel Prize winnings he founded The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity, which is dedicated to combating indifference, intolerance and injustice through international dialogue and youth-focused programs.

Wiesel's life has gone on, but he doesn't ever want to leave his memories behind. "The opposite of history is not myth," he says. "It is forgetfulness." ■

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