

Elie Wiesel 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 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.

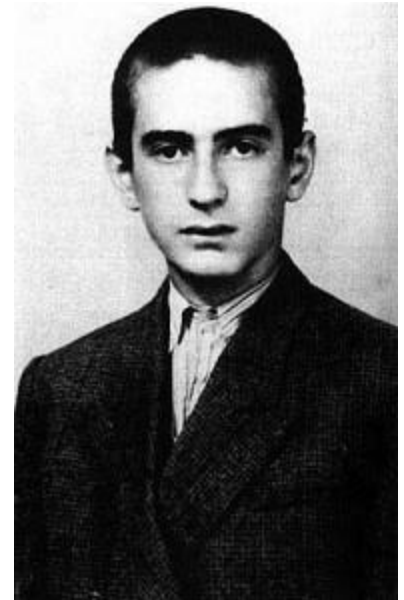
Wiesel's self-imposed silence came to an end in the mid-1950s after he interviewed the Nobel Prize-winning French novelist François Mauriac. Deeply moved by Wiesel's story, Mauriac urged him to tell the world of his experiences and to "bear witness" for the millions of people who had been silenced. The 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 (1972–1976) and the first Henry Luce visiting scholar in humanities and social thought at Yale University (1982–1983).

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.



Elie Wiesel, age 15, shortly before deportation

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

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