Wiesel Bio from United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC

Elie Wiesel was born in Sighet, Romania, on September 30, 1928.

A Nobel Peace Prize winner and Boston University professor, Wiesel has worked on behalf of oppressed people for much of his adult life. His personal experience of the Holocaust has led him to use his talents as an author, teacher, and storyteller to defend human rights and peace throughout the world.

A native of Sighet, Transylvania (Romania, from 1940-1945 Hungary), Wiesel and his family were deported by the Nazis to Auschwitz when he was 15 years old. His mother and younger sister perished there, his two older sisters survived. Wiesel and his father were later transported to Buchenwald, where his father died.

After the war, Wiesel studied in Paris and later became a journalist in that city, yet he remained silent about what he has endured as an inmate in the camps. During an interview with the French writer Francois Mauriac, Wiesel was persuaded to end that silence. He subsequently wrote La Nuit (Night). Since its publication in 1958, La Nuit has been translated into 30 languages and millions of copies have been sold. In Night, Wiesel describes his experiences and emotions at the hands of the Nazis during the Holocaust: the roundup of his family and neighbors in the Romanian town of Sighet; deportation by cattle car to the concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau; the division of his family forever during the selection process; the mental and physical anguish he and his fellow prisoners experienced as they were stripped of their humanity; and the death march from Auschwitz-Birkenau to the concentration camp at Buchenwald.

In 1978, President Jimmy Carter appointed him Chairman of the President's Commission on the Holocaust. In 1980, he became Founding Chairman of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council. Wiesel is also the founding president of the Paris-based Universal Academy of Cultures.

Wiesel's efforts to defend human rights and peace throughout the world have earned him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the United States Congressional Gold Medal and the Medal of Liberty Award, the rank of Grand-Croix in the French Legion of Honor, and in 1986, the Nobel Peace Prize. He has received more than 100 honorary degrees from institutions of higher learning.

Three months after he received the Nobel Peace Prize, Elie Wiesel and his wife Marion established The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity. Its mission is to advance the cause of human rights and peace throughout the world by creating a new forum for the discussion of urgent ethical issues confronting humanity.

His more than 40 books have won numerous awards, including the Prix Medicis for A Beggar in Jerusalem, the Prix Livre Inter for The Testament, and the Grand Prize for Literature from the City of Paris for The Fifth Son. The first volume of Wiesel's memoirs, All Rivers Run to the Sea, was published in New York (Knopf) in December 1995. The second volume, And the Sea is Never Full, was published in New York (Knopf) in November 1999.Elie Wiesel has been Distinguished Professor of Judaic Studies at the City University of New York (1972-1976), and first Henry Luce Visiting Scholar in the Humanities and Social Thought at Yale University (1982-1983). Since 1976, he has been the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Boston University where he also holds the title of University Professor.

Children During the Holocaust

Children were especially vulnerable in the era of the Holocaust. The Nazis advocated killing children of “unwanted” or “dangerous” groups in accordance with their ideological views, either as part of the “racial struggle” or as a measure of preventative security. The Germans and their collaborators killed children both for these ideological reasons and in retaliation for real or alleged partisan attacks.

The Germans and their collaborators killed as many as 1.5 million children, including over a million Jewish children and tens of thousands of Romani (Gypsy) children, German children with physical and mental disabilities living in institutions, Polish children, and children residing in the occupied Soviet Union. The chances for survival for Jewish and some non-Jewish adolescents (13-18 years old) were greater, as they could be deployed at forced labor.

The fate of Jewish and non-Jewish children can be categorized in the following way: 1) children killed when they arrived in killing centers; 2) children killed immediately after birth or in institutions; 3) children born in ghettos and camps who survived because prisoners hid them; 4) children, usually over age 12, who were used as laborers and as subjects of medical experiments; and 5) those children killed during reprisal operations or so-called anti-partisan operations.

In the ghettos, Jewish children died from starvation and exposure as well as lack of adequate clothing and shelter. The German authorities were indifferent to this mass death because they considered most of the younger ghetto children to be unproductive and hence “useless eaters.” Because children were generally too young to be deployed at forced labor, German authorities generally selected them, along with the elderly, ill, and disabled, for the first deportations to killing centers, or as the first victims led to mass graves to be shot.

Upon arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau and other killing centers, the camp authorities sent the majority of children directly to the gas chambers. SS and police forces in German-occupied Poland and the occupied Soviet Union shot thousands of children at the edge of mass graves. Sometimes the selection of children to fill the first transports to the killing centers or to provide the first victims of shooting operations resulted from the agonizing and controversial decisions of Jewish council (Judenrat) chairmen. The decision by the Judenrat in Lodz in September 1942 to deport children to the Chelmno killing center was an example of the tragic choices made by adults when faced with German demands. Janusz Korczak, director of an orphanage in the Warsaw ghetto, however, refused to abandon the children under his care when they were selected for deportation. He accompanied them on the transport to the Treblinka killing center and into the gas chambers, sharing their fate.

Non-Jewish children from certain targeted groups were not spared. Examples include Romani (Gypsy) children killed in Auschwitz concentration camp; 5,000 to 7,000 children killed as victims of the “euthanasia” program; children murdered in reprisals, including most of the children of Lidice; and children in villages in the occupied Soviet Union who were killed with their parents.

The German authorities also incarcerated a number of children in concentration camps and transit camps. SS physicians and medical researchers used a number of children, including twins, in concentration camps for medical experiments that often resulted in the deaths of the children. Concentration camp authorities deployed adolescents, particularly Jewish adolescents, at forced labor in the concentration camps, where many died because of conditions. The German authorities held other children under appalling conditions in transit camps, such as the case of Anne Frank and her sister in Bergen-Belsen, and non-Jewish orphaned children whose parents the German military and police units had killed in so-called anti-partisan operations. Some of these orphans were held temporarily in the Lublin/Majdanek concentration camp and other detention camps.

In their "search to retrieve 'Aryan blood,'" SS race experts ordered hundreds of children in occupied Poland and the occupied Soviet Union to be kidnapped and transferred to the Reich to be adopted by racially suitable German families. Although the basis for these decisions was "race-scientific," often blond hair, blue eyes, or fair skin was sufficient to merit the "opportunity" to be "Germanized." On the other hand, female Poles and Soviet civilians who had been deported to Germany for forced labor and who had had sexual relations with a German man—often under duress—resulting in pregnancy were forced to have abortions or to bear their children under conditions that would ensure the infant's death, if the "race experts" determined that the child would have insufficient German blood.

In spite of their acute vulnerability, many children discovered ways to survive. Children smuggled food and medicines into the ghettos, after smuggling personal possessions to trade for them out of the ghettos. Children in youth movements later participated in underground resistance activities. Many children escaped with parents or other relatives—and sometimes on their own—to family camps run by Jewish partisans.

Between 1938 and 1940, the Kindertransport (Children's Transport) was the informal name of a rescue effort which brought thousands of refugee Jewish children (without their parents) to safety in Great Britain from Nazi Germany and German-occupied territories. Some non-Jews hid Jewish children and sometimes, as in the case of Anne Frank, hid other family members as well. In France, almost the entire Protestant population of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, as well as many Catholic priests, nuns, and lay Catholics, hid Jewish children in the town from 1942 to 1944. In Italy and Belgium, many children survived in hiding.

After the surrender of Nazi Germany, ending World War II, refugees and displaced persons searched throughout Europe for missing children. Thousands of orphaned children were in displaced persons camps. Many surviving Jewish children fled eastern Europe as part of the mass exodus (Brihah) to the western zones of occupied Germany, en route to the Yishuv (the Jewish settlement in Palestine). Through Youth Aliyah (Youth Immigration), thousands migrated to the Yishuv, and then to the state of Israel after its establishment in 1948.