

Biography of Elie Wiesel

Elie Wiesel was born in Sighet, Transylvania on September 30, 1928. He had two older sisters and a younger sister named Tzipora. The town of Sighet is located in present-day Romania, although historically the area has been claimed by the people of both Hungary and Romania. Elie (short for Eliezer) grew up speaking Yiddish at home, and Hungarian, Romanian, and German outside. He also learned classical Hebrew at school. Elie's mother's family was part of the Hasidic sect of Judaism, and Elie loved the mysticism and folk tales of the sect as a child. He devoted the early years of his life to religious studies although his father encouraged him to study modern Hebrew and secular subjects also.

During the early years of World War II, Sighet remained relatively unaffected by the war. Although Sighet became controlled by the Hungarians instead of the Romanians, the Jews in Sighet believed that they would be safe from the persecution that Jews in Germany and Poland were suffering. In 1944, however, Elie and all the other Jews in the town were deported to concentration camps in Poland. Elie and his father were taken to Auschwitz, where they became separated from Elie's mother and younger sister Tzipora. Elie, who was fifteen at the time, never saw them again.

During the following year, Elie was moved to the concentration camps at Buna, Gleiwitz, and Buchenwald. He managed to stay with his father the entire time until his father's death from dysentery, starvation, exposure, and exhaustion at Buchenwald. Finally, in April 1945, Elie was liberated from Buchenwald by the United States Third Army.

After the war, Elie learned that his mother and younger sister had died in the gas chambers, but that his two older sisters had survived. Elie lived in a French orphanage for a few years and in 1948 began to study literature, philosophy, and psychology at the Sorbonne in Paris. He supported himself as a choirmaster and

teacher of Hebrew, and he became a journalist, writing for the French newspaper L'Arche and the Israeli Yediot Ahronot. Elie had vowed never to write about his Holocaust experiences, but in 1955, after meeting the French Catholic novelist and Nobel laureate Francois Mauriac, he decided to write *And the World Remained Silent*, a 900-page volume. The book was originally written in Yiddish and published in Buenos Aires, Argentina. After two years, it appeared again in a compressed, 127-page French version called *La Nuit* (Night).

In 1956 Elie Wiesel was hit by a taxicab in New York and confined to a wheel chair for almost a year. He applied for American citizenship and after recovering from his injuries, continued to live in New York as a feature writer for a Yiddish-language newspaper called the *Jewish Daily Forward*. He wrote an additional 35 works in French dealing primarily with Judaism and the Holocaust. His novels include *L'Aube* (Dawn) and *Le Jour* (The Accident), which are semi-autobiographical works dealing with Holocaust survivors. In *La Ville de la Chance* (The Town Beyond the Wall), Wiesel imagines returning to his home town, which he does only after the novel is published.

Wiesel's other novels include *The Gates of the Forest*, *The Oath*, *The Testament*, and *The Fifth Son*. He has written plays, including *Zalmen, or the Madness of God* and *The Trial of God*, and his essays and short stories are collected in the volumes *Legends of Our Time*, *One Generation After*, and *A Jew Today*. In addition, he has written collections of Hasidic tales and Biblical stories, and the English translation of his memoirs was published in 1995 as *All Rivers Run to the Sea*. Wiesel continues to write in French, but his wife Marion, who he married in 1969 and who also survived the concentration camps, collaborates with him his books' English translations. Wiesel's books on the Holocaust have helped win him an international reputation.

Wiesel became politically involved after learning about the persecution of Soviet Jews in the USSR. He first traveled to the USSR in 1965 and described the

situation he observed in the volume *The Jews of Silence*. He has continued to plead on the behalf of oppressed peoples in the Soviet Union, South Africa, Vietnam, Biafra, and Bangladesh.

Elie Wiesel has lectured at colleges around the country and has been Andrew Mellon Professor of Humanities at Boston University since 1976. In 1978 he was appointed Chairman of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council by President Jimmy Carter, and in 1985 he was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal of Achievement by President Ronald Reagan. In 1986 Wiesel received the Nobel Prize for Peace. Currently, Elie Wiesel lives in New York City with his wife and son Elisha.