

On the threshold of the XXI century: Elie Wiesel

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Elie Wiesel was born in Rumania in 1928. While still a young boy he was deported with his family to the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz, and then Buchenwald, where his parents and little sister perished. Wiesel found a mission in the horrors he saw at the concentration camps: to be the world's memory. His books and conferences have this fundamental purpose, to keep humanity from forgetting the universal tragedy of the Holocaust in the hope it will not be repeated.

That testimony begins in his renowned book *Night*. "I will never forget that night", he writes, "the first night in the camp that transformed my life into one long night, cursed seven times and seven times sealed. I will never forget that smoke. I will never forget the little faces of children, whose bodies I saw transform into columns of smoke under an intense blue sky. I will never forget those flames that forever consumed my faith. I will never forget the nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the will to live. I will never forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul, turning my dreams to dust. I will never forget these things, even if condemned to live as long as God. Never."

But such bitterness, unavoidable for a direct witness of the most atrocious crimes against humanity, would yield in time to a resigned disposition, a new encounter with God, and a renewal of faith. The passage of time and the success of his mission would console and justify his suffering. In the words of Francois Mauriac in the prologue to *Night* "Sion has again risen from the mausoleums and crematoriums. The Jewish nation has been resurrected from its thousands of dead. It is through them that it lives again. We know not the value of a single drop of blood, a single tear. All is grace. If the Eternal is the Eternal, the last word for each of us belongs to Him." It was here that Wiesel found his reason for being, and he has remained true to it since.

Wiesel reminds us that this century has been one of violence and wars—more than seventy, two of them world wars, in the course of the last 95 years. Where have we failed? In our attitudes: the indifference and intolerance that characterize the modern human being. "It does not matter how the twenty-first century might be as long as it is never like the one now ending" implores Wiesel. Lived horrors cannot be forgotten. They must be the bulwark against the winds of fanaticism that blow at one time or another. For in spite of our extraordinary social, scientific, and medical advances in the course of the twentieth century, the world is constantly seduced by violence and hate.

That is why Wiesel calls upon us not to forget, to repudiate the easy route of indifference, which leads to invisibility. "The opposite of love is not hate", says Wiesel, "it is indifference." Our moral paradigm, regardless of our creed, must demand that we fight against injustice and oppression, discrimination and hate, as part of a proper life. It is not enough to evade these problems in our daily lives. We must actively fight against them. Tolerating their existence, even to a small degree, is opening a new window of opportunity to the Holocaust.

Wiesel lives according to such a paradigm. His life has been a constant battle against harassment, discrimination, tyranny and racism from a universal perspective. His fight ranges from the cause of the Israeli state and the defense of Soviet Jews to the protection of the Miskito in Nicaragua, the "disappeared" in Argentina, Cambodian refugees, the Kurds, the victims of Apartheid and the Serbo-Bosnian war. Hence the Nobel Committee, in awarding him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986 called Wiesel "one of the most important spiritual leaders and guides in an era where violence, repression and racism still characterize the world... a convincing representative for the vision of humanity and for the unlimited humanism needed for a just and lasting peace."

Wiesel's work spans the literary, academic, and activist worlds at different levels of the political, social and diplomatic spheres. His prolific oeuvre includes almost forty books, translated to various languages and honored with multiple awards. Among them *A Beggar in Jerusalem*, recipient of the Prix Livre, and *The Fifth Son*, awarded the Grand-Prix de Literature de la Ville de Paris. *Night (La Nuit)* has been Translated into more than twenty-five languages since its 1958 first edition. Wiesel has organized many international conferences including "Facing the Twenty-First Century: Threats and Promises", held in 1988 in Paris with nine Nobel laureates present. Other events include "Anatomy of Hate", a cycle of conferences held in Boston, Haifa, Oslo, Moscow, and New York between 1989 and 1992. Wiesel chairs the President's Commission on the Holocaust and is the founding President of the Council for the Holocaust Memorial in the United States. He is founding President of the Universal Academy of Cultures, based in Paris, and belongs to various intellectual and literary organizations like the Author's Guild and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In the academic field Wiesel has been distinguished professor of Judaic studies at City University of New York, visiting professor of humanities and social thought at Yale and, since 1976, professor of humanities, religion and philosophy at Boston University.

At a personal level, Wiesel is a humble man despite his greatness, modest despite his erudition, joyful despite his suffering. His task is difficult, not due to the effort of diffusing his message, but for reaching a large enough audience. Those of us who had the opportunity to hear him in Costa Rica, thanks to CIAPA and the Doris Z. Stone Chair, will never see the world with indifference again. Like Wiesel, we vow to never forget.

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