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Elie Wiesel

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Memory Is a Shield

A Conversation with Elie Wiesel

Elie Wiesel was 15 years old when he and his family were deported by the Nazis to Auschwitz. In his best-selling memoir, *Night*, Wiesel recounts his experiences during the Holocaust, including the death of his father at the Buchenwald concentration camp.

In 1978, President Jimmy Carter appointed Wiesel to lead the President's Commission on the Holocaust. From 1980 to 1986, Wiesel served as the founding chair of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, the governing body of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). Wiesel was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986. Today, he is the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Boston University. He has written more than 40 fiction and nonfiction books.

At the USHMM dedication ceremony on April 22, 1993, Wiesel spoke about his hope that the museum would become a forum for gathering people and fostering understanding:

Now, a museum is a place, I believe, that should bring people together, a place that should not set people apart. People who come from different horizons, who belong to different spheres, who speak different languages—they should feel united in memory. And, if possible at all, with some measure of grace, we should, in a way, be capable of reconciling ourselves with the dead. To bring the living and the dead together in a spirit of reconciliation is part of that vision.

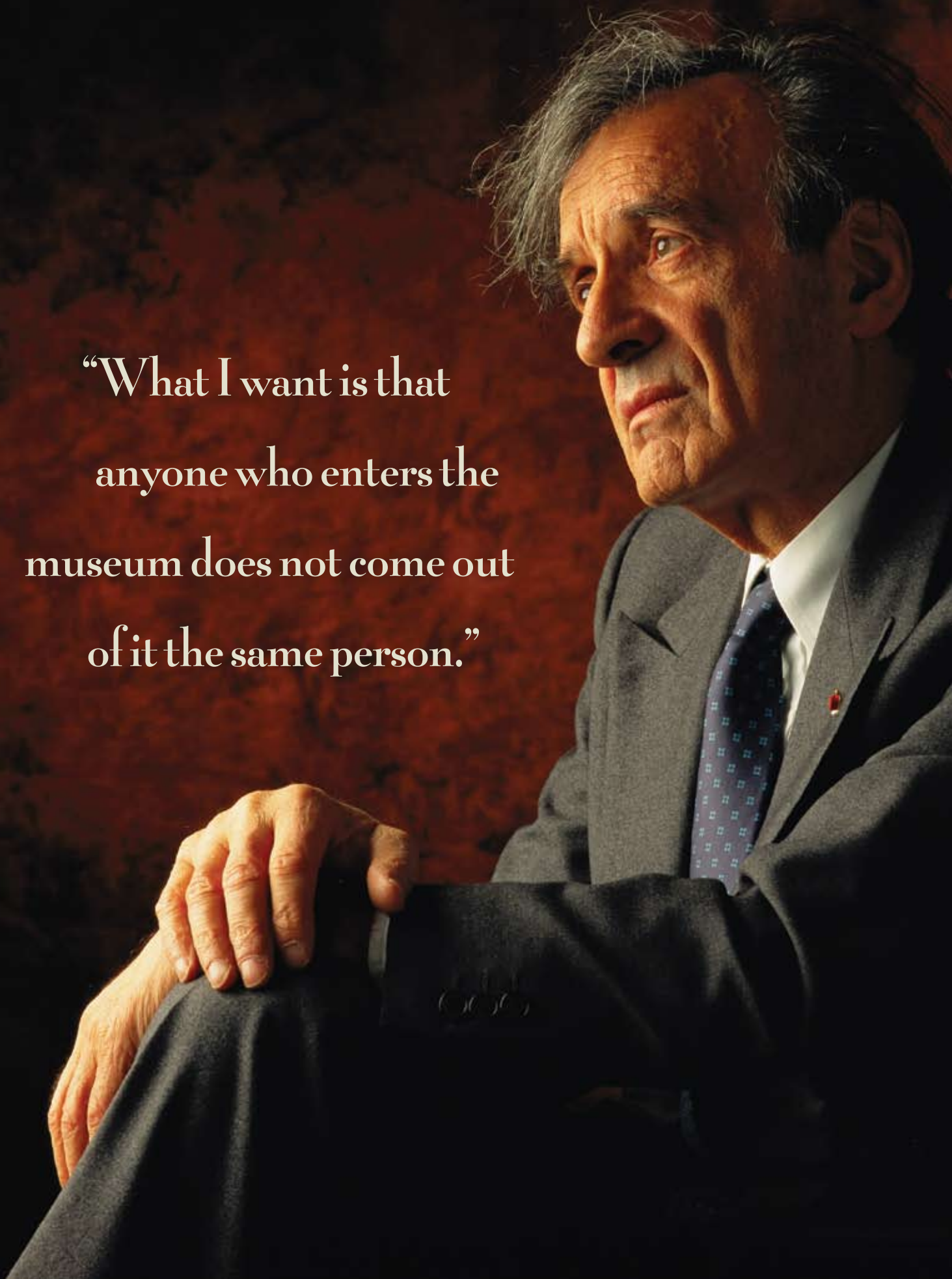
This past April, Daniel Greene, a historian at USHMM, interviewed Wiesel in his New York City office. Greene and Wiesel discussed contemporary antisemitism, memory and the role of museums in remembering tragedy.

Daniel Greene: I wonder if we might begin by discussing the resurgence of antisemitism today. In June 2004, you gave a speech at the United Nations seminar on antisemitism ["We Plead on Behalf of an Ancient People"]. I was fascinated to hear you say, "I never thought I would have to fight antisemitism. Naively, I was convinced that it died in Auschwitz." What did you mean?

Elie Wiesel: If one considers all the components that brought about Auschwitz, one must acknowledge that maybe antisemitism was not the only factor. But one thing is clear: Without it there would have been no Auschwitz. At the same time, after the war some of us believed, very naively, innocently, that there will be no more antisemitism, that antisemitism died in Auschwitz. And then we realized that, no, its victims perished in Auschwitz, but antisemitism is still alive and doing rather well.

Greene: Was there a moment of realization for you? It struck me that you described yourself as naive.

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Wiesel and Greene at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Wiesel: Well, I was naive. I was very naive. In 1945, I was convinced that that would be the last major injustice against human beings, because people will have learned. I think many of us believed that.

The United Nations was also a gesture, and a project, of naiveté. Read the charter of the United Nations. Those who created the United Nations were convinced—and I praise them for that—that thanks to the United Nations there will be no more wars, no more hunger, no more humiliation, no more violation of human rights. They were naive. So were we. And, of course, the world now realizes that our hope was displaced.

Greene: One of the most often repeated lessons of the Holocaust is “never again.” “Never again” can the world allow this to happen. “Never again” can people stand silently by in the face of such injustice. Considering the genocides that have taken place since World War II—Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur—is saying “Never again” as a lesson of the Holocaust naive?

Wiesel: It is naive, I guess, sure. It’s naive to say now because while we say “never again,” of course, injustices are being committed. But I believe that Auschwitz is a unique phenomenon—never before and never again, naturally. There’s a difference between the Holocaust and genocide. Genocides, yes, have occurred, or at least attempted genocides, but no Holocausts.

Greene: Should we stop saying “never again?”

Wiesel: Not at all. I think we should say it until it becomes reality.

Greene: When we spoke last year at the USHMM, a group of students passed us in an exhibition, and you told me that they needed to be “inoculated” against antisemitism. I also have heard you described hatred as a “cancer.” Tell me why you use this metaphor of disease to describe antisemitism and hatred.

Wiesel: Antisemitism is a product of hatred and a phenomenon defined by hatred; its intent is to create more hatred, of course. And it’s directed against Jews, only against Jews. But an antisemite is a racist, and a racist is a racist is a racist. I think he or she who hates hates everybody—slowly, gradually, going from one group to another, from one minority to another, from one victim to another.

Now, with this, I already gave you the definition of a disease, of an infectious disease: it goes from cell to cell, from limb to limb, from person to person, from group to group, from community to community, unless it is stopped. Cancer in itself is not contagious. It simply spreads inside the body of the person who suffers from it. But in this case, we may use it as a metaphor and say that it is an infectious or a contagious disease.

Greene: And its goal is to kill the host.

Wiesel: To kill, absolutely—first of all, to undermine the healthy zones of the human being and the morale of the person. That is its goal: that the person should be so demoralized that he or she would lose hope. And there again, the analogy with cancer is proper because any oncologist will tell you, and any cancer patient will tell you, that cancer is the only disease where the morale is

as important as the medication and the treatment, if not more important. So, of course, the antisemite would like to demoralize the Jew. The racist wants to demoralize the person the racist hates. And today there are so many people who hate so many people that antisemitism is no longer a matter solely of individual incidents. It's more than that. It's a threat.

Greene: Do you harbor anger or hatred from your personal history?

Wiesel: Anger, yes. Hatred, no. I was spared, really. Many of my friends carried hatred a long time after the war. But I came to France immediately after liberation. I didn't go through the DP [displaced persons] camps. I plunged into study, and that saved me, and it saved my sanity and it saved me from hatred.

I never believed in collective guilt. I've repeated it hundreds of times. I don't believe in collective guilt, therefore I don't believe in collective punishment. I don't believe in that—or in collective pardon, by the way, because everything's personal. The children of killers are not killers but children.

But, I am angry, very often. When am I angry? I'm angry when I witness injustice and I'm helpless. I'm angry now because of Darfur, for instance. I have been screaming and screaming and screaming about Darfur since the very beginning. My voice was among the first voices to be heard. I'm angry because we scream and scream and scream and nothing happens.

Greene: Do you despair about the increasing phenomenon of Holocaust denial?

Wiesel: I think it's serious, but I would not really allow despair to enter my psyche. Despair is never an option. Despair is never a solution. Despair is a question. Despair means give up, and we should never give up, nor should we ever give in.

Greene: For many Holocaust survivors, there has been a trajectory of memory, if you will. Immediately after the war, many chose not to look back, but today, as survivors are aging, many have chosen to speak more openly about their traumatic experiences during the Holocaust. Memory and remembering have informed so much of your writing from the beginning, though. I wonder, what does memory mean to you at this point in your life?

Wiesel: Well, I believe in memory. Look, first of all, I belong to a people who've celebrated memory since the

very beginning of its existence, 3,500 years ago. But also because I know what the opposite of memory is.

Forgetting can happen not only to one person but to the group. Forgetting means the end of civilization, the end of culture, the end of generosity, the end of compassion, the end of humanity. Therefore I celebrate memory, and I try to strengthen it. And I believe—and I still do, in spite of everything—that memory is a shield. If we remember what people can do to each other, then we can help those who tomorrow may be threatened by the same enemy to do something. In order to feel empathy and compassion for and with a person who is alone, suffering, in desperation, it's only because we remember others who were alone, suffering and in despair.

Greene: What role did memory play for you in your past, especially during the war?

Wiesel: During the war there was nothing to help me except my father. My father was with me, and therefore I wanted to live, because I knew if I died, he would die. Other people say they wanted to live to bear witness. I must be honest. I thought when I entered that world I will never come out alive. So, memory didn't help. On the contrary, we tried not to remember. While we were there, we never spoke about those who were not with us. We were afraid of breaking out in tears. We remembered only in our dreams. We dreamt about holidays with special meals and these kinds of things—our family being together in our dreams. We didn't talk about it. It was afterwards, after the war, when I realized memory was essential to all our efforts.

Greene: Do you think the way that you remember has changed over time?

Wiesel: The way? No. The scope maybe, broadened. But the way, no. Memory means what? Memory means introspection. You go deeper and deeper into yourself. And you find, of course, that memory is inclusive; it's not exclusive. But then it becomes selective. Then your task is to unlock all the doors and all the gates. And then the memory of course goes deeper, farther, in many directions, discovering more faces, listening to more words and more cries, collecting more tears.

Greene: What role do you think museums should play in memorializing the Holocaust?

Wiesel: Museums, as such, are important to me because—in the case of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial

Museum, which I was so involved with from the very beginning—it is accompanied by archives and education and learning and research. You go into a museum, to the Louvre in Paris, and you see the greatest artworks in the world. They are important to you only because then you go to a bookstore and you buy a book about Rembrandt or Goya. And at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, of course, you don't have to go that far within the building or within the realm of the museum and its library and archives to find all the information about what you see in the museum.

Greene: What should Holocaust museums strive for?

Wiesel: That when the person goes in and then leaves, that person is no longer the same. That was the ideal that I expressed from the very beginning of my involvement with the museum in Washington. I said that what I want from this museum is precisely that: that anyone who enters the museum does not come out of it the same person.

Greene: You mean that it can change not only people's knowledge but people's behavior?

Wiesel: Of course it can. Something enters that person's life, that person's awareness, that person's memory, that person's concerns. Then, when that person leaves, and he or she hears about Darfur, they respond to Darfur. Or, before that, if they hear about Rwanda, they respond to Rwanda. Or simply when there is a beggar in the street, with his palms open, and you say to yourself, of course I know that that person is going to take my money and go and buy drinks or drugs. Nevertheless, you cannot see a person with his outstretched palm and not put something in it. And that is because you have been in that museum.

Greene: We're living in a moment, as you know, when the generation of eyewitnesses to the Holocaust is diminishing. The survivors' generation is diminishing. Do you worry about a time when there are no longer any living eyewitnesses to the Holocaust?

Wiesel: Of course I worry. Generations come and generations go. We're already four generations away. There are already great-grandchildren of survivors. I believe that he or she who listens to a survivor becomes a witness. And I think the third, fourth generations are much more involved than the first one was. So therefore

there are some good things to say about what is happening today. I see it around me in the letters I receive from children. I get so many letters from children from high schools around the world, especially from America or France—in the hundreds each month.

Greene: So you don't have a great concern about this memory being kept?

Wiesel: Concern, yes, but fear, no. I don't think that this memory can disappear. What I'm afraid of really is not forgetting. I'm afraid of trivialization or banalization of that memory, of the cheapening of that memory. That is something that I have focused on, and repeated, for years and years and years.

Greene: Does one diminish the tragedy of the Holocaust by discussing it alongside other tragedies?

Wiesel: No, no, no. It depends how it's being done. Look, trivialization or banalization is more the matter than the meaning. It's how you present it. Even universalization can be presented in a cheap way. But you can take the most sacred thing in the world and treat it cheaply. What I plead for is such a feeling of commitment that whatever you say should be pure, literally pure, almost chemically pure.

Greene: So, you're comfortable that future generations will take this history and not make kitsch of it going forward or not lessen the memory?

Wiesel: Look, I have faith. It's an act of faith. I have faith because this is the most documented event—not only tragedy but event—in history. There are so many books on the subject—what we need is teachers. I place much





of the burden on the teachers' shoulders. We have to prepare our teachers. I remember when learning about the Holocaust became compulsory in the curriculum. I was for it, naturally, and fought for it. But I did have a concern, because suppose a teacher teaches this subject with the same boring tone as other material. Anyone can make education into a boring endeavor—we must teach the teachers. Special programs should be established for teachers, before they become teachers, and then my faith will be justified.

Greene: Do you feel that people look to you as a symbol of memory?

Wiesel: No, I'm not a symbol. I'm a human being. Symbols are not human beings. I'm a human being, except I try to do something with my life.

Greene: Certainly they look to you as a moral voice and as a moral leader.

Wiesel: No, because I have no ulterior motive, really. There is no ulterior motive for me in my work. Even on a very superficial level, I already have a Nobel Peace Prize [laughs]. I have it all. So, whatever we have received, good or bad, we must do something with it that is real. There's so much that I haven't done yet. **M**

This discussion took place as part of USHMM's *Voices on Antisemitism*, a bimonthly podcast series on the resurgence of antisemitism more than 60 years after the Holocaust. The series is one component of USHMM's continuing effort to raise public awareness about threats of prejudice and hatred. Daniel Greene, the series curator, brings together voices from across the political, religious and geographic spectrum to discuss how antisemitism influences global politics, interfaith relations and personal histories. In addition to Elie Wiesel, the series includes reflections from former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, former Dutch

parliamentarian Ayaan Hirsi Ali, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Holocaust survivor Gerda Weissmann Klein, Princeton professor Cornell West and many others.

Wiesel also was featured in USHMM's podcast series *Voices on Genocide Prevention* (www.ushmm.org/conscience), a weekly interview program covering genocide and current crimes against humanity around the world.

To listen to an audio version of this and other programs in *Voices on Antisemitism*, visit www.ushmm.org/podcast/antisemitism. The series is produced by USHMM and Melissa Robbins.