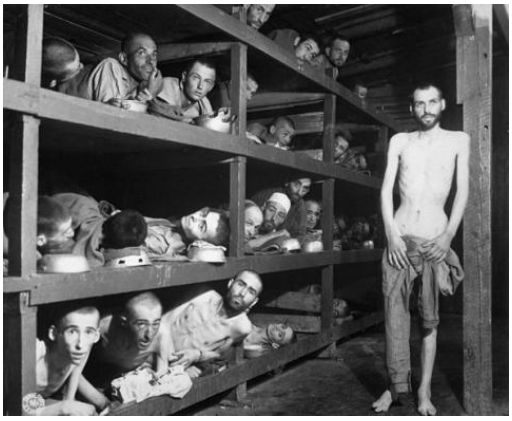
Elie Wiesel - Holocaust Child Survivor



The National Archives describes this picture, which includes a young Elie Wiesel: "These are slave laborers in the Buchenwald concentration camp near Jena; many had died from malnutrition when U.S. troops of the 80th Division entered the camp. The very ill man lying at the back on the lower bunk is Max Hamburger, who had TBC and severe malnutrition. He recovered and became a psychiatrist in the Netherlands. Second row, seventh from left is Elie Wiesel. Photograph taken 5 days after rescue." National Archives, ARC Identifier 535561.

Let us remember,
let us remember
the heroes of Warsaw,
the martyrs of Treblinka,
the children of Auschwitz.
They fought alone,
they suffered alone,
they lived alone,
but they did not die alone,
for something in all of us
died with them.

Elie Wiesel

Elie Wiesel was an adolescent when he was sent to Auschwitz with his family. This image depicts how he appeared just-before that calamitous event.

We can compare parts of Elie's life-at Auschwitz with that of Schmuel, the "Boy in the Striped Pajamas."

Like Schmuel:

- Elie, arriving at Auschwitz, was separated from part of his family.
- He lived with his father at Auschwitz.
- He lost his father during the Holocaust.

Unlike Schmuel:

- Elie - who was 15 years old in May of 1944, when his family was sent to Auschwitz from their home near Romania's Carpathian Mountains - was old-enough to work, with his father, as a forced laborer.
- Elie survived the war.

In January of 1945, as the Soviet Army neared Auschwitz, Nazi officials began their evacuation of the infamous camp. Elie and his father, Shlomo Wiesel, were transferred from Auschwitz to Buchenwald, a Nazi concentration camp in Germany.

In a weakened condition, the elder Wiesel died shortly after the Buchenwald march.

Elie was rescued, during April of 1945, by American soldiers who liberated the Buchenwald inmates. One of those rescuing soldiers took a now-famous picture of Buchenwald prisoners. Elie was one of them.

After the war, Elie and his two older sisters were reunited in a French orphanage. Since the day their family was separated at Auschwitz, they had never-again seen their mother, Sarah Feig Wiesel, or their little sister, seven-year-old Tzipora (pictured in this photo).

Fifty-four years to the day after Elie's liberation from Buchenwald, he gave a speech at the White House. A guest of President Clinton, Wiesel commented on the events of the millennium that was just ending and expressed hope for the millennium to come.

He also issued a warning, reflected in the title of his speech: "The Perils of Indifference."

In the decades since his deliverance from the camps of Nazi Germany, Wiesel has written books, urged people to prevent genocide, won the Nobel Peace Prize ... all the while reminding us never to forget how capable mankind is of inflicting cruelty on others.

Wiesel remembers, for example, the burning pits he saw his first night at Auschwitz. One pit was for adults; the other was for children. He talks about that memory in his book, *Night*:

Not far from us, flames were leaping up from a ditch, gigantic flames. They were burning something. A lorry drew up at the pit and delivered its load - little children. Babies!

Around us, everyone was weeping. Someone began to recite the Kaddish. I do not know if it has ever happened before, in the long history of the Jews, that people have ever recited the prayer for the dead for themselves .... Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp .... Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent sky.

The boy who saw the pits at Auschwitz had become the man who addressed the White-House gathering. This is what he said, in his "Perils of Indifference" speech:

Fifty-four years ago to the day, a young Jewish boy from a small town in the Carpathian Mountains woke up, not far from Goethe's beloved Weimar, in a place of eternal infamy called Buchenwald. He was finally free, but there was no joy in his heart. He thought there never would be again.

Liberated a day earlier by American soldiers, he remembers their rage at what they saw. And even if he lives to be a very old man, he will always be grateful to them for that rage, and also for their compassion. Though he did not understand their language, their eyes told him what he needed to know—that they, too, would remember, and bear witness.

. . . We are on the threshold of a new century, a new millennium. What will the legacy of this vanishing century be? How will it be remembered in the new millennium? Surely it will be judged, and judged severely, in both moral and metaphysical terms. These failures have cast a dark shadow over humanity: two World Wars, countless civil wars, the senseless chain of assassinations—Gandhi, the Kennedys, Martin Luther King, Sadat, Rabin—bloodbaths in Cambodia and Nigeria, India and Pakistan, Ireland and Rwanda, Eritrea and Ethiopia, Sarajevo and Kosovo; the inhumanity in the gulag and the tragedy of Hiroshima. And, on a different level, of course, Auschwitz and Treblinka.

So much violence, so much indifference.

What is indifference? Etymologically, the word means "no difference." A strange and unnatural state in which the lines blur between light and darkness, dusk and dawn, crime and punishment, cruelty and compassion, good and evil.

What are its courses and inescapable consequences? Is it a philosophy? Is there a philosophy of indifference conceivable? Can one possibly view indifference as a virtue? Is it necessary at times to practice it simply to keep one's sanity, live normally, enjoy a fine meal and a glass of wine, as the world around us experiences harrowing upheavals?

Of course, indifference can be tempting—more than that, seductive. It is so much easier to look away from victims. It is so much easier to avoid such rude interruptions to our work, our dreams, our hopes. It is, after all, awkward, troublesome, to be involved in another person's pain and despair. Yet, for the person who is indifferent, his or her neighbor are of no consequence. And, therefore, their lives are meaningless. Their hidden or even visible anguish is of no interest.

Indifference reduces the other to an abstraction.

Over there, behind the black gates of Auschwitz, the most tragic of all prisoners were the "Muselmanner," as they were called. Wrapped in their torn blankets, they would sit or lie on the ground, staring vacantly into space, unaware of who or where they were, strangers to their surroundings. They no longer felt pain, hunger, thirst. They feared nothing. They felt nothing. They were dead and did not know it.

Rooted in our tradition, some of us felt that to be abandoned by humanity then was not the ultimate. We felt that to be abandoned by God was worse than to be punished by Him. Better an unjust God than an indifferent one. For us to be ignored by God was a harsher punishment than to be a victim of His anger. Man can live far from God—not outside God. God is wherever we are. Even in suffering? Even in suffering.

In a way, to be indifferent to that suffering is what makes the human being inhuman. Indifference, after all, is more dangerous than anger and hatred. Anger can at times be creative. One writes a great poem, a great symphony, have done something special for the sake of humanity because one is angry at the injustice that one witnesses. But indifference is never creative. Even hatred at times may elicit a response. You fight it. You denounce it. You disarm it. Indifference elicits no response. Indifference is not a response.

Indifference is not a beginning, it is an end. And, therefore, indifference is always the friend of the enemy, for it benefits the aggressor—never his victim, whose pain is magnified when he or she feels forgotten. The political prisoner in his cell, the hungry children, the homeless refugees—not to respond to their plight, not to relieve their solitude by offering them a spark of hope is to exile them from human memory. And in denying their humanity we betray our own.

Indifference, then, is not only a sin, it is a punishment. And this is one of the most important lessons of this outgoing century's wide-ranging experiments in good and evil.

In the place that I come from, society was composed of three simple categories: the killers, the victims, and the bystanders. During the darkest of times, inside the ghettoes and death camps—and I'm glad that Mrs. Clinton mentioned that we are now commemorating that event, that period, that we are now in the Days of Remembrance—but then, we felt abandoned, forgotten. All of us did.

And our only miserable consolation was that we believed that Auschwitz and Treblinka were closely guarded secrets; that the leaders of the free world did not know what was going on behind those black gates and barbed wire; that they had no knowledge of the war against the Jews that Hitler's armies and their accomplices waged as part of the war against the Allies.

If they knew, we thought, surely those leaders would have moved heaven and earth to intervene. They would have spoken out with great outrage and conviction. They would have bombed the railways leading to Birkenau, just the railways, just once.

And now we knew, we learned, we discovered that the Pentagon knew, the State Department knew. And the illustrious occupant of the White House then, who was a great leader—and I say it with some anguish and pain, because, today is exactly 54 years marking his death—Franklin Delano Roosevelt died on April the 12th, 1945, so he is very much present to me and to us.

No doubt, he was a great leader. He mobilized the American people and the world, going into battle, bringing hundreds and thousands of valiant and brave soldiers in America to fight fascism, to fight dictatorship, to fight Hitler. And so many of the young people fell in battle. And, nevertheless, his image in Jewish history—I must say it—his image in Jewish history is flawed.

The depressing tale of the St. Louis is a case in point. Sixty years ago, its human cargo—maybe 1,000 Jews—was turned back to Nazi Germany. And that happened after the Kristallnacht, after the first state sponsored pogrom, with hundreds of Jewish shops destroyed, synagogues burned, thousands of people put in concentration camps. And that ship, which was already on the shores of the United States, was sent back.

I don't understand. Roosevelt was a good man, with a heart. He understood those who needed help. Why didn't he allow these refugees to disembark? A thousand people—in America, a great country, the greatest democracy, the most generous of all new nations in modern history. What happened? I don't understand. Why the indifference, on the highest level, to the suffering of the victims?

But then, there were human beings who were sensitive to our tragedy. Those non-Jews, those Christians, that we called the "Righteous Gentiles," whose selfless acts of heroism saved the honor of their faith. Why were they so few? Why was there a greater effort to save SS murderers after the war than to save their victims during the war?

Why did some of America's largest corporations continue to do business with Hitler's Germany until 1942? It has been suggested, and it was documented, that the Wehrmacht could not have conducted its invasion of France without oil obtained from American sources. How is one to explain their indifference?

And yet, my friends, good things have also happened in this traumatic century: the defeat of Nazism, the collapse of communism, the rebirth of Israel on its ancestral soil, the demise of apartheid, Israel's peace treaty with Egypt, the peace accord in Ireland. And let us remember the meeting, filled with drama and emotion, between Rabin and Arafat that you, Mr. President, convened in this very place. I was here and I will never forget it.

And then, of course, the joint decision of the United States and NATO to intervene in Kosovo and save those victims, those refugees, those who were uprooted by a man whom I believe that because of his crimes, should be charged with crimes against humanity. But this time, the world was not silent. This time, we do respond. This time, we intervene.

Does it mean that we have learned from the past? Does it mean that society has changed? Has the human being become less indifferent and more human? Have we really learned from our experiences? Are we less insensitive to the plight of victims of ethnic cleansing and other forms of injustices in places near and far? Is today's justified intervention in Kosovo, led by you, Mr. President, a lasting warning that never again will the deportation, the terrorization of children and their parents be allowed anywhere in the world? Will it discourage other dictators in other lands to do the same?

What about the children? Oh, we see them on television, we read about them in the papers, and we do so with a broken heart. Their fate is always the most tragic, inevitably. When adults wage war, children perish. We see their faces, their eyes. Do we hear their pleas? Do we feel their pain, their agony? Every minute one of them dies of disease, violence, famine. Some of them—so many of

them—could be saved.

And so, once again, I think of the young Jewish boy from the Carpathian Mountains. He has accompanied the old man I have become throughout these years of quest and struggle. And together we walk towards the new millennium, carried by profound fear and extraordinary hope.

If the “Boy in the Striped Pajamas" - and the many other children who perished during the Holocaust years - had been given the chance to live, what could they have accomplished with their lives? What contributions could they have made to the betterment of mankind?

We will never know, but there is one thing we can do. We can avoid “the perils of indifference” by refusing to be indifferent to the cruelties and prejudices of today’s world.

The Clinton Presidential Library has made Elie Wiesel's April 12, 1999 speech available online. You can watch it here, via YouTube. His speech begins at 14:29 into the clip.

Credits:

Image of Buchenwald online, via the U.S. National Archives.

Image of Elie Wiesel and Elie's little 7-year-old sister, Tzipora Wiesel, online courtesy Elie Wiesel.

Text of Elie Wiesel's speech, "The Perils of Indifference," online via numerous websites.

Video of Elie Wiesel's speech, online courtesy the Clinton Presidential Library via YouTube embedding.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Elie-Wiesel-Holocaust-Child-Survivor

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Media Stream

Tzipora Wiesel
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Elie Wiesel at 15
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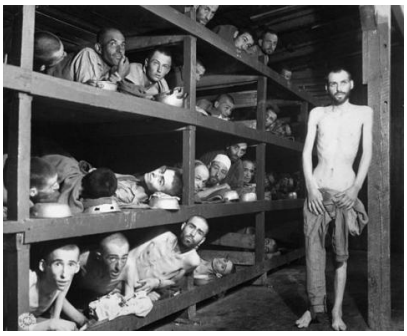

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