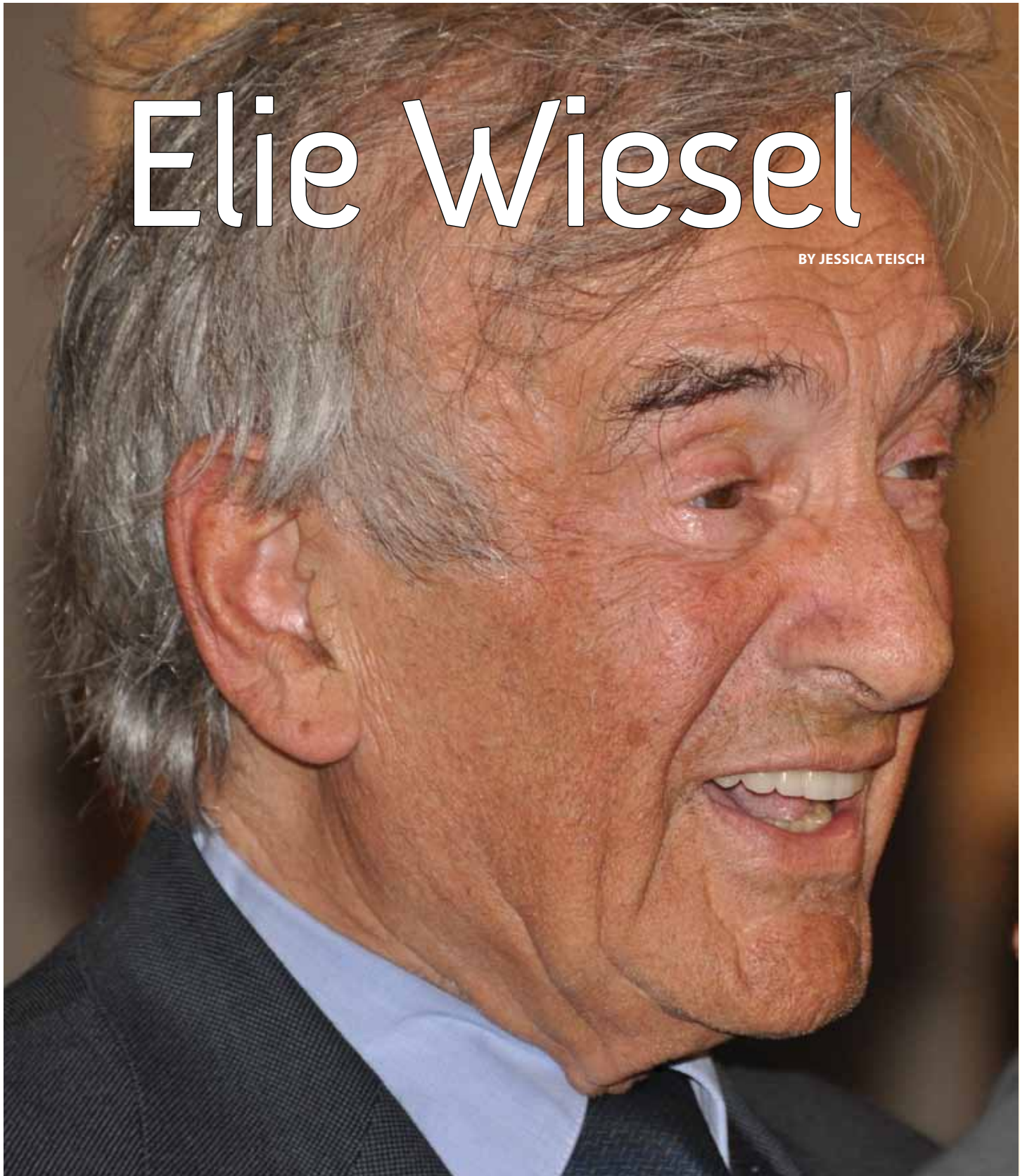


Elie Wiesel

BY JESSICA TEISCH



IN ELIE WIESEL'S NEW NOVEL, *A Mad Desire to Dance* (see review on page 43), a European expatriate living in New York, the child of two Holocaust survivors, suffers from the burden of the war and his parents' secrets. He soon turns to a psychoanalyst—with unpredictable results.

One of our strongest moral compasses today, Elie (Eliezer) Wiesel—Nobel Peace Prize recipient; Jewish

writer, professor, and activist; and Holocaust survivor—has dedicated his life's work to understanding—and never allowing the world to forget—the atrocities of the 20th century, in particular the Nazi death camps. "To remain silent and indifferent is the greatest sin of all," he has said, succinctly capturing our collective moral responsibility to fight hatred and genocide. The Nobel Prize Commit-

tee summed up Wiesel's commitment when he received the prize in 1986: "Elie Wiesel has emerged as one of the most important spiritual leaders and guides in an age when violence, repression and racism continue to characterize the world. Wiesel is a messenger to mankind; his message is one of peace, atonement and human dignity."

Wiesel, born in 1928, grew up in a close-knit Jewish community in a village in Romania. During World War II, he and his family were deported to Auschwitz, where his mother and younger sister perished. Wiesel and his father, forced to work under extremely harsh conditions, were sent to Buchenwald; his father died just before the war's end. In 1945, after the Allied troops liberated the camp, Wiesel found asylum in France, entering a French orphanage and reuniting with his two older sisters, who had also survived. Wiesel then studied philosophy at the Sorbonne and started to write for French and Jewish newspapers. In the mid-1950s, Wiesel moved to New York and became an American citizen.

Only at the prompting of François Mauriac, the 1952 Nobel Laureate in Literature, did Wiesel write about the death camps. The autobiographical novel *La Nuit* (*Night*) is still considered his classic work and the foundation of the daunting philosophical issues about God, faith, life, death, the despair and hope of humanity, and the struggle against evil with which Wiesel has wrestled. Drawing on his early theological training, Wiesel has written more than 40 semiautobiographical novels, nonfiction books, essays, memoirs, and plays. Because he writes to testify against war crimes everywhere, he covers a wide range of topics—from biblical and Hasidic portraits, the traditions of Jewish life and the loss of the Old World, and Israel's Six Day War to the plights of Soviet and Ethiopian Jews, the Armenian genocide, Darfur, and other humanitarian crises. His wife Marion translates his award-winning books from French into English. In 1978, he was appointed chair of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council. He received the Congressional Medal of Freedom in 1985 and the Nobel Peace Prize a year later.

THE NIGHT TRILOGY

THE NIGHT TRILOGY IS POWERFUL in its exploration of several themes: the meaning and value of surviving the near annihilation of a race; the loss of religious faith in the face of unspeakable tragedy; the limits of the human spirit; and the effect of the Holocaust on the modern Jewish people and nation.

Night, considered Wiesel's masterpiece, is a devastating autobiographical novel written in a short, simple, fragmented narrative. Since it appeared, *Night* has sold approximately 10 million copies. By contrast, *Dawn* and *Day* (previously titled *The Accident*) are meant to be read more as fiction. As Wiesel writes in the introduction to the trilogy, "Though the first is a testimony, the other two serve only as commentaries. However, they are all written in the first

person. In *Night* it is the 'I' who speaks; in the other two, it is the 'I' who listens and questions." The titles of each book mark Wiesel's transition from darkness to light, according to the Jewish tradition of counting the start of a new day at nightfall.

Night (1958)

◆ OPRAH BOOK CLUB SELECTION

THE STORY: At the Nazi concentration camps of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, Eliezer, a young Orthodox Jew, experiences daily inhumanities as he and his father face unspeakable evil. Wiesel records his memories of his friends' and family's deaths, the loss of his innocence and faith in humanity, and his guilt at having survived the Holocaust. Above all, Eliezer battles with God. "Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live," he writes. "Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust." Although painful reading, *Night*, written in the first person, addresses major philosophical questions about humankind's capacity for evil, the legacy of the Holocaust, and the survival of the Jewish people. Most importantly, it bears witness to those who died.

"His slim volume of terrifying power is the documentary of a boy—himself—who survived the 'Night' that destroyed his parents and baby sister, but lost his God. ... As the brutality of the [Nazis] debased everything in life, the forces of good and evil fought for supremacy in the boy." GERTRUDE SAMUELS, NEW YORK

TIMES, 1/13/60

Dawn (1961)

THE STORY: Elisha, a young Jewish man (the narrator of *Dawn*), survived the Holocaust and is now an underground fighter in British-controlled Palestine. Ordered, the next

NOBEL PEACE PRIZE LECTURE, 1986

"There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest. The Talmud tells us that by saving a single human being, man can save the world. We may be powerless to open all the jails and free all the prisoners, but by declaring our solidarity with one prisoner, we indict all jailers. None of us is in a position to eliminate war, but it is our obligation to denounce it and expose it in all its hideousness. War leaves no victors, only victims. ... Mankind needs to remember more than ever. Mankind needs peace more than ever, for our entire planet, threatened by nuclear war, is in danger of total destruction. A destruction only man can provoke, only man can prevent. Mankind must remember that peace is not God's gift to his creatures, it is our gift to each other."

dawn, to execute a British officer who has been taken hostage in retaliation for the death of a Jewish fighter, Elisha finds himself on the other side of the gun. The night before the execution, he struggles with the ghosts of the past and with his present mandate. Like *Night*, *Dawn* meditates on God and death—but it goes a step further to address philosophical issues about the boundaries of victim and victimizer and disproportionate responses to violence.

“From the first of these ninety pages to the last there is an inevitability about the story that a reader hopes will not come to pass. . . . [Dawn is] a book that hits home at the unsentimental heart, a strong morality tale written from the inside.” HERBERT MITGANG, NEW YORK TIMES, 7/16/61

Day (formerly *The Accident*) (1962)

THE STORY: In New York City, a taxicab hits a Holocaust survivor, now a successful journalist grappling with an

existentialist crisis of self-loathing and despair. As he recuperates from his narrow escape from death once again, he reflects on his tragic experiences during the Holocaust. Consumed by thoughts and memories, he turns to his difficult relationships, past and present, to clarify his central question: Can he really reinvent his life and maintain the will to live without holding on to the memories of the past? Like *Night* and *Dawn*, *Day* wrestles with life and death—but rather than implicating God, the battle wages within the protagonist himself.

“Mr. Wiesel is suffering with the angels and the reader is convinced . . . that man’s conscience was defeated at Auschwitz. But in *The Accident* the horrors of the past are superimposed in a New York setting.” HERBERT MITGANG, NEW YORK TIMES 4/15/62 ■

SELECTED WORKS

ALTHOUGH WIESEL RARELY ADDRESSES his own Holocaust experience directly in his fiction, most of his novels (and nonfiction) spring from that experience. Indeed, the Holocaust’s atrocities inform his very identity—and his evolution as an activist, scholar, and writer. The following works, many thematically similar in that they deal with the philosophical dilemmas of life, death, faith, and God that emerged from his death camp experience, follow Wiesel’s intellectual development and inspired moral leadership over time as he grasps the twentieth century’s horrors and vows they shall never again be repeated.

Fiction

THE TOWN BEYOND THE WALL (1964)

A young Holocaust survivor returns to the town where he and his family were deported to the death camps. But instead of witnessing indifference by the non-Jews who stood by and watched their Jewish neighbors disappear, he discovers the meaning of suffering and friendship.

THE GATES OF THE FOREST (1966)

A young Holocaust survivor unsuccessfully attempts to forget the past and live in the present. But

as he reaffirms his need for love, he grapples with how to live in a world that God has forsaken.

A BEGGAR IN JERUSALEM (1970)

◆ **PRIX MEDICIS.** In this tale that merges mysticism and reality, a Holocaust survivor visits Jerusalem during the Six Day War and, at the Western Wall, listens to the tales of beggars and madmen. Soon, he starts to face his memories and understand suffering and loss.

THE OATH (1973)

In the 1920s, local Jews are accused of ritual murder when a Christian boy disappears from their Eastern European town. The only survivor of the ensuing pogrom promises to remain silent about the town’s last days of terror—until, 50 years later, he must save the life of a man who wishes to die.

THE FIFTH SON (1985)

In this tale of good and evil, the son of a Holocaust survivor strives to understand his father’s haunted silence and secrets. When he discovers his father’s role in the murder of an SS officer and the truth about this official, he leaves New York for Germany in a quest for revenge.

THE TIME OF THE UPROOTED (2005)

A Czech Jew survived World War II when a Christian cabaret singer passed him off as a Christian boy. As he visits a dying woman who may

be this savior, he recounts his failed life—and his permanent feeling of rootlessness. (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2005)

Nonfiction

LEGENDS OF OUR TIME (1968)

This collection of stories and essays explores Wiesel’s philosophy, relationships, and life. They discuss Jewish resistance during the Holocaust, the death of his father, his childhood village, and a visit to Russia to examine the repressed Russian Jewry, among other topics.

ALL RIVERS RUN TO THE SEA Memoirs, Vol. I, 1928–1969 (1995)

Wiesel chronicles the time from his happy, pious childhood in a Carpathian village to his trials at Auschwitz and Buchenwald and his years of spiritual struggle. In his life in postwar France, he recovered his religious faith and eventually became a writer and a spokesman for humanity.

AND THE SEA IS NEVER FULL Memoirs, Vol. II, 1969–(1999)

In this sequel, Wiesel recounts his battles to “bear witness” to the world’s vast inhumanities, from his defense of dissidents in the Soviet Union to decrying genocide in Cambodia and Bosnia and apartheid in South Africa. He also candidly recalls his friendships with some of the world’s leaders. ■