

Author Background for *Night*



Reference

Elie Wiesel was born in 1928 in Sighet, a border town of about 120,000 people. It is a town with a long and complicated history. After World War I, it was a part of Hungary, then handed over to Romania, and then taken back by Hungary at the beginning of World War II. During the war, the town became part of Hitler's Third Reich. After the war, it was under Russian rule for a time and then turned over to Romania.

Wiesel grew up in the Jewish section of Sighet. His father, Shlomo, was a shopkeeper who was deeply involved in the Jewish community. He wanted his only son (Elie Wiesel had three sisters) to be as practical as he himself was. The boy's mother, a well-educated woman, encouraged him to be pious. She would have liked for her son to become a rabbi. As a boy, Wiesel felt closer to his mother than his father. He immersed himself in religious studies and dreamed of becoming a scholar.

Then in March of 1944, the Germans entered Hungary and the boy's life changed forever. Within a month, the Nazis were deporting thousands of Jews from Transylvania, including about fifteen thousand from Sighet and eighteen thousand from neighboring villages. Wiesel, at the age of fifteen, was among those shipped to Auschwitz along with his parents and sisters. There his mother and youngest sister were immediately sent to the gas chambers. His two older sisters managed to survive, but he did not know their fate until after the war.

Wiesel and his father clung to one another from their arrival at Auschwitz to their entry into Buchenwald. There his father developed dysentery and died just three months before liberation.

After the war, Wiesel was sent to France along with four hundred other child refugees. At the border, the children were asked if they wanted to become French citizens. Wiesel, unable to understand the question, did not respond. As a result, he was stateless until 1963, when he became a U.S. citizen. Over the next few years, Wiesel studied French, continued his Jewish studies, and took classes in philosophy and literature. He supported himself by tutoring in Yiddish, Hebrew, and the Bible.

For Wiesel, the French language offered a "new beginning, a new possibility, a new world." Although he eventually became a reporter who wrote articles in Hebrew, Yiddish, and English (which he learned in 1952 on a trip to India), all of his books except *Night* have been written in French. And it was a Frenchman who first encouraged him to tell his story. On one assignment in 1954, he met the French Catholic writer François Mauriac who not only urged the young reporter to write about his experiences but also helped him find a publisher. Two years later, Wiesel completed the first version of *Night*. After it was condensed and translated from Yiddish into French, Mauriac wrote the foreword.

The publication of *Night* marked the beginning of Wiesel's literary career. Since then, he has written more than thirty-five books. After their marriage in 1968, his wife, Marion, served as his English translator. The Wiesels live in New York City with their son, Elisha. Today Wiesel is not only a writer but also a teacher. He is Andrew W. Mellon Professor in

the Humanities and University Professor at Boston University. He is also an observant Jew who continues to be a witness to history. He has spoken out repeatedly against injustices wherever they occur in the world. Over the years, he has received many awards for his work, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the United States Congressional Gold Medal, the French Legion of Honor, and, in 1986, the Nobel Peace Prize. In presenting the award, Egil Aarvik, the chair of the Nobel Committee, said the following of Wiesel:

His mission is not to gain the world's sympathy for the victims or the survivors. His aim is to awaken our conscience. Our indifference to evil makes us partners in the crime. This is the reason for his attack on indifference and his insistence on measures aimed at preventing a new Holocaust. We know that the unimaginable has happened. What are we doing now to prevent its happening again?

Through his books Elie Wiesel has given us not only an eyewitness account of what happened, but also an analysis of the evil powers which lay behind the events. His main concern is the question of what measures we can take to prevent a recurrence of these events.

By the 1990s, Wiesel was expressing his concern by traveling to war-torn countries to call attention to violations of basic human rights.

