

SIMON WIESENTHAL

3. FORGIVENESS WITHOUT CONDONING

Simon Wiesenthal (1908–) is a death camp survivor and one of the great “Nazi hunters” who gathered evidence for the Nuremberg war crimes trials and helped track down a number of notorious war criminals, including Adolf Eichmann. Born in Buczacz, Galicia, he studied architecture and had just graduated from the Polytechnic Institute in Lvov when Poland was invaded by the Nazis. Wiesenthal was imprisoned in various ghettos and camps for nearly five years. He and his wife lost eighty-nine family members to the Nazis. After the war he joined the American Commission for War Crimes and later founded the Jewish Historical Documentation Center, now in Vienna, which has brought over 1,100 Nazi criminals to justice. He is the author of several books, including *The Murderers Among Us* and *Justice, Not Vengeance*. He lives in Austria.

While interned in a concentration camp in Lemberg, Poland (today Lvov, Ukraine), Simon Wiesenthal and other prisoners were marched into town for a manual labor project at a military hospital, the former Lemberg High School where Wiesenthal once studied. He is pulled aside from his work detail by a nurse, who takes him to a private sickroom and leaves him alone with a German man in a bed. The following passage from *The Sunflower* tells what happened next and highlights the thorny distinction between forgiveness and condoning—as well as the vital link between forgiveness and freedom. Without forgiveness, the injuries of evil become self-perpetuating.

'The Devil's Sentimentality' (G. K. Chesterton)

"*Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner.*"

—French proverb

"To understand is to forgive."

—English version

"Never criticize anyone until you've walked a mile in his moccasins."

—Variant

"If the wolf understands the sheep, he'll die of hunger."

—Henri Michaux

"One knows the kind of human being who has fallen in love with the motto, *tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*. It is weak. . . . It is the philosophy of disappointment that wraps itself so humanely in pity and looks sweet."

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*

"Marcel Proust twice filled out a questionnaire that included the following item: 'For what faults do you have the greatest indulgence?' . . . At age seventeen his response was: 'For those I understand.' "

—Roger Shattuck, *Forbidden Knowledge*

"He's ravished a few maidens,
He drank the blood of many poor children.
But if you knew him you'd see
The Werewolf is like you and me."

—New England folksinger Banjo Dan

"Not knowing any better excuses nothing, even though it may explain much."

—Roger Shattuck

"To understand all is to see that nothing could be otherwise than as it is."

—philosopher Isaiah Berlin

The Sunflower

As my eyes became accustomed to the semidarkness I could see that the white bandages were mottled with yellow stains. Perhaps ointment, or was it pus? The bandaged head was spectral.

I sat on the bed spellbound. I could not take my eyes off the stricken man and the gray-yellow stains on the bandages seemed to me to be moving, taking new shapes before my eyes.

"I have not much longer to live," whispered the sick man in a barely audible voice. "I know the end is near." . . .

I was unmoved by his words. The way I had been forced to exist in the prison camps had destroyed in me any feeling or fear about death.

Sickness, suffering, and doom were the constant companions of us Jews. Such things no longer frightened us. . . .

"I know," muttered the sick man, "that at this moment thousands of men are dying. Death is everywhere. It is neither infrequent nor extraordinary. I am resigned to dying soon, but before that I want to talk about an experience which is torturing me. Otherwise I cannot die in peace."

He was breathing heavily. I had the feeling that he was staring at me through his head bandage. Perhaps he could see through the yellow stains, although they were nowhere near his eyes. I could not look at him.

"I heard from one of the sisters that there were Jewish prisoners working in the courtyard. Previously she had brought me a letter from my mother . . . She read it out to me and then went away. I have been here for three months. Then I came to a decision. After thinking it over for a long time . . .

"When the sister came back I asked her to help me. I wanted her to fetch a Jewish prisoner to me, but I warned she must be careful, that nobody must see her. The nurse, who had no idea why I had made this request, didn't reply and went away. I gave up all hope of her taking such a risk for my sake. But when she came in a little while ago she bent over me and whispered that there was a Jew outside. She said it as if complying with the last wish of a dying man. She knows how it is with me. I am in a death chamber, that I know. They let the hopeless cases die alone. Perhaps they don't want the others to be upset."

Who was this man to whom I was listening? What was he trying to say to me? Was he a Jew who had camouflaged himself as a German and now, on his deathbed, wanted to look at a Jew again? According to gossip in the Ghetto and later in the camp there were Jews in Germany who were "Aryan" in appearance and had enlisted in the army with false papers. They had even got into the S.S. That was their method of survival. Was this man such a Jew? Or perhaps a half-Jew, son of a mixed marriage? . . .

Time seemed to stand still as I listened to the croaking of the dying man.

"My name is Karl . . . I joined the S.S. as a volunteer. Of course—when you hear the word S.S. . . ."

He stopped. His throat seemed to be dry and he tried hard to swallow a lump in it.

Now I knew he couldn't be a Jew or half-Jew who had hidden inside a German uniform. How could I have imagined such a thing? But in those days anything was possible.

"I must tell you something dreadful . . . Something inhuman. It happened a year ago . . . has a year already gone by?" These last words he spoke almost to himself.

"I have not much longer to live," whispered the sick man in a barely audible voice. "I know the end is near."

"My name is Karl . . . I joined the S.S. as a volunteer. Of course—when you hear the word S.S. . . ."

"Yes, it is a year," he continued, "a year since the crime I committed. I have to talk to someone about it, perhaps that will help."

Then his hand grasped mine. His fingers clutched mine tightly, as though he sensed I was trying unconsciously to withdraw my hand when I heard the word "crime." Whence had he derived the strength? Or was it that I was so weak that I could not take my hand away?

"I must tell you of this horrible deed—tell you because . . . you are a Jew."

The man, now aged twenty-one, tells Wiesenthal the story of his life and how he, a former Catholic, had joined the S.S. and committed acts of murder that rival the worst of the Nazi atrocities. He is now filled with regret and self-pity.

Once again he groped for my hand, but I had withdrawn it sometime before and was sitting on it, out of his reach. I did not want to be touched by the hand of death. He sought my pity, but had he any right to pity? Did a man of his kind deserve anybody's pity? Did he think he would find pity if he pitied himself . . .

"Look," he said, "those Jews died quickly, they did not suffer as I do—though they were not as guilty as I am."

At this I stood up to go—I, the last Jew in his life. But he held me fast with his white, bloodless hand. Whence could a man drained of blood derive such strength?

"I was taken from one hospital to another, they never sent me home. . . . I am well aware of my condition and all the time I have been lying here I have never stopped thinking of the horrible deed at Dnepropetrovsk. If only I had not survived that shell—but I can't die yet, although I have often longed to die. . . . So I lie here waiting for death. The pains in my body are terrible, but worse still is my conscience. It never ceases to remind me of the burning house and the family that jumped from the window."

He lapsed into silence, seeking for words. He wants something from me, I thought, for I could not imagine that he had brought me here merely as an audience.

"When I was still a boy I believed with my mind and soul in God and in the commandments of the Church. Then everything was easier. If I still had that faith I am sure death would not be so hard."

"I cannot die . . . without coming clean. This must be my confession. But what sort of confession is this? A letter without an answer . . ."

* * *

He sat up and put his hands together as if to pray.

"I want to die in peace, and so I need . . ."

I saw that he could not get the words past his lips. But I was in no mood to help him. I kept silent.

"I know that what I have told you is terrible. In the long nights while I have been waiting for death, time and time again I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him. Only I didn't know whether there were any Jews left . . ."

"I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace."

Now, there was an uncanny silence in the room. I looked through the window. The front of the buildings opposite was flooded with sunshine. The sun was high in the heavens. There was only a small triangular shadow in the courtyard.

What a contrast between the glorious sunshine outside and the shadow of this bestial age here in the death chamber! Here lay a man in bed who wished to die in peace—but he could not, because the memory of his terrible crime gave him no rest.

"I must tell you of this horrible deed—tell you because . . . you are a Jew."

"I cannot die . . . without coming clean. This must be my confession. But what sort of confession is this? A letter without an answer . . ."

"I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace."

And by him sat a man also doomed to die—but who did not want to die because he yearned to see the end of all the horror that blighted the world.

Two men who had never known each other had been brought together for a few hours by Fate. One asks the other for help. But the other was himself helpless and able to do nothing for him.

I stood up and looked in his direction, at his folded hands. Between them there seemed to rest a sunflower.

At last I made up my mind and without a word I left the room.

* * *

The work in which I am engaged brings me into contact with many known murderers. I hunt them out, I hear witnesses, I give evidence in courts—and I see how murderers behave when accused.

At the trial of Nazis in Stuttgart only one of the accused showed remorse. He actually confessed to deeds of which there were not witnesses. All the others bitterly disputed the truth. Many of them regretted only one thing—that witnesses had survived to tell the truth.

I have often tried to imagine how that young S.S. man would have behaved if he had been put on trial twenty-five years later.

Would he have spoken in court as he did to me before he died in the Dean's room? Would he openly admit what he had confessed to me on his deathbed?

Perhaps the picture that I had formed of him in my mind was kinder than the reality. I never saw him in the camp with a whip in his hand, I saw him only on his deathbed—a man who wanted absolution for his crime.

Was he thus an exception?

I could find no answer to that question. How could I know if he would have committed further crimes had he survived?

I have a fairly detailed knowledge of the life story of many Nazi murderers. Few of them were born murderers. They had mostly been peasants, manual laborers, clerks, or officials, such as one meets in normal everyday life. In their youth they had received religious instruction; and none had a previous criminal record. Yet they became murderers, expert murderers by conviction. It was as if they had taken down their S.S. uniforms from the wardrobe and replaced them with their consciences as well as with their civilian clothes.

I couldn't possibly know their reactions to their first crimes, but I do know that every one of them had subsequently murdered on a wholesale scale.

When I recall the insolent replies and the mocking grins of many of these accused, it is difficult for me to believe that my repentant young S.S. man would also have behaved in that way . . . Yet ought I to have forgiven him? Today the world demands that we forgive and forget the heinous crimes committed against us. It urges that we draw a line, and close the account as if nothing had ever happened.

We who suffered in those dreadful days, we who cannot obliterate the hell we endured, are forever being advised to keep silent.

Well, I kept silent when a young Nazi, on his deathbed, begged me to be his confessor. And later when I met his mother I again kept silent rather than shatter her illusions about her dead son's inherent goodness. And how many bystanders kept silent as they watched Jewish men, women, and children being led to the slaughterhouses of Europe?

At last I made up my mind and without a word I left the room.

Was he thus an exception? I could find no answer to that question. How could I know if he would have committed further crimes had he survived?

There are many kinds of silence. Indeed it can be more eloquent than words, and it can be interpreted in many ways.

Was my silence at the bedside of the dying Nazi right or wrong? This is a profound moral question that challenges the conscience of the reader of this episode, just as much as it once challenged my heart and my mind. There are those who can appreciate my dilemma, and so endorse my attitude, and there are others who will be ready to condemn me for refusing to ease the last moment of a repentant murderer.

The crux of the matter is, of course, the question of forgiveness. Forgetting is something that time alone takes care of, but forgiveness is an act of volition, and only the sufferer is qualified to make the decision.

You, who have just read this sad and tragic episode in my life, can mentally change places with me and ask yourself the crucial question, "What would I have done?"

From Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969, 1997). Copyright © 1997 by Simon Wiesenthal.

What could he have done?
What should he have done?
What would you have done?

Some Responses

Jean Améry, writer and death camp survivor: "Dear Mr. Wiesenthal, you will probably be disappointed by my comments. Your problem is not a problem for me. . . . Politically, I do not want to hear anything of forgiveness! I believe that you, who have devoted your life to investigating the political realm of the Nazi crimes, will understand my position. Why does it matter to me? For one simple reason: what you and I went through must not happen again, never, nowhere. Therefore—and I have said and written this over and over—I refuse any reconciliation with the criminals, and with those who only by accident who did not happen to commit atrocities, and finally, all those who helped prepare the unspeakable acts with their words."

Alan L. Berger, professor and scholar in Holocaust Studies: "Granting the murderer forgiveness would have been the final victory of Nazism. Had he spoken to Karl, Simon would have sealed his own guilt."

Robert McAfee Brown, Presbyterian theologian and chaplain of Stanford: "I think I would have urged the young man to address his plea directly to God, and throw himself on the possibility of Divine Mercy, something I am not permitted to adjudicate one way or the other."

Harry James Cargas, author and Roman Catholic: "If God chooses to forgive Karl, that's God's affair. Simon Wiesenthal could not. I cannot. For me, Karl dies unforgiven. God have mercy on my soul."

The Dalai Lama, spiritual leader of Buddhism around the world: "I believe one should forgive the person or persons who have committed atrocities against oneself and mankind."

Edward H. Flannery, Roman Catholic priest: "Simon refused simply by walking away from Karl. But apparently not so simply from himself."

Mary Gordon, novelist and Roman Catholic: "If the dying Nazi soldier wished to atone, he should have insisted that he be placed in the camps, so that he could die in the miserable circumstances of those in whose name he is asking forgiveness."

Mark Goulden, journalist and publisher: "And reflecting on these things, I would have silently left the deathbed having made quite certain there was now one less Nazi in the world."

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—Mark Goulden

Arthur Hertzberg, *rabbi and professor*: “Wiesenthal said nothing, and he was right. The crimes in which this S.S. man had taken part are beyond forgiveness by man, and even by God, for God Himself is among the accused. . . . But the God who had allowed the Holocaust did not, and does not, have the standing to forgive the monsters who had carried out the murders.”

Theodore M. Hesburgh, *President of the University of Notre Dame*: “My whole instinct is to forgive. Perhaps that is because I am a Catholic priest. In a sense, I am in the forgiving business.”

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *philosopher and theologian*: “No one can forgive crimes against other people. It is therefore preposterous to assume that anybody alive can extend forgiveness for the suffering of any one of the six million people who perished. According to Jewish tradition, even God Himself can only forgive sins committed against Himself, not against man.”

Cardinal Frank König, *Roman Catholic Archbishop of Vienna*: “The question of whether there is a limit to forgiveness has been emphatically answered by Christ in the negative.”

Primo Levi, *author and death camp survivor*: “When an act of violence or an offense has been committed, it is forever irreparable . . . I think I can affirm that you did well, in this situation, to refuse your pardon to the dying man.”

Herbert Marcuse, *philosopher and social observer*: “I think I would have acted the way you did, that is to say, refused the request of the dying S.S. man. . . . One cannot, and should not, go around happily killing and torturing and then, when the moment has come, simply ask, and receive, forgiveness. In my view, this perpetuates the crime.”

Martin E. Marty, *historian and Lutheran*: “If I forgive in the face of true repentance and new resolve, I am free. Wiesenthal successfully works on the basis of his uncertainty; it motivates him. But I can let my being haunted preoccupy me so that I do not notice ‘the other.’ Forgiving and being forgiven are experiences that allow me to be free for a new day. I cannot say that I would be more free or more creative than is Wiesenthal. That is because I cannot say what he should have done but only what I would like to think I would want to do.”

Dennis Prager, *rabbi and radio talk show host*: “When the first edition of *The Sunflower* was published, I was intrigued by the fact that all the Jewish respondents thought Simon Wiesenthal was right in not forgiving the repentant Nazi mass murderer and that the Christians thought he was wrong. . . . God Himself does not forgive a person who has sinned against a human being unless that human being has been forgiven by his victim. Therefore, people can never forgive murder, since the one person who can forgive is gone, forever.”

Matthieu Ricard, *Buddhist monk and interpreter for the Dalai Lama*: “Wiesenthal acted with remarkable dignity. A Buddhist, however, could have said to the dying soldier, ‘The best thing you can do now is pray that in your future lives you will be able to atone for your crimes by doing as much good as you have done evil.’ Knowing that the soldier is destined to undergo much suffering in his future lives, a Buddhist would feel compassion not just for the soldier and his victims, but for all sentient beings who, until they become free from hatred and ignorance, will perpetrate endless cycles of suffering for themselves.”

Joshua Rubenstein, *director of Amnesty International*: “I find myself indifferent to the wounded Nazi’s plea for forgiveness. . . . The Nazi had committed mass murder. Simon was merciful enough with him. For Simon to grant him forgiveness, as well, would have been a betrayal of his and his family’s suffering, and all the suffering around

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him. This was the first and probably last time, after all, that he confronted an utterly helpless Nazi and could have smothered him.”

Albert Speer, Hitler's architect and Minister of Armaments: “Afflicted by unspeakable suffering, horrified by the torments of millions of human beings, I acknowledged responsibility for these crimes at the Nuremberg Trial. With the verdict of guilty, the court punished only my legal guilt. Beyond that remains the moral involvement. Even after twenty years of imprisonment in Spandau, I can never forgive myself for recklessly and unscrupulously supporting a regime that carried out the systematic murder of Jews and other groups of people. My moral guilt is not subject to the statute of limitations, it cannot be erased in my lifetime.”

“Should you forgive, Simon Wiesenthal, even if I cannot forgive myself? . . . My trauma led me to you. You helped me a great deal—as you helped the S.S. man when you did not withdraw your hand or reproach him. Every human being has his burden to bear. No one can remove it for another, but for me, ever since that day, it has become much lighter. It is God's grace that has touched me through you.”

André Stein, psychotherapist to survivors: “I am dismayed about the eagerness of many to forgive child-killers, torturers, rapists by transferring the blame onto a murderous ideology and propaganda, and, in Karl's case, onto his youthful vulnerability. The call for forgiveness reminds me of the words Arthur, Simon's comrade, uttered in the camp when Simon asked his opinion: ‘. . . there will be people who will never forgive you for not forgiving him . . . But anyhow nobody who has not had our experience will be able to understand fully.’ ”

Nechama Tec, professor of sociology: “Right after I read *The Sunflower* I felt that were I in Wiesenthal's place I would not have absolved the dying S.S. man of his heinous crimes. I knew, almost intuitively, that for me forgiveness was not an option.”

Desmond Tutu, Anglican Archbishop of Capetown: “I have been overwhelmed by the depth of depravity and evil that has been exposed by the amnesty process of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission appointed to deal with the gross human rights violations that happened in our apartheid past. . . .

“There is also another side—the story of the victims, the survivors who were made to suffer so grievously, yet despite this are ready to forgive. This magnanimity, this nobility of spirit, is quite breathtakingly unbelievable. I have often felt I should say, ‘Let us take off our shoes,’ because at this moment we were standing on holy ground.”

“. . . It is clear that if we look only to retributive justice, then we could just as well close up shop. Forgiveness is not some nebulous thing. It is practical politics. Without forgiveness there is no future.”

Harry Wu, Chinese dissident and pro-democracy activist: “In regard to Mr. Wiesenthal's story and in comparing his story to my own, I must first state that it is inconceivable for me to believe that anyone in the People's Republic of China would ask for such forgiveness as the Nazi soldier did to the Jewish prisoner. In China, there was no understanding that what the Communists did to their own people was in any way morally wrong.”

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Forgiveness Frees

"The struggle must begin within one's own soul—all else will follow upon this."

—Martin Buber

"I want to forgive. I want to embrace. I don't want more suffering. And if the sufferings of children go to swell the sum of sufferings which was necessary to pay for truth, then I protest that the truth is not worth such a price. I don't want the mother to embrace the oppressor who threw her son to the dogs! She dare not forgive him! Let her forgive him for herself, if she will, let her forgive the torturer for the immeasurable suffering of her mother's heart. But the sufferings of her tortured child she has no right to forgive; she dare not forgive the torturer, even if the child were to forgive him! And if that is so, if they dare not forgive, what becomes of harmony? Is there in the whole world a being who would have the right to forgive and could forgive?"

—Ivan, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoevsky

"And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on God's. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself."

—Corrie ten Boom,
death camp survivor

"O Lord,

Remember not only the men and women of goodwill,
But also those of ill will.

But do not only remember the suffering they have inflicted on us,

Remember the fruits we bought thanks to this suffering,

Our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility,

The courage, the generosity,

The greatness of heart which has grown out of all this.

And when they come to judgment

Let all the fruits that we have borne

Be their forgiveness. AMEN AMEN AMEN"

—a poem written on a scrap of paper
found near the body of a dead child when Allied troops
liberated the Ravensbrück concentration camp, 1945

"A wise man once said, 'Memory is the secret of redemption.' And so it must be for Armenians. To paraphrase a famous passage from Armenian literature: We remember in order to live. Death not comprehended is mortality; death perceived is immortality."

—Vigen Guroian, "How Shall We Remember," 1985

"Rwanda's revolutionaries had become what the writer V. S. Naipaul calls postcolonial 'mimic-men,' who reproduce the abuses against which they rebelled."

—Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You*

"For values to change, there has to be an acknowledgment of guilt, a genuine desire for atonement, a willingness to make amends, the humility to accept your mistakes and seek forgiveness. But everyone says it's not us, it's our brothers, our sisters. At the end of the day, no one has done wrong. In a situation where there has been such gross injustice and nobody is willing to seek forgiveness, how can values change?"

—Rwandan Minister of Justice Gerald Gahima

Questions

1. What do you think Wiesenthal could or should have done?
2. What does it say of Wiesenthal that he could not shake these questions all those years later?
3. What is the link between forgiveness and personal and political freedom? How does this link relate to the earlier Bauman reading on victims and martyrs?