

Sunflower by Simon Wiesenthal

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Simon Wiesenthal was born in 1908 in Buczacz, Galicia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A recent graduate of the Czech Technical University in Prague and the Polytechnic Institute in Lvov, he had just begun to work in an architectural office in Lvov when Poland was invaded by the Nazis. From 1941 to 1945, Mr. Wiesenthal was a prisoner in several ghettos and concentration camps, including Buchenwald and Mauthausen. By the war's end, he and his wife had lost eighty-nine family members to the Nazi murderers. After the war, Mr. Wiesenthal joined the American Commission for War Crimes and was later transferred to the O.S.S. at Linz. In 1946, with thirty other concentration camp survivors, he founded the Jewish Historical Documentation Center, which functioned in the American Zone until 1954, and reopened in Vienna in 1961. Its task is to identify and locate Nazi war criminals. The center's work was instrumental in bringing over 1,100 Nazi criminals to justice. Mr. Wiesenthal has been honored with numerous awards for his work, including "Commander of the Order of Orange" in the Netherlands, "Commendatore della Repubblica" in Italy, a gold medal for humanitarian work by the United States Congress, the Jerusalem Medal in Israel, and sixteen honorary doctorates. The Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, with branches in New York, Miami, Toronto, and abroad, is named in his honor. Among his best-known books are *The Murderers Among Us*; *Justice, Not Vengeance*; *Sails of Hope*; and *Every Day Remembrance Day*, all of which have been translated into many languages.

EXCERPT, SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

In *The Sunflower*, Simon Wiesenthal writes of an incident that occurred during the time he was a concentration camp inmate. One day, he and his work detail were sent to clean medical waste at a converted army hospital for wounded German soldiers. On the way, "Our column suddenly came to a halt at a crossroads. I could see nothing that might be holding us up but I noticed on the left of the street there was a military cemetery . . . and on each grave there was planted a sunflower . . . I stared spellbound . . . Suddenly I envied the dead soldiers. Each had a sunflower to connect him with the living world, and butterflies to visit his grave. For me there would be no sunflower. I would be buried in a mass grave, where corpses would be piled on top of me. No sunflower would ever bring light into my darkness, and no butterflies would dance above my dreadful tomb."

Simon's work group arrived at the hospital. As they worked, a nurse came up to Simon and asked, "Are you a Jew?" When he answered "Yes," she took him into the hospital building, to the bedside of Karl, a 21-year old dying Nazi soldier. Karl's head was completely covered in bandages, with openings only for his mouth, nose and ears. Karl wanted to tell Simon his story. He began, "I know 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 . . . I must tell you of this horrible deed - tell you because . . . you are a Jew."

Karl talked about his childhood and described himself as a happy, dreamy child. His father was a Social Democrat and his mother brought Karl up as a Catholic. Karl joined the Hitler Youth and later volunteered for the SS. That was the last time his father spoke to him. Karl went on to tell Simon about being sent to fight in Russia, and about coming, one day, to a village.

"In a large square we got out and looked around us. On the other side of the square there was a

group of people under close guard . . . The word went through our group like wildfire: 'They're Jews' . . . An order was given and we marched toward the huddled mass of Jews. There were a hundred and fifty of them or perhaps two hundred, including many children who stared at us with anxious eyes. A few were quietly crying. There were infants in their mothers' arms, but hardly any young men; mostly women and graybeards . . . A truck arrived with cans of petrol which we unloaded and took into a house . . . Then we began to drive the Jews into the house . . . Then another truck came up full of more Jews and they too were crammed into the house with the others. Then the door was locked and a machine gun was posted opposite . . . When we were told that everything was ready, we went back a few yards, and then received the command to remove safety pins from hand grenades and throw them through the windows of the house . . . Behind the windows of the second floor, I saw a man with a small child in his arms. His clothes were alight. By his side stood a woman, doubtless the mother of the child. With his free hand the man covered the child's eyes . . . then he jumped into the street. Seconds later the mother followed. Then from the other windows fell burning bodies . . . We shot . . . Oh God! I don't know how many tried to jump out of the windows but that one family I shall never forget - least of all the child."

After that event, Karl's division moved on to the Crimea. One day, in the middle of a fight, Karl climbed out of his trench and he recalled, "in that moment I saw the burning family, the father with the child and behind them the mother - and they came to meet me. 'No, I cannot shoot at them a second time.' The thought flashed through my mind . . . And then a shell exploded by my side. I lost consciousness . . . It was a miracle that I was still alive - even now I am as good as dead . . . So I lie here waiting for death. The pains in my body are terrible, but worse still is my conscience . . . I cannot die . . . without coming clean . . . In the last hours of my life you are with me. I do not know who you are. I only know that you are a Jew and that is enough . . . 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."

Simon left the room without a word. When his group returned to the hospital the next day, the same nurse came to Simon and told him that Karl had died.

Today, I sometimes think of the young SS man. Every time I enter a hospital, every time I see a nurse, or a man with his head bandaged, I recall him. Or when I see a sunflower....

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

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 SS 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....

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.

(Simon Wiesenthal. *The Sunflower. On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*. New York: Schocken Books, 1997. pp. 95-97.)

SYMPOSIUM

The following are excerpts from six of the 46 responses published in the Symposium of the 1997 revised U.S. edition:

Sven Alkalaj (Bosnian Ambassador to the U.S.A.)

"I explicitly and emphatically reject the idea of collective guilt, but I do believe that there is such a thing as national or state responsibility for genocide, for mass murder, and for drumming up an artificial hatred among the ordinary people, by various means, to make that genocide easier to carry out. It cannot be stressed enough that the punishment of the guilty and some measure of justice are absolutely necessary for forgiveness or reconciliation even to be considered. If genocide goes unpunished, it will set a precedent for tomorrow's genocide. Without justice, there can never be reconciliation and real peace.... After knowing what we knew about the Holocaust, the genocide of Bosnia and Herzegovina should shame us all. Of course that shame would not bring back life to the dead of Auschwitz or Treblinka, Sarajevo or Srebrenica, but that shame does make it incumbent upon us to hold accountable those who arrogantly and immorally valued their lives so much more over those of their fellow men and women."

The Dalai Lama

"I believe one should forgive the person or persons who have committed atrocities against oneself and mankind. But this does not necessarily mean one should forget about the atrocities committed. In fact, one should be aware and remember these experiences so that efforts can be made to check the reoccurrence of such atrocities in the future.

I find such an attitude especially helpful in dealing with the Chinese government's stand on the Tibetan people's struggle to regain freedom. Since China's invasion of Tibet in 1949-50, more than 1.2 million Tibetans, one-fifth of the country's population, have lost their lives due to massacre, execution, starvation, and suicide. Yet for more than four decades we have struggled to keep our cause alive and preserve our Buddhist culture of non-violence and compassion.

It would be easy to become angry at these tragic events and atrocities. Labelling the Chinese as our enemies, we could self-righteously condemn them for their brutality and dismiss them as unworthy of further thought or consideration. But that is not the Buddhist way."

Eva Fleischner (Professor Emerita of Religion at Montclair State University)

"I am struck not only by the agony of the dying man, but by his obliviousness to the suffering, the inhuman condition, of Simon and his fellow Jews. The mere fact of having summoned Simon to his room exposes the Jew to punishment, if not death. Yet Karl insists on seeing "a Jew" – any Jew – in the hope of being able to die in peace. His own suffering completely blinds him to the suffering of the Jews – not of the Jews in whose murder he participated and who continue to haunt him – but of those still alive in the camps and ghettos, also of Simon.

While this is understandable, humanly, given his deathbed agony, I am left with the question: Could Karl have done something to ameliorate their fate, or the fate of at least a few Jews, by

speaking to his fellow SS instead of summoning a poor, helpless, doomed Jew to his bedside? Would such an act perhaps have constituted atonement?"

Harold S. Kushner (Rabbi Laureate of Temple Israel in Natick, Massachusetts)

"If we feel that our past behavior was wrong, being forgiven means erasing that message, liberating ourselves from the idea that we are still who we used to be, and freeing ourselves to become a new person.

To be forgiven is a miracle. It comes from God, and it comes when God chooses to grant it, not when we order it up.... God's forgiveness is something that happens inside us, not inside God, freeing us from the shame of the past so that we can be different people, choosing and acting differently in the future.

That was the mistake of the Nazi soldier in *The Sunflower*. His plea for forgiveness was addressed to someone who lacked the power (let alone the right) to grant it. If he wanted to die feeling forgiven, he should have said to himself: "What I did was terribly wrong and I am ashamed of myself for having done it. I reject that part of myself that could have done such a thing. I don't want to be a person who would do such a thing, I am still alive, though I don't know for how much longer, but the Nazi who killed that child is dead. He no longer lives inside me. I renounce him." And if God chose to grant him the miracle of forgiveness, he would feel that he had expelled the Nazi within him as our body expels a foreign object, something that is not us, and he would die a different person than he had lived."

Lawrence L. Langer (Professor Emeritus of English at Simmons College in Boston)

"The mass murder of European Jewry is an unforgivable crime. By his own description, the SS man provides the details: Jewish men, women, and children are herded into a building, hand grenades are thrown in, setting it on fire; the SS men then shoot Jews – including little children – trying to escape the flames through exits or by jumping from windows. Can one repent such a monstrous deed? I do not see how. The real test of the SS man's spiritual integrity came at the moment he received the order to shoot. At that instant he was still a morally free man (assuming he had not taken part in earlier crimes). By agreeing to shoot instead of deferring to a higher authority and disobeying the order, he failed the test and permanently cut himself off from the possibility of forgiveness. This may not be true for other crimes – but the mass murder of European Jewry is not an ordinary crime....

Words like "wrong" and "misdeed" grew up in a universe of discourse oblivious to places like Auschwitz and Majdanek, where gas chambers and crematoria flourished. The long list of exonerating terms that appear in *The Sunflower* – atonement and expiation, repentance and absolution, guilt and forgiveness – to me reflects a valiant but misguided and ultimately doomed effort to reclaim for a familiar vocabulary an event that has burst the frame of conventional judgmental language....

The vital question to ask about this text is not whether Wiesenthal should have forgiven the SS man. It is rather why the SS man, as a young boy, against his father's wishes, joined enthusiastically in the activities of the Hitler Youth; why, again presumably against his father's wishes, he volunteered for the SS (as free a choice as a man could make at the time); why he then pursued a career in that murderous league of killers without protest, including the episode he tells

of on his deathbed; and most important of all, why he had to wait until he was dying to feel the time had come for repentance and forgiveness. On these issues, the SS man is deftly silent."

Manès Sperber (Austrian-French novelist, essayist, and psychologist)

"If the young SS man was guilty, yet he differed from the organizers of the extermination camps and the accomplices of genocide. By his obedience to his criminal leaders he augmented the guilt which he had incurred by putting himself politically and unconditionally at their disposal. There is no question of that, but it is none less true that in the end he brought the accusation against himself. As an accused person he is condemned in our eyes and rejected, but as accuser he placed himself among the victims.

Nevertheless Simon Wiesenthal was quite right in refusing to pardon him, at any rate not in the name of the martyrs, who neither then nor now had entrusted anybody with such a mission. But if that young man had lived and remained true to the convictions which tortured the last hours of his life, and maybe even transfigured him – if he were still among us would Wiesenthal condemn him? I think not. And I feel that I too could not condemn that SS man today."

In the latest edition of the book, there are 53 responses given from various people, up from 10 in the original edition. Among respondents to the question are theologians, political leaders, writers, jurists, psychiatrists, human rights activists, Holocaust survivors, former Nazis and victims of attempted **genocides** in Bosnia, Cambodia, China and Tibet. The responses vary. Some respondents write that forgiveness ought to be awarded for the victims' sake; others respond that it should be withheld. Others do not say definitively whether or not forgiveness was the right thing.

List of responses

Name	Nationality	Profession	Religion	Response
Sven Alkalaj	Bosnian	Diplomat and politician	Judaism	Uncertain
Jean Améry	Austrian	Essayist; Holocaust survivor	Judaism	Uncertain
Smail Balić	Bosnian-Austrian	Historian	Islam	Uncertain
Moshe Bejski	Israeli; Polish-born	Judge; President of Yad Vashem's Righteous Among the Nations Commission ; Holocaust survivor	Judaism	Do not forgive

Name	Nationality	Profession	Religion	Response
Alan L. Berger		Professor of Religion and Holocaust studies; Author		Do not forgive
Robert McAfee Brown	American	Minister; Activist; Theologian; Professor of Theology and Ethics; Author	Christianity (Presbyterian)	Uncertain
Harry James Cargas	American	Professor; Holocaust scholar; Author	Christianity (Roman Catholic)	Do not forgive
Robert Coles	American	Author; Psychiatrist; Professor		Do not forgive
The Dalai Lama (Tenzin Gyatso)	Tibetan	Spiritual leader; Activist; Nobel Peace Prize laureate	Buddhism (Tibetan)	Forgive
Eugene J. Fisher		Catholic Bishop; Author; Scholar of Interreligious studies	Christianity (Roman Catholic)	Uncertain
Edward H. Flannery	American	Catholic Priest; Author; Activist against anti-Semitism	Christianity (Roman Catholic)	Forgive
Eva Fleischner		Professor of Religion; Author		Do not forgive
Matthew Fox		President of University of Creation Spirituality; Author; Priest	Christianity (Episcopalian); formerly	Do not forgive

Name	Nationality	Profession	Religion	Response
			Roman Catholic	
Rebecca Goldstein	American	Philosopher; Author	Judaism (Orthodox)	Do not forgive
Mary Gordon	American	Professor of English, Barnard College; Author	Christianity (Roman Catholic)	Do not forgive
Mark Goulden	British	Journalist; Publisher	Judaism	Do not forgive
Hans Habe	Austrian; Hungarian-born	Author; Publisher; Jewish descent	Christianity (Protestant)	Uncertain
Yossi Klein Halevi	Israeli; American-born	Author; Journalist; Son of Holocaust survivor	Judaism	Uncertain
Arthur Hertzberg	American; Polish-born	Rabbi; Author; Scholar; Activist	Judaism (Conservative)	Do not forgive
Theodore M. Hesburgh	American	Priest; Professor; President of University of Notre Dame	Christianity (Roman Catholic)	Forgive
Abraham Joshua Heschel	American; Polish-born	Rabbi; Theologian; Philosopher; Professor; Author	Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative)	Do not forgive
Susannah Heschel	American	Professor of Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College; Scholar;	Judaism	Do not forgive

Name	Nationality	Profession	Religion	Response
		Daughter of Abraham Joshua Heschel		
José Hobday	American	Franciscan nun; Author; has written about Catholic and Native American spirituality; of Seneca, Iroquois and Seminole descent	Christianity (Roman Catholic)	Forgive
Christopher Hollis	British	Journalist; Author; former Member of Parliament	Christianity (Roman Catholic)	Forgive
Rodger Kamenetz	American	Poet; Author; Professor of Religious Studies at Louisiana State University	Judaism	Do not forgive
Cardinal Franz König	Austrian	Cardinal; Archbishop of Vienna; Theologian; Scholar	Christianity (Roman Catholic)	Forgive
Harold S. Kushner	American	Rabbi; Author	Judaism (Conservative)	Do not forgive
Lawrence L. Langer	American	Scholar; Professor; Holocaust analyst; Author		Do not forgive
Primo Levi	Italian	Author; Chemist; Holocaust survivor	Judaism	Do not forgive
Deborah E. Lipstadt	American	Historian; Author; Professor; Holocaust scholar	Judaism	Do not forgive

Name	Nationality	Profession	Religion	Response
Franklin H. Littell	American	Holocaust scholar;	Christianity (Methodist)	Do not forgive
Hubert G. Locke		Professor; Holocaust scholar		Uncertain
Erich H. Loewy		Professor of Bioethics, University of California Davis		Do not forgive
Herbert Marcuse	German; American	Philosopher; Sociologist; Political theorist; Author	Judaism	Do not forgive
Martin E. Marty	American	Religious scholar	Christianity (Lutheran)	Forgive
Cynthia Ozick	American	Author	Judaism	Do not forgive
John T. Pawlikowski	American	Priest; Professor of Social Ethics; Advocate for Catholic-Jewish relations	Christianity (Roman Catholic)	Do not forgive
Dennis Prager	American	Author; Theologian	Judaism (Orthodox)	Do not forgive
Dith Pran	American; Cambodian	Photojournalist; survivor of Cambodian genocide; subject of The Killing Fields		Forgive
Terence Prittie	British	Journalist; Author;		Do not forgive

Name	Nationality	Profession	Religion	Response
Matthieu Ricard	French	Author; Buddhist Monk; PhD in Molecular Genetics	Buddhism (Tibetan)	Forgive
Joshua Rubenstein		Regional director for Amnesty International USA; Fellow of Russian Studies		Do not forgive
Sidney Shachnow	American; Lithuanian-born	Major General, U.S. Army; Purple Heart Recipient; Green Beret; Holocaust survivor	Judaism	Do not forgive
Dorothee Sölle	German	Theologian; Author	Christianity (Lutheran)	Uncertain
Albert Speer	German	Minister of Armaments and War Production for Nazi Germany; Chief Architect to Adolf Hitler; Nazi party member; Accepted moral responsibility at the Nuremberg trials; known as the "Nazi who said sorry"		Do not forgive
Manès Sperber	Austrian-French	Author; Psychologist	Judaism	Do not forgive
André Stein		Professor; Psychotherapist; Author; Holocaust survivor	Judaism	Do not forgive

Name	Nationality	Profession	Religion	Response
Nechama Tec	American; Polish-born	Professor of Sociology; Author; Holocaust survivor	Judaism	Do not forgive
Joseph Telushkin	American	Rabbi; Author	Judaism	Do not forgive
Tzvetan Todorov	Bulgarian; French	Historian; Philosopher; Sociologist; Author		Do not forgive
Desmond Tutu	South African	Social rights activist; Politician; Anglican Bishop; Author	Christianity (Anglican)	Forgive
Arthur Waskow	American	Rabbi; Author; Political activist	Judaism	Do not forgive
Harry Wu	American; Chinese-born	Advocate for human rights in China; survivor of 19 years in Chinese labor camps		Do not forgive

QUESTIONS/TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. "In his confession there was true repentance," writes Wiesenthal (p. 53). Not all of the commentators agree with him. Many of them think Karl was angling for "cheap grace," and that his remorse exists only because he finds himself facing death. Which point of view do you agree with? Do you think, with literary critic Tzvetan Todorov (p. 251), that the very fact of Karl's expressing remorse makes him exceptional, and therefore deserving of respect?
2. Eva Fleischner found that almost without exception, her Christian students "come out in favor of forgiveness, while the Jewish students feel that Simon did the right thing by not granting the dying man's wish" (p. 139). Do you feel that the Christian and Jewish writers in this volume are similarly divided? Do their differences stem from first-hand experience, or from different notions of sin and repentance, as Dennis Prager suggests? Do any writers in this book seriously suggest forgiveness??and why? Do you believe, with political theorist Herbert Marcuse, that "the easy forgiving of such crimes perpetuates the very evil it wants to alleviate" (p. 198)?

3. Did the mother of the SS man, by her passivity, acquiesce in her son's crimes? Wiesenthal says that people who wanted "only peace and quiet" were "the mounting blocks by which the criminals climbed to power and kept it" (p. 91). Most of the authors in this volume believe that Wiesenthal did the right thing in not telling her about her son's crimes. Psychotherapist Andre Stein, however, disagrees, saying that "Simon had a responsibility toward past and future victims to tell her the truth. And Karl's mother had the responsibility of rising above her personal pain and telling the world what her son had done" (p. 240). Which point of view do you agree with?
4. "I asked myself if it was only the Nazis who had persecuted us. Was it not just as wicked for people to look on quietly and without protest at human beings enduring such shocking humiliation?" (p. 57). Some of the commentators believe that those who were following orders were just as guilty as those who gave them; others, like Dith Pran, draw a moral line between followers and leaders. Would you hold them equally responsible?
5. "Without forgetting there can be no forgiving," says retired Israeli Supreme Court Justice Moshe Bejski (p. 116); the Dalai Lama, on the other hand, believes that one must forgive but not necessarily forget. Do you think it is possible to forgive and not forget? How would you differentiate forgiveness and reconciliation?
6. Wiesenthal's friend Josek tells him that no one can offer forgiveness on behalf of another victim. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, "No one can forgive crimes committed against other people" (p. 165). Wiesenthal is not so sure. "Aren't we a single community with the same destiny, and one must answer for the other?" he asks (p. 65). It is a question echoed by the Catholic writer Christopher Hollis when he posits that insofar as Karl's crime was part of "a general campaign of genocide, the author was as much a victim—or likely to be soon a victim—of that campaign as was the child, and, being a sufferer, had therefore the right to forgive" (p. 169). Which point of view do you find more persuasive, Hollis's or Heschel's?
7. Many of the Symposium contributors believe that even as he lay dying, Karl saw the Jews as objects or subhumans, and that his wish to confess to a Jew, any Jew, and a concentration camp prisoner at that, showed that he had learned nothing from his experiences. Do you agree with this?
8. "There are many kinds of silence," Wiesenthal states (p. 97). What messages, positive and negative, does Wiesenthal's own silence convey? What does it tell the dying man? What does it tell to you, the reader?
9. Eugene J. Fisher believes that "we have no right to put Jewish survivors in the impossible moral position of offering forgiveness, implicitly, in the name of the six million. Placing a Jew in this anguished position further victimizes him or her. This, in my reading, was the final sin of the dying Nazi" (pp. 132-33). Literature professor Lawrence L. Langer and writer Primo Levi share this opinion. Do you agree?
10. Jean Amery, Mark Goulden and Cynthia Ozick insist that Karl and the other Nazis should never under any circumstances be forgiven. Do you find their arguments harsh or just?
11. Theologian Robert McAfee Brown acknowledges that "perhaps there are situations where sacrificial love, with forgiveness at the heart of it, can make a difference, and can even empower" (pp. 122-123). He cites Nelson Mandela and Tomas Borge as examples of men who have forgiven wrongs that many might see as unforgivable. Do you think that Mandela's and Borge's situations are comparable with Wiesenthal's? Where do the differences lie?

12. If you believe that Karl should be forgiven, apply Harry James Cargas's reductio ad absurdum (p. 125): If Hitler had repented, should he be forgiven? Why or why not?
13. How does collective guilt differ from national guilt? Do you believe that future generations should continue to feel remorse for a previous generation's crimes? Martin E. Marty compares the national guilt visited upon the postwar generation in Germany with our own national guilt for the institution of slavery and the genocide of Native Americans, and questions whether the perpetuation of such feelings is healthy. Do you agree with his position?
14. "I wonder if Simon did not receive his vocation from this dying SS man," writes Episcopal priest Matthew Fox (p. 146). Does this seem a reasonable theory to you? Do you agree with Fox's belief that in hunting down former Nazis, Wiesenthal is actually offering them the opportunity for a moral conversion?
15. Does Simon Wiesenthal's life's work as a Nazi hunter constitute his own response to the question he poses in this book?