

OPRAH'S CUT WITH ELIE WIESEL

He's one of the people I most respect: Elie Wiesel. After I first read his memoir *Night* seven years ago, I was not the same—you can't be the same after hearing how Elie, at age 15, survived the horror of the Holocaust death camps. Through his eyes, we witness the depths of both human cruelty and human grace—and we're left grappling with what remains of Elie, a teenage boy caught between the two. I gain courage from his courage.

The story—and especially that number, six million—numbs us: A Jew hater named Adolf Hitler rises to power in Germany, the world goes to war in 1939, and when the showdown is over six years later, the tyrant has slaughtered six million Jews. Six million. Inconceivable. We see footage of the concentration camps, the gas chambers, the gallows. Yet words like Holocaust and Auschwitz are still abstractions—seemingly impossible until we see photos of someone who was there. A face. Eyes. Hair. Prison numbers tattooed into an arm. A real person like Elie Wiesel who, 55 years ago, made it through the atrocity.

"How could you live through the Holocaust and not be bitter?" I ask Elie. At 72, he emanates quiet strength; with his strong handgrip, it's as if he's saying, "I assure you—I am alive." We sit across from each other at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in Manhattan, where hundreds come to see evidence of what happened to the Jewish people. Thousands already know Elie Wiesel's name—he is a prolific writer, a professor at Boston University and an activist who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986—but I want him to take me back to the time when living to tell the story was the last thing that mattered to him. I wanted to know:

"What does it take to be normal again, after having your humanity stripped away by the Nazis?"

"What is abnormal is that I am normal," he says. "That I survived the Holocaust and went on to love beautiful girls, to talk, to write, to have toast and tea and live my life—that is what is abnormal."

"Why didn't you go insane?"

"To this day," he says, "that is a mystery to me."

And a miracle.

After he was liberated from Buchenwald in 1945, he and other orphans were sent to France. There, he lived in an orphanage, then later supported himself as a tutor and choir director—and he decided that he wanted to live again. He studied literature, philosophy and psychology at the Sorbonne, and in 1952 he became a reporter for a newspaper in Tel Aviv. For ten years after his release, he vowed not to speak of his experience. "I wanted to be sure that the words I was going to use about this event were the proper word," he has said.

In our time together, Elie and I talk about how it is possible that he can still believe in the sovereignty of a force bigger than himself, why he has no explanation for his survival in the death camps, and what, five decades after Auschwitz, brings him what he calls real joy.

Oprah: There may be no better person than you to speak about living with gratitude. Despite all the tragedy you've witnessed, do you still have a place inside you for gratefulness?

Elie Wiesel: Absolutely. Right after the war, I went around telling people, "Thank you just for living, for being human." And to this day, the words that come most frequently from my lips are thank you. When a person doesn't have gratitude, something is missing in his or her humanity. A person can almost be defined by his or her attitude toward gratitude.

O: Does having seen the worst of humanity make you more grateful for ordinary occurrences?

EW: For me, every hour is grace. And I feel gratitude in my heart each time I can meet someone and look at his or her smile.

O: Did you ever hate your oppressors?

EW: I had anger but never hate. Before the war, I was too busy studying [the Bible and the Cabala] to hate. After the war, I thought, What's the use? To hate would be to reduce myself.

O: On your first night in the camp, you saw babies being thrown into the flames. Can you ever forgive those who killed the children?

EW: Who am I to forgive? Only the children themselves could forgive. If I forgive, I should do it in their name. Otherwise, it is arrogant.

O: By becoming a voice for those who are suffering, are you doing what the world did not do for Jews during the Holocaust?

EW: I've gone everywhere, trying to stop so many atrocities: Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia. The least I can do is show the victims that they are not alone. When I went to Cambodia, journalists asked me, "What are you doing here? This is not a Jewish tragedy." I answered, "When I needed people to come, they didn't. That's why I am here."

O: Is it our indifference and arrogance that makes us Americans feel that we are the center of the universe—that a mother's pain after losing her child in Bosnia or Nigeria isn't as important as our own pain?

EW: I wouldn't generalize. There are people in America who are so sensitive. Whenever I meet young Americans abroad, they are there to help. A doctor in New York read a quote of mine that sparked her involvement. Somebody had asked me, "What is the most important commandment in the Bible?" and I said, "Thou shalt not stand idly by." So she packed up her office and went to Macedonia—I met her there... We cannot free all the prisoners in the world or save all the victims of AIDS, but we can at least show them that we are with them.

O: You and the others in the camp were forced to march by three people who were hanged. And somebody behind you whispered, "Where is God?"

EW: A voice in me said, "God is there."

O: Where are you and God with each other these days?

EW: We still have a few problems! But even in the camps, I never divorced God. After the war, I went on praying to God. I was angry. I protested. I'm still protesting—and occasionally, I'm still angry. But it's not because of the past, but the present. When I see victims of a tragedy—and especially children—I say to God, "Don't tell me that you have nothing to do with this. You are everywhere—you are God."

O: Did you come out of the horror of the Holocaust with your ability to love intact?

EW: After my liberation, I fell in love with every girl—consecutively. But I would never dare tell a girl that I loved her, because I was timid—and afraid of rejection. I missed so many opportunities because I was afraid to say what I felt. I needed to love more than I needed to be loved. I needed to know that I could love—that after all I had seen, there was love in my heart.

O: Do you remember the day you were released from the camp?

EW: April 11, 1945. The Americans were close by, and a few days before that, on April 5, the Germans had decided to evacuate all the Jews. Every day, they would evacuate thousands—and most were killed upon leaving. I was in a children's block with other adolescents, and we were left until the end. [But every day we marched to the gate anyway.] I was near the gate more than five times before I was released, and each time, the gate closed just before I came to it.

O: How do you explain that you survived the camps?

EW: I have no explanation.

O: You—someone who has studied the Talmud, the Cabala—have no explanation?

EW: Believe me, I have tried to know, but I do not. If it is God, I have problems with that. If he bothered to save me, why couldn't he have saved all the others? There were people worthier than I.

O: Don't you think your survival has something to do with who you've become and what you've said to the world about the Holocaust?

EW: No, no, no. The price is too high. Because I survived, I must do everything possible to help others.



Photo by Brooke Slezak