

Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech

INFORMATIONAL TEXT

Elie Wiesel
1986

Introduction

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Elie Wiesel (1928–2016) was a survivor of the Auschwitz and Buchenwald Nazi concentration camps, going on to write 57 books about the Holocaust and other subjects. The Nobel Committee called him a “messenger to mankind,” stating that his struggle to come to terms with “his own personal experience of total humiliation and of the utter contempt for humanity shown in Hitler’s death camps,” as well as his “practical work in the cause of peace,” delivered a powerful message “of peace, atonement, and human dignity” to humanity. The following is an excerpt from his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech.

“Because if we forget, we are guilty, we are accomplices.”

- 1 And it is with a profound sense of humility that I accept the honor—the highest there is—that you have chosen to **bestow** upon me. I know your choice transcends my person.
- 2 Do I have the right to represent the multitudes who have perished? Do I have the right to accept this great honor on their behalf? I do not. No one may speak for the dead, no one may interpret their mutilated dreams and visions. And yet, I sense their presence. I always do—and at this moment more than ever. The presence of my parents, that of my little sister. The presence of my teachers, my friends, my companions . . .
- 3 This honor belongs to all the survivors and their children and, through us to the Jewish people with whose destiny I have always identified.
- 4 I remember: it happened yesterday, or eternities ago. A young Jewish boy discovered the Kingdom of Night! I remember his **bewilderment**, I remember his **anguish**. It all happened so fast. The ghetto. The deportation. The sealed cattle car. The fiery altar upon which the history of our people and the future of mankind were meant to be sacrificed.
- 5 I remember he asked his father: “Can this be true? This is the twentieth century, not the Middle Ages. Who would allow such crimes to be committed? How could the world remain silent?”
- 6 And now the boy is turning to me. “Tell me,” he asks, “what have you done with my future, what have you done with your life?”



1986 Nobel Peace Prize winner and writer Elie Wiesel gives a speech after awarding ceremonies on December 11, 1986.

 Skill: Informational Text Structure

The text becomes sequential. Wiesel describes the horror he experienced as a young boy, and then he moves to the present as he has a conversation with that boy. The adult’s answer to the boy’s questions conveys a key concept in paragraph 7—we must remember the Holocaust.

1. **Kingdom of Night** Elie Wiesel’s description of life as a Jewish person under the Nazis during World War II, alluding to the title of his unforgettable memoir, *Night*

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NOTES

- 7 And I tell him that I have tried. That I have tried to keep memory alive, that I have tried to fight those who would forget. Because if we forget, we are guilty, we are accomplices.
- 8 And then I explain to him how naïve we were, that the world did know and remained silent. And that is why I swore never to be silent whenever wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men or women are **persecuted** because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must—at that moment—become the center of the universe. . .
- 9 There is so much to be done, there is so much that can be done. One person—a Raoul Wallenberg², an Albert Schweitzer³, Martin Luther King, Jr.—one person of **integrity**, can make a difference, a difference of life and death.
- 10 As long as one dissident is in prison, our freedom will not be true. As long as one child is hungry, our life will be filled with anguish and shame. What all these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them, that when their voices are stifled we shall lend them ours, that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs.
- 11 This is what I say to the young Jewish boy wondering what I have done with his years. It is in his name that I speak to you and that I express to you my deepest gratitude as one who has emerged from the Kingdom of Night. We know that every moment is a moment of grace, every hour an offering; not to share them would mean to betray them.
- 12 Our lives no longer belong to us alone; they belong to all those who need us desperately.

 Skill: Reasons and Evidence

Wiesel supports his claim by referencing people in history who have stood up to injustice and made a difference. These examples are relevant evidence to his claim and help make his argument complete.

2. **Raoul Wallenberg** a Swedish architect, businessman, diplomat, and humanitarian who saved tens of thousands of Jews in Nazi-occupied Hungary during the Holocaust
3. **Albert Schweitzer** a French theologian, writer, philosopher, and physician who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952