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| **Biography: Elie Wiesel Nobel Prize for Peace**  Elie Wiesel Date of birth: September 30, 1928 |

Elie Wiesel was born in the small town of Sighet in Transylvania, where people of different languages and religions have lived side by side for centuries, sometimes peacefully, sometimes in bitter conflict. The region has long been claimed by both Hungary and Romania and, in the 20th century, has changed hands repeatedly, a hostage to the fortunes of war.

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| [[Elie Wiesel Biography Photo](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/wie0-010)](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/wie0-010) |

Elie Wiesel grew up in the close-knit Jewish community of Sighet. While the family spoke Yiddish at home, they read newspapers and conducted their grocery business in German, Hungarian or Romanian as the occasion demanded. Ukrainian, Russian and other languages were also widely spoken in the town. Elie began religious studies in classical Hebrew almost as soon as he could speak. The young boy's life centered entirely on his religious studies. He loved the mystical tradition and folk tales of the Hassidic sect of Judaism, to which his mother's family belonged. His father, though religious, encouraged the boy to study the modern Hebrew language and concentrate on his secular studies. The first years of World War II left Sighet relatively untouched. Although the village changed hands from Romania to Hungary, the Wiesel family believed they were safe from the persecutions suffered by Jews in Germany and Poland.

The secure world of Wiesel's childhood ended abruptly with the arrival of the Nazis in Sighet in 1944. The Jewish inhabitants of the village were deported en masse to concentration camps in Poland. The 15 year-old boy was separated from his mother and

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sister immediately on arrival in Auschwitz. He never saw them again. He managed to remain with his father for the next year as they were worked almost to death, starved, beaten, and shuttled from camp to camp on foot, or in open cattle cars, in driving snow, without food, proper shoes, or clothing. In the last months of the war, Wiesel's father succumbed to dysentery, starvation, exhaustion and exposure.

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| [[Elie Wiesel Biography Photo](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/wie0-022)](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/wie0-022) |

After the war, the teenaged Wiesel found asylum in France, where he learned for the first time that his two older sisters had survived the war. Wiesel mastered the French language and studied philosophy at the Sorbonne, while supporting himself as a choir master and teacher of Hebrew. He became a professional journalist, writing for newspapers in both France and Israel.

For ten years, he observed a self-imposed vow of silence and wrote nothing about his wartime experience. In 1955, at the urging of the Catholic writer Francois Mauriac, he set down his memories in Yiddish, in a 900-page work entitled *Un die welt hot geshvign* (And the world kept silent). The book was first published in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Wiesel compressed the work into a 127-page French adaptation, *La Nuit* (Night), but several years passed before he was able to find a publisher for the French or English versions of the work. Even after Wiesel found publishers for the French and English translations, the book sold few copies.

In 1956, while he was in New York covering the United Nations, Elie Wiesel was struck by a taxi cab. His injuries confined him to a wheelchair for almost a year. Unable to renew the French document which had allowed him to travel as a "stateless" person, Wiesel applied successfully for American citizenship. Once he recovered, he remained in New York and became a feature writer for the Yiddish-language newspaper, the Jewish Daily Forward *(Der forverts ).*

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Wiesel continued to write books in French, including the semi-autobiographical novels *L'Aube* (Dawn), and *Le Jour* (translated as *The Accident* ). In his novel *La Ville de la Chance* (translated as *The Town Beyond the Wall* ), Wiesel imagined a return to his home town, a journey he did not undertake in life until after the book was published.

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| <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/wie0-021> |

As these and other books began to win him an international reputation, Wiesel took an increasing interest in the plight of persecuted Jews in the Soviet Union. He first traveled to the USSR in 1965 and reported on his travels in *The Jews of Silence.* His 1968 account of the Six Day War between Israel and its Arab neighbors appeared in English as *A Beggar In Jerusalem* . In time, Wiesel was able to use his fame to plead for justice for oppressed peoples in the Soviet Union, South Africa, Vietnam, Biafra and Bangladesh.

He has written plays including *Zalmen, or the Madness of God* and *The Trial of God (Le Proces de Shamgorod ).* His other novels include *The Gates of the Forest, The Oath, The Testament,* and *The Fifth Son.* His essays and short stories are collected in the volumes *Legends of Our Time, One Generation After,* and *A Jew Today.* Although Wiesel still writes his books in French, his wife Marion now collaborates with him on their English translation.

In 1978, President Jimmy Carter appointed Elie Wiesel Chairman of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council. In 1985 he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Freedom and, in 1986, the Nobel Prize for Peace. The English translation of his memoirs appeared in 1995 as *All Rivers Run to the Sea.* Since 1976, he has been Andrew Mellon Professor of Humanities at Boston University. He makes his home in New York City with his wife and their son, Elisha.

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