

THE SUNFLOWER:

On the possibilities and limits of forgiveness

By Simon Wiesenthal

A review by Ruth Pluznick

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Editor's note: We approached Ruth Pluznick to write a review of Simon Wiesenthal's book, 'The Sunflower: On the possibilities and limits of forgiveness' because we believe its subject matter directly relates to the issue of responding to trauma. Responses to trauma do not only involve questions of healing, but also questions of justice. Both the content and style of this book seem highly relevant to our field and Ruth makes some of these links at the end of her review. While Ruth was writing this piece, Simon Wiesenthal died at the age of 96. It seems all the more appropriate to include this review of his book in these pages.

On a warm and sunny afternoon in September, my sister and I are standing at the gravesite of our parents. We are placing small stones on their headstones, a traditional Jewish practice when visiting cemeteries. Neither of us remember the 'official' reason we do this. My sister has given this exercise her own meaning. She tells me: 'Wherever I travel, I collect stones and bring them here to place on the graves of our relatives and that's my way of letting them know where I've been'. She also likes to visit the cemetery before Jewish holidays and special family events. This is her way of remembering, one of her ways of inviting the relatives who are deceased to continue to have a presence in her life.

All of the family that my sister and I loved and lost are buried here. It's a bit of a family reunion for us when we visit. But this small cemetery in Portland, Maine, is a long way from Poland where my father was born. Most of his relatives were still living in the shtetl of Osiek when the Nazis invaded Poland. There are no gravesites for my family in Poland.

The Sunflower: On the possibilities and limits of forgiveness takes its name from an experience described by its author Simon Wiesenthal. While imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, Simon Wiesenthal was on his way to a work detail when he and his fellow prisoners passed a military cemetery. A sunflower was planted on each grave 'as straight as a soldier on parade'. Butterflies were moving from one flower to the next, and it seemed to the author that they were carrying messages from one soldier to another. Simon Wiesenthal realises: '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.'

My father, his sister and parents emigrated to Portland before the war broke out. We never spoke of the Holocaust when I was a child. Later, I asked my father what had become of our relatives in Poland – his grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins. They were a close family. I remember my

father during this conversation, sitting at the kitchen table, folding and unfolding his dinner napkin while deciding what to say. Finally, and simply: 'We were told that everyone in the shtetl, family and neighbors, were rounded up and taken to the edge of the town. They were lined up and shot and buried in a mass grave.'

Fortunately, Simon Wiesenthal survived his imprisonment. In *The Sunflower*, he bears witness to the life and suffering of the millions who lived and died in the Holocaust. He tells a compelling story of his own experience as a prisoner in a concentration camp. The reader is drawn into a world of unimaginable horrors – extreme deprivation of basic rights and needs, the constant presence of brutality and degradation and death, the absence of any justice. This is not easy reading. Yet there are also moments of transcendence evident in the care and conversation of friends within the camp who serve to protect and also, perhaps, to preserve each others' identities, hopes and dreams, values and beliefs, visions and commitments. We witness the forces of de-humanisation; we are also given a glimpse of prisoners resisting its effects.

The Sunflower's central concern is revealed to the reader when the author recounts a particular incident that occurs while he is on a work detail at a local hospital. He is summoned to the bedside of a dying Nazi who wants to make a confession for his participation in a crime in which two hundred Jewish men, women and children were herded into a house which was then set on fire: 'amidst screams from within the house and fire leaping from one floor to another, rifles were readied to shoot down anyone who tried to escape' (p.40). The soldier then recounts: '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' (p.42). The soldier shoots them. Later, in combat with the Russians and ordered by his superiors to fire, the soldier finds himself unable to move: 'In that moment I saw the burning family ... they came to meet me. No, I can not shoot at them a second time' (p.51). In his moment of hesitation, a shell explodes by the soldier's side and the injuries

he sustains will ultimately lead to his own death. Images of the family continue to haunt him. In the soldier's words: 'I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him' (p.54). Simon Wiesenthal listens to the confession, at times even offering acts of kindness. But he leaves the room without any reply to the soldier.

Simon Wiesenthal then begins to question himself, and his fellow prisoners, as to whether or not it was right to refuse a dying man forgiveness. *The Sunflower* chronicles their conversations. Then we discover that the author is not only telling a story of a tragic time in the history of Jews or his own life. He is also creating a context for the reader so that the reader may respond to a question that is both personal and political. He says: '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?"' The question invites the reader to consider his/her own ethical and moral traditions. These traditions of thought which influence our actions in response to crime, justice, compassion, and individual and collective responsibility, are then made visible. The issues raised in this consideration are, at the same time, historical (the Holocaust) and contemporary (e.g. Bosnia, Rwanda).

In the second half of the book, fifty-three men and women responded to Simon's Wiesenthal's question. Their reflections follow the author's story of his experience during the Holocaust. Respondents included theologians, political leaders, writers, jurists, psychiatrists, human rights activists, Holocaust survivors and victims of attempted genocide in Bosnia, Cambodia, China and Tibet. Representing different religions, cultures, genders, careers, and having lived in different times and sociopolitical contexts, they offer strong arguments for and against forgiveness. Their multiple perspectives serve to more richly describe these complex issues and to provide us (the readers) with a surface to reflect our own values and actions. As a participant in this exercise, I felt that I had been provided with a new way to make sense of the Holocaust. I was being asked to struggle with challenging moral questions and lift out values and principles of justice, responsibility, reparation, etc. (instead of only sadness or outrage); in the process, recognising the relevance of these values and

principles in my choices and actions today and for the future. It had me thinking of myself as 'a descendant of Jews of the Holocaust' and also as a 'thoughtful and committed citizen of the world' with 'an obligation to both remember and to act' (Kis-Sines 2005) in ways that are honouring of the lessons learned from the Holocaust.

Trauma can steal from us our hopes and dreams and our purposes in life. Yet Simon Wiesenthal found a way to stay connected with what was important to him. In his own words: 'When at last the hour of freedom struck, it was too late for so many of us. But the survivors made their way homeward in groups. For me there was no home to return to. Poland was a cemetery and if I were to make a new life I couldn't start it in a cemetery. Nor did I want to meet those who bore the guilt for our sufferings. After the liberation, I joined a commission for the investigation of Nazi crimes. Years of suffering had inflicted deep wounds on my faith that justice existed in the world ... I thought the work of the commission might help me regain my faith in humanity.' (p.84)

Simon Wiesenthal never expected to survive the Holocaust. Six million Jews had died; 89 of those dead were members of his family. Millions of non-Jews had also lost their lives. Simon Wiesenthal later said: 'Survival is a privilege which entails obligations. I am forever asking myself what I can do for those who have not survived.' (Wiesenthal 1989, p.351)

According to his biographer, Hella Pick: 'Mr. Wiesenthal always felt that he owed it to the millions of victims who had perished in the Holocaust to dedicate his life to their memory – to identify the mass murderers, to expose their crimes by witness accounts in open courts and to have them brought to justice by due process of law' (Globe & Mail 2005, p.57). Since the war, Simon Wiesenthal's efforts have been instrumental in bringing over 1,100 Nazi criminals to trial. His work is also considered to be influential in the development of the UN International Criminal Court and the tribunals charged with identifying and trying those responsible for crimes against humanity in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Sierra Leone (see Pick 2005).

As I was writing this review, I was saddened to hear the news that Simon Wiesenthal had passed away. At age 96, he had outlived many of the

perpetrators he was seeking. The radio announcer said, 'He will be remembered as the conscience of the Holocaust'. I thought of his friends Arthur and Josek who died in the camp. I wondered what they might say was most important to them about his life and legacy.

My neighbor has a sunflower in her front yard. It peers out over the fence and I am face to face with it each morning as I pass her house. I have been deciding all month what meaning to attach to it. This morning, on the morning that Simon Wiesenthal begins the journey to his final resting place, the sunflower and I stand together in a moment of silence.

When I told my friend, Angel Yuen, that I was writing this review, she asked me: 'I wonder what it would mean to your ancestors that you are hoping to find some purposeful ways to do something with the stories of the Holocaust?' Angel is very good at re-remembering exercises. So I have given this some thought and here is my answer to Angel: 'Maybe I am a sunflower for my ancestors, standing sentinel for their legacy. Being my father's daughter, it is possible that I am continuing a tradition of values and principles of life – 'how the world should be' – important in their lives as well, that was not murdered by the Nazis. And this tradition will provide the foundation for me – it will compel me to continue to fight injustice, oppression, genocide. And in this way, I will honour their memory and play my part in ensuring that their suffering will not have been for nothing.

THANKS

To Cheryl White and David Denborough for inspiration, invitation and good editing; Michael White for a new way to make sense of trauma; Daniel Bogue and Charles Waldegrave for our continuing conversations about the Holocaust; and to my colleagues in Toronto who read and offered reflections: Chris Chapman, Rick Eckley, Bob Engel, Natasa Kis-Sines, Marilyn Vasilkioti, and Angel Yuen.

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which entails obligations.
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what I can do
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(Wiesenthal 1989, p.351)

LINKS TO OUR WORK AS THERAPISTS AND PRACTITIONERS

What relevance might *The Sunflower: On the possibilities and limits of forgiveness* have for the readers of *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*? Or for me as a narrative practitioner? I have included here a few of my thoughts on this.

Firstly, Simon Wiesenthal's story is a first-person account of everyday life and death in a concentration camp. It is beautifully written, but – as mentioned earlier – it is not an easy read. This is surely the world at one of its worst moments. What makes a difference, I think, is that Simon Wiesenthal allows us to 'doubly listen'. He provides a graphic account of events, but then gives us 'clues' to the abilities of the prisoners to hold onto hopes and dreams and purposes and commitments that sustain them throughout the dehumanising practices. These hopes, dreams, purposes and commitments are made visible to us in the author's conversations with his friends Arthur and Josek, as well as in Simon Wiesenthal's own thoughtful reflections on his plight and his ongoing sense of outrage at the injustice and the indifference of the world to the suffering. Recognising these 'acts of resistance' to their de-humanisation helped me to see the prisoners as men with dignity and opened the possibility for a different story about their lives and abilities. *The Sunflower* – though it may not be Simon Wiesenthal's intention – provides a good practice exercise for a reader to 'doubly listen', as important to the story of the Holocaust as it is to the lives of the people with whom we consult who have also experienced trauma.

Secondly, while Simon Wiesenthal's story would have been a rewarding experience in its own right, I found it so much more powerful that he invites the reader to answer the question: 'What would I do?' As Eugene Fisher, a respondent for *The Sunflower*, noted:

'No one can really know what she or he would have done in such a situation. One can only come up with what one would *hope* to have done' (p.130). The hope, of course, reflects what we give value to. In providing commentary from fifty-three men and women in various walks of life, Simon Wiesenthal ensures that these ideas will be more richly described for the reader. The reader can then note which responses particularly resonate, and reflect on what this might suggest about what is important to him/her. Where we stand on these issues of justice and forgiveness, and the historical, religious and cultural contexts for our choices, becomes more visible. It would seem to me that this is an important thing to know about ourselves if we are to consult with communities or persons who have suffered or perpetrated crimes against others.

Finally, an additional, and most compelling, reason for reading *The Sunflower* is suggested by Robert Coles, also a respondent. In his own words: 'Let us, who are lucky to have been given by fate the safety to read and ponder *The Sunflower*, to pose its haunting, provocative, thoroughly challenging moral questions to ourselves, not only struggle for (and with) our various responses, answers, but take to heart what may be, finally the author's real intent for us – that we never, ever forget what happened to him and millions of others; that their experiences become for now and for the future our very own – an introspective moral legacy we dare not relinquish for our own sakes, never mind out of respect for those whose suffering has enabled that legacy' (p.129). Engaging with the history of the Holocaust in this way can open up new possibilities for conversations and actions to heal our world and give new meaning to all the lives that were taken (see Silbert 2003).