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Elie Wiesel's Remarks at the Dedication of Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum

By Elie Wiesel
2005

Eliezer "Elie" Wiesel (1928-2016) was a Romanian-born American Jewish writer, a Nobel Laureate, political activist, and Holocaust survivor. In this speech, Wiesel speaks at the opening of Yad Vashem's new Holocaust History Museum. The Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum is Israel's official memorial to the victims of the Holocaust. Wiesel discusses the horrors of the Holocaust, as well as his hopes for the museum's impact on others. As you read, take notes on how Elie Wiesel believes the Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum can impact the future.

[1] Mr. President, Mr. Prime Minister, Mes Amis de France, Nitsolei Shoa Yekarim:

As you walk through the museum, so magnificently conceived by Moshe Safdie, you wonder: Where is the place of rage in all that? How come that the Jewish people, when we discovered the magnitude¹ of cruelty and the consequences of hatred, how come that we were not possessed by a[n] extraordinary, implacable² rage — rage of the killers; rage toward those who inspired the killers; rage towards the indifferent — those who knew and were silent? Where is rage?



"Yad Vashem Hall of Names" by David Shankbone is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.

So you look and you look, and you are afraid to look. I am. I look at some pictures of Jews from Hungary and I am afraid to discover some that I have known. You read and you read, and you say to yourself: Where did they have the strength to write, to use words, destined to whom?

My good friends, all of us know more or less that there was a tragedy; and we also know we must be honest about it: There are no words.

[5] Only those who were there know what it meant being there. And yet, we are duty-bound to try and not to bury our memories into silence. We try. I know what people say: "It's so easy." Those that were there won't agree with that statement. The statement is: "It was man's inhumanity³ to man." No! It was man's inhumanity to Jews. Jews were not killed because they were human beings. In the eyes of the killers, they were not human beings! They were Jews! It is because they were Jews that it was so easy for the killers to kill!

1. **Magnitude** (*noun*): the great size or extent of something
 2. **Implacable** (*adjective*): relentless; unstoppable
 3. **Inhumanity** (*noun*): extremely cruel and brutal behavior

And you see the pictures. My god, you see the pictures. Jews were ordered to dig their own graves. Have we ever had that in history, which always is filled with cruelty — but not such cruelty? Have mothers ever been forced to give up their children in order to live? And few mothers chose that, no? Mothers went with their children, with their babies — there are no words.

At that time we had a feeling that history had entered into madness, and madness had its own logic, its own destiny, almost its own archeology.⁴ And within that madness it was perfectly plausible to kill children.

And so, we go through the museum and we don't understand. All we know is that it happened. And now the question is: What does one do with memories?

Any psychiatrist⁵ will tell you, if you suppress memories they come back with fury. You must face them. Even if you cannot articulate⁶ them, we must face them. And memories are many and varied: memories of those who died with weapons in their hands; and those who died with prayers on their lips. And let no one say that some were heroes and others martyrs.⁷ In those times the heroes were martyrs and the martyrs were heroes. It was heroic for a friend to give his piece of bread to his friend. It was heroic to go around on Shabbat⁸ and simply say to his or her friends: "It's Shabbat, today." It was heroic to have faith; it was heroic to be human.

[10] And so we go through the museum and what should we do? Weep? No. My good friends, we never try to tell the tale to make people weep. It's too easy. We didn't want pity. If we decided to tell the tale, it is because we wanted the world to be a better world — just a better world, and learn, and remember.

There is a frightening character in all of Kafka's⁹ stories. It's always the messenger who tried to deliver the message, and is unable to do so. We feel sorry for a poor messenger. But there is something more tragic than that: when the messenger has delivered the message and nothing has changed.

You heard tonight those who spoke here with elegance, with compassion, and they spoke already about anti-Semitism¹⁰ and intolerance. Now? 60 years later? When the messenger has tried to deliver the message? Why should there be anti-Semitism? But there is. Why should there be suicide killers? But there are. Why should there be hatred? But there is. Fanaticism?¹¹ Yes! It's calmed? No, it's here!

The messenger has delivered the message. What is our role?

We must become the messengers' messengers.

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4. the remains of a culture of a people
 5. a medical practitioner who specializes in diagnosing and treating mental illnesses
 6. **Articulate (verb):** to express an idea or feeling clearly or effectively
 7. A "martyr" is a person who is killed because of their religion or other beliefs.
 8. "Shabbat" is the Jewish Sabbath: a day of rest and spiritual enrichment.
 9. referring to Franz Kafka, a German-language writer of novels and short stories
 10. "Anti-Semitism" is hostility, prejudice, or discrimination against Jews.
 11. a belief or behavior involving an obsessive enthusiasm