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Elie Wiesel on Survival: 'I Chose Life'

Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Author, Professor Speaks at Chapman University on 60th Anniversary of his Liberation from Buchenwald

ORANGE, Calif., April 13, 2005 -- A 16-year-old boy, nearly starving to death in dirty striped prisoner garb, gazed with unbelieving eyes on the stunned American soldiers who came to free him and his fellow prisoners from Nazi Germany's Buchenwald concentration camp on April 11, 1945.

"I was not a candidate for survival," recalls Elie Wiesel. "I was a sickly boy before the war, and I never thought I would make it through that place alive. It was pure luck," he told a packed auditorium at Chapman University on April 11, 60 years to the day from the moment the "Boys of Buchenwald" call their birthday.

Unable to cope with the emotional pain of losing his mother, father and sister and witnessing first hand the atrocities of the holocaust, Wiesel kept a personal vow of silence about his past, but ended it 10 years later when he realized that the world had not learned its hard lesson about hatred and indifference.

"My feeling was that if people heard my testimony and learned the extent of the tragedy, there would be no more oppression, hatred or indifference. And look, the world has not changed," he said, referring to post-World War II incidents of genocide and human rights violations.

"In 1956, when I arrived in America, I decided to tour the country. I saw hatred, and I became so enraged because the law allowed it!" he said. "I never felt shame as a Jew, but I felt shame as a white man."

"Hatred is contagious," he added. "Hatred is a cancer that goes from limb to limb, from person to person, from group to group. He who hates, hates everybody. Those who hate Jews hate all minorities. Ultimately, he hates himself and becomes a victim of his own hatred."

"There are people right here in Orange County who devote their entire lives to denying the Holocaust. They have tried to contact me with questions, but I will not justify them with answers. I will not yield to the enemy."

During his speech, Wiesel described his captors as "killers", never once using the names Nazis or Germans.

When asked by a student, "How can we prevent genocide?" he told him: "Make the tragedies of the past become part of your conscience and your awareness, then turn it into an act of conscience. You must do something."

Wiesel, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986 and has written more than 40 books, was awarded an honorary doctorate of humane letters by Chapman University during his day-long visit that raised an estimated \$380,000 for the school's Sala and Aron Samueli Holocaust Memorial Library.

Wiesel agreed to visit the campus after nearly two years of requests by Dr. Marilyn Haran, director of Chapman's Rodgers Center for Holocaust Education. He turned down similar anniversary observances, including a return to Buchenwald.