

Remembering Elie Wiesel's legacy for the sake of today's refugees

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By Robert R. Singer | Jul. 6, 2016 | 7:58 PM

Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel, who passed away on Saturday, dedicated his life to engraving the memory of the Holocaust into contemporary consciousness and fighting xenophobia and hatred in all of its forms. His indelible and timeless legacy, as applicable today as it was in the dark days of World War II, illuminates the human capacity for goodness even in the face of evil.

As Wiesel said in accepting his Nobel Prize in 1986, "We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere."

During the Holocaust, this guiding principle was profoundly embodied by those righteous gentiles who took sides and risked their own lives to save hundreds of thousands of Jewish children from almost certain death. These children of yesteryear are the aging Holocaust survivors of today, among the last living witnesses of that courageous refusal to remain silent.

One can only hope that this critical lesson be remembered in contemporary times, as xenophobia and extreme nationalism sweep Europe, and as hundreds of thousands of refugees find themselves at a junction of life and death, far from their families and the places they once called home. The horrors faced by today's refugees are different from those suffered during the Holocaust, as are the risks facing today's bystanders, but one fact remains the same: it is all too easy for ordinary citizens to turn a blind eye to that which threatens or discomforts them.

There are many stories of righteous gentiles and the children they saved during the Nazi years. Some have become embedded in historical memory, such as the 669 rescued from Czechoslovakia in 1938-39 by Sir Nicholas

Winton, and the 2,500 young lives that were spared thanks to the selflessness of the righteous Pole Irina Sendler.

Wiesel, Winton, Sendler and most others like them are no longer alive. The number of living Holocaust survivors and witnesses is dwindling at a rapid rate as the years pass, and the majority of those still alive today were children when the horrors took place. It is they who can attest to the goodness they received and to the evils that they evaded thanks to their saviors' righteousness.

A lesser known but equally strong example is the collective rescue carried out by the residents of Le Chambon-Sur-Lignon, a small Protestant village on the Vivarais Plateau of France's Massif Central, who gave refuge to thousands of mostly foreign-born Jewish children and adults. It is estimated that some 3,000-5,000 Jews were saved as a result of this endeavor. The rescue effort began in 1940, when a village pastor and adamant opponent of anti-Semitism, André Trocmé, contacted the Quaker American Friends Service Committee and offered to provide relief to the tens of thousands of Jews being held in local internment camps.

On behalf of Le Chambon, Trocmé offered to do what no other village was willing to do at the time: absorb the internees and provide them with safe shelter. Trocmé and his wife Magda began enlisting residents of the village and its surrounding farms, finding hundreds of families willing to hide the refugees. Word of mouth spread, and numbers of other Jews made their way to Le Chambon and its environs. For nearly four years, thanks to villagers and organizations like the French Children's Aid Society, the Quaker American Congregationalists, and the Swiss Red Cross, and to funding from certain national governments including Sweden, the thousands of children brought to Le Chambon enjoyed housing, education and extracurricular activities. The villagers also helped move the refugees to the Swiss border, where they would be smuggled to safety. For the rescuers themselves, these selfless efforts sometimes had serious consequences – a number were deported to death camps and killed, including Trocmé's cousin Daniel Trocmé, who died in Majdanek.

In 1990, the State of Israel collectively named the residents of Le Chambon and nearby villages as Righteous Among the Nations. Many of the rescued children are still alive today, thanks to the mass efforts of the thousands of French villagers. Indeed, sometimes it takes a village to save a child.

The world no longer fears a recurring Holocaust against the Jews, despite the unprecedented rise in anti-Semitism in recent years. This is perhaps due to the strength of the State of Israel and to non-governmental organizations such as the World Jewish Congress; it is also due to the fact that some European states are finally coming to terms with and embracing responsibility for the crimes and complicity of their fathers and grandfathers.

The decision of certain European states to recognize their role in the Holocaust is more than welcome, but we also urge them to carefully review the lessons of that time when dealing with the increased xenophobic and anti-immigrant manifestations within their borders today.

The world must never forget the consequences of standing idly by as xenophobia rears its violent head. The world must never forget the consequences of standing idly by as refugees fleeing for their lives find themselves shunned by entire societies unwilling to risk their own comfort for the safety of others.

In his Nobel acceptance speech, Elie Wiesel also said: “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.” This is a lesson so aptly applied to today’s reality; these are words that must not be forgotten.

The unapologetic xenophobia, far-right nationalism and anti-immigrant policies of today are unnervingly reminiscent of the pre-Holocaust anti-Semitism of yesterday, much of which was also directed at desperate refugees fleeing for their lives. It is imperative for both governments and ordinary citizens to stand up and recognize the lessons of the past. Because by now, we know all too well what can happen when society remains silent and allows hatred of others to spread its wings.

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