

from
The Sunflower

Simon Wiesenthal

Simon Wiesenthal was a prisoner in a Nazi death camp during World War II. One day a nurse brought him into the presence of a young, dying man whose head was wrapped in bandages. The man was a Nazi, a member of the dreaded SS. Slowly, in great physical and emotional pain, he told Wiesenthal his life story—that he was raised to be religious, how he joined the Hitler Youth, and later the SS, how his father became distant because of this, although his mother remained constant and loving. Hours later, the soldier finally confessed to a terrible crime—forcing hundreds of Jews into a building, setting the building on fire, and shooting any Jew who tried to escape the flames.

The Nazi struggled to a sitting position, and clasped his hands together as if for prayer. He begged forgiveness for his crimes, saying that without an answer he could not die in peace. Wiesenthal stared at the pitiable figure, then left without saying a word.

The memory of that day haunted Wiesenthal for years to come. He wondered if he had made the right choice—withholding forgiveness and denying comfort to a dying man who was obviously repentant. Finally, his guilt forced him to seek out the man's parents in hopes of finding some sort of answer.

I CLIMBED the decrepit, dusty stairs and knocked on the shattered wooden door. There was no immediate response and I prepared myself for the disappointment of an unfulfilled mission. Suddenly the door opened gratingly, and a small, frail old lady appeared on the threshold.

"Are you Frau Maria S——?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered.

"May I speak to you and your husband?"

"I am a widow."

She bade me come in and I looked around the room, the walls of which were cracked and the plaster on the ceiling was loose. Over the sideboard hung, not quite straight, a photograph of a

good-looking, bright-eyed boy. Around one corner of the picture there was a black band. I had no doubt this was the photograph of the man who had sought my forgiveness. He was an only son. I went over to the photo and looked at the eyes that I had never seen.

"That is my son, Karl," said the woman in a broken voice. "He was killed in the war."

"I know," I murmured.

I had not yet told her why I had come, indeed I had not yet made up my mind what I wanted to say. On the way to Stuttgart many thoughts had run through my head. Originally I had wanted to talk to the mother to check the truth of the story he had told me. But was I not secretly hoping that I might hear something that contradicted it? It would certainly make things easier for me. The feeling of sympathy which I could not reject would then perhaps disappear. I reproached myself for not having planned to open the conversation. Now that I confronted the mother I did not know how to begin.

I stood in front of Karl's portrait in silence: I could not take my eyes off him. His mother noticed it. "He was my only son, a dear good boy. So many young men of his age are dead. What can one do? There is so much pain and suffering today, and I am left all alone."

Many other mothers had also been left all alone, I thought. She invited me to sit down. I looked at her grief-stricken face and said: "I am bringing you greetings from your son."

"Is this really true? Did you know him? It is almost four years since he died. I got the news from the hospital. They sent his things back to me."

She stood up and opened an old chest from which she took the very same bundle the hospital nurse had tried to give me.

"I have kept his things here, his watch, his notebook and a few other trifles . . . Tell me, when did you see him?"

I hesitated. I did not want to destroy the woman's memory of her "good" son.

"Four years ago I was working on the Eastern Railway at Lemberg," I began. "One day, while we were working there, a hospital train drew up bringing wounded from the east. We talked to some of them through the windows. One of them handed me a note with your address on it and asked me to convey to you greetings from one of his comrades, if ever I had the opportunity to do so."

I was rather pleased with this quick improvisation.

"So actually you never saw him?" she asked.

"No," I answered. "He was probably so badly wounded that he could not come to the window."

"How then was he able to write?" she questioned. "His eyes were injured, and all the letters he sent to me must have been dictated to one of the nurses."

"Perhaps he had asked one of his comrades to write down your address," I said hesitatingly.

"Yes," she reflected, "it must have been like that. My son was so devoted to me. He was not on specially good terms with his father, although he too loved our son as much as I did."

She broke off for a moment and looked around the room.

"Forgive me, please, for not offering you anything," she apologised, "I should very much like to do so, but you know how things are today. I have nothing in the house and there is very little in the shops."

I stood up and went over to her son's photograph again. I did not know how to bring the conversation round again to him.

"Take the photograph down if you like," she suggested. I took it carefully down from the wall and put it on the table.

"Is that a uniform he is wearing?" I asked.

"Yes, he was sixteen at the time and in the Hitler Youth," she replied. "My husband did not like it at all: he was a convinced Social Democrat, and he had many difficulties because he would not join the Party. Now I am glad he didn't. In all those years he never got any promotion; he was always passed over. It was only during the war that he was at last made manager, because all the younger men were called up. Only a few weeks later, almost exactly a year from the day on which we received news of our son's death, the factory was bombed. Many lost their lives—including my husband."

In a helpless, despairing gesture she folded her hands together.

"So I am left all alone. I live only for the memories of my husband and my son. I might move to my sister's, but I don't want to give up this house. My parents lived here and my son was born here. Everything reminds me of the happy times, and if I went away I feel I should be denying the past."

As my eyes came to rest on a crucifix which hung on the wall, the old lady noticed my glance.

"I found that cross in the ruins of a house. It was buried in the rubble, except that one arm was showing, pointing up accusingly to the sky. As nobody seemed to want it I took it away. I feel a little less abandoned."

Had this woman too perhaps thought God was on leave and had returned to the world only when he saw all the ruins? Before I could pursue this train of thought, she went on: "What happened to us was a punishment from God. My husband said at the time of Hitler's coming to power that it would end in disaster. Those were prophetic words: I am always thinking about them . . ."

"One day our boy surprised us with the news that he had joined the Hitler Youth, although I had brought him up on strictly religious lines. You may have noticed the saints' pictures in the room. Most of them I had to take down after 1933—my son asked me to do so. His comrades used to rag him for being crazy about the Church. He told me about it reproachfully as if it were my fault. You know how in those days they set our children against God and their parents. My husband was not a very religious man. He rarely went to church because he did not like the priests, but he would allow nothing to be said against our parish priest, for Karl was his favorite. It always made my husband happy to hear the priest's praise . . ."

The old lady's eyes filled with tears. She took the photograph in her hand and gazed at it. Her tears fell on the glass . . .

I once saw in a gallery an old painting of a mother holding a picture of her missing son. Here, it had come to life.

"Ah," she sighed, "if you only knew what a fine young fellow our son was. He was always ready to help without being asked. At school he was really a model pupil—till he joined the Hitler Youth, and that completely altered him. From then on he refused to go to church."

She was silent for a while as she recalled the past. "The result was a sort of split in the family. My husband did not talk much, as was his habit, but I could feel how upset he was. For instance, if he wanted to talk about somebody who had been arrested by the Gestapo, he first looked round to be sure that his own son was not listening . . . I stood helplessly between my man and my child."

Again she sank into a reverie. "Then the war began and my son came home with the news that he had volunteered. For the SS; of course. My husband was horrified. He did not reproach Karl—but he practically stopped talking to him . . . right up to the day of his departure. Karl went to war without a single word from his father.

"During his training he sent us snapshots but my husband always pushed the photos aside. He did not want to look at his son in SS uniform. Once I told him, 'We have to live with Hitler,

like millions of others. You know what the neighbors think of us. You will have difficulties at the factory.'

"He only answered: 'I simply can't pretend. They have even taken our son away from us.' He said the same thing when Karl left us. He seemed to have written Karl off as his son."

I listened intently to the woman and I nodded occasionally, to encourage her to continue. She could not tell me enough.

I had previously talked to many Germans and Austrians, and learned from them how National Socialism had affected them. Most said they had been against it, but were frightened of their neighbors. And their neighbors had likewise been frightened of them. When one added together all these fears, the result was a frightful accumulation of mistrust.

There were many people like Karl's parents, but what about the people who did not need to knuckle under, because they had readily accepted the new regime? National Socialism was for them the fulfilment of their dearest wishes. It lifted them out of their insignificance. That it should come to power at the expense of innocent victims did not worry them. They were in the winners' camp and they severed relations with the losers. They expressed the contempt of the strong for the weak, the superman's scorn for the sub-human.

I looked at the old lady who was clearly kind-hearted, a good mother and a good wife. Without doubt she must often have shown sympathy for the oppressed, but the happiness of her own family was of paramount importance to her. There were millions of such families anxious only for peace and quiet in their own little nests. These were the mounting blocks by which the criminals climbed to power and kept it.

Should I now tell the old lady the naked truth? Should I tell her what her "good" boy had done in the name of his leaders?

What link was there between me, who might have been among her son's victims, and her, a lonely woman grieving for the ruin of her family amid the ruins of her people?

I saw her grief and I knew my own grief. Was sorrow our common link? Was it possible for grief to be an affinity?

I did not know the answers to these questionings.

Suddenly the woman resumed her recollections.

"One day they fetched the Jews away. Among them was our family doctor. According to the propaganda, the Jews were to be re-settled. It was said that Hitler was giving them a whole province in which they could live undisturbed among their own people. But later I heard of the brutality with which the SS treated them. My

son was in Poland at the time and people talked of the awful things that were happening there. One day my husband said: 'Karl is with the SS over there. Perhaps the positions are reversed and he is now treating our doctor, who formerly treated him—'

"My husband would not say what he meant by that. But I knew he was upset. I was very depressed."

Suddenly the old lady looked at me intently.

"You are not a German?" she ventured.

"No," I replied, "I am a Jew."

She became a little embarrassed. At that time all Germans were embarrassed when they met Jews.

She hastened to tell me:

"In this district we always lived with the Jews in a very peaceful fashion. We are not responsible for their fate."

"Yes," said I, "that is what they all say now. And I can well believe it of you, but there are others from whom I won't take it. The question of Germany's guilt may never be settled. But one thing is certain: no German can shrug off the responsibility. Even if he has no personal guilt, he must share the shame of it. As a member of a guilty nation he cannot simply walk away like a passenger leaving a tramcar, whenever he chooses. It is the duty of Germans to find out who was guilty. And the non-guilty must dissociate themselves publicly from the guilty."

I felt I had spoken sharply. The lonely widow looked at me sadly. She was not the person with whom one could debate about the sins and the guilt of the Germans.

This broken woman, so deeply immersed in grief, was no recipient for my reproaches. I was sorry for her. Perhaps I should not have raised the issue of guilt.

"I can't really believe the stories that they tell," she went on. "I can't believe what they say happened to the Jews. During the war there were so many different stories. My husband was the only person who seemed to have known the truth. Some of his workmen had been out east setting up machinery, and when they came back they told of things even my husband would not believe, although he knew that the Party was capable of anything. He did not tell me much of what he had heard. Probably he was afraid I might gossip unthinkingly, and then we get into trouble with the Gestapo, who were already ill-disposed towards us and kept a watchful eye on my husband. But as our Karl was with the SS they did not molest us. Some of our friends and acquaintances got into trouble—they had been denounced by their best friends.

"My husband told me once that a Gestapo official had been to see him at the works, where foreigners were employed. He was inquiring into a case of sabotage. He talked to my husband for a long time, and finally said, 'You are above suspicion, for your son is with the SS.'

"When Father came home and told me what had happened, he said bitterly: 'They have turned the world upside down. The one thing that has hurt me more than anything else in my life is now my protection.' He simply could not understand it."

I gazed at the lonely woman sitting sadly with her memories. I formed a picture of how she lived. I knew that from time to time she would take in her arms her son's bundle, his last present, as if it were her son himself.

"I can well believe what people said—so many dreadful things happened. But one thing is certain, Karl never did any wrong. He was always a decent young man. I miss him so much now that my husband is dead. . . ." I thought of the many mothers who were also bereft of their sons.

But her son had not lied to me; his home was just as he had described it. Yet the solution of my problem was not a single step nearer . . .

I took my leave without diminishing in any way the poor woman's last surviving consolation—faith in the goodness of her son.

Perhaps it was a mistake not to have told her the truth. Perhaps her tears might help to wash away some of the misery of the world.

That was not the only thought that occurred to me. I knew there was little I could say to this mother, and whatever I might have told her about her son's crime she would not have believed.

She would prefer to think me a slanderer than acknowledge Karl's crime.

She kept repeating the words: "He was such a good boy," as if she wished me to confirm it. But that I could not do. Would she still have the same opinion of him if she knew all?

In his boyhood Karl had certainly been a "good boy." But a graceless period of his life had turned him into a murderer.

My picture of Karl was almost complete. His physical likeness too was now established, for in his mother's home I had at last seen his face.

I knew all about his childhood and I knew all about the crime he had committed. And was pleased with myself for not having

told his mother of his wicked deed. I convinced myself that I had acted rightly. In her present circumstances, to take from her her last possession would probably have also been a crime.

Today, I sometimes think of the young SS man. Every time I enter a hospital, every time I see a nurse, or a man with his head bandaged, I recall him.

Or when I see a sunflower . . .

And I reflect that people like him are still being born; people who can be indoctrinated with evil. Mankind is ostensibly striving to avert catastrophes; medical progress gives us hope that one day disease can be conquered, but will we ever be able to prevent the creation of mass murderers?

The work in which I am engaged brings me into contact with many known murderers. I hunt them out, I hear witnesses, I give evidence in courts—and I see how murderers behave when accused.

At the trial of Nazis in Stuttgart only one of the accused showed remorse. He actually confessed to deeds to which there were no witnesses. All the others bitterly disputed the truth. Many of them regretted only one thing—that witnesses had survived to tell the truth.

I have often tried to imagine how that young SS man would have behaved if he had been put on trial twenty-five years later.

Would he have spoken in court as he did to me before he died in the Dean's room? Would he openly admit what he had confessed to me on his deathbed?

Perhaps the picture that I had formed of him in my mind was kinder than the reality. I never saw him in the camp with a whip in his hand, I saw him only on his deathbed—a man who wanted absolution for his crime.

Was he thus an exception?

I could find no answer to that question. How could I know if he would have committed further crimes had he survived?

I have a fairly detailed knowledge of the life story of many Nazi murderers. Few of them were born murderers. They had mostly been peasants, manual laborers, clerks or officials, such as one meets in normal everyday life. In their youth they had received religious instruction; and none had a previous criminal record. Yet they became murderers; expert murderers by conviction. It was as if they had taken down their SS uniforms from the wardrobe and replaced them with their consciences as well as with their civilian clothes.

I couldn't possibly know their reactions to their first crimes, but I do know that every one of them had subsequently murdered on a wholesale scale.

When I recall the insolent replies and the mocking grins of many of these accused, it is difficult for me to believe that my repentant young SS man would also have behaved in that way . . . Yet ought I to have forgiven him? Today the world demands that we forgive and forget the heinous crimes committed against us. It urges that we draw a line, and close the account as if nothing had ever happened.

We who suffered in those dreadful days, we who cannot obliterate the hell we endured, are forever being advised to keep silent.

Well, I kept silent when a young Nazi, on his deathbed, begged me to be his confessor. And later when I met his mother I again kept silent rather than shatter her illusions about her dead son's inherent goodness. And how many bystanders kept silent as they watched Jewish men, women, and children being led to the slaughterhouses of Europe?

There are many kinds of silence. Indeed it can be more eloquent than words, and it can be interpreted in many ways.

Was my silence at the bedside of the dying Nazi right or wrong? This is a profound moral question that challenges the conscience of the reader of this episode, just as much as it once challenged my heart and my mind. There are those who can appreciate my dilemma, and so endorse my attitude, and there are others who will be ready to condemn me for refusing to ease the last moments of a repentant murderer.

The crux of the matter is, of course, the question of forgiveness. Forgetting is something that time alone takes care of, but forgiveness is an act of volition, and only the sufferer is qualified to make the decision.

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?"