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## Simon Wiesenthal: The Search for Justice

I was only twelve or thirteen years old when I first read Simon Wiesenthal's *The Murderers Among Us*, but it was, for me, a life-changing experience. It was not just the experiences that Simon Wiesenthal had been through, although those were remarkable; it was not just what he had survived, even though that was nothing short of miraculous; it was that he had come through everything with his humanity, with his soul, intact. And perhaps more than just intact.

Wiesenthal has been called a Nazi-hunter and indeed he helped track down and convict some of the worst criminals of all time. Yet he was never motivated by vengeance; Wiesenthal devoted his life to a higher mission, to justice. He would say:

*Justice for crimes against humanity must have no limitations.<sup>1</sup>*

Wiesenthal would live for sixty years after his liberation from the Mauthausen Concentration Camp on May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1945, living to the age of 96. He was fortunate, perhaps even blessed, to be reunited with his wife, Cyla Muller, the love of his life. Together they would have a daughter, Paulinka Kriesberg, and three grandchildren. His wife and daughter would urge him, even beg him, to move to Israel where Paulinka and the grandchildren lived; yet he would never stop his quest, and never give up his obligation to seek justice for those who died:

*When history looks back, I want people to know that the Nazis could not kill millions of people with impunity.*

Wiesenthal's gaze was not just focused on the past; he was aware of the implications that his work would have for the future generations:

*There is no denying that Hitler and Stalin are alive today... they are waiting for us to forget, because this is what makes possible the resurrection of these two monsters.*

Wiesenthal never lost sight of his goal of protecting our future by not letting the past be forgotten. Above everything else, Wiesenthal gathered and kept records, testimonies and accounts of The Holocaust, that it not be forgotten or denied:

*Discovering witnesses is just as important as catching criminals.*

It is these qualities that, for me, made Simon Wiesenthal a hero worth learning about.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/s/simon\\_wiesenthal.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/s/simon_wiesenthal.html)

## His Early Life

Wiesenthal was born in the town of Buczacz, in the Galicia region, when that area was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He was born shortly before midnight on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1908, but, in order to please Simon's grandparents, his birth was not reported until after the clock struck twelve so that his would be the first birth of the New Year.<sup>2</sup>

Wiesenthal was born into a place that was, for the area and the times, accepting of Jews. There were about 9,000 people living in his town; of that number more than 6,000 were Jews. Not only that, but Jews could hold positions of wealth and find acceptance. Simon's father, Asher, was a wholesaler who had escaped from the pogroms in Russia to find his fortune in this more civilized land. In Austria he had found acceptance and, perhaps in return, had joined the military reserves. In 1914, Asher's unit was called up to serve in World War I. In 1915, Asher would die in combat fighting the Russians. The family was forced to flee to Vienna that year, but would return to Buczacz in 1917, after the Russians left.



These events would take place when Simon was seven and nine years old, respectively. Yet they would foreshadow much of his later life. Over time, Simon would find refuge in Vienna, leaving or being forced to leave several times, but always returning. And Simon, like his father Asher before him, would feel a kind of loyalty to Austria, despite all that would happen.

Beginning in February of 1917, there were a series of revolutions in Russia that would topple the government of the Tsar. Initially the Provisional Government, led by members of the Imperial Duma, took control, and the Tsar was allowed to abdicate. Quickly however the more radical members of the workers' councils or Soviets began to assume power. In October of 1917, the Bolsheviks under the leadership of Lenin assumed power. In 1918, the alliance of Germany and Austria lost World War I and Galicia was lost. For a period of time, Galicia was a battleground between Russia and Poland. As Simon would say, "We'd get up in the morning without knowing which regime was in power."<sup>3</sup>

When Simon was twelve years old he was attacked by a Russian Cossack soldier, who cut at Simon with a saber while riding past. Simon's thigh was cut to the bone, leaving a scar that he would have for the rest of his life. Simon would later use the scar as a reminder for himself and others: the Nazis were not the only anti-Semites in the world.

When Simon was fifteen, he started at the equivalent of high school. It was there that he met Cyla Muller, a Jewish girl with blonde hair. Simon would immediately fall in love, a romance that

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simon\\_Wiesenthal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simon_Wiesenthal)

<sup>3</sup> Linda Jacobs-Altman, 1999, *The Importance of Simon Wiesenthal*, Lucent Books

would last his whole life. Simon loved to draw and was very skilled at it, although this was not a talent that his family encouraged. He would find a way to put this skill to use and would grow up to become an architect. To complete his degree Simon would have to leave Buczacz. The nearest school, at Lvov, would not accept Jews; Simon had to go to Prague, in Czechoslovakia to complete his degree. This he did, returning to his home. But there was a further obstacle. At this point, Galicia was part of Poland and he needed certification by a Polish school. This time the University of Lvov was willing to admit him as a part-time student. But he would again encounter anti-Semitism, this time from the Poles. Often Jewish students were beaten by non-Jews on their way to campus. They would be forced to walk through a gauntlet while people struck at them with clubs or whips or sticks tipped with razor blades. Other times the university would have “Jew-free days” when Jewish students were forbidden to come on the grounds. Sometimes these Jew-free days would occur during exams. Because of these obstacles, Simon would not get his Polish degree until 1939. However he had learned enough and had enough talent that he started getting jobs even without the degree. Soon he was an established architect and secure enough in this profession to ask for Cyla’s hand in marriage. On September 9<sup>th</sup>, 1936, they became man and wife.

### **The Holocaust Comes**

Of course a dark cloud was already hanging over Europe. In 1932, Hitler had become Chancellor of Germany. In 1933, using the Reichstag Fire as an excuse, Hitler seized power in Germany. In 1938, Hitler declared unification with Austria under the *Anschluss* or “union.” In 1939, Hitler would be given the Sudetenland section of Czechoslovakia by Britain’s Neville Chamberlain and Edouard Daladier of France, if Hitler promised not to take anymore land. Six months later, Hitler signed a pact with Joseph Stalin of Russia that divided Poland between them. Galicia, where Simon and Cyla were living, was in the section given to Russia. The Russians invaded Poland from the east on September 17<sup>th</sup>, 1939 (16 days after the Germans had invaded from the west) and completed their conquest on October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1939.



Simon’s mother had remarried by this time, to a man who owned a brick factory. The Russians immediately began arresting Jewish merchants, doctors, lawyers, any Jew that they thought of as being a member of the middle class. Simon’s stepfather was taken away, never to be seen again. He would die in a Soviet prison. Widowed for the second time, Simon’s mother would move in with her son and daughter-in-law.

It is clear from Simon’s scholastic achievements that he had “book smarts.” It is during this time that Simon’s “street smarts” are revealed, intelligence that will be key to his survival. The Russians issued special identity cards to Jews that forced them to move out of the larger cities. Simon bribed an NKVD official to issue regular papers for his family. This allowed them to remain in Lvov, where Simon had work. Simon couldn’t have known at the time, but Jews who were being forced out of the cities were being rounded up and sent to Siberia. He had saved their lives.

On June 22, 1941, the Germans cast aside their pact with the Russians and invaded the Russian-occupied area of Poland. On June 28<sup>th</sup>, the Nazis arrived in Lvov. Along with the Nazis came the Ukrainian collaborators, who immediately launched a pogrom that resulted in the deaths of six thousand Jews. After this slaughter, the Nazis began arresting Jewish intellectuals and business people, who were targeted as being potential leaders. Simon was discovered hiding in a basement and was hauled off to Brigidki prison. His survival at this time and during the remainder of the Nazi era can be attributed to a number of events that are so unlikely as to be called miracles.

The Nazis didn't even bother putting him in a cell; they did not plan on keeping him alive long enough for that to be warranted. He was taken to a court-yard along with some forty other Jews. The police lined them up against a wall and placed a crate next to each person. They then started moving down the line, shooting each one and dumping the body into the crate. They had just about reached Simon when the church bells rang calling the Christians to Vespers. They agreed to postpone the rest of the executions until the morning and Simon was taken to a cell for the night.

Simon expected to be executed in the morning, but during the night he was awakened by a Polish friend, named Bodnar. Bodnar was serving as part of the Ukrainian auxiliary and he befriended Simon. He, cleverly, denounced Simon as a Soviet spy and claimed that he had orders to take Simon for questioning. Leaving with Simon as his prisoner, he had him back at his home before dawn. Let us call this *Miracle Number 1*.



Having survived, Simon was still trapped in Lvov. The Jews of the city would be rounded up and forced to live in a ghetto. The Jews were forced to build the wall surrounding the run-down neighborhood, and to pull up the cobblestones in the street. Rain and snow turned the streets into a muddy quagmire, part of the dehumanizing process that the Nazis used to break the will of the Jews. Filthy, crammed into tiny apartments, they were being starved as well. The daily food

allotment was a slice or two of bread and a bowl of runny soup. The meager rations provided as little as 600 calories per day.

On October 21, 1941, Simon and Cyla were among those selected from the ghetto for slave labor and were taken to the Janowska Camp. The Germans had originally set up a factory at 134 Janowska Street in the suburbs of Lvov, but soon expanded it<sup>4</sup>. Before leaving, Simon gave his mother a gold watch that he had hidden, another example of his survival skills. Simon told her that she could use it for a bribe. Despite his efforts, that would be the last time that he would see her. A Ukrainian officer would come to round her up; she would use the watch to buy him off. But a few minutes later another policeman came. Rosa had nothing left and would be taken off to the Belzec extermination camp. Between 430,000 and 500,000 Jews were believed to have been exterminated at Belzec, as well as an unknown number of Poles and Gypsies. Only two Jews are

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.fold3.com/page/286021450\\_janowska\\_concentration\\_camp/](http://www.fold3.com/page/286021450_janowska_concentration_camp/)

known to have survived the camp to give testimony, Rudolf Reder and Chaim Hirszman. It is due to this lack of witnesses that so little is known about the camp and why so few of the perpetrators were ever brought to justice. Only seven former members of the *SS-Sonderkommando Belzec* were ever indicted. Of these, only one, Josef Oberhauser, was brought to trial in 1965 and sentenced to four years and six months in prison, of which he served half before being released.<sup>5</sup> If you want to understand Simon's motivation, you need look no further. In the interview where he tells the story of his mother, Simon cries and says that he hoped she died on the train to the camp, to be spared the suffering.

Meanwhile, back at Janowska, Simon and Cyla were forced to perform hard labor, quarrying stone. If a prisoner looked sick at the end of the day or couldn't perform the required work, they were not allowed to return to the barracks, but instead were forced to sleep outside on the frozen ground in sub-zero temperatures. The Nazis jokingly referred to this as the "fresh-air cure." No one lasted very long in the camp and every morning the living prisoners were forced to dig burial pits for the dead. Simon and Cyla were saved by what we can call *Miracle Number 2*; they were transferred to the railway repair works.

The railway repair project was managed by the two most unusual Nazis that Wiesenthal would ever meet. Heinrich Günthert and Adolf Kohlrantz treated their Jewish prisoners as human beings, giving them decent food and housing, even though this put them at risk from their Nazi superiors who accused them of coddling. Simon was put to work painting swastikas on captured locomotives, while Cyla polished brass fittings. During this time, Simon concealed his background as an architect, claiming that he just had a talent for drawing. When Günthert found out Simon's secret, he was furious. A Jew caught lying to a German could be shot immediately. Günthert demanded to know why Simon had lied; Simon candidly replied that he figured he would stay alive longer by hiding his profession. Günthert thought about it a while, then called over his assistant Adolf Kohlrantz and from that point on Simon worked as a draftsman, with even more privileges. He now had a private hut, didn't have to return to the Janowska camp, and soon Cyla would be allowed to join him. But Simon as a realist and did not expect these conditions to last.

Simon had originally been attracted to Cyla because of her beautiful blonde hair, unusual in a Jewish girl. She also had gray-blue eyes, spoke Polish fluently and could pass for a gentile. Simon had met members of the Polish underground while working at the railway station. He made a deal, exchanging maps that he had drafted of the key railway points, if they would take Cyla to safety. They agreed to smuggle Cyla out and find her lodgings. But they could not provide her with papers. For that Simon turned to an unlikely ally. Adolf Kohlrantz didn't blink an eye at Simon's request, but handed over a blank identity form and told Simon to pick out a suitable name. He even turned his back while Simon forged the official signature, so that he could say that he knew nothing about it. Cyla Wiesenthal entered and Irena Kowalska left, on her way to Lubin. Call this *Miracle Number 3*.

Simon and Cyla were able to stay in touch for a while; Simon was allowed to telephone her from the railroad office. Then the Germans rounded up Polish women to work as forced labor in a machine gun factory. Cyla was among them and disappeared as far as Simon was concerned.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belzec\\_extermination\\_camp](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belzec_extermination_camp)

Simon had always known that he was living on borrowed time. On April 20, 1943, the commandant of the Janowska camp decided to celebrate Hitler's fifty-fourth birthday by executing fifty-four Jewish intellectuals. The problem was that the Nazis had already killed so many intellectuals that there was a shortage. He ordered a roundup of those working outside. Simon was among those caught in the net.

At the camp, the executions were to take place by having the prisoners stripped naked and made to walk down a tube of barbed wire. At the end was a sandpit. As each prisoner reached the pit, an SS gunner fired a burst from a machine gun. Thus each prisoner could see their fate, but could do nothing to escape. As Simon was walking down, he heard a voice shouting his name with urgency. It was an SS corporal announcing that Simon was needed to perform "important work" back at the railroad yard. Dressing, Simon was escorted back where a grinning Adolf Kohlrantz informed Wiesenthal that the important work that only he could do was to paint a gigantic poster for Hitler's birthday. He had saved Simon's life through this ruse. *Miracle Number 4.*

Again the respite was but temporary. In September, rumors were heard that workers would no longer be allowed to live outside the camp. Simon knew that if he returned to the camp, he would die. Kohlrantz knew it too, and arranged for Simon and another Jewish laborer, Arthur Scheiman, to go into town for supplies. Kohlrantz deliberately chose a Ukrainian guard who did not know the area to accompany them. Wiesenthal and Scheiman went into a stationary store to buy art supplies, the guard stayed out front and the two Jews slipped out the back. Count that as *Miracle Number 5.*

Wiesenthal would never see Kohlrantz again, but he would never forget his lesson. Kohlrantz, and to a lesser extent Heinrich Günthert, are why Wiesenthal would reject the concept of collective guilt of the German people. Both treated the Jews as human beings; Kohlrantz in particular did everything that he could to save Wiesenthal and others. In 1945, Kohlrantz would be killed fighting for Germany during the Battle of Berlin.

Simon was now on the run. The Nazis sent Ukrainian auxiliaries after the escaped prisoners. For a time Wiesenthal hid among the partisans in the forest. Some of the partisans were anti-Semitic. Fearing that he would be turned in if he stayed, Wiesenthal met up with Arthur Scheiman, who was being hidden by his Gentile wife. For a while the two men hid in the back of the shop where she worked as seamstress. This proved too risky; they returned to the partisans where they hid in a shallow space, a "grave" under the floorboards of a partisan safe house. Scheiman couldn't stand the close space and returned to his wife, but Wiesenthal stayed. All went well, until a group of Poles in a nearby apartment beat up a German railway inspector. The Gestapo ordered a house to house search, the partisans fled and Wiesenthal would be discovered. This was on June 13, 1944. When Wiesenthal was captured he had in his possession a diary and two pistols. The pistols would have earned Wiesenthal immediate execution, but his captors decided to keep these for themselves and only turned in the diary.

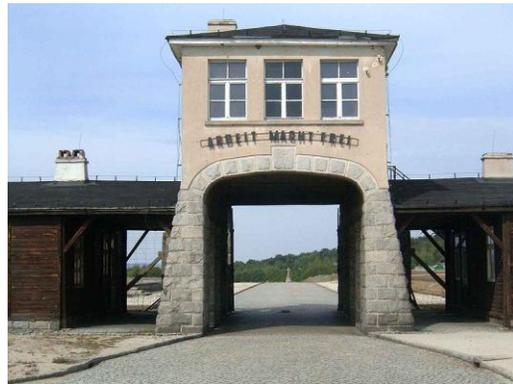
Wiesenthal's diary was coded so that only he could read it. Included with notes were maps and diagrams. This brought him to the attention of the Gestapo, in particular Master Sergeant Oskar Waltke, one of the most feared men in all Galicia, known for torturing his victims until they confessed, whether they were guilty or not. Even Gentiles had been known to confess to being Jews. Wiesenthal was brought back to the Janowska camp for interrogation. Wiesenthal had been able to hide a razor blade in a cuff and used that to slit his wrists. He passed out from blood loss, only to wake in the hospital in Lvov. Waltke assured Wiesenthal that, as soon as Simon was

strong enough, they would be having a “long talk.” For five weeks, Wiesenthal was kept in the hospital and restored to some degree of health to be able to withstand the session with Waltke. The date was set for the “long talk” to begin on July 18, 1944. Fortunately, that same day, the Soviets began a bombardment of Lvov. Chaos ensued, with the SS men and prisoners scattering in all directions. *Miracle Number 6.*

What followed was a strange and fortunate sequence of events. The SS men were not eager to face the advancing Russians. They used the Jewish prisoners as an excuse to avoid combat. Two hundred SS men were going to guard thirty-four starved and weak Jews. First they began on a train; when the tracks ended, the SS confiscated thirty horse-drawn wagons from German civilians also fleeing the Soviet advance. One or maybe two Jews would ride in each wagon along with six or seven SS men. Writer Alan Levy refers to this as the “cowardly caravan.”<sup>6</sup>

Finally the SS man made camp near Grybow, a Polish city. There they had Wiesenthal paint a sign announcing that this was “SS Construction Staff Venus.” The idea was to make the camp look official. Eventually, the Soviet advance reached Grybow, forcing the SS to retreat even further until they reached the Plaszow concentration camp, near Cracow. Here, the trip finally ended with the SS men sent off to combat and the Jews sent off to concentration camps.

Wiesenthal was sent to the quarries near the Gross Rosen camp. Gross Rosen was a camp that specialized in the brutal treatment of both Jews and German political prisoners, who had been taken as part of Hitler’s campaign of *Nacht und Nebel*, which means “Night and Fog.” People who had resisted the Nazis either for political reasons or because of conscience were “disappeared” either to be killed or their fate was to be unknown. It would be as if they had disappeared into night and fog. It was here that Simon would hear a false rumor that Cyla was dead from a Polish prisoner who lived near Cyla’s last known residence. The house that she was staying in was, in fact, destroyed, but Cyla had already been taken to work at a factory.



As the Russians continued to advance, Simon was shifted from camp to camp. From Gross Rosen, he was transferred to Buchenwald. When the Russians neared Buchenwald, Simon was among six thousand Jews sent to Mauthausen. The transportation was via open trucks; the prisoners were given neither food nor water. Eighteen hundred died during the journey. When Wiesenthal reached Mauthausen, he weighed 90 pounds. He was placed in a barracks and left to starve to death. Fortunately a worker at the camp named Eduard Staniszewski came to the barracks looking for someone to draw a birthday greeting for a co-worker. In exchange for the drawing, Wiesenthal received a small sausage and a piece of bread. Other projects followed, each with a small payment of food. It was only because of these “commissions” that Simon was able to survive until the Allies liberated the camp. Call this *Miracle Number 7.*

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<sup>6</sup> *The Wiesenthal File*, Alan Levy, William Eerdmans Publishing, Michigan, 1993



Wiesenthal also did a series of drawings that were intended to capture the horror of the camp. His most famous is of three prisoners being executed.

On May 5, 1945, a platoon of 23 men from the 11th Armored Division of the US Third Army, led by Staff Sgt. Albert J. Kosiek, arrived at the main camp near the town of Mauthausen. They were guided there by Louis Haefliger, a Red Cross representative in the camp, and two German soldiers, after first liberating the Gusen sub-camp, 6 kilometers to the west.

Haefliger's testimony is recorded in a book called "The 186 Steps" and reads as follows:

*The camp at Mauthausen was overcrowded, and the camps of Gusen I and II filled beyond human limits. There were as many as five sick men to a narrow camp bed. There were sixty thousand human beings - men, women and children. Zierys (the camp commandant) no longer knew where to turn...He speeded up the work of annihilation as much as he could. The Krematorium chimney smoked day and night. The sanitary conditions were at the lowest imaginable level. They were dying of hunger. Zierys made believe that he was touched by this himself. He put on a self-pitying air, this man with whom I had to take my meals, this monster who once had a truck full of cadavers driven in front of his wife's window, to boast about his work.<sup>7</sup>*

In what seems to me an odd occurrence, the liberation of Mauthausen was reenacted the next day (May 6<sup>th</sup>) so that it could be filmed. Many of the pictures that you may have seen of the liberation are actually staged.

Sgt. Kosiek's testimony is also available:

*I saw things that I would never have believed if I hadn't seen them with my own eyes. I never thought that human beings could treat other human beings in this manner. The people that were alive made me wonder what kept them alive. They were only skin and bones.<sup>8</sup>*

Among the survivors was Simon Wiesenthal.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.scrapbookpages.com/Mauthausen/KZMauthausen/Liberation/index.html>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.gusen.org/kosiek1x.htm>

## Return to The World of the Living



Concentration camps extended from Koldichevo in the east to Natzweiler in the west. Mauthausen is roughly in the center. Because of its central position, and because the other camps had been evacuated due to the advancing armies of the US and the Soviets, many of those at Mauthausen had come from other concentration camps. Wiesenthal had gone from Janowksa to Gross Rosen to Buchenwald, with a stop outside Plaszow. Others at Mauthausen had been held at Auschwitz, Dachau and Bergen-Belsen. Mauthausen was collection point for those who survived and for their stories.

The motivation for Wiesenthal to begin collecting these stories, as well as thoroughly documenting his own account, occurred not long after liberation. A Polish barracks clerk named Kazimierz Rusinek was selected by the Americans to hand out passes to allow the survivors to leave the camp for a bit. When Wiesenthal asked for one, Rusinek responded that if the Nazis had still been there Wiesenthal would be dead for asking. He then beat Simon up and threw him out. Although he could barely walk after the beating, Wiesenthal was not going to take this abuse from someone who was supposed to help him. He got two other prisoners to help him get to the American commander's office. There he saw a sight that changed his life.

The Americans were bringing SS men in for questioning. These men that, just a little while before, had wielded the power of life and death over millions, were now standing around fearfully. The Americans had begun to investigate war crimes.

A life is changed by such small things: Rusinek's refusal to give Wiesenthal the pass; Wiesenthal's determination to go to the Americans to get justice; arriving at the same time and place that the Americans were conducting the first interviews. Call this *Miracle Number 8*. That day Wiesenthal just listened, but the next day he went back to the commander's office to make this offer to Lt. Abby Mann:

*"You liberated me, you saved my life. But I don't know what to do with my life. I have no one for whom or with whom I want to live. Now that I have seen what you're doing here in this office, I want to participate. That could be a task which would lend some meaning to my life. I spent four years in various concentration camps, in ghettos, and in Gestapo prisons. I've seen a lot and I have a good memory. I can help you find the criminals, put the right questions to them, question them. I don't expect any pay; I want to do it to justify my own survival."*

At this point, he did not know that Cyla was alive; in fact he had it on good authority that she was dead. This figured into Simon's state of mind; as far as he knew, he had nothing else to motivate him. Mann's reply was to ask Simon how much he weighed. Wiesenthal lied and said 130 pounds. Mann told him to come back when he was healthy, but since this might take a while, Wiesenthal could start by writing a letter of what he knew. Mann scarcely knew what he was asking for.

Wiesenthal's first list had ninety-one names, along with dates, locations and a description of the crimes. It was neatly typed. The list included the exact address for a railway clerk who Wiesenthal had seen shoot a woman; Frederick Warzog, the Janowska camp commandant, was on the list; Leo John of Plasgow, who had made a specialty of killing women and children; Amon Goth, whose predilection for shooting prisoners for sport is chronicled in Schindler's List.<sup>9</sup> After presenting the list, Wiesenthal asked if he could join the War Crimes unit. Mann replied, "Of course, you've been with us for a long time already."

Wiesenthal was originally attached to a Captain Tarracuso, whose family had come to America from Soviet Georgia in 1918. They were charged with bringing in SS guards who had served at Mauthausen and who remained in the area. Tarracuso allowed Wiesenthal to make arrests on his own. Initially Wiesenthal was so weak that he could barely walk up the two flights of steps to a small village house, but he gathered himself and arrested the SS guard living there. The former "superman" came along peacefully when commanded by his former prisoner. Thus began Wiesenthal's career as a Nazi hunter.

Wiesenthal's initial success working with the American War Crimes office was short-lived. After only three weeks, the area around Mauthausen was transferred to Soviet control. The Americans allowed Wiesenthal to transfer to Linz, Austria, where he began to work with the OSS, the precursor to the CIA, to find war criminals. But the American agenda of de-Nazification was shifting. The Cold War was beginning. Quickly the focus changed to finding and recruiting German scientists and counter-intelligence operatives to use against the Soviets. The shift in American interest allowed Nazis like Adolf Eichmann, Josef Mengele and Klaus Barbie to escape to South America.

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<sup>9</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amon\\_Goeth](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amon_Goeth)

Without active American support, Wiesenthal began collecting and documenting eyewitness accounts of war crimes, while the memories were still fresh and before the survivors began to disperse. Working with other Mauthausen survivors, he helped set up the Jewish Committee of Survivors in Linz and began conducting interviews. It was during the course of these interviews and Wiesenthal's extensive list making that yet another miracle occurred. Wiesenthal came across the name of a lawyer that he had known from before the war, Dr. Biener. He asked Biener to go to Warsaw to Topiel Street and see if he could recover the remains of Wiesenthal's wife, Cyla. Remember that, while he was in the quarries near the Gross Rosen camp, a Polish man had told Wiesenthal that his wife must have been killed, although such was not the case. Instead of coming back with Cyla's remains, Biener came back with Cyla herself, alive. That would make *Miracle Number 9*.

Again the direction of Simon's life is changed by such small circumstances. Had he known earlier that Cyla was alive, he would have certainly have sought her out; instead he worked first with the Americans and then on his own. He might have left Austria and returned to Poland. Instead he stayed in Austria and continued the process of interviewing survivors and documenting the Holocaust. When he discovered war criminals, he would do what he could to bring them to justice.

In the early days, Wiesenthal's efforts were not appreciated. He was running the center on a shoestring budget, usually contributions from American Jews, from survivors, and from small organizations. He had never made a decision to devote his life to being a Nazi hunter. Wiesenthal would say, "I assumed that the Allied governments and free nations of Europe would mount a serious effort to ferret out the estimated 150,000 criminals who committed crimes against humanity' as part of Germany's Final Solution of the Jewish Problem."<sup>10</sup> That never happened. By 1954, Wiesenthal's frustrations over the inaction and apathy of world governments led him to close the center. Its documents were sent to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Israel, except for one set of records that he claimed to have kept for himself: the dossier on Adolf Eichmann.

### **The Hunter**

Eichmann was an obsession for Wiesenthal, with good reason. In 1942, Eichmann had attended the Wannsee Conference as recording secretary; in this capacity he was the one to set down in writing Germany's policy of genocide<sup>11</sup>. He was given the position of Transportation Administrator for the Final Solution to the Jewish Question, which put him in charge of the trains that would take the Jews to the concentration camps. In 1944, he was sent to Hungary. While in Hungary, Eichmann tried to trade European Jews to the Allies in exchange for 10,000 trucks and other supplies, a program called "Blood for Goods." A transcript, as recalled by Joel Brand, a member of the Relief and Rescue Committee of Budapest (also known as the Va'ada) who Eichmann chose as his representative for negotiations with world Jewish leaders and the Allied governments, is available. It



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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.answers.com/topic/simon-wiesenthal>

<sup>11</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolf\\_Eichmann](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolf_Eichmann)

shows how Eichmann viewed the Jews:

*“Do you know who I am? I have carried out the Aktionen (actions) in the Reich – in Poland – in Czechoslovakia. Now it’s Hungary’s turn. I let you come here to talk business with you. Before that I investigated you – and your people. Those from the Joint and those from the Agency, and I have come to the conclusion that you still have resources. So I am ready to sell you – a million Jews.*

*All of them I wouldn’t sell you. That much money and goods you don’t have. But a million – that will go. Goods for blood – blood for goods. You can gather up the million in countries which still have Jews. You can take it from Hungary, from Poland, from Austria, from Theresienstadt, from Auschwitz, from wherever, you want. What do you want to save? Virile men? Grown women? Old people? Children? Sit down and talk.”*<sup>12</sup>

The negotiations would be blocked by the British government who were concerned that the negotiations would split the allies, opposition by the Soviets and uncertainty as to what to do with a million Jews if they were saved. Neither the Americans nor the British were willing to take them in. Eichmann then began the extermination of Hungary’s Jewish population. He already had plans drawn up for their transportation to Auschwitz.

In 1945, Eichmann’s superior, *Reichsführer* Heinrich Himmler had ordered Jewish extermination to be halted and evidence of the Final Solution to be destroyed. Eichmann disagreed with this decision and continued the genocide of Hungarian Jews against orders. Not only did Eichmann want to exterminate all the Jews, he also wanted to avoid active combat.



When the war was over, Eichmann was captured by the US Army. He gave his name as Otto Echimann. In 1946, he escaped from custody and hid in a small town in Germany. In 1950, he traveled to Italy, where he posed as a refugee named Ricardo Klement. There he would be aided by Bishop Alois Hudal to obtain a Red Cross passport and Argentinean visa.

Bishop Hudal had been the author of the 1937 book *The Foundations of National Socialism* and had found favor with some Nazis; other Nazis were critical of Hudal and the Catholic Church in general<sup>13</sup>. After 1945, Hudal began working in the Ratline, a system of escape routes that took Nazis and other Fascists to safe havens mostly in South America, particularly Argentina, Paraguay, Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, and Bolivia. Other destinations included the United States, Great Britain, Canada and the Middle East.<sup>14</sup> On July 14, 1950, Eichmann would board a ship to Argentina; in 1952, he was able to arrange for his family to join him. It seemed the world had forgotten about him.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/nazioccupation/brand.html>

<sup>13</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alois\\_Hudal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alois_Hudal)

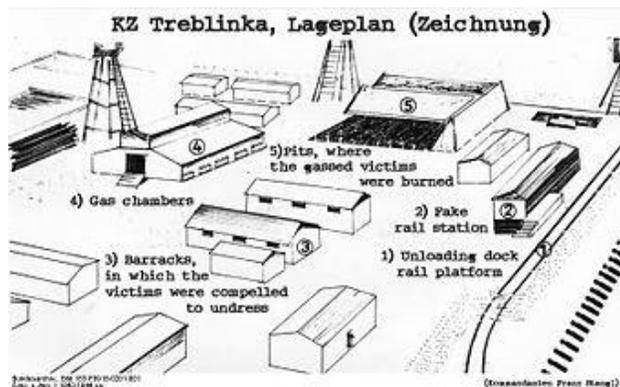
<sup>14</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ratlines\\_\(World\\_War\\_II\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ratlines_(World_War_II))

One of the reasons that Wiesenthal had stayed on in Linz was that Eichmann's family lived only a few blocks away from his office. Wiesenthal monitored the remaining members of Eichmann's family until they disappeared in 1952. In 1953, Wiesenthal learned from a letter that a man believed to be Eichmann had been seen in Buenos Aires. Wiesenthal had neither the funding nor the international support to continue his investigation. In 1954, he passed along Eichmann's possible location to the Israeli consulate in Vienna. In 1957, Fritz Bauer, a German prosecutor, received independent confirmation of Eichmann's location, but took no action. One of the handicaps that investigators faced was that no one was quite sure of how Eichmann looked after all these years. In 1960, Eichmann's father died. Wiesenthal arranged for photos to be taken of Eichmann's brother Otto who was said to have a strong resemblance to Adolf. Wiesenthal would provide these photos to Israel's Mossad. On May 11<sup>th</sup>, 1960, Eichmann would be captured and taken to Israel for trial; Mossad agent Zvi Aharoni said that the pictures were useful in confirming Eichmann's identity. The day after Prime Minister Ben-Gurion announced Eichmann's capture, Wiesenthal was being interviewed. While the interview was going on, he would receive a congratulatory telegram from Yad Vashem. Capitalizing on his status as minor celebrity, Wiesenthal would write a book entitled *Ich jagte Eichmann: Tatsachenbericht (I Chased Eichmann: A True Story)*. The book would be published six weeks before Eichmann's trial began.

Wiesenthal has been criticized for overstating his role in bringing Eichmann to justice. He always pointed out that his book was called *I Chased Eichmann* not *I Caught Eichmann*. Regardless of how it came about, Wiesenthal had emerged as the living reminder of the Holocaust and in particular that those who had committed war crimes were being allowed to live unmolested. His greatest strengths were his meticulous record keeping and his indefatigable spirit. He would help the prosecution prepare their case and attended part of Eichmann's trial. In 1962, Eichmann would be convicted, sentenced to death and hanged.

The Eichmann case was only the first of a number of cases in which Wiesenthal figured. He would reopen the Jewish Documentation Center, this time in Vienna, and concentrated on finding war criminals. In his book *The Murderers Among Us*, Wiesenthal talks about attending a performance of the play *The Diary of Anne Frank*. The performance is interrupted by a group of Holocaust deniers. Wiesenthal's response is to track down Karl Silberbauer, the Gestapo officer who arrested Anne Frank. Silberbauer was working as a police inspector in Austria; he would confess "Yes, I arrested Anne Frank."<sup>15</sup>

In October 1966, sixteen SS officers, nine of them found by Wiesenthal, went on trial in Stuttgart, West Germany, for participation in the extermination of Jews in Lvov. In 1967, Wiesenthal tracked down Franz Stangl, who was living in Sao Paulo, Brazil. So confident was Stangl of his safety that he had registered at the Austrian consulate under his own name. Stangl had been commandant of the Sobibor extermination camp, where



<sup>15</sup> <http://www.wiesenthal.com/site/pp.asp?c=lsKWLbPJLnF&b=4441293#.USFJfaU4vIc>

100,000 Jews were murdered, before moving on the Treblinka camp. During Stangl's time, over 700,000 Jews were believed to have been gassed there. Because he wore a white uniform, Stangl was nicknamed "The White Death." Wiesenthal stated that he was charged by an informant (believed to have been Stangl's brother-in-law) a penny per Jew or \$7000 for Stangl's location. In 1970, Stangl was convicted and sentenced to life in prison. He would die of heart failure in Düsseldorf prison on June 28, 1971.



Less successful was Wiesenthal's pursuit of Josef Mengele, the camp doctor at Auschwitz, who performed horrible experiments on human subjects. He was nicknamed *The Angel of Death* (*Todesengel*.) He would evade capture, live out his life without ever being brought to justice and would die in Brazil in 1979. Mossad had actually discovered Mengele's whereabouts in 1960 in Buenos Aires. But they hadn't gotten Eichmann out of South America as yet and held off. Mengele would then flee to Paraguay. Years later Wiesenthal thought that he found Mengele based on a sighting; but all he succeeded in proving was that Mengele was dead by that time.

In 1967, Wiesenthal was on tour to promote his book *The Murders Among Us* and was visiting New York. Using the publicity of the book tour to provide a platform he called attention to the case of Mrs. Hermine Ryan, formerly Hermine Braunsteiner, a housewife living in Queens, New York. According to Wiesenthal's dossier on her, Mrs. Ryan had supervised the killings of several hundred children at the Majdanek concentration camp. She had actually been traced to her American home in 1964, an article had even appeared in the NY Times, but nothing had been done. Wiesenthal used his notoriety to get the case reopened. It still took nine years from the original discovery for her to be extradited to Germany for trial as a war criminal in 1973. At her trial she would be charged with "collaborative murder in 1,181 cases and being an accessory to murder in 705 cases." The trial, like the extradition, would drag on for years; she would eventually be found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment.<sup>16</sup> She would die in 1999, eighteen years after her sentencing.



It is difficult to say that justice was meted out in these cases. How can one even talk about a just punishment for the crimes that these monsters had committed? Eichmann was hanged, but most of the other war criminals were sent to prison. By the time they were sentenced, they were old men and women anyway. Stangl's actual time in prison was less than two years. Some war criminals received relatively light sentences, a few years. Some were not even found guilty of any crime. Silberbauer, who sent Anne Frank off to her death, was never even removed from the police force. He was suspended during the investigation, but then returned to work afterwards. Silberbauer, like many Nazis,

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<sup>16</sup> [http://www.simon-wiesenthal-archiv.at/02\\_dokuzentrum/02\\_faelle/e05\\_braunsteiner.html](http://www.simon-wiesenthal-archiv.at/02_dokuzentrum/02_faelle/e05_braunsteiner.html)

would get to live a full life; to see to see his children grow; to see grandchildren. Experiences that he had denied to others.

So why was Wiesenthal's work so important?

### **The Later Years**

Simon Wiesenthal lived for 60 years after his rescue from the Mauthausen camp. He devoted almost his entire life to documenting the Holocaust, to recording the memories of survivors, to finding war criminals and seeing them brought into court. He also wrote about the Holocaust and traveled the world to speak. Cyla would be by his side for 58 of those years. It was only after Cyla died in 2003 that Wiesenthal retired. Toward the end, Cyla had urged Simon to move to Israel, to be near their daughter and their three grandchildren. Simon, however, was not willing to give up his work.

Wiesenthal's work was considered to have been instrumental in the trials of over 1,000 of these criminals. Yet the task must have seemed insurmountable. According to Wiesenthal, approximately 150,000 Germans and Austrians were involved in war crimes. Other authors put the number at over 200,000. Germany has tried about 90,000 individuals, but only about 6,500 received severe sentences. In Poland, the country that had the largest number of concentration camps, trials actually started before the war ended. The first trials date back to September of 1944, more than six months before the war ended. Almost 5,550 criminals were tried in Poland. Notorious murderers including Amon Goeth, commandant of the Plaszow camp, and Rudolf Hoess, the first commandant of Auschwitz, were hanged by order of the Polish courts.<sup>17</sup>

One of Simon Wiesenthal's autobiographies is entitled "*Justice, Not Vengeance.*" Yet the magnitude of the crimes that the Nazis committed against humanity, against the Jews, the Romany, the countless other victims, these crimes were so great that it is hard to imagine justice being meted out by any court. There could have been revenge, but Wiesenthal rejected that. Wiesenthal recounts a story of a Jewish man who had seen his one murdered before his eyes. He helped find the SS man responsible and bring charges. At the trial, the family of the SS man, including his children and grandchildren, were in attendance. The Jewish man planned to sneak a knife into court and exact vengeance by attacking the grandchildren. Wiesenthal talked him out of taking vengeance.

But while there could not be justice on an individual level, no fit punishment for the crimes committed, there could be justice on a larger scale. One goal of the Nazis was to erase all memory of the Jewish people. Justice could take the form of not letting the world forget, of reminding the world that terrible crimes had been committed and must not be forgotten. It was to this cause, to keeping the memory of what happened alive and in the world's conscience, that Simon Wiesenthal would devote his life. He would say:

*When the Germans first came to my city in Galicia, half the population was Jewish: one hundred fifty thousand Jews. When the Germans were gone, five hundred were alive. ... Many times I was*

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<sup>17</sup> [http://www.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%2058887.pdf](http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%2058887.pdf)

*thinking that everything in life has a price, so to stay alive must also have a price. And my price was always that, if I lived, I must be deputy for many people who are not alive.*

Let me further add that every cause needs a face; otherwise it becomes just an idea. Simon Wiesenthal chose himself to become that face. Much of the criticism of Wiesenthal would come from that self-appointment.

Perhaps Wiesenthal's greatest victory was in overturning the 20-year statute of limitations in Germany, which would have effectively given the Nazis a free-pass after 1965. His lobbying efforts are credited with stopping that expiration.

### **His Later Days**

His efforts were not always appreciated. In April of 1970, Bruno Kreisky, a Jew and a Social Democrat, became chancellor of Austria. Wiesenthal pointed out to the press that four of Kreisky's cabinet appointees had been members of the Nazi party. This began a spate of accusations that would span years. Leopold Gratz, the Minister of Education and Culture characterized Wiesenthal's Jewish Documentation Centre as a "private spy ring, invading the privacy of innocent parties." In an interview a week later, Kreisky himself described Wiesenthal as a "Jewish fascist", a remark he later denied making.

In 1975, when Kreisky was up for re-election and unsure of his majority, he proposed an alliance with the Freedom Party, headed by Friedrich Peter. Wiesenthal had proof that Peter had been a member of the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Infantry Brigade, a unit that had exterminated over 13,000 Jews in Ukraine between 1941 and 1942. He did not disclose this information until after the election, which Kreisky won without Peter's help. Peter denied participating in or having knowledge of the atrocities. Kreisky said that Wiesenthal used "the methods of a quasi-political Mafia." But beyond that, he would accuse Wiesenthal of having worked for the Germans, being an agent of the Gestapo and of working with the Judenrat of Lvov. He claimed that he had proof of these accusations in an archive. Wiesenthal sued Kreisky for libel. The suit dragged on until 1989, when it was settled in Wiesenthal's favor. The archives were opened, no proof was found. Kreisky died nine months after the verdict and his heirs refused to pay Wiesenthal the court ordered settlement.

In 1971, when Kurt Waldheim was named Secretary-General of the United Nations, Wiesenthal reported that there was no evidence of any Nazi past. In this he failed to check the records. It turned out that Waldheim had been a member of the SA, the Brown Shirts. During the war, Waldheim served in Yugoslavia and Greece, had knowledge of massacres of civilians, although there was no evidence that he participated. Wiesenthal, out of embarrassment, stuck to his assertion and participated in Waldheim's defense. In 1976, Waldheim was re-elected as Secretary-General; in 1986, he became President of Austria. When allegations again surfaced, Kreisky defended Waldheim and Waldheim continued to assert that he was not aware of any war crimes. This time, Wiesenthal reversed himself. Waldheim had been stationed only five miles from Salonika when the Jewish community there was shipped to Auschwitz. This time Wiesenthal said "I cannot believe you."

Wiesenthal had been wrong about Martin Bormann escaping Germany; Bormann had committed suicide in 1945. He thought that Mengele was alive years after he had died. What most galled

critics of Wiesenthal was the perception that he tried to take credit for the capture of Eichmann. His assertion that he kept the Eichmann file has been challenged; Tuviah Friedman, Wiesenthal's counter-part at the Documentation Center in Vienna may have actually kept the files.<sup>18</sup> There are errors in his books. Wiesenthal would often tell several different versions of the same anecdote. A drawing that he made in 1945 that he said was of a scene that he had witnessed in Mauthausen was actually based on photos that had appeared in *Life* magazine.

Despite those errors and inconsistencies, Wiesenthal was able to accomplish a tremendous amount of good in his role. The Simon Wiesenthal Center is headquartered in Los Angeles with offices in New York, Toronto, Miami, Chicago, Paris, Buenos Aires, and Jerusalem. Its mission is to defend the safety of Jews worldwide and to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive. The Center has established Museums of Tolerance in Los Angeles, Jerusalem and New York, dedicated to confronting bigotry and racism. More than 5 million have visited the branches. Moriah Films, the multimedia division, has produced 11 movies, two of which (*Genocide*, made in 1981 and *The Long Way Home*, made in 1997) have won Academy Awards.<sup>19</sup>

In a statement on Wiesenthal's death, Council of Europe chairman Terry Davis said, "Without Simon Wiesenthal's relentless effort to find Nazi criminals and bring them to justice, and to fight anti-Semitism and prejudice, Europe would never have succeeded in healing its wounds and reconciling itself. He was a soldier of justice, which is indispensable to our freedom, stability and peace."

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<sup>18</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuviah\\_Friedman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuviah_Friedman)

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.wiesenthal.com/>

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