

**Spring School “MEMORYSCAPES OF THE
HOLOCAUST IN ROMANIA”**

2019, May 21st-25th

Șimleu Silvaniei

**Elie Wiesel’s commitment to spread the
legacy of the Holocaust:
a call to conscience**

Sonia CATRINA, PhD

**The ‘Elie Wiesel’ National Institute for the Study of the
Holocaust in Romania**

Overview of the research

Objectives

To analyse the production, usages and circulation of the Holocaust Jewish survivors' memories within mainstream societies. To disclose the social or political contexts that led Holocaust Jewish survivors taking position.

To particularly analyse Elie Wiesel's commitment to spread the legacy of the Holocaust and keep it alive, as a manner to fight hatred, promote human dignity and stand up to injustice. on this issue.

Theoretical Background

Young: “cultural memory” as “received history” = the testimony of witnesses **transmitted** through memoirs, oral history or public discourses.

Assmann: memories **publicly communicated, circulate and compete with each other to become official narrative.** Objectified and institutionalized memories, framed as “cultural memory”, these narratives are internalized by individuals and appropriated as common references to the past.

“cultural memory” = the general framework within which the past acquires a meaning and its convey a society’s self-image

Hirsch: “**mediated cultural memories**” = are the effect and affect of fragmented personal and collective experiences articulated, performed, and interpreted through various technologies or media of memory”

Rothberg: Holocaust memories as “**multidirectional**”, considering the memorial flow “as subject to on-going negotiation, cross-referencing and borrowing; as productive and not privative”

Research Questions

When did Holocaust survivors begin to share their eyewitness testimonies?

What has determined them to cross that uncrossable barrier?

How do their testimonies cross generational boundaries to inform a wider community?

Main axes of my presentation

- (1) the stages of the Holocaust memory-making**
- (2) the Holocaust survivors' decision to bear witness and embark on talking about their experiences during the war**
- (3) the Elie Wiesel's call to conscience to spread the legacy of the Holocaust**

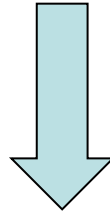
I. The Holocaust memorialization: from a local endorsement to a global perspective

- I. > 1960: the period of “**stunning silence**”, characterized by marginalization, repression and forgetting the wartime horrors
- II. the Eichmann trial-1980’s: witnesses = **embodiment of memory**, privatization and individuation of memory
- III. 1980-1990’s: new frontiers in Holocaust memorialization because of the interest for a witness perspective.

The new ways of appropriating the past allowed the **transnationalization of the Holocaust memory** which gradually becomes an integral part of the global political and media agenda.

The Holocaust: **iconic status** and **source for self-conscience political action** >>> **cosmopolitan memory: it can happen to anyone, at any time, and everyone is responsible.**

January 2000, *Stockholm International Forum Conference on the Holocaust*: to discuss the importance of Holocaust education, remembrance and research



Holocaust memorative activity becomes “multidirectional”. The ‘common European identity’ does not replace national identities, on the contrary, it allows for the emergence of multiple ‘versions of the past’. National memories are similarly influenced and transfigured by a transnational European collective memory under the impact of Europeanization.

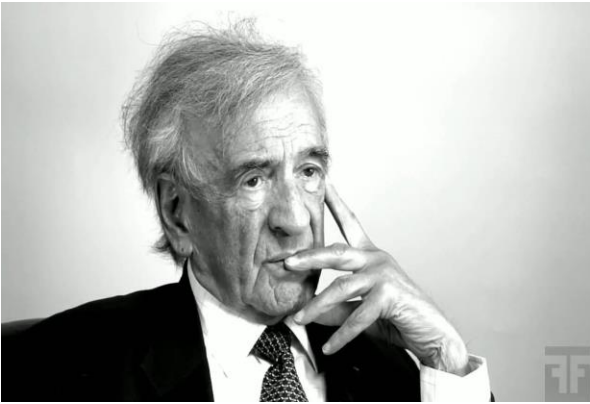
II. Moral Responsibility in the Holocaust memorialization

The memory of the Holocaust: **ambivalent** and even **antithetical reactions**

1) ? the motives of those who seek to perpetuate Holocaust memory in public consciousness, “Holocaust industry”, denial, revisionist attitudes etc.

2) Holocaust survivors: testimonies, memorial acts, in an attempt to publicly frame the Holocaust, as a work through the traumatic past. Their engagement in memory-work = social responsibility, as the process of memory-building “is not merely about remembering and forgetting, it is about connecting memory to on-going events, to the self in contemporary society, to social conscience”.

III. Elie Wiesel's lifetime engagement to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive



Wiesel began writing about the Holocaust after a **ten-year self-imposed vow of silence**, not to document historical truths about physical events, but to present his own history, as his memoir is concerned with the emotional truth about the Holocaust, as experienced by individuals, (“prisoner A-7713”).

Because of that horrific experience, Elie Wiesel became a leading advocate for human rights throughout the world. His life as an activist and author grew exponentially after his publication of “Night” in 1958. This book led to his writings on genocide and its aftermath, influencing generations and leading him to champion Soviet Jews, Nicaraguan Miskoto Indians, South African victims of apartheid and other human rights issues throughout his life, through the auspices of the Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity.

He was instrumental in the establishment of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, which opened in 1993 in Washington, D.C. The museum tells the dark story of the Holocaust, not only for the Jews, but for all who were victims of the Nazi regime, including persons with disabilities, Gypsies, homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witness and Catholics.

His tireless advocacy for human rights and keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive won him a Nobel Peace

Elie Wiesel, *Nobel Lecture* / December 11, 1986

Of course we could try to forget the past. Why not? Is it not natural for a human being to repress what causes him pain, what causes him shame? Like the body, memory protects its wounds. When day breaks after a sleepless night, one's ghosts must withdraw; the dead are ordered back to their graves. But for the first time in history, we could not bury our dead. We bear their graves within ourselves....

For us, forgetting was never an option.

Remembering is a noble and necessary act. The call of memory, the call to memory, reaches us from the very dawn of history. No commandment figures so frequently, so insistently, in the Bible. It is incumbent upon us to remember the good we have received, and the evil we have suffered. ... the rejection of memory becomes a divine curse, one that would doom us to repeat past disasters, past wars....

We emerged from the nightmare and began to search for meaning

We must remember the suffering of my people, as we must remember that of the Ethiopians, the Cambodians, the boat people, Palestinians, the Mesquite Indians, the Argentinian “desaparecidos” – the list seems endless.....

*There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest. Mankind needs peace more than ever, for our entire planet, threatened by nuclear war, is in danger of total destruction... A destruction only man can provoke, only man can prevent. Mankind must remember that **peace is not God’s gift to his creatures, it is our gift to each other.***

Thank you!

Sonia CATRINA

soniacatrina@gmail.com