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EDITOR'S DESK

Wiesel's Calls To Action Still Resonate

Nobel Laureate's son praises anti-Trump marchers for 'reminding us of my father's message.'

BY GARY ROSENBLATT | February 1, 2017, 8:52 am |

Even as the first attendees were gathering downtown Sunday afternoon for a marathon reading of "Night," Elie Wiesel's terse, haunting account of his experience as a teenager in a Nazi death camp, the drama was building for a singularly poignant encounter — between history and current events, between politics and principle and between fathers and sons, as Elisha Wiesel continued a family tradition of speaking truth to power.

The "community reading," as the press release described it, featured more than 70 "notable New Yorkers" — I was honored to be among them — each reading at least a page from the book; it lasted five hours in all. The event was timed to commemorate International Holocaust Remembrance Day (Jan. 27) and to mark the death of Wiesel, the Nobel Peace Laureate and the Shoah's most famous survivor, who died last summer.

The site was the Museum of Jewish Heritage-A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty, the symbol of freedom and of America's welcoming embrace of newcomers from around the world. And the program took place amidst the sounds of protests from many thousands who gathered in the adjacent Battery Park to call out President Trump's executive order restricting immigration.

Walking among the crowd prior to the reading, I saw young and old holding signs like "Which of us is next?" and "This is Un-American" and "We are the popular vote." They roared in assent as politicians and activists called on the president to undo his order.

I could well imagine Wiesel speaking to the throng in a voice both gentle and firm. "No human race is superior; no religious faith is inferior," he once said. "All collective judgments are wrong. Only racists make them."

As the conscience of a generation, Wiesel spoke out against inequality and inaction at home and around the world. "There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice," he said, "but there must never be a time when we fail to protest."

Those thoughts lingered with me as I walked from the park to the museum, the crowd's chants still ringing in my ears.

Backstage, Zalman Mlotek, artistic director of The National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene, was greeting the readers and working to ensure that the program would go as smoothly as it did, preparing to shuffle readers on and off the stage without taking away from the dramatic impact of Wiesel's narrative.

The Folksbiene partnered with the museum in presenting the program, and it was Mlotek's idea to pay tribute to Wiesel by having "Night" read aloud, a first for the museum. He reminded me that the original manuscript of the book that became "Night" was written in Yiddish.

It was more than 800 pages and filled with rage. Only over a period of years, and with the help and encouragement of French Catholic writer Francois Mauriac, did young Wiesel chisel down and reshape his memoir into a hundred pages of simple, unalloyed sentences made all the more powerful by describing the horror, and his inability to save his father with him in the camps, in such a straightforward manner.

"We felt it was the right time and the right thing to do," Mlotek told me.

The readers came from such a mix of backgrounds and professions. There were New York officials like Department of Education Chancellor Carmen Farina, Comptroller Scott Stringer and former Gov. Eliot Spitzer. Foreign dignitaries included Israeli Consul General in New York Dani Dayan and the French Ambassador to the UN Francois Delattre. Most poignant was the presence and readings of German Consul General in New York Brita Wagener and Hungary's UN Ambassador Katalin Bogyay.

Among the prominent Jewish leaders taking part were Rabbi Yitz and Blu Greenberg, Rabbi Amichai Lau Lavie, museum chair Bruce Ratner, Jewish Funders Network's Andres Spokoiny and Dr. Ruth Westheimer.

Journalists and writers included Andre Aciman, Joseph Berger, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, Ann Curry, Jane Eisner, Pia Lindstrom and Edward Rothstein. From the arts, Ellen Burstyn, Tova Feldshuh, Joel Grey, Sheldon Harnick, David Hyde Pierce and Ron Rifkin. And there were young students and aging Holocaust survivors who read as well.

Throughout the reading, the images of innocent citizens targeted for discrimination because of their religion and memories of the rapid breakdown of societal norms were hard for those in the audience to ignore, especially after the ADL's former national director, Abraham Foxman, drew a parallel to the current political unrest in America in his opening remarks.

Prior to the reading of "Night," Foxman, a child survivor of the Holocaust, recalled Wiesel as one who "taught us the importance of memory and … how to remember," gave voice to the survivors and "set a moral standard" by raising his voice. Noting that Wiesel taught "never to be indifferent," he cited the Nobel Laureate's quote: "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference."

"Yesterday," he continued, addressing Wiesel, "we witnessed the Statue of Liberty being blindfolded and the words of Emma Lazarus gagged. We know we would have heard your moral voice of outrage."

Elisha Wiesel, his father's only child and now in his 40s with children of his own, closed the program by reading his father's Nobel acceptance speech of two decades ago. It read in part: "I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. 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."

Later Sunday evening, in a telephone interview, Wiesel marveled at "the amazing confluence of events" from the day. In addition to the Battery Park rally and the dramatic reading, he pointed out that his father's father died in Buchenwald in 1945 — on Jan. 29, that day.

He was grateful to have a Ma'ariv (evening service) minyan at the museum following the program and to be able to recite Kaddish.

Hearing "Night" read aloud, with its tale of the suffering of his father, then a teenager, and his grandfather, was "a wildly personal affair for me," he acknowledged, "and to hear it spoken so powerfully by committed and passionate" people was deeply meaningful.

Asked if carrying the legacy of Elie Wiesel with him was more burden than blessing, he praised his father for allowing him to make his own way in life. "It was fantastic the way my father raised me," he said. "He didn't need me to be a continuation of him, to be a social activist or writer, but just to lead my life and be the bridge between generations. He wasn't afraid of that or the choices I made."

As for his thoughts on the new administration's actions, Wiesel said that while he recognizes the need for security, "these moves show a lack of empathy. They are very troubling because they have a real impact on real people … telling the world: 'Our home is not so welcoming.'"

He shared his Facebook posting describing how proud his father was to be an American, despite the country's flaws.

Elisha Wiesel thanked the public readers of "Night" at the museum that day for "honoring my father's memory and reminding us of his message" and the Battery Park marchers for not being silent, and for acting on his father's message.

"Thank you for being my father's America," he wrote.

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