

The birthplace of a legend

Unearthing precious memories at
Elie Wiesel's childhood home in Romania

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Photos by MARC ISRAEL SELLEM

"Before me, always, is the photograph of the house in which I was born. The door that leads to the yard. The kitchen. I want to go inside, but I am afraid. I want to look at the house, if only from afar. With all that has happened to me, it is essential for me to remember that place." – Elie Wiesel

SIGHET, Romania – Two days before Passover in 1944, on the night before he and his family were rounded up and forced into ghettos and later deported to Auschwitz, 15-year-old Elie Wiesel dug a hole in the garden of his home and buried a gold watch his beloved grandfather had given him.

Two decades later, after surviving the Holocaust, Wiesel returned to Sighet by himself and, under the cover of darkness, crept into the garden to see if the watch was still there.

A week ago Sunday, I sat in the house in Sighet in which he was born in 1928, and moderated an interview with him via Skype in New York.

As he sat in New York, smiling with his jaw resting in his hand, I asked him where he had buried the famous watch.

He laughed. "Twenty years later, when I came back to Sighet, I found where I buried my gold watch under a tree, and I put it back," he said. "I don't want anyone to find it."

The story speaks volumes, according to Wiesel scholar Joel Rappel.

"It's symbolic," Rappel says. "Just like the watch, time stood still." But although the watch remains buried, its memory lives on in our minds because of Wiesel's story.

Wiesel's parents, Shlomo Wiesel and Sarah Fieg, as well as his younger sister Tzipora, died in Nazi death camps, while he and his two older sisters, Beatrice and Hilda, survived.

Some 10,000 Jews from Sighet, almost half of the town's population, were loaded onto freight trains from May 16 to 22, 1944, and sent to Auschwitz. Only 1,000 to 2,000 survived, and while a few returned to Sighet after the war, the majority were spread across the world.

On the weekend of May 16-19 this year, more than 100 "Sigheteni" – a few survivors as well as second- and third-generation Jews from the Transylvanian border town, including some of Wiesel's cousins from Israel – gathered in Sighet to mark the 70th-anniversary commemoration of the Jewish deportations under the Hungarian government. They came from Israel, the US, the UK, South America and South Africa.

In a particularly moving ceremony at the Sighet City Hall on the morning of May 18, in the presence of Mayor Ovidiu Nemes, they lit candles for their relatives who perished during the Holocaust, and cried as they told their stories.

That afternoon, they joined residents of the town in attending the opening of the Holocaust Cellar education center adjacent to the garden in Wiesel's home, which Wiesel himself opened as a Holocaust Museum in 2002. In total, more than half a million Jews from northern Transylvania were murdered or died during the Holocaust; the learning center contains photographs and archival mate-



A MAN sits in the garden of the childhood home of Elie Wiesel, now a Holocaust Museum.

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I found where I buried my gold watch under a tree,
and I put it back.'*

- Elie Wiesel



MOSHE ISZAK, four (right) and Hershel Iszak, three, who were murdered in the Holocaust. They were the brothers of IDF Col. (res.) Eli Izhaki. Two of Izhaki's grandparents and all of the cousins from his father's side also perished. (Courtesy Eli Izhaki)



rial dedicated to the local victims.

"The education center commemorates the terrible fate that befell the Jews of this area, and ensures their story will not be forgotten," said Chaim Chesler, founder of Limmud FSU and chairman of the Claims Conference Memorial Committee. "Next year, I hope Wiesel will be able to come here himself to see it for himself, together with his family."

It was Chesler who initiated the idea of the education center, which was dug out and renovated over the last year or two under the supervision of Eli Izhaki, a retired IDF colonel and Jewish Agency official. Izhaki grew up in Transylvania and lost most of his family during the Holocaust – including two brothers, four-year-old Moshe Iszak and three-year-old Hershel Iszak.

"It took a lot of hard work to dig up this cellar and renovate it," Izhaki said. "But it was worth it. It means a great deal to me and other survivors."

Funding for the Holocaust Cellar came jointly from the government of Romania, the City of Sighet, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, the Elie Wiesel National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Romanian Jewish Federation, the Caritatea Foundation and Limmud FSU.

Among those in attendance were Romanian Religious Affairs Minister Viktor Opaschi, Deputy Education Minister Irinia Cajal, Claims Conference Vice President Ben Helfgott, Sighet Jewish community head Harry Marcus, Romanian Chief Rabbi Rafael Sheffer, cantor Yosef Adler, and Eliesabet Ungurianu, director of the Wiesel Institute in Romania. The rabbi spoke in Romanian and Hebrew, Helfgott in Yiddish and English, and the cantor sang kaddish.

"This is one of the most emotional moments of my life," Nemes said, speaking through a translator. "The Holocaust is the cruelest crime of humanity. I have made a promise to the Jews of Sighet to make the town the most important place of pilgrimage in Transylvania. We are trying all the time to remember those Jews who were once part of this city. To all of you who once had family in Sighet, welcome home!"

"Not only have I witnessed this morning a very wonderful memorial service, but I was very touched by it," said Helfgott, 84, a Holocaust survivor from Poland who now lives in the UK. "Those dealing with Holocaust education and remembrance are performing a very important task, because we should never forget what has happened. I don't know of any other particular town that has made such a moving memorial."

Hermann Kahan, who was born in 1926 and was a childhood friend of Wiesel, sang an emotional Shabbat kiddush over wine, "just as the rabbi used to sing before the Shoah."

Kahan and a sister survived the Nazi concentration camps and settled in Norway, but his mother and another sister were murdered in the Auschwitz gas chambers and his father died tragically just 10 days after he was liberated.

"I am very sorry that Elie is not here with us today, but he would feel the same way I feel," said >>



ELIE WIESEL speaks via Skype from New York after the inauguration of the Holocaust Cellar education center.



AT THE opening of the Holocaust Cellar education center in Sighet. (From left: Elisabeta Ungurianu, director of the Wiesel Institute in Romania, Chaim Chesler, the initiator on behalf of the Claims Conference of this project, Sighet Mayor Ovidiu Nemes and Claims Conference vice president Ben Helfgott.)

Kahan, a retired businessman and leader of the Oslo Jewish community. “Because we survived the Holocaust, continuity is very important for us. That’s why you have children and grandchildren, and you are so happy about this. Because it didn’t stop with you. To see the second and third generations here, it is so moving. I think if the Garden of Eden is like this, then I’m in paradise.”

Kahan, who grew up as a hassid, said that he had not lost faith in God despite being tortured by the Nazis, but very much believed that the State of Israel was the one thing that would prevent a Holocaust from happening again.

“When I married a lovely Jewish woman, I told her it was very important for us to raise our children in a Zionist way. So we had five children, four of whom now live in Israel, and they have given me 17 grandchildren and 18 great-grandchildren,” he said.

In 2013, he received Norway’s highest award, commander of the Order of St. Olav, for his efforts to promote tolerance and understanding. He was invited to the royal palace when President Shimon Peres recently visited Oslo.

“I had a beautiful childhood, until I was 17,” Kahan recalled. “We spent the whole day studying in *heder* and, after the age of 12, in a yeshiva in the area, and all the hassidim spent Shabbat with the rabbi. I studied both with Elie Wiesel and with David Halivni [who later became a renowned Talmud scholar]. We were all taken to Auschwitz, and were reunited many years after the end of the war.”

For his part, in the Skype interview, Wiesel said the world had not yet learned enough from the Holocaust.

“Sighet has never left me,” he said, noting that his parents had kept wine in the cellar of their house. “Shabbat in Sighet was like no other Shabbat I ever had, except Shabbat in Jerusalem. I hope to come to Sighet next year.”

Wiesel, the world’s most famous Holocaust survivor, is also a prominent human rights activist and the author of some five dozen books. His best-known book, *Night*, is based on his horrific experiences in the Auschwitz, Buna and Buchenwald camps.

The Nobel Committee, in awarding him the peace prize in 1986, called him a “messenger to mankind,” saying that through his struggle to come to terms with “his own personal experience of total humiliation and of the utter contempt for humanity shown in Hitler’s death camps” as well as his “practical work in the cause of peace,” he had delivered a powerful message “of peace, atonement and human dignity” to humanity.

He and his wife, Marion, established the Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity soon after he received the Nobel Prize, “to combat indifference, intolerance and injustice through international dialogues and youth-focused programs that promote acceptance, understanding and equality.” He has devoted his life to fighting prejudice and racism, as well as the violation of human rights throughout the world.

“To all of you at the opening of the new Holocaust Cellar in my home in my little town of Sighet in the Carpathian Mountains, I so wish that I could be there with you today,” he said, in his soft, deep voice. “The house I was raised in is now a museum, but to me it will always be uniquely special, eliciting the warmest of memories until the darkness of the kingdom of night befell us.”

The Elie Wiesel House is today a place of pilgrimage for thousands of visitors interested in its famous namesake, and the city is preparing a walking tour “in the footsteps of Elie Wiesel.”

Although he is credited with poignantly conveying the memories and messages of the Holocaust to millions of people around the world through his books, lectures and foundation, he himself doesn’t believe its horrors can ever be adequately expressed in words. He doesn’t particularly like the word “Holocaust,” because it doesn’t adequately convey the genocide of six million Jews, among others, by Hitler’s regime and their local collaborators. Seven decades later, he believes, the Shoah’s real historic meaning, like his gold watch, remains buried in the past.

As one of the survivors said, no one knows how many Elie Wiesel were lost during the Holocaust. But their memories live on in those who tell and teach their stories, and in Holocaust memorials, museums and education centers such as the one inaugurated in Sighet.

In *Night*, Wiesel famously wrote: “For the survivor who chooses to testify, it is clear: his duty is to bear witness for the dead and for the living. He has no right to deprive future generations of a past that belongs to our collective memory. To forget would be not only dangerous but offensive; to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time.”

As the group of Israeli journalists covering the event left the Wiesel House in Sighet, we were confronted by a shabbily dressed local man at the gate, pointing to the pens in our pockets. As I reached out to give him one of mine, I couldn’t help noticing the old gold watch on his left hand. ■



(FROM LEFT) Romanian Chief Rabbi Rafael Sheffer affixes a mezuzah at the entrance to the Holocaust Cellar, as Cantor Yosef Adler, Ben Helfgott, Chaim Chesler and Hermann Kahan look on.



A MAN walks past the childhood home of Elie Wiesel in Sighet.



(FROM LEFT) Sighet Mayor Ovidiu Nemes, Ben Helfgott, Hermann Kahan and Chaim Chesler tour the new Holocaust Cellar.