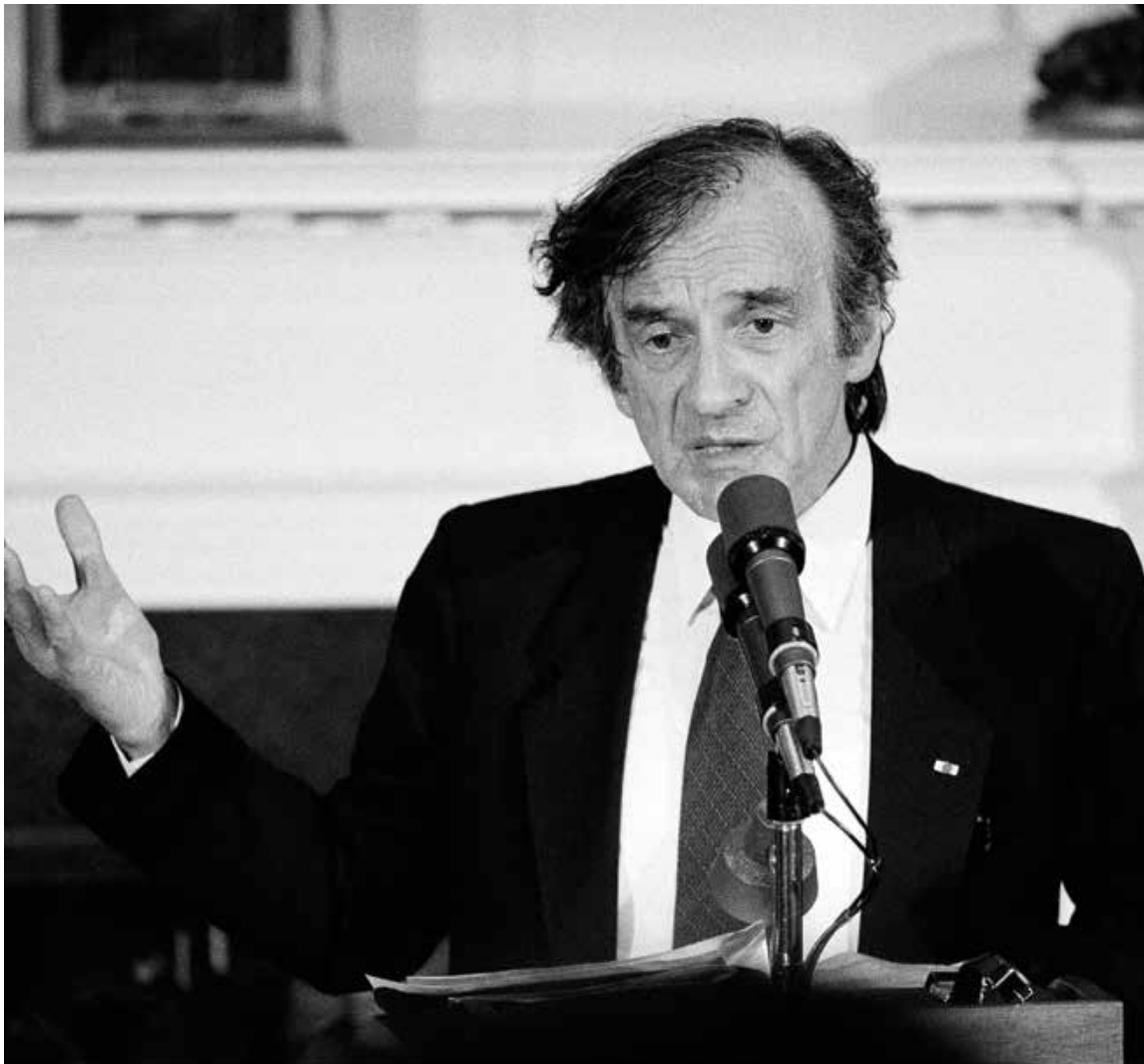


Congressional Gold Medal of Achievement

SPEECH | THE WHITE HOUSE | APRIL 19, 1985



Mr. President, Mr. Vice President, Secretary Bennett, Mr. Agresto, Mr. Regan, very distinguished members of the Senate, my friends—and of the House:

Mr. President, speaking of reconciliation, I was very pleased that we met before so a stage of rec-

onciliation has been set in motion between us. But then we were never on two sides; we were on the same side. We were always on the side of justice, always on the side of memory, against the SS, and against what they represent.

It was good talking to you, and I'm grateful to

you for the medal. But this medal is not mine alone. It belongs to all those who remember what SS killers have done to their victims. It was given to me by the American people for my writings, teaching, and for my testimony.

When I write, I feel my invisible teachers standing over my shoulders, reading my words and judging their veracity. And while I feel responsible for the living, I feel equally responsible to the dead. Their memory dwells in my memory.

Forty years ago, a young man awoke, and he found himself an orphan in an orphaned world. What have I learned in the last 40 years—small things. I learned the perils of language and those of silence. I learned that in extreme situations when human lives and dignity are at stake, neutrality is a sin. It helps the killers not the victims. I learned the meaning of solitude, Mr. President.

my entire life reciting their names, I would die before finishing the task. Mr. President, I have seen children—I have seen them being thrown in the flames alive. Words—they die on my lips.

So, I have learned. I have learned, I have learned the fragility of the human condition. And I'm reminded of a great moral essayist, the gentle and forceful Abe Rosenthal, having visited Auschwitz once wrote an extraordinary reportage about the persecution of Jews, and he called it, "Forgive them not Father, for they knew what they did."

I have learned that the Holocaust was a unique and uniquely Jewish event, albeit with universal implications. Not all victims were Jews, but all Jews were victims. I have learned the danger of indifference, the crime of indifference. For the opposite of love, I have learned, is not hate but indifference. Jews were killed by the enemy but be-

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We were alone, desperately alone. Today is April 19, and April 19, 1943, the Warsaw Ghetto rose in arms against the onslaught of the Nazis. They were so few and so young and so helpless, and nobody came to their help. And they had to fight what was then the mightiest legion in Europe. Every underground received help, except the Jewish underground. And yet, they managed to fight and resist and push back those Nazis and their accomplices for six weeks.

And yet, the leaders of the free world, Mr. President, knew everything and did so little or nothing or at least nothing specifically to save Jewish children from death.

You spoke of Jewish children, Mr. President; one million Jewish children perished. If I spent

trayed by their so-called allies who found political reasons to justify their indifference or passivity.

But I've also learned that suffering confers no privileges. It all depends what one does with it. And this is why survivors of whom you spoke, Mr. President, have tried to teach their contemporaries how to build on ruins, how to invent hope in a world that offers none, how to proclaim faith to a generation that has seen it shamed and mutilated. And I believe, we believe, that memory is the answer—perhaps the only answer.

A few days ago on the anniversary of the liberation of Buchenwald, all of us Americans watched with dismay and anger as the Soviet Union and East Germany distorted both past and present history. Mr. President, I was there; I was there

when American liberators arrived, and they gave us back our lives. And what I felt for them then nourishes me to the end of my days, and will do so. If you only knew what we tried to do with them then, we who were so weak that we couldn't carry our own lives—we tried to carry them in triumph!

Mr. President, we are grateful to the American Army for liberating us. We are grateful to this country—the greatest democracy in the world, the freest nation in the world, the moral nation, the authority in the world. And we are grateful especially to this country for having offered haven and refuge and grateful to its leadership for being so friendly to Israel.

Mr. President, do you know that the Ambassador of Israel, who sits next to you, who is my friend and has been for so many years, is himself a survivor? And if you knew all the causes we fought together for the last 30 years, you could be prouder of him. And we are proud of him.

And we are grateful, of course, to Israel; we are eternally grateful to Israel for existing. We needed Israel in 1948 as we need it now. And we are grateful to Congress for its continuous philosophy of humanism and compassion for the underprivileged.

And as for yourself, Mr. President, we are so grateful to you for being a friend of the Jewish people, for trying to help the oppressed Jews in the Soviet Union and to do whatever we can to save Sharansky and Abe Stolyar and Iosif Begun and Sakharov and all the dissidents who need freedom. And of course, we thank you for your support of the Jewish State of Israel.

But, Mr. President, I wouldn't be the person I am, and you wouldn't respect me for what I am, if I were not to tell you also of the sadness that is in my heart for what happened during the last week. And I am sure that you, too, are sad for the same reasons. What can I do? I belong to a traumatized generation. And to us, as to you, symbols are important. And furthermore, following our ancient tradition—and we are speaking about Jewish

heritage—our tradition commands us, quote: “to speak truth to power.”

So may I speak to you, Mr. President, with respect and admiration, of the events that happened. We have met four or five times, and each time I came away enriched, for I know of your commitment to humanity. And, therefore, I am convinced, as you have told us earlier when we spoke that you were not aware of the presence of SS graves in the Bitburg cemetery. Of course, you didn't know. But now we all are aware. May I, Mr. President, if it's possible at all, implore you to do something else, to find a way, to find another way, another site. That place, Mr. President, is not your place. Your place is with the victims of the SS.

Oh, we know there are political and strategic reasons, but this issue, as all issues related to that awesome event, transcends politics and diplomacy. The issue here is not politics but good and evil. And we must never confuse them, for I have seen the SS at work, and I have seen their victims. They were my friends. They were my parents. Mr. President, there was a degree of suffering and loneliness in the concentration camps that defies imagination. Cut off from the world with no refuge anywhere; sons watched helplessly their fathers being beaten to death; mothers watched their children die of hunger. And then there was Mengele and his selections, terror, fear, isolation, torture, gas chambers, flames—flames rising to the heavens.

But, Mr. President, I know and I understand, we all do, that you seek reconciliation. So do I. So do we. And I, too, wish to attain true reconciliation with the German people. I do not believe in collective guilt, nor in collective responsibility; only the killers were guilty. Their sons and daughters are not. And I believe, Mr. President, that we can and we must work together with them and with all people. And we must work to bring peace and understanding to a tormented world that, as you know, is still awaiting redemption.

I thank you, Mr. President.