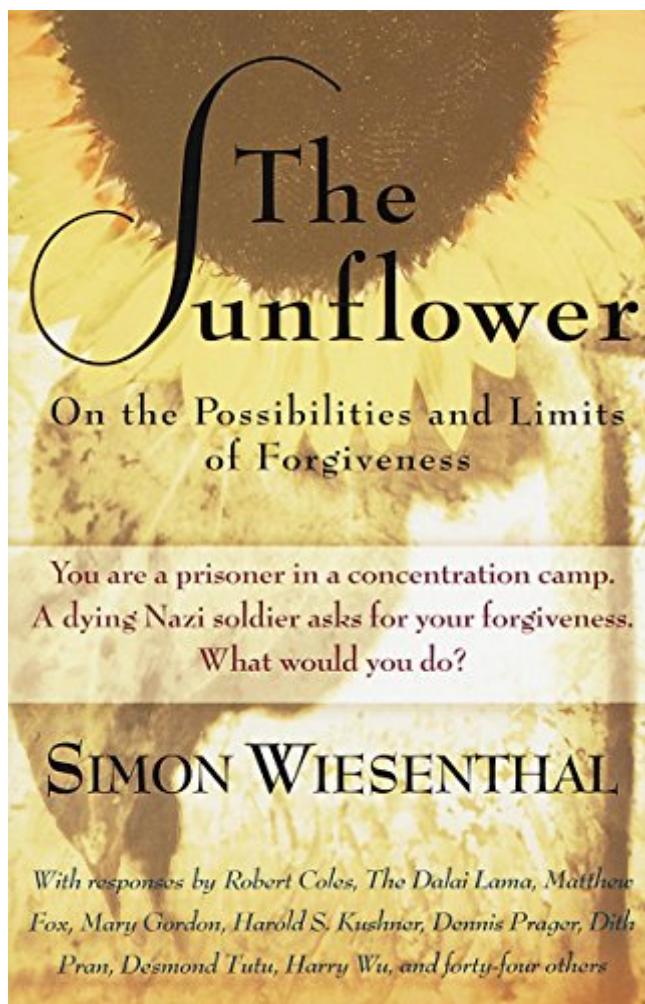


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# The Sunflower: On The Possibilities And Limits Of Forgiveness



## **Synopsis**

A Holocaust survivor's surprising and thought-provoking study of forgiveness, justice, compassion, and human responsibility, featuring contributions from the Dalai Lama, Harry Wu, Cynthia Ozick, Primo Levi, and more. While imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, Simon Wiesenthal was taken one day from his work detail to the bedside of a dying member of the SS. Haunted by the crimes in which he had participated, the soldier wanted to confess to--and obtain absolution from--a Jew. Faced with the choice between compassion and justice, silence and truth, Wiesenthal said nothing. But even years after the war had ended, he wondered: Had he done the right thing? What would you have done in his place? In this important book, fifty-three distinguished men and women respond to Wiesenthal's questions. They are theologians, political leaders, writers, jurists, psychiatrists, human rights activists, Holocaust survivors, and victims of attempted genocides in Bosnia, Cambodia, China and Tibet. Their responses, as varied as their experiences of the world, remind us that Wiesenthal's questions are not limited to events of the past.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Interesting book but I think the focus was slightly misplaced. Like most of those who responded, I agree, that obviously Simon can not forgive Carl for an act of murder done to a third party. But there is another element here and that is repentance for its own sake. Simon remains silent despite his assumption of the sincerity of Carl's regrets because he can not forgive him. I feel the correct answer would have been "I can not forgive you for what you did to someone else but use your remaining time alive to repent your actions and hopefully you will be forgiven in the next world" No matter how evil someone was, if they express sincere regret even if that regret will not undo anything, nor will it fully atone for them, nonetheless their repentance is to be encouraged

This is more like 2 books in one. The first is the story and the second is responses from scholars, religious leaders, and country leaders on what they would do or what they believe. Its a difficult question with no right answer. Since I've never been in that situation its hard to know what I would do, I probably would do just what he did, although it would haunt me. Its hard to forgive, even harder when the person has committed such heinous acts of cruelty. But if we don't forgive, if we reduce "them" to a subhuman category because of their behavior are we any better than they are? I'm not saying I could do it, but it does give me pause. It reminds me of the Amish parents who forgave the man who shot up an Amish school house. How do you forgive someone who just murdered your child? I don't know. Having compassion for people no matter what is something that is difficult to achieve. I do agree with most of the scholars though when they say you may be able to forgive but never ever forget.

[The Sunflower : On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness] by [Simon Wiesenthal] was a simply tender and thought provoking book. Simon Wiesenthal (famous Nazi-hunter) spent time in Auschwitz and Mauthusen before being liberated. While at Auschwitz he was sent to the hospital bed of a young, dying SS officer. This officer asked Wiesenthal to forgive him, although they personally had no contact with each other. The SS officer needed to be forgiven before he died. Wiesenthal did not forgive him, by keeping his silence. This young, 22 year old SS officer also gave Wiesenthal his mother's address and wanted him to tell his mother that he loved her. This always haunted Wiesenthal and years later he writes about it. Was it his place to forgive this Nazi for all Jewry? Did he have the authority or the right to do so? He visited the mother 4 years after the war and again, kept silent when the mother said, "He (SS officer) was such a good son." Again, Wiesenthal has pangs of conscience. The answer is never resolved. The second half of the book are the opinions of theologians and other philosophers on what they would have done in

Wiesenthal's situation. Very interesting reading.

Would you forgive the Nazi perpetrator? The Sunflower by Simon Wiesenthal

The Sunflower is a philosophical narrative about moral responsibility and the possibility—and limits—of forgiveness of genocide. In this parable, the narrator describes his hellish daily existence in the Lemberg concentration camp. The story reflects, in some respects, Wiesenthal's own experience in several Nazi concentration camps during WWII: including Janowska, Plaszow and Mauthausen. Although the narrative shies away from vivid descriptions of violence, it alludes to the sadistic mistreatment of Jewish inmates by SS officers as well as to the starvation, disease and constant threat of being shot or selected for the crematorium that were part and parcel of the daily horrors experienced by inmates. The book, originally published by Schocken Books in 1976, has been taught for decades in schools as an introduction to the Holocaust. Written in a simple yet elegant prose, The Sunflower has been especially popular because it raises the important questions about moral responsibility for national crimes and explores the victims' capacity for forgiveness. The latter point was particularly relevant to Wiesenthal, who spent years of his life tracking down Nazi fugitives and bringing them to trial for their crimes against humanity.

In a moment of rare beauty in his somber existence in the concentration camp, the narrator, a Jewish prisoner on his way to forced labor, sees a row of sunflowers planted on Christian soldiers' graves. In a poetic scene, the narrator describes how he is initially enthralled by the flowers' beauty, only to be later struck by its implications: he stared spellbound. The flower heads seemed to absorb the sun's rays like mirrors and draw them down into the darkness of the ground as my gaze wandered from the sunflower to the grave. It was gaily colored and butterflies fluttered from flower to flower. Were they whispering something to each flower to pass on to the soldier below? Yes, this was just what they were doing; the dead were receiving light and messages. (The Sunflower, Simon Wiesenthal, New York: Schocken Books, 1998, 14). As he overcomes his awe, he realizes that, as a Jewish prisoner, he will be deprived of dignity not only in life, but also in death. He will be shot and tossed into a mass grave or gassed and incinerated. For him, as for millions of other Jewish prisoners, "No sunflower would ever bring light into my darkness, and no butterflies would dance above my dreadful tomb." (15). When the narrator arrives at work, where he is charged with throwing away medical waste, a nurse signals him to follow her to a hospital bed. There the narrator sees a man enveloped in bandages, pale and rail thin. As this man addresses him with great difficulty, the narrator realizes that the dying man is a young German SS officer: a mortal enemy. Astonishingly enough, the officer

begs for his forgiveness for what he's done to other Jewish people. He doesn't excuse his behavior, but he describes some of its causes. He tells him about the Nazi indoctrination when he was in Hitler Youth. He speaks of the manuscripts and speeches that depicted Jews as a subhuman race and called for their annihilation, which he later encountered in his training as an SS officer. He also speaks of being subjected to tremendous peer pressure from fellow soldiers as well yielding to the pressure of following orders from his superiors. And yet, now that he's about to die, he feels a sense of responsibility and guilt for his murderous acts against defenseless civilians. He confesses that he was part of an SS brigade that hunted Jews down, forced dozens of them—defenseless men, women and children--into a house, then tossed hand grenades into the windows to kill all of them. Some people jumped, while on fire, from the broken windows. Still haunted by this vivid memory, the SS soldier can't expire in peace without some kind of atonement from a Jew: from a member of the group he and other soldiers victimized. The narrator is surprised by the request and paralyzed by indecision. He doesn't know how to respond. When he returns to the camp that evening, he tells his friends about this strange encounter. Adam, an architect, finds the SS soldier's request preposterous and trivial given that the Nazis were murdering millions of Jews. One less Nazi, he states cynically. Josek, a deeply religious Jew, maintains that he'd have refused the pardon with a clear conscience. How could his friend have forgiven atrocities of such a magnitude? And who was he to speak for millions of other victims? Both friends remain suspicious: Why would the Aryan Superman need the forgiveness of an inferior Jew? The narrator, however, sees the dying SS soldier as a fellow human being. The SS man's attitude toward me was not that of an arrogant superman. Probably I hadn't successfully conveyed all my feelings: a subhuman condemned to death at the bedside of an SS man condemned to death (67). Of course, their circumstances were far from symmetrical. In fact, they were diametrically opposed. Still unsure of his own ethical stance, the narrator asks each of us, readers, to ask ourselves: If faced with the Nazi soldier's dying request for forgiveness, What would I have done? (98) If we read the transcripts of the Nazi leaders put on trial, we see that this question of forgiveness doesn't come up often for the perpetrators: at least not in the public trials. Adolf Eichmann or Rudolf Hoss, for instance, express no regret or compunction for their crimes. They deny all sense of personal responsibility and blame only the Nazi system and their superiors for their murderous deeds. Yet for the victims, the question is extremely relevant because it asks them to consider at least some of the perpetrators as human: as men capable of guilt and regret for their crimes. Wiesenthal's

simple moral parable shows the Nazis as a diverse group who nevertheless behaved the same way. Not every SS soldier hated Jews. Not every SS soldier was a ruthless sadist. Not every SS soldier gladly followed orders to butcher innocent people. Yet almost every SS soldier chose, like the man in *The Sunflower*, to follow such orders, to commit such crimes. Almost every SS soldier killed countless innocent Jews. How could this happen? Understanding what forces were at play to make genocide possible doesn't mean forgiving perpetrators or exonerating them of blame. But without a sociological, and historical, understanding of how tens of thousands of German citizens—some of whom were ordinary men, like the soldier in this story--were capable of such atrocities, we are likely to overlook the vulnerability of our own times. Claudia Moscovici, Literature Salon

This is a thoughtful, difficult book and subject. It was well-written as well as engaging and should be read by everyone. Why? -- History is often repeated by those who do not consider the bigger picture of life: the age old conflict of good and evil. The question is: what is my response and responsibility?

I searched for a book that would teach me about forgiveness, as a concept. I did not want a book that would say you must always forgive and right away. This book gave me a lot of good ideas. There is a dramatic story in the first half, and then 30 or so responses by various thinkers (about 5 pages each) in the second half. I liked that I could learn so much through the clear, concise writing by Wiesenthal and the contributors. I also learned a few lessons from this history about human nature--which is another reason I read the book. The central question of the author is, "What would you have done?" I will perhaps try to answer that personally.

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