

# The sunflower



The Power that Forgiveness can Grant Simon Wiesenthal unfortunately lived his life as commonly as a Jew was allowed to during the German controlled concentration camps of World War 2. This all changed when Wiesenthal was confronted with something that was anything but common for this time period.

That was the gift of forgiveness that was requested on behalf of a dying SS soldier named Karl. Karl, who had committed severe crimes against humanity, accounted one specific offense to Wiesenthal in hopes for a peaceful passing into the afterlife. This placed Wiesenthal in a position to which he had to decide two things. First, if he had the authority to forgive this SS soldier for what he had done as the offense did not occur against him directly. Secondly, if he was willing to forgive such a horrible crime on behalf of his people.

Many instances come and go without any real long-term consequence or impact. Occasionally there are pivotal moments in our lives that, for better or worse, change something in our core being or, at the very least, cause us to question elements of our foundation. It could be argued that Wiesenthal was one of the few exceptions to this idea, in that his life for an extended period was riddled with events that one would see as life changing. Even within these ??? life changing events??? lies an event so momentous that it causes a man so saturated with tragedy to question some elements of his foundation when countless other tragedies were deemed life as usual. Defiantly leaving the bedside of a dying SS soldier in silence who pleaded with him for forgiveness regarding one horrific atrocity committed against fellow Jews, the author of The Sunflower makes the decision to deny the

dying man the peace of forgiveness. His peers console him by telling him he had no place to forgive the man for his acts.

I tend to side with what Harold Kushner points out in regards that if god chose to forgive Karl that he would feel as if he had removed the Nazi within and then would of died a different person then he had lived (185). There??  
™s no denying Wiesenthal suffered in his life as many of us could not perceive. The fact remains, even if the argument for authority is lost, more could have been done for the SS soldier in the area of forgiveness. While it is true that forgiveness could not be obtained within that very instance, the opportunity to start the process of spiritual healing was lost with how Wiesenthal reacted. Wiesenthal could have looked at the request that Karl asked as a sign that God was not on vacation, but in fact was there.

Forgiveness is one of the basic principles of catholicism as well as Judaism.

God forgives all and teaches for others to do the same. Wiesenthal is as responsible for mentally preparing himself for his own spiritual repair as Karl is for his actions. Karl, while on his death, bed was seizing the opportunity to begin his own spiritual healing purposefully using Wiesenthal in the process. Wiesenthal could of took note from Karl in his situation and applied it to his personal life and explained to others that he saw the goodness in what the SS solider was doing and that there is hope.

This is echoed by what Cardinal Franz Konig stated that ??? You had the opportunity to put forward an act of almost superhuman goodness??? (183). Something made Wiesenthal stay and listen to the dying SS mans confession, and by his own account he perceived a piece of humanity within

the man that overtime was chiseled away by the Hitler Youth propaganda. Wiesenthal leaves us with the impression the SS man to a certain extent was trapped much as he was. Why didn't he express that to his fellow Jews through forgiving Karl, Wiesenthal could set an example to his fellow Jews of how in the end they are stronger than the opposition. Wiesenthal, along with other Jews confined with him, had been beat down both physically and emotionally to the point that he had his own questions of where God was. After meeting Karl, Wiesenthal could have returned and advised his fellow prisoners of what had happened but explained it in a manner that showed him in a position of power instead. This goes along with what Harold S.

Kushner was pointing out in the story he provided of the woman in his congregation ??? I am asking you to forgive because he doesn't deserve to hold the power to live in your head??? (186). Instead of releasing this power Wiesenthal could have gained from it. While it is often stated throughout *The Sunflower* how it was not Wiesenthal's responsibility to forgive Karl's soul, it might not have been Karl's intention. Wiesenthal did indeed interpret it that way. Perhaps Wiesenthal should have looked at it from a different aspect. As Arthur Hertzberg pointed out, Karl was not asking for God's forgiveness through Wiesenthal but for Wiesenthal's forgiveness on behalf of the Jews (167).

Had Karl wanted forgiveness being that he is catholic he would have summoned a priest. In addition, Wiesenthal, in the arena of forgiveness could have expressed his concern of authority to the SS man as an explanation for no out right forgiveness. It would have certainly provided

some level of comfort greater than silently leaving his side with no explanation.

While there is something to be said for reflecting back on life's pivotal moments, the opportunity for dramatic growth was lost in silently, defiantly leaving the bedside of a dying man. One could certainly sympathize with the plight of Simon Wiesenthal. However, Wiesenthal does not reference his suffering as a reason for the lack of forgiveness, but rather he questions his authority to do so.

The fact remains, even if the argument for authority is lost, more could have been done for the SS soldier in the area of forgiveness. Works

CitedHertzberg, Arthur response to ??? Symposium??? in *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness* by Simon Wiesenthal: New York: Schocken Books, Inc, 1998. Hushner, Harold S. Response to ??? Symposium??? in *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness* by Simon Wiesenthal: New York: Schocken Books, Inc, 1998.

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