

Elie Wiesel swore to make sure the Holocaust isn't forgotten.  
On Tuesday, he'll deliver his message of peace to Charlotte.



DAVID COVENTRY/ECHO FOUNDATION — SPECIAL TO THE OBSERVER

At 78, human rights activist Elie Wiesel keeps a hectic schedule warning against indifference to genocide and anti-Semitism. Recently, he talked about his Holocaust experiences with ABC-TV's Bill Weir in New York.

## The witness who can't stay silent

The boy seventh from the left in the second row from the bottom is Elie Wiesel. This photo was taken April 16, 1945, a few days after U.S. troops liberated Buchenwald concentration camp. Wiesel's father died in the camp.



BY TIM FUNK

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NEW YORK- Elie Wiesel has decided to walk the nine blocks to his 10 a.m. interview at Rockefeller Center even though it's 36 degrees.

He's given up on the car that was expected 10 minutes ago and is now striding down Madison Avenue, his wild, wispy gray hair dancing in the cold wind. For Wiesel, 78, the world's most famous Holocaust survivor, the time he has left in this world is too precious to be spent waiting.

The person who knows him best, his wife, Marion, says Wiesel is speeding up at a time in life when most people are slowing down. "As he gets older, he has an even greater sense of urgency," she says. "He wants to finish what he started."

Trying to keep up with Wiesel this morning as he hurries past slo-mo pedestrians are a balding bodyguard and Stephanie Ansaldo, president of Charlotte's Echo Foundation.

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# The witness who can't stay silent

Wiesel from 1A

Ansaldó's group was born 10 years ago, when Wiesel, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, last visited Charlotte. Its mission: to launch projects that echo Wiesel's message to guard against indifference in a still-suffering world.

After years of invitations to come back, Wiesel has finally agreed to speak -- on Tuesday -- with students, educators, community leaders, clergy and a paying crowd of 2,000 at the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center.

Like everything else he does -- speaking to the U.N. Security Council about genocide in Darfur, bringing together top Israeli and Palestinian leaders at a conference, helping to launch the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington -- the trip to Charlotte will be Wiesel's way of keeping two promises. He made them to himself when he was a skinny teenager in the Nazi death camps, prisoner A-7713. That number is still tattooed on his arm.

He swore, first, that he would never let the world forget the 6 million Jews killed by the Nazis -- a pledge that led to "Night," his 1958 memoir.

And because Wiesel was devastated by the world's indifference to the genocide of Jews during World War II, he also promised himself that as an adult, he would never be silent "whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation."

Hence his drive to get the United Nations, the United States and Israel to do more to stop the slaughter and help the refugees in Sudan's Darfur region -- the world's new "capital of human suffering," Wiesel says.

The fact that Wiesel -- 5 feet 7 with a slight frame -- is traveling this morning with a bodyguard is yet another sign to him that hate and violence are still at large 62 years after he and others were liberated at the Buchenwald death camp.

Wiesel added security after a peace forum Feb. 1 in San Francisco. A man dragged Wiesel from an elevator for an "interview" in his sixth-floor hotel room. Wiesel started yelling, and the man walked away.

A man identifying himself as Eric Hunt, 22, later said on an anti-Semitic Web site that he'd been trailing Wiesel for weeks. His plan: Videotape "the cornered Wiesel" while forcing him to admit that "Night" -- a book that's read in high schools all over the world -- is fiction.

After the Web posting, police arrested Hunt in New Jersey.

Lately, Wiesel has been plagued by nightmares. He gets by on four hours of sleep a night and dreams about the death camps where his family was taken in 1944. He never saw his mother and little sister again. And he watched his father slowly die. Instead of fading away, the terror of his youth has grown more vivid in his old age.

Today, he got up at 5 a.m., to work on his latest novel. "I don't like to sleep," Wiesel says. "It's a waste of time."

## A sly sense of humor

Rockefeller Center is in sight. Wiesel breezes by shivering fans of NBC's "Today" show who are waiting outside for a brush with Matt, Meredith, Ann or Al.

On the long walk, Wiesel is stopped by only one fan -- a young man who simply bows, shakes his hand and moves on.

"Most of the time, they say, 'You look like somebody famous. Who are you?'" Wiesel says. "I just laugh."

This figure so identified with serious causes has a sly sense of humor.

His most revealing comic comeback during the hike is about his hectic pace of living.

His schedule today is packed: two dinners, his 10 a.m. WNBC interview, a meeting with one of his students from Boston University, and a sit-down with ABC's "20/20" for a show on people who have lived through -- and survived -- hell on earth.

He seems to have the schedule of a 25-year-old.

"No," Wiesel says, "an 18-year-old."

## Battling indifference

"Very light, please," Wiesel tells the TV makeup artist before closing his eyes. "Very, very."

Minutes later, he's in the studio, sitting opposite Gabe Pressman, host of WNBC's "News Forum" and an old friend.

The two men banter as "Brownie," the stage director, runs off to get Wiesel a coffee with milk and five sugars.

"My throat doesn't work today," Wiesel says, coughing. "When I write a lot, it affects my voice."

Pressman leans in, but is having trouble hearing Wiesel's whisper, which comes with a heavy accent that's a blend of Yiddish, French and Romanian.

"5 ... 4 ... 3 ...," Brownie counts down, then gives way to Pressman's pre-taped intro, which sounds like a promo for a moral boxing match:

"Twenty-one years after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, Elie Wiesel -- a survivor of the Nazi death camps -- is fighting an unusual battle: He's taking on the Holocaust deniers ..."

The first of the deniers: Wiesel's would-be kidnapper.

"I have never felt such fear," Wiesel says. "I felt my very being threatened. That's why I began to shout, 'Help! Help!'"

What happened next troubled Wiesel just as much.

"Many people heard my screams," he tells Pressman. "When I ran down to security, they told me that



three people called. But not one door opened."

"Interesting," Pressman responds, "in view of the fact that you devoted a big part of your life to writing against the 'sin' — as you put it — of indifference."

"Exactly, exactly," Wiesel says, like a teacher happy that his student has grasped the larger lesson. "There must have been at least 20 or 30 people who heard my screams. I have never screamed as loudly as that. And not ... one ... door ... opened."

Pressman then asks about Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranian president who staged a two-day conference in Tehran last December that questioned whether the Holocaust happened.

Every country should declare him persona non grata, Wiesel says, and indict him for attempted crimes against humanity.

When Pressman mentions Ahmadinejad's threat to wipe out Israel, Wiesel again sees an opportunity to teach and to be a witness:

"We have learned from history — and especially we Jews, and not only Jews — we have learned that when the enemy of humankind threatens, we should ... take ... his ... threats ... seriously."

## A man in motion

This time, the car is waiting, ready to take Wiesel back to the offices of the Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity. It's a place stuffed with reminders of just how busy Wiesel stays these days — as well as with hints as to why he never slows down.

First, there are the books. Rows and rows of them.

Wiesel has written more than 40 books. And he's working on two more: one fiction, one nonfiction. He's too superstitious to say what they're about — only that, as always, he's writing them in French. With a pen. Wiesel prefers that to a computer, never uses e-mail and goes on the Internet only to read Hebrew newspapers.

On the shelves in his cluttered but majestic office sit the English, French and Hebrew translations of his books — including the spare "Night."

Wiesel gets more than 100 letters a month from teenagers who've read "Night," most of them wanting to tell him how affected and haunted they were by his story of surviving the death camps as a teenager. Every letter is answered, Wiesel says.

"They should know that their words were not wasted," he says. "They spoke or wrote and somebody listened."

Down the hall: A signed photograph/greeting from King Abdullah of Jordan. In May, he and Wiesel will host a conference for Nobel laureates on the Middle East.

Wiesel has his critics. Some say his support of Israel has blinded him to the suffering of Palestinians. He says he's waiting for Palestinians to affirm Israel's right to exist and condemn suicide bombers.

Others fault Wiesel for supporting the U.S. invasion of Iraq. He acknowledges the situation in Iraq is a mess but says he, like much of the world, believed U.S. intelligence that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction.

## The past, and the future

On Wiesel's desk, there's a snapshot of his 1-year old grandson, Elijah — the person most likely to bring a smile to Wiesel's somber, weathered face.

Another photo, much larger, is of the small house where Wiesel was born. It was in Sighet, Transylvania, now Romania, and it looked for a time as if Eliezer Wiesel, a pious Jewish student, would grow up there to be a Talmudic scholar.

But the Nazis took him and his family away. He was robbed of his last years of childhood, but today he's filled with a passion to see that other children get to keep theirs.

In his 1986 Nobel acceptance speech, Wiesel talked about his promises to the boy he once was:

"And now the boy is turning to me. 'Tell me,' he asks, 'what have you done with my future, what have you done with your life?' "Wiesel says that boy remains inside him, still guiding him, still asking those questions, as the man he has become tries to combat genocide and anti-Semitism and indifference.

Slow down?

"First, I don't want to. And then, I cannot. I cannot slow down. I walk fast. There are so many things to do, really. And little time. There are so many things to do."

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## Against Indifference

**WHAT:** Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel's speech: "Against Indifference."

**WHEN:** 6:30 p.m. Tuesday.

**WHERE:** Belk Theater, Blumenthal Performing Arts Center, 130 N. Tryon St.

**TICKETS:** \$65 for adults; \$35 for seniors and students.

**DETAILS:** [www.carolinatix.org](http://www.carolinatix.org) or 704-372-1000.

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