

The Elie Wiesel Living Archive
STORYTELLING HANDOUTS – Jewish Adults
Stories & Truth Handout

Stories & Truth (Minutes 1-3 in recording)

Not so long ago I was in Israel. And I went to see the man who used to be my rebbe. He survived. He's the Rebbe of Vizhnitz, famous Hasidic dynasty. And when I came to see him 22 years after we parted, he recognized me. And he said, "Well, it's you, the grandchild of Dovid Feige." And I said, "Rabbi, for the last 22 years I am working very hard to get myself a name, and here with you I am still the grandchild of Dovid Feige."

To which he answered, "So that's what you were doing for 22 years?" Well, that's what I try to do. Then he asks, "What do you do?" And at that moment, of course, I really lost all my powers, and I said, "I really don't know." He said, "But yet, what are you doing?" I say, "I am writing." He said, "That's what you are doing?" I said, "I am trying."

"And what are you writing?" "Well," I said, "stories." "What kind of stories?" "Stories." "True stories?" I say, "Rabbi, what do you mean by that?" And he said, "Stories that really happened?"

And here I caught him. And I said, "**Rabbi, you see, it's not so simple. Some stories did not happen but are true. Others did happen but are not.**" So he looked at me sadly, and he said, "Well, that's what you were doing for 22 years."

CONSIDER THIS:

- What might Professor Wiesel mean by "some stories did not happen but are true"?
- How might storytelling help us get closer to the truth that Professor Wiesel is speaking about?

Power of Words Handout
(about 35-36 minutes into talk)

Today other books hold me in their grip, and I try to learn from other storytellers how to pierce the meaning of an experience and how to transform it into legend. But most of them talk too much. The song is lost in words, like rivers in the sand. The Selishter Rebbe told me one day, "Be careful with words. They are dangerous. Beware of them. They beget demons or angels. It's up to you to give life to one or the other. Be careful, I tell you. Nothing is as dangerous as to give free rein to words."

Professor Wiesel said many times that the original manuscript of his memoir, *Night*, was originally almost 900 pages, and he edited it down to its present size. How might his choice to edit his memoir in such a dramatic fashion reflect the Selishter Rebbe's caution about using words carefully?

Silence Transcript & Handout (minutes 42-48)

This story takes place in Tangier at a meeting between Michael and Pedro. They meet, and they tell each other stories. And both are forgiven. The hero of my story, Michael, said, "It's neither fear nor hatred. It is silence." The silence of a five-year-old Jew. His name was Mendele. **In his eyes the whole sweep of his people's suffering could be read.** He lived in Szerencseváros, which means in Hungarian the city of luck.

One day the Germans decided to rid the country of what they called the Jewish plague. Feige, Mendele's mother, a beautiful and pious young widow, had a visit then from an old friend of her husband, a peasant who owned an isolated farm on the other side of the mountain. "Take your son, Feige, and come with me," the peasant said to her. "I work out two openings so you can breathe, but be careful. In heaven's name be careful. Don't move. Whatever happens, don't budge. And most of all, when we leave town at the sentry station, be careful, and tell that to your son, Feige."

The widow took her son's face in her hands, and as she stroked his hair very gently she said to him, "Did you hear? We must be silent. Whatever happens, it's our only chance. Our lives depend on it. Even if you are afraid, even if you hurt, don't call out, and don't cry. You can scream later. You can cry later. Do you understand, son?"

"Yes, mother, I understand. Don't worry, I won't cry. I promise."

At the sentry station, two Hungarian gendarmes, black feathers in their hats, asked the peasant where he was going. "I'm going home," he answered. "I have two farms, two fields. The town lies between them. To move hay or wheat from one to the other, I have got to cross the city. I have done it so often that the horses know the way all by themselves."

"What are you hiding underneath?" asked the gendarme.

"Nothing, officers. Nothing at all, I swear it. I have nothing to hide."

The gendarmes drew their longswords from their black scabbards and drove them into the hay from all angles. It went on forever. Finally, the peasant couldn't stand it any longer. He let out a whimper and tried to smother it with the back of his hand. Too late. One of the gendarmes had noticed. The peasant had to unload the hay. The gendarmes, triumphant, saw the widow and her son.

“Mama,” Mendele wept. “It wasn’t me who called out. It wasn’t me.” The gendarme’s ordered him off the wagon, but he couldn’t move. His body was run through. “Mother,” he said again when bloody tears ran into his mouth, “It wasn’t me. It wasn’t me.” The widow, a crown of hay about her head, did not answer. Dead. She, too, had kept silence.

Silence plays an important role in legends, in storytelling. Things that are not said are as important, if I may quote George Steiner, as things that are said. Poems that were not written have the same impact as those that were composed. Whatever I’m trying often to do is not to write. It’s to achieve such a power in silence that words are useless.

It is late, so I think I will be silent soon. But before, I’ll tell you something else. Very short. It is said about Beethoven that when you listen to his symphonies, first movement, second, third, and fourth, in the end they all reach the apotheosis, and then it’s finished, and then it’s silence. The silence, too, belongs to Beethoven. I think in storytelling or in literature, the silence, too, belongs to the tale. Thank you.