

Beauty, Truth and Forgiveness: All in the Eye of the Beholder and the Times

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Abstract

If you Google Simon Wiesenthal, The Sunflower, you will get more hits than Gone With the Wind, and almost as many as the Bible. Wiesenthal, at the time a Nazi prisoner, was confronted with a dying German soldier, who asked for forgiveness. Wiesenthal rejected the request, and in The Sunflower, after telling his story, asks the reader what he would have done. The published responses to his question have been diverse, discussed and debated in an extensive literature. A brief review of this literature is provided. The core of the paper involves an analysis of three unique and contemporary surveys, two provided by the author, and a third dealing with the published responses of students at Boston Latin School. An interesting element of these recent results suggests that, contrary to both the notion that “time heals all wounds,” and to the strong evidence that Wiesenthal’s own response softened considerably over the years, the extent of forgiveness has clearly hardened since the initial responses to Wiesenthal’s question.

Key Words: Individual attitudes towards forgiveness; time, age, religion

I. Preface

Jerry Falek and I were walking along West Cliff Drive, Santa Cruz’s wonderful three mile parkway along the Pacific Coast. Jerry, a world class Story Teller, was relating the story of Simon Wiesenthal’s experiences as a Nazi prisoner, experiences that were soon to reverberate around the world.

During the Nazi control of Europe millions of Jews were imprisoned in concentration camps, six million of them did not survive. From 1941 to 1945 Simon Wiesenthal was one of those Jewish prisoners. As a prisoner he endured horrific inhumane experiences, he was constantly beaten, starved and publicly humiliated. He was forced to do slave labor that only rendered him weaker pushing him close to death. The Nazis murdered most of his friends and family. Children were killed in front of his very eyes. ***At one point during his imprisonment he was sent to work at a nearby hospital, where he had an experience unlike any he could have imagined.*** It was an experience that haunted him for much of the rest of his life, as related in his essay, *The Sunflower*.

Upon entering the hospital, a nurse, acting on her own, took Simon from his work and guided him to the bedside of a man, covered in bandages from head to foot, clearly very near death. Upon hearing Simon enter, he began to tell the story of his life. Karl, a 21 year old, was a member of the Hitler Youth, and in 1939 enthusiastically joined the army. He spoke of his experiences as a Nazi officer in training, and then recounted one particular experience. An experience which he deeply regretted. Following a particularly bloody encounter, his regiment ordered close to 300 local Jewish residents into a single house. After placing large barrels of petrol around the house, the troops began throwing grenades into the house. Among those forced inside were many women, children and infants. The troops were ordered to shoot anyone trying to escape. Karl complied. There were no survivors. It was shortly after this incident when Karl was mortally injured, and brought to the hospital. As he ended his story, Karl made a “death bed” request; he sought forgiveness for his crimes—crimes which he now deeply regretted—from a Jew, Simon in this case. Simon stood up and left the room in silence, refusing Karl’s request.¹

At this point Jerry asked me what I would have done if faced with Karl’s request, a question I would soon learn was precisely what Simon asked of the readers of *The Sunflower*. I responded almost instantly. “That’s easy. I’d forgive him.” To which Jerry replied, “David, it’s not nearly that simple.”

¹ It is worth noting that according to Jones (1999, p. 146) Karl’s “extensive training” as SS officer had made him “much better prepared psychologically” for his work than the many other German troops engaged in the Holocaust.

Perhaps, but here as in so many other complex situations, the expression “where you stand depends on where you sit” (or here, perhaps where you pray) may tell us a great deal about our responses to the most complex of issues.²

II. Introduction and Brief Literature Review

In both editions of *The Sunflower*, Wiesenthal’s long essay (just under 100 pages) is followed by what he titles *The Symposium*. The latter consists of the responses to Wiesenthal’s question, the final words of his essay;

You, who have just read this sad and tragic episode in my life, can mentally change places with me and ask yourself the crucial question, “What would I have done?” (Wiesenthal, 1998, p. 98)

This seemingly straight forward question has evoked an “industry” of discussion, commentary, and analysis. Can the question be answered by anyone other than the direct victims? Who indeed are the direct victims? Are they those buried in the mass grave or are we all in a sense “direct” victims? Is Wiesenthal’s question even the right one? Was his failure to respond to Karl’s dying request really a rejection of the request? Where is God in all of this? What does it really mean to forgive? To what extent must the “guilty” party actively seek forgiveness, and is such a request even necessary for the injured to grant forgiveness? In a sense, Wiesenthal may well have opened up the mother of all Talmudic discussions.³ A “review” of this literature is obviously impossible. What I will do in the next few pages is highlight some of the essential and diverse approaches one can expect to find in much if not all of this immense body of material.

Can the question be answered by anyone other than the direct victims? This position is fairly common among the respondents to the two editions of *The Sunflower*, as the following examples suggest:

“...one must grant to individuals who belong to the victim collectivities complete freedom of judgment.” (Rene Cassin, 1970, p. 106)

“It is now clear that a man, in the case of a serious crime, has no authority to forgive mortal sins which another has committed against other people.” (Friedrich Heer, 1970, p. 127)

“It is...preposterous to assume that anybody alive can extend forgiveness for the suffering of any one of the six million people who perished.” (Abraham J. Herschel, 1970, p 131)

“Forgiveness to the injured doth belong.”....And if the dead can’t forgive, neither can the living.” (Mark Goulden, 1998, p. 157)

“...people can never forgive murder, since the one person who can forgive is gone, forever.” (Dennis Prager, 1998, p. 226)

The same position is extant in the vast literature spawned by Wiesenthal’s essay. For example, the title of Mendel Kalmenson’s essay “Should We Forgive the Nazis?” is quite direct. Under the section “NO in Capital Letters,” (p. 2) he writes:

“The real question, overlooked by many of the respondents, is not whether or not Simon should have forgiven the Nazi, but whether or not he could have forgiven him....The victim alone owns the copyright to forgive the criminals who committed crimes against him.”

Eric. H Loewy argues that while forgiveness “is a shoddy concept” (2005, p. 145), none the less “the act must be perpetrated against the person who is supposed to be forgiving.” (p. 147) Sarah Schurr, in offering a Unitarian Universalist Response, while unwilling to “offer final forgiveness and absolution,” would have offered Karl her “compassion...so that it may speak to the compassion and goodness that I know is in you Karl.

I hope you die in peace.” (Schurr, 2008, p.4).

² I have in mind what has come to be known as Miles’ Law, to be discussed briefly in the conclusion below.

³ By way of comparison, a Google search of Wiesenthal’s *The Sunflower* generates 87 pages. *Gone with the Wind* and the Bible produce 83 and 92 respectively. All three pale in comparison to the Sutton (2009) recently published bibliography dealing with forgiveness literature, and extending through 114 pages.

In a deep sense the argument that only the direct victims that can forgive is totally at odds with the prolonged “guilt” attributed to many Germans who had no “direct” involvement in the Holocaust.

In her work with children of Nazi families, Kaslow writes of the “dilemmas” of so many individuals “who were automatically adjudged *guilty* because of the horrific acts committed by their ancestors.” (p. 208)

Who indeed are the direct victims? Are they those buried in the mass grave or are we all in a sense “direct” victims? Both implicitly and explicitly, the discussion above makes clear that the “victims” are only those shot by Karl and his German compatriots. But, as indicated at the outset, the issues raised by Wiesenthal’s question are complex in the extreme. For example, Enright, et. al. (1991) argue that while the injury “must be directed personally at the forgiver,” in speaking of the Holocaust, the victims include those with “personal, indirect involvement...” (p. 127). And Yoav Van Der Heyden (2005) argues that in Wiesenthal’s discussion in *The Sunflower*, he sees Karl as “directly responsible for Simon’s oppression as well as his family, and all Jews. This seems to link Karl as the injurer more directly with Simon as the injured party.” (p. 20) But one can rely on a more recognized and universal source in arguing that Karl committed crimes against *all of humanity*. That is, what happened during the Nazi reign of terror—precisely what Karl himself was party to—and as determined during the Nuremberg Trials, were indeed crimes against *all of us*. These are: “Murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, and other inhumane acts committed against any civilian population, before or during the war, or persecutions on political, racial or religious grounds in execution of or in connection with any crime within the jurisdiction of the Tribunal, whether or not in violation of the domestic law of the country where perpetrated.” (Harris, 2010, p.1)

Is Wiesenthal’s question even the right one, and was his failure to respond to Karl’s dying request really a rejection of the request? It certainly is the question he asked (word for word), but one can find in the ensuing discussion and commentary a clear response of “no, not at all.” Bill Long (2005), for example, is critical of Wiesenthal for even asking the question. He writes:

“I would contend that the ‘question’ of forgiveness is too complex a question here....the fact that the German wanted forgiveness and the fact that Wiesenthal felt that the German’s question therefore became *his* question doesn’t mean that it is necessarily *our* question...why should Wiesenthal feel that the German’s need becomes his need, or question too?....Wiesenthal’s response (silence) actually belies the fact that the issue is really one of forgiveness after all.” (pp 3-5) Long’s alternative involved a veritable third degree: “I would not have let the German get away with his insistent, and burden-shifting question, without having him explain his need for the question in more detail.” (p. 4)

An alternative response is not that the question is “wrong” per se, but rather that it’s far too simplistic, or at least Wiesenthal’s silence based on the brief encounter with Karl doesn’t begin to provide an adequate response. That is to say, the *process* of forgiveness is an extremely complex one, and whatever he might have thought, Wiesenthal couldn’t possibly respond *fully* to Karl’s question in the brief time he had in the dying soldier’s room. As Shriver suggests, “forgiveness takes *time*. It is a process that may take years and years to consummate.” (1998, p. 134) Writing in the same volume, Enright, Freedman and Rique provide a detailed outline of the “process” by which forgiveness comes about. Under four broad categories, they list a total of 20 specific elements necessary for the process to be completed. (1998, p. 53) Enright and his colleagues, in putting together the 20 steps, cite 13 other articles, each by a specific author. From this highly complex perspective, there is no way that in the few anxious and uncomfortable moments Wiesenthal spent in Karl’s room, could he have come to any final response.

This is the essential point Van Der Heyden (2005) makes in his extended discussion of Wiesenthal’s behavior, not only during his moments with Karl, but a good bit beyond, a process that may well have absorbed a lifetime. “Wiesenthal found meaning to his life’s purpose in honoring the memory of those that had suffered in Holocaust....Perhaps bringing perpetrators to trial, to face their crimes, and the representatives of their victims, can be seen as a reenactment of Simon’s meeting with Karl.

Perhaps he sought to bring a human fact to the crimes, so that the world would understand that human beings were responsible.” (p. 36) Van Der Heyden goes on to suggest that “his process of forgiving seems to culminate in his choice to protect Karl’s mother from the pain of her son’s confession, and in so doing ending the cycle of pain.” And finally, he argues that the encounter with Karl “had a significant impact on the life that he lived after the holocaust.” (p. 38)⁴

Matthew Fox, in the final paragraph of his contribution to the Symposium (Wiesenthal, 1998) makes the case for Wiesenthal’s forgiveness, both eloquently if indirectly:

“Forgiving and forgetting are two separate acts. One should forgive—not out of altruism, but out of the need to be free to go on with one’s life—but we ought not to forget. Simon did not forget—therefore he has gifted us with the greatest of gifts—a lifetime dedicated to justice and compassion. A god-like life. His story prevents our forgetting. If we can remember, then maybe we will choose life over death.” (p. 148)

In any event, the notion that we can understand Wiesenthal’s “final” response to the request for forgiveness based solely on his leaving Karl’s room in silence seems simplistic in the extreme.⁵

As if to reinforce this notion of necessary time, and on a radically different venue the National Public Radio (NPR) story, “A tradition Shattered: Israelis Play Wagner at Bayreuth,” made the news simultaneously with the writing of this introduction.⁶ The article concludes with the words of the Israeli Chamber Orchestra Conductor, Roberto Paternostro:

"I've conducted for more than 25 years all over the world," he says, "and I've never seen anything like it in my life. Everybody was so emotional — and many people came from Israel for the performance. After we finished the Wagner, there was such a great moment of silence, and then a standing ovation." (Siegel, p. 1)

The comments of one of the respondents, Sheron Welker added a fitting coda: “This is the real deal...this is grace...and everyone responded. Forgiveness is the key to happiness. Paternostro responded to the best that is in him, and it is so contagious!! We all want to be like this...and we have so few examples.” (Ibid., p. 3)

Where is God in all of this? The answer here depends on which version of God one subscribes to. It is quite clear in the discussion, in the two editions of *The Sunflower*, and well beyond, that a dichotomy exists between Christians and Jews. The traditional Jewish position, as put starkly by Mendel Kalmenson (2011), is clear:

The victim alone owns the copyright to forgive the criminals who committed crimes against him. Anyone who speaks on his behalf, without permission, is no different than a common thief. (p. 4) Commentary in *The Sunflower* offers little dispute in this regard. As an example, Arthur Hertzberg (Wiesenthal, 1998, p. 168) writes that the God “who allowed the Holocaust did not, and does not, have the standing to forgive the monsters who had carried out the murders.”

Christians are more forgiving. Theodore M. Hesburgh (Wiesenthal, 1998) makes the case without ambiguity. I think of God as the great forgiver of sinful humanity. The greatest story of Jesus is the Prodigal Son. Can we aspire to be as forgiving of each other as God is of us?...Of course, this sin here is monumental. It is still finite and God’s mercy is infinite. (p. 169)

What does it really mean to forgive? Among the issues that emerge here is the question of “absolution,” that is in a sense to have Karl’s crime “wiped away.” While such a notion may seem absurd to many (including myself)—nothing can possibly restore the lives taken by Karl—the notion is raised in the vast commentary evoked by Wiesenthal’s question.

⁴ McGary (1989) in his essay on forgiveness argues that in cases of severe harm, “to overcome one’s resentment too quickly...seems to me to be morally inappropriate.” (p. 346)

⁵ That seems to be what Andrews (2000) does in seeing Wiesenthal’s leaving Karl’s room as a rejection of his request for forgiveness, while in the previous paragraph arguing that “forgiveness, if it is to come at all, can take a very long time.” (p. 82)

⁶ I want to thank my daughter, Abigail Kaun, for bringing the article to my attention.

For example, in characterizing Karl's dying request, Long (2005) suggests that Karl "wanted some kind of forgiveness or absolution..." (p. 3) Kalmenson (2011) implies as much when arguing that the "Torah's answer and attitude, derived from an eliminated generation seeking absolution for G-d," is "an unequivocal no." (p.2) JoAnn G. Magnuson (2008) is without equivocation in writing that "the young soldier wanted to confess to, and obtain absolution from, a Jew." (p.1)

Contrary to the above, one might reasonably argue that Karl, brought up Catholic with plans to enter the ministry, would understand that the Jewish prisoner had no authority in granting absolution. This took place during confession, with a Priest as audience. And, of course, in his own words, it was an appeal for *forgiveness*, however indirect, that Wiesenthal assumed Karl was making from his death bed.⁷ While complex in the extreme, the notion of "forgiveness" is clearly distinguishable from that of "absolution." On this point, Jacob Kaplan, Chief Rabbi of France at the time, couldn't be more explicit:

"We are in the presence of an SS man...who bitterly regrets his crimes, and who accepts as a just punishment the cruel suffering inflicted by his wounds. He could have called upon a chaplain of his cult who would most probably have granted him absolution. But he valued the *forgiveness* of a Jew more highly than the *absolution* of a priest. (Wiesenthal, 1970, p. 144, emphasis added) McGary (1989) is equally explicit in arguing that forgiving should not be equated with "forgetting," "holding one culpable," nor "pardoning" the guilty party. (p. 347) Steven R. Vazquea (1997) argues in a similar vein, and introduces what he calls "depth forgiveness," a process that could take years (p. 6), and a notion fully consistent with the arguments of Fox and Van Der Heyden cited above.

To what extent must the "guilty" party actively seek forgiveness, and is such a request even necessary for the injured party to grant forgiveness? In a sense the second question, if answered in the negative would render the first part moot. In any event, while some have questioned the sincerity of Karl's request, from Wiesenthal's perspective, there can be little doubt as to what he assumed about Karl's own words. In speaking of his post war encounters with many Nazi war criminals, he writes the following: "When I recall the insolent replies and the mocking grins of many of those accused, it is difficult for me to believe that my repentant young SS man would have behaved in that way." (Wiesenthal, 1997, p. 97) This perspective is fully consistent with that of Trudy Govier (2002), in her major work dealing with forgiveness. She couldn't be more clear (and certain) in arguing that Karl "came to feel great agony and remorse for what he had done." (p. 102)

Despite these seemingly unambiguous perspectives, others have found his death bed plea less than persuasive. Alan Berger (Wiesenthal, 1997) sees Karl as offering no "moral courage." He writes, "The entire issue of cheap grace, forgive and forget, is raised here." (p. 119) Lawrence Langer sees Karl's request as a "desperate last gesture to escape his guilt, though we will never know what his buried motives were." (Ibid, p. 189) Deborah Lipstadt wonders if Karl would have "felt so contrite if he had not been at death's door? (Ibid., p. 196) The same doubt exists in the earlier edition of *The Sunflower*. Primo Levi suggests that Karl

"...does not appear as fully reinstated from the moral point of view... [I believe] that had it not been for his fear of impending death, he would have behaved quite otherwise: he would not have repented until much later...or perhaps never." (Wiesenthal, 1970, p. 157)⁸

With regard to the second part of the question, is a *request* for forgiveness itself necessary, the issue here is moot. Karl's words did imply such a request.

⁷ Indeed, this is quite explicit in the subtitle to *The Sunflower*. And it is perfectly reasonable to assume that Wiesenthal's use of the term, to the exclusion of "absolution" was without ambiguity.

⁸ Interestingly, Levi is much more condemning than many others. An attitude that may well have stayed with him for much of his life. According to The Writer's Almanac, "He died in 1987 after a fall, or a jump, from his third-floor balcony in Turin. Fellow Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel said at the time, "Primo Levi died at Auschwitz forty years earlier." The coroner ruled his death a suicide, and it's true that he had been suffering from depression. Others argued that he had complained of dizziness a few days earlier, and that, as a chemist, he would have chosen a more foolproof method with less risk of paralysis, had suicide been his intent." (Keillor, 2011) Dennis Morton, who works with poetry and poets, and a good friend of mine suggested, in conversation, that Levi's poem, "Monday," may well help understand the difference in reaction and subsequent life of Levi and Wiesenthal. The poem is one of the most chilling I've ever read.

Nevertheless, the fact that the issue is raised in the breadth of discussion, suggests that for some, Karl's motive is irrelevant. In his review article, Christopher Bennett cites the work of Trudy Govier; wherein she sees "...unilateral or discretionary forgiveness...the kind of forgiveness...offered by Nelson Mandela when, on leaving prison, he forgave those who had put him there. Unilateral forgiveness need not be offered on the basis of the wrongdoer's repentance." (2004, p. 90)

As indicated at the start of this section, these few pages can't begin to do full justice to the vast commentary evoked by Wiesenthal's captivating essay, a commentary that is likely to continue as long as we seriously contemplate how we "should" respond to those who do us harm.

Complexity aside, the fact is that while not all of the respondents to Wiesenthal's question had an answer, most did. And as I will argue below, one can say a good bit *a priori* about the nature of these responses. That is, of equal interest to the questions touched on above, is the extent to which an individual's own background enters into the response to Wiesenthal's question. That religion should play a significant role in one's response is fairly obvious. But a number of other demographic factors might also come into play—family background, age, education and occupation—are some of the more obvious potential influences. In the remainder of this paper, I will offer an analysis of how the way in which we respond to fundamentally complex moral questions are often determined before the questions are asked.

III How have "we" answered Wiesenthal's question?

In the following discussion, "we" represents five groups of respondents; two sets from Wiesenthal's "Symposium"; two sets of original survey data done for this paper, and a set of responses from members of Boston Latin High School. I will take each in turn.

Symposium Responses (1970 and 1999 combined.) As indicated above, in both editions of *The Sunflower*, the second half of the book is devoted to the responses of distinguished religious leaders, academics and business and political figures. 36 individuals in the first edition, and 53 in the second. Of the latter, seven individuals appear in the first edition as well, resulting in 82 individual responses in all.⁹

These individuals were then identified by religion (Jewish and non-Jewish), and by three broad occupational categories, Theologian (29), Author (35) and other Professionals (18).¹⁰ Table 1 gives the distribution of responses for the entire 82 respondents as well as by religion. Table 2 gives similar information by occupation, and Table 3 provides the modest data for the seven women included among the total respondents.¹¹

In a sense, there are only three ways one might respond to Wiesenthal's question, "What would you have done?" Two are quite straight forward: some would have done the same thing, walk out without responding while others would have granted Karl's request ("agreed" and "disagreed" respectively) There is yet a third response: that indicates in one way or another an inability to answer the question. For example, Eugene J Fisher (Wiesenthal, 1999) writes the following:

"I can remember being relieved that no one, then [1970] asked me to respond to it. I should have had no way to start. In one sense, I still don't. As several of the original responders stated, no one can really know what she or he would have done in such a situation...Nor can any Christian really speculate, as other commentators acknowledge, as to what a Jew should have done in the situation described. Christians simply do not have the experiential base to make a moral judgment on Jewish behavior with regard to the Shoah. (p. 131) Such limitation, however, is not unique to the Christian respondents Deborah E. Lipstadt (ibid, p.196), writes:

"Ultimately we have no way of knowing if the soldier had actually performed complete *teshuvab* (repentance)," and Yossi Klein Halevi (ibid, p. 163) suggests that a presumption implied in judging Wiesenthal "reveals a lack of humility."¹²

⁹ The individuals whose responses are in both editions are Hanse Habe, Abraham J. Heschel, Christopher Hollis, Primo Levi, Herbert Marcuse Terence Prittie, and Manes Sperber.

¹⁰ The identification of the first edition respondents was relatively simple, as their respective occupations were given in The Symposium. This was not the case in the second edition. However, given the stature of all of the respondents, an internet search was fairly straight forward in the identification. .

¹¹ As indicated in the next section, the responses given in the two samples differ significantly.

The several panels in Table 1 provide a breakdown of the nature of responses among the entire group, as well as by religion. As can be seen, there are almost equal numbers of Jews (43) and non-Jews (39) in the total sample. The distribution of responses, however, is hardly uniform: well over half of the respondents (58 percent) agreed with Wiesenthal, while the percentage who disagreed (23) was slightly greater than those who couldn't answer (19). The major and vivid distinction arises in the Jewish responses as compared to those of non-Jews. Seventy percent of the Jews would have walked out without responding to Karl's request, while a plurality of non-Jews (45 percent) would have granted such a request. In a sense, this result should be expected, given the discussion in the previous section. When it comes to forgiveness and even absolution, non-Jews have an easier time of it in their own religious environments, and it shouldn't be surprising that they are equally forgiving themselves. This is not to say that the forgiveness comes with ease: in the sample a significant minority (37 percent) of the non-Jews were themselves unwilling to forgive Karl.

Table 2 provides the responses for the total sample of 82, broken down by occupation. With some modest amendments, the basic conclusions drawn from Table 1 hold. Jewish Theologians (86 percent) and Professionals (100 percent) are more in agreement, with Jewish Authors (57 percent) less so.¹³ As indicated in the next section, these differences among the professions are not nearly as vivid as are the differences in the 1970 and 1999 responses.

Finally, the very limited number of women in the two samples precludes any real conclusions save for the fact that the results in Table 3 suggest no difference by sex. However, the limited number of women may say a bit more about the broader gender/sex related issues that characterize our society. More than a little actually: there were no women included in the 1970 edition. The seven women included came 30 years later.

Symposium Responses (1970 and 1999 considered separately). Much of the discussion in the brief introductory review above suggests that the process of forgiveness is a long one, a process some have argued involving a multitude of necessary steps over an extended period of time. And argued by Van Der Heyden above, in the specific case here, the process may well have involved Wiesenthal's post-prisoner life's work (op. cit.)

By implication one might argue that with passing time, individuals in general will more easily have come to terms with the horrors of the past. Indeed, that has certainly been the case with the way the Western Allies have come to initially aid and eventually accept Germany and Japan as legitimate partners in the latter part of the 20th century. In the year's immediately following the end of WW II, one would be hard put to find a VW bug in any Synagogue parking lot, a situation I'm sure no longer exists. Indeed, what could be more reflective of our collective reconciliation, and by clear implication, forgiveness, than President Kennedy's historic words: *Ich bin ein Berliner*¹⁴

It was these a priori assumptions that drove the analysis of responses for each of the periods separately. The results given in Table 4 are both "surprising" and may well be contrary to implications suggested in the paragraph above.¹⁵

¹² Halevi writes of his increasing commitment to German-Jewish reconciliation. He sees in Wiesenthal's subsequent behavior, explicitly regarding Karl's mother, an act of "moral courage." (p. 165) In the earlier edition, Saul Friedlander writes that "there is no answer to this question." (Wiesenthal, 1970, p. 114) and Roger Ikor argues that "not only is there is no possible answer to Simon Wiesenthal's awful question, there is simply no answer which we would be justified in giving." (Ibid., p. 136-37)

¹³ It is interesting to note that of all six categories, the largest percentage of those unable to answer the question are Jewish Authors (38 percent). See Panel E in Table 2.

¹⁴ Granted, Kennedy's words, spoken in June of 1963 were as much aimed at the Soviets and their East Berlin allies as they were words of reconciliation, they were undeniably the latter in a fundamental way as well.

¹⁵ The total numbers in each of the two years for Jews and non-Jews are relatively small, and in a statistical sense the results do not conform to the traditional probability requirements where one typically rejects a hypothesis if the results don't achieve at least a significance level of 10 percent (and often more stringent limits are employed). In the two cases below, based on the chi-square test of the difference in two means, the Jewish difference for the two years is significant at the 15-20 percent level, and the non-Jewish at the 50 percent level. The latter difference then is of no statistical significance. But while not achieving the strictest limits, there certainly is a basis for considering the Jewish difference "significant." Also, independent of the individual significance levels, the fact that there was an increase in the harsher position for all respondents, regardless of religion is interesting in itself.

The 1999 respondents, regardless of religion were clearly less forgiving than their earlier peers (83 percent of the Jews in 1999 and 65 percent in 1970).

The same patterns holds for non-Jews: those refusing to respond to Karl's request increased from 31 to 43 percent over the two surveys. All of this growth came out of the "disagree" position (50 percent in 1970), as the percentage of those unable to respond remained at 19 percent.

As indicated in footnote 15, the change in attitude between to two samples may not be of overwhelming statistical significance, but the seemingly large change in attitude does evoke a possible explanation, one that is both casual and hypothetical. There can be little argument with the well discussed notion regarding the time implied in any process of forgiveness. Certainly the 1970 respondents had less historical time from which to consider Wiesenthal's question, than did 1999 respondents. On the other hand, while time lengthened, so too did the political/cultural and economic climate. The early respondents lived at a time of considerable hope, optimism and satisfaction. Economic growth in the early post WW II era, and in particular in the early and mid-1960s, was significant in much if not all of the Western world. The degree of optimism among major economists of the day couldn't have been more evident as the following attests:

Keynesians saw little to discourage them.....Just as managers would guide the operation of the large corporations, economists would manage the macroeconomyThere was every reason to believe that we were entering what Robert Heilbroner called the "Golden Age of Capitalism," and that by the end of the decade we would be reading obituaries of the business cycle. (University of Rhode Island, p.1)

It was through explicit *Government Policy* that we saw a *solution* to our nation's economic, and by indirection to some extent, our social problems as well. A sunny view that captured the economic conditions of the time, and one which stood in stark contrast with Ronald Reagan's perspective. In his Inaugural Address (1/20/1981) the newly elected president set the tone that has echoed through much of the world, a tone that may or may not have reached its full nadir with the rise of Tea Party in the United States. "Government is not the solution, government is the Problem." In a sense, his soon to be partner across the Atlantic, Margaret Thatcher went a bit further: In castigating those seeking help from the government, she denied even the possibility. In regard to government she asserted:

"There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and *people look to themselves first.*" (Thatcher, 1987, emphasis added.)

There is no reason to think that the fundamental change in social perspective, ushered in by these newly elected leaders shouldn't have impacted all elements of society, including to at least some degree the respondents' perspective on Karl's request. As an extremely small test of this assertion, I asked three of my colleagues (all over the age of 50) what they would have expected regarding the views of the 1970 and 1999 respondents. They, as did I, fully expected the views to have softened. I also asked three students, one 28 and the other two under 20 the same question. They had it "right." I told them of my surprise, and of the actual results. "What's going on," I asked. In one way or another they each thought the world they were living in was a harsh and unforgiving place. Clearly a topic beyond the scope of this paper, the remainder of which will be devoted the more contemporary responses to Wiesenthal's question.

UC Santa Cruz student responses. A survey was conducted in a large introductory economics class, Spring 2009, essentially as a first step in exploring the responses of a population distinct from the relatively unique set in the two *Sunflower* editions. The surveys (see Appendix 1) were distributed in class, with a request to have them returned the following class meeting. That is, it was entirely voluntary, and 100 students, approximately half of class responded. As can be seen in the Appendix, students provided information on their religion. Information regarding the students' gender, education, race, college major and parent's religion were also provided. The distributions of these attributes are given in the Table 5.¹⁶

¹⁶ The questions asked in Appendix 1 regarding the student's active/non-active status and the breakdown by among the several Jewish options was extremely small, and these results do not appear in Table 5.

In looking at each of these variables in isolation, while differences exist in the responses to Wiesenthal's question, none of the differences are of particularly high statistical significance, and most of the differences don't approach any significance at all (students whose parents were Christian or other were less and more likely to have walked out on Karl respectively, both at a significance level of 20 percent).

However, these results are strengthened considerably when running a full regression with all of the variables in Table 5 included. Here some of the other variables approach reasonable significance levels as well. Students with Christian (other) parents were less (more) likely to agree with Wiesenthal at the .06 (.09) significance level. It is also the case that students who gave their religion as Christian were *more* likely to agree, this at the .08 significance level. On the face of it this may seem totally contradictory to the impact of parents' religion. That is, students whose parents were Christian were less likely to agree with Wiesenthal, while students who themselves were Christian indicated the opposite. This may not be quite the anomaly it seems. In the sample, as indicated in Table 5, 51 percent of the students listed their parents as Christian, while only 30 percent saw *themselves* as Christian. We may well be dealing with two groups here, with the latter taking on a "harsher" perspective, similar to the suggestion in the previous section regarding the early and late *Sunflower* samples.¹⁷ In any event, as indicated above, this relatively casual survey did suggest that a more extensive *contemporary* survey was worth undertaking.

Internet Survey responses. An invitation was put out on a web site created for this specific purpose, via Seamonkey.com. The invitation and the survey itself are given in Appendix 2 and Table 6 respectively. Over the period from October, 2008, through December, 2009, a total of 470 individuals responded. The demographic characteristics are given in the Appendix. While obviously not a "random" sample, there is a clear balance in terms of sex, and a reasonable distribution in terms of respondents' religion, and that of their parents. As might be expected, internet web site users are dominated by younger people (78 percent), students as opposed to those engaged in the labor force (76 percent), and a demographic group who also are more likely to have some college up to an undergraduate degree (81 percent) as opposed to those with no college or post-graduate work.

As with the analysis in the previous section, regressions were run on each of the characteristics in isolation. The detailed results are not reported here, but are available from the author upon request. When taken in isolation, the following results obtain (with significance levels * = .10, ** = .05, and *** = .01):

- Males are more likely to agree with Wiesenthal (48 vs. 38 percent) **
- Individuals under age 24 are more likely to agree with Wiesenthal than those over 45 (45 vs. 30 percent)**
- The extent of agreement with Wiesenthal is inversely related to level of education, with those with a graduate degree significantly less likely to agree than those others (32, 43 and 52 percent for those with some graduate work, some college including an undergraduate degree, and those with education levels up to high school graduation respectively). ***
- Students and those with non-professional occupations were more likely to agree than those with professional and non-professional employment (46 vs. 36 percent respectively). The differences here are significant at .11 level.
- Both practicing and non practicing Jews are more likely to agree with Wiesenthal (55 percent) as compared with Catholics (38 percent*), Christians (27 percent***), and other (34 percent**). There were no significant differences with practicing Jews among agnostics/atheists and non-practicing Jews.
- Regardless of stated religion, individuals who indicated they were active were less likely to agree with Wiesenthal (23 percent), than those with limited activity (42 percent**) and those who were inactive (47 percent***).

¹⁷ Again, it is important to note, as with the *Sunflower* sample, which itself was both small and unique in terms of the participants, the same caveat applies here. None the less, the seemingly "unexpected" results in both cases are not inconsistent with the very tentative explanation offered in the text.

- Respondents with Jewish mothers were more likely to agree (60 percent**) that those who indicated Christian or other (37 and 47 percent respectively).
- Finally, and perhaps most interesting in a sense, responses to Wiesenthal's question were totally independent of the respondents' father's religion.

While these results are informative to a degree, only an analysis that includes all of the variables combined can provide meaningful inferences. The results from such an analysis via multiple regression are given in Table 7. As indicated, the majority of variables are of no reasonable statistical significance. What is vividly clear is the fact that very much like the results obtained in the two editions of *The Sunflower*, however much detail is provided in the analysis, responses to the question regarding Karl's implicit request for forgiveness is driven *almost* entirely by aspects of religion. The clear exceptions to this conclusion are the facts that men are significantly more likely to agree with Wiesenthal's decision to walk away than are women, and respondents over the age of 44 are significantly less likely to agree. Women are 9 percent less likely to agree than are men, as are respondents over 44 years of age (significant at just beyond 5 percent and at 2 percent respectively). Otherwise, as can be seen in Table 7, the only variables that are significant at better than the .10 percent level have to do with the respondents' religion. Catholics, Christians, agnostics and atheists, and those of other religions are 13, 21, 9, and 17 percent more likely to forgive than are both practicing and non-practicing Jews.¹⁸

Two other variables are of reasonable significance. Respondents who indicated they were religiously active, independent of religion, and those who indicated "none" for their mother's religion were 15 and 19 percent more likely to forgive (significant at .06 and .07 respectively). All of the other variables discussed in the preceding section simply vanish in significance when combined with the religious and sex attributes of the respondents.

The Students at Boston Latin High. Finally, in the process of research for this study I came across a set of responses to Karl's question from students at Boston Latin Academy, a private school with classes from 7th through 12th grade. Posted on Boston's web site, *learntoquestion*, are 107 responses over the years 2003 through 2006. While the percentages differ over the five sets of responses, all told 42 percent of the students essentially agreed with Wiesenthal's decision to ignore Karl's request for forgiveness. Forty three percent disagreed, and would have granted Karl's request, while the remaining 15 percent couldn't provide an answer. I have no information on the student's religion, although it would seem reasonable to assume that few were Jewish. And thus, on the face, the Boston Latin students' views might seem somewhat at odds with the "more forgiving" nature of non-Jews implied in the overall responses to *The Sunflower* discussed above.

But this is really not the case. Recall, that in the second more recent Sunflower sample, non-Jewish respondents were slightly *more likely* to agree with Wiesenthal as compared with the initial 1970 results (43 vs. 30 percent respectively; see Table 4). Also, as discussed above, there does seem to be a "hardening" of perspectives in the United States, post 1980, and that forgiveness has become a "harder sell" among those whose essential life experiences begin in the latter part of the 20th century.

Equally if not more interesting are the very thoughtful responses of the Boston Latin students, regardless of their position. What follows is an excerpt from each of the three views. These provide only the briefest hint of the deep and mature thoughts expressed in these several surveys; the content is readily available at the cited reference *learntoquestion*.

"I like to consider myself a good person with a good heart, but forgiving a volunteer Nazi who killed a family would not happen with me....I would not ease his pain because he was not repentant on killing a family—he was repentant for fear of what dreams may come (the Hamlet references are becoming so cliché with me, but it was the only Shakespeare book I ever liked)."

"I really do not think anyone can know without actually being there. However, I would like to think that I could and would forgive the SS man. He was repentant. He plead for forgiveness. The final judgment is between him and God. So, I think that I could forgive him, so that I could move on and not be overcome with hate and revenge."

¹⁸ The Christian difference is significant at the .02 percent level, and other at .07. While the Catholic and agnostic differences are not of high significance, that fact that all of the coefficients are negative is not without relevance.. The latter two are significant at about the .20 level.

“There really isn’t one answer to this question, especially for me. I think it depends on the type of person you are. If you are a vengeful person which I admit that I am, then maybe you would want that man’s conscience to suffer...the state of dying also allows time for reflection on your life and could be a person’s most honest moment, so maybe he truly was sorry...Personally, I think there was no right or wrong decision that Simon could have made.”

Recall Jerry Falek’s comment to my immediate response, “of course I’d forgive him.” “It’s not nearly so simple.”

IV. A Brief Conclusion

As suggested in the introduction, an individual’s position on a seemingly complex issue may well be determined, *a priori*, that is by what that person brings to the issue as much or more than the “facts in the case.” As the author of “Miles’ Law (where you stand depends on where you sit) has argued, “No person should ever be put in a position of being asked to be ‘objective about the life and death or the expansion or contraction of the organization to which he or she owes primary loyalty.”(Miles, p. 401)

And while in the specific case, Miles was referring to one’s governmental agency, the notion surely applies to other important associations we all come to have, not the least of which for many is religion. It is thus not surprising that in the case of Karl’s implied plea for forgiveness, Jews would be less responsive than those of other faiths. This for two reasons: they are likely to feel more sympathy with Karl’s victims, and they worship a less forgiving God. Indeed, in all of the discussion above, whatever the nature of the sample, Jews have taken a harsher stance with respect to Karl’s plea than have those of other religions, as well as those without religious identification.

On the other hand, whatever our *a priori* inclinations might be, they are not exercised in a vacuum. That is, our external circumstances, the “times in which we live,” are not without impact. With respect to the question at hand, and contrary to Wiesenthal’s own journey toward forgiveness, those agreeing with Simon’s initial rejection of Karl’s request have increased over time, both among Jews and all others involved in the surveys, the young perhaps to a greater extent than others.

The popular notion, “time heals all wounds” certainly did apply to Wiesenthal himself. On the other hand, the notion of forgiveness and other forms of empathy have come under considerable stress of late. This is particularly true of both the United States and England, where, since the early 1980s, the worship of self-interest at the expense of any notion of communal concern has come to dominate the public discourse. This pushing aside of the “other,” along with an increasingly harsh economic reality may not fully explain the changing pattern of responses to Simon’s question. That the two are not at all related, however, seems an improbable case.

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Table 1: Responses For Entire Sunflower Sample By Religion

PANEL A TOTAL	82	Percent
Not Jewish	39	48
Jewish	43	52

B Responses	82	Percent
Agree	47	58
Disagree	19	23
Can't say	16	19

C Jewish Total	44	Percent
Agree	33	75
Disagree	2	5
Can't say	9	21

D Non-Jewish Total	38	Percent
Agree	14	37
Disagree	17	45
Can't say	7	18

E Agree Total	47	Percent
Jewish	33	70
Non-Jewish	14	30

F Disagree Total	19	Percent
Jewish	2	11
Non-Jewish	17	89

G Can't say	16	Percent
Jewish	9	56
Non-Jewish	7	44

Table 2: Responses For Total Wiesenthal Sample By Occupaton

PANEL A Theologian	Total 29	Percentage
Jewish	13	47
Non-Jewish	16	53
Agree	16	57
Disagree	8	29
Can't say	5	14

B Jewish Theologian	13	46
Agree	11	86
Disagree	1	7
Can't say	1	7

C Non-Jewish Theologian	16	54
Agree	5	33
Disagree	7	47
Can't say	4	20

D Author	Total 35	Percentage
Agree	17	49
Disagree	6	17
Can't say	12	34

E Jewish Author	21	61
Agree	12	57
Disagree	1	5
Can't say	8	38

F Non-Jewish Author	12	39
Agree	4	33
Disagree	5	42
Can't say	3	33

G Professionals	Total 18	Percentage
Agree	13	72
Disagree	5	28
Can't say	0	0

H Jewish Professionals	10	56
Agree	10	100

I Non-Jewish Professional	8	44
Agree	5	38
Disagree	3	63

Table 3: Responses Of Women In Wiesenthal Sample

Women	7	Percentage
Jewish	4	57
Non-Jewish	3	43
Agree	5	71
Disagree	1	14
Can't say	1	14
Professional	1	14
Theologian	3	43
Author	3	43

Table 4: Jewish And Non-Jewish Responses In Wiesenthal Sample By Year

1979 PERCENTAGE RESPONSES	JEW	NON-JEW	1999 PERCENTAGE RESPONSES	JEW	NON-JEW
Agree	65	31		83	43
Disagree	5	50		4	38
Can't say	30	19		13	19

Table 5: UCSC Student Survey Characteristics

VARIABLE	CHARACTERISTICS	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	PERCENT AGREEING W/WIESENTHAL
GENDER	Male	61	50
	Female	39	35
RELIGION	Jewish	10	59
	Christian	30	46
	Other	7	56
	None	51	41
EDUCATION	Frosh/Soph	65	50
	Junior/Senior	35	34
	Graduate	4	60
RACE	Asian	19	48
	White	50	43
	Other	31	42
MAJOR	Social Science	71	45
	Science	22	46
	Humanities	6	43
PARTENTS RELIGION	Jewish	11	74
	Christian	51	35*
	Other	8	55*
	None	28	50

*Significant at the .10 percent level.

Note: While 100 students returned the survey, on occasion a response was not given. Thus, the third column doesn't always add to 100.

Table 6: Internet Survey Distribution Of Attributes

Variable	Characteristics	Number of Respondents
Gender	Male	212
	Female	258
Age	Under 24	366
	24 through 45	49
	Over 45	55
Education	Up to High Scholl Diploma	27
	Up to Undergrad Degree	382
	Post Grad work/degree	61
Professional Level	Student	357
	Nonprofessional	86
	Professional	27
Religion	Catholic	81
	Christian	82
	Agnostic/Atheist	150
	Other	46
	Practicing Jew	34
	Non-Practicing Jew	77
Religious Activity	Active	64
	Limited	103
	Inactive	303
Mother's Religion	Christian	249
	Jewish	50
	Other	104
	None	67
Father's Religion	Christian	208
	Jewish	63
	Other	99
	None	100

Table 7: Internet Survey Regression Results

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	t value
(Intercept)	0.73717	0.08721	8.452 ***
female	-0.08541	0.04551	-1.877 *
twentyfivefourtyfour	-0.08804	0.07463	-1.180
fourtyfiveplus	-0.16793	0.07250	-2.316 **
catholic	-0.13220	0.08984	-1.472
christian	-0.21001	0.09096	-2.309 **
agnosticatheist	-0.08778	0.07096	-1.237
other	-0.17203	0.09498	-1.811 *
jewpractice	-0.01299	0.12410	-0.105
religiousactive	-0.14640	0.07689	-1.904 *
religiouslimited	-0.02643	0.06250	-0.423
motherchristian	-0.12438	0.09301	-1.337
motherother	-0.03593	0.10052	-0.357
mothernone	-0.18762	0.10322	-1.818 *

Significance levels: *** .0001, ** .05, * .10

Adjusted R²: 0.05698

Appendix 1**In Class Sunflower Summary and Response Sheet**

The survey included the description given on the first page of this paper, with the following:

The question Simon has asked of himself and of others is ‘**was it right to refuse Karl’s request for forgiveness?** Do you **a) agree, b) disagree, c) can’t give a definitive opinion** with regard to Simon’s refusal to grant Karl’s request?

Please provide a brief explanation for your response;

Gender _____ Years of schooling _____

Age _____ Ethnicity _____

Occupation _____

If primary occupation is college student, major _____

Religion _____ (active, not active)

Parents Religion, Mother _____, Father _____

If Jewish, and active, select one of the following: Orthodox, Conservative Reform, and Other _____

Appendix 2**Internet Survey Introduction**

470 respondents: 10/15/08 through 12/02/09

For the last several months I have been working with David Kaun, a UCSC Economics Professor, on a project dealing with the broad question of forgiveness. The stimulus for the project came from a conversation he and I had about Simon Wiesenthal’s remarkable essay, *Sunflower*. Wiesenthal tells the story of his time in as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp. At one point he was confronted with a plea from a dying young German soldier who came to realize the nature of his horrific acts. The soldier, Karl, wanted forgiveness from “a Jew.” Wiesenthal’s response led him to ask “What would you have done if you had been in my shoes?” As it turned out, what seemed to be a simple question turned out to be highly complex. In the two editions of *Sunflower*, over 80 individuals, including eight women—all well known academics, religious figures, and writers—provided a highly diverse set of responses that could be distinguished by religion and to an extent profession.. Interestingly, Professor Kaun and I had diametrically opposed reactions. The discussion, however, simulated us to seek a much broader set of responses, both in terms of demographics, religious attitudes, work and school experience.

We conducted some preliminary surveys; these provided clear evidence that as was the case with the responses published in *The Sunflower*, the question of forgiveness is a highly complex one.

The final version of our survey is accessible via the link below. We have worked to create a survey that is both comprehensive in posing the question that Wiesenthal asks, and at the same time “user” friendly; it shouldn’t take more than 5 minutes or so to complete. We very much appreciate your participation in our study. If you have any questions, or comments please feel free to contact us.

[Note: the Sunflower Summary is given in Appendix 1 above]

Respondent Characteristics¹⁹

Sex: male, female.

Age: <25, 25-44, >44.

Education (highest level)**: up to high school, undergraduate, graduate.

Occupation Status**: professional, non-professional, in school.

Religion: Catholic: other Christian, agnostic/atheist, Jew (practicing & non-practicing), other.

Religious Activity: active, limited, inactive.

Mother’s Religion: Christian, Jewish. Other.

Father’s Religion: Christian, Jewish. Other.

** No significant differences by education and occupation status; variables excluded from regression shown in Table 7

¹⁹ The original Internet Survey requested a great deal more specific information for the categories below. In many instances, the responses were far too few to be meaningful; these minimal responses were combined into the broader categories listed here. The original survey is available from the author upon request.