

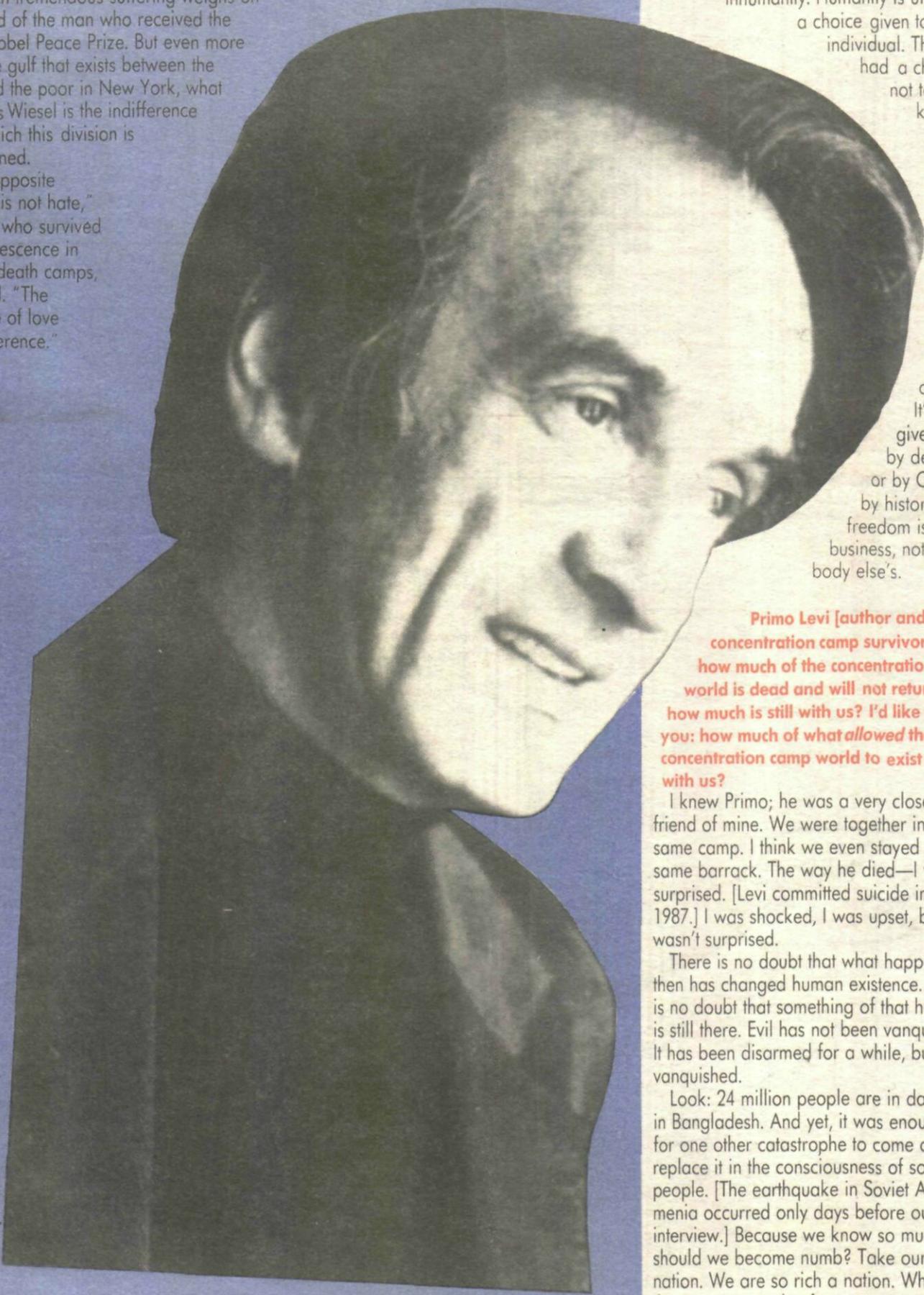
**T**he Manhattan apartment building in which Elie Wiesel lives is surrounded by legions of the homeless—just like any other fashionable high-rise in America's most powerful city. An estimated 75,000 homeless individuals live here. They lie in cardboard boxes placed over heating grates. They sleep in rags on the cold, beautiful marble stairs in Grand Central Station. They beg change from well-dressed passersby—a lucky few of whom carry in their pockets \$80 tickets to a popular Broadway musical about a poor man imprisoned for stealing a loaf of bread. The first cold snap of the year struck just before our interview, and two people froze to death on the sidewalks of New York.

The juxtaposition of so much wealth and such tremendous suffering weighs on the mind of the man who received the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize. But even more than the gulf that exists between the rich and the poor in New York, what horrifies Wiesel is the indifference with which this division is maintained.

"The opposite of love is not hate," Wiesel, who survived an adolescence in Hitler's death camps, has said. "The opposite of love is indifference."

# The Elie Wiesel Difference

By Osha Davidson



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**Osha Davidson: In what essential way is today's world different because of the Holocaust?**

**Elie Wiesel:** We have learned certain things. We have learned to interfere in other people's business. After all, human rights activities are interference in the domestic activities of other nations. Until the Holocaust, nobody would accept that kind of interference.

Second, we learned that the impossible is possible. Which means that, if we are not careful, slaughter on a universal scale could become the norm—not the exception. We have learned to be suspicious: suspicious of promises. We have learned to take threats seriously. We have learned that the nuclear menace, the nuclear shadow, is real.

I think we have also learned the limits of humanity—as well as the limits of inhumanity. Humanity is ultimately

a choice given to every individual. The killer had a choice not to be a killer.

Even in the camps we had a choice. That's an important choice. It's not given to us by destiny or by God or by history. Our freedom is our business, not somebody else's.

**Primo Levi [author and concentration camp survivor] asked: how much of the concentration camp world is dead and will not return and how much is still with us? I'd like to ask you: how much of what allowed the concentration camp world to exist is still with us?**

I knew Primo; he was a very close friend of mine. We were together in the same camp. I think we even stayed in the same barrack. The way he died—I wasn't surprised. [Levi committed suicide in 1987.] I was shocked, I was upset, but I wasn't surprised.

There is no doubt that what happened then has changed human existence. There is no doubt that something of that hatred is still there. Evil has not been vanquished. It has been disarmed for a while, but not vanquished.

Look: 24 million people are in danger in Bangladesh. And yet, it was enough for one other catastrophe to come and replace it in the consciousness of so many people. [The earthquake in Soviet Armenia occurred only days before our interview.] Because we know so much, should we become numb? Take our own nation. We are so rich a nation. What we throw out every day from restaurants could feed a continent! Why not take 100 military aircraft loaded with food and send them to Africa, to Sudan, to Ethiopia and now to Bangladesh. Send architects and teachers and help a people that

needs help to survive.

If this indifference continues, we shall all be its victims. That is the fallout of the tragedy that befell my people.

**Do you see that indifference growing in America over the past decade?**

I wouldn't want to blame any particular group. Take President [Franklin D.] Roosevelt; he was known for his humanism, for his quest for democracy. But Roosevelt was indifferent to the Jewish plight during the war. After all the newspapers wrote about *Kristallnacht* [the night in 1938 on which the Nazis ordered the destruction of 300 Jewish synagogues and smashed the windows of stores owned by Jews throughout Germany and Austria]—it was not even six months after *Kristallnacht*—the ship *The St. Louis* came here with 1,200 Jewish men, women and children aboard. They were in Florida in American waters, and they were sent back. Roosevelt, the humanist, sent back 1,200 people knowing that they were going back to Nazism, to persecution, if not to death. And when he did so, what was the reaction of the country? Was there an outcry? No. So it's not the first time we are indifferent.

**But isn't it more acceptable to be indifferent today? Look at poverty, homelessness. There was a time when indifference was recognized as complicity. That idea seems to have been lost.**

Well, we are trying to bring it back. I am, at least. There is something basically wrong with us. After all, we were indifferent to the Indians. Not at first; first we killed them. But since then we are indifferent to their memory. We should remember day after day what we had done to the Indians.

As for the poor today—it's a disgrace. To have homeless people, hungry people—we have millions of people who live below the poverty level in this country. It is beyond me. I don't understand it. Maybe we need someone to wake us all up.... It is an urgent task, an immediate task. But we turn away. I think we are losing our own humanity.

**You've said that there are more people not free than free in this country. Who are you including in the category of "not free"—the poor, and those imprisoned by their own consciousness?**

Absolutely. I believe that if a person cannot feed his or her children, then his or her human rights are being violated. Economic freedom is just as important as political freedom.

And in Latin America—I don't understand all these discussions. Why not take 500,000 people into our country? We can afford to. We have so much. Why is it a big deal to open our doors and say, "Look, you need security; we shall provide you with security. You need happiness; we shall try to give you happiness." It would raise the moral standard of our nation to unprecedented heights. Why isn't it being done? I wish I knew the answer. ■

**Osha Davidson** writes regularly for *In These Times*.