

SUMMARY THE SUNFLOWER

SIMON WIESENTHAL



Summary of “The Sunflower” by Simon Wiesenthal

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Come along on a Holocaust survivor’s quest to answer the questions surrounding the forgiveness of a Nazi soldier.

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|----------------------------------|----|
| Introduction | 5 |
| Simon's Dilemma | 6 |
| Simon's Decision | 8 |
| The Argument Against Forgiveness | 10 |
| The Argument For Forgiveness | 12 |
| A Question Without Answers | 14 |
| Final Summary | 16 |



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Introduction

While imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, Simon Wiesenthal was brought to the bedside of a dying Nazi soldier seeking repentance from a Jew. At his bedside, Simon listened in disgust as the soldier confessed to his atrocious crimes. In the end, Simon was faced with the choice between compassion and justice, silence and truth. He has lived with his decision for years, but ever since, he has been haunted by the questions: Did he do the right thing? What would you have done in his place? Throughout *The Sunflower*, Simon questions fifty-three distinguished men and women these same questions. Theologians, political leaders, writers, jurists, psychiatrists, Holocaust survivors, and genocide survivors, each with their own story to tell, share their responses to these questions. Each one teaches Simon, and us, that forgiveness isn't as clear as we once thought.

Simon's Dilemma

In the early 1940s, the world was experiencing World War II in which people were experiencing death and suffering. The worst of the suffering included Jewish prisoners like Simon Wiesenthal who were forced into concentration camps throughout German-occupied Poland. The conditions were brutal, Simon was given little food and was forced to complete hard labor for the Nazis. If he refused, he would be shot. Simon and the other Jewish prisoners were no longer treated as human beings, instead, they were simply animals that should be tortured and abused.

Simon worked alongside his friends Arthur, Adam, and Josek. Throughout their time, the group of friends would often argue over the existence of God. While Josek remained faithful and believed that God was testing their strength through this horrible time, the others questioned how God could allow them to suffer so greatly. Soon, however, Simon would be met with an even bigger dilemma.

One morning, Simon becomes separated from his friends and is selected to work in a hospital. During his journey to the hospital, Simon sees a military cemetery where a sunflower lies on each grave. Seeing this, Simon begins to envy those soldiers. He realizes that if he dies in the concentration camp, he will be placed into a mass grave where no one will care to put a flower. Even in death, the Germans were still superior. At this point, Simon arrives at the hospital where a nurse pulls him aside to ask him if he is a Jew. The nurse brings Simon to the room of a fatally wounded Nazi soldier named Karl Seidl. Laying on his deathbed, Karl pleads for Simon to forgive him for his crimes against Jews.

Simon sat with Karl as he told the story of his life. Karl explains that he was born in Stuttgart in a Catholic household. His father, a Social Democrat, opposed Hitler and the Nazi party and pleaded with Karl not to join the Hitler Youth Program. Against his parents' wishes, Karl joined anyway and later volunteered for the SS. He then goes on to tell the story of the crime in

which he feels the most remorse and guilt. In a small Ukranian village, Karl and his fellow soldiers were ordered to gather 300 Jews, mainly women and children, into a house that was then set on fire.

A mother, father, and small boy then tried to jump from the house that was now blazing; however, Karl and other Nazis were armed outside ready to shoot anyone who dared try to escape. Karl is haunted by the image of this family, especially the look in the eyes of the young boy, and he begins to weep. Karl continues his story, stating that one day he again becomes haunted by the memory of the Jewish family and stops in his tracks. Just then, a shell explodes nearby and tears apart his face and body. Now in unbearable pain, Karl knew he would die soon and asked Simon to forgive him for his crimes so that he could die in peace. Faced with a dilemma beyond comprehension, Simon didn't know how to respond.

Simon's Decision

Once Karl finished his story and asked Simon for his forgiveness, Simon doesn't say anything and simply walks out of the room. While disgusted by what Karl had done, Simon showed respect for the man by staying and listening to his story and holding his hand. He even shooed away a fly that was bothering the dying man. During his story, however, Simon is reminded of a young boy from the Lemberg Ghetto named Eli.

Eli had miraculously survived a raid on young children in which a fake kindergarten was set up to lure parents into sending their children into it. When the children arrived, they were then taken straight to the gas chambers. Eli, however, had stayed home that day and became the last Jewish child that Simon ever saw.

After Simon leaves the hospital, he reunites with his friends and explains to them what just happened to him. All three are glad to hear that Simon didn't allow Karl to experience forgiveness, and Josek expresses that Simon didn't have the power to forgive him on behalf of other people anyway. Simon is still haunted by the situation and returns to the hospital the following day. He arrived to find that Karl had died that night and left Simon his possessions, including a name and address for his mother; however, Simon refused to take it.

The next two years are a nightmare as Simon experiences severe hunger as well as the loss of his three friends. The situation with Karl has not left him and he becomes haunted in the night by thoughts of the Nazi soldier. Trying to seek comfort, Simon confides in a fellow Catholic prisoner named Bolek. Bolek argues that Simon should have forgiven Karl since Karl had no one else to ask.

In 1945, Simon is liberated from the Mauthausen camp and is reminded of Karl when he sees the sight of a sunflower. Despite refusing Karl's belongings, he has remembered Karl's mother's name and address even

after all these years. He decides to travel to Germany and visit his mother. While there, Simon listens as Karl's mother laments the loss of her son and husband who also died in the war. However, she describes Karl as a kind young man and chooses to believe that Karl would've never harmed the Jews. At this moment, Simon chose silence once again. He decided against telling Karl's mother the full extent of their conversation, allowing her to keep the image of her son a positive one.

During this time, Simon asks "What would you have done in this situation?" He remains haunted by the experience and seeks to answer the power of forgiveness in extreme situations like this.

The Argument Against Forgiveness

Simon asks this same question to people such as cardinals, rabbis, the Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, and Albert Speer. Most of which choose to answer the question based on their religious upbringing. In the Jewish tradition, for example, murder can never be forgiven. In Judaism, forgiveness can only be given by the victim himself, proving that Simon cannot forgive crimes in the name of others.

Others, including Primo Levi, believe that Karl continued to demonstrate his anti-Semitism by asking his nurse for “a Jew, any Jew.” This request implies that Karl believed that Jews are not individuals, and even further proved his anti-Semitism by failing to ask Simon anything personal about himself, including something as simple as his name. This shows that even on his death bed, Karl showed the mentality that many Nazis share and dehumanized an entire race.

Alan L. Berger, who has been teaching *The Sunflower* for many years, even questions the sincerity in Karl’s repentance. Berger takes the side that a person cannot forgive someone who has taken the life of another person. He continues to say, however, that he even questions whether repentance for such horrible crimes is morally possible. His silence in the presence of both Karl and his mother, Berger believes, was the only proper response. It not only showed compassion, but it did not allow Karl to feel relief from the guilt he harbored for his crimes.

Moshe Bejksi is also among those who believe that Simon should not have granted Karl forgiveness. He begins his argument stating that Karl is a representative of all German Nazis, who collectively committed “abominable crimes” against the Jewish population. He also believes that Karl’s confession was only brought about during a desperate time in which death was imminent; otherwise, he would have continued committing crimes alongside his fellow Nazi soldiers. In this case, Simon and Karl represent two different worlds - the criminal and the victim.

Moshe Bejski experienced many common experiences as Simon, including spending time in labor, concentration, and extermination camps. He too was starved and made to feel less than human. With these shared experiences, Bejski is certain that anyone in Simon's position would have done the same. Bejski even goes so far as to say that showing Karl mercy would have been a "betrayal and repudiation" of the memory of millions of Jews.

While many of those who argue against forgiveness practice Judaism, practitioners of Christianity agree to a point as well. Henry James Cargas, for instance, references the idea of "unforgivable sin" in Christian scripture. He states that if unforgivable sin exists, then certainly the Nazis have committed it. He continues to say that he, too, would not have been able to forgive Karl in Simon's situation.

The Argument For Forgiveness

While many agreed with Simon's refusal to forgive Karl, others defined the line between forgiveness and forgetting. These people believed that forgiving Karl for his crimes doesn't mean that you should forget what he has done. The Dalai Lama brings up this point by giving the example of China's invasion of Tibet from 1940 to 1950. The invasion resulted in the death of 1/5 of the Tibetan population, but the Dalai Lama argues that to be angry with the Chinese for their crimes is "not the Buddhist way." He even cites a Tibetan monk who admitted that during his imprisonment, his biggest fear was losing compassion for the Chinese.

Others who share this sentiment include Dith Pran, a witness and survivor of the Cambodian Khmer Rouge genocide. Pran admits that he could never forgive or forget the leaders at the top, it was because of their decisions that Pran's father died of starvation, and that his three brothers and sister were killed. However, Pran argues that it is important to make a distinction between the leaders and the soldiers. The leaders intentionally plotted to destroy human beings; however, the soldiers were similar to the victims. Soldiers were trapped, uneducated, poor, and feared death. Therefore, Pran states that he can forgive the soldiers and would have forgiven Karl.

One person who offers a similar perspective is that of José Hobday, a woman of Native American descent who has spent much of her life listening to the stories of genocide against her own people. When listening to these stories, Hobday felt anger and resentment towards those who committed such crimes and desired revenge. Her mother, however, once told her, "Do not be so ignorant and stupid and inhuman as they are...You must learn the wisdom of how to let go of poison." Hobday believes that forgiveness isn't necessary for Karl's peace of mind, but Simon's. You see, when you hold onto resentment and anger, you ultimately become trapped by these negative emotions. Letting go of the anger you feel and forgiving your perpetrator isn't for the benefit of the criminal, but the victim.

Many look to other examples to argue that forgiveness is possible. For instance, Desmond Tutu speaks about his own experience during apartheid. People suffered greatly, they were tortured and their loved ones were killed; however, many of these people are ready to forgive their perpetrators, while others still struggle. Tutu gives the example of Nelson Mandela, the first democratically elected South African president. Mandela served twenty-seven years in prison, during which his eyesight was ruined and his family was harassed. Yet, Mandela forgave those who jailed and tortured him, even inviting his white jailer to his inauguration. Tutu believes that it is this kind of forgiveness that helps society build a better, more compassionate future.

A Question Without Answers

While many argued whether Simon should have forgiven Karl or not, others decided to argue that Karl's repentance should be taken into consideration. Tzvetan Todorov, for instance, recognizes that many Nazi soldiers did not regret their actions. Instead, they regret leaving any survivors. Karl, however, seemed to be experiencing true remorse and guilt for his crimes and should perhaps be treated differently. Todorov argues that while Karl shouldn't be absolved for his crimes, he should be recognized for attempting to change.

Similarly, Matthieu Ricard believes forgiving Karl would not result in condoning in past crimes, but instead, acknowledge Karl's inner change as a person through his repentance. By acknowledging his change, Simon would have offered Karl the opportunity to escape the "whirlpool of wrongdoing." Ricard, being a Buddhist, finally argues that in Simon's situation, he would have told Karl to pray for his future lives. Certainly, Ricard believes, Karl is destined to suffer in the afterlife; therefore, Simon only contributed to his suffering by refusing to forgive him.

On the other hand, Joseph Telushkin points out Karl's implication that he is suffering more than the Jews. During Karl's confession, he states that the Jews he killed didn't suffer and experienced quick deaths. He then goes on to say that the Jews were "not as guilty" as he was implying that Jews were guilty of something. In this scenario, Karl's confession becomes less sincere. Telushkin also argues that if Karl wanted to die with a clearer conscience, he should repent for his evils before, not after, they are committed. Therefore, Karl shouldn't have committed his atrocious crimes in the first place.

While many people differ in their opinions, many of their differences are rooted in their religious beliefs. Dennis Prager highlights the differences in religious beliefs in response to an incident that happened in today's society. A young woman jogging in Central Park was brutally raped and murdered

by a gang of young men. While in prison, these men were visited by a Cardinal from the Roman Catholic Church telling them that “God loves you.”

Prager, however, was furious and asked Jewish rabbis for their response to this situation. Each rabbi stated they would certainly not visit the men in jail, and if forced to visit them, they would most definitely not tell them that God still loves them. Prager provides several reasons for this difference in conceptions of forgiveness and argues, among other things, that the belief that God loves everyone makes it impossible for Christians to hate evil people. So what does this ultimately mean?

In the end, there is no simple answer to the question of forgiving Karl Seidl for his crimes against the Jewish people. Many people have their beliefs, none of which are better or worse than another's. Many argue, however, that perhaps Simon's silence was the best response to Karl's pleas. Not only did his silence fail to forgive Karl for his crimes, but it also showed the kindness and compassion of humanity in the face of terrible suffering.

Final Summary

When it comes to the topic of the Holocaust, many people question the forgiveness of Nazi soldiers who committed some of the most atrocious crimes in history. Throughout Simon Wiesenthal's search for answers, he found that forgiveness is much more complicated than it seems. By engaging in conversations with Christians, Jews, Holocaust survivors, Buddhists, genocide survivors, and more, Simon discovered the nuances of each religion and the complexities surrounding the topic of forgiveness. It turns out that there is no true answer to the question surrounding forgiveness, instead, we must continue to question the atrocities of humanity and discover how and why we allow them to occur.



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