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## He didn't become a macher

**A new biography of Simon Wiesenthal is about one man's ability to maneuver among a very large number of entities in order to achieve an objective, without selling his soul to the devil**

By **Yitzhak Laor**

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"Simon Wiesenthal: The Life and Legends," by Tom Segev. Doubleday, 457 pages, \$35. (Published in Hebrew by Keter, 495 pages, NIS 98)



Simon Wiesenthal

Photo by: AP

I devoured this book about Simon Wiesenthal like a detective story. I can hardly remember when I last read such a fascinating biography. Part of the enjoyment is related to Tom Segev's ability to tell a story, to know when to touch and when to let go. He has a kind of awareness that history is a fascinating story (for example, the end of each chapter prepares you for the sensation of the next ).

But part of the interest is undoubtedly related to the hero of the story. I used to get tired of hearing his name in the news. Not because he chased Nazis. That actually pleased me. But at some stage it seemed to me that he was working for something greater. Now this book comes along and confirms such suspicions, while also turning them into part of an exhilarating story about a man in the post-inferno world: He emerged and decided that he would run the



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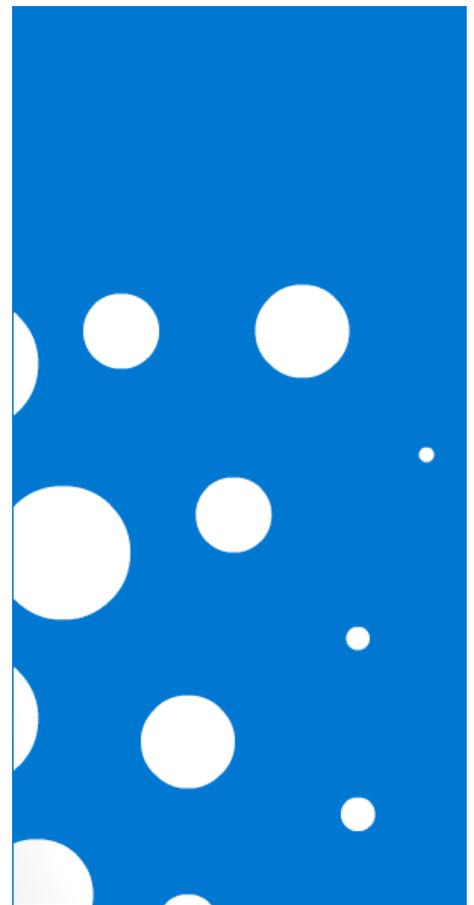
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world like a private detective. Usually, the Jewish macher was swallowed up within the State of Israel, sometimes making his way up the ladder, sometimes making do with memories of the past. But Wiesenthal turned himself into an international institution.

He was born in Buczacz, Galicia, when the region was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This affiliation was of great significance for Jews when it came to anything related to "German culture": it gave them a language beyond Yiddish and Polish, it led them to believe they belonged to German culture, and it bore implications for their relationship with the two other large ethnic groups in the region, Ukrainians and Poles. This was a relationship that assumed great significance in the story of Wiesenthal, mainly connected to the Holocaust itself: Who hid people, who persecuted them, who helped. The heterogeneity of Galicia, about which S.Y. Agnon often wrote songs of praise, takes on horrifying meaning in this book.

In any case, these details are certainly important for explaining Wiesenthal's desire to settle in Vienna after the war. The question that kept going through my head when I was a child, about Holocaust survivors who chose to rebuild their lives in Germany or Austria, has never left me, and I admit that I still have no good answers to this question. Segev has a nice description of Wiesenthal's life after the war, and this question receives an explanation of sorts: a personal story about a man who didn't remain in Europe in order to make money or to buy homes more easily, but who turned his life into an instrument of punishment in the wake of his terrible history and that of his family. Segev knows how to address this subject because he too treats the lives of Holocaust survivors among Germans and Austrians as something incomprehensible.

**Totally independent**

What made Wiesenthal so special? It is doubtful whether that question can be answered without repeatedly returning to the key point: Instead of becoming a macher, a public figure or a speaker, he embarked on a prolonged and sometimes totally independent operation. This is a book about the possibility, or the impossibility, of working alone, in a concrete manner, in a world of political forces. It is a book about the possibility of maneuvering among many entities in order to achieve a goal. It's a book about someone who did not sell his soul to the devil in order to succeed. That is the reason for Tom Segev's love for his hero. The author fell in love with his subject's clearheaded idealism.

In short, Wiesenthal managed to bring about the arrest of more than 1,000 Nazi criminals, who without him would have been allowed to continue living their lives. Over the years he acquired many enemies: Nazis, of course, and Bruno Kreisky, Austria's Jewish chancellor, whose rivals on the right, including Kurt Waldheim, Wiesenthal insisted on supporting. His intervention in Austrian politics was fueled by a kind of pride: He saw himself as an Austrian citizen, although his mother tongue was not German. Kreisky was a "genuine" Austrian Jew. He had a past as a fighter against the fascists. He was willing to forgive Nazis for the sake of Austrian politics, because after all, a huge percentage of Austrians had been Nazis. The war between the two men reached theatrical tones.

Mossad chief Isser Harel also tried to deny Wiesenthal credit for the successful surveillance of Adolf Eichmann. Wiesenthal conducted a bitter war against him, too. On the other hand, since at some point he was recruited to the Mossad, there are documents proving that members of the organization were in contact with him and greatly admired his abilities.

A biographer who receives access to his subject's papers is liable to be indebted. Segev knows that there are contradictions in Wiesenthal's biography. For example, at some point he mentioned that he was in Auschwitz. He was not in Auschwitz. Why did he write that? It's not clear. After all, his personal Via Dolorosa included five other camps. Segev does not think that his explanations can really answer the difficult questions about his subject. At some point Wiesenthal turned himself into the representative of the Jews, and since as far as



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the world was concerned the Jews were in "Auschwitz," and Auschwitz became a metaphor, he inserted himself into Auschwitz, as though Mauthausen was less horrifying.

Wiesenthal did not give up on hunting Nazi criminals, even when he knew that the United States, with whose agents and agencies he worked at first, wanted them to get away with it. At some point, he compromised and made do with what the Americans actually wanted; in other words, hunting Nazis in the communist countries. That happened at the time when Israel severed relations with those countries. In response, the Polish and East German espionage agencies tried to find something that would confirm suspicions that Wiesenthal had cooperated with the Nazis during the German occupation. Segev visited the archives of the Polish and East German secret services and discovered how fair they had been. They didn't find anything, and they concluded that there was nothing against him. In addition, he is almost surprised by the respectful attitude of the East Germans.

That is one of Segev's advantages, and this goes for his previous books too. He permits himself to be surprised by his discoveries even as he is writing. In that way he protects us from the historian in him. Segev follows in Wiesenthal's footsteps to the places that were covered with dust after the war. So many crimes, in so many places, by so many criminals, that it is doubtful whether anyone seriously assumed the role of imposing law and order after the war - amongst the creation of the post-war blocs, Jewish refugees who had returned from the netherworld, the expulsion of the Germans from the East, Austria's becoming neutral, the destruction of evidence, and mainly the huge numbers of "marginal" sites of conflagration, and the names of "petty" criminals. Wiesenthal immersed himself in that world, his eyes searched and his memory worked, as names, numbers and dates were etched into it. He had an exceptional memory, and used it for his intelligence work, mainly intelligence gathering via newspapers, cross-referencing names, filing letters.

His desire for revenge - and this is perhaps the book's most interesting point - overcame its "simple" side, that is, its immediate, cruel side, and instead turned it into the perseverance of a hunter. It is no wonder that writers and film producers took an interest in him. It is no wonder that other Nazi hunters clashed with him (Beate Klarsfeld; Tuvia Friedman, who admired him ). He himself, according to Segev's description, had quite a big ego, but handled himself intelligently and didn't forget anything.

Wiesenthal emerged from the hell and engraved his deeds on the system of symbols of the century. How? He wanted to chase criminals. He moved among different groups, first Jewish and humanitarian organizations. He learned very quickly how to run his affairs, as long as he was able to finance himself and his life; in other words, he was not a Jewish macher who makes the round of institutions and manages to get money for other Jews. Had he been involved in murdering Nazis, he would probably have been "finished" after three or four murders, or one magnificent and widely covered trial. But something inside him refused to accept the one off. Something inside him told him to accept the rules of the game and within them to be greater than the rules.

True, he did not really always succeed in being independent. He maneuvered so much that he found himself giving a seal of approval to Kurt Waldheim, who was a war criminal. He became an agent of the Mossad; the same Mossad that by 1949 employed Nazi criminal Walter Rauff, who had developed the method of using vans for gassing. Wiesenthal didn't know about that, and we can reasonably assume that he would have found a way not to accept it, but what is impressive about this man is that to the end of his life he didn't accept the Israeli insistence on considering the crimes of the Nazis as crimes against the Jewish people, but rather to see them in the human context.

Anyone who wants to understand Wiesenthal's greatness will compare him to Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel. The difference between

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them deserves a separate essay, and is entirely connected to the nature of the activity: Is it possible to act more or less alone and to succeed, or in order to "succeed" do you have to become part of an existing machine and simply make speeches?

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