



## FORGIVENESS



The year is 1943. Simon Wiesenthal was a Jewish architect incarcerated in Lemberg Concentration Camp. He was summoned by the guards. He assumed it was to his death or to heard away the dead bodies of other Jews.

The Nazi guards escorted him through a ghetto towards a hospital, Simon notices butterflies flying from sunflower to sunflower in the German graveyard. Each grave had one "...as straight as a soldier on parade", as though the flowers took in sun rays and pulled them down into the dark ground where the soldier lay. Simon realized there would be no sunflower on his grave. Merely corpses were piled on top of each other. There would be no sunflower to connect him with the world or bring him light, no butterflies to visit his grave.

Simon was escorted to a school. It was the school he used to teach in, only now it was being used as a hospital. He was taken to the bedside of the dying Nazi soldier Karl Seidl.

Seidl was bandaged from head to toe. His breathing was wheezy. Simon would have been repulsed were it not for the fact he'd seen so many worse things by then. Seidl asked Simon to sit down and told him the following:

"I joined the SS when I was 16. All my friends were doing it. I wanted Germany to be great again. I started killing Jews by the hundred. By the time the war was a few years in I'd killed thousands. Last year we filled a house with 300 Jews and threw grenades inside. I gunned down any who were trying to escape by jumping out of the window. But then I looked through the sights of my rifle and saw a woman holding her baby. I paused. My commanding officer told me to fire and I did."

"Last month I was on the battle field fighting the British. They opened fire. I stood up to retaliate, but looking through the sight on my rifle I remembered the mother and child. I froze. I must have stood there for 5 or 10 seconds. Long enough not to raise the enemy had thrown a grenade at me. That's why I'm here. I have shrapnel poisoning. I'll die before the week is out."

"Simon I asked you here because I want to ask you something. I want to ask for your forgiveness."

Wiesenthal said nothing. He left the room and went back to the concentration camp.

However Simon spent the rest of his life uncertain if he did the right thing? So that he didn't go to the grave unsure he wrote about incident and asked writers, philosophers and thinkers from all around the world to tell him what they think he should have done.



### Starter Question: Should Simon have forgiven Seidl?

#### Nested Questions

- ✓ Are some acts unforgivable?
- ✓ If someone apologises then should you forgive them?
- ✓ Can you forgive before justice is served?
- ✓ Can you forgive on behalf of your race/group?
- ✓ Can you forgive on behalf of the dead?

- ✓ Can you forgive someone just before they die?
- ✓ Is there any reason for Simon to forgive Sidel?
- ✓ Can Sidel forgive himself?
- ✓ What is forgiveness?

## EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Here's a brief summary of some of the responses writers and philosophers have given Simon in the book *The Sunflower*: Do you agree or disagree?

**Jean Amery:** It would have made no difference politically. It would have one been significant to you and him.

**Dali Lama:** In Tibet the worst thing to fear about Chinese occupation is that we may lose compassion towards our oppressors.

**Smail Balic:** Simon wasn't qualified to forgive. Only god can forgive this sin.

**Rodger Kamenetz:** Sidel asking for forgiveness was an abuse of Simon. It showed that he saw him as a Jew, not a human.

**Desmond Tutu:** Nelson Mandela forgave his oppressors and South Africa was able to move forward. Unless there is forgiveness there can be no future.

**Herbert G Locke:** Simon was silent and we should be to. Silence shows the most human response to the most challenging of dilemmas.

**Primo Levi:** Simon may feel remorse for not forgiving him but his remorse would be ten times greater than if he had forgiven Sidel. Simon chose the lesser of two anguishes.

## EXTENSION ACTIVITY

*Lets imagine scientists study people who had been wronged in similar ways. They divide them into two groups: those who've forgiven the people who wronged them and the people who haven't. On average those who forgave were less likely to be suffering from anxiety and depression.*

### **Task Question: Does this prove you should forgive people who've wronged you?**

#### **Nested Questions**

- ✓ Should forgiveness be for our own benefit or the benefit of the culprit?
- ✓ Is injustice more important than mental health?
- ✓ Should you forgive someone because you want to forgive someone?