

Simon Wiesenthal – The Life and Legends by Tom Segev.
Jonathan Cape 2010.

Tom Segev is one of Israel's finest journalists and author of some highly regarded books; only a writer of unimpeachable integrity could have taken on the biography of one of the 20th century's most controversial and high profile Jews, the 'Nazi hunter' Simon Wiesenthal; and it is clear from this intriguing and highly informative book that Wiesenthal's life has been placed in secure hands.

Segev tells the story of Wiesenthal's life in all its twists and turns on the basis of meticulous research in several countries, with access to his subject's own voluminous archive of over 300,000 pieces of paper, and with the support of Wiesenthal's daughter.

Simon Wiesenthal played a key role in raising the case of many former Nazi war criminals who had escaped justice, and was directly responsible for the bringing to justice of a significant number. With the tracking down of others he was more peripherally connected, but his profile being what it was he often got credit for arrests with which he had had slim or no involvement at all.

As the sub-title of the book suggests Wiesenthal's relationship to the truth was often somewhat flexible, and his talent for self-promotion and publicity actually endangered the successful prosecution of some hunts. In Austria, where he established his base, he was a deeply controversial figure, loathed by its Chancellor Bruno Kreisky and the target for much of the anti-Semitism that never left the country in spite of the wartime exploits of its most loathsome sons.

Nevertheless, as he got older, Wiesenthal became an iconic figure, the friend of film stars and Presidents, and though he was hard to work for, a neglectful husband and father, and an obsessive and at times manically driven man, he stood by his mission to bring as many of the perpetrators of crimes against the Jewish People in the Shoah to justice, and carved out a unique place for himself in the annals of 20th century Jewish history.

Tom Segev has produced yet another superb book to add to his canon, and a biography worthy in every way of its subject.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh