

# 'The prison is in your mind'

Sent to Auschwitz at 16, **Edith Eger** reveals how the power of Spirit helped her survive the darkest of days

**What can you tell us about your childhood?**

I was born on September 29, 1927, into a Jewish family in the Slovakian city of Košice, which at the time was in Hungarian territory.

I was a disappointment to my father, a tailor. He'd had two girls and wanted a son. But when I was about nine or 10 he told me I was his confidante!

I was very lonely, had a magical friend I'd talk to, was extremely shy and cross-eyed. My sisters Magda and Klara would blindfold me when we went out for a walk so people wouldn't see how ugly I was!

In my teens I was a talented ballet dancer and gymnast and began training for a future Olympic Games. I wanted to represent my home country of Hungary but, when the shadow of Nazism fell over Eastern Europe, I was not allowed to train with the team.

**What do you recall about that terrible time in 1943 when you, your parents and older sisters were deported to Auschwitz?**

I remember Mum saying in the cattle car, 'No one can take away what you put in your own mind.'

When we arrived, we were separated from our father, and then, Dr Josef Mengele, the infamous Angel of Death, pointed at Mum and said to me, 'Is she your mother or your sister?'

'Mother,' I replied and he pointed with his thumb for her to go to the left. I followed Mum and he grabbed me and threw me on the other side.

'You'll see her very soon. She's just going to take a shower,' he said.

My mother turned to me and smiled, a small, sad smile. That was the last time I saw her.

Later, an inmate cruelly ripped out my earrings and pointed at smoke coming out of a chimney.



*'I knew if I lived in the future I would never get out'*

'Your mother's burning in there,' she told me. There's a potential Hitler in every one of us. I was shaved and stripped of my clothes, feeling ashamed and embarrassed when men stared at my body.

After that, every time that I went into a shower I didn't know whether gas would come out or water.

Mengele used to trawl the barracks looking for talented inmates to entertain him. I was forced to dance one day and, when my performance pleased him, he tossed me a loaf of bread.

My sister, Klara, was the superstar child prodigy on the violin in our family. The only Jewish girl accepted in her conservatory in Budapest. She was smuggled out by her professor, who hid her until the end of the war.

I looked after my other sister, Magda, until we were liberated. Half-starved and broken, we endured enforced SS marches across central Europe as the war entered its final months. I still have flashbacks and nightmares today.

**What spiritual wisdoms did you learn in the concentration camp?**

That it wasn't a place of recovery, it was a place of discovery. I discovered 'god' in Auschwitz. I prayed and He spoke within me, guiding me to turn hatred into pity.

I had the best spiritual guide ever and felt peace and beauty within me. It told me I am the one who will create my life. If I survive it will be one day at a time and then I will be free tomorrow. I knew if I lived in the future I would never get out alive. I told myself I am never going to consider that I won't get out of here. I worked hard at developing my inner voice.

Of course, I had anger and shook my fist at 'god' but somehow, in time, I turned that into pity and decided the prisoner was not me, it was the guards. They'd been brainwashed to hate



people like me. They were the ones who'd pay with their conscience. That knowledge guided me to stop hating anymore.

**What happened after you were finally liberated?**

In May 1945, when the American army liberated the Guns kirchen camp, a young American soldier noticed my hand moving slightly among a number of dead bodies. He summoned medical help and brought me and my sister back from the brink of death.

Magda and I managed to find our way back to the family home. I may have been freed from the death camp, but I knew I must also be free – free to create, to make a life, to choose. And until I found my freedom, I'd just be spinning around in the same endless darkness.

At 19, I married a Slovakian called Bela, whose mother had been gassed at the camp. He made me laugh and feel protected. We had three children together (Marianne, Audrey and John. Bela died in 1993, aged 73, of tuberculosis).

In 1949 my husband, Magda and I emigrated to the US, where she worked as a piano teacher and I did a PHD in clinical psychology, becoming an expert on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

I may have been helping others but it was years before I felt free in my own mind.

**In 1980 you made a pilgrimage to Auschwitz. Why did you return to a place that caused you so much pain?**

To face my fears and reclaim my innocence. Magda refused to accompany me. She said to

**PROFILE...**

**Name**  
Edith Eger

**Career** She's a clinical psychologist and lecturer, and has spent much of her career working with members of the military to help them heal from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Edith has appeared on Oprah Winfrey and Larry King Now and speaks internationally.

**Did you know?** Edith is known as 'the Anne Frank who didn't die' as she shares the same optimistic and positive spirit as the Jewish teenager.



me, 'You're an idiot, a masochist, what's the matter with you?'

We went through the same experience, but we had two very different responses. And the work I did guiding people to relive their traumas and not get stuck meant I too had to go through the shadow of the valley of death and do the same.

I had to properly grieve in order to heal. I couldn't heal what I didn't feel. You can't medicate grief, it's a natural reaction to a loss. There's no forgiveness without rage, you don't cover onions with chocolate. Your body talks to you and you need to respect its symptoms. If you don't deal with them, it will deal with you. Otherwise what stays in you, stays in your body and can develop as a cancer.

Women don't know how to be assertive and we pile a lot of feelings up in ourselves until we burst, and sometimes it's too late.

My trip to Auschwitz was part of the process of seeing things differently. I imagined finding the words that might have saved my mother from the gas chamber. I felt the regret, wishing I could have changed things. It dawned on me that the life I hadn't lived was becoming the only life I prized. I realised I was physically free but not emotionally and set out to become a survivor, not a victim of circumstance.

The relief from my guilt came as I became aware of the cruelty I'd been practising with myself. After my visit I stopped using shaming self-talk and practised kindness with myself.





Magda, Klara and Edith together in the 1970s



On holiday with Magda and Klara in the early 1930s



With the Veterans Affairs Advisory Board

would it be if they were alive. But I don't live in the past, I live in the present even though I'll never forget the past.

**Your book *The Choice* (£8.99, Rider) about your experiences was published when you were 90. Why then?**

It took me a lifetime to write it. I seriously thought about doing it 11 years ago so that when I died my children would know their ancestors were strong survivors and never gave up. I wanted them to know that challenges in life are temporary and they'll survive them. And I wanted to be remembered as a woman of strength and not a victim of anything.

**What drives you to continue to share your story of survival?**

To unite the human family and empower people not to be a victim. To help people find their way from victimisation to empowerment, from prison to freedom.

The biggest prison is your mind and the key to it is in your pocket. Look within you – the living 'god' is there. Hatred breeds more hatred. Love is why we come to this world and how we can make a difference, by believing in goodness and kindness. I tell people to be a good parent to yourself because you're the only one you have for a lifetime – all your other relationships end.

Freedom is discovering the part in you that doesn't allow anyone to define who you are. Recently, I gave a lecture about bullying and said a bully is really a coward. People are going to put you down but no one is going to do that without your permission. People only

have as much power over you as you allow. Reclaim your power, the power within you.

You were born with love and joy and not born in fear. Fear and love do not coexist. If you have fear you have no love. If you have love you are not going to have any fear. Fear is a parasite and sucks you up and you become a victim. I refuse to be a victim. I was victimised but it was not who I am, it was what was done to me.

**What advice do you have for people still trying to find the key to unlock themselves from their mental prison?**

Get up in the morning and go to the bathroom, look at yourself in the mirror and say, 'I love you'. Self-love is self-care. Love your neighbour as yourself but not better than yourself. Tell yourself daily, 'I'm beautiful, I'm kind.' Honour yourself and love yourself. There'll never be another you, no one can ever replace you.

**What's your life like today?**

I live in La Jolla, California. I go swing dancing once a week and do the boogie woogie! I have a joy within me that I cherish because I don't have to wait for anything to come from the outside (external world). I feel younger now than I did years ago. I have five grandchildren and three great-grandsons, and that's the best revenge to Hitler.

✦ **More info** *The Choice* by Edith Eger is published by Rider Books, priced £8.99.

**WIN**

We have five copies of *The Choice* to give away. Email your name, address and contact number with *The Choice* in the subject bar, to spirit.destiny@bauermedia.co.uk by January 3, 2019.



The arrival of Hungarian Jews at Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in 1944

**Did your breakthrough inform your work as a psychologist?**

Yes, I always tell people the best thing that a parent can teach them is how to be a good parent to themselves. In Auschwitz nothing came from outside. I had to look within and ask myself, 'How can I be a good parent to myself?'

Even today I ask my patients to live in the present and ask themselves how they can take care of themselves financially, emotionally and physically. I teach self-responsibility, there's no freedom without responsibility. I usually start by asking women two questions: 'When did your childhood end?' and 'Would you like to be married to you?'

**Have you ever felt the spirit of your parents around you?**

I still feel them guiding me today and I owe it to them that they didn't die in vain. So I continue to share what Mum told me in the cattle car, 'No

one can take away what you put in your head.'

I beg children to think big, make a difference. Think small, you stay small. The way you think is how you see the world and the way you are.

I think as hopefully as I can. When I pray, I pray to Mum and thank her for bringing me home. I have a lot of thank yous when I pray. I also recognise that I didn't 'overcome' what happened, I came to terms with it.

**Do you still get flashbacks to your time in Auschwitz?**

Many things trigger it and make me relive it but it's not the trigger that's important. It's important for me to welcome those feelings and feel them and breathe them, then release them and not blame other people for them.

Of course, I still think about my parents and my first love, Eric, who died there, and ask how



**Love yourself**

**Try it now!**

Learn how to be a good parent to yourself, just as Edith did in Auschwitz, with these daily exercises

♥ **START EACH** day by showing yourself love.

Spend the first five minutes after you wake breathing in love for yourself.

Breathe in for five seconds, visualising a golden ball of love flooding your body. Then breathe out for five seconds any feelings of unworthiness until you are a globe of light.

♥ **INVEST IN** a self-love crystal such as rose quartz. Whenever you feel in need of some love, take it out of your pocket and tell yourself, 'I love and accept myself unconditionally.'

♥ **SPEND 15** minutes over lunch meditating on things you are grateful for about yourself and your life.

♥ **NOURISH YOUR** heart chakra, which is associated with the colour green, by making a nutritious smoothie. Blend green fruits of your choice, such as kiwi, apples, grapes,

*'A golden ball of love flooding your body'*

cucumbers and avocados, with organic yoghurt and coconut water. As you are drinking it, imagine what you want to manifest in your life, whether it be creating your own business to finding a new home, and trust it will come to pass.

♥ **DO SOMETHING** new to boost your confidence such as taking a dance class like Edith.

You may not be the greatest dancer, but you don't have to do things perfectly to really enjoy them and feel good about yourself. ♥