

Dancing to Survive, Forgiving to Live: The Story of Dr. Edith Eva Eger

The first skills a gymnast learns are cartwheels, backflips, and splits. Young athletes dedicate an immense amount of time into perfecting these skills with years spent in the gym. This sport conditions girls to be tough, disciplined, and graceful. For one little girl, these traits meant the difference between life and death. Edith was seventeen years old when her family was moved from Hungary and sent to Auschwitz in 1944. Edith was a happy girl with a spot on Hungary's Olympic training team. She excelled in gymnastics and was often found showing off flips and kicks to her sisters. In 1942, life took a drastic change. Edith's gymnastics instructor kicked her off of the team in accordance with a new German law. Confused and heartbroken, Edith left the sport she poured so much time and heart into. Neighborhood whisperings of relocation started to work their way into Edith's home, but her father insisted the family stay put. In May of 1944, Nazis occupied Hungary and Edith's family was one among millions that ended up at Auschwitz. Edith's oldest sister, Klara, was hidden away by her music instructor so she could continue playing violin. With one family member gone, the rest of Edith's family did their best to stay together. Upon their arrival at Auschwitz, however, lines began to form. The old and weak were sent to the left while the young and strong were sent to the right. Edith's mother, Illona, looked well enough to pass into the strong category. When it was Edith's turn to step forward, she realized the person doing the sorting was none other than the Angel of Death himself, Dr. Joseph Mengele. His piercing eyes gazed upon Edith's face and he carefully asked, "Is this woman your mother or your sister?" (34). Edith could never have pictured the magnitude of this question. The word that came out of her mouth would be the word that haunted her forever. She replied, "mother," and Illona was swiftly pushed to the left. Edith cried out and tried to follow

her mother, but Menengle curtly replied, “you’re going to see your mother very soon. She’s just going to take a shower” (35). Edith clung to her sister Magda as they were shoved to the right. It was only after Edith saw the smoke that she realized her mother was gone. The emotional events that Edith first encountered were only the beginning of a horrible and haunting future at Auschwitz. Edith and her sister survived the unthinkable as mere teenagers, losing their childhood, family, and health over two years. The horrors of the Holocaust taught Edith lessons about love, loss, and growth, spurring her to a future in psychiatry where she used her pain to heal others. The story of Dr. Edith Eva Eger has helped countless patients grow by making what Edith has come to coin, “the choice.” As Edith says, “I celebrate your choice to dismantle the prison in your mind, brick by brick. You can’t change what happened, you can’t change what you did or what was done to you. But you can choose how you live now. You can choose to be free” (272).

One cold, gray morning, Edith’s malnourished body could no longer handle any abuse. Edith was dying, and she accepted it. She yearned to be with her mother again, to be free of the suffering. As she lay down to die, men started yelling in English. The Americans had come to liberate Auschwitz! Her body was too frail to move and her voice was too weak to shout, so she lie still and prayed that one of the soldiers would see her. Finally, a soldier saw her chest moving in and out. He lifted her body from the dirt, patted her head, and fed her M&M’s. This marked the start of Edith’s new life. She had escaped the physical prison camp of Auschwitz, but as she would soon discover, her mind would be imprisoned for many years to come.

Edith’s life after 1945 consisted of immense adversity, yet she found strength by using psychiatry to help others combat their own challenges. After liberation, Edith and Magda were orphans with nowhere to go. By lucky chance Magda caught a glimpse at a sign hanging on a

streetpost. It was a flyer for the great violin player, Klara. Their sister was alive and performing for vast audiences. Klara, Magda, and Edith lived together up until all the girls found husbands. Edith met the bubbly Bella Eger, who took her to America to start a new life. They had three children and a stable home where Edith could try to come to terms with what she went through. Edith's mind was still scarred by her trauma. She was stuck in a mental jail and could not find a key. She spent years as a psychiatrist trying to help other people combat their struggles but neglected her own in the process. After much thought, Edith decided the only way to free her mind was by returning to Auschwitz where it all began. She looked upon the ground she once stood and forgave herself for everything. She forgave herself for her mother's death, she forgave herself for surviving, and she forgave herself for being a victim by believing any of it was her fault. Edith's strength, resilience, and intelligence is a wonder to all. Her spirit glows bright and her story will not be forgotten. Just like the millions who were lost too soon, suffered too young, or endured too much, their stories will not be forgotten.

Edith's bravery is touching for countless reasons. I remember the time, tears, and work that I put into my ten years of gymnastics. The sport was my life fifteen hours a week, providing me with purpose, happiness, and strength. Edith recalls feeling the same way when she was in the gym and her abilities predicted a long gymnastics career ahead of her. The intrusion of evil and hate ripped Edith away from a golden future and even the chance to live out her full childhood. For me, my time as a gymnast has come to pass, but I dedicate my knowledge to other aspiring gymnasts through coaching. As a coach, I work one-on-one with countless giddy girls who are eager to flip around. Every practice I see the potential in their eyes. I keep Edith's story close to me when I coach because I know how lucky these girls are to pursue their passion. Edith lost her chance to showcase her training, but these little girls are just getting their start.

Gymnastics is more than a sport, it is a discipline and teacher for students to learn to face adversity. When Dr. Menengle pointed Edith to death at Auschwitz, she did a high kick to save her life. Edith recalls the way she moved, with Dr. Menengle yelling, "Little dancer, Dance for me!" (40), and Edith did her routine as she thought, "I focus on my routine, on my years of training... if I miss a step, if I do anything to displease him, it could be me. I dance. I dance. I am dancing in hell... I dance for life" (40). Now, at 92, when Edith finishes a lecture in front of thousands of soldiers, she does the same high kick, to remind herself of the life she fought for, and to teach others that strength is unwavering. Even in the toughest of times or the worst of circumstances, hope is in the heart, ready to be unlocked when one makes the choice.

Works Cited

Eger, Edith. "The Choice," New York City, *Scribner*, 5 September 2017. Accessed 1 February 2020. Print.