

The New York Times

NONFICTION

What a Survivor of Auschwitz Learned From the Trauma of Others

By Lori Gottlieb

Oct. 6, 2017

THE CHOICE

Embrace the Possible

By Edith Eva Eger with Esme Schwall Weigand

288 pp. Scribner. \$27.

Edith Eva Eger's mind-blowing memoir of surviving Auschwitz doesn't begin with the terrifying night when she is 16 years old and armed soldiers herd her Hungarian family into a wagon full of Jews. Instead, we meet Dr. Eger in an El Paso therapy room in 1980, where she is treating a catatonic young man plagued by ... well, she's not sure what.

Trauma, yes. But she has yet to discover its source. And when she does, it will bring her closer to her own.

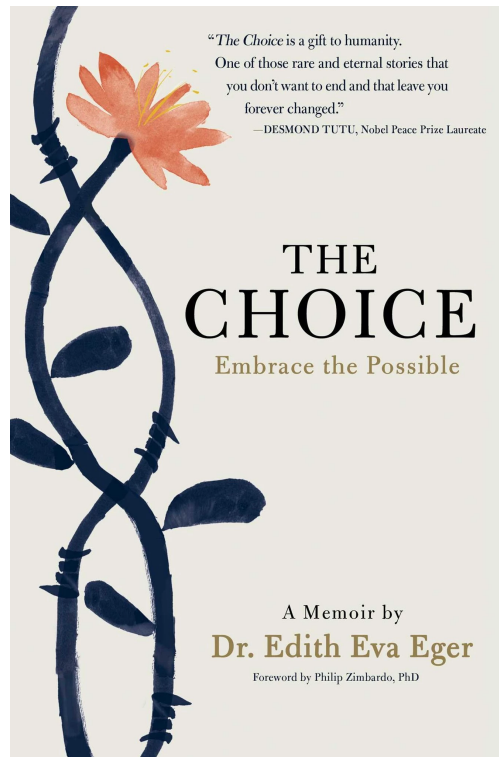
By then, Eger will be a married mother of three, a public-school teacher turned therapist who had escaped to America after sneaking her imprisoned husband out of jail — “Yesterday's Nazis become today's Communists,” he said, when passing up a government post — and leaving everything they owned behind. Eventually, she will earn worldwide recognition for helping all kinds of people move past their struggles — from military personnel to cancer patients, from those who suffered abuse to couples on the brink of divorce. And at nearly 90 years old, she will write “The Choice: Embrace the Possible,” an unforgettable account of her painstaking path to emotional healing alongside that of her patients.

This wasn't the life that Eger imagined for herself as a teenage dancer and gymnast in the early 1940s. Then she was on the Hungarian gymnastics team, preparing for the next Olympics — until, due to anti-Semitism, she was expelled. It's the most devastating blow of her life, but she has no idea of the devastation to come.

The wagon takes Eger's family to a brick factory, where they work before being crammed in a cattle car en route to Auschwitz. In the dark train, her mother offers a lifesaving, and later, life-changing, piece of wisdom. “Just remember,” she says, “no one can take away from you what

you've put in your mind."

Eger will use those words upon their arrival, when Josef Mengele sends her mother to the gas chamber and that night commands Eger to dance for him. "The barracks floor becomes a stage at the Budapest opera house," she imagines.



Over the next year, she endures relentless atrocities and witnesses others — a woman in labor with her legs bound shut; a young boy used for target practice — only to be lifted from a pile of corpses at the end of the war, weighing 70 pounds and nearly dead herself.

She is free, but with a broken back and broken spirit. Now what? The “now what” is the crux of “The Choice.”

Eger isn't the first Auschwitz survivor to write an account of the experience and introduce a way to move forward. In fact, it's the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl's "Man's Search for Meaning," handed to Eger by a fellow student more than two decades after liberation — at a time when Eger is still “pounded by loss” — that jump-starts her journey from “wearing a mask” to learning “how people heal.”

Frankl becomes her friend and mentor, and while their ideas overlap, Eger offers a singular perspective as both seeker and guide. She gets in the trenches with her patients (sometimes calling them “honey”) and grants readers intimate access to her parallel quest to escape from the

prison of her mind. Her cases, riveting in the telling, though not always groundbreaking in technique, illustrate with a profound sense of humility that no matter how varied our experiences, we are more alike than different.

At one point, a judge sends to her for treatment a troubled 14-year-old boy who arrives spewing racist venom. But instead of condemning him, Eger looks for herself in him, for her own bigotry and hatred — and makes a choice.

“We have the capacity to hate and the capacity to love. Which one we reach for,” she writes, “is up to us.”

I can’t imagine a more important message for modern times. Eger’s book is a triumph, and should be read by all who care about both their inner freedom and the future of humanity.

Lori Gottlieb is a psychotherapist who writes a weekly advice column, *What Your Therapist Really Thinks*, for New York magazine.

A version of this article appears in print on October 7, 2017, on Page 19 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: The Power to Heal