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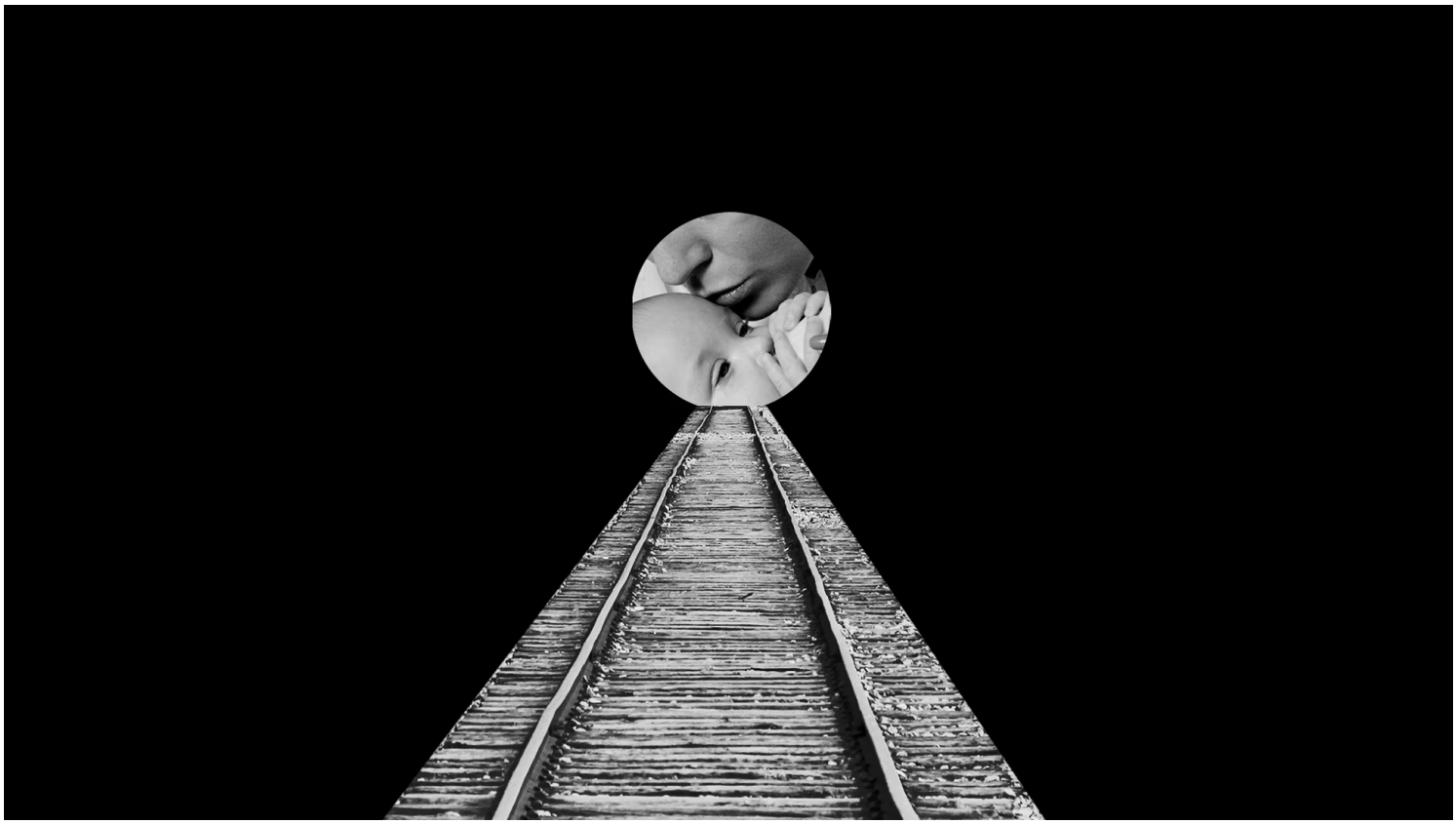
IDEAS

A Holocaust Survivor's Secret Sadness

My mother died in Auschwitz. I survived, but it took me decades to realize that this was part of my daughters' inheritance, too.

By Edith Eger



The Atlantic; Getty

About the author: *Edith Eger is a clinical psychologist and the author of* The Choice *and* The Gift.

In my earliest memories of my mother, I see her braiding the challah for our Friday-night meal, cutting and laying sheets of strudel dough across the dining-room table, feeding the goose she kept in the attic of our home in Kassa, Hungary, for her decadent foie gras. But I also remember her sorrow—for the mother she'd lost when she was only 9, and also, I sensed, for the woman she herself had become. A woman who created everyday feasts and bountiful picnic baskets, yet was starving inside. Even today, I hear her moaning in front of the portrait of her mother that hung over the piano in our living room. "Help me, help me," she'd cry as she cleaned and dusted.

In May 1944, when I was 16, my mother was killed in the gas chamber on our first day in Auschwitz. My father also died in Auschwitz, but I have never known exactly when. I was still reeling from the loss of my parents, and struggling with my guilt for having survived, when, just two years after the war's end, I became a young mother. I was also determined, after so much pain and loss, to be a source of life. I resolved never to freight my children with my sorrow or trauma. For decades, I never spoke of the death camps, never told anyone, including my children—especially my children—that I was a survivor.

Audrey, my younger daughter, has said she was aware of my sadness when she was growing up. She knew I went into the bathroom to cry. Sorrow was present and palpable in our house, but it wasn't acknowledged or explained. "We ended up being pretty private. There's a lot we didn't tell you," my elder daughter, Marianne, has said. "If we were in pain, you'd be sad for us, and that put you in pain." Audrey's dominant impression was that in our family, "we just didn't touch the sadness."

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This isn't easy to hear. I don't like the image of myself as emotionally distant and fragile. Often, our impulse as mothers is to give our children what we didn't have growing up and to shield them from pain. Now, after a lifetime of experience as a mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, and as a clinical psychologist, I've seen the ways protection can backfire. If we give children too much support, they might not learn that they're capable. If we give them too much safety, they might not learn how to protect themselves. I have asked each of my daughters about their experience of this; they're far enough apart in age, and grew up in such different circumstances, that they had very different childhoods.

Marianne was born in Czechoslovakia, into the family wealth and status of my husband, Béla. When I met Béla at a tuberculosis hospital in the Tatra Mountains soon after the war, I had no idea that he was from one of the wealthiest families in Prešov (a city in modern-day Slovakia), where his father had once been mayor, or that we would start our family in his childhood home, a 500-year-old mansion that was once a monastery. But when Marianne was 2, we gave up our portion of the family fortune, fled the new Communist government, and emigrated to America.

We settled in Baltimore, Maryland, where Béla worked unloading boxes in a warehouse, and I did piecework in a garment factory to help pay for the tiny rooms we rented at the back of a house. As she went to school, Marianne became our little ambassador to the New World, teaching us the English language and American culture. And perhaps this outward-facing role that she played in our family helped inoculate her from the secret sadness that pervaded our home.

I was busy denying the past; Marianne inadvertently discovered it. By the time she was 10, she'd read every book in the children's section of the public library, so she began combing the bookcases in our house. One day, she sat us down on the couch and opened a book, one we thought we'd kept hidden behind others. "What is this?" she asked, pointing to a picture of naked, skeletal corpses piled in a heap. I ran to the bathroom and vomited. I heard Béla say, "Your mother was there."

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I hated that she knew. And I hated that I couldn't work up the courage to talk to her about it. I was too afraid that if I spoke of the horror, it would drag me back there, and her with me.

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Marianne has told me not to feel guilty about this. She has described to me a number of her friends in New York whose parents were survivors, and who grew up with constant family conversation about the war. The Holocaust was in their consciousness at all times. "There's some relief that we were never confronted with the truth of [your past] until we were older," she said. "As a young kid I felt incredibly safe and loved. I felt very secure, and that was wonderful."

On the surface, Audrey had a more stable family life than Marianne, but that did not necessarily make her feel secure. She was born in Baltimore, but we moved when she

was young to El Paso, Texas, a cosmopolitan border city where being an immigrant family was more mainstream. Béla established himself as an accountant, and I went to college and became a high-school teacher.

I'd thought my silence about the past would be a buffer for my children. Yet in hiding from the past, I wasn't free of it. I remember walking past Audrey's room in our El Paso home one day when an ambulance drove by with its siren blaring. Audrey dived under the bed. I realized she'd picked up the startle response from me. Even now, I freeze when I hear that wailing alarm of emergency. In trying to give my children freedom from my trauma, I'd only reinforced it.

Then came a time of rupture. When Audrey was still young and living at home, Béla and I divorced. (Happily, we reconciled and remarried two years later.) By the time of our marital hiatus, Marianne had already left home, gone to graduate school, and become a child psychologist.

I would follow in her footsteps, but only after this unsettled period—during which I finally began to publicly acknowledge that I was a survivor. A fellow student at the University of Texas at El Paso had given me a copy of Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. At first I couldn't bear to read a fellow Auschwitz survivor's story, but late one night, my curiosity got the better of me, and I opened the book. As I read, I didn't feel shut down or trapped, which had been my fear. Frankl's main premise was that "everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." This opened up the possibility that I, too, could choose—to tell my story, and to heal.

I still didn't talk directly about my past with either of my children, even as I began to write and speak about it to others. Audrey had learned about the Holocaust not from me but at Sunday school. Again, it fell to Béla to tell her that I'd been in Auschwitz. Perhaps out of loyalty to me and my silence, or because she shared my fear of reckoning with what had been hidden away, Audrey always avoided anything that dealt with the Holocaust.

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That finally changed a few years ago, on a trip we took together to Europe. We met a man whose grandfather had been a Nazi. As Audrey spoke with him, and spent time with him on a work project, she saw that, though born on opposite sides of an immense historical tragedy, they were walking the same path: figuring out how to live with a brutal past, and choosing the legacy to pass on.

"Sometimes I wanted it to be happier," Audrey has admitted. "The upside is, I became very independent. I got myself where I needed to go and did what I needed to do." Today, she is a business-leadership coach. "Resilience is in my DNA."

"Success, working hard, knowing how to figure it out—it's in the family genes," Marianne agreed. That makes me think of my parents' frustrated ambitions: my father, who longed to be a doctor but whose family couldn't pay for medical school; my mother, who had a career at the foreign ministry before she married my father but whose world seemed to contract when she became a wife and a mother. It seems that despite the loss and horror our family endured, each generation has grown stronger. Béla used to say that our children and grandchildren were the best revenge against Hitler. He didn't live long enough to meet our great-grandchildren, but how proud he would have been of them.

Today, I am the bridge that connects my mother to my daughters and their daughters. Sometimes, talking to them, I feel in a flash my mother's presence. I see her packing food—flour, schmaltz—the morning the Hungarian Nazis tore us from our beds at dawn and imprisoned us in a brick factory, where we slept on the ground for weeks, awaiting transport to Auschwitz. In a moment of crisis, she had the foresight to pack the ingredients to prepare food. She had no way to know that soon, eight of us would share one loaf of bread, our only daily ration. I can hear my mother's voice in the dark and stench of the cattle car: "Just remember, no one can take away from you what you've put in your mind."

So I am the transmitter of my mother's recipes: chicken paprikash, székely goulash. In Auschwitz, when we were starving, we prepared food in our minds. We imagined the ingredients of sustenance. I'm still doing it, nearly 80 years later.

Either way—from what we had in childhood or from what we didn't have—we create nourishment. I eat and cook now because once I was starving. And so that I can pass on something from my parents. If I feed the generations to come, I can feel that my parents didn't die in vain.

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