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*One of those rare and eternal stories that  
you don’t want to end and that leave you  
forever changed.”*

—DESMOND TUTU, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

# THE CHOICE

*Embrace the Possible*

A Memoir by

**Dr. Edith Eva Eger**

Foreword by Philip Zimbardo, PhD

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# THE CHOICE



Embrace the Possible

DR. EDITH EVA EGER

with Esmé Schwall Weigand

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New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

# Contents

Foreword by Philip Zimbardo, PhD

## **PART I: PRISON**

Introduction: I Had My Secret, and My Secret Had Me

- 1: The Four Questions
- 2: What You Put in Your Mind
- 3: Dancing in Hell
- 4: A Cartwheel
- 5: The Stairs of Death
- 6: To Choose a Blade of Grass

## **PART II: ESCAPE**

- 7: My Liberator, My Assailant
- 8: In Through a Window
- 9: Next Year in Jerusalem
- 10: Flight

## **PART III: FREEDOM**

- 11: Immigration Day
- 12: Greener
- 13: You Were There?
- 14: From One Survivor to Another
- 15: What Life Expected
- 16: The Choice
- 17: Then Hitler Won

18: Goebbels's Bed  
19: Leave a Stone

#### **PART IV: HEALING**

20: The Dance of Freedom  
21: The Girl Without Hands  
22: Somehow the Waters Part  
23: Liberation Day

Acknowledgments  
About the Author  
Index

*For the five generations of my family  
my father, Lajos, who taught me to laugh;  
my mother, Ilona, who helped me find what I needed inside;  
my gorgeous and unbelievable sisters, Magda and Klara;  
my children: Marianne, Audrey, and John;  
and their children: Lindsey, Jordan, Rachel, David, and Ashley;  
and their children's children: Silas, Graham, and Hale*

# Foreword

By Philip Zimbardo, PhD

*Psychologist and professor emeritus at Stanford University, Phil Zimbardo is the creator of the famed Stanford prison experiment (1971) and author of many notable books, including the New York Times bestseller and winner of the William James Book Award for best psychology book The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil (2007). He is founder and president of the Heroic Imagination Project.*

One spring, at the invitation of the chief psychiatrist of the U.S. Navy, Dr. Edith Eva Eger boarded a windowless fighter jet bound for one of the world's largest warships, the USS *Nimitz* aircraft carrier, stationed off the California coast. The plane swooped down toward a tiny five-hundred-foot runway and landed with a jolt as its tailhook caught the arresting wire and stopped the plane from careening into the ocean. The only female aboard the ship, Dr. Eger was shown to her room in the captain's cabin. What was her mission? She was there to teach five thousand young Navy men how to deal with the adversity, trauma, and chaos of war.

On countless occasions, Dr. Eger has been the clinical expert brought in to treat soldiers, including Special Operations Forces, suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries. How is this gentle grandmother able to help so many military personnel heal from the inner brutality of war?

Before I met Dr. Eger in person I called to invite her to give a guest lecture to my Psychology of Mind Control class at Stanford. Her age and her accent made me picture an old-world babushka with a headscarf tied under her chin. When she addressed my students, I saw for myself her healing power. Luminous with her radiant smile, shining earrings, and blazing

golden hair, dressed head to toe in what my wife later told me was Chanel, she wove her horrific and harrowing stories of surviving the Nazi death camps with humor, with an upbeat and feisty attitude, and with a presence and warmth I can only describe as pure light.

Dr. Eger's life has been full of darkness. She was imprisoned at Auschwitz when she was just a teenager. Despite torture, starvation, and the constant threat of annihilation, she preserved her mental and spiritual freedom. She was not broken by the horrors she experienced; she was emboldened and strengthened by them. In fact, her wisdom comes from deep within the most devastating episodes of her life.

She is able to help others heal because she has journeyed from trauma to triumph herself. She has discovered how to use her experience of human cruelty to empower so many—from military personnel like those aboard the USS *Nimitz* to couples struggling to rekindle intimacy, from those who were neglected or abused to those who are suffering from addiction or illness, from those who have lost loved ones to those who have lost hope. And for all of us who suffer from the everyday disappointments and challenges of life, her message inspires us to make our own choice to find freedom from suffering—to find our own inner light.

At the close of her lecture, every single one of my three hundred students leapt into a spontaneous standing ovation. Then, at least a hundred young men and women flooded the small stage, each waiting for a turn to thank and embrace this extraordinary woman. In all my decades of teaching I had never seen a group of students so inspired.

In the twenty years that Edie and I have worked and traveled together, this is the response I have come to expect from every audience she addresses around the world. From a Hero Round Table in Flint, Michigan, where we spoke to a group of young people in a city struggling with high poverty, 50 percent unemployment, and increasing racial conflict, to Budapest, Hungary, the city where many of Edie's relatives perished, where she spoke to hundreds of people trying to rebuild from a damaging past, I have seen it happen again and again: people are transformed in Edie's presence.

In this book, Dr. Eger weaves together the stories of her patients' transformations with her own unforgettable story of surviving Auschwitz. While her story of survival is as gripping and dramatic as any that has been told, it is not just her story that has made me passionate about sharing this

book with the world. It is the fact that Edie has used her experiences to help so many to discover true freedom. In this way, her book is much more than another Shoah memoir, as important as such stories are for remembering the past. Her goal is nothing less than to help each of us to escape the prisons of our own minds. Each of us is in some way mentally imprisoned, and it is Edie's mission to help us realize that just as we can act as our own jailors, we can also be our own liberators.

When Edie is introduced to young audiences, she is often called "the Anne Frank who didn't die," because Edie and Anne were of a similar age and upbringing when they were deported to the camps. Both young women capture the innocence and compassion that allow a belief in the basic goodness of human beings, despite the cruelty and persecution they experienced. Of course, at the time Anne Frank was writing her diary, she had yet to experience the extremity of the camps, which makes Edie's insights as a survivor and as a clinician (and great-grandmother!) especially moving and compelling.

Like the most important books about the Holocaust, Dr. Eger's reveals both the darkest side of evil and the indomitable strength of the human spirit in the face of evil. But it does something else too. Perhaps the best comparison for Edie's book is to another Shoah memoir, Viktor Frankl's brilliant classic *Man's Search for Meaning*. Dr. Eger shares Frankl's profundity and deep knowledge of humanity, and adds the warmth and intimacy of a lifelong clinician. Viktor Frankl presented the psychology of the prisoners who were with him in Auschwitz. Dr. Eger offers us the psychology of freedom.

In my own work I have long studied the psychological foundations of negative forms of social influence. I've sought to understand the mechanisms by which we conform and obey and stand by in situations where peace and justice can be served only if we choose another path: if we act heroically. Edie has helped me to discover that heroism is not the province only of those who perform extraordinary deeds or take impulsive risks to protect themselves or others—though Edie has done both of these things. Heroism is rather a mind-set or an accumulation of our personal and social habits. It is a way of being. And it is a special way of viewing ourselves. To be a hero requires taking effective action at crucial junctures in our lives, to make an active attempt to address injustice or create positive change in

the world. To be a hero requires great moral courage. And each of us has an inner hero waiting to be expressed. We are all “heroes in training.” Our hero training is life, the daily circumstances that invite us to practice the habits of heroism: to commit daily deeds of kindness; to radiate compassion, starting with self-compassion; to bring out the best in others and ourselves; to sustain love, even in our most challenging relationships; to celebrate and exercise the power of our mental freedom. Edie is a hero—and doubly so, because she teaches each of us to grow and create meaningful and lasting change in ourselves, in our relationships, and in our world.

Two years ago Edie and I traveled together to Budapest, to the city where her sister was living when the Nazis began rounding up Hungarian Jews. We visited a Jewish synagogue, its courtyard a memorial to the Holocaust, its walls a canvas of photographs from before, during, and after the war. We visited the Shoes on the Danube Bank memorial that honors the people, including some of Edie’s own family members, who were killed by the Arrow Cross militiamen during World War II, ordered to stand on the riverbank and take off their shoes, and then shot, their bodies falling into the water, carried away by the current. The past felt tangible.

Throughout the day, Edie grew more and more quiet. I wondered if she would find it difficult to speak to an audience of six hundred that night after an emotional journey that was almost certainly stirring up painful memories. But when she took the stage she didn’t begin with a story of the fear or trauma or horror that our visit had likely made all too real for her again. She began with a story of kindness, an act of everyday heroism that, she reminded us, happened even in hell. “Isn’t it amazing?” she said. “The worst brings out the best in us.”

At the end of her speech, which she concluded with her trademark high ballet kick, Edie called out, “Okay, now everybody dance!” The audience rose as one. Hundreds of people ran onto the stage. There was no music. But we danced. We danced and sang and laughed and hugged in an incomparable celebration of life.

Dr. Eger is one of the dwindling number of survivors who can bear firsthand testimony to the horrors of the concentration camps. Her book recounts the hell and trauma that she and other survivors endured during and after the war. And it is a universal message of hope and possibility to all who are trying to free themselves from pain and suffering. Whether