

Q&A with Auschwitz Survivor Eva Kor

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How do you think it will feel to walk into Auschwitz 70 years later?

In many ways I can remember every detail of the liberation. Nobody prepared us for what liberation would be like. I hoped then I could go home and find my family. We had a daily saying, like a mantra, “Someday soon I will be free and I will go home.” But going home to me meant reuniting with my mother, father, and two older sisters, not just an empty house with four walls, which is what we found.

The day the liberation happened, it was eerily quiet after weeks and months of artillery and bombing and noises of war that even the best film cannot reproduce. We thought maybe this is the day we will be free, but how would it happen? Well, it was January 27, 1945. It was a Saturday I believe, about 4:30 pm. A woman ran into the barrack and yelled at the top of her voice, “We are free! We are free!” Simple words. I thought to myself, *That’s wonderful, but what does that mean? Can I just now go home? What does it really mean to be free?*

Miriam and I both looked outside the second story window of a building in Auschwitz I (we were there for nine days before liberation). We looked out, but we couldn’t see anything. We went downstairs and still couldn’t see anything. It was snowing so heavily it was a complete whiteout. We stood there maybe half an hour until my eyes adjusted and at a distance I could see lots of people, I don’t know how many. Looked like a whole army. They were all wrapped in white camouflage raincoats. They had the biggest smiles I have ever seen, and the most important part of it was they didn’t look like Nazis. That was good enough for us to run up to them. They gave us chocolate, cookies, and hugs, and that was my first taste of freedom. For me to realize that Miriam and I were alive, that we have triumphed over unbelievable evil, and that my little promise to myself to survive had become a reality – that was an unbelievable feeling.

So when I go back, I will remember all those thoughts. And in some way, it will feel like it just happened yesterday. Yet I look at myself in the mirror and I surely don’t look like that little girl holding Miriam’s hand. And Miriam is gone (she died in 1993). So the feeling of being free is very, very important to me. People who know me know I fight fiercely for my independence and freedom. So to be free and to relive that moment is always very rewarding.

The first time I went back, I went into the camp and I walked outside and I walked back in, and I said, “I can do it! No one is stopping me!” That is actually what we did right after the liberation, because we wanted to understand, what does it mean to be free?

That is an interesting question for anybody to ask: What does it mean for people to be free? It’s a deep question. From my perspective, freedom means as long as you have the ability to follow your

will, then you are free. If you don't like a place where you live, you can leave. If you don't like the job you have, you can quit. If you don't like your country, you can move. Comparing it to the fact that we could not leave the place we were living in and if we dared approach the gate of the fence, we would be shot at, that is to me always a very important thing about what freedom really means. It is a most basic feeling and in some ways it is very deep. Sometimes we feel we are stuck in a job we don't like and we feel we cannot leave it, or stuck in a relationship we don't like and cannot leave it. I believe that any person can leave it unless they hold a gun to your head. So going back, it's always bringing back these reconfirmation that I am free and that freedom happened 70 years ago.

Do you miss your twin sister Miriam when you return to Auschwitz?

I miss her in two places: If I go to Israel, I desperately miss her because this is where I used to visit her. And when I am in Auschwitz I miss her there too, because we lived there for nine months and we went back a few times together. It was always a joint project. Well, she is gone, so I am carrying on the work. But I sure wish even today...wouldn't that be wonderful if Miriam were alive? She was my best friend, she almost always understood me, and even if she didn't understand me, she was willing to listen to me and that helped. There was no better person to communicate with the other Mengele Twins. I realized that from the day that I forgave the Nazis in 1995 and I was confronted by the twins in Auschwitz. I told them then, "If Miriam were alive today, she could explain to you better than I ever could why it is important for all of you to forgive for yourselves." To convince other survivors to forgive is no feather in my cap. I just want them to know that every survivor has a choice: to live free from what happened to us, or be victimized by it for the rest of their lives. Miriam could have explained it to them. She had a unique talent in connecting to the other twins which I do not have. Miriam could relate to them the idea of forgiveness in a way that they would accept.

So what do you say to others who object to your concept of forgiveness?

I say to them, "Why? Tell me why is that a problem for you? Do you think that I deserve to be free?" When I put it that way, they say "Sure." Do I deserve to be free from the pain that was inflicted on me? They say, "Yes, but the Nazis should be punished. They should take responsibility for their crimes." They should, but I cannot make anybody do that. I can point it out to them, but that is their job. How on Earth does it help me if I make them do something they don't want to do?

The idea of forgiveness is so basic, so beautiful, and so simple, because I have decided for myself. I do not need anybody's approval, anybody's acceptance, nor anybody's permission to forgive. And that is the power that forgiveness has. That I alone can do it to free myself is a beautiful thing because in life we are always bound by so many things. But as long as I am not hurting anybody, I do not see any reason to be tied down and not be able to free myself from the burden imposed on me by force and brutality.

Yes, I think there should be some kind of penalty or punishment for the perpetrators, but I am not in charge of it. I am just trying to heal myself. The minute I make myself the person in charge of the handing out punishment, I am no longer healing myself. To me, it feels like I am handing out revenge. As I said many, many years ago, getting even has never healed one single victim. I would

like somebody to show me a victim who was hurting desperately and who was healed by revenge. All you really have done is create a new victim.

What should happen to the perpetrators? I am not going to be the one to decide it. Let's say that I, Eva Kor, was one of the leaders of the world who was successful in liberating the camps and I have the insight of forgiveness that I have today. What would I have wanted to do to the perpetrators? I would have wanted very, very much to have each perpetrator testify to what they have done for two purposes: Number one, to validate the memories of the victims and verify the memories of the survivors. Number two, as they talk about it, they are taking responsibility for their actions. I do think they should pay something for it but that should be done by a court.

The most important thing is to get the testimony of the perpetrators. Let's imagine what would have happened in 1946, '47, '48, and '49 if we had these testimonies of perpetrators. The dialogue and the discussion about what happened in the camps and the healing of the victims and the perpetrators could really move forward. What good does it do to the world having all these people running around feeling guilty or trying to justify their crimes?

After the war, the Nazis pretended it didn't happen, they denied that it happened, and then they tried to justify it. Mengele himself said that at least he saved the lives of the twins for a while. Wonderful [sarcastically]. Did I want to be a guinea pig? But if they could have testified exactly what was the scope of the whole Nazi regime, we would have known in black and white with the testimonies recorded that they did all these crimes instead of having the revisionists and the neo-Nazis saying that didn't happen. There would be more proof for every single one. And I think it would have been important for every victim to know what was done to them.

Where these perpetrators a bunch of crazy "looney tunes"? Some, probably. How does a normal intelligent human being stoop so low to become common criminals and murderers? That is an important question for humanity to know.

As I look at it 70 years later, similar pictures are coming into the news where there is hatred, there is divisiveness, and the old customs are not dying easily. They are always sticking it on the Jews because the Jews are minorities in the world and I am very sad to see not too many people are standing up for the Jews today. Some are. More than there were in the 1930s and '40s. But there are also prejudices against homosexuals, handicapped, and other people. So the old diseases do not die very easily. But can we change it?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if along with our ABCs in first grade, we teach children that they have some power over their lives? When someone does something to hurt them, instead of hitting back, they can use the power of forgiveness. We can teach it. We can learn at a very young age and it can easily become second nature. Bullying would be reduced. It has a lot more power than getting even. Even if it is not a panacea, it is a lot better than we have now.

What is one trend in the world today that gives you hope?

Actually I have seen this trend building for a long time: When the children of perpetrators and the children of victims get together and form friendships, that gives me hope. Facing History and

Ourselves – that was the first program that I have heard about that was doing this. Long before I forgave the Nazis, I heard of that program and I thought, *That really makes very good sense*. Why should the children of victims and perpetrators hate each other? But the fact is, they can come together and rise above that baggage.

I think the programs that we should concentrate on should address the question, How do we help young people stop the mistakes that were done by my generation and the generation of Mengele? I personally believe that I have a very simple answer: By healing the victims and teaching children at a young age to forgive.

I want to put it out there: Forgiveness is the best revenge. Once I forgive Hitler and Mengele and all the others – and I can only forgive what they did to me, not in the name of anybody else – once I can do that, I am free from what happened to me. They no longer have any hold over my life. So that is the best revenge. Don't wait for that person who hurt you to come and say they are sorry. You are still giving that person a hold over your life! That is the best revenge because what they did no longer rules over your life.

Human beings are able to reach that kind of a state of a mind, that kind of a relationship with the people who hurt them. We as human beings are capable of that. I know because I am capable of that and others are too. If we could just concentrate a little bit more on healing rather than on punishing the perpetrators, we could move ahead much faster.

That is the reason that people come to our museum. Sometimes they fly in from California and sometimes they fly in from Utah. This weekend, someone came from Philadelphia. I don't have any magic. They want to hear how a person who is so mistreated and abused can go on and be happy, be hopeful, smile, and enjoy life. How can one do it by forgiveness? They all want to learn that. And because they want to learn that, there is a seed of hope already.

Another sign of hope to me is that people are interested in visiting Auschwitz. It is an important thing, that the world can come and learn and see what happened there. We know that 1.5 million people visited Auschwitz last year. That is not a small number. That gives me hope that people want to learn. We are not going to change the world overnight, but if people want to learn, that gives me hope that we can actually change it.

Does a survivor have to forgive in order to heal?

In my experience, I believe so. But I am willing to listen to any other survivor to see if they have found another way of healing themselves. I remember talking to one very famous survivor. We met at a gathering in Washington, DC. She said, "I am functioning fine, I am very happy, and I have a happy family." I just mentioned casually, "I am leaving in a week for Germany." I just was telling her what I was doing in the next few weeks. She snapped back at me and said, "I will never set foot on German soil."

I thought, I am sorry because it seems you are not dealing that well with the past. That response was filled with pain so I don't know if she was successful in getting that out of her system. Would she

even have been able to understand forgiveness and give it a chance? She's a very wise woman, very smart in many ways. Yet she cannot forgive.

Actually I talked to her again a couple years ago. She said, "I admire you Eva, and I agree with you that forgiveness should be helpful, but I cannot do it." That is the million dollar question. Why are there some who cannot do it? What makes one survivor able to do it and one cannot?

The other thing I would like to see happen is to use forgiveness in the jails of the United States, which are filled. I look at the people who have committed crimes and I wonder what kind of victimization was carried out against them? Because I personally don't believe that many people are born evil. I believe all children are born innocent. That evil or criminal activity is learned rather than innate. It does not excuse it, but we have to wonder what happened to them. If we could prevent that, the jails would be out of business. On top of that, we should realize how many wonderfully-talented young people we are losing to hate, crime, and violence.

You founded the CANDLES organization in 1984 and opened CANDLES Holocaust Museum and Education Center in 1995. What is your hope for the future of CANDLES?

I hope millions of people will be touched by our message, not only by visiting the museum but also on the website and all the messages that we are putting out there. I hope they would learn the lesson that they have a choice and the power to change their lives. We are trying to educate about what happened for the purpose of stopping it from happening again, with the idea that we can heal the victims. To me it looks like a ray of sun shining on our ideas. We have to take it out from the museum and somehow show it off in the world at large. I don't know how, but it has so much promise and it can be done very inexpensively.

What I want to emphasize about forgiveness is it costs zero dollars to the person who wants to forgive. They can do it in the privacy of their own home.

I hope that the museum will have a million members in 10 years. I want to get one million people involved in becoming ambassadors of CANDLES by carrying our message, which is ultimately this: "Anger is a seed for war. People who forgive are at peace with themselves and the world. Therefore forgiveness is a seed for peace." If they can carry that message wherever they go, we will have a lot of people sowing seeds of peace.

I hope the museum will create a lot of educational materials about healing and forgiveness and maybe do one workshop a year where those people who want to learn it can learn it from us at the museum.

I hope that we will have an endowment. If one day I cannot go and do a lecture, then I don't have to worry about supporting the museum. I don't plan to retire as long as my mind and body function. I will always be out there teaching. I love to meet the people. I love to see how my words impact them.