

Below are a few extracts from Edith Eger's book:

'In my yearning to belong, in my fear of being swallowed up by the past, I worked very hard to keep my pain hidden. I hadn't yet discovered that my silence and my desire for acceptance, both founded in fear, were ways of running away from myself— that in choosing not to face the past and myself directly, decades after my literal imprisonment had ended, I was still choosing not to be free. I had my secret, and my secret had me. The catatonic Army captain sitting immobile on my couch reminded me of what I had eventually discovered: that when we force our truths and stories into hiding, secrets can become their own trauma, their own prison. Far from diminishing pain, whatever we deny ourselves the opportunity to accept becomes as inescapable as brick walls and steel bars. When we don't allow ourselves to grieve our losses, wounds, and disappointments, we are doomed to keep reliving them. Freedom lies in learning to embrace what happened. Freedom means we muster the courage to dismantle the prison, brick by brick.'

'Men in uniform push among us. Nobody explains anything. They just bark simple directions. Go here. Go there. The Nazis point and shove. The men are herded into a separate line. I see my father wave to us. Maybe they're being sent ahead to stake out a place for their families. I wonder where we'll sleep tonight. I wonder when we'll eat. My mother and Magda and I stand together in a long line of women and children. We inch forward. We approach the man who with a conductor's wave of a finger will deliver us to our fates. I do not yet know that this man is Dr. Josef Mengele, the infamous Angel of Death'.

“‘Little dancer,” Dr. Mengele says, “Dance for me.” He directs the musicians to begin playing. The familiar opening strain of “The Blue Danube” waltz filters into the dark, close room. Mengele’s eyes bulge at me. I’m lucky. I know a routine to “The Blue Danube” that I can dance in my sleep. But my limbs are heavy, as in a nightmare when there’s danger and you can’t run away. “Dance!” he commands again, and I feel my body start to move’

‘...to survive is to transcend your own needs and commit yourself to someone or something outside yourself. For me, that someone is Magda, that something is the hope that I will see Eric again tomorrow, when I am free. To survive, we conjure an inner world, a haven, even when our eyes are open..... Marching to our daily labor—to a warehouse called Canada, where we were ordered to sort the belongings of the newly arrived inmates; to the barracks that we had to clean and clean and clean; or to the crematoriums, where the unluckiest were forced to harvest gold teeth and hair and skin from the corpses waiting to be burned—we talked as though we were heading to market, planning our weekly menu, how we would test each fruit and vegetable for ripeness. We’d give one another cooking lessons. Here’s how to make palacsinta, Hungarian crepes. How thin the pancake must be. How much sugar to use. How many nuts.... Food fantasies sustained us at Auschwitz. Just as athletes and musicians can become better at their craft through mental practice, we were barracks artists....’

‘We stand in a line on the white stairs. The Stairs of Death, they are called. We are waiting on the stairs for another selection, we presume, that will point us to death or more work. Rumors shudder down the line. The inmates at Mauthausen, we learn, have to carry 110-pound blocks of stone from the quarry below up the 186 stairs, running in line. I picture my ancestors, the pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, bent under the weight of stones. Here on the Stairs of Death, we’re told, when you’re carrying a stone, running up the stairs, and someone in front of you trips or collapses, you are the next to fall, and on, and on, until the whole line buckles into a heap. If you survive, it’s worse, we hear. You have to stand along a wall at the edge of a cliff. Fallschirmspringerwand, it’s called—the Parachutist’s Wall. At gunpoint, you choose: Will you be shot to death, or will you push the inmate beside you off the cliff?’

‘But it’s watching a starving person eat a dead person’s flesh that makes the bile rise in me, that makes my vision black. I cannot do it. And yet I must eat. I must eat or I will die. Out of the trampled mud grows grass. I stare at the blades, I see But it’s watching a starving person eat a dead person’s flesh that makes the bile rise in me, that makes my vision black. I cannot do it. And yet I must eat. I must eat or I will die. Out of the trampled mud grows grass. I stare at the blades, I see their different lengths and shades. I will eat grass. I will choose this blade of grass over that one. I will occupy my mind with the choice. This is what it means to choose. To eat or not eat. To eat grass or to eat flesh. To eat this blade or that one’.

‘When you can’t go in through a door, go in through a window, our mother used to say. There is no door for survival. Or recovery either. It’s all windows. Latches you can’t reach easily, panes too small, spaces where a body shouldn’t fit. But you can’t stand where you are. You must find a way’.

‘It isn’t just my own loss that hurts. It’s the way it ripples out into the future. The way it perpetuates’.

‘To be passive is to let others decide for you. To be aggressive is to decide for others. To be assertive is to decide for yourself. And to trust that there is enough, that you are enough’.

‘Just remember, no one can take away from you what you’ve put in your mind. We can’t choose to vanish the dark, but we can choose to kindle the light’.

‘Jungian ideas appealed to me. I liked the emphasis on myths and archetypes, which reminded me of the literature I had loved as a girl. And I was intrigued by the notion of bringing the conscious and unconscious parts of one’s psyche together into a balanced whole’.

‘The bleak horizontal lines— of barracks, fence, tower— are regular and orderly, but there is no life in this geometry. This is the geometry of systematic torture and death. Mathematical annihilation. And then I notice it again, the thing that haunted me those hellish months when this was my home: I can’t see or hear a single bird. No birds live here. Not even now. The sky is bare of their wings, the silence deeper because of the absence of their song’

‘Time doesn’t heal. It’s what you do with the time. Healing is possible when we choose to take responsibility, when we choose to take risks, and finally, when we choose to release the wound, to let go of the past or the grief.

‘There is the wound. And there is what comes out of it. I went back to Auschwitz searching for the feel of death so that I could finally exorcise it. What I found was my inner truth, the self I wanted to reclaim, my strength and my innocence’.