

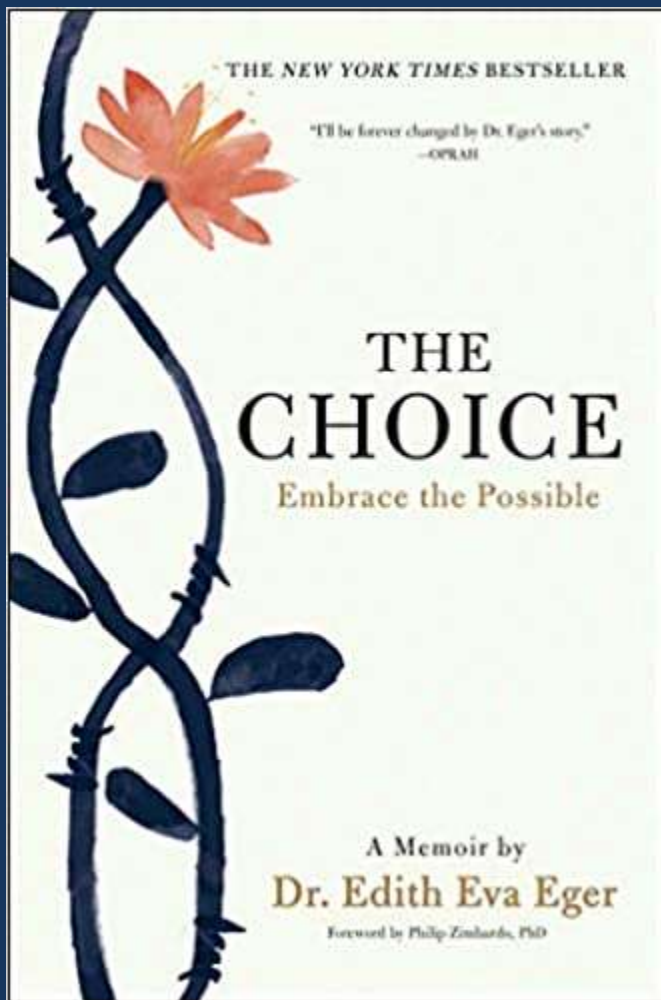
## Allison's Book Corner April 2021

***The Choice: Embrace the Possible*** by Dr. Edith Eva Eger  
(Scribner 2017)

When I was an elementary schoolgirl in Queens, NY, there were quite a few Holocaust survivors living in my neighborhood. Some of them visited the elementary school as special guests. I do not specifically remember their speeches or presentations. But I do vividly remember the numbers tattooed on their arms; I remember sleeves pulled up and numbers shown.

I am sure someone explained the significance, and that each prisoner at Auschwitz was assigned a camp serial number. The numbers scared me. I instinctively knew they meant something terrible. In the late '70s, tattoos of any kind were not necessarily cool - not like today when young women and men proudly sport tattoos all over their bodies and faces.

Our author, Dr. Edith Eger, is a 93-year old survivor of Auschwitz. When her family was taken prisoner from their homeland of Hungary, her parents were murdered immediately in the gas chamber. 16-year old Edith was thus orphaned at the camp with one of her two sisters. The two devised tricks to avoid being separated from one another. Somehow this trickery led to our author never being tattooed. After being taught about the Holocaust at school and seeing the tattooed survivors, I avoided the topic. It was too scary.



The last movie I saw about the Holocaust was the 1980 television movie "Playing for Time" starring Vanessa Redgrave. As you can imagine, it was an unforgettable performance by Miss Redgrave. I have not seen "Schindler's List," but somehow I was drawn to Edith Eger's memoir. I kept hearing about Dr. Eger and her life's work as a psychologist, and was aware of Oprah Winfrey's interview with her in 2019. I tried reading her Eger's 2020 book, *The Gift: 12 Choices to Save Your Life*,

but it made no sense to read that before her memoir, *The Choice*. I have discovered that most things we try to avoid turn out to be the best things for us. What an awesome treasure this book is to the reader. Not because of the difficult account of the author's time at Auschwitz and the unspeakable acts that occurred before her eyes. And not because of the death march she survived with her sister and their subsequent liberation by American soldiers. The true heart and core of this book is about overcoming trauma, and about how to avoid becoming bitter and angry in the process. There are so many lessons here for the reader that I cannot possibly cover them all.

Dr. Eger is one of the first people who I have heard teach that with forgiveness comes rage. **And that the rage is normal.** You have to go through the rage to get to the other side. In order to live a life of emotional freedom, Dr. Eger had to forgive those who murdered her parents and held her and her sister captive. She could not walk around filled with rage and revenge and become the successful person she is now. This realization dawned while she was treating patients for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). As we now know, PTSD is not exclusive to soldiers exposed to war. Any extreme trauma can trigger the disorder. The lessons that Dr. Eger learned as a captive and as a practicing psychologist are relevant to recent events. If you watched the trial of Derek Chauvin for the death of George Floyd, you know that each eyewitness displayed PTSD in his or her testimony.

The title of this memoir, *The Choice*, represents many things. First, the choice her parents made not to flee Hungary before the Nazis invaded. (Edith learns years later that her parents had multiple opportunities to flee before the family was sent to the concentration camp. That her parents failed to make the right choice when they could later compels Edith to choose to flee Europe in the face of Communism and emigrate to America with her family.) Second, the choice Edith made at Auschwitz to survive against all odds for herself and for her sister.

Dr. Eger's road to marriage, children and a career as a psychologist is something you have to read for yourself. She has lived a full life since captivity, rebuilding and dedicating her life to serving others. When something happens in our life that is difficult, she wants us not to ask *why me?* but instead to ask *what now?* That perspective is so much more constructive than *why not me?* We are in the situation, and we need a plan - so *what now?* makes a lot of sense.

Edith also had survivor's guilt. For many years she could not forgive herself for telling Joseph Mengele ("The Angel of Death") at Auschwitz that her mother was not her sister. Immediately he sent her mother to the gas chamber. As a married woman with adult children, Edith decided to return to Auschwitz to face her fears as a liberated adult. She went back and forgave herself for surviving and decided to embrace her life.

Dr. Eger has quite the presence on social media for a woman in her nineties. She has her own website where you can view video of her speaking. She is on Facebook and Instagram. I am now one of her Instagram followers. She has done one Ted Talk and several podcast interviews. If you have read this far in the review, look her up on social media. Dr. Eger is a living treasure, and we must be thankful that she is still here and sharing her story of survival. In honor of Holocaust Remembrance Day (April 8), American Public Television and select public television stations are broadcasting a documentary of Dr. Eger's life throughout April 2021: <https://www.aptonline.org/catalog/I-DANCED-FOR-THE-ANGEL-OF-DEATH-THE-DR-EDITH-EVA-EGER-STORY>. You can find additional information about the film at: [holocausteducationfilmfoundation.com](http://holocausteducationfilmfoundation.com).

Current events have shown us that the human race has not learned all of history's lessons. Mass genocide still occurs. But if even one person is reached by Dr. Eger's message, that is a good thing for society. Even the Nazis were not born hating people. While at Auschwitz, Dr. Eger regarded Nazis with pity. She knew their hatred had been carefully cultivated.