THE FREEDOM OF THE DANCE

By

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Laughter, song, and dance create emotional and spiritual connection;
they remind us of the one thing that truly matters when
we are searching for comfort, celebration, inspiration, or healing:
We are not alone.
— Brené Brown

"How is this night different from all other nights?" It is one of the four questions that the youngest at the table must ask as part of the traditional Passover seder. In 1944, 16-year-old Edie (Elefánt) Eger, the youngest child at her family's table in Košice, Czechoslovakia[i], asks the question. Edie remains the shy child, her two older sisters, Klara and Magda, seemingly more confident and worldly than she. A talented violinist, Klara aspires to a concert career. Magda is a gifted musician as well, filling the house with the sound of the piano. Not only does Edie feel overshadowed psychologically by her sisters, but also physically. From the reflection in the mirror, Edie notes her short and wiry body, which lacks the feminine curves and voluptuousness of Klara's or Magda's. Her family notices as well, and their teasing forces her to recede further into her shell. But the proportions of Edie's body do provide one advantage. Having studied ballet since the age of five, Edie is an accomplished dancer and gymnast. She begins to transform even as she climbs the steps to the dance studio. When she dons her tights and leotard, she finally assumes the true version of herself, and the studio mirrors reflect this. As she dances, Edie hears each spin, kick, and bend shout, "*I am, I am, I am. I am me. I am somebody."*

Edie competes to make the Olympic gymnastics training team. With her acceptance comes affirmation for working hard and consolation for feeling misunderstood at home. Edie throws herself into training with renewed vigor, buoyed by the possibility that she might compete in the Olympics. When the coach pulls her aside one day, Edie struggles to comprehend the news— Jews are no longer allowed on Olympic teams. Another gymnast will take her place.

Olympic ambition becomes just one of countless opportunities and freedoms stolen from Jewish residents. Given the present heartache and the uncertainty of the future, Edie's mother impresses upon her daughter this necessary truth— "We don't know where we're going. We don't know what's going to happen. Just remember, no one can take away from you what you've put in your mind." Despite the antisemitic forces bearing down on them, the Elefánt family continues to live as normally as it can. On Passover, Edie fulfills her role by asking, "How is this night different from all other nights?" By morning, she will know the answer.

Both personal witness and academic research have demonstrated the power of the arts in sustaining individuals during times of suffering. The act of creating beauty amid ugliness cultivates a mighty practice of spiritual resistance and forges a brave conduit for resilience. In an equally potent way, the arts can also be wielded as a destructive weapon. The Nazis perfected this to an extent never seen before or since. They forced prisoners in concentration camps to form orchestras to entertain their captors and to function as a mechanism in the machinery of genocide itself, as the orchestra members provided the music for their fellow prisoners to march to and from daily work details. Throughout the Holocaust, agents of the Third Reich ordered artists of every kind to serve the very people who intended to wipe them and their culture from the face of the earth. Actor Zdenka Ehrlich-Fantlová, who was deported first to Theresienstadt and then a series of other camps including Auschwitz, described the paradox of performing in these places of death as "dancing under the gallows."

This unfathomable reality becomes clear for Edie the next day after the seder meal as soldiers pound on her family's door in the darkened morning hours. With Klara away studying violin in Budapest, it is Edie, Magda, and their parents who are detained. After some temporary holding places, the four find themselves crammed into a cattle car heading East. When the train arrives in Auschwitz, the hungry and exhausted family emerges to armed guards and dogs among lines of people being sorted. But their ears also catch strains of music played by an orchestra, to which Edie's father remarks how this place surely cannot be so terrible if there is music. The Nazi tool of psychological manipulation through the arts works as intended.

Soldiers separate the men from the women. Later, Edie will write, "If I could distill my entire life into one moment, into one still image, it is this: three women in dark wool coats wait, arms linked, in a barren yard. They are exhausted. They've got dust on their shoes. They stand in a long line." Edie, her mother, and sister Magda hover at the threshold of life and death, without knowing it. The Elefánt women have a little while longer before they realize that they will never stand together again.

Into this liminal space, Dr. Josef Mengele, the infamous Angel of Death who conducts horrendous experiments on the prisoners, comes into view. He is sorting the women, a process known as Selection. Mengele motions some to proceed to the right and others to the left. When he encounters these three particular women, he points to the mother and asks Edie if she is her sister or mother. Having no way to know the implications of the question, Edie answers truthfully that she is their mother. Mengele indicates for her mother to go to the left. Edie immediately senses that she has made some kind of mistake and runs after her mother. Mengele grabs Edie’s shoulder to prevent her. “You will see your mother very soon. She’s just going to take a shower.” Mengele then pushes Edie and Magda toward the right.

“All your ecstasy in life is going to come from the inside.” These words spoken by Edie’s ballet master surface in her mind. It will be in Auschwitz where Edie will decipher their meaning.

After having their belongings ripped away, Edie and her sister wait in another line, this one for the intake procedures designed to further dehumanize them. Edie inquires of another prisoner about when she can see her mother. In answer, a finger points toward the chimneys in the distance with their continuous exhalation of smoke and ash. “Your mother is burning in there. You better start talking about her in the past tense.”

After hours of nakedness, Edie receives a scratchy, ill-fitting gray uniform dress. Thankfully there are no mirrors to reflect back her shorn head and dazed eyes. A prisoner leads Edie to a barracks where she must sleep on hard boards, six to a bunk. Through it all, Magda remains by her side. The sisters have become orphans in the span of one day. As she tries to rest on the bunk, Edie again hears orchestra music, similar to what they noticed on arrival. Surely this must be an auditory mirage because she cannot imagine an orchestra’s existence in such a place. But another inmate confirms the inconceivable— the presence of a camp orchestra led by a famous Viennese violinist.

The violinist is Alma Rosé, a member of Vienna’s most elite musical family. Alma grew up hearing impromptu concerts at home by her beloved uncle, the internationally renowned composer and conductor Gustav Mahler. Alma’s virtuosic violin playing took root under her father's careful tutelage. Since 1880, Arnold Rosé had served as concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic and the Vienna Opera Orchestra. Alma watched night after night as her father, dressed in formal wear with his violin case in hand, climbed aboard the court carriage adorned with the royal crest that had been sent to ferry him to that evening's performance. But now all of that exists as relics from another time. When the Third Reich annexes Austria in 1938, antisemitic policies dictate Arnold Rosé's dismissal, despite his 50-year tenure. Neither Alma nor her father can perform in public. No longer revered as royalty, they now bear the only identifier that matters— Jews.

In 1939, Alma manages to get her father and herself to safety in London. The once wealthy family now penniless, she accepts a performing opportunity in Holland. What follows becomes all too common. The Nazi takeover of Holland leaves Alma trapped and forced into hiding. She attempts an escape to Switzerland via Belgium and France. Alma makes it all the way to Dijon, France, where the Gestapo arrest her on a train that is only 90 minutes from the Swiss border. The cattle car bearing the 36-year-old violinist arrives at Auschwitz in July 1943. The German love of music means that her musical pedigree matters here, and the SS put her in charge of conducting an orchestra of female prisoners. Alma soon realizes that she can save the lives of these women by helping the group to play better and by creating a diverse repertoire that will please their captors. In the end, many women have Alma Rosé to thank for their lives. But Alma is not conducting the orchestra Edie hears now in May. Alma died in April.

The music stops, followed by a commotion at the door. The prisoners jump to their feet and stand stupefied as Mengele bursts in with his entourage. Edie recognizes him immediately as the person who pointed her mother toward the line for the gas chamber. Prowling for entertainment, Mengele shouts a question, and in response, one of the other prisoners shoves Edie forward.

Mengele's eyes lock on her. Then he orders, "Little dancer, dance for me."

Dancers rely on mirrors as they train, their reflected image guiding, revealing, and instructing. But what happens when the reflection of your art glints through the eyes of a madman? Pianist and composer Szymon Laks, also a prisoner at Auschwitz, describes being forced to play music in a death camp as "music in a distorting mirror." Now, Edie too enters this depraved house of mirrors, summoned to perform and ultimately to choose which of her distorted reflections reveals her true self.

In that moment, Edie describes feeling like Eurydice in the underworld as she awaits the chord of Orpheus's lyre, whose sweet music might charm Hades into setting her free. She simultaneously conjures an alternate allusion that she may be Salome, forced to dance for her stepfather Herod and made a recipient of death. Will this dance set her free or further enslave her? Mengele commands the orchestra to play "The Blue Danube," a popular waltz by Johann Strauss II. Edie already knows a routine to this piece, but how can her limbs respond after the trauma of that day?

Mengele again shouts, "Dance!" And Edie's body begins to move, operating automatically, the muscle memory reliable from years of practice. As she dances before this murderer, Edie invokes the words of her now dead mother. "No one can take away from you what you've put in your own mind." As if responding to an incantation, the horrific scene before Edie disappears, replaced by a world inside her head. The dirty barracks floor morphs into the stage of the Budapest Opera House. Edie dances for an audience of admirers who toss flowers. She continues to twirl, kick, and bend as the camp orchestra segues into music from Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet.*

When the music stops, Edie's awareness returns to her reality. Mengele seems pleased by her performance, and he tosses her, not a bouquet of flowers, but a lifesaving loaf of bread before departing to scout for more entertainment. As she shares the bread with her sister and bunkmates, Edie feels grateful to still be alive. She now embodies a truth that American dancer and choreographer Martha Graham will famously espouse— "Movement never lies. It is a barometer telling of the soul's weather to all who can read it."

Edie will later put into words the spiritual understanding that came to her in that unfathomable moment. The heightened proprioception that she relies on so expertly as a dancer is complemented by another kind of awareness.

> As I dance, I discover a piece of wisdom that I have never forgotten. I will never know what miracle of grace allows me this insight. It will save my life many times, even after the horror is over. I can see that Dr. Mengele, the seasoned killer who just this morning murdered my mother, is more pitiful than me. I am free in my mind, which he can never be. He will always have to live with what he's done. He is more a prisoner than I am. As I close my routine with a final, graceful split, I pray, but it isn't myself I pray for. I pray for him. I pray, for his sake, that he won't have the need to kill me.

In art imitating life, or vice versa, Jewish artist Felix Nussbaum depicted the horrors inflicted on the Jewish people as a danse macabre. Born in Osnabrück, Germany, Nussbaum showed artistic promise as a child, and his father, an amateur artist, encouraged him to become a painter. He enrolled at the Hamburg School for Arts and Crafts in 1922 and then studied at the Lewin-Funcke School in Berlin where he met Polish-Jewish artist Felka Platek. In 1932, Nussbaum moved to Rome, having won a prestigious scholarship from the German government to study there, but left abruptly in 1933 because of Hitler’s rise to power. That same year, a fire destroyed Nussbaum’s studio in Berlin and all 150 paintings inside. Nussbaum and Platek eventually fled to Belgium, where they married. When the Nazis advanced into Belgium, officials arrested Nussbaum and sent him to the internment camp at Saint-Cyprien. Miraculously, he escaped, and the couple went into hiding.

Nussbaum used his talents to paint surrealist portraits of life under Nazi control and of death via genocide. In April 1944, he painted his last known work— *Die Gerippe spielen zum Tanz* (The Skeletons Playing for the Dance). In this oil on canvas, Nussbaum depicts a shattered society. Skeletons play musical instruments— clarinets, a drum, a trumpet, a violin, as they stand among ruins littered with the artifacts of science and the arts. A crumbled marble statue rests next to a compass. A lightbulb lies abandoned on a paper scrap of music. What remains unclear is whether the skeletons are performing a dirge to mourn the loss or an ode to celebrate the destruction. Only one figure in the painting has escaped skeletal form. The artist himself, gaunt and tired, sits behind the organ, possibly the conductor of this macabre band. His image offers the only sign of hope, the hope that he will survive this dance of death. Later that summer, Nazi officials arrest Nussbaum and his wife as the result of an informant. On August 3, they arrive in Auschwitz and are sent directly to the gas chambers.

Edie Eger was not the only dancer to confront the horrors of this time through the strength that art instills and embodies. During the horrific siege of Leningrad, dancers and musicians sought to bring beauty to the starving residents. Despite lack of heat and electricity, ballet dancers mounted the stage in layers of clothing, willing their limbs to move despite the starvation and dystrophy that riddled their bodies. In Theresienstadt, the large number of imprisoned artists there generated a vast outpouring of creativity, including as outreach to the children. Professional dancer Kamila Rosenbaum decided to set to dance the classic Czech children’s book *Broučci* (Fireflies). Written in the 19th century by Jan Karafiát, it tells the story of Brouček, a young boy firefly who, after discovering so much pain and darkness in the world, decides that he must shine his light. When the children held captive in Theresienstadt danced as glowing fireflies, there could be no mistaking the message of hope that these children would survive to bear witness and to shine as beacons of racial justice.

And amid the generous offerings of dance, the Nazis twisted choreography into an evil cadence. Pianist Władysław Szpilman recounted a horrific scene in the Warsaw Ghetto. He watched Nazi guards order musicians into the streets to play music and then force the residents to dance. Wanting their "game" to be as cruel as possible, the guards selected dancers among the fat, short, and disabled. Then as the Germans roared with laughter, they would shout, "Faster! Go on, faster! Everybody dance!"

After responding to Mengele's demand for dance, Edie spends the next 12 months trying to survive in Auschwitz and on subsequent death marches. Upon arrival in Gunskirchen, one of the many subcamps of Mauthausen, Edie realizes that there is "always a worse hell." She can no longer walk. Her hunger is so great that she contemplates succumbing to cannibalism as other desperate people around her have. Instead, she crams her mouth with blades of grass. A brief glimmer of hope sparks when her sister Magda finds a tin of sardines. Maybe the nutrition inside can save their starving bodies. But they too soon realize the cruelty of having no way to open it. No more hope remains. They are the almost dead among the dead. Soon Edie loses sense of which she is.

Then on May 4, 1945, American soldiers enter the camp, greeted by the overwhelming stench from piles of rotting bodies. The soldiers call out for anyone who is alive to raise their hand. A soldier walks near Edie and Magda, but both are too weak to move or call out. Just as he turns away, the glinting of something metallic catches his eye. It is the unopened sardine tin still gripped in Magda's hand. Soldiers hurry to extract the two sisters from a pile of corpses. Edie weighs 70 pounds, and her back is broken.

Physical recovery happens slowly, and psychological recovery even slower. Edie marries and immigrates to the United States. As she raises her children, she earns multiple degrees in psychology. She is determined to answer the question, "Why did I survive?" and in doing so, to find meaning in her life through helping others. Today, at age 95, Dr. Edith Eger remains a sought-after clinical psychologist who has assisted countless individuals in their recovery from addiction and trauma. Part of her unique approach centers on what she calls Choice Therapy, the lesson about freedom that she learned during the Holocaust. She believes that our painful experiences do not have to be a liability but can provide us with the opportunity to discover our unique purpose. After the liberation, Edie was free *from* the death camps, but that represented only the first step. She still needed to become free *to* choose life. Edie teaches that the freedom we gain from choice can only be realized in the present moment. No true liberty exists in the past's "if only" or the future's "until." Through years of practice, Edie has learned to separate what happens to her that she does not choose, such as Mengele pointing her mother to the left, from what she retains as a choice— her responses, her actions, her words. She describes it this way.

> I will always be a woman whose mother and father were gassed and burned and turned to smoke…I [will] always be what every person is, someone who will bear suffering. We can't erase the pain. But we are free to accept who we are and what has been done to us and move on.

Today, our world bears a palpable weariness from years of combating a deadly virus and from waging other relentless battles against ignorance, prejudice, hatred, and selfishness. Although the suffering we face today could never, and should never, be equated with the genocide carried out by the Nazis, stories such as Edie Eger's can teach us necessary lessons about resilience and about the gift of choice. In resonance with Edie's conclusions, the words of Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl reveal the road less traveled. "Between stimulus and response there is space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom."

As children, we long for the day when we will be grown up enough to make all our own decisions. But then in adulthood, we confront so many choices in a given day that we complain about "decision fatigue." Some are trivial. Chocolate or vanilla? Hot or iced coffee? Some are life and death. Admittedly, we find some comfort in exercising the little bit of control that comes with choice, especially since so much in our lives arrives without our consent or control. We suffer from getting what we do not want and from not being able to hold on to what we do want. But amid the chaotic spiral of life, we can pause. We can inhabit that space Viktor Frankl described. We can embrace the ecstasy of that inner life, the freedom of the dance that Edie discovered. We can *choose* our response to what life hands us. What a beautiful gift.

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[i] Košice belonged to Hungary before June 1920 when it became part of Czechoslovakia. It will again become part of Hungary after 1938. Regardless of moving borders, the Elefánt family identified as Hungarian Jews.

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Author Biography

Dr. Kellie Brown is a violinist, conductor, music educator, and award-winning writer whose book, *The Sound of Hope: Music as Solace, Resistance and Salvation during the Holocaust and World War II* (McFarland Publishing, 2020), received one of the *Choice* Outstanding Academic Titles award. Her words have appeared in *Earth & Altar*, *Ekstasis*, *Psaltery & Lyre*, *Calla Press*, *The Primer*, and others. More information about her and her writing can be found at www.kelliedbrown.com.