

INTERVIEW

Forgiveness: The Key to Self-Healing—
An Interview with Eva Mozes-Kor

Joanie Eppinga

Eva Mozes-Kor was ten years old when she and her family were deported from their home in Transylvania to Auschwitz. There, Dr. Josef Mengele was doing medical experiments on twins. Eva's mother, father, and two older sisters were put to death in the gas chambers, but Eva and her twin sister Miriam were preserved to be subjected to experiments. Eva was given an injection that nearly killed her at the time, and Miriam died of the aftereffects of the experiments many years later. As an adult, having married and moved to America, Eva watched her sister struggle with lingering medical issues. She donated a kidney to Miriam and tried to gather information about what had been done to her sister at Auschwitz, but Mengele's files have never been recovered. Eva's search to find more information, or even Mengele himself, was unsuccessful; but in the course of her quest, Eva discovered the powerful healing effects of forgiveness. On May 20, 2010, she met with our editor, Joanie Eppinga, at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Terre Haute, Indiana that she started fifteen years ago, and gave the following interview.

EPPINGA: What would you have liked to have seen happen if Mengele had been caught?

MOZES-KOR: My point was not that he needs to be caught. My point is that if he is alive, or was alive, he should have been found so that the survivors would have the information that has been taken away with him. My sister might still be alive today. Her doctors kept asking what had happened, but we don't have the information. The files disappeared. Mengele disappeared.

EPPINGA: So it wasn't that you were looking for revenge, but you were looking for information.

MOZES-KOR: Even in the days when I had not forgiven him, I would not have wanted necessarily revenge. I always wanted the information. I might have not been *kind* to him as I would be today (*laughter*), not because he deserves it, but people need to understand that a victim who gets involved in revenge uses all the wrong behavior that a person can use. In so doing they are actually ruining their own lives.

EPPINGA: How do you think we can convey that message to people?

MOZES-KOR: That's what I'm trying to figure out myself! I was talking yesterday to 10-, 11-, and 12-year-olds, and they're so absorbed; we really need to grab them before they turn 13. (*laughter*) They are like a sponge, they are absorbing everything, and I told them, "If somebody hurts your feelings, beats you up, does something wrong, could you forgive them?" They're looking at me dumbstruck. I said, "This is what I would like to teach you."

EPPINGA: Do you think that the potential for evil in humans is inherent, or is it the result of experience?

MOZES-KOR: I would say that maybe a small number, maybe 5%, there are some wirings in the brain that don't work normally, and therefore they are predisposed. But I would say that in those cases, there is not anything you can do with them. You have to protect society from them. But I would say we are not focusing in society on the right things. If a victim is not healed, there is the seed for more: a seed for murder, or a seed for problems.

EPPINGA: Yet it sounds as if you would agree with that statement Anne Frank made, that people are basically good at heart.

MOZES-KOR: Well I would agree with that, that they are *born* good at heart. You see people getting angry. I see young teenagers coming in so angry. I get some kids from the inner city whose parents neglected them: child abuse, parents are in jail, they don't even know if they are going to have food tomorrow—in the United States!—but that's the way it is. It is not their fault. Now what happens with them is the problem. They're bonded with those parents. Bonding is good, but not with something that's evil, or bad, or neglecting. And they are still "I can't forgive them." Molestation is the number one problem in the United States, from the letters that I get. So many, both boys and girls, have been molested. And how did these molesters become molesters?

EPPINGA: It's well understood that many of them were molested themselves. So how do we heal the victims?

MOZES-KOR: Well, I think we teach children, from age three on, a skill for life. We teach them as soon as they're old enough, how to read, write, arithmetic. These are all life skills for modern society. But we don't teach them how to deal with one another. My philosophy is very simple. I would teach each child how to forgive. They know how to be good to each other.

If I say to you, “You look beautiful, you are smart,” you know how to deal with that. Now let’s try the opposite—difficult words. This is where we get our feelings hurt. And physical violence—how do we deal with that? We need to teach each child, Mary or Johnny or whoever, that when they are called a name, when they are pushed, beaten, spit on, insulted—how does that young little ego, which is very fragile, learn to ignore the insult? It festers in time, and who knows what it creates? Or we can say to Mary, “Go hit Joey.” Now we are teaching violence. We can’t ignore conflict because it’s part of life’s task. We have to deal with it.

EPPINGA: So what do we teach Mary?

MOZES-KOR: Well, we can say to Mary, “You go back to school tomorrow” (and the younger you start the better, but it depends on each child’s intelligence and development; but it should be part of the kindergarten curriculum) “and you tell Joey, ‘Joey, what you did yesterday was terrible. I think you should never do that again. But I forgive you.’” Now you’ve given the child a very powerful tool. You’re empowering the child. And you repeat that all through elementary school. As they get older it gets more and more complicated, but you’re putting the seeds there for conflict resolution that is simple and empowering. And helping the victim to find peace and resolve conflict is really the secret to creating a society that is less violent. What society does wrong today, in my opinion, is that they are teaching justice: “All the Nazis must be brought to justice.” It sounded good. But then as I got a little bit older I said, “Well, okay, suppose all the Nazis were brought to justice, including Mengele. Would my life change?” No. I still would have been orphaned at age 10. My family would still have been murdered. I still was used in experiments. How does that justice help the victim? Helping the victim is my only focus. Not that it’s the only way, but I found in myself that that was the most neglected part of the equation. There was a lot of lip service. But as I said in the film [the documentary *Forgiving Dr. Mengele*], if every Nazi were brought to justice, it would not heal the soul of one single victim.

EPPINGA: But what if it gave them a sense that there is an overall sense of justice in the world?

MOZES-KOR: But there isn’t. And let’s be fair about that. Let’s say Mengele is responsible for a hundred, two, three, four hundred, a thousand lives; he has only one life to give. So how is that just? You can always say, “How is it just if a guy who is maybe half crazy goes to a kindergarten and kills ten kids—all he can give is one life, so how is it just?” Not that I am against putting perpetrators in jail, or that the legal system does not have a

role to play in keeping society safe. They are already doing that. I think their idea is that once the perpetrator has been proven guilty and put in jail, the world is hunky-dory—and it is not! Again, the victims are left out there, dealing with their own emotional pain.

Jokingly I say to some of my audiences that I would like to go up to Mount Sinai and see the burning bush and ask God to give the 11th commandment: “Forgive your worst enemy. It will heal your soul and it will set you free.” Because how do you get the word out? That is the biggest challenge I have found. People don’t know about it. Some of these people stumble upon my DVD, *Forgiving Dr. Mengele*, and they say, “It is a miracle!” After every war is fought, the first step, after the victims are found, after nurturing them back to physical health, they should be taught to forgive. And that could be done in many interesting ways. I like Mandela’s idea of bringing the victims and the perpetrators face to face. Why? When two adversaries meet as equals, something very interesting happens: The humanity of each side comes out. Also, the perpetrators’ testifying validates the tragedy and the pain of the victim. You must validate that right at the beginning. And so, because there is a meeting and a validation, there is a change of ideas and a realization that the other side is also human, and instead of hiding and pretending it didn’t happen, like with the Holocaust—I mean, nobody talked about it for forty-some years! The victims were suffering, and the perpetrators weren’t that happy either! They were hiding, afraid they would be caught; they were lying; and I have met with German people in their forties and fifties who are tremendously traumatized by their parents’ being in the Nazi party. Once I was participating in a conference in Wurzburg and a man said, “I know my father was a Nazi. But he was my father. How do I deal with that?” Nobody was addressing that. In Germany today, if you say one good thing about the Nazis, you are going to be put on trial. That is overdone too. I think society hasn’t quite learned how to deal with that. There would have been no Hitler and no Nazis if children had been raised from a young age [learning] how to forgive. Hitler himself was a victim.

EPPINGA: How do you suggest that we teach children that, even if other people look different or dress differently or have different beliefs, they are not something Other? That they are in the same human family?

MOZES-KOR: They *are* human in the same way, but they believe differently, and that is okay. I talk to very young children about prejudice. When I talked yesterday, I said to one of the little girls, who was wearing a blue sweatshirt, “I don’t like you, Katie.” She looked at me. I said, “Because you are wearing a blue sweatshirt.” She still looked at me, and I said, “I actually

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like blue. But what I am trying to show you: Do I know you? Do I know anything about you except that you are wearing a blue sweatshirt? Is that a reason for me to judge you as a person?" She said no. I said, "That is prejudice. I am prejudging you."

I don't even like the word antisemitism, because antisemitism is a buzzword for prejudice against Jews. But prejudice occurs in all its forms and shapes. So what I would like to teach is that we try to get to know people. The reason it's important—yes, we as human beings are afraid of something that is different, because it's not familiar; it's strange. Everyone likes people who look like us, think like us, go to the same church or place of worship as us, dress like us. That is easy. The difficulty is when we have to like people, or at least try to get to know them, who are completely different. I don't think it's easy—it's really not; the comfort disappears. When I have to meet with somebody with a long ponytail, a guy with earrings, with body piercings, with tattoos, it doesn't even have to be somebody from another culture—What on earth are they thinking? And I don't like it! Yesterday we had a gentleman come here, about 55 or maybe 50, with gray hair and a little ponytail; I looked at my associate and she looked at me; we rolled our eyes. (*Pause*) He was the nicest guy ever.

EPPINGA: So you were able to reach out to him.

MOZES-KOR: Yes. And why do they want to look like that? They maybe think someone who looks conventional, conservative, in a suit, looks stuffy; and they don't want to look like that. Well that is *their* prejudice. This is where we have to go beyond. You don't have to move to Iran or Iraq or any of these places where the cultures are different, where the values are different.

What I would teach every child is that we all have human feelings. We all have a brain; we have two eyes, a nose, a mouth; if we cut ourselves we bleed, and sometimes even that blood is the same type as each other's. You get somebody with a completely different philosophy in life, different religion, different tribal background, and they still might be okay to donate blood to you. If we hurt their feelings, they're going to be hurt. That doesn't mean that we can instantly communicate with them; but what I teach is *respect*. You need to teach respect—respect people you meet, and treat them fairly, and judge them on their actions. Because really I don't care if you belong to the same group as I do; if you're a mean son-of-a-gun I'm still going to judge you on your actions. And that is the only fair way. So maybe reserve judgment on people until you know them. There might be people who look like we do and think different, and there might be people who think like we do and look different. People are more like us than differ-

ent, if you go back to the basic human being. We all want to be comfortable; we all need certain coverings for our bodies because we're cold or hot.

EPPINGA: Did you come to your understanding of forgiveness as the result of an epiphany, or is it an ongoing process?

MOZES-KOR: Well, not in the way that I was sitting at the table having a cup of coffee and. . . No. But it was a Eureka moment in one very simple way. I never, ever thought about forgiving anybody. It never entered my mind. Even when I was only 23, 24, I was living in Israel and was in the Israeli army, and there was very little discussion of the Holocaust. But one of my co-workers said to me, "So you hate the Germans?" I said, "Yes, I do." "You hate the Nazis?" "Yes, I do." "What are you going to do about it?" That was a strange question. I went home and I really didn't know. I wasn't going to fly over and kill somebody. What was I going to do about it? I got back next day to work and I said, "Well, I don't *hate* them, I just don't *like* them." Because I didn't know what to do with that very strong word. It's a very strong word, to say *hate*. I couldn't deal with that for many, many years, because when I lived in Israel from 1950 to 1960, nobody wanted to talk about the Holocaust. Not at all. I didn't deal with it, and Israel was very ill equipped to deal with the Holocaust. I was sixteen when I was talking to my cousin, and he said to me, "Let's not talk about it." Nobody knew how to react. "What do I do with these two little kids who came back from the camp?" We had no psychologists; there were no experts; and I don't even think that the experts know what to do.

Though she didn't find Mengele's files, Eva didn't give up; she heard that there was a doctor who had worked at Auschwitz during the war, Dr. Hans Münch, who would be willing to talk with her. She flew to Europe to meet him and was surprised to be treated very respectfully by a former Nazi. It turned out that he had never seen Mengele's data, but he was able to offer accounts of what had happened at Auschwitz.

MOZES-KOR: I thought, "What are the chances that I will ever have to ask this again of someone who will treat me like a human being?" So I asked: "Dr. Münch, do you know anything about what happened at Auschwitz?" I didn't know what he would say, but he said to me immediately, "This is the nightmare I live with every day of my life." He went on, describing the operation of the gas chamber. People would be told to hang their clothes and remember the number they hung them on, and to take off their shoes, to prepare to take a shower. The shower room looked luxurious, polished to perfection; it smelled very good—there was perfume everywhere, so people would be at ease. Then when the shower room was packed to capacity the

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doors would close, and he was stationed outside at a peephole looking in. A hatch-like opening opened in the ceiling. The Zyklon B was dropped—it looked like pellets of gravel. They hit the floor, and the gas was operating like dry ice. So as the Zyklon B was dropped, the gas was actually rising from the floor, and as it was rising, people were getting away from the rising gas, climbing on top of each other, trying to grasp for air, forming a mountain of intermingled bodies. And when the strongest people, who were always on the top of the pile, stopped moving, he knew that everybody was dead, and he signed the death certificate. They were that meticulous about it. Never any names—just numbers, whatever numbers there were in the gas chamber. I told him, “I never heard about that. I never knew the gas chambers operated that way.” I said, “Dr. Munch, this is very important information. I am going to Auschwitz in 1995, and I want you to come with me and sign a document at the ruins of the gas chamber in the company of witnesses.” He said to me immediately, “I would love to.”

Now I came back to Terre Haute very, very excited. I didn't tell anybody anything, but I was going to have this original document; if anybody ever said there weren't any gas chambers, I could take this document and shove it in their faces. But I think basically that I am a pretty nice person. And I wanted to thank this Nazi doctor for his willingness to document. Now do you know where to go to find a gift for a Nazi? I did not know where to turn. So I went to the local Hallmark shop and I read a lot of cards.

EPPINGA: And none of them were right.

MOZES-KOR: Two and a half hours. The two ladies who worked there came up and asked if I was finding what I was looking for. I considered telling them what I was looking for, but I thought, “I better not go there; they're going to think that I have lost my marbles.” I left very, very disappointed. I expected to come out of there with some kind of an idea, which I didn't. But then I went back to my lesson number one. I have three lessons that I give kids when I lecture: 1) Never give up; 2) How to deal with prejudice; and 3) Forgive your worst enemy; it will heal your soul. So I went back to lesson number one—it's the most important lesson, because without it nobody can accomplish anything in life. You can't even get an education if you give up. For ten months, when I was cooking, cleaning, driving the car, doing laundry, whenever my mind was free to think, I kept asking myself, “What can I give this Nazi doctor as a gesture of my thanks?” Hundreds of ideas popped into my head, and none seemed appropriate—until ten months later, and it was a very simple idea: How about a letter of forgiveness? I immediately knew that he would like it. I discovered for myself such a life-changing experience. I did not start out to forgive anybody; I just wanted to

thank a Nazi doctor for his goodness. To realize that I, the little victim of almost 50 years, had the power to forgive—no one could give me that power. No one could take it away. It was mine to use in any way I wished. It is a lot of power.

All victims, it doesn't matter what the victimization is, are hurt, are angry, feel hopeless, feel helpless, and definitely feel powerless. I discovered I had a power. So I began writing my letter, and I asked a friend to correct my spelling, and she said to me, "You know, it's very nice you're forgiving Dr. Münch, but you really need to forgive Mengele." I said, "No no no, this is just a little letter." She said, "I know. Promise me you will think about it." Once I began to think about it, I said, "Wow. I even have the power to forgive the god of Auschwitz." And I liked that idea—I liked the fact that I had some power over my own destiny. And I wasn't hurting anybody, so why couldn't I do it? This is when I decided if I forgave Mengele, I forgave the kids who harassed me for several years; I forgave the people in Washington, D.C. who arrested me and roughed me up in 1986. There were a lot of people that had done me wrong here in the United States and hurt me. But finally I was free from all that. So that is the way it happened. It's not a Eureka moment in the sense that I was sitting at the table eating something and *boom*. I was looking for something else completely.

EPPINGA: How would you suggest that other people prepare their hearts to forgive?

MOZES-KOR: I would ask, "Would you like to be free from the pain that you are suffering?" If the answer is no, there is nothing you can do. If the answer is yes, then I think that we can go on and try to teach them: Okay, write a letter. I find the idea of writing a letter is a very simple thing. You have your mind, your paper, your pen, and you can write. Try to write a letter to the people who have hurt you. Also, I would suggest that the idea of having a ceremony is important, because it makes it almost formal and final. You could have a ceremony in a church with a group of people who helped you, you can have it. . . . Actually, I don't like churches because they always focus on God. I feel that forgiveness has zero thing to do with God. It is the will of the person to be free of what was done to them. The victim does have that right—to be free. If you forgive someone because God told you to do so, that is not as correct as when *you* decide that you want to be free from that. We have done here two conferences on forgiveness, and we ended with a ceremony; we gave each person a little piece of paper, maybe 2 by 3 inches, to write something to somebody who they wanted to forgive. We put them in helium balloons, and we let them go. Just the idea that you

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let go. We could do something similar by a river, just like the Jewish Yom Kippur—you send your sins down. You could just . . . whatever. You could write a letter and do nothing with it! Shred it!

EPPINGA: So for you, forgiveness is very much about moving toward your own freedom.

MOZES-KOR: Absolutely. And no one can do it for anybody else. Each person has to do it for themselves. I also have added, halfway joking but I think it's quite serious: I call forgiveness a miracle medicine. You don't have to bill an HMO. There is no co-pay. It's free. Everybody can afford it. It has no side effects. It works. The reason, I feel, that many survivors do not want to forgive is they do not want to give up the security of having that pain. They know how to deal with that. But if you don't like the way you feel without the pain, I guarantee to you, you can go and take it back. No one will stop you.

EPPINGA: How has your life changed as a result of forgiving?

MOZES-KOR: The first thing I that found as we were standing by the ruins of the gas chamber January 27, 1995, and I read my document [of forgiveness] and signed it, I immediately felt the burden I was carrying was completely lifted from my shoulders. It was tremendously liberating emotionally. I was no longer a victim of Auschwitz. I was no longer a prisoner of my tragic past. I like the person who I am. I like the skin I am in. Most people do not feel comfortable in their own skin. That is probably the biggest thing that has happened. I don't say that I am perfect.

EPPINGA: How has forgiving changed your behavior?

MOZES-KOR: I can smile. I can dance. I can dance in Auschwitz. I can dance anywhere. And why *not* dance in Auschwitz? Some people think it's sacrilegious, but I lived there, and if I want to dance there—

EPPINGA: You get to choose.

MOZES-KOR: That's correct. I used to think that the world was a terrible place. I now think that the world is a wonderful place. My whole outlook on life has changed. The problem with victims is, you can hang every perpetrator, but if the victim is still in that mentality of "Poor me, look at what happened to me . . ." This is a mental trap! Some say, "If only they would say they are sorry!" We are giving them power for the rest of our lives, that they should say they are sorry? I take the power back! I forgive them! If they come to me and say they are sorry, fine; but my decision does not

depend on anything that anybody else does. I feel it is very easy to teach people; it would be easier if we taught if from a very young age. We would create a lot less victims and therefore a lot less perpetrators. I am 100% convinced that victims often, not always, but often, become perpetrators. Now I am sure that I am not the best mother I could have been. As a victim, I yelled a lot. Would I have known that I could heal myself a lot earlier . . . If the UN had one unit that would really help victims, it should be a forgiveness unit, one that not only clothes them and gives them medical help, but—nobody's taking care of the human soul! This is a basic part of our existence!

EPPINGA: How has your understanding of forgiveness changed over time?

MOZES-KOR: 180% has changed. Not the major thing, but the *depths* of it. My understanding has changed. I was challenged continually and still am: "Why forgive?" and so I ask myself that same question. And how can I teach forgiveness? I know what worked for me. The thing is that I want it to work for everybody, because I can see, number one, that it can help heal the victim. And my focus is always going to be how to help the victim. If we can help the great majority of the human victims, we don't need to worry about preventing war.

EPPINGA: Because their hearts will be healed?

MOZES-KOR: That's correct. If you realize that every victim who is angry, and who carries that anger and pain, sometimes passes it on to their children and grandchildren—the children and grandchildren are already victimized because of the victim's background.

My understanding of forgiveness wasn't quite as deep and as subtle [before]. I knew when it started that it made me free. But I didn't really understand that everybody can do it; that it actually is important for world peace. A person who is angry with the world—I call anger a seed for war. By the same token, forgiveness is a seed for peace. I did not understand all that because as I kept trying to redefine and elaborate on the ideal forgiveness, I realized that this is a tremendously powerful tool; it's a *doable* tool. It's not as expensive as people seem to think. We teach children many life skills, yet we are not teaching them how to deal with their emotional pain.

I would like to be able to add to this little museum a pavilion that I would call the Forgiveness/Peace Pavilion, with a little garden with it. I think people come here and leave tremendously encouraged. They go to other Holocaust museums and they are left with the burden of what happened. Or they say, "If we remember, it won't happen again." Baloney! Baloney! The Jews are good at remembering, but remembering does not do

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anything to remove the threat. I would like to see one battle, one murder, one genocide that has been prevented because of remembering. So I disagree even with some of my dear friends who have a lot of good will; remembering is not enough. Yes, we must remember, but we have to decide *why* we remember. We remember to heal. If you do not heal the victim, you are leaving the seed for another tragedy. Jews have given the world the One God idea; they have given the world the Ten Commandments; but what if we gave the world a way to deal with pain? Wouldn't that be a much better legacy to the Holocaust? Forgiveness is an individual thing; but you can advocate it. We can advocate forgiveness.

Many people ask me how they should live their lives. Sometimes young girls come, and they don't tell me why they come. They finally ask, shyly, "How did you find out how to forgive?" I ask them, "Why do you want to know? Has someone hurt you?" And then it comes out: They have been molested. I ask: "Do you deserve to live free of what was done to you? Let's forget about the perpetrator. You're not running his or her life. You're running only your life. Do you deserve to be free?" They say, "Yes." And I say, "You can be free of that! You have the power to forgive, and it will free you." Some say, "The perpetrator doesn't deserve it." I say, "That's quite possible, but *you* deserve it." It doesn't make sense, but the strange thing is, it works. You have one power. I forgave Mengele. And you know what? There is not a single thing Mengele can do about it. I have the final word. Your forgiveness is the final word.

