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A Healing Forgiveness

Eva Kor was 10 when she and her family stepped off the train in Auschwitz in the fall of 1944. Minutes later an SS officer took her and her twin sister, Miriam, away from their mother, father and two older sisters. The twins never saw the others again. Awaiting the girls was Josef Mengele, “the Angel of Death” who performed unspeakably sadistic experiments on roughly 1,500 sets of twins. When the Soviet army liberated Auschwitz on Jan. 27, 1945, Eva and Miriam were among the fewer than 200 survivors of Mengele’s atrocities.

Flash forward to 1993. At her own initiative, she met with Dr. Hans Munch, a former Nazi who had served at Auschwitz. After the meeting she decided to do something remarkable: She wrote him a letter of forgiveness.

Kor will talk about her ordeal at the hands of Mengele and her decision to forgive in a talk, “Surviving the Angel of Death,” Thursday, May 5, at 7:30 p.m. at UC Santa Barbara’s Corwin Pavilion. Her visit commemorates Holocaust Memorial Day as part the spring 2016 Taubman Foundation Symposia in Jewish Studies at UCSB.

“I don’t deserve any great admiration, nor do I think one needs a lot of strength to forgive,” Kor said from the CANDLES Holocaust Museum and Education Center in Terre Haute, Ind. “Every human being can and should forgive people who have hurt them. Not because the perpetrator ever deserves it, but I don’t even care if they deserve it. I think it’s because the victim deserves to be free of what was imposed on them by life or some ill-willing people, whatever happens.”

After the Eva and Miriam were liberated from Auschwitz, they eventually emigrated to Israel. Eva later married an American, Michael Kor, and settled in Terre Haute. In the early 1980s she and Miriam began searching for the other Mengele twins and sent out 12,000 letters. By 1984 they had found 122 surviving individuals. That same year she and Miriam founded CANDLES, for Children of Auschwitz Nazi Deadly Lab Experiments Survivors. The CANDLES museum opened in 1995. Kor continues to give lectures around the country. She has also returned to Auschwitz numerous times, often with educators.

In conjunction with Kor's talk, the UCSB Library is presenting a new exhibit, "The Letters of Josef Mengele," in the library's eighth-floor Tower Lobby. Running through May 27, the exhibit features two letters he wrote to his wife, Irene, from Auschwitz. Given Mengele's infamy, the handwritten letters are so unremarkable as to seem surreal. He writes of his work as though it was normal to torture children: "I'm doing okay so far. My work is going ahead …"

The letters, on loan from the Florence and Laurence Spungen Family Foundation, give no hint of the horrors he was inflicting on children every day. If you didn't know who wrote them, they would seem like the typical correspondence of a soldier to his family. This does not surprise Kor. "Sure they're normal," she said. "Why wouldn't they be? Mengele was not some phantom of a crazy guy. He was a doctor. He was a Nazi doctor, which is important to remember, and he wanted to serve his motherland like a good Nazi. By the same token, it would be my opinion it would difficult to be a good Nazi and a good doctor."

In a 2001 talk to physicians and scientists in Berlin, Kor acknowledged that forgiving the Nazis was controversial among Holocaust survivors. But she told them it had to be done to free herself from that nightmare. "I do realize that many of my fellow survivors will not share, support, or understand my way of Healing," she said. "There might be some people on both sides who will be angry with me. I understand that. I believe we should not go on suffering forever. This is the way I healed myself. I dare hope that it might work for other people."

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