



Holocaust Survivor EVA KOR

(1934-2019)

A woman of peace. A woman of forgiveness.

By Susan M. Brackney

For decades, Eva Mozes Kor carried the weight of Auschwitz with her. At the age of 10, her parents and her two older sisters were murdered there by the Nazis. The fact that she and her identical twin sister survived only added to that weight. But, in the end, it wasn't what she carried but what she finally chose to lay down that mattered most—to her and to those who will carry on her legacy.

Born in the village of Portz, Romania, in 1934, Eva and Miriam Mozes were among 3,000 twins Josef Mengele used in

experiments in pursuit of a perfect Aryan race. After the 1945 liberation of Auschwitz by the Soviet army, Eva and Miriam survived life in communist Romania, later immigrating to Israel in 1950 at the age of 16. Both served in the Israeli army. In 1960, Eva met and married Mickey Kor, himself a Holocaust survivor. Although she spoke no English, she moved with him to Terre Haute, Indiana.

"My mom was considered somewhat of a pariah and an oddball here when I was younger," recalls her son, Alex Kor, a

podiatrist with Witham Health Services in Lebanon, Indiana.

"People made fun of her because they didn't know her story. And she didn't really know how to succinctly represent what had happened to her."

In Indiana, Kor endured years of anti-Semitic Halloween pranks and was the target of a hate crime. Eventually, she found her footing and her voice. She even came to personally forgive the Nazis—engendering controversy and a widespread movement for peace. Most notably, she reconciled with a former Nazi doctor, Hans Münch, and later with "the accountant of Auschwitz," Oskar Groening. Testifying at his 2016



Eva and her sister, Miriam, stand by pictures of themselves as inmates at Auschwitz. Courtesy photo



Leah Simpson, director of the CANDLES Holocaust Museum. Photo by Rodney Margison

trial, she shook Groening’s hand, and he, in turn, kissed her cheek.

Kor died on July 4, 2019, during an educational trip to Krakow, Poland. She left behind Mickey, now 93, their son, Alex, and daughter, Rina.

Many of those closest to Kor cannot bring themselves to refer to her in the past tense. “She

still has a mission,” says Leah Simpson, director of Terre Haute’s CANDLES (Children of Auschwitz Nazi Deadly Lab Experiment Survivors) Holocaust Museum and Education Center. “She still has a legacy. She still has things to do.”

Kor created CANDLES in 1984 to help locate and provide support for twin survivors who’d likewise suffered under Mengele. In 1995, CANDLES became a full-fledged museum with a mission to educate others about the Holocaust. Eight years later, in an apparent hate crime, an arsonist firebombed CANDLES. Undeterred, Kor rebuilt the museum and reopened in 2005.

During her search for fellow twin survivors, Kor located 122, and, in 1985, she traveled with some of them to mark the 40th anniversary of Auschwitz’s liberation. Soon, she began paying travel expenses for teachers to accompany her on subsequent trips. “It just continued to grow,” Simpson says.

Over the last several years, Kor periodically led tours to her native Romania, and, for roughly the last 15 years, she also led trips to Auschwitz. “Recently, one trip turned into two trips

because we’ve had so much interest,” Simpson notes. “So, Eva would stay, and the first 100 would return home. Then the next 100 would show up.”

This year, Kor hosted two back-to-back groups of 150 visitors in all. Joe Lee was on the second leg of Kor’s final trip. He used an Indiana Arts Commission grant to help defray the cost of visiting Auschwitz with her.



Kor kibitzing with visitors at the CANDLES Museum. Courtesy photo

A story of hope, redemption, and resurrection

“She was not the picture of some kind of plaster saint,” says Lee, an artist and an illustrator for *Bloom* and *The Herald-Times*. “She was wonderfully cantankerous and quick with one-liners. She had an incredible sense of humor.”

Lee initially met Kor in December 2018. “My wife had seen her in the summer,” Lee recalls. “As soon as she heard Eva speak, she said, ‘Joe, you really have got to come over and hear her.’” Although Kor would be undergoing major heart surgery in a

matter of weeks, she spoke for two hours. “Part of the reason I believe she spoke for so long was because her representative was there from the House,” he says. “One of her dreams was to speak to both houses of Congress. Part of her talk was a pitch to do that.”

Lee is now working on an original graphic novel to help get Kor’s story out. In part, the idea came to him after he saw Chutz-Pow!—a short, Holocaust-related comic book series. “There have been other graphic novels and biographies that have dealt with the Holocaust, with *Maus* being best known,” Lee says. “But *Maus* is truly a tragedy. Eva’s story has tragic elements, but, ultimately, it is a story of hope and redemption and resurrection—all of those things.”

Lee admits it will be a challenge to tell that story accurately. “It’s a huge responsibility to do it correctly and probably a little more difficult now that Eva is gone,” Lee admits. “My hope was that I would be able to meet with her over the course of working on it.”

With the help of the CANDLES museum staff, Lee is connecting with a wide range of people—each of whom can share a different aspect of Kor’s life. Despite her absence, Lee also hopes to capture some of the more obscure details about her as a person. “There are inadvertent things you kind of get from osmosis, from being around somebody,” he says. “You know, she called her purse ‘Sherman’ after the Sherman tank. Because her purse was so heavy and contained quite a bit of daily armaments—lipstick and those kinds of things. ... That’s the kind of thing you’d never know unless you heard her say it.”

The heart of a teacher

“She was very special, as far as wanting to teach kids,” says Jeff Rudkin, a video production teacher at Bloomington’s Batchelor Middle School. Rudkin’s students first met Kor in 2003 when they interviewed her for an original Holocaust-related documentary.

“When she did the first interview with our students, I could tell they were nervous,” Rudkin says. “But she just told her story and had them in the palm of her hand.”

The interview energized Rudkin’s students. “They were really wanting to find out more and seek out additional Holocaust survivors,” he says. “They found two other survivors ... and interviewed them and put together their first documentary about the Holocaust.”

The students shared their film with Kor, who was so pleased she offered to speak at Batchelor. “Shortly after she agreed to do that was when her museum got firebombed in a hate crime,” Rudkin remembers. “But she still came and spoke to a school-wide assembly.”

In 2005, 2010, and 2015, small groups of Batchelor Middle School students traveled to Auschwitz with Kor. The 2005 trip marked the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. “That was a huge event with a lot of world leaders,” Rudkin

says. “To see Auschwitz—especially in the middle of winter like that with Mrs. Kor walking around showing us where things happened and telling her story—that had a very big impact. It was a very emotional trip.”

He continues, “The second time we went to Poland, some adults in the group were concerned about how well the kids were processing the experience. So, Eva took time out one evening to sit down and just talk with them and make sure they were ... not struggling with it. And then she laughed and came to the conclusion that they were handling it better than the adults.”

Rudkin’s students would produce several more films about the Holocaust, featuring Kor and her husband, Mickey. They’ve also tackled anti-bullying, respect, and other positive topics. “Our students are constantly doing films like that to help keep her message going,” he says. “We’re just grateful that we had such access to her over these last several years.”



Batchelor Middle School students with Kor and teacher Jeff Rudkin (3rd from left) at Auschwitz. Courtesy photo

‘Forgive everyone who has hurt you’

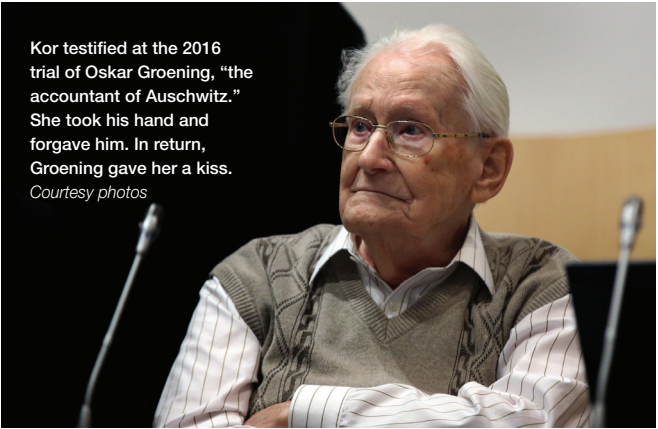
Perhaps the most impactful lesson Kor shared is about forgiveness. In her book *Surviving the Angel of Death: The True Story of a Mengele Twin in Auschwitz*, Kor writes: “Forgive your worst enemy and forgive everyone who has hurt you—it will heal your soul and set you free.”

While visiting Auschwitz’s infamous “selection platform” with Kor, Lee saw this forgiveness firsthand. “That’s kind of a pivot for everything,” he explains. “It’s the last place on earth that she saw her two older sisters and her parents.”

He continues, “To sit there and hear her talk about that and say to all of us, ‘It’s a happy story’—it was kind of earth-shattering that she could reach that state.”



Artist Joe Lee. Photo by Nicole McPheeters



During his trip, Lee also met the grandson of Mengele’s assistant. “He was telling me about meeting Eva,” Lee says. “At one point, Eva asked him, ‘Have you forgiven your grandfather?’ He didn’t have an answer. It was easy to accept the idea of forgiveness in a theoretical sense, but the actual forgiving of an individual that you are related to—he had enormous amounts of guilt and shame associated with his family’s involvement. So, that was really powerful.”

Kor didn’t necessarily set out to forgive the Nazis. And doing so would take her some 50 years. Nor did she expect to become a sought-after public speaker, author, activist, and international figure. “It was a series of small events that led to this momentum, and now, hopefully, a legacy,” her son, Alex Kor, says.

Where it all began

Kor began telling her story in the 1980s, shortly after NBC aired its *Holocaust* miniseries. “My mom contacted [the local TV station] to see if they had any archival footage,” Alex says. “They said, ‘No, but would you want to appear in our studio to talk about your experience?’”

After appearing on two broadcasts, she began getting speaking requests. By the early ’90s, Kor was lecturing regularly. “She was asked to speak in Boston at a medical ethics conference in ’92 or ’93,” Alex remembers. “And they said, ‘Oh, by the way, Eva, maybe you could find one of those Nazi doctors to speak with us?’ My mom always liked to joke and she said, ‘Well, the last time I looked, they weren’t advertising in the Yellow Pages!’”

But Kor had done a series of interviews at Auschwitz with a German television station, and the program had included a Nazi doctor, Hans Münch, who had been cleared of all charges.

“In 1993, six to eight months after my aunt [Miriam, Eva’s twin sister] died, that’s what led to the forgiveness,” Alex says.



“She went there to meet with Münch in Germany ... and see what information he knew about what was injected [into the twins during Mengele’s experiments]. He said he didn’t know anything, but said, ‘This is a nightmare I live with,’ and she said, ‘What nightmare?’ He said, ‘The nightmare is that I saw the gas chamber.’” After hearing that, Kor asked Münch to accompany her to Auschwitz and

acknowledge the existence of the gas chambers. He agreed.

“So, my mom came back to Terre Haute and would go to Hallmark stores looking for a card for a Nazi doctor,” Alex says. “One time, she spent two hours there.” She decided to write a personal letter instead.

She showed a draft to her former Indiana State University English professor. Alex says, “The English professor said, ‘Well, these are the corrections, but I challenge you: Why are you forgiving Münch? How about Mengele? Your problem is not with Münch. It’s with Mengele.’”

In 1995, Kor marked the 50th anniversary of Auschwitz’s liberation with Münch. Together, they signed a reconciliation document. According to *The Washington Post*, “In it, Münch testified to the killings he witnessed at the camp, and Kor granted personal forgiveness to all who took part in the murders, including Münch and Mengele.”

From that year forward, Kor discussed the power of forgiveness. “She really



Kor’s son, Alex.
Photo by Rodney Margison

didn’t understand until a year or two later how much happier she was,” Alex says.

“My worst nightmare would be that in three years, 10 years, 30 years, that people either misrepresent what my mom said or they forget her altogether,” he says. “That’s why I’m so motivated to continue her message.”

Joe Lee acknowledges the truth of that statement. “Once the spokesperson is gone, it’s easy for it to kind of be put on the shelf and forgotten,” Lee says. “So, that legacy really is up to the rest of us who got a piece of that message to carry it forward. I really hope that here in Bloomington the seeds of that would grow.”

Planting the seeds

As it turns out, those seeds are flourishing. Via their documentary, *Eva: A-7063*, WFYI Public Media’s Ted Green and Mika Brown are spreading Kor’s message of radical forgiveness. The video began airing on PBS member stations last April and has been shown independently at the Buskirk-Chumley Theater and across the U.S. What’s more, they’ve launched a corresponding “Eva Outreach and Education Program,” including a 360-degree virtual reality tour of Auschwitz available to schools in Boone, Hamilton, Hancock, Hendricks, Johnson, Madison, Marion, Morgan, and Shelby counties.

Kor left behind thousands of ambassadors. “A lot of them will go and speak on my mom’s behalf,” Alex says. “I encourage that, because I think that’s the way the message continues.”

In Lee’s case, that’s already happening. “I had a gallery show that went up before I left, and I was doing a gallery talk when I got back from Auschwitz,” Lee says. “The gallery talk completely changed from talking about the artwork I had on the wall to talking about Eva.”

Lee has since spoken about Kor to the First Christian Church and a Kiwanis Club. “A little bit here and a little bit there,” he says.

For its part, CANDLES will celebrate its 25th anniversary next year. “The museum just keeps moving forward,” says Simpson, the museum director. “We have plans in place to eventually have sites both in Terre Haute and in Indianapolis.” The Terre Haute-based museum is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. “She created it in honor of Miriam, and now it will be in honor of Eva and Miriam,” Simpson says.

Thanks to the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation, museum visitors can still interact with Kor—via hologram. To create the holographic experience with Kor, more than 100 cameras were used, and she sat under 6,000 lights for five hours of questioning each day for a week. Over that period, Shoah Foundation Executive Director Stephen Smith asked her 1,000 questions.

“I knew it was going to be the interview of a lifetime,” Smith remarked during an August 4 memorial service held for Kor on the Indiana State University campus. “I knew she would say things completely differently to anything I’d ever heard and ... whatever she said I would treasure for future generations.

“It’s not about being right or wrong,” he continued. “It’s about the fact that she is her own person and made her own decisions based on her own inclinations and values.”

For instance, when Smith asked Kor, “How can you forgive something so evil?” she replied, “I believe with every ounce of my being that I deserve to be free. I deserve to be happy. I danced on the selection platform at Auschwitz, and people asked me, ‘Why did you dance on the selection platform?’ I said, ‘This is the place where they took my joy away, and this is the place where I am going to take that joy back to reclaim my own life.’”

And she did. ✧



Stephen Smith, executive director of the Shoah Foundation, speaking at Kor’s memorial service on August 4, 2019. Photo by Rodney Margison