Optimism in Eddie Jaku's *The Happiest Man on Earth*

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Abstract

Eddie Jaku's memoir The Happiest Man on Earth*is a profound narrative of survival, resilience, and the transformative power of optimism. Born in 1920 in Leipzig, Germany, Jaku was a proud German Jew whose life was irrevocably altered by the rise of Nazi ideology. Deported to multiple concentration camps, including Buchenwald and Auschwitz, he endured unspeakable horrors, personal loss, and physical suffering. Yet, amidst this darkness, Jaku found strength in friendship, hope in small acts of kindness, and ultimately, a reason to live. After surviving the Holocaust, he made a conscious decision to dedicate his life to happiness, compassion, and forgiveness. His memoir not only documents historical atrocities but also delivers a timeless message about the human capacity for resilience and the moral choice to live with joy. Jaku's story stands as a beacon of hope for future generations, emphasizing that even in the darkest times, one can choose light.*

This paper is an attempt to look into the levers of optimism that Jaku employs in the darkest hours and the legacy of peace and happiness that he helped spread through his memoir.

Keyword: *happiness, Holocaust survivor, Positivity*

Eddie Jaku's*The Happiest Man on Earth* is a poignant reminder that humanity can survive the most haunting of experiences. Eddie Jaku is a holocaust survivor and unlike most other survivors, Jaku decided to be happy for the rest of his life. That decision is a turning point in his life and has enabled him to claim for himself the title – the happiest man on earth.

Eddie Jaku was born as Abraham Solomon Jakubowic in Leipzig, Germany in the year 1920 in a family of German Jews. The family was proud of their religious heritage and their own national identity as Germans. He reminisces about his father:

My father was as proud a German citizen as could be, an immigrant from Poland who settled in Germany. … Nothing could shake my father's patriotism and pride in Germany. We considered ourselves Germans first, Germans second, and then Jewish. Our religion did not seem as important to us as being good citizens of Leipzig. We practiced our traditions and observed our holidays, but our loyalty and our love were for Germany. (7-8)

But, for Jaku, as well as for the millions of Jews living in Germany, the ascension of Hitler's Nazism brought with it an existential threat.Jaku gets enrolled in a technical school under a pseudo-German name, where he graduates top of the class and gets admitted to a union – a recognition reserved only for the best. But Jaku is broken because of the separation from his family and the fact that he has to hide his religious identity,just to survive.

Jaku makes the mistake of trying to visit his family and gets thoroughly beaten before being arrested for being a 'JudenHund' – a Jewish dog. He ruminates that "in that moment, I lost my dignity, my freedom and my faith in humanity. I lost everything I lived for. I was reduced from a man to being nothing." (25) Jaku is taken to the Buchenwald Labour Camp, where he signs a labour agreement but escapes with his father to Belgium and starts teaching Mechanical Engineering. When Belgium fell to the Germans, Jaku walks into France, which too has fallen into the Nazi hands. He finds love and humanity in the French countryside.

I must tell you, I have never experienced so much kindness from strangers as I did in the small villages of France. … the villagers would see me and call out in French, 'Have you eaten? Are you hungry?' And they would invite me in to share their breakfast. These were people who had very little themselves, poor farmers who were already suffering from the hardships of the war, but they were willing to share everything they had with me, a stranger – and a Jew. (50)

Jaku hears of torture and mass murders all around him, including that of close relatives. After a brief period of getting united with his family, the family is rounded up to be taken to Auschwitz – the name that has become synonymous of the horrors of Holocaust. All the elder members of the family and the women are killed on arrival. When he searches for his parents, an SS officer points to raising smoke at a distance and tell him: "You see the smoke over there? That's where your father went. And your mother. To the gas chambers and the crematorium." (70)

At Auschwitz, he is reunited with his friend Kurt and they work as skilled labourers, surviving on boiled potatoes. "The average survival time of a prisoner in Auschwitz was seven months. Without Kurt, I wouldn't have made it half that far." (82) He relishes his friendship with Kurt through those gruelling months of slave labour.

I cannot emphasize this enough, especially to young people. Without friendship, a human being is lost. A friend is someone who reminds you to feel alive.

Auschwitz was a living nightmare, a place of unimaginable horrors. But I survived because I owed it to my friend Kurt to survive, to live another day so that I might see him again. Having even one good friend means that the world takes on new meaning. One good friend can be your entire world. (84)

Working in the factory for the SS, he meets his sister who had just survived like himself but couldn't reveal the connection for fear of death. He endures cruel punishments and the constant monitoring and betrayal of kapos – the Jewish collaborators of the Nazis. He escapes from the camp, only to be shot by a Polish man who he thought would help him. "Do I hate the man? No, I do not hate anyone. He was just weak and probably scared as I was. He let his fear overtake his morals. And I knew that for every cruel person in the world, there is a kind one. I would survive another day with the help of good friends." (105) Jaku gets the bullet removed from his body without anaesthesia with the help of Dr.Kinderman, another inmate. The doctor also gives him friendly advice as to how to preserve his energy to live another day.

At the camp, the Jews are given coffee mixed with bromide that chemically castrated most of the inmates that they didn't have children after the end of the war. As the Nazis get surrounded by the Allies, the prisoners are shifted from Auschwitz to Buchenwald in a train with open wagons. The prisoners did not get any food from their captors, but they get surprise help from unknown women as they pass through the countryside.

They gave us no food, but when we were travelling through Czechoslovakia, women would sometimes run up alongside the train and throw bread to us. It was not much bread – one loaf between 30 people – but even a mouthful of bread is better than none at all. And once more, it proved to me that there were still good people in the world. This knowledge was hope, and hope is the fuel that powers the body. (121)

At Buchenwald, Jaku fortunately is put under the supervision of an SS officer called Goh, who happened to be a prisoner of war along with Jaku's father when they served in the German Army during the First World War. He smuggles some extra food to Jaku in the detention. In Poland, he escapes from the SS and gets help from a Polish family. He ends up in a hospital run by the American soldiers but weighs only 28 kg and has only a 35 per cent chance of

survival. There at the hospital, Jaku decides to be a different person.

In that moment, I made a promise to God that if I lived, I would become an entirely different person. … I promised that I would dedicate the rest of my life to putting right the hurt that had been done to the world by the Nazis, and that I would live every day to the fullest. (132)

After his miraculous survival and rescue by the Americans, Jaku reaches Brussels, marries a woman called Floreand settles as a family. His sadness of all that has happened in a few years disappears and gives way to happiness when their first child – their eldest son, Michael – arrives. "From that day on, I realized that I was the luckiest man on Earth. I made the promise that from that day until the end of my life, I would be happy, polite, helpful and kind. I would smile." (153-54). As he and his wife start the new family, they both realise that they are meant to be friends for life, sharing the happiness and doubling it along the way.

Eddie Jaku and his family move to Australia and he waits for decades for the hurt to heal and his heart to mellow down but throughout he keeps his promise to be the happiest man on Earth.

Eddie Jaku lived on till his death in 2021 at the age of 101. He lived a contented life, surrounded by friends and relatives and his ever-growing family of children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. He volunteered at the Sydney Jewish Museum and gave talks and lectures, spreading happiness wherever he went. His life is a tale of perseverance and hope in the deepest darkness in human history.He published his memoir *The Happiest Man on Earth* in 2020 when he turned 100 and it went on to become an international bestseller.

Rod McGuirk, writing for *The Times of Israel* called him "a beacon of light and hope."The BBC called the memoir a chronicle of "his extraordinary story of survival, weaving in his messages of tolerance and forgiveness." Scott Morrison, the Prime Minister of Australia, hailed his life "a testimony of how hope and love can triumph over despair and hate" (quoted in Doherty). The Australian government honoured Eddie Jaku with the highest civilian prize-the Order of Australia (OAM) in 2013.

EddiJaku's life, beautifully documented through his powerful writing, presents an incredible story and a message of hope. Throughout all his suffering and the betrayals he endured, Jaku's perseverance and the hope he had on humanity shines through.

Jaku's story reminds us that happiness can be a conscious choice, even in the shadow of horror. His life is not just a memoir—it's a guide for how we can respond to suffering with kindness, to loss with gratitude, and to evil with compassion.*The Happiest Man on Earth* is a must read for everyone who has set foot on earth, more so to people who believe that they are enduring a life of struggle.

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