

## **Karen Johanson RG-50.028.078.01.01**

### **Summary of Interview**

**Karen Johanson** (née Mavis/Mewes) was born in a suburb of Berlin, Germany, on August 3, 1933.

Father: Walter Mewes. Mother: Hannah **Steinitz**.

Karen Johanson's mother, Hannah, came from a large well-to-do family and had been a ballerina with the Berlin Opera. Hannah's family owned a pharmacy and several marzipan and nougat factories in Berlin. Their businesses and properties were confiscated when Jewish establishments were taken over by the Nazis. Karen's father, Walter, was a German Lutheran, and her mother was a non-practicing Jew who was baptized as a Lutheran. The German government considered anyone with Jewish ancestry, even several generations back, to be Jewish and thus a target for Nazi persecution. Once, when Karen was very young, she and her mother were stopped by Gestapo agents at the Czechoslovakian border because someone had tipped off the authorities. The Gestapo officer asked Hannah if she had named her daughter after the wife of the prominent Nazi Hermann Göring. At first, she replied that was a good reason *not* to name her daughter Karen, but quickly added that she had not named her after the pretty and popular Carin Göring and wouldn't have done so because she wanted her daughter to have an uncommon name. After Karen's birth, her parents decided not to have any more children because under the Nazi government, a second child of a marriage between a German and a Jew would be declared Jewish. Karen excelled in school but was expelled from the private kindergarten that she attended when her teachers found out that her mother was a Jew. As a child, she did not realize why she was being kicked out of the school and thought that it was her own fault because she had done something wrong.

An American film company approached Karen's parents to ask permission for her to play the lead role in *Heidi*, a film being made in the United States. Karen's mother declined because she was afraid Karen would not be able to live a normal life if they went to the U.S. for filming. The actress Shirley Temple got the role instead.

When laws were enacted that forbade Karen's mother from living together in the same home as her German husband, she moved in with her in-laws who lived across the yard. A governess was hired to care for Karen. Her father had been fired from his employment in the civil service, and he started a business from home. In 1938, Karen's family was torn apart even further when her mother left Germany to live in England to avoid being arrested and sent to a concentration camp. Karen could not understand why her mother was moving away and begged her not to go. In her young mind, she thought that she was to blame for this turn of events. Feelings of guilt plagued Karen for many years afterward.

The large house that Karen's Jewish grandmother, Selena Mewes, lived in was confiscated, and she was forced to move into an apartment in Berlin, along with a Jewish professor she knew. One night, the professor was arrested and sent to a concentration camp where he was killed. Selena feared the same thing would happen to her. When the Gestapo went to the apartment in the night, banging loudly on the door, Karen's grandmother quickly took an overdose of insulin that killed her. Two of Karen's uncles were arrested and sent to concentration camps, but their wives managed to flee to the United States. While on a train heading to a concentration camp, one of Karen's cousins hastily handed her baby to a passenger on a train going in the opposite direction. Other cousins were sent to England on their own as if they were orphans. As a result, the family completely lost touch with them.

Karen's father married a German Catholic woman despite Karen pleading with him not to do so. Her stepmother threw Karen out of the house and stole whatever had been left to her by her mother. Karen had no choice but to move in with her father's parents, along with her governess. Her life with her German grandparents was not easy. She exchanged only a few letters with her mother in England. Bombing, looting, fighting in the streets, and rape were common. Karen and her cousins pretended to be little children to avoid being sexually harassed. She heard that both an elderly woman and a five-year-old child had been raped by Russian soldiers. Karen narrowly avoided being hit with shrapnel during a bombing on her street. Telephones were tapped, and ordinary Germans feared being reported to the Gestapo by their neighbors, teachers, or even their relatives. People were suspicious of one another. It was well-known that children could be easily manipulated to implicate their parents or grandparents, which could lead to their arrest, so Karen's father and grandfather did not speak openly around her about what was going on in Germany. They were not political and they, along with many others, did not know the full extent of the horrors going on in the concentration camps. Karen was not interested in and did not get involved with the Nazi propaganda taught in school. She did not like the fact that the Catholic Church supported Hitler and that clergymen did the "Heil Hitler" salute. She was also of the opinion that Hitler was crazed and that he surrounded himself with men who were former criminals.

By the end of the war, Karen had lost about 50 of her relatives. Survivors were malnourished, and Karen recalled that she was often hungry and had little to eat except for raw potatoes and soup made from brown flour. After the Americans arrived, she would go through the rubbish from the military canteen to look for food for the family. Before Berlin fell, she often walked about barefoot because she did not have shoes. On June 30, 1946, Karen was flown by the British military to London. By then, she was suffering from kidney disease and high blood pressure and was put into a children's hospital in Scotland for treatment. When they were finally reunited, Karen and her mother were like strangers to one another because they had been apart for so many years. Their relationship was never as close as it had once been. Her mother had married a man from Scotland and adopted a little orphaned girl because she missed Karen so much. In Scotland, both Karen and her mother felt that the discrimination they suffered for being German was the same as what they had endured in Germany for being Jewish. Karen's father died in Germany, and her stepmother died on the day she was about to remarry.

As a child, she regularly attended the Lutheran church with her German grandmother. As she got older, Karen wondered why there was so much misery in the world and what was the purpose of life. She prayed to God and searched for answers in many different churches and places of worship, including a synagogue. Still, nothing made sense to her. Her health was poor, and she felt that no one cared for her. At times, Karen could hardly cope. When she was 16, she contemplated suicide by jumping out of a 13<sup>th</sup>-floor window in New York. In the spring of 1956, Karen met Jehovah's Witnesses when they called at her door in Chicago. She immediately began to study the book "*Let God Be True*" with the Witnesses and readily soaked in what she was learning. Everything fell into place for Karen when she finally understood God's purpose for the earth—it was to become a paradise like the Garden of Eden that Adam and Eve had lost. She was also pleased to discover what Jesus' role was in the fulfillment of God's purpose. Karen was baptized as one of Jehovah's Witnesses in December 1956.

Karen was happy to finally find peace of mind in Jehovah's organization. She felt she was enjoying a spiritual paradise as she awaited the time when the earth would become a literal paradise. Karen recalled attending a convention of Jehovah's Witnesses in New York in 1958 and hugging other

Witnesses she met on the street, even though she did not know them. She enjoyed having the Witnesses as her worldwide family. Karen worked with other Jehovah's Witnesses to share Bible truths with people, including prisoners in a local jail. Karen had several children and grandchildren. At the time of the interview, she had been married to George Johanson for eight years.

**Keywords**

Jehovah's Witnesses publications – "*Let God Be True*"

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