

Helga Niedrich

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Abstract

Helga Niedrich (née Mader), born on April 20, 1929 in Witkowitz, Czechoslovakia, discusses her family and early childhood spent with her grandparents in Leipnik, Czechoslovakia (Lipník and Bečvou, Czech Republic); attending German school; moving with her mother and stepfather to Stadt Liebau, a village in the Sudetenland; her mother's work for the National Socialist Women's League and her stepfather's membership in the SA; her time in the League of German Girls; her memory of Hitler and the Nazis marching into the village; the food rations and her work on a farm once the war began; her stepfather's conscription into the army and his eventual capture by the Soviets; the camp for British prisoners of war outside of the village; having no knowledge of the extermination of Jews during the war; fleeing the Soviet soldiers at the war's end; her mother's sexual assault; eventually arriving in Prague and staying in a stadium; her and her mother's transport to Theresienstadt on May 24, 1945; the 15 months she spent there as a forced laborer; her and her mother's transport to the Soviet zone of Germany and their work on a farm there; their escape to the British zone; visiting the Czech Republic later in life; her move to be with a friend in Braunschweig, Germany; her stepfather's fate; meeting and later marrying her husband; her family's immigration to the United States; her visits to Israel; learning more about the camps later in life; the dangers of Holocaust denial; and the guilt and shame she sometimes feels about her German heritage.

Summary

00:00 Helga Niedrich was born Helga Mader on April 20, 1929 in Witkowitz, Czechoslovakia which is now the Czech Republic. It was a big city and they moved to a smaller city of Leipnik. The people did not like Germans and gave them a hard time. Her father was a shoemaker. They moved to Liebau in the Sudetenland which was the German part of Czechoslovakia as Hitler annexed it to Germany. They moved because the Czech people did not give her father much business and he succeeded in obtaining a job as an office manager as he spoke both German and Czech. He was able to translate Czech into German. Helga attended a German school. Her father was Anton Marda and her mother was Marie Bartow Marda.

05:00 Anton was her stepfather and he did not care for children so they were not close. His first wife died from cancer. He never touched or spanked Helga. Her mother was good and loved her. Helga was an only child. Her mother came from the area near Witkowitz and her father came from a little village. Helga had few relatives. Her grandmother had brothers but she did not see them. She lived with her grandmother (Oma) who raised her.

Her grandmother was crazy about her so took her in until the war started. She lived with her grandmother for 10 years in Leipnik and remained until her parents moved. Leipnik had a Czech part and her mother worried that they were German. Sometimes they were called names. Her mother belonged to the Association of Ladies who cared for the hungry and for women whose husbands were away at war. Leipnik had 7,000 people.

10:00 There were just a few Germans so the Czechs wanted them at their school. The Germans requested to use one room of the Czech school. Another reason they moved was so she could attend school. Helga loved Leipnik as it was beautiful and she lived with her Oma until Hitler marched in. She had a private German teacher come to her home to give her private lessons. Her parents would not permit her to attend the Czech school. Sudetenland had a German school. The neighbors' children were her playmates. There was a Czech boy next door and the farmer had two daughters older than her that she played with. She took a train to the next city to attend German school. After two years, her parents moved to a larger town of Rahnertza (?) so she had to get up early for the train. Helga had nice girl friends. In the winter she had to walk in the snow to the train station. Her mother lived in the same town that Helga lived in so she visited occasionally.

15:00 When her parents moved to Sudetenland, Helga had to move with them. Her grandparents were retired. Her grandfather was a postman. They both got pensions. They lived in the center of town. They had a kitchen and two rooms. Later they lived at Judenmstrasse where the Jews lived which was Helga's favorite apartment. The Jews had their own street with a synagogue. There was a shortcut that Oma took to get her groceries. They went to the Jewish delicatessen to buy matzo and fish. They spoke to them in Czech.

20:00 Helga spoke perfect Czech and German. It was a small community. The Jews sat outside. A car could not get through the street. The Jews looked poor. Some of the men dressed differently. Later they wore the Jewish star and Helga asked her Oma why they are different and Oma replied, "They are not different, they are people like you and me." As the time was getting close to Hitler marching in, the children called Helga names. Her parents were for Hitler and said, "You better be." Her parents decided it best to move to Sudetenland. Her Oma remained and did not get harmed. Her stepfather was in the SA and wore a uniform and attended weekly meetings. Occasionally, he marched through the city. Her mother belonged to the Nazi organized Women's Socialist League and worked for the National Women's Party.

25:00 She lived in the city square above a bank. Her father worked for the Justice of Peace in the Square and her mother worked for the Women's League in the Square. Czechoslovakia was divided into two groups 1) Prague was the capital and 2) Prim was the capital. They lived in a tiny village of Stadt Liebau in Sudetenland with a square and

a church and a restaurant. The Czechs were gone but there were two Jewish families who had two boys in school there. They spoke German in that town. Helga did not like living with her parents and did not care for the school.

- 30:00 Hitler's birthday was April 20th, like hers, and school was closed. They moved there in '39. Hitler came in the winter. The Nazi party was popular there. Her parents talked in favor of Hitler as felt he would be good for them. Helga had to join the Nazi organization or be an outcast as they would think she was a Communist. Girls belonged to the Hitler Youth and there was a separate Hitler Youth for boys. They had a uniform consisting of a black skirt, white blouse, a handkerchief and a leather jacket. The boys also had a uniform. They marched, sang songs about flowers and spring and went camping. At Christmas they made things for the poor and gave it to them. If a lady had a baby, they gave her flowers and sang to her. Boys made objects of wood and jigsaws for the women and children.
- 35:00 They had a curfew of 7PM in winter in 9PM in summer. If they got caught being out later, they got into trouble. Her teacher warned her that he would tell her stepfather but did not. The organization was like the Scouts. There were groups for 10-year-olds. At home, Helga only got along with her mother. Her stepfather was enlisted at the end of the war as they took 15 and 16-year-olds and old men at the end. It was nice as she ate lunch alone with her mother. Her parents argued a lot which scared her. Her mother would cry. Prague was far away from Moravia where they lived. When the Nazi soldiers marched into town, there was no shouting. The streets were filled with people greeting Hitler. They did not hate the Czechs. There were two Jewish boys in her class who were poor. One day in 1941 they were gone and the teacher said they moved. They had got taken and she did not think of it but now realizes where they went.
- 40:00 Her grandma visited but did not get along with her stepfather. Her stepfather ignored her and never got close. Her mother was sweet and outgoing and fun to be with as she had a good sense of humor. Her grandfather died of old age during the war and her grandmother died of cancer afterwards. Hitler annexed Czechoslovakia. He built an autobahn in Germany but not in Sudetenland where they saw no change. Helga accepted the adult's good view of Hitler. The Germans marched through town but did not stay there. They had food rations and everyone, including Helga when she turned 14, had to work. She attended school until she turned 14. Then she could either babysit or work on a farm and she chose the latter.
- 45:00 She liked one farm family, the Morbitzas (?) where she got billeted during the war. The husband was an only child and should not have gotten drafted but did. They had three children. It was a farming economy in her area. One factory made material and another matches. There were a couple of groceries where you weighed sugar on a scale. Also, they had a wagoner who made wagon wheels, a butcher, a baker, a cobbler and

seamstresses. You had to make everything yourself or go to these businesses. She visited her grandmother in Leipnik at Christmas and school recesses and spent the summer with her. She needed to get a special pass for travel. In 1942 she was 14 and completed 8 years of school. Her teacher taught her little about Hitler. They were taught history and geography. There was a large picture of Hitler in the classroom. Her parents were not religious. Helga was born Catholic and no one went to church but she wanted to go.

50:00 In Stadt Liebau, the Catholic Church was always open so she went in alone and sat alone. Outside was a big cross and a statue of Jesus. A little old lady with a long black skirt kissed his feet so she copied which angered her stepfather. She had one hour of Catholic religion where the priest came and spoke from the bible which required a parent's signature. Her stepfather would not sign so she cried as she was the only child in Liebau who could not go and she was embarrassed. Helga went to her priest and he said to sit way in the back. At the farm, Helga would bring in the sheep, take care of the horses, feed the cows and horses and bring in hay on the hay wagon. She loved the many farm tasks and wanted to marry the farmer. She brought in potatoes and wheat. She lived at home which was close by. Her family never starved as the farmer would give her lots of food to take home. Her stepfather ended up in a Russian prison and did not come home until after the war.

55:00 She heard the war ended from a radio announcement as a warship was sunk. When the radio played, "Deutschland, Deutschland, uber alles" (Germany, Germany, above all the others), her stepfather would make them rise even if eating supper. They had a map on the wall with pins showing the location of the Germans in the war. Helga remembers the Battle of Stalingrad in June '41 was horrible. Her mother was crying and scared that they were in war with Russia. Outside of Liebau there was a camp for British POWs. They could not speak German. One spoke a little German and told her that Germany was losing the war. She does not recall whether they got a letter from the stepfather from Russia. It was peaceful at home with her mother without the stepfather. Helga did not miss him. She got bacon, lard, cakes and cheese from the farm where she worked. Her mom was a lousy cook and preferred to read. Helga was not hungry until after the war.

60:00 Her grandmother warned her not to voice her opinion. They were not for Hitler. She did not know anyone who disappeared. She heard of a lady with two children got on a wrong train as it was a train with Jews as she saw they wore the yellow Jewish star. She got off and told the SS that she got on the wrong train and they said she must stay and she died at Auschwitz. Her husband was a German officer.

65:00 They were afraid that if she went home, she would tell what she saw. Helga heard this story after the war when she learned about gassing the Jews. She did not know about internment camps. They did not have a car as only the rich had one so only traveled by

bicycle. There were newspapers but she did not read them. Her Opa read the Czech paper. Her mother was not a fanatic or frightened about what was going to happen if they lost the war as Helga was in the Hitler Youth and her mother in the Nazi Women's organization. They did not talk about the war as too afraid to talk so would say, "We're winning."

70:00 They went to war with Russia and her mother did not think that Germany could win. Hitler committed suicide in April 1945 when she arrived in Thereisenstadt and knew they lost the war. Her mother was at her office and Helga ran around the city with a girlfriend and knew the Russians were close. She heard cannon and shooting, saw houses burning and the airplanes were above them. They were scared as they heard the Russians rape so the two friends ran home. Her mother came home from work and told her to pack a suitcase because the Russians are coming. They packed mostly food and some clothes. Helga stuffed the suitcase with books and could not close it. Her mother told her to throw the books out and they sat on the suitcase to close it.

75:00 They heard a boom down the street and ran out the back door to the forest, dragging their suitcase. Occasionally, they turned around and saw others joining them. They were fleeing the Russians and the bombing and saw the city on fire. They never returned to Stadt Liebau. More people joined them and no one knew where they were going. There were rumors that they could make it to Prague before the Russians as the Americans are coming. They would have to get over the bridge to get to the Americans. The British POWs were still there and the Russians probably let them go. They ran out of food and joined the German troops who shared their rations with them. They said the war is over but there were still some skirmishes. They tried to get to Prague which was far. They traveled about a week with stops to rest with the Russians on their heels. They came to a meadow and saw farmers escaping on horse and wagon with feather beds and grandma sitting on top. They came to a pond and told her mother to rest while she washed her socks in the pond.

80:00 Suddenly there was shouting all over as they were surrounded by the Russians. Everybody was running – the German soldiers, the farmers and German civilians. One girl got shot in her leg at the meadow and was lucky to brag about it as she made it out safely. Helga and her mother arrived at Prague on foot but Helga was ill from malnutrition. They were herded to the Prague stadium. The war was over for Germany. There were four or six Czechs holding the German flag and someone stabbed it so she knew the war was over. They remained there for a week. The Russians set off fireworks nightly to celebrate. Helga laid on the bleachers with the other refugees. She heard ladies screaming at night as the Russians went around with flashlights and picked them out. Earlier on the road, Helga and her mother were in a wagon with the German soldiers and a Russian grabbed her arm. He wanted her to get out of the wagon and she was scared as she was young and still played with dolls. The German officer said, "What

do you want? You are not going to rape any of our German women and the Russian officer agreed but took her mother. They were happy to have survived.

85:00 The same thing happened at the stadium but there was no one to protect them. Her mother lay on top of her when the Russians went around with a flashlight. The worse thing was hearing the screams all night. After a week, they brought in a soup kitchen. She recovered from diarrhea by then. Her mother took her to a field hospital and requested medicine for her. Helga had to lay on the floor and next to her a German doctor amputated a German soldier's leg and she heard it fall into a bucket. She will never forget that. Helga got medicine and the next day returned to her mother. They were given soup once or twice a day which was boiled water.

90:00 When her mother was taken from the wagon and returned the next day, she said, "Several Russians." Helga was raised a sheltered life but knew something happened. The latrine in the stadium was a few feet from the firing squad. They would blindfold the German soldiers and the Russians would shoot them. She returned to her mother and cried and shook as it was the first murder that she saw. They kept shooting even after the soldier died so wasted their bullets. Then they marched from the stadium to the train station in Prague and were loaded up on a train to Germany. They arrived and marched to Thereisenstadt.

95:00 The town had been used as a ghetto for Jews. They made it look fancy with someone playing the harmonica and people drinking coffee at a café. It was scary as the buildings looked horrible. On each side were Czechs or Russians hitting one another. Helga was in the middle but her mother got hurt and was bleeding. They reached a half circle at the end which looked like a grave with three flags: Russian, Czech and typhus. They were taken down and beaten. It was mostly women with some German soldiers and no children. They separated the men from the women. There were just young people and old people but no children. They placed 200 women in one concrete cell. It was the military prison for Maria Theresa, Queen of Austria-Hungary. It had thick walls and would be difficult to escape though a couple succeeded.

100:00 It was a brick building with bunks. Everyone was stripped and their luggage was removed. Ladies' heads were shaved but they permitted Helga to keep her braids. They received striped clothes, just like the Jews. She found out about the concentration camps from the Jews who were there. They had to take care of the Jews. One Jewish man gave her a thick Army blanket. They arrived there May 24th. They heard Hitler had died but no one cared. There was a bunk full of Jews in the ghetto who were sick. She remained in Thereisenstadt for 15 months. Helga did not know that it was a holding camp, not a death camp. She found out about Auschwitz, and Treblinka.

- 105:00 For the first few weeks, they stood outside for roll call and then put to work. They marched to the ghetto which was military barracks where the seriously ill Jews were laying. Helga and her mother had to take care of them. They were all men. She had five rooms and her mother had five rooms. They had to wash the floors. The Jews were living skeletons. Helga was skin and bones, like those from Auschwitz. One morning she went to the first room with a bucket to wash the patients, dishes and floors. The doctors and nurses were Russian, very nice. The nurse entered and said the man is “kaput” (dead) and she had to wash him before they take him away. Helga washed him after asking her mother for help. She had never washed a dead person before or seen a naked man before. He was lying in a puddle of diarrhea. The skin peeled off him as she washed him. Helga was 15 or 16 at the time. Then they took him away.
- 110:00 There were things to pack with layers of dead people. Then Helga had to take care of the other patients. One patient called her, “Helga” and loved her. The Russians served the workers good food such as scrambled eggs and toast but she could not eat it after washing a dead person. One patient wanted her to sit on his bed and talk but she had to wash the floors and the people. She fed the man and spoke German to him. Helga used the same bucket for all her work but changed the water and felt it not sanitary. There were about three or four people in each room. She worked all day and felt it was not a bad job. Other than the man who talked to her, the others were full of hate toward her. Some patients were just skin and bones and might not have lived. Those ready for travel were disinfected before leaving. Wagons were made into the disinfecting area. That was a good job for her. There were 50 men and 50 women. She felt sorry for them. She had to tell them to remove their clothes. There was a contraption which she threw the clothes in to get rid of the lice.
- 115:00 There was a little old man with a long beard who looked like a Rabbi and she had to tell him to remove his clothes. He tried to cover himself up. She felt sorry for him. The patients got new clothes and went home or to Israel. She had a third job where she was taken to the ghetto to paint the military’s rooms. They told her the color such as red or green that they wished. The Russians did not know how to flush the toilet so broke them. Some Russians washed their faces in the toilet. They did not know anything. Some had slit eyes. One Russian officer, Anatoly (?) saved a woman from getting raped. The Russians were always looking for girls and Anatoly told them to leave the girls alone. They had a Russian cook who made a thick, yellow piece which was good as they were starving. After work, Helga spoke with her mother in their room.
- 120:00 Her mother was worried about her and tried to watch over her. She tried to see that they worked together. It was difficult for a child to go through such things. Sometimes Helga thought it an adventure and told her mother not to worry. They worked at a vegetable garden where they weeded tomatoes, potatoes and radishes and ate them as a young Czech male did not care. The workers would steal the vegetables just before they

returned to camp by tying up their pants and putting the vegetables inside. They marched back and Helga spoke Czech. At the gate stood two Czech officers who she had a crush on. One was handsomer than the other. One gave her a bunch of cherries. Though they marched in big and fat, he permitted it. One lady's pants opened and the potatoes went running all over. The guards permitted it depending on their mood. They might beat you a little but that did not stop the workers as they were hungry. The food was terrible except for the yellow peas. In the morning, they got a thin slice of bread. In the evening, they got soup and for weeks it was water and potatoes with no salt. Then they fed them cooked blood. She does not know where the blood came from but it needed salt to taste better. It looked and smelled terrible but they were hungry. She had a better chance at stealing from the fields than the older women who had to stay in the camp as they were too old to work so lay in their bunks until they died. Someone brought them a pot of soup but it was insufficient to survive. They did not hear about the outside world and at first were not allowed to write. Later they wrote postcards which went through censorship. She has some written in Czech as her mother wrote to the grandma to tell her where they were so she would know they were alive.

125:00 Her mother wrote to Oma in Leipnik and asked for a package. She sent them cookies which they shared with others. At first they were not allowed to tell anyone where they were. Helga's grandpa had already died and her grandma died later from breast cancer. The Jews that they washed did not say anything and Helga did not question them as she just wanted to get her job done. Later she found out about Auschwitz and other concentration camps. When she was in Israel, Helga went to Yad Vashem and saw a blanket from Thereisenstadt. Treblinka was the only other camp she heard of. Helga started reading about the Holocaust as she liked to read old books. She learned about Dachau and Treblinka. There were more camps. She was in Thereisenstadt for 15 months. She was lucky as she spoke fluent Czech.

130:00 Later it was not as strict there as in the beginning as they stopped the beating and the capos were nicer. They took the people out of Thereisenstadt and put them into farming and she got the best farm. The farm lady had a young son. It was a plantation. She heard them speak Czech and asked the manager of Thereisenstadt to place her there and he agreed. She ate at the farmer's table. The farm lady loved her. The lady's husband had died. They had a German shepherd. The lady and her son ran the place. Helga wanted to take the dog for walks. She had her own room. The goat ate the lilac. Helga worked in the garden and liked the lady's baking. The camp was emptied by transporting the people to the British, French, American and Russian sectors. Her mother refused to go without her so they went together to the Russian sector in Northern Germany. They went to two farm houses. Helga did not know much German and they spoke a dialect there. They stayed a year.

135:00 They were mean to her mother who was an office worker and a babysitter as they did not like her. She went to the English zone and wrote Helga to come which she did but it was difficult. Her mother had sneaked over the border at night. Someone knew the right place to go over the border. Helga sneaked with others on the path through the woods to get to the English zone. She got a job in a convent's kitchen where she got good food. She got a contagious illness and was placed in a cell all one. Her mother was lucky and worked in the kitchen for a Czech office and got good food. They made meat and kneidlach (bread made into a ball and thrown into hot water, similar to a matzo ball). She wanted to bring Helga two kneidlach and the Czech officer came into the kitchen so her mother ran into the bathroom and threw them into the toilet. They would not sink, they floated. The officer left and her mother took the kneidlach out of the toilet and Helga loved them.

140:00 They had pork roast and sauerkraut. Her mother had written traveling instructions to the English zone and Helga followed them. They lived in Schdetlebow (?) and never returned there as the Russians tore it down to make it a military area. Helga and her husband went to Czechoslovakia about 10 or 15 years ago. Through the Red Cross, her mother found out that the grandmother was in a German hospital. Around 2000 it became the Czech Republic with the Russians taking over but now they are free. The Russians did not build anything but destroyed homes and broke windows and stucco peeled off the walls. It broke her heart when she saw Leipnik. Helga grew up in Leipnik. She and her husband saw it when it was independent. She has good memories of it. It had old city walls from the 14th century. Helga came home from Israel with rocks. She told her husband about the park and he finally agreed to go. Her mother lived on the Russian border in Germany. She was happy to see Leipnik. It was the same but rundown. She remembers every rock and went to the place where they went swimming. She did not have dolls. She would put dogs in a baby buggy and walk to the park.

145:00 It was fun to show her husband all the places where she played and walked as there were so many memories. She had a problem with food stamps. Getting permission to stay required many papers. Helga had no place to stay as she did not want to cook in the nunnery. Her mother had a place. Helga found her favorite girlfriend, Crystal, in Northern Germany in Braunschweig. Crystal was engaged and lived there. They were separated during the war. Helga got a job there with the Beauty Parlor. It was a family business with man, woman and son and they lived upstairs and the salon was downstairs. They had two little girls and the husband got killed during the war. Helga made 40 marks a month to do their housework. Her stepfather returned from a Russian prison as he spoke Czech and could communicate with the Russians. He found Helga's mother and they divorced as he had a girlfriend and children. He got married and Helga's mother got married. The new husband got sick and died. Her mother and stepfather remained

friends but did not remarry. They picked mushrooms and remained in Europe. Helga met her husband while at the nunnery.

150:00 Her mother was cooking and the husband-to-be was doing construction as everything was bombed out. Hans Niedrich got food in the kitchen for her mother so the mother thought he would make a good husband for Helga. Helga took a week vacation to Wurzburg and met him and they corresponded as there was chemistry between them. They are married 61 years. They got married and remained in Wurzburg for almost three years when she gave birth to Kurt. When he was two year old, they went to the US to Boston where Hans' sister and brother-in-law lived. First they stayed a week in Salem and then joined Hans' friend in California. Helga has been to Israel five times; 1979 was the first time. She went five times because she loves the Jews. She feels at home there and wonders if she has Jewish blood from her ancestors. Long ago Jews were converted to Catholic and maybe that happened to her relatives. If she was not so old, Helga would go again. At the Israel airport, she went down the steps of the airplane and felt like kissing the earth and cried. She also cried at the Wailing Wall and could have sat there all day. Sometimes her children ask about her life. The youngest knows everything. The oldest son is gone. The middle son is not interested. She talked with her husband about her experiences. He escaped from a coal mine in France.

155:00 He knows her story. They have a book called, "Thereisenstadt." She learned about concentration camps from books. She drew a picture so others might know. She read about Treblinka. She would do a "mitzvah" for the Jewish people if she could. She hopes that this interview helps as some are deniers. She believes that it will be forgotten if not taught in school. She does not want it forgotten. The old who survived concentration camps are dying out and she is worried that it can happen again.

160:00 She wants the Jews to live in peace. Helga does not want the Holocaust to be forgotten. She feels ashamed to say that she is German and rather say she is Czech. Anyway, it is true that she is Czech as she was born in Czechoslovakia. She only lived in Germany for four years. Though she loves German food and scenery, she would not want to live there. She seldom went to Germany. Her husband was German and he would go to Germany while she went to Israel. She is afraid that people might think that she killed a Jew. Helga went two or three times to Germany and her husband went annually. She would sit in the train and look at each person and wondered if they killed a Jew. Therefore, she does not want anyone to think that she is German.

164:0