

## Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

P.O. Box 25506, San Mateo, CA 94402

**Name of interviewee:** Eger, Edith

**Date of interview:** 8/14/1992

**Summary:** Edith Eger (nee Edith Elefant) was born in Kosice (Kassa), Hungary (now Slovakia) on September 29, 1927. Her father, Liosha (Louis) was a tailor, and her mother, Helen (Klein) worked for the Hungarian ministry. Her childhood is very important to her and she describes it in length and detail. Some of her favorite memories are of her mother's cooking. She says that in her family, "food was love" and she learned even as a child to never leave food on her plate. At age four she began doing ballet and this is what she says began her important development of inner strength. She was also training to compete in gymnastics at the Olympic games for Hungary but was told she "was not adequately qualified" because she was Jewish. As a child, she had an eye condition whereas her eyes were permanently "cross-eyed." When she was ten her mother took her to Budapest and she had a successful operation to correct this condition. But it was extremely painful, done with no anesthetic. She had two sisters, Magda and Klara, who were both very talented musically. Klara was smuggled out of Hungary when the war began by one of her professors from the Music Academy in Budapest who put on a Nazi uniform and took her out of the country. She never felt like anyone noticed her and believed she was born a "loner" just like her mother was. She went to a private girl's school but never learned English in school because it was forbidden under Hitler's regime.

When she was sixteen years old, in March of 1944, she recounts in detail how the Germans walked into her town and the Hungarians joined forces with them. Two weeks later she was taken to a brick factory until May but does not specify the exact location of that factory. In May of 1944, she was taken in a boxcar to Auschwitz with her parents, aunts and uncles, and her eldest sister Magda. They were told that they were going to work somewhere in Hungary. When she arrived in Auschwitz, both of her parents as well as her aunts and uncles were sent straight to the gas chambers because when she arrived a guard had said, "Anyone over forty or under fourteen go to the left." She makes distinct note that while her mother was not over forty years old, she appeared so because her hair was graying. She describes the relationships she had with her parents as crucial to her survival in Auschwitz. She says that in Auschwitz "death was never an option for her" and she knew she would survive. When she arrived at Auschwitz and she passed the selection, she and Magda were taken to the barracks and shaven and then made to strip naked. Then they were given the prisoner uniform to wear with a number on it. It was at this point she was told by one of the guards that she might as well think of her parents in "the past tense." She said that the barracks had three layer cots in them and she was on the top.

In Auschwitz, her most distinct and discussed memories involve how she was selected to dance for Dr. Mengele because of her extraordinary talent. She tells

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how she closed her eyes when she danced for him and dreamed she was dancing the part of "Juliet" in the play, "Romeo and Juliet." She says that she never cried while she was dancing. She says that she thinks the Nazis put drugs in their soup so as to keep them from remembering things. She says she believes this because it looked often like there were "little pills" floating at the top of her soup. For dancing so well for him, Dr. Mengele gave her an extra piece of bread. She also speaks a great deal of how she helped Magda survive in the camp. Magda, she says, had always suffered from weight problems and the camp was difficult for her because she suffered more from hunger than Edith did. Edith tells of how she would save her food so she could give it to Magda when Magda suffered hunger pains. She also speaks of how she used her talents of dancing and gymnastics to survive Auschwitz. She says that upon arrival, she was not given a tattoo because the guard told her they would waste the ink on her because she was going straight to the gas chamber. Edith began performing gymnastics for the guard until he decided that she should live.

She was liberated from Auschwitz on May 4, 1945. When she was liberated she said she had five types of typhoid fever, pneumonia, and absolutely no hair left. What she did between the time of liberation and when she immigrated to the US in 1949 is not clear. When she came to the states, she says that she was extremely poor and had to work in a factory in Baltimore. She got married and taught herself English from the books her first child, Marianne, brought home from day care. She said she had to basically learn the American way of life from her own daughter. Her husband had several illnesses. Shortly after they were married he suffered from tuberculosis and was in the hospital. At the time this interview was done, her husband was also in the hospital because of lung problems. Edith decided to go back to school but the exact date is not mentioned.

She went to the University of Texas in Austin to receive her doctorate and now does a wide variety of work. She works with battered wives and abused teenagers. She also does a lot of family counseling and travels the world speaking of her experiences. She is quite clear about the fact, however, that for thirty years she did not talk at all about the Holocaust. She never told her own children about it. She decided she had to go back to Auschwitz so that her parents did not die "in vain." She said that doing that made her free and let go of the secret she had been carrying for so long. The biggest thing it allowed her to do she says, is forgive herself for surviving Auschwitz even though her parents both died. And today she says that the biggest revenge she has on Hitler is that she has three children and four grandchildren. She now lives with her husband in San Diego, California and works as a family therapist. She speaks at great length how her grandchildren truly are her world and how she lives every day for them.