

Interviewee: Edith Hahn de Kraus

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Interviewer: Karen Codner

Edith begins the interview making comments about the fact that it was then 70 years of the Holocaust. She also reflects on the fact that no one wanted to believe that a democracy as good as Czechoslovakia will fall under the Nazi regime. She adds that even when the catastrophe became clear, no one wanted to abandon the little "silver spoon" and leave the country.

Edith was born when WWI was still raging. Mother had come from the Sudeten (and it took her a while to learn the Check language) and father came from a little town in Czechoslovakia. In 1900, after finishing his bachelor degree, he went to Trieste, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and also lived in Barcelona. He lived there until WWI. Edith's family lived in a nice apartment in the center of Prague. Edith assumes she was born at home; her maternal grandfather was a doctor. Edith was the oldest of three children, (her two younger sisters were twins.) The family was well-to-do: they employed a cook, a cleaning lady and a German tutor for the children. Mother did not work. Edith went to the public elementary school for 5 years, then for 4 years to a high school and another 4 years to a commercial school, where she finished her bachelor's degree. The Jewish students in Edith's class were 5 or 6, out of a total of almost 30, but she only befriended the Jewish students. There may have been a Jewish school but she did not know anyone who attended it as it was not "fashionable". When father became worried that Edith did not have any Jewish knowledge, he hired a rabbi to teach her. Father traveled a lot in Europe and North Africa, places the family would follow on a huge atlas placed in the living room. He had an import business. Since Edith worked for him in his office, she learned Spanish in order to understand the business correspondence. Father died in 1938, before the war.

The children played marbles, spinning top, dolls, ball and store. The family vacationed for two months in Italy, at the beach or the mountains. In 1927 Edith

began to ski, after being competent in skating. She also played tennis. She had private tutors for German, French, English, Phys. Ed and Literature. There were no movie houses. They went often to the theatre. (Saturdays and Sundays there were cheaper tickets for students, although they were in a standing only section.) After the age of 15-16 they took dance classes in the evening. They were all dressed in formal ballroom dresses. Birthdays were celebrated by inviting a group of the closest friends. Jewishly, they were the "3-day Jews", that is: the observed the Jewish New Year, Yom Kippur and Passover. Her best memories are Passover and Christmas Eve. The Seder meal. Music in the family. Sunday's lunch at her grandparents. The great-grandmother. Racovnic and seeing an airplane for the first time. The family did not celebrate Shabbat. Edith saw it celebrated for the first time in Chile. They did not know any religious Jews, and certainly not the ones who belonged to the most observant type. One of the subjects of the elementary school was Religion. When Edith was 16 years old she was sent for two months to Switzerland in order to improve her French and, in 1936, when she graduated college, she went to France for two months to improve her French also. Life was with family. The maternal grandparents lived nearby and the paternal grandparents had died in 1922, when Edith was an infant. Mother played bridge with her cousins. Mother's name was Margarita and she was very good looking (blond with blue eyes.) Edith's father had a darker skin, Mediterranean-like. One of her twin sisters looked like the mother and the other like her father. Parents belonged to the Bnai-Brith and the grandparents to a similar group called "the Old Fellows" that was mixed. They felt very patriotic towards Checkoslovakia, as they were the very first generation of the republic, and did not like the Polish or the Hungarians.

Edith loved to read a lot (never Kafka!) She read the German-Jewish writers from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Polish Jews looked to them as coming from the East, and they only spoke Yiddish. The Checks were coming from the West. Before the war Edith heard a little Yiddish, and preferred to be addressed to in Polish rather than Yiddish.

Mother gave Edith an ultimatum on March 15, 1939, to marry or be sent to England. Edith married in November 1939. His grandfather was a Jewish teacher,

but Edith knew more Jewish things than her husband did. They had a nice apartment. In 1941, all the Jews were sent to live in the center of Prague. Edith and her husband had very poor accommodations-just one room.

Harbinger of things to come. Cousin moved from Berlin to Paris in 1935. They did not believe that the same thing will happen in Bohemia. Edith's mother went to Paris to deposit her jewels in 1939.

No memories of anti-Semitism until after the war. Whereas before the war they did not think of escaping, after the war they could not wait to do it.

Edith was sent to Terezin in 1942, before her husband or her mother. Transports of 1,000 were departing to there. Living accommodations in the camp. Working in the laundry, in cleaning. Meeting people of a lower level whom she would have never known in Prague. The children's opera Brundibar. Intellectual pursuits in the camp. Performances of Brecht's "Three Penny Opera" and Verdi's Requiem. Diet and nutrition. A volley ball team. They lived afraid to be transported out. In 1943, when her turn came, she was in the hospital suffering from a contagious infection. That prevented the Nazis from taking her to Auschwitz! Mother was 51 years old. In May 1944, mother was scheduled to leave on a transport. Edith managed to intervene so that she was taken off the list. Parents' turn came again, and mother died of dysentery in the camp. Edith's turn came in September of 1944 when she volunteered to go to what was advertised as a "new ghetto". She ended up in Auschwitz...The Danish group that received care packages from King Christian of Denmark. Visit of the Danish Red Cross. (The Jewish Danes were also released before the end of the war.) Arrival in Auschwitz. Painful fear at the sight of Mengele. There were so many arriving that Edith and others were not having a number tattooed.

Sisters began going to "hachshara" (agricultural training school prior to going to Israel) in 1936, prior to one of them going to Palestine. She went to the moshav Nahalal, to the agricultural school there. The other sister also immigrated to Palestine, from Slovakia, at the beginning of 1947.

First impressions of Auschwitz. Processing into the camp. Fear. The roll-calls. The facilities. She considered Auschwitz a preamble to death. She spent 6 weeks in the camp. Transferred to work in Germany, 30 km from Dresden. Life there and work in a factory in a lathe, surrounded by nice people who were her supervisors. Falling ill for 6 weeks due to scarlet fever. During bombardments, the Germans went to the bunkers and the inmates were shut in, in the factory. Seeing Dresden in fire in February. Exchanging gifts for birthdays: an apple, a piece of bread. Walking to Mauthausen; eating grass there. Edith's husband died in Auschwitz in December 1944.

Edith spent altogether a week in Auschwitz. Liberated from Mauthausen by the Americans. Her request from them: a handkerchief and lipstick. Return to Prague, and receiving her apartment back. (Havel lived in the same building.) Meeting her new husband and moving to Chile in June 1947. She felt accepted there, so much so that she gave up her Check passport.

She cannot forgive the Germans, and has no friends who are not Jewish. She considers she survived due to luck, simply.