

Edith Wellisch

Photographed with her husband Eugen

Wartime Experience: Hidden

I was born Hana Ester Reich in Stropkov, Czechoslovakia on January 24, 1926, to Herman and Fany Reich. I am the youngest of five children, and never knew my mother, Fany, because she died of illness a few days after I was born. I have three older brothers and an older sister. My sister, Libusa had a twin brother, Simon, who was the youngest of the three boys. When my mother died, one of my aunts who was living in Kosice, took me in. She already had eight children. My aunt's family owned a combination kosher restaurant and pub.

I lived with my aunt and uncle until my aunt died of a heart attack when I was 14 years old. By then, Czechoslovakia was given up to Hitler by Great Britain's Prime Minister Chamberlain in his hopes of keeping Hitler satisfied with one small conquest. Hitler gave the portion of Czechoslovakia that included Kosice to Hungary, so, for a while at least, I escaped transport to Auschwitz, but not the wearing of the yellow Star of David on my clothing. The rest of my family wasn't so lucky. My father, stepmother, three brothers, sister and infant half sister were all taken to Auschwitz; only my sister, Libusa survived three years in the death camp.

I was sent to Budapest to baby sit the young sons of my first cousin, who was one of the original eight children of the aunt who raised me. I was able to stay there with them in relative safety until March 19, 1944, the day the Nazis marched in to take over Budapest and Hungary. Within days, the Jews of Budapest were rounded up for transport to various death camps. My cousins and I obtained forged identification papers and made our way to hide in the cottage of a friend in the Hungarian countryside. My cousins and I could stay for only a few short weeks because the Hungarian county sheriff and deputies were extremely anti-Semitic and had their suspicions about us, the newcomers, had checked on us once already, and would be back to do more than just check on us again. My cousins and I traveled back to Budapest to perhaps get across the border to Bratislava, Czechoslovakia.

At this point, I was hired to work as a maid for the police chief, with his complete knowledge of my true identity. It's unusual that a Jewish girl should be helped by a gentile, especially one in such a position where he could get in so much trouble, but I knew him and could trust him because I was going into hiding with his wife. The police chief furnished the false identification papers I used until the end of the war. My cousin and her family also had false papers and lived in a Bratislava apartment when we parted company. The police chief moved his wife and "maid" (me) to stay with relatives in the Czechoslovakian countryside, where Allied bombing was unlikely. I stayed with the police chief's family until the Russians overtook the German occupiers on Easter Sunday, 1945.

I had no way to get home to Kosice because transportation was chaotic, and travel was risky for a young woman to make a trip alone. In many cases, there was little difference between

German and Russian occupation. I knew of an acquaintance that was traveling to Kosice and had him take a letter I wrote to my relatives describing my whereabouts. My cousin (from my father's side) happened to be hiding in the village next to the one where I was. He went back to Kosice when the war ended to look for any surviving relatives and was given my letter. My cousin returned to the village where I was staying, and together we went to Kosice.

I left Czechoslovakia in 1949 to marry my fiancé in Italy. He was a professional soccer player from Hungary who I met in the Bratislava hospital where I was working, when he was brought in with a broken leg. Eugen was later playing for a team in Italy and asked me to go there so we could be married. I haven't been back to Czechoslovakia since then. Our first daughter was born in Italy. I moved with my young family to France and then Belgium, as my husband's soccer career changed course. I had a son in Belgium, and then moved to the United States in 1954. My family settled in Chicago until 1956, when we moved to San Francisco. My two youngest daughters were born in San Francisco. We bought our first house in 1962 and my husband and I still live there today.