

“Hidden Children”

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Hidden Children

“You’re from the Jewish house, aren’t you?”

Edith froze.

“It’s OK. We know all about you,” Renée continued matter-of-factly. “We’re all the same, Catholics and Jews. That’s what my mother says, and that’s what I think, too.”

Edith sat in astonishment. Nothing made sense here in Moissac. Teachers were gentle, children were kind, and being Jewish seemed to be OK. Even school might be fun.

-Excerpt from *Hiding Edith: A True Story* by Kathy Kacer ^{pg 48}

This form of kindness was not experienced by most Jewish children who lived during the Holocaust, and unfortunately, it was not long-lived. Edith Schwalb, a Jewish child born to a famed soccer player, had life anything but easy. ^{pg 11} She was born during a time of cruelty and brutality; a time that left everyone- man, woman, and child- living in fear, especially Jews. Edith was born during the Holocaust.

Many parents, fearing for their families’ safety, made heartbreaking decisions, such as moving their children to convents or boarding schools in the country that would hide them from the Nazis. The kids that survived, because they went into hiding, are called the “Hidden Children.”

Edith’s father was arrested, in 1940, because of his religion. This led her mother, Mutti, and sister, Therese, to seek refuge in the countryside, and Gaston, her brother, was sent to a house in Moissac with Edith. ^{pg 31} The house, funded by the Jewish Scouts of France, was overseen by Shatta and Bouli Simon. During the Holocaust, over five hundred Jewish children

lived in the house. All but one child, a girl whose parents took her away, survived the terrible situation they found themselves in. ^{pg 157}

Edith lived at the house in Moissac, France for years, going on “camping trips” anytime school officials were alerted by the mayor that the threat of a Nazi raid was imminent. ^{pg 79} She went to school alongside the children of the village, who kept their secret with amazing courage, knowing that they could all be executed for helping the Jewish children. Edith visited her brother, who lived next door at a house for younger children. When the house closed because of fear the children would be discovered, Edith retained a new identity. She posed as Edith Servant, a Catholic orphan living at a boarding school in Enghien-les-Bains. There, instead of the whole town knowing who she was, only the director knew her secret. ^{pg 105}

Four girls, Edith, Irene, Simone, and Suzanne were sent to the boarding school. They secretly practised their religion of Judaism at great danger during the night and attempted to seamlessly fit in as Catholic orphans during the day. ^{pg 123} The children were successful, and the girls were ignored, along with their lice and hunger. ^{pg 116} As the pain from hunger became unbearable, Edith stole carrots from the garbage before going to Mass with the Catholic children. This is one example of the desperate measures Edith took to survive. Another instance is when Edith was questioned by a Nazi she cleverly evaded with quick wits.

In one terrifying occurrence, Edith feared for her life. Allied planes appeared in the town she was in, and shook the school with bombs. ^{pg 134} After the bombing became a repeated occurrence, the school was closed and Edith was sent to a farmhouse, by herself. The family offered sanctuary to one child, because of the danger of being discovered with multiple orphans. She posed, this time, as the niece of Monseigneur and Madame Merlcau. They cared for Edith

and gave her bountiful amounts of food until after the war, where she returned to the house in Moissac. ^{pg 144} For days she waited with Gatson, until one day she spotted her. She spotted Mutti, her mother, and was overjoyed to see her after being separated for such a long period of time! They were happy, except for one thing. Edith didn't know what happened to her father. Edith's father survived the war and was liberated in Auschwitz, but ate too much food that his body could not handle because of his starvation, and, sadly, he passed away. It was because of this shattering news, Edith made a decision. She went back to the house in Moissac and became a counselor. ^{pg 154}

Edith stayed there until 1949, when she was asked to become a counselor in Paris. In 1953, Edith married Jacques Gelbard, and two years later they moved to Canada, where Edith cared for Mutti. ^{pg 155} Her brother Gaston is a famous chef and the Gelbard family has been actively participating in the scouting movement as an affirmation and commendation of the sacrifice and risk by the scouting community in Moissac - for giving Edith a chance at surviving the cruelty she and millions of other children faced. ^{pg 156}

I have never experienced the Holocaust. I have never lived through the horror of my father being taken away from me or not knowing if my family was alive. I have, however, experienced first hand the great sorrow of the Holocaust. In the summer of 2016, my family went to Germany and Austria. While in Germany, we visited one of the most horrendous sights there, Dachau Concentration Camp. In somber moods, we looked around at the devastating sights around us. The distressed mood was complemented by the drizzle of rain against the seemingly gray background where we imagined the pain and suffering of those who resided at the camp. In the museum there was a bookstore, with only a handful of books written in English. My sister

and I each got a book, hers about a young child who traveled to multiple countries, learning new languages and evading Hitler. Mine, however, was about a girl named Edith Schwalb. This is how I first learned about the “Hidden Children.”

Since the day I first read that story, as an eleven year old, my perspective, my outlook on life, has changed drastically. I no longer look ahead at tomorrow, but I live in today. I think that that is an ideal we should all focus on. We shouldn't take for granted the blessings we have, but instead share with others, like Edith did. If you took anything away from this story, let it be Edith's resilient and giving nature, because, as an unknown author once said, “The past cannot be changed. The future is yet in your power.” Edith showed courage, bravery, and an unwavering desire to survive. Fear must have been gripping her soul, and yet, with so much sadness in her heart, she still lived on and gave back to others. We can't change the horrendous actions that altered billions of lives, but we can make sure it never happens again.

References

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