

My father, Israel (Sol) Kahn, and me in Berlin, Germany, in 1948. We immigrated to the United States in 1950.

A CHILD SURVIVOR SPEAKS

For the First Time

Edith Kahn Rhodes

AGA WAS A VERY SUNNY, PLAYFUL CHILD, WHILE I WAS MORE SERIOUS AND QUIET. I LOVED MY LITTLE SISTER AND ENJOYED HAVING A PLAYMATE WHO FILLED OUR HOUSE WITH LAUGHTER.

I was born in Germany in 1934. My parents were originally from Latvia, but moved to Germany when my father was invited to come there to run his uncle's business.

As Hitler came to power, life for Jews became tenuous, especially for foreigners, and my parents could not remain in Germany. Soon after my birth, we returned to Indra, Latvia, a town about 150 miles from Riga. That is where I grew up and where my younger sister Aga was born in 1936.

My parents came from Orthodox and even somewhat Chassidic backgrounds. The younger generation chose to be more modern, but strongly identified with their Jewish roots and customs. We celebrated Jewish holidays and were educated in Torah. We were familiar with both Yiddish and Hebrew.

Mother was a striking, stylish woman. She was an accomplished homemaker, loving and gentle. She always dressed tastefully, and dressed us in pretty attire. It pleased her to see her little girls receive admiration.

As the firstborn, Father showered me with special attention and I tried my utmost always to please him. He was genuine in his dealings with people and was liked by all. On many of his trips to Riga, he took me along and I remember attending the opera with him and his sister. We were a happy family.

The year 1940 brought many changes and challenges. On June 17, the Soviets marched into Latvia. Everyone had to learn new ways, to adjust to a different life politically. Everyday existence became a struggle. Commercial enterprises were nationalized, officials







of the previous administration lost their positions, the educational curriculum was changed to fit the Soviet system and religious education was prohibited.

As of December 1940, Jewish community institutions and non-communist organizations were prohibited by law. Any expression of anti-Soviet sentiment was not permitted and was usually punishable by exile to Siberia. The bourgeois (as the rich, particularly rich Jews, were referred to) were exiled to Siberia. This turned out to be a blessing, if they were able to survive the cold and brutal conditions, because they escaped the Nazi killers.

DEPORTATIONS AND MIRACLES

When Germany invaded Latvia on June 22, 1941, once again our lives were thrown into turmoil. I was six and a half years old; my sister Aga was about five. I didn't really understand what was going on. My parents tried to protect us from the tragic realities, but I could see they were upset and worried.

The Jews suddenly became a hunted people. We had no rights, anybody could do anything to us with impunity. Jews lost their jobs and had to turn over their positions and property to the Germans. We had to wear the Star of David, so we could be easily identified and persecuted.

In no time the Germans mobilized a cooperative Latvian Auxiliary Police. These forces led the persecutions, theft and killing of Jews. Unspeakable evil was perpetrated by this willing police force, who initiated unimaginably cruel acts against Jews. When Jews were directed to relocate to other towns or streets, Latvian guards terrorized and shot those who fell behind, and many were mugged and robbed by the local peasants.

Mass killings began. My five aunts, their husbands, and my cousins were killed at that time. Somehow my parents were able to hide us and themselves, and we were not found by the Germans or Latvian policemen. Besides us there were a few other Jewish families that weren't killed in the first mass killings. Aunt Riva (my mother's sister), her husband, and their two little boys also managed to survive that slaughter.

I don't recall how it happened, but we ended up in the Riga Ghetto. A workshop was established outside of Riga. The adults were assigned various jobs, repairing and cleaning uniforms. This lasted for about a year to a year and a half. My sister and I, my two little cousins and some other children still survived, but we did not play much and our lives were not carefree.

Our daily existence was full of deprivation and the fear of being killed. One of my terrifying memories is when aunt Lena was accosted by her building's janitor who wanted to kill her for her apartment. She ran away and melted into a group of Jews in the street. But then that group was all taken to the outskirts of Riga where all were shot. Lena managed to detach from that group and return to us.

One day a truck with Nazi soldiers arrived at the ghetto





From left to right: 1. My father Israel (Sol) and my mother Paula with me at about six months old.
2. Me as a baby with my maternal grandmother Zippa (Ziporah) Rosen-Perman.
3. The only existing picture of my baby sister Aga *Hy"d*.
4. My aunt and stepmother Riva and me.

and announced, "All children are to be taken to a children's camp. Get them ready." People knew this was a lie. They were going to be killed.

The head of the workshop, a Jewish man and a friend of my father, noted that the number of children that were to be picked up was one less than there actually were. He quickly realized he could save one child. Of course it couldn't be a very small child, it had to be one who was old enough to hide and not to cry. He picked me and hid me in an industrial-size clothes dryer.

Parents tried to hide their children, but the soldiers didn't leave until everybody was found. My aunt tried to hide her two little boys, but they also were found and put in the truck along with my sister Aga. The heartbreak of the parents can only be imagined. They knew they would never see their children again. After the truck left, it was safe for me to come out. I was very sad and felt very bad and uncomfortable that I was the only child left in the ghetto, the only one still together with her parents.

Shortly after that the ghetto was closed. We were taken to a boat that took us to a concentration camp near Danzig in Germany. Conditions on the boat were very bad, unbearable sometimes. After all we had been through, now this. I remember one young girl of about 17 who just went crazy. She was singing, laughing, and then she was giving a sermon. She just completely lost her mind. As we passed villages and towns along the waterway, we saw people doing ordinary things. Children playing outside their houses, people eating. As if nothing had ever happened. I remember my mother saying to me that there were still some people living normal lives though we were living in an insane reality. For example, we had no toilets. We had one bucket for people to go to the bathroom in. And these were civilized and dignified people, so you can imagine how terrible that was.

ARRIVAL IN STUTTHOF

When we arrived in the Stutthof Concentration Camp, the men and women were separated. Then came the selection process. People were separated into two groups. As we quickly learned, one group was sent to work and live and the other to be destroyed, to die. Those who were young and healthy were to be used for slave labor. Those who were old and weak were directed to the group that was to be killed.

My mother and aunt were selected for the work group. When my turn came, the young soldier who had to decide where I should go didn't seem to know into which group to send me. He told me to stand there and he would ask his supervisor. Aunt Riva, who was nearby, quickly grabbed my hand and pulled me into her group. In all the noise

and confusion, the soldier didn't notice. Her quick thinking and brave action saved my life. My mother, Aunt Riva, and I were now among many in Stutthof. Mother and Aunt Riva were always with me. Their presence and caring protected me and I felt safe. They shared whatever little food they had with me.

Although it was a very difficult environment in the concentration camp, I somehow, after a while, was able to adapt to the circumstances. People were dying left and right and there were piles of dead bodies everywhere. Today I would be afraid to see one dead body, but then, after a while, I didn't think much about walking right next to a pile of dead bodies.

I was eight years old. There was one other young girl in Stutthof. She was very pretty and people made a fuss over her. I remember thinking that everybody was making a fuss over her and nobody was paying attention to me, and I felt bad about it. But later, the little girl disappeared. Children weren't supposed to be there and she was discovered and probably killed. My looks did not attract much attention, and it seems I blended into the dreary scenery which saved my life.

One day, one of the soldiers somehow got a few geese, and he asked me to watch them. And so for three or four days, I was taking care of the geese as best I could, trying to keep them from running away. I had a difficult time keeping the geese from running away. I was given a stick or something like that. Somehow I did keep them in the general area. I remember the German soldier was feeding them grapes and, of course, no grapes for me. I understood that this was how it had to be because I was a Jew.

A MIRACULOUS REUNION

One day I was separated from my mother and aunt and was put in with a group that was transferred to a different camp. It was terrifying for me as I was only nine years old. I didn't know what to do or how I would survive on my own. There was a woman there who knew my mother and she was a comfort and great help to me.

Several days after the transfer, a soldier came in and announced to all, "You're being taken to another place. You can stay here or come with me." I didn't know what to do. I couldn't decide. I asked my mother's friend for advice and she said she didn't know which was better, to stay or to go somewhere else, to the unknown. I decided to go; I don't know why. The soldier said, "If you are strong, you will be picked to go." I stood on my tiptoes to appear taller and I was taken with the group that looked young and healthy. We were packed in a cattle car like sardines, with no light, and conditions were very bad. Fortunately, it wasn't a long journey.

As it turned out, we were taken back to the camp where my mother and aunt were!

Every day Mother and Aunt Riva had gone to search among the new arrivals, hoping that I would somehow be among them. When they saw me in the group that arrived, they thought it was a miracle, and it was. I couldn't have survived on my own. People all around us were dying of starvation and typhoid. My mother also became sick with this disease.

We didn't know it, but the war was coming to an end. Germany was losing the war. The Russian army was encircling this part of Germany.

We were ordered to line up to be taken somewhere else. My mother was too weak to walk and I couldn't decide if I should stay with my mother or go with my aunt. Mother insisted that I go with my aunt. After all those years of suffering and escaping death together, it was tragic to be torn away from my mother. I never saw her again. The camp was discovered and freed in May 1945. More than 85,000 people died in that camp.

We were led away from the advancing Russians by guards and German soldiers. Many people who were too weak to walk were shot. During January 23-24, 1945, the Russian army advanced close to Stutthof. The last two groups left on the 26th of January on the death march to Lebork, some 140 kilometers from Stutthof.

The march started with 25,000 prisoners and was expected to last seven days, but it actually lasted ten days. The issued food was only enough for two days. The columns marched on through snow drifts, with the SS guards casually murdering anyone who fell behind.

GREAT JOY AND GREAT SORROW

We were taken to a barn for the night where we slept in the straw, grateful to finally rest. The next morning we had to continue the march. It didn't make sense since the Russian army was surrounding the area. But then, nothing made much sense. Some Jews who tried to run away were shot and killed.

One day we noticed that the guards were gone and then we saw Russian soldiers. They told us we were now free. We were free? How does one grasp this?

The entire nearby town (I don't remember its name but it was near Stutthof) was burning. The German people had fled, abandoning their homes. The camp survivors entered the abandoned houses to wash up, find clothing and get whatever food was left there. My aunt and I also entered one of these houses and rested for a day. The next day a few men in concentration camp uniforms came to look for civilian clothing. As they were talking among themselves in German, Aunt Riva heard their Latvian accent. First she asked them if they knew her brother, and they said no. She then dared to ask, "Do you know Sol Kahn?" They answered, "Yes, he is staying with us not far from here." They led us to that house. My dear father was there. Our reunion was full of tears and joy.

When my father saw us he couldn't believe his eyes.



Edith Rhodes with daughter Ava, founding members of Chabad of Northern Palm Beach Island.

This was another miracle. He was sure that no one from his family had survived. After he settled us in a place he began to search for my mother. He learned that when the Russians freed Stutthof and the ghetto, they took the sick people to the local hospital. Sadly, it was too late for her. She died in the hospital a few days later. This information was difficult for me to absorb. After seeing and experiencing all the evil and killing, somehow I hoped for another miracle, that Mother would survive.

We found a little apartment that was vacated by a German family. My aunt was sick with typhus and luckily she fought it. In the meantime, Father and I walked around in the little village and talked to the other survivors. Father realized that going back to Latvia would not be a good or safe decision. Father and Aunt Riva decided to apply for visas to either the United States or Palestine, as Israel was called then, which was still under the British mandate. And, Father and Aunt Riva got married.

They realized that in order to get visas we needed to be in a big city, to be close to the administrative offices, to register. We managed to resettle in Berlin, where we found a place to live. At the time Berlin was divided into Russian and American sectors, and we settled on the Russian side.

Because Father spoke perfect German and Russian, the Russians hired him as a translator. He worked for them for a while until my father's friend, a Russian officer, advised him that we better leave for the American sector of Berlin. The Russians were beginning to think that Father was a spy, because he was able to speak Russian and German so well. They were planning to arrest him and send him to Siberia. So, of course, we left and found a place on the American side of Berlin.

By then, I was eleven years old. Father and Aunt Riva decided that I should start school and found a student who tutored me for a year and a half, until I was able to enter public school in 7th grade. I was very well received by the German students and even made friends, with whom I kept in contact for many years.

During this time, we saw many survivors leave Germany. A friend of my father's persuaded his relative in Cleveland to sponsor us to come to the United States and so we arrived in the summer of 1950.

A NEW LIFE

I was almost 16 when we came to Cleveland. To give me the best opportunities, my father asked around for the best high school in Cleveland. They told him Shaker Heights. They rented a tiny apartment in that area and I started 10th grade.

Even though I had learned some English in the German school, I found using the language and talking to people very difficult. But now, with a thoughtful teacher and kind students, in about three or four months I spoke fluently. I must admit that it was not easy to learn all the subjects, but with time I succeeded and it became easy. I was fortunate to get a full scholarship to Ohio State University. I made friends and built a social life where I felt comfortable. I was able to leave my past behind.

In Cleveland I met a young man named Jess Rhodes. Jess started medical school at Ohio State where we got to know each other, and I realized that he was a very kind and good person. Eventually Jess proposed marriage and I accepted. I'm glad I did. I received my degree in education and Jess received his medical degree.

When all his studies and his residency were completed, we settled in West Palm Beach, Florida, where Jess opened his practice. We have been married for 52 years, and we still live here. Our sons Paul and Steve

and our daughter Ava have filled our lives with affection and gifts of grandchildren: Samantha, Jesse, Stephanie, Hannan, Lola and Nina.

I didn't really want to speak about the war, other than to people who actually had similar experiences. When I was asked to speak for schools, I knew it would be too difficult for me, so I didn't. I'm glad other people have done it, and are doing it, I'm grateful to them, but I just couldn't do it. My husband asked me many times to give an interview but I just kept postponing it. So when my granddaughter Samantha mentioned that she might want to do an interview, and that she had learned photography and filmmaking, I decided it's time to do it. That was when I was filmed for the documentary, "Grandma's Untold Story." When in 2014 I was asked to share my story for the Palm Beach Chabad House, Rabbi Zalman and Rebbetzin Hindel Levitin, it was my first time telling my experiences to a live audience.

A few years back, I heard about the Child Survivors/ Hidden Children group meeting in Boca Raton. I was curious to meet other children (now older adults) and feel a commonality of memories, confirming some hazy memories, recapturing the lost child within each one, and to find a way to honor the six million.

I am very pleased to be part of this vital group that adds to Holocaust education efforts in Florida by bearing witness and developing books to become our voices for the future. I have witnessed evil but I know that there is also goodness and kindness. I chose to be a good human being in spite of all the suffering that I have experienced. We should not lose faith in people or G-d. We need to remain good human beings and show a better way through our contributions of charity and our commitment to our fellow Jews.■



Edith and Jesse Rhodes with grandchild.

Batya Lerner, D.D.S.
Aron Gamss, D.D.S.

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