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The Nazi Officer's Wife: How One Jewish Woman Survived The Holocaust



Synopsis

Edith Hahn was an outspoken young woman in Vienna when the Gestapo forced her into a ghetto and then into a slave labor camp. When she returned home months later, she knew she would become a hunted woman and went underground. With the help of a Christian friend, she emerged in Munich as Grete Denner. There she met Werner Vetter, a Nazi Party member who fell in love with her. Despite Edith's protests and even her eventual confession that she was Jewish, he married her and kept her identity a secret. In wrenching detail, Edith recalls a life of constant, almost paralyzing fear. She tells how German officials casually questioned the lineage of her parents; how during childbirth she refused all painkillers, afraid that in an altered state of mind she might reveal something of her past; and how, after her husband was captured by the Soviets, she was bombed out of her house and had to hide while drunken Russian soldiers raped women on the street. Despite the risk it posed to her life, Edith created a remarkable record of survival. She saved every document, as well as photographs she took inside labor camps. Now part of the permanent collection at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., these hundreds of documents, several of which are included in this volume, form the fabric of a gripping new chapter in the history of the Holocaust—a complex, troubling, and ultimately triumphant. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I'm an 18-year old college student in India. My father had been to London recently where he ran into

Ms. Angela at Harrods. Although, it was a chance meeting for him, it was a god-sent gift for me. She encouraged him to read a copy of "The Nazi Officer's Wife" written by her mother, Edith Hahn Beer. Although I must admit that war novels never interested me before, I was proven wrong by this one. Once I started reading the book, I just couldn't put it down. Here is a simple, straightforward account of a Jewish woman whose faith in her religion and her strength never let her down in spite of the horrendous perils that she had to face every minute of her life during the World War period. When I try to understand the pain in her heart when she was refused her University Degree, when she had to leave her Mother for the Asparagus fields, when she had nobody to turn to after her relationship with her boyfriend was heading nowhere, when she had to put on an endless charade amidst the core of the Nazi society, when she had to rely on God's mercy to keep her Jewish identity a secret, when she had to work as a maid in London after being an honoured Judge in Germany..... what can I say, it's just unimaginable that this woman managed to survive through all this on her own. There are so many lessons that this book has taught me. I can never stop admiring Edith Hahn Beer for her unshakeable faith that tomorrow is a better day. One of the most beautiful things I found in this book was the French saying "Life is beautiful and it begins tomorrow". It is so true that very few of us bother to realise its meaning! And of course, how can I forget to mention how moved I was by this woman's love for her Mother. Her belief that she would be reunited someday with her Mother, her pangs of grief when "she sent me cake when she was hungry, mittens when she was cold"...and her resolution to do the same for her daughter (by trying to provide her the family which she herself never had around her).... these things go a long way in bringing out human emotions in their most tender and vulnerable forms. One cannot help but think inwardly what else one could have done under such terrible circumstances. No doubt Ms. Beer's decisions were justified in every sense and they were ably supported by her virtues which we should all aspire to inculcate.

Edith Hahn Beer is a Jewess, now living in Netanya Israel. In 1938, pro-Nazi Vienna, she was an intelligent, inquisitive law student, with an adventurous spirit. After Anschluss, the Germans pressed the Austrian Jews for all their money and valuables in return for exit visas. Some families had to decide, because of a lack of funds, which of their children could leave for safer havens, and which were doomed to stay in Austria with their parents, and almost certain deportation. Edith's two sisters left the country, but she remained with her childhood friend and lover, Pepi, with the hope they would soon marry. She was sent to a labor camp in the north of Germany to do backbreaking farm work, 12 hours a day, six days a week. The motto of some of the Jewish laborers was, "Life is beautiful, and it begins tomorrow." Her mother was deported to the East while Edith was in

Germany, helpless to assist or join her beloved parent. When she finally returned to Vienna, her home and family were gone. Her remaining friends, Jew and Gentile, with few exceptions, were afraid to assist her. Her beloved Pepi, whose Jewish father had married a non-Jew, was a weak man, dominated by his mother. And the mother wanted nothing to do with Edith. A prewar friend, who also happened to be a doctor, and a Nazi Party bureaucrat, assisted Edith, and another gentile friend obtained copies of her own identity papers for her. Edith writes, "Our faces will be imprinted on the hearts of those who are kind to us, like a blessing." So, she moved to Munich, in 1942, submerging her identity in the wartime Reich. Edith Hahn disappeared from the face of the earth and Grete Denner emerged to replace everything Edith had ever been. Grete was not only a new identity, she was a totally different woman; mild, meek, unassuming and uneducated - hard to pick out of a crowd. Thus began life as a "U-boat," submerged beneath the surface of society in Nazi Germany. She writes, "Now I am like Dante. I walk through hell, but I am not burning." Living in mortal fear, she found work as a nurses aide, and a room with a kind family. She met a handsome Aryan, Werner Vetter, who wooed her persistently. When he pressured her to marry, she finally blurted out her secret. Werner accepted her Jewishness, to the extent that he still wanted to marry and protect her. He wanted to sleep with her and have her take care of him. But her husband never rid himself of Nazi prejudices about "Jewish blood," and resisted having a child with Edith/Grete. She, in turn, became the passive, perfect wife Werner desired, abandoning any remaining sense of self. The ironies of her existence increased as the war progressed, and Germany's doom became obvious to almost all. Then Werner, blind in one eye, was drafted and became an officer in the Wehrmacht. Edith/Grete became pregnant - the Ideal Aryan Wife, with a baby on the way and a husband at the front. This is a powerful account of a person existing in a schizophrenic life, with constant fear of discovery, and almost no sense of identity. The isolation was devastating. One can only imagine Edith's survivor guilt, which most Holocaust survivors suffer from. Here she was living the "normal" life of a German Hausfrau, while millions of others, like her own mother, went to the camps and crematorium. She discusses this guilt frankly in the book. She was and is an extraordinarily brave woman. We are fortunate that, at great risk to her life, she kept a record of her survival and has chosen to share her inspiring story. This intimate narrative is simply and intelligently written. Her tale is so gripping that it is almost impossible to put down. At times it does seem that truth is stranger than fiction. I highly recommend this autobiographical account of a woman's life in hell. It is a story like no other.

I did not think I could read yet another WWII/Holocaust book and I was put off by the odious notion

of a Jewish woman marrying a Nazi officer for cover. Forget all that. Let no one judge until he/she has read this book, a simple tale of day-to-day survival. Beautifully written. A page turner.

Just when I thought I had read and seen everything I'd ever want about the Holocaust (and then some), I found myself fascinated by this book. Quite frankly, reading about somebody's true experience suddenly makes a story like "Life is Beautiful" seem shallow and unnecessary. (Truth being stranger, and more compelling, than even well-intended fiction.) In some ways it's the details of real everyday life -- the food rations, the clandestine radio listening, the casual comments of neighbors -- that make the book come alive. Plus, the clarity of the storytelling (it reads like a novel but maintains the right dose of sobriety and dignity) simply transports you into Edith Hahn's world. It's a must-read for anyone who wants to feel knowledgeable about the Holocaust.

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