**Edith Forrester – Life Before The War**

Edith describes her family background and how she felt when her mother told her she was leaving Germany. She explains that she was too young to realise that her parents were not coming with her. She tells the interviewer about the Gestapo’s visit to her home. She then speaks about the fate of her Jewish mother and her Christian father.

INT: Good afternoon. Today is the 6th of March 2014 and I’m here to interview Miss Edith Forrester. Good afternoon.

EF: Good afternoon Claire.

INT: Edith, could you begin by telling me when you were born?

EF: Yes I was born in Nordhausen in Harz, in Germany.

INT: And in what year was that?

EF: 1931.

INT: And what was your name at birth?

EF: Edith Twelkemeyer.

INT: Now can you tell us a little about your family life before you came here?

EF: Yes. I had been going to a school, a non-Jewish school, and I had a little girlfriend called Gretchen. We used to go to school together and whenever she discovered I was Jewish she stopped coming for me. That was a heartbreak for me but I had a wonderful teacher called Herr Krieghof and I can remember very vividly my mother saying that we were going away. I thought, ‘Oh good, a holiday!’ So we went shopping, I think in Hamburg, and visited friends and then one day my mother took me up to school to see Herr Krieghof and she was telling him that I would be going away, but I didn’t hear, just that I was just going myself, in my mind we were going as a family. And to my amazement I saw tears in Herr Krieghof’s eyes and I’d never seen a teacher with tears in his eyes and then he bent down and gave me a hug.

And I was so overcome by this and I thought, ‘Why did he do that?’ You know? So these moments have come back to me again and again because I was happy at school and I played with other children and…But I can remember when the name-calling started because they started calling, ‘Jüdin!’ ‘Jüdin!’ when they discovered at school. And of course I asked what that meant, you know, and so on and my mother just said, ‘Oh don’t worry about that. That’s not anything to hurt you or anything.’ But I also remember very clearly each morning at school we had to stand in lines in the playground and of course the German flag was raised and then at the end we had to say, ‘Sieg Heil, Sieg Heil!’ and put your hand out and I felt just cold shivers going down my spine because, you know, we had many, many Jewish friends that came in to the house and they were all so demonstrative and loving and everything.

And I can remember my mother was making felt flowers and she had a whole group of ladies who came to do this but what I didn’t know at the time was they were really learning English together and in case the Gestapo came, they were making flowers and when I arrived I had one of these felt flowers in my coat and…yes, the Gestapo eventually came. And first of all they went upstairs to the top flat, took away the Jewish owner and he was never heard again, of again. And then the next flat it was all Jewish people and they were taken away, as well, and then they came to me and I can remember it was night time, seemed to me in the middle of the night, but one of them was very rough and my grandmother was in the next room.

I had a bed with the maid, Annalise, and they pulled my grandmother out of bed and she was actually known to be at that time dying of cancer and she was standing in a white nightdress with her hands clasped and praying, you know, and that has never, ever left me because I adored my grandmother. My father had his own business and my mother was in charge of the office so it was really, Annalise, the maid, and my Omi [grandmother] who were important to me. So whenever I came home from Kindergarten and school it was always Omi I ran to or Annalise and… you know. So…

INT: Was that in 1938?

EF: 1938 yes, yes, 1938 that was, yes.

INT: And did they take your grandmother away or…?

EF: No, no, they took my father away. But my father, being non-Jewish, he of course was able to come back two or three days later and, you know, we were relieved at that. But by this time, names were being sewn on things, my little nametags and everything on what I was going to take with me and it was just … preparing for a journey.

INT: And were you aware that you were Jewish before any of this happened? No?

EF: No, no. These were lovely Jewish people that came and I loved them but being Jewish was never something that was discussed – you know, you are a Jewish child and you must do this and you must do that. At Christmas time I went one year to my father’s relatives in Gütersloh and the next year I would go to Berlin to be with my Jewish Omi’s sister and family.

So it was the best of both worlds but a child accepts these things very much more and it’s only now when I think back that I think how could I not have guessed that things were not the way it should have been, you know?

INT: Your parents must have been good at protecting you.

EF: Yes very much so. And, you know, the agony of my father seeing us off, you know, to the station that morning to get to the train and it still didn’t dawn on me. Dad would be coming… “Papa, wann kommst du ja?” [When are you coming?] so to speak. “später, später, ja…” [later later, yes…] And then of course we got to the railway station and all the SS were lined up and we were standing there with the parents and then they told us to come forward and my mother was allowed to come and help me up, and the steps on a German train are very high, and lifted me up and then the door was closed.

I could not believe that my mother was not with me. Couldn’t believe it! And there were…standing in the corridor…I mean the train was packed full of only children and then suddenly the train started and I can remember screaming, “Mutti! Mutti!” [Mother! Mother!] And somebody lifted me up and pushed people aside so I could see out of a window and my last memory of my mother was she was frantically looking to see if she could see me and I saw her but she never saw me, these last minutes. But it was a terrible, painful, painful thing, you know.

INT: Do you know how they were able to get you on to the Kindertransport? Did you ever find out how they achieved that?

EF: No, no idea at all, no. But God meant it and that is, that is what it was.

INT: And what happened to your mother afterwards? Did you find out?

EF: Yes she was taken to a munitions factory and she… my father had to divorce her. He didn’t want to divorce her but she said, “It will be better for your safety and I will go”. So she agreed to that and she didn’t see him again. But it has been emphasised again and again by both sides of the family that my father wanted to stay with my mother and she would not allow it, so her child was going to be safe. And I think she had hoped she would get to Britain as a domestic because that was the only way they could get there, to be in service, but she never made it, so that is…that is it. In the records it said that she died of pneumonia but my cousin Kurt gave me that information.

He can’t do anything else now; he’s really my mother’s cousin but he was twelve years younger than my mother and he’s about twelve/thirteen years older than me and he lives continually now in the past, you know. And he filled me in with a lot of information. He saw my father, when he went back as a GI. He escaped from [Germany]…now he…I think he…yes, his parents died in Auschwitz but his grandmother died in Theresienstadt and he had a letter applying to get out to America and he doubled the letter over and they thought it meant that he’d got permission to get out. And he said “Raus” [out of here]. And he escaped and he went to America to New York, to our family doctor, Johnny Stern, who delivered both of us and, you know, it was amazing. And from there he settled and became an American citizen.

INT: And your father, did he spend the rest of his life in Germany?

EF: Yes he did, yes, yes. So…yes.

**Edith Forrester – Immigration**

Edith describes her journey to Britain and arriving in London. She then talks about arriving in Scotland and meeting the gentleman and lady who soon became her beloved Mum and Dad.

INT: So how did you come to Scotland then? How did that happen?

EF: Well, when we arrived…I’d never been on a boat before but when we arrived, oh my, they took us to a great big hall in London and would you believe it they had white tablecloths, white, and they served us drinking chocolate and sandwiches and biscuits and cakes. And I was shaking so much that I spilt my cocoa, drinking chocolate, and it made a lovely brown river down this thing and that was the first time I ever shed a tear from when I left Germany.

INT: Was that because you were advised not to cry? Some people have told us that they were told it was dangerous, or Kinder were told it dangerous to cry.

EF: Dangerous to try what?

INT: To cry.

EF: To cry? No, no.

EF: No, nobody ever said that to me. Uh-huh, no. So then we all had labels of course so then after we’d eaten they said… you know we were in different groups.

INT: So they pointed to different areas?

EF: Uh huh, that’s right. And then they put us on a bus and we sat up all night on this train… no idea were I was going but then I had no idea on the first train where I was going, or on the ship. And on the ship, I had…I was with a girl much older than me and she made me go up on the top, you know. No, other way round; I was at the bottom and she was at the top.

INT: On a bunk?

EF: On a bunk each. And she was very, very sick during the night. So I had to look after her and she just had to stagger into my bunk.

EF: You know, and I had to climb up on top of this one but she kept being sick so neither of us had much sleep so that was a nightmare, and yes, that was coming over. And then when we were on the train we were of course on our way to Scotland and again I had no idea what was happening so when we got off they took a photograph, which I think you’ve seen? Bob’s [McKenzie] on that photograph, and his sister, at the very end. And they just put us on a bus again and they took us to an orphanage in Selkirk, which is now a hotel.

I’ve been back there. I was invited as an honoured guest at their Ridings – you know, the annual event, many years ago. And they took us there and it was a, och at that time, it was a dismal place, you know, and we were in a long dormitory, one for the boys, one for the girls, and I was at the very end one and because there were mice running around the floor, when somebody wanted to go to the toilet they’d say, “Edith, komm doch mit!, komm doch mit!” [Come with me] And of course, poor me, I had to get up and go to the toilet with them for company. Oh dear…

INT: To scare off the mice?

EF: I know, I know.

INT: Oh dear that’s terrible. Were there a lot of children there with you at that time?

EF: Difficult to tell, probably maybe about thirty of us, difficult to assess really. But there were a lot of older ones, there weren’t so many…I was the youngest one actually so…yeah. But that was something. And we got porridge every morning and it was runny…oh no…So that was a nightmare too. I didn’t like porridge.

INT: I’m sure. And did you have any English? Had you learned any English?

EF: No, not a word – kein einziges Wort, (not a single word) Nothing. And now the funny thing is whenever I think of anything or if I’m caught in a traffic jam or anything, Helen always declares I speak in German, “Du liebe Zeit!”[Dear me!] “Was ist das?” [What is that?]“Was ist los? [What’s the matter?]” You know, things like that so…crazy.

So I had not a word of English, not a word, and we were sitting one day, having a meal actually, and they said “Edith” and I went. I was taken into one of the lounges and a lady and gentleman got up and she was dressed in powder blue dress and matching coat, tweed, and he had plus fours in chocolate brown and he had very brown eyes, you know. And they couldn’t speak a word of German; I couldn’t speak a word of English, but somehow I felt I could trust these people. For the first time since I had left my home and my parents I could trust them. And we smiled at each other and there was nothing else but all the paperwork was to be done then and they were going to come and collect me. Well that wasn’t discussed with me, but other ladies came as well, elderly ladies, two elderly ladies came to interview me and look me over and, I didn’t react one way or the other, not at all.

So anyway, when it came to the bit, Mum and Dad came to collect me and they said, “I’m very sorry. She’s been promised to the ladies – Naimes.” “Oh no. No, no” My father said. “That is not on because we’ve signed all the papers and we are definitely getting Edith.” “Well,” she said, the matron said, “I’m so sorry but you won’t get her today. We’ll have to look into this.” And they did look into it and in the end, of course Dad being a very determined person and a legal person, he knew all the tricks of the trade and so on… One day it was arranged that I would have my case packed and we got on the train. That was when there was still a connection between The Borders and Edinburgh and when we got to Edinburgh and got off the train, who were coming along the platform but Mum and Dad.

And they took me on another train and we went to Sinclairtown, which is another district in Kirkcaldy. The station is no longer there, and we got off there. And long stairs up and just a short walk and we came to the bank where Dad was in charge, a bank manager. And bank house on top, and brand new, a flat, and just when we went in, suddenly whoosh! And down the stairs came the most beautiful white and brown cocker spaniel and that was my friend forever, licked me all over and we have been inseparable until he died. So he didn’t die until he was fifteen…I’m maybe adding things that are irrelevant?

INT: No, no, no, not at all. So I suppose that gave you a very good impression of Scotland when you first came?

EF: Oh yes, yes.

**Edith Forrester – Settling In**

Edith talks about her new life in Kirkcaldy and her education. She describes her reaction when she finally met her birth father again.

INT: And what about going to school after that?

EF: Well that was…

INT: You still only spoke German?

EF: Yes, well they put me in the infant class to learn English and every morning the bell would go at a certain time. I can’t remember when…excuse me…And a group of pupils would be standing there, “We’ve come to take Edith to school!” And I had this for weeks that they came to collect me. And of course they gave me all kinds of IQ tests and various things and I had a lot of help from the infant mistress and the teachers and so gradually I got into my own, into my own age group. But every so often I had a request – somebody would come into the class and say, “Edith is to go to Miss O’Hinnachie and I thought “No, no…”

This lady did IQ tests and she sat on a squeaky cushion and every time you asked a question she would lean forward ‘Squeak! A Question, squeak! And an answer. Oh dear. It was all, you know, a man with a black bag goes up to the door, what’s his job? And things like that.

INT: Yes.

EF: So anyway…

INT: Were the children all kind to you? Because the war was starting and they must have known you came from Germany.

EF: The only time I ever had this was in Sunday School, because Mum and Dad were Christians and Dad, being thirty-nine/forty in age, he wasn’t called up because all the men had been called up. He wanted to go but he was Reserved. And he and Mum, were fire guards and different extra jobs that they did and, fine…But they were church members and we went every Sunday and only one time a little girl that I was sitting next to said, “I don’t want to sit next to you because you’re a German”. And that…whoa, that was…I went home and told Mum and Dad. Dad was furious and of course he saw his sister who was the superintendent of the Sunday School and he said, “Make sure that never happens again! And take that child away from Edith so she doesn’t have this…” You know.

INT: So he was able to stop her.

EF: Yeah, yeah. People were curious when you went out into the park for a walk, I sometimes with Dad’s sisters went for a walk after I had lunch with them, after Sunday school and they would say, “Oh, is that the little German girl” You could hear them whispering it, you know. But nobody was unkind, ever, not ever.

INT: That was good. Did you meet other people? Once you were with your new Mum and Dad did you meet other people who had come on the Kindertransport? That had come as refugees?

EF: No it was ironic that years later friends had been living in Dysart, another part of Kirkcaldy, well they had taken in a boy of the same age as me and they never even got us together.

And he, his parents came back; they managed to escape and get out. And they went to America, and he came back to this country to see that the people who had taken him in, who we knew, and we met here and it was just an amazing, amazing time together that we had. We had never met before but we just…Oh it was just….

INT: Did anybody, as far as you know, come from the Refugee Committee to check that you were being well looked after?

EF: Probably, maybe for Mum and Dad, but I was not conscious of that, no, no. Going to the police station, when I was sixteen, seventeen and eighteen, the superintendent of the police was a friend of Dad’s and he said… ‘Gavin asks to see me each time and we’ll have a cup of tea, just a formality’.

INT: And why did you have to go the police station?

EF: Because I was an alien.

INT: I see. And then were you given British citizenship after that? What happened?

EF: Yes, it was The Minors Act that came about when I was nineteen and Dad saw about that…getting me converted to Christianity…no, to British nationality.

INT: So I am assuming that you, not only didn’t meet any other people who came from Germany, but you also didn’t meet anybody from the Jewish community, is that correct?

EF: Not quite because there was a teacher at Kirkcaldy High, Herr Guhde, and he took in a Polish Jewish lad and we became very friendly. In fact they helped Mum and Dad because they couldn’t speak German and he did the translating so I was very fond of Dr Guhde and Henry so yeah…

INT: What did you find strangest about Scotland?

EF: Tomato soup. Red soup, I’d never, ever had red soup in my life before, red soup…But I thought it was all just so interesting, you know. Nobody was anything but helpful. It was just…Oh I just…Scotland’s the country for me, but British, I’m first and foremost British.

INT: And did you see your father again?

EF: Yes.

INT: What happened with your birth father?

EF: That was very difficult, very difficult because I went to Germany and his sister was a dear aunt of mine and she’d been bombed and she was paralysed from the neck down and I was going to stay with her and my father.

And he arrived at the station with beautiful red roses and everything. I have to confess with shame to this day; I felt nothing when I saw him. He was standing with his back to me when I looked out the window and he was tall and thin, just as I remembered him. Tall, very tall, six feet tall and you know, the crinkly hair which was grey of course but when he turned, the face was so wrinkled and ravaged. But he was always touching me and holding my hand and I could not, I could not feel the love that I had felt for this wonderful father that I had for nearly seven years, well seven years yes.

INT: And when was it that you went? How old were you by then when you went back to Germany to see him?

EF: Would it be nineteen or twenty? I was a student here.

INT: That is a long time.

EF: And of course…what I didn’t know was that my Scottish father was going out of his mind because he said to Mum, “She’ll not want to come back. She’ll see her own father. She’ll not want to come back.” She kept saying, she was one of these wonderful calming spirits, she said, “Gavin, she’ll be back, don’t you worry. This is her home and she loves us.” And I never saw such relief on their faces when I stepped off that plane and just ran towards them, you know.

INT: And why was it you weren’t able to go back sooner than that? Because that must have been quite a long time after the war had ended?

EF: Well I had no desire to go. I’d been fighting it and Mum and Dad didn’t want to force it.

INT: Right, right. That’s interesting. And after school what happened?

EF: After school I sort of said, I… I applied for university and was accepted for St Andrews University and then I suddenly said, “You know, you’ve been looking after me all these years. I would like to go and work.” And Mum and Dad said, “No. Take your education first.” But when I make up my mind about something I can be quite firm. So what happened was I applied for the continental exchange in London and got into the Post Office and the civil service here as a telephonist and it was the strangest thing, but just when I realised that I had made a terrible mistake, because all the girls were just talking about their boyfriends and what they did, and I thought I could do a university, Open University…

So I spent evenings/weekends studying and they’d say, “What were you doing at the weekend Edith?” And, you know, even boyfriends, I couldn’t spend the time with them because I was studying. I didn’t want to tell them. I was doing this quietly. And I thought, ‘This is not going to work.’ So I decided I would leave the Post Office and, ironically, when I had just made up my mind to do so, the appointment came through from London that I’d got a post in the continental exchange if I’d wanted it, but I didn’t. So then I went to university.

INT: And what did you study there?

EF: Modern languages and Latin. I did Italian the first year as well but my degree is in French and German.

INT: And then I think you went on to teach?

EF: Yes I went for a year to Moray House and then on to teach. Thirty-one and a half years teaching and I was a couple of years in the Post Office and that counted towards my final pension, so that worked out well.

**Edith Forrester – Reflection On Life**

Edith describes the many highpoints in her life and her one main regret.

INT: And have you ever wanted to go back to Germany since? Since that last meeting with your father?

EF: No, no. I did go with a couple of groups when we took students and I had a very good head of department. He was Polish and happened to be in Poland at the time the war broke out and therefore…yes. He had to join the Polish Army, and he and I took a couple of trips to Germany with pupils and that was mostly enjoyable but…

INT: And later in life did you start mixing more with other people who came as Kindertransport or as survivors of the Holocaust?

EF: Well yes, I heard about the Kindertransport. I think it was really through Hansie (Hansie Douglas Dobschiener) although she didn’t come through the Kindertransport. I just had this desire to meet some of the others and I used to enjoy meeting Bob and Betty (McKenzie) and the Wugas, who I hadn’t known before, and some of the others. And all had done very well, you know so…But Rosa Sacharin was a dear lady, yeah, and I found her very nice. She’s been through to see me. But it’s keeping in touch, you know, and there it is…

INT: If you look back now on your years here in Scotland what would you say was, has been the high point for you?

EF: Oh my…there’s so many.

INT: High points?

EF: Well getting wonderful foster parents. Even though I was never adopted, they were wonderful parents to me. They had lost their own child, Mum nearly died and the baby was stillborn and she couldn’t have any more. But they took me thinking that I would go back to my own parents. What kind of people are those? Wonderful, loving people. That was a highlight. And getting me an education, because they did without. We didn’t get grants in those days and they saw me right through my education and everything and it was wonderful. And I said, “Well one thing I’m not going to do, I’m not going to teach.” “Well just wait and see.” So my lady advisor said to me, “

Edith, I want you to take a year at Moray House, you know, once you’re through. Go and get your degree.” And I said, “I don’t want to teach.” But she said, “Nevertheless take your year at Moray House.” And I always remember because Miss Christie was a very strict lady but she was an excellent, excellent lady and teacher. We had her for classics, for Latin. And that’s what I did. I found myself in teaching and I loved it! Absolutely loved it. I had thirty-one and a half years teaching and I loved it.

INT: And did you ever tell the children about your background and where you came from?

EF: No but since I’ve retired, I’ve done many talks, many talks in schools. Usually to either Primary Seven or…not to Primary Seven, and also to secondary schools, yes. I did that for many years and but now I’m past that I think.

INT: And you felt it was important, why to do that?

EF: Because I, I had had to hide my Jewishness; I had to hide my being German and through Mum and Dad, they said, “There’s nothing to be ashamed of. Why would you hide that?” And I suddenly felt I can shout it from the rooftops, “I am Jewish!” And if I were in a room that was full of people and somebody said, “Any Jews stand!” I would not even hesitate because I am so proud of my Jewish birth and that I had a Jewish mother that bore me.

INT: And yet you are a keen member of the Church as well aren’t you?

EF: Yes, yes. I was a deacon for many, many years but it’s only for so many years at a time in the Baptist Church. I was baptised and Hansie came and she said, “Edith I don’t know if I’m going to manage because I’m in Coldstream in the morning for the service but if I can I will be there in the evening.”.

INT: And that was Hansie Douglas?

EF: Hansie Douglas Dobschiener.

INT: Dobschiener.

EF: And I can always remember her when I was baptised and Helen, who is my best friend, Dr Wishart, she came and got me out, dried me off and then I went and got dressed and then I came through and Hansie shot down the aisle…like that.

INT: She gave you a hug?

EF: Yes, yeah, oh yes.

INT: Are there…I shouldn’t ask this really, but are there any low points from your experience here in Scotland?

EF: Difficult to tell because in many ways I have been so blessed, so many ways. My home, no mortgage; I could take early retirement because of my deafness. That has been a hard thing to put up with because it started when I was in my late thirties and it’s got steadily worse so I have very strong hearing aids. And yeah…And I think I always vowed, which was wrong, I know that now, that I would never marry unless it was a Jew that I married.

And, as it so happened one of the loves of my life was German, turned out to be German and I couldn’t tell him. I hadn’t even the courage to tell him that I was Jewish. I just broke it off and said, “No I don’t think this friendship is going to go anywhere”. So…yeah. But no, I’ve been so blessed. Pension from my teaching, you know, and everything in the house was left for me so I’m blessed. I would have loved to have had children, especially grandchildren. Oh how I would have loved them. But I have seven Godchildren and they are very loving and I’ve had them since they were born and now they are grown up. That’s some of them up there. These are the Godchildren.

INT: You’ve got lovely photographs.

EF: Identical twins.

INT: Well Edith that was very nice to speak to you this afternoon and thank you very much.

EF: You’re welcome.