

Edith Bell (Edith Labowsky)

Age: 91

Birthdate: November 11, 1923

Birthplace: Hamburg, Germany

Religious Identity: Jewish tradition, but Atheist.

Warning: Contains sexual content that may not be appropriate for some readers. Discretion advised.

Holocaust Story:

I was born in Hamburg, Germany five years after the armistice was signed in WWI. I had one older sister, 10 years older; she left Germany in 1934 to Palestine, where she lived, until her death at age 94. I lived in Germany until January 1938 my parents and I moved to the Netherlands. The Germans invaded and the laws in Germany, became the Netherlands laws. We didn't have the opportunity to go underground it just didn't work; we didn't have connections, my father who fought in WWI, believed what Hitler had said that "the fatherland will be grateful to you." He thought he would be treated fairly and consequently that my mother would be treated fairly. Then in the spring of 1943 my parents were picked up and my aunt who lived with us, I was working for the Jewish council and all I was doing was sorting clothes to be sent to the camps. Consequently I had a deferment on my ID, as you know we all had to carry ID's. One day I came back from work and they were gone, and we had made arrangements that if something like that happened that I would move in with some friends. My parents were sent to Theresienstadt, my Aunt was sent to Auschwitz and died there. My parents were in Theresienstadt and in July 1943 the loud speakers came on where I was and it said all the Jews who were here had to leave and we were sent to Westerbork (Transit Camp). Every Tuesday a train went to its destination unknown. It was everyone's desire to stay off the train. Since my parents were in Theresienstadt I stayed in Westerbork until January 1944 and then during that time, well actually for me the time there wasn't too bad. I befriended one person who was helping to run the place, they were put there by the Dutch government and that guy was able to get us a bit more food. He shared with me. Anyway in January 1944 another train went to Theresienstadt and that was a passenger train and I saw my parents again there. My mother had aged 20 years and my father was dying. Suffering from hunger symptoms and in March my father died in Theresienstadt. In Theresienstadt you could survive if you could work hard, I was young and strong and able to work I was able to share some food with my mother. But in October of 1944 they sent a train to Auschwitz and we got to the station in Auschwitz and of course the officer there said you go that way you go that way, and I said that's my mother I want to stay with her and he told me I would see her again, which of course was a lie. That was the last time I saw her, it took me several days to find out what happened to the other side of people, of course we found out they went up in smoke. I did not get a number for whatever reason I don't know, I was only there for a week and then again on a train to destination unknown we ended up in Kospa in Upper Silesia there were 1000 women and we were housed in an old barn. Shelves covered with straw, every morning we would go out and we were digging ditches. When the ground got very cold we couldn't dig anymore so they made us carry huge logs, and later we found out that the Russians were approaching and we dug these defense ditches against the tanks,

we'd put the logs in so the approaching tanks couldn't get through. It was very, very cold and I had this cloak that we had gotten in the other camp, I had thin leather shoes, and we were walking on the icy roads for miles to go to work. If you have a thousand people walking it gets muddy, in the evening my shoes were muddy and wet, overnight they froze and in the morning I put them back on, this repeated day after day. My feet froze, and I got frostbite and I went to the infirmary and they cut it open and put some powder on it, it got infected and I just couldn't walk anymore and I ended up in the infirmary, after some days there. My friend came in and she said don't ask any questions and follow me out, then on the way back to the regular barrack I found out that the whole camp was moving fleeing from the Russians. She had made arrangements told the guard that I was her sister and I had been working. So anyway I was allowed to sit on the wagon where the guards had the luggage, and the other women were walking two days for 30 miles. By that time of course everybody was in as bad shape as I was, they decided no body was allowed to be on the wagon, and whoever couldn't walk had to stay behind. I really felt I couldn't walk. My friend was trying to help me; she said she has to keep going because she had to make sure to see her husband again. I couldn't move and also on the way we had heard that the Russians were only 10 kilometers away, I stayed behind there were 6 of us in bad shape. The rest left, six more showed up who were in hiding and joined our group. So we expected, we didn't know what to expect three days after everyone had left some German soldiers came and they asked us if we had seen the Russians and we told them no and then they left. A few hours later some Russian soldiers came, January 1945 and that's how we were freed. We were in Upper Silesia, was where we were freed. I was 19 when I was deported first, and then 21 when we were freed, exactly two years. I got back to the Netherlands in July 1945. Well, we were all in pretty bad shape some of the other women, had severe health problems I finally got real bandages because in the camp I got a tiny gauze piece and had ripped part of my dress and used that. After the place where we stayed behind, the last night when we were all there, we spent the night in an agricultural school in the dormitory. Then when the Russians came we still stayed there, but then it wasn't very safe for us, one night a couple of Russian soldiers came and they raped the youngest of our group while we were all listening, one was standing there with his gun, we couldn't do anything. We complained about the incident, and he told us there wasn't anything we could do. Then we were transferred to a field hospital, people took care of us there. After a while it was moved, and we still had not totally recuperated; only some were. Some of us were in a hospital and I was there, I remember the day Roosevelt died, one of the soldiers said to me "Roosevelt kaput". Of the six women there was one other woman who like myself was born in Germany and lived in the Netherlands and wanted to get back, and neither of us wanted to get back to Germany. The reason I wanted to go back to the Netherlands was because this fellow that I met in Westerbork, and we had decided that we wanted to get married but we wanted to wait because we felt separately we had a better chance of surviving. So I wanted to get back there to see him, my friend had a half-sister who she hoped was still living in her parents' house in Amsterdam. We didn't have anyone else, our parents were gone so. After the war Hitler's laws were null and void, so after the war we were German again, and they wanted to send us to Germany, and we both spoke Dutch fluently and we said we were Dutch and we got into the camps and ended up into the Netherlands, on the border. Anthoven was the entrance where the Red Cross was and the Dutch people, we thought at that time now were going to fess up and tell them that were really not Dutch. We didn't want to live a lie, they then said we were German we had to leave, but we protested and we were able to stay there. I went to the Red Cross and I told them to find out if my friend was still in Westerbork, and I found out not only that they were still there but my friend was just there two days before to find out anything about me. Not only was he alive, but he was still interested, it took a while for us to be together,

then another six months before we got the papers to get married, in December of 1945 we got married. After some time we didn't want to stay in the Netherlands. Since my sister was in Palestine we decided to go there and join her, we also had an offer from his Uncle in New York. First my husband went in preparation and he decided to learn cheese making where he worked in a cheese factory. I learned to sew; in December of 1947 we were able to go to Palestine. My sister lived in a Kibbutz; one of her friends was in the army the Jewish brigade which was part of the British army. He made the arrangements for us. Alia Dalich? This gave us a passport and transit visa. This bus would take us to the Kibbutz where my sister was and we lived in the kibbutz, we had a son he was little over a year old when he died of Polio. My husband didn't like the kibbutz very much and my son's death was the last straw for us, so we moved to a cooperative farm, and my husband was serving in the Israeli army he came home and wasn't feeling well one day and three days later he was dead. Needless to say I was devastated after all that and I had friends from Hamburg who lived in Panama and they said well if you want why won't you come and visit us, and so I thought why not. In May 1952 I went on a boat to Panama, and I stayed with my friends and family there and kind of thought of going back it was going to be hard it wouldn't be the same. So I stayed on thinking I can go back whenever I want, then I met a nice soldier from the U.S. who proposed to me and that's how I came to the United States in April 1955 but we were married in January 1955. My husband was a student working on his Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin he was a student of history. Finished that and he taught there for a few years, and we lived there. And then he got a job offer in West Virginia and we had spent many summers in the Blue Ridge Mountains, and we knew we liked those mountains. So we said okay let's do that for a few years, he was still writing his dissertation, he said let's go there and I'll finish my dissertation and I'll go teach somewhere. So we moved to Athens, West Virginia, it took him seven years to finish his dissertation, we really liked it there. It was always publish or perish, he didn't like writing he liked teaching. So we said well let's stay until something better comes along. We stayed in Athens, WV from 1963-1996, my husband died and by that time I thought well I have this big house, and thought about moving a bit closer to my children. So in 2001 I came to Pittsburgh. We had two children, son and daughter Alice and Daniel both born in Madison, Wisconsin. Sidney was my husband's name. Daughter is named after my mother I didn't want to name my son after my father because my father's name was Walter but in English Walter sounds like such a mouthful. So we came up with Daniel.

In West Virginia I was *the* Holocaust survivor who was willing to talk to the schools and I did that for fifteen years. When my daughter went to college, she was assigned to interview an interesting woman so she did an interview with me. It was never a secret my kids knew but never in detail. Then one time in the 80's a teacher called me and said "Mrs. Bell I heard that you worked in a factory in Germany and I'm teaching my kids about WWII would you come?", and I said "It wasn't a factory, it was a concentration camp", she said would you come and talk to them. I didn't know how I felt about it, I didn't know how I would respond emotionally. It was an elementary school, 6th graders. I said let me think about it, talked with my husband about it, I said to myself if I *can* do it, it really would be important. So I decided to give it a try, and then I kept getting calls and calls to come speak. I was traveling to give talks, so then when I came here to Pittsburgh there were 125 Holocaust survivors, I did sign up for the speakers borough, and I did go out and speak for a few years.

What is one of your favorite things to do now?

I am very active in the Peace and Justice Movement, I have been a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom for over 50 years. I feel very strongly that as a Holocaust survivor I have to speak out for human rights. I was asked by the students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish voices for peace to speak to them, and I did but before I did somebody from a Zionist organization had a big piece in the post-gazette blasting me because last year there was this big ad in the new York times signed by Holocaust survivors in opposition to the Gaza bombing and I was one of them. So this D.C guy blasted me, and he had never met me and said what I was going to say and not say. I felt once I give this talk I would be done with it, and here I had to write a response there was an excellent article about who the real Edith Bell was. It appeared before I spoke. Then all this publicity I spoke on campus at the University of Pittsburgh there was police and the dean greeted me. There were a lot of people there ready to ask very nasty questions. The Jewish chronicle was there, he did a fabulous article. Then there was another in the post-gazette from D.C attacking me again. He wasn't there, he wasn't at my talk. So then there were more and more. It was a nasty, nasty business. You know I told them what I had to say about it, and I stayed with facts and I didn't attack anybody. It ended up good. I feel as a Holocaust survivor I have to speak out for Human rights, whoever the humans are.

Did your experience in the Holocaust hold you back or motivate you?

It certainly didn't hold me back, I think it strengthened me; I am a fighter, a survivor. I get very annoyed when people introduce me as a holocaust survivor, that's not my identity. I only talk about it if I feel like it gives me extra credentials, when it has some more weight. I'm Edith Bell peace activist.