



Edith Klar

Holocaust speech to middle school students

These are notes from a couple of speeches I made in 1997 to middle school children in Las Vegas. It had been, and still is, difficult for me to talk about this.

I had never discussed this period of my life until I came to Las Vegas to retire. I never even talked about it to my children. Las Vegas opened up this opportunity and I reluctantly opened up to it at that time. I was also not sure if I wanted my name included in this, but then realized that one must put a name to all this to make this whole nightmare in our history a reality. Please realize that my notes reflect what I remember, along with what my parents related to me over the years.

I was born in Vienna, Austria in September of 1937. There was already great fear of an impending war in Europe at that time. Hitler invaded Austria in 1938, and life became a nightmare for the Jews. As time went on, it became increasingly apparent to my parents that they had to make a decision to either remain in Austria or escape to another country. They had made several attempts at immigrating to the United States, but Immigration took so long in issuing them visas that by the time they finally did, the war had begun, and they were unable to leave the country as Hitler issued a moratorium on all ships leaving the country. An escape had to be made. My father learned of a man who smuggled Jews across the Belgian border. He made contact with this man and arranged a meeting with him. My father asked him if it would be possible for him to take the family across the Belgian border. This included my mother, paternal grandmother, my father and me. At first, he was very reluctant because of the size of the family, but when my mother pleaded with him, he relented and agreed to be our guide. He informed them that they would have to travel to Luxemburg to meet him where the journey would begin. He warned them of the apparent risks of such a journey as it involved travelling for hours on foot, through the forest for miles in pitch darkness and frigid temperatures. My parents' only hope was that Belgium would be their refuge. Little did they know what awaited them in Belgium. They arranged a designated time and place to meet in Luxemburg several days later.



We left our apartment early in the morning, leaving all belongings behind and took the train from Austria to Luxemburg arriving the following morning. We immediately made our way to the designated location to meet our guide. He was waiting for us and secretly escorted us through several areas to access the woods. As we entered the forest, we immediately began to walk and run intermittently as speed and silence was of utmost importance. My grandmother had a difficult time keeping up as she was elderly and not very well, but she had no choice as we had to keep moving. We were cold, we grew hungry, terrible exhausted, and above all, frightened.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a band of French soldiers appeared. They apparently were after the guide. They grabbed him, beat him brutally, and dragged him away. My father believed they were the Vichy French [1]. Horrified at this sight, my family didn't know what to do. We were totally abandoned, and just stood there, and our only choice was to continue running and disappear further into the woods. There was no way to know where we were going. After a couple of hours, we worked our way out of the woods and happened to come upon a guest house. We went in and asked the owner if he would warm up some milk for me as I had been crying. There happened to be two men sitting there who befriended my parents. One of them wanted to know where we were headed. My father told them that we were from Austria, but that we were desperately trying to get across the Belgian border. In the course of the conversation, one of the men offered to drive us as close as possible to the border, but said that we would have to cross the border on our own as he did not have the necessary papers to get us through. Since our guide had the documentation in his possession to get us there, we had no papers. My mother informed him that they had no money to pay him for this, but offered him a couple of pieces of jewellery that her mother had given her. She told him that although it had great sentimental value to her, she would give it to him on the promise that when we got ourselves settled, we would pay him and he could send us the jewellery back. He agreed to this arrangement. As a matter of fact, he was such a kind person that he offered to take us to his home for the rest of the night and promised to take us to the border at dusk the next day. The following evening, he drove us as close to the border as he could and situated himself so that he could observe us, hopefully, running across successfully. It was difficult crossing that border as we were still quite a distance away, so it meant running in pitch darkness, basically, running for our lives. Somehow, miraculously, we were able to get across the border without incident.

We somehow made our way to Brussels and immediately made contact with the Jewish Federation for some financial assistance, which we received. However, it was not enough to sustain us, and as a result, we often ended up homeless, living on the streets, hiding behind bushes, and

moving from one area to another. Jews were required to wear a Jewish Star to identify them as Jews [2], but of course my parents did not wear one as it would have been a dead giveaway. My father's brother, who lived in Brussels, attempted to rent an apartment for us, but landlords did not want to rent to Jews, and especially to a family with a baby. So we kept moving from one place to another. Occasionally, people would allow us to stay in their home for brief periods of time. After some time, we finally were able to find a small apartment which we shared with our relatives – aunts, uncles and cousins. There were ten of us. There was very little food to go around. We managed to survive on potato soup and some bread whenever we could get it.

I was surrounded by a loving family. I believe that I probably gave them a purpose in life. Having a child around somewhat distracted them and helped their morale in these very trying times. I found my mother crying a great deal. She was worried that my father would be arrested, and she would be left on her own with an infant. My dad tried to earn some money by selling cigarettes, candies and odds and ends, but there was always a risk involved in being out on the street.

One day, my mother's worst nightmares became a reality. My father went out on an errand and never returned. It was a long time before my mother learned what happened to him. He apparently was stopped by the French Police and accused of being a spy because he spoke German. The French Police hated the Germans, so if you spoke German, you were automatically accused of being a spy. He was sent to Saint-Cyprien, France [3] and imprisoned in a labor camp for 15 months. He unsuccessfully attempted to escape twice. He made it home on the third attempt. He arrived without warning and stunned everyone. There he stood on our doorstep in the middle of the night. This was a miracle. He never wanted to discuss the circumstances of his escape, and we never asked him. I'm sure it must have been too painful to reveal.

I had a very loving relationship with my paternal grandmother. She was everything I didn't have and couldn't have in interactions with other children. I remember she would always have a treat for me. I would hear her calling me in German "Edith, Zucker!" That meant "Edith, sugar." She had this sugar cube for me that I loved, and I would come running over. I was so thrilled with that. What a special treat that was!!!

We lived on the second floor of an apartment and the bathroom was on the first level and shared by several of the tenants. Our apartment was always kept in darkness, as was the outside landing. We were hidden, and that's the way it had to be. My grandmother was a very independent person, and family members always told her that if she needed to use the restroom anytime during the night, she should wake one of them to take her as it was too dangerous to attempt going down the stairs in darkness.

One night, I was awakened by the most horrendous sound of a crash. To this day, it still resounds in my head and ears. After that, I remember much confusion, shouting, crying and then my cousin Peter coming into my room, sitting down on my bed and informing me in German, that Grandma was dead. I could not focus on this – it was so foggy to me as a small child. What happened to Grandma? Well, being the independent soul that she was, she attempted to make her way to the restroom on her own. She went out the apartment door, took a step forward, thinking it was a step and fell over the railing, down the landing, two flights to her death. I was a heartbroken child not understanding her disappearance from my life.

Life became more and more hopeless with each passing day with family members disappearing from our lives. My father's cousin was taken off the street and sent to a concentration camp to be gassed. He left a wife and child behind. My maternal grandmother and my Aunt Paula and her husband lived together in Austria. One day my uncle went out on an errand and never returned. My aunt was distraught as she didn't know what happened to him. She found out soon enough. His ashes arrived in an envelope in the mail. Then the Gestapo came after my maternal grandmother and Aunt Paula. One day, they barged into their apartment, looking for Jews, took my grandmother and dragged her out of bed. She had suffered a stroke and had been bedridden for some time. They took both my grandmother and aunt outside and according to an account by a neighbour, who spoke to my parents after the war, the Gestapo threw my grandmother in a truck as if she were garbage, and when my aunt begged them to let her go with her mother, the German shouted "no, you go somewhere else!" The neighbour came out and shouted at the officer, "what's the matter with you, don't you see this poor woman is ill – leave her alone!!!" As a result, she was brutally beaten for that. We learned through a tracing bureau after the war, that my grandmother and aunt were sent to the Buchenwald concentration camp and ultimately gassed. My Uncle Oskar, my father's brother, was taken off the street by the Gestapo and sent to a labor camp where he was tortured and starved. He contracted typhoid fever and was sent to a hospital because he had a contagious disease. After begging for food, he was given a small amount, but died shortly afterwards. With typhoid fever a person should not be fed for a certain time, but by this time he was so dehydrated and just skin and bones that he didn't have a chance of survival. His wife and five-year-old child escaped to Switzerland thinking that it was neutral country, which of course, was a fallacy. As soon as they arrived, the Gestapo was right there to arrest them sending them off to a concentration camp to eventually die in the gas chamber.

Just at the onset of the war, we received a visit from my father's sister and husband. They said they came with exciting news. They told us that a letter had come in the mail inviting them to work for the German government. The letter described ideal working conditions, good pay and a beautiful place to live in the country, fresh air, food and a promise of a bright future. My aunt said to my father, "we want you to come with us – this is a wonderful opportunity for you." My dad replied "God, no! Please don't fall for this – do not go. This is a ploy, a trick to get you there and when you get there, they'll kill you." They didn't seem to understand. He tried to explain to her that they would end up in the hands of the Gestapo, and that it would not be an ordinary job – that this had an evil motive to it. She said to him, "look at you – you have a child you can't feed, you have no home and no future to speak of – how can you pass up such an opportunity?" They felt that the German government wanted to make things right. After much pleading, they unfortunately could not be dissuaded from going. To them, this was going to paradise. They made the decision to go to this paradise which turned out to be a concentration camp and ultimately the gas chamber.

It was 1941, and it was time for my parents to move on their own, and this time they rented an apartment on the third floor on a street called Rue Picard. There, we basically lived in darkness and silence and slept in our regular clothes as we always had to be prepared for the worse, in case the Gestapo came after us. Unfortunately, unbeknownst to my parents at the time, they made a grave mistake in where they rented. It turned out that where they rented was across the street from what was called a "Kaserne" which is a barracks, but it was a German barracks. This was where the Gestapo stayed, trained and where they did their maneuvers!!! It was a horrendous faux pas. The stone building spanned about one half blocks long, and adjacent to it was a courtyard with a rod iron fence surrounding it. From the side of our window, I could see German soldiers marching, marching day and half the night in their heavy boots the sound of which chill me to this day. I can still hear them shouting and swearing day and night. The voices would reverberate across the street. It was frightening because we always feared that one day they would come and take us

away, or that someone would report us. As I said, this marching and cursing went on half the night. At the end of their maneuvers they would congregate in the café on the main floor of the apartment which was a bar owned by the landlord. They would start drinking, carousing, laughing and the music would be playing, and it all sounded so close to us that we feared they would be coming upstairs any moment. One night in the middle of the night, our doorbell rang, once, twice, three and four times. We froze in silence waiting for them to break the door open. A few seconds later, we heard the doorbell ring in the apartment across the hall from us. There was noise, scuffling and crying, and the next morning, we learned that they took away the family and their three boys.

The Germans had a strategy to trick you. When my mother would go out, from time to time, she would be stopped by an officer who would question her, "where is your Jewish Star?" Her response would always be, "I'm not Jewish." In order to earn some money she worked at various jobs. She cleaned houses and often did alterations for people. There was a time when she worked for a jeweler in his back room making sandwiches and cleaning for the staff. One day, she asked the boss for permission to run an errand. She needed to go to a store up the road, and told the boss that she would return shortly. As she was walking up the street, she felt someone behind her. When she turned around, there was one of the employees of the store trying to get to her, looking at her with terror in his eyes, and warning her not to go back to the store. She asked him what happened, and he told her that the Gestapo just picked up the family from the store, and they were headed to the school to pick up their ten-year-old boy. With this news, all my mother could do was get home as fast as she could.

There were so many incidents and miracles that occurred in our lives at that time. One day my father became ill with a stomach problem. In those days, people did not go to doctors readily as we do today. One resorted more to homeopathic methods. This particular day, we needed to get to a store to get something for my father to help him with his problem. It required taking a bus, and on this very rare occasion, my mother took me with her. It was unsafe for me to ever go out, but she decided to take a chance this time. I have a clear recollection of boarding the bus, and after travelling a short distance, the bus came to a sudden halt, and we were overwhelmed with about a dozen Gestapo ordering us out. They lined us up and several officers walked up and down pointing to each and every one of us and repeatedly asking "any Jews here, Jews, Jews, Jews?", as they walked the line. I huddled into my mother's arms and cried, and I could feel her shaking uncontrollably, continually whispering to me, "don't talk German, don't talk German." The reason for that was that talking German would have aroused suspicion because the language in Brussels is French. You never wanted to give them a chance to question you. As we waited, the officers went off to the side holding whispering conferences. Our thoughts were that we would be hauled off. After about an hour, they suddenly told us to get back on the bus. We couldn't believe how lucky we were this time. This was a miracle that rarely happened to people when they were questioned.

As the days passed, life became increasingly ominous and dangerous. My parents felt it was necessary to find better protection for me. They had heard of a convent in Brussels that hid Jewish children. Arrangements were made for an interview with the head nun of a recommended convent, and a few days later I was taken there to be hidden. The abandonment and loneliness I felt is indescribable. I thought I was being punished for something I had done, and cried and pleaded with my parents not to leave me there, and that I would not do it again. I was about four years old at the time. They had no choice but to leave me there. I was forced to wear the Catholic garb and a cross around my neck, and was told to cross in prayer day and night. I recall crying constantly causing a scene daily, and every time my parents visited me, which was almost nightly, I repeatedly asked them "why, why did you put me here ... what did I do, I won't do it again!" In retrospect, in my infantile mind, I believe I was losing my mind. The halls of the convent echoed, the nun's prayers echoed, and when they walked in the halls, their shoes echoed!!! This feeling of eeriness, as I knew it, surrounded and consumed me every moment of my time there. I felt totally abandoned. My parents would bring bits of food for me, whatever they could spare. My mother would say to dad, "she breaks my heart ... I can't see her cry all the time like this ... we need to take her home." Dad would answer her "no, this is her only chance of survival. We know we are going to die." This would go on every time my parents visited me. My mother could not be consoled. She cried bitterly and begged my father to take me home. He would try to comfort her by saying "just keep her here a little longer ... a little longer. This all will be over soon." I believe dad hoped that, somehow, a miracle would occur, and God would come down and end this nightmare and rescue us. But that was not to be for a very long time. One late Sunday evening, on another visit, once again, my mother cried to dad, this time with a different urgency and said "Arthur, I'm taking her home." She was not compromising this time. She said, "I have had a strong premonition and feel that something terrible is going to happen to Edith in this convent very soon, and we have to take action now." This time, my dad listened to her and did not argue. My mother was very intuitive, as I am, and he relented. They took me home. The very next morning, a neighbour paid a visit to my mother and asked her, "Mrs. Steiner, what was the name of the convent your daughter was in?" When she gave her the name, the neighbour told her, that she had learned that this particular convent had been raided in the middle of the night as so often tragically occurred in these convents. The Gestapo barged in and took out 60 Jewish children and their nuns. When the nuns looked out the window and saw the Gestapo approaching, they grabbed the children and hid them in closets. The Germans came in and found the children and took them along with the nuns. My parents could not believe this miracle. How close they came to losing their only child!

By this time, I was visibly ill, pale as a ghost and severely undernourished. Of course, I could not go to school as schools were raided daily and Jewish children hauled away. I was home schooled daily by my father. My parents had to watch their child deteriorate and could do nothing about it.

Another torturous two years would pass, and one morning in late spring of 1945 I was awakened by most unfamiliar sounds of music, singing and dancing in the street. I could not focus ... where were the marching boots, the shouting and cursing voices coming from across the street that were so familiar to me? What – no marching soldiers? Mom sat down on my bed and said to me "Edith, the war is over, it's Liberation Day. You can now go to school, play outside, you can do whatever you want – we're free at last." Free? What did that mean to an eight-year-old who never knew the meaning of freedom – never knew the difference? I was born into captivity. What did I know of freedom? We ran downstairs and joined the crowd to sing and dance in celebration with everyone. The most heartwarming, most touching incident, even to an eight-year-old, was when neighbours came over to us hugging us, saying "we are so glad you're alive!" Mother and dad were stunned. It was then that they realized that everyone actually knew we were Jews – and we thought it was a well guarded secret! They all knew and no one gave us away and pointed to that third floor window to divulge our secret. That's all they had to do. Even the landlord knew, and he never gave us away with the Germans in and out of his café daily – not a word from him. How could that be – it's incomprehensible for that time! It would have been so easy – the Germans were right across the street for God's sake. We had protection we never knew. I am, however, so sad when I think of the six million Jews who perished and did not have that miracle, that luxury of being protected the way we were. How and why we survived, I do not know, and it is something I will always be grateful for. The thread of our lives just seemed to weave itself in and out of danger, somehow creating an unbelievable miracle for us in avoiding capture each time. Unfortunately, so many of my family members perished in concentration camps and

were not so lucky.

The fact that the war ended was wonderful, of course, but one had to pick up the pieces of destruction from a war, and destruction there was in every aspect of life. The government ordered all children physically examined as they suspected TB from undernourishment along with other illnesses. I'll never forget the day I was examined by a woman doctor who informed us that I was on the verge of TB. I was told that I could not go to school, could not interact with other children, and had to have complete rest. I recall being very sad at that news. It took me one and a half years to recover. I started school when I was ten. In the meantime, my sister, Vivian, was born in June 1947, and my parents once again made an attempt at emigration to the US. There was a problem. This time, it was not a war, it was a different kind of problem. It was me. Immigration did not like my X-rays. They said that I was still ill, but my parents tried to explain to them that what they were seeing on the X-rays were scars which meant that my lungs had healed. They would not accept this answer and would not allow me to enter the US in this condition. After reams of paperwork and doctors' notes from everywhere proving my recuperation from this illness, lo and behold, in the winter of 1949, we were finally allowed to enter the US. We left Belgium and were initially taken to Paris after which we went to Cannes to board our ship to America. We were brought over by the H.I.A.S. organization, which was a refugee assistance program [4]. We arrived in New York and were taken to their headquarters in Manhattan and stayed with other refugees from different countries. We remained there for three months. I started school, which turned out to be a tremendous cultural shock for me. My parents proceeded to rent an apartment with the intention of settling in New York, however, it turned out that they were defrauded of \$ 200 in a scheme by a woman who posed as the landlord of that apartment. When my parents began to move into the place, the actual landlord appeared and wanted to know what they were doing there, at which time my mother told him, somehow, without knowing English, that we were simply moving into our apartment which we rented. He responded with "you did not rent this apartment from me." So that was the end of New York for them, and their last \$ 200. When my Aunt Rene and Uncle Jack from Indianapolis (mom's sister and brother) learned of the fraud, they said that New York was not for them and suggested they move to Indianapolis where they promised to help them get settled and find jobs. We picked ourselves up and headed for Indianapolis. It was very difficult for my parents without knowing the English language. A rabbi helped them find jobs. I started school, where I didn't fare well. First of all, I was a Jew in Indianapolis, and I was from Europe. I might as well have been from outer space and had leprosy. Europeans were not very well received or respected in those days. I still had some problems with the language, although I learned quite a bit of English in the three months I spent in New York, however, I was not as fluent as I would have liked. I was academically advanced as the educational system in Europe was far superior to that of the US at that time, however, it didn't do me much good because my communication skills were lacking. As my English skills improved, I went into some acting, which I loved as it allowed me an opportunity to be someone else for a time. I did not like myself very much mainly because I felt I did not fit in. I graduated from High School in 1955. After graduation I decided to take a vacation to Toronto to visit a cousin before starting college. After spending a month there, she introduced me to a young man who became my husband the following years. I had two sons who were born in Montreal. In 1967 we made our way to California to seek better employment opportunities. After several temporary positions, I became an Executive Secretary for the Walt Disney Company. I retired after 21 years and relocated to Las Vegas.

In retrospect of the Holocaust era, and all that transpired in my life, I somehow feel that I've lived through a history book. I only hope that my background and experiences have made me into a better person.

[1] In June 1940, after surrendering to the German Reich, France was divided into an occupied northern and an unoccupied southern zone, the southern one being governed by Marshal Philippe Pétain and his "Vichy regime". Vichy France wilfully collaborated with the Germans, especially regarding the persecution of the Jews in France.

[2] From June 1942 on (in the German Reich already since September 1941), Jews in Belgium had to wear a "Judenstern" or "Davidstern" on their clothes.

[3] Saint-Cyprien, department of Pyrénées-Orientales: village in the south of France.

[4] H.I.A.S.: Hebrew Immigration Aid Society.