

Eulogy for Dr. Edith Ehrlich née Schwarz

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It was just a few short weeks ago, when many of us here today, gathered to *celebrate* my mother, Dr. Edith Ehrlich, on her ninetieth birthday. Little did we know at the time that we would be meeting again so soon on such an unhappy occasion. For today we gather to *remember* my mother, taken from us so unexpectedly swiftly.

At my mother's birthday party, I held a PowerPoint presentation about her life throughout her nine decades. But how can one distil such a rich life lived during some of the most turbulent times in human history into just a few words?

As many of you know, my mother was a voracious reader, actually a culture-vulture in general, who helped foster in her children a love of art, literature, and music. Indeed, she received her doctorate in German Literature, albeit on a philosophical subject: *Suffering in Nietzsche: Motive and Masque*. One of the many authors she introduced us to was Johann Peter Hebel, a significant German literary figure who lived at the turn of the nineteenth century. Among his many short stories is one that is considered one of the most beautiful ever written: "*Unverhofftes Wiedersehen* (Unexpected Reunion)." It tells of the lost love of a woman both in her youth and in her old age. The bridge between the two stages of her life is a masterpiece of writing:

Meanwhile, Lisbon was destroyed in an earthquake, and the Seven Years War came and went ... America became free, and the united French and Spanish forces could not conquer Gibraltar ... Napoleon conquered Prussia, and the English bombed Copenhagen, and the fieldworkers sowed and reaped. The millers ground grain, and the blacksmiths hammered, and the miners dug for metal in their subterranean workshops.¹

¹ My translation of the text as found at http://hausen.pcom.de/jphebel/geschichten/unverhofftes_wiedersehen.htm on October 17, 2015.

Were we to try to encapsulate the sweep of my mother's years in a similar manner, it would read something like this:

The twenties roared, and the markets crashed. Fascism arose, and millions were killed. The iron curtain descended, and people fled. Israel was born, and Korea was split. Kennedy was assassinated, and Armstrong walked on the moon. The students rebelled, and the Berlin Wall was torn down. Osama terrorized, and Obama became President. And through it all, Edith went to school, met the love of her life, fled her home, became a bride, studied philosophy, raised a family, researched and wrote, gardened and cooked, and lived to see her children's children grow up.

But, to be a bit more prosaic and pedantic: My mother was born as Edith Schwarz in Vienna, Austria on August 2, 1925. Her parents were the unhappily married Ernst and Ernestine Schwarz, who nicknamed her Ditta. Although she grew up in relative poverty, her parents were – with some help – able to send their only child to a Jewish day-school, where she was always at the top of her class academically. One day, however, as punishment for an inadvertent infraction, she was temporarily sent to the back of her sixth-grade classroom to sit with the kids with behavioral issues, which is how she met Leonhard Ehrlich, whom she instantly befriended and who was to become the love of her life.

But their days together in Vienna were fraught with tension on account of world events well beyond their control. After Austria was incorporated into Nazi Germany, she experienced the first stages of the years of terror that were to follow. To the end of her life, she had vivid memories of Kristallnacht, whose 77th anniversary we observed just a few days ago, when her father went into hiding and her mother confronted the Nazi thugs who trashed their meager apartment. Along with most other Viennese Jews, the Schwarz family sought a way out of the hell that was Nazi Germany. Edith was the first to escape. As she later found out, it was thanks to a clerical error that her name appeared on a list of children to be taken to safety in England on a *Kindertransport* ("Children's Transport"). Leaving her sorrowing parents behind, and not knowing whether she would ever see them again, she arrived alone in foreign England, only to be told she was the

wrong girl. Since it was impossible to send her back to Vienna, she was eventually taken in by an abusive and exploitative family in the Midlands.

However, Edith had an uncle who had immigrated to the US thanks to his business connections. Once in England, she wrote to her uncle and told him the truth about the situation in Austria, something that she and her family had not been able to do until then owing to Nazi censorship. Her uncle took her letter to his boss, who immediately agreed to sponsor her parents for immigration. Thus it happened that thirteen year-old Edith saved her parents from almost certain death. Indeed, they were among the last Jews to flee Europe before the Holocaust, leaving some four months *after* the beginning of World War II.

Although her parents were met at the docks in New York by her old friend Leonhard, by the time she was able to join her parents there a few months later, he had moved to Chicago with his family. In the ensuing four or five years they saw each other only once, when Leonard, as he was now called, was able to save up some money and travel to New York to visit her. Nevertheless, when Leonard was drafted into the American Army, where he served as a highly-decorated frontline medic on the European front, Edith hopped on a bus for the three-day journey to Salina, Kansas, in order to marry him. Edith was eighteen years old at the time, and they were to remain inseparable in as perfect a partnership as can be imagined until Leonard's death four-and-a-half years ago, shortly after their sixty-seventh anniversary.

After Leonard's return from the war, the young couple spent the next few years working and studying. Edith earned a degree in Chemistry from Roosevelt College (later: University) in Chicago and trained as a nutritionist, both of which skills served her in good stead when she briefly became a professional beer taster! Eventually, Edith and Leonard decided to pursue their studies in Psychology and moved to Switzerland from 1948-1951, in part to see whether any relatives had survived the war. Few had, which made those that remained all the more precious.

While at the University of Basel, they fell under the spell of the philosopher Karl Jaspers and switched their majors to Philosophy. Thanks to a connection fostered

by Jaspers, they returned to the States to continue their studies at Yale University, from which Leonard earned his Ph.D. and Edith her M.A. It was while they were at Yale that Edith gave birth to her first child, a son, after a series of previous miscarriages. Soon after, they moved to Western Massachusetts, since Leonard had received an invitation to teach in the Philosophy Department at UMass Amherst. They were to spend the next fifty-three years at home in the Amherst area. Before long, their family had expanded with the birth of their daughter, the moving-in of Edith's mother, and the addition of a veritable menagerie of cats, a dog or two, and miscellaneous other small animals.

For about a dozen years, Edith taught German language and literature at UMass, from which she received her doctorate in 1976. Unfortunately, she lost her job there in a departmental purge of middle-aged women, an experience that was to leave her bitter until the end of her life. She then devoted her time to her family, her gardening, her gourmet cooking, her travels, and her research. She gave papers at conferences, wrote articles, translated books from German to English, published German language readers, co-founded an academic organization devoted to Jaspers, and was my father's research associate and partner, particularly in the project that consumed over thirty years of their lives, a historical and philosophical investigation into the decision-making process of Jewish community leadership under the duress of Nazi domination. In addition, she wrote an engaging and lengthy memoir of her first thirty years for her children and grandchildren. Regrettably, the latter two works are still unpublished. In spite of my certainty that my mother would live long enough to see both of them in print, it was unfortunately not to be.

Although my parents never viewed themselves as Holocaust survivors but as refugees, my mother was burdened with the guilt of the survivor, having lost just about all her extended family. As with many other people who lived through the Holocaust, both as refugees and as survivors, their greatest act of revenge was an affirmation of life. Nothing gave Edith and Leonard greater pleasure than seeing their children produce five grandchildren between 1983 and 1990. As long as their health allowed it, there was hardly a family event, whether bris, bar mitzvah, or graduation, which they did not attend, whether in Canada, the States, or Israel.

Once again, while I was certain that my mother would live long enough to become a great-grandmother, this too was unfortunately not to be.

Owing to her chronic health problems, Edith always assumed that Leonard, who rarely if ever was ill, would outlive her. Hence, she was completely unprepared for becoming a widow. To give you some idea of how inseparable Edith and Leonard were, it was only the day after his funeral that Edith spent her first night in a hotel-room alone, and it was nearly two years later that she took her first and only solo round-trip airplane voyage.

To help Edith cope with her loss, we children prevailed upon her to adopt a cat, which is how Schnurli, her constant companion during these last few years, entered her life. As she phrased it, Schnurli gave her a reason to get out of bed in the morning. Another thing that played a great role in bringing her back among the living was her ever-growing circle of dear friends at Linden Ponds Retirement Community. If there was one positive to come out of her final months of suffering, it was that she finally realized just how beloved she was, and by how many people.

Earlier this year, Edith was able to celebrate two of the happiest days of her life. On the Ides of March Edith attended the wedding of her grandson Yossi, the first of her grandchildren to wed, thus acquiring her first granddaughter-in-law, Robin. And on the first weekend of August, Edith was feted by her family and friends on the occasion of her ninetieth birthday. She had such a good time that she started making plans for her ninety-fifth. But alas, it also was not to be.

Edith was the last of her generation on the Ehrlich-Schwarz side of the family. With her loss, we lose not only a beloved mother, grandmother, and friend, but also the last link to a world that is no longer. She was the last person alive to have known and remembered Dita Herz, her best-friend from childhood days, her Onkel Philip and Tante Fantschi, as well as countless others murdered during the Holocaust. Luckily, thanks to Edith's memoirs, their memory will not have perished with Edith's passing.

To paraphrase Dylan Thomas, my mother did “not go gentle into that good night.” She “rage[d], rage[d] against the dying of the light.” After all, she still had so much to live for: her children, her grandchildren, her anticipated great-grandchildren, and the long-awaited publication of her magnum opus, *Choices under Duress of the Holocaust*, which she co-authored with her soulmate Leonard.

In many respects, my mother had a difficult life: as an impoverished child, as a Jew under Nazi domination, as a refugee, as an immigrant, and as a woman in what was then more than now a man’s world. These experiences left her quite bitter and angry at the world, especially in light of what she – and only she – perceived as her failure to live up to her full potential. Nonetheless, she evidenced a charming sense of humor with a particular passion for gallows humor, which served her well during these last few months.

As some of you know, my parents had an excerpt from Schiller’s poem “*An die Freude* (Ode to Joy)” – set so famously to music in the final movement of Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* – inscribed in their wedding rings: “*schöner Götterfunken* (beautiful divine spark),” which reflected how they felt about each other. My father certainly would have applied another line from the same poem to his Edith: “*Wer ein holdes Weib errungen, stimm in unserm Jubel ein* (Whoever has found a fair wife, join in our jubilation).” Like him, we – her family and friends – celebrate Edith and are thankful for the person she was.

I ended the eulogy for my father four years ago by quoting the closing lines of Bach’s great and controversial *Saint Matthew Passion*, which my parents loved so much. Allow me to close my mother’s eulogy by quoting some lines from a piece of music my mother felt would bring any parent to tears, or in my opinion any sentient human being: “Wotan’s Farewell” from the end of the even more controversial Wagner’s *Die Walküre*, which, while directed by a father to his daughter, may by analogy be applied to any loss, since we are all children of one creator:

Leb wohl, du kühnes, herrliches Kind!

Du meines Herzens heiligster Stolz!

Leb wohl, leb wohl, leb wohl!

Farewell, you audacious, wonderful child.

You, my heart's holiest pride.

Farewell, farewell, farewell.

Yehi zikhrach barukh!

May her memory be blessed.