

Edith and Kurt Sekules



Edith Sekules

Edith Mendel was born in 1916, halfway through the Great War. Her parents were part of Vienna's middle-class Jewish community, which was an integral part of the liberal and pluralist population of the city.

Edith found ample nourishment in 1920s and 1930s Vienna for her love of classical music and literature. Despite the political tensions of the late 1920s and early 1930s, she frequented the city's opera and musical recitals.

Problems in her father's motor business forced Edith to abandon her studies and enter the catering industry to help provide for the family. During her training she met Kurt Sekules, a radio technician, and they fell in love. In 1936, amid news of horrific antisemitism in Germany and growing fears that the Nazis would invade Austria, they married.

Two years later, Hitler did indeed march in triumph through the streets of Vienna. Edith soon lost her job at the prestigious Hotel Bristol and Kurt was also dismissed. The same anti-Semitic measures prevailing in Germany were instituted in Austria; the Nazis called it their 'great spring-cleaning'. Into this ominous climate Edith and Kurt's first child, Ruth, was born in May 1938.

The young Sekules family, like many of Vienna's Jews, resolved to leave the country as soon as they could. Edith's younger sister Lottchen, known as Lotte, left for London having managed to find a job in domestic service. After receiving encouraging replies to Kurt's application for work in Estonia, he, Edith and their baby daughter boarded a plane for Tallinn on 28 September 1938, the same day that Chamberlain left England for the Munich Conference.

With much support from the local Jewish community, Kurt found work in Estonia and the family found lodgings. They were able to keep in touch with their family in Vienna and Edith found out that her mother had managed to follow Lotte to England, where she, too, had found work as a domestic and cook. Her father and grandmother, however, were forced to remain in Vienna, in the ever-worsening conditions for Jews. They both died the following year.

Edith and Kurt applied to emigrate to Australia and in 1939 their applications were approved. However, because they were German nationals when war broke out, their permits were automatically cancelled. In June 1940 Estonia became part of the USSR and, when Hitler attacked Russia, the Sekules family became enemy aliens. It was not long before they were arrested by the secret police.

They were taken in cattle trucks to Harku, a detention camp near Tallinn. A great many of their fellow travellers were Jewish refugees like themselves, arrested because of their German passports.

They were shunted eastward from camp to camp ahead of the advancing Nazi army, each time in crowded cattle trucks, vulnerable to attack from the air. Although conditions were nothing like the horror of the Nazi concentration camps, rations were basic, space was minimal and the work by which prisoners could earn extra food was arduous. The worst hardships, however, were caused by the extremity of the arctic winters. Many prisoners did not survive them.

During the winter of 1944 Edith suffered a miscarriage and had to undergo an operation. She endured the operation without any anaesthetic, because none was available. After it was completed she was allowed a 15-minute rest and instructed to walk the half-hour journey back to the camp alone.

The war eventually came to an end, but the prisoners were not released. Returning Russian soldiers were given priority on the railway lines and Edith and Kurt did not commence their tortuous journey home until January 1947. By then they had three young children.

The economic conditions in post-war Austria were hard, and the Sekules family decided to move to Northern Ireland, where Kurt's parents had escaped before the war. They travelled via London, where Edith was reunited with Lotte and her mother. Until a letter from the Kok Uzek camp in Kazakhstan made its way to London after the war, Edith's mother had assumed that Edith and Kurt had fallen victim to the Nazis. She had had trees planted in Israel in their memory, which Edith was able to visit some years later.

With encouragement from a family friend, Edith was persuaded to start a knitting business, a venture which was welcomed in Northern Ireland. She found suitable premises in Kilkeel, a fishing village in County Down, and bought several knitting machines. The business became successful and eventually supplied knitwear to clients all over the world. It is still in operation.

With all my experience of camp life to that point, I concluded that the hardest part of being a prisoner was not the loss of freedom or being forced to be in a group all the time but the fact that all decisions were made for you by someone else and without any prior warning. This depersonalised you through being stripped of any freedom of choice. It was all-embracing – when, how and where to travel or go; how to be housed; when, what and where to work; when to get up and when to go to sleep. These are all assumed as automatic choices when you are free; in camp all choice is abruptly withdrawn from you.

From Edith Sekules, Surviving the Nazis, Exile and Siberia (London, 2000).