



Mrs. Edith Gerda Decker

July 25, 1926 - April 25, 2024

Edith Gerda Decker, nee Koschig, is an extraordinary individual known for her unparalleled courage, tremendous compassion, and love of all children. Edith's story begins on July 25, 1926 in Sternalitz, Germany. She was the middle child of eight children, daughter of Fritz and Gertrude Koschig. In the early 1930s the family moved to Kranowitz on the Czechoslovakian border where her father, Fritz Koschig, secured a prominent position as a border patrol agent. He tempered the strict regulations by allowing easy passage for those who merely wanted to visit family and friends. Edith recalled an idyllic childhood filled with beauty and joy. She remembered wandering through the forests, gathering wildflowers and blueberries in the mountains with her sisters as her brothers explored the nearby caves. In the winters she'd hitch a ride with her friends by grabbing the runners of horse drawn sleighs gliding through the snow. She'd often recall the kindness of the butcher's wife, who on ice cold winter mornings would offer the Koschig children hot chocolate and a chance to warm their toes by the fire before continuing on to school. On December 6th, St. Nicholas, a village elder dressed in heavy furs and carrying bundles of treats would visit the children in their houses, instilling fear as he commanded them to recite prayers or leap over logs before rewarding them with nuts and foil wrapped chocolate ornaments. And on Christmas Eve, the Christ child was said to visit the home while the family attended evening service at the Lutheran Evangelical church. The Koschig children would return home to an eight-foot pine tree glittering with candlelight and decked out with

presents. Life was filled with wonder, family love was overflowing, and friends were just short walk away – even if political boundaries were drawn. Edith would often cross the border through the cornfields to visit a Czech friend who also passed freely to stay with the Koschig family. Edith realized from an early age that borders should not be constraints, that cultures could be shared and celebrated, and that people from various ethnicities should be respected.

By the late 1930s the family moved to Bernstadt, Herr Fritz Koschig's hometown and birthplace. A small artist town, home to the famous Jewish Expressionist painter Ludwig Meidner, Bernstadt was nestled between lush pastures and wildflower meadows. Edith spent her early teen years running through the poppy fields, hiking in the pine forests, and foraging for mushrooms. She'd recall picking berries with her mother while her little brother Gustav whistled like a bird, or meeting friends for an afternoon "kaffeeklatsch" and mocha torte down by the Ring, the town square. In the spring she would gather pussy willows from the riverbank, and in winters, that same riverbank was flooded to create an ice rink where she would skate for hours with her siblings and friends under the thick frothy snowflakes. In the holiday season, Herr Koschig, who worked as a quality control manager at the local sugar factory, would bring home armloads of sugar cones for all the children and their friends.

But the sweetness was short-lived. The specter of war loomed heavily. By the early 1940s, Edith and her family felt the tension from political unrest and witnessed the sorrows as men left for military service and as Jewish friends disappeared from school. The children felt angry and confused when Nazi propaganda surfaced. Yet, Herr Fritz Koschig, a great advocate for human rights, would, in staunch opposition to Hitler, forbid his family to listen to Hitler on the radio. He commanded that his elder sons, Manfred and Ehrenfried, enlist in the Navy to avoid recruitment by the dreaded SS troops who were known for their inhumane treatment of minorities and dissidents. And Herr

Koschig's actions became even more bold as he engaged in underground activities. Using his experience as a former border patrol agent, he obtained documents and other resources to help his Jewish friends and neighbors escape from Germany.

Edith's innocence was further eroded when Bernstadt housed prisoners of war near the residential area. Her younger brother Gustav would beg his mother for bread to take to the prisoners. He'd stand by the fence in a casual pose, only to stealthily toss chunks of bread over to the inmates.

But by early 1945 any semblance of routine living came to an abrupt halt. One bitter cold winter evening, in mid-January, the sky glowed ominously. The locals, feeling a sense of dread from the growing tragedies of war, violence, and unrest, saw this as an omen of suffering to come. A few nights later, Russian soldiers stormed the Koschig house, ordering the family to pack up and leave the area. With the advance of the Russian army, the citizens of Bernstadt, as well as those of all Silesian towns, east of the Oder River, were marched south. The family left on foot with few possessions, with the youngest daughter Ruth still in a stroller. Edith's mother packed a trunk of valuables and fine linens, only to later discard it because it was too heavy a physical burden. But the emotional burdens were even greater. Edith's sister Irmgard remembers the sorrow of leaving behind her new ice skates, a Christmas gift from her bother Ehrenfried, and the greater dread that the lost gift would symbolize her lost literal connection with her brother. The family battled freezing temperatures, hunger, and fear. At that point Edith had already been sent separately to a women's military training camp in Czechoslovakia.

Chaos ensued as the mass exodus took place. The Germans were marched to Czechoslovakia, for what they believed was a temporary stay, a "pause" as

Irmgard would later describe in a poem, only to be persecuted and victimized by the Czechs for the Germans' affiliation with the Nazis. The Germans were chased out on foot, but had nowhere to go. Edith was still at the training camp when in May of 1945, soldiers disbanded the camp, telling the women to save themselves if they could, since the war was over. But by that time, she had long since lost contact with her family who was forced to move further east in 1946 to what would become East Germany in 1949.

In the brutally cold winter of 1946, Edith joined a horse-drawn caravan that was headed back to Silesia, but on hearing that her hometown was bombed by the Russians and occupied by the Poles, stayed on the outskirts and found work as a bookkeeper in a nearby farm.

One day, an acquaintance shouted out that Edith's brother Fritzel, who had been recruited to fight for the Germans at age 15 was alive and well – and back in the still-standing family home, waiting for the family to return, a homecoming that would never occur. But Edith was overjoyed that one family member was close by, and to add to her astonishment, the Russians, whom she had feared, escorted her back, and even presented her with a bouquet of flowers, all because of their respect for Herr Koschig, who had once been imprisoned in a Siberian labor camp in WW1 but managed to escape after five attempts. He had communicated his story in Russian with the Russian soldiers before he left Silesia, and therefore the Russians protected Edel and Fritzel from the Polish soldiers, as the two children celebrated their reunion. Meanwhile, the Russian women who had taken over work at the sugar factory provided Fritzel and Edith with extra milk and bread while other German neighbors who had made their way back would bring necessities. Fritzel would later describe those days as “horrible-beautiful” times. In the throes of despair and unrest, they discovered the kindness of friends and even goodwill from those they once thought of as enemies.

But after many months, the Russians declared, in broken German, that it was time for Fritz and Edith to leave since the Poles were permanently taking over the territory. They escorted them to the border of the newly formed East Germany. Fritz and Edith found their way to an aunt's house in Grossenhain and were later re-united with their parents and many of their siblings. But the Rubble Years were marked by destruction, alienation, severe food shortages, uncertainty and despair. Gustav, the young brother who had once whistled bird songs joyfully, the one who had brought bread to the prisoners, now begged his mother for more food for himself, declaring that he was not yet ready to die from hunger. And the youngest sister Ruth had hardly known a home cooked meal since she was only offered raw fruits and vegetables while the family had traveled on the open road. The Christmas tree was a mere walking cane into which Fritzel bored holes to insert a few pine branches. Gustav learned to make sandals from leather scraps for friends in exchange for sausage from their smokehouse. All the siblings contributed to the family. They worked wherever they could, brought whatever they could, bartered for whatever they could. But the family, realizing that life was unsustainable, vowed to cross the border, even at great peril, to West Germany. Yet, they had to go separately and stealthily as the East German authorities closed the border and gave orders for soldiers to capture, and sometimes even shoot, escapees.

So, one spring day, Edith left abruptly, without telling her parents so that they could honestly say they had no idea what had happened to her. Though her father later fell victim to brutal interrogation tactics, Edith left undetected. She embarked on an arduous trek through the forests of southeastern East Germany, sometimes traveling alone, sometimes with others, sometimes running around in circles, sometimes disguising herself as an old woman searching for firewood. Once, she even crawled through the forests to avoid capture after a farmer's wife had betrayed the group of young escapees. Then one morning, after a stay with a woman on the East German border, Edith

casually announced she would gather some birch branches to decorate the woman's entrance, as was customary, in celebration of May Day. She carefully made her way through the birch forest and then took off running. After many hours, the forest grew sparse, the sky opened, and a new view emerged. Edith made it to West Germany. It was May 1st, 1952.

One by one all but one of the Koschig family crossed the border to the West. Gustav came over in 1954 at age 21. Fritzel was the last to arrive, having been caught twice as he tried to exit through West Berlin. Once he even escaped by jumping from a second story window, losing a shoe in the process. Some of the Koschig family members stayed with friends, while some married and stayed with in-laws. They settled in various parts of West Germany: Irmgard near Hanover, Manfred in Mannheim, Ehrenfried in eastern France, Gustav near Bochum, Ruth in Munster, and Fritzel in Cologne, and later Wuppertal. And their parents settled in Munster. One sister, Vera, remained for several years in East Germany where she married and had a child before her untimely death from cancer. Her husband had been sent to a concentration camp for having given potatoes from his farm to some starving people.

Edith, who had come into West Germany from the south, made her way up to the Frankfurt area where work opportunities were more favorable. In Weisbaden, she worked with refugees from East Germany and war orphans. Always compassionate, she would identify with those torn from their communities and with mothers who had lost their children. And she empathized with children who were orphaned, taken from their parents, or given up for adoption. But her love of children gave her a purpose. Through the Red Cross she found placement with American families who needed child care.

By the mid-1950s she was hired as a nanny by the Hardaway family, an American military family stationed in Frankfurt. Colonel Hardaway, who later became Brigadier General Hardaway, was a distinguished surgeon who had served during the Pearl Harbor attacks. The family embraced Edith, and with their kindness and love, she slowly began to heal from the horrors of her experiences.

Following is an excerpt from the diary of the late Mrs. Lee Hardaway:

May 15, 1956

I was horrified to discover Edith ironing this afternoon. "This is supposed to be your day off!" She never goes out, except for her periodic reports to the police. (She is a refugee from the East Zone.) ...We have a lot of panhandlers at the door, and once when a woman came wanting money or food, I had Edith give her a loaf of bread, and later asked her what about these people, wasn't there any set-up for looking after them?" ... She said they could get work if they wanted to, and that many times in the East Zone [she and her family] had gone four or five days without eating, but they didn't go knocking on people's doors, saying "Please give me..." She is very proud and very honest. My main difficulty is to keep her from working herself to death.

Edith focused on housekeeping duties, but especially loved the child care. She grew to love the Hardaway children whole-heartedly, and they remained dear to her for the rest of her life. The Hardaways, having appreciated her dedication to the children and good work ethic, had an interesting proposal for her.

This excerpt from the aforementioned diary references the exciting offer:

July 23, 1957

...Edith and I cooked. Edith wanted to know what a cowboy was, and I did my best to explain. Joan wanted to know if Edith wouldn't like to see America and when she said she would, I asked her if she would consider going back with us...she said she would like to, and that before the war she had planned to go to a trade school and then immigrate to one of the colonies in Africa. She was fascinated when I told her we had a farm and eagerly asked if we would be living on it...

And so, Edith accepted the offer to accompany the Hardaways to America, and on March 3, 1958 entered the U.S. through Ellis Island. But even in the New World, far from war-torn Europe, the effects of the war haunted her. She recalled being terrified of the skyscrapers, fearing they would fall on her just as the buildings of German cities collapsed and lay in rubble. Still, she felt a new adventure was about to begin.

The family was sent to the South as Colonel Hardaway was stationed in Fort Benning, GA. But there, a new kind of war was brewing, unrest from the discrimination against African-Americans. So, Edith, remembering her own pain and her father's values, would challenge the status quo. She would shock department store saleswomen by drinking from "colored" fountains or make a statement by sitting in the back of the bus with minorities. She quietly but fiercely took on the Civil Rights Movement, standing up for peace and justice for all.

In the early 1960s Edith moved with the Hardaways to the suburbs of Washington, D.C., near Silver Springs, MD. where she continued to devotedly care for the children, and even accompanied the family on a road trip across America. Still enchanted with the cowboy mystique and the Native American culture, she was eager to learn the history and culture of the American past. Back in D.C. she also did some socializing. She attended what she called the "Americanization" school to learn English. There she met her future husband, Francois Decker. They married in April 1961, and Edith gave birth to daughter

Marlis in February 1962.

With the joy of motherhood, Edith embraced her role as wife and mother in Riverdale, MD. She became a dedicated wife and an exemplary mother. She was loving, kind, and devoted. In 1967 She moved to Baltimore with her husband and daughter where she continued to focus on acclimating to American life. She loved watching westerns, laughed heartily at comedies, enjoyed shopping and outings to the park. She was emotionally invested in her daughter's life, took an interest in every facet of her daughter's school and social life, and celebrated her every small accomplishment. Despite additional hardships due to financial worries and her husband's failing health, she found joy in small gestures, lovely memories, the laughter of children, and little keepsakes. She treasured hand-made gifts – and kept them all. To the very end of her life, she still had her gifts from the Hardaway children.

But the war never left her. She continued to suffer from post-traumatic stress; she often cried, pined for her home in Germany and her siblings, and reminisced about her life in Bernstadt. Still, every day Edith also found a way to affirm life by focusing tasks at hand and meeting challenges with empathy. She could be critical, but she was fair. She gave praise where praise was due. She would express herself openly and directly. She kept an eye on bigger social issues. She continued to championed human rights. She even bought her daughter a black doll in the early 1960s. She expressed her empathy for all children who suffered whether from war or other tragedies. She socialized with people from all walks of life, attended ethnic festivals, embraced all cultures, and hoped and prayed for harmony and freedom.

When bigger joys seemed far away, Edith would focus on the small joys, finding the macrocosm in the microcosm. She noticed interesting prints and flowering plants. She loved polka dots and pom-poms. She relished mocha cakes and coconut flakes. She loved miniature dolls and straw hats. She

attended craft fairs and harvest celebrations. And when she later had grandchildren, she became a doting grandmother. She would visit her daughter's family often near Philadelphia, and later made the long trip from Baltimore to upstate New York several times a year to stay for weeks with her grandchildren. She would spend hours taking her grandchildren on leisurely walks, playing games with them, telling stories, or making crafts. She treasured their words, their smiles. and their gestures. She was nurturing, and supportive. But she was also exuberant. As her granddaughter, Sophia noted, she would express delight with intensifiers to emphasize her approval of an action: "Das ist aber schon! (But that really is so great!) she would often say in praise.

In her last years, Edith found inner peace. She reconnected with long lost relatives of the Clinton family, spent hours talking to Fritzel, Irmgard, and Gustav on the phone, and continued to enjoy the small luxuries of cake and coffee or an outing to a festival. She later lived with her daughter where, in her last seven years, she enjoyed the peace and comfort of family presence. She was grateful for every small gesture of kindness, and she would show her gratitude with a warm radiant smile, a smile she managed to give even to the very last days of her life, a smile that touched all those who came into her presence.

On April 25, 2024 she died peacefully in her sleep with her daughter Marlis by her side.

Edith Decker is survived by her daughter, Marlis Paffenroth and grandchildren, Sophia and Charles Paffenroth, the Clinton family, Gustav Koschig and family, the Shirdewahn family, and the Schneider family.

In lieu of flowers, donations in Edith's memory can be made to Shriners Hospital for Children or Save the Children, in care of the Dwyer Funeral

Home, 776 North St, Pittsfield MA 01201

Tribute Wall

BB

“ Over 45 years ago I met Mrs. Decker via Marlis. Mrs. Decker was an impressive woman, and was always very nice to me—she was also a great cook! She had a hard life during and after WWII, but she made it through stronger for the experience and raised a wonderful daughter, Marlis. I had the great pleasure of working with Marlis in high school which is how I met Mrs. Decker. She will be missed dearly, and her memory is a blessing to those who knew her.

Brian Bresnan - January 30, 2025 at 08:38 PM

SP

“ 9 files added to the album Omi



Sophia Paffenroth - June 09, 2024 at 04:31 PM

JH

“ Thanks so much for that beautiful story of her life. Knowing more about her childhood and family gives more context to my own memories. It was painful to learn about the trauma she suffered after the war but makes me so glad that found such happiness in making her own family. She was so loved! It is so gratifying to see those pictures of her wearing that brilliant smile in the midst of that family. I know her passing leaves a hole that can never be filled but she also leaves some wonderful memories as well as a legacy in her daughter and grandchildren.

Joan Hardaway - May 20, 2024 at 12:16 AM

SP

Thank you for your heartfelt sympathy and touching comment. We were all moved by your response. I'm glad you enjoyed reading the full story and that it added breadth and depth to your memories with her.

Sophia Paffenroth - May 26, 2024 at 02:15 PM



“ 18 files added to the album Life Tributes



Dwyer Funeral Home Inc. - May 12, 2024 at 12:59 PM

BW

“ Thank you for sharing this beautiful story of your Mom with us. I cried all the way through. What a beautiful woman, and what havoc men can wreak on his fellow man. We all have the choice to bring life or death to others. I took a moment to celebrate the life of your beautiful, outstanding Mom. And thanks for the pictures. This should be a book.

Barbara W - May 11, 2024 at 07:27 AM

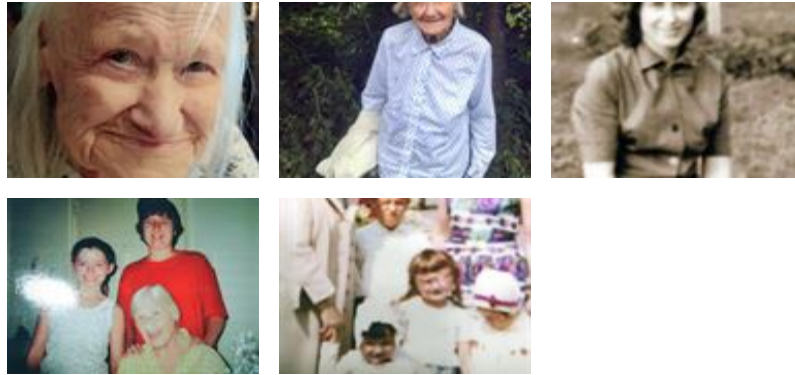
SP

Thank you so much for your beautiful comment, Barbara.

Sophia Paffenroth - May 17, 2024 at 09:07 PM



“ 116 files added to the album Life Tributes



Dwyer Funeral Home Inc. - May 08, 2024 at 05:11 PM

JM

This is an amazing story of a life well-lived, beautifully written and meaningfully detailed. It's wonderful to know our family members – where they were from, how they lived, and what they overcame. It is also important to know these stories collectively and historically. The generations that came before us built the communities and influenced the societies we live in.

Marlis, I met your mom just once or twice but have heard so much about her. I know how very much you loved and cared for her. Thank you for sharing her remarkable story with us!

Julie McGee - September 23, 2024 at 06:41 PM