

Edith Szanto

Title: *Reminiscence*

Author: Edith Szanto

Publisher: Sydney Jewish Museum

Place of Publication: Darlinghurst, NSW.

Year of Publication: 2006

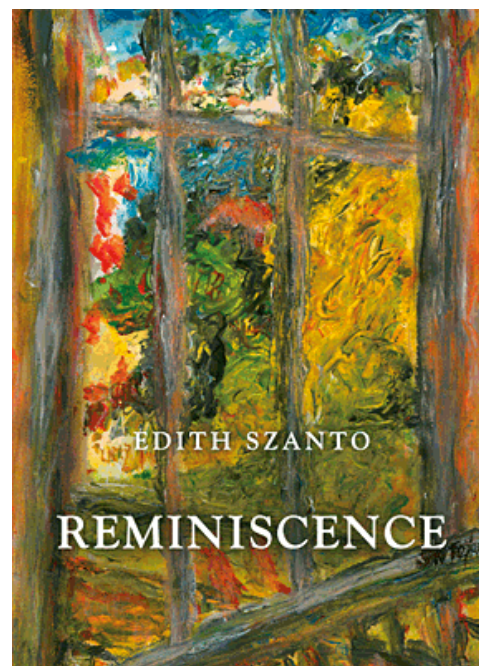
Location of Book: Monash University, Lamm Jewish Library, Sydney Jewish Museum, State Library of Victoria and other public libraries.

Cities/towns/camps: Hungary: Budapest, Szekszárd, Pestszenterzsébet ghetto, Obuda transit camp; Poland: Auschwitz-Birkenau; Czechoslovakia: Meziměstí (Halbstadt) labour camp; Austria: Andau, Vienna, Salzburg DP camp; Australia: Sydney.

Note: those cities/towns/camps underlined are those which are most central to the narrative.

Genre: Memoir

Key events/experiences: ghetto; concentration camp; Hungarian Uprising.



Reminiscence chronicles the extraordinary life of Hungarian survivor Edith Szanto, from her childhood during World War I to her persecution under the Nazi and Communist regimes, culminating in her flight to Austria following the Hungarian Uprising of 1956. Edith later settled in Sydney where, at the age of ninety, she wrote her memoir.

The book is 198 pages long. Pages 1-51 describe the author's childhood during and after the First World War. Pages 52-73 recount her struggles amidst the rise of antisemitism. Pages 74-123 follow the Nazi-occupation of Budapest and the author's deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau with her family. Pages 124-55 describe her transfer to the Halbstadt labour camp, liberation and journey home. Pages 156-72 recount her marriage and life under Communist rule. Pages 173-98 chronicle her family's flight to Austria following the Hungarian Uprising in 1956 and subsequent emigration.

Edith Szanto (née Krausz) was born 31 August 1913 in Budapest to German-speaking parents Emilia and Ernő Krausz. During the First World War she spent her early years on her grandparent's farm in Szekszárd while her father served in the army. Her idyllic childhood ended when her father returned after five years as a prisoner of war. The family lived in Pest, where they struggled financially. Edith attended school, learning Hungarian for the first time. When she was thirteen, her brother Janos was born. After matriculating in 1933, Edith was unable to secure stable work in the antisemitic environment. She studied fashion design and worked for a time as a dress designer in a Jewish store.

During this time Edith fell in love with young composer, Laszlo Rosenberg. In 1942, Laszlo and her brother were conscripted into the Hungarian labour brigade. In May 1944, when she was aged 31, Edith and Laszlo married during one of his furloughs. Late in the war Laszlo died on a death march to Austria.

In March 1944, when German forces occupied Hungary, imposing harsher restrictions on Jews, the Krausz family was forcibly relocated to the Pestszerterzsébet ghetto on the city outskirts. In late June, Hungarian gendarmes deported the ghetto inhabitants to the Obuda brick factory alongside hundreds of Jewish deportees from the Hungarian countryside. After three days, they were transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau by train in crowded cattle trucks, where they were met with unimaginable scenes of brutality. At the selection, Edith was separated from her family who were subsequently murdered in the gas chambers.

After several months of inhumane mistreatment in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Edith was sent to the Halbstadt forced labour camp in the Sudetenland to work in a munitions factory. Due to her fluency in German, she was assigned clerical work and spared hard labour. Recognizing her artistic skills, the chief engineer trained Edith in technical design, transferring her to a special weapon drafting department where she was given extra food rations and protection.

In May 1945, the camp was abandoned by the SS personnel and liberated soon after by the Russian army. Amid the chaos, the prisoners hunted down and enacted violent retribution against their former SS captors. Edith embarked on a perilous journey home, travelling on foot and train, relying on stolen food and the kindness of strangers. Exhausted, and having narrowly escaped sexual assault by Soviet soldiers, she arrived in Bratislava in a terrible condition and was briefly hospitalized. After recovering, she made her way to Budapest with aid from the UNRRA and Jewish relief organisations, only to find her home occupied by strangers. Wandering the streets aimlessly, she was eventually reunited with her surviving aunt and brother.

Following a lengthy legal battle, Edith and Janos reclaimed their home. Through friends, Edith met Dr. István (Pista) Szanto, a fellow Holocaust survivor who had lost his wife and daughter in Auschwitz. The pair fell in love and married in June 1948. Tragically, Edith suffered an ectopic pregnancy which rendered her unable to have children.

Under Hungary's Communist regime, life became increasingly perilous. Due to his ties to the Socialist Party, Pista was arrested, branded a "class enemy" and forced to retire from his medical profession to work as a labourer. Although Edith secured work designing communist propaganda posters, the couple lived under constant surveillance, endured repeated raids, and faced the ever-present threat of arrest and deportation.

The regime's authoritarian rule was ended by the Hungarian Uprising of October 1956. After peaceful university protesters were shot by police, violent street battles erupted between revolutionaries, Hungarian police, and Soviet troops. The fighting resulted in

many casualties and Edith narrowly missed being shot whilst queueing for bread. By 11 November, Soviet forces crushed the revolution and Budapest fell under Soviet control. Mass arrests and executions ensued and tens of thousands fled the country.

With Janos and Pista facing arrest for their socialist connections and involvement in the initial protests, the family made a harrowing escape to Austria, evading Russian patrols and walking for miles in darkness to reach the Austrian border. When they finally arrived in the Austrian village of Andau, crowded with refugees, local residents and others provided shelter and transportation to Vienna. In Vienna, the Krausz family was supported by Jewish aid organisations that provided food, shelter, and secured Australian landing permits. In May 1957, they briefly relocated to Salzburg before travelling to Marseille where they boarded a ship to Australia. After a four-week voyage, they arrived in Sydney. Initially settling in Melbourne for work, Edith and Pista returned to Sydney after six months to be with Janos and his family.

In 2003, Edith began writing her memoir by hand in a local café. Her manuscript was later submitted to the Sydney Jewish Museum, translated from Hungarian into English, and published in 2006 as part of the Museum's "Community Stories" project.

Reminiscence is a deeply personal and poignant memoir of Edith's life and her wartime experiences. The memoir vividly recounts her pre-war, war and post-war memories, but does not cover her life in Australia. While some historical dates and timeline of antisemitic persecutions are vague, the memoir intimately captures the author's lived experiences and trauma. It also provides significant insight into post-war life under Communist rule. Through Edith's reflections, *Reminiscence* offers powerful testimony of grief, resilience, and hope.