

Helen Staub

Title: *Helen Staub: A Holocaust Memoir*

Author: Helen Staub

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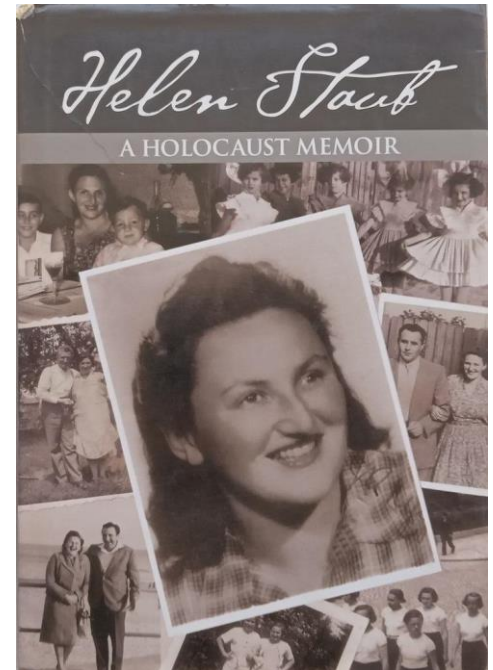
Location of Book: Lamm Jewish Library and Sydney Jewish Museum.

Cities/towns/camps: Czechoslovakia: Sudoměřice, Brno, Theresienstadt, Prague; Poland; Auschwitz-Birkenau and Merzdorf concentration camps; 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.



Helen Staub is the author of her 191-page eponymous book. Helen endured two years in the Theresienstadt ghetto until she volunteered to accompany her mother on one of the last transports to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Her mother was murdered on arrival, but Helen survived multiple concentration camps with the support of her cousin. They were freed in May 1945.

Pages 1-36 provide a brief account of the author's upbringing in Czechoslovakia and her life under Nazi occupation. Pages 35-56 describe her family's two-year incarceration in Theresienstadt from 1942-44. Pages 57-71 cover her internment in the Auschwitz and Merzdorf concentration camps. Pages 72-126 describe liberation, her return to Czechoslovakia and eventual emigration to Sydney in 1949. Pages 127-191 describe her marriage and family in Australia and return travels to Europe. The memoir is interspersed with 72 photographs of the author and her extended family.

Helena Staub (née Rindova) was born on 8 July 1925 in the rural village of Sudoměřice, Czechoslovakia, to upper-class, assimilated Jewish parents Marie and Josef Rind. She had an older brother Jarous. Her parents owned a grocery store, and her father also worked as an accountant. She attended the local public school and had good relations with her Christian neighbours. In 1937, the family moved to Brno for her father's work.

In March 1939, Brno fell under Nazi occupation, leading to the dismissal of Helen's father and the family's return to Sudoměřice. By 1940, escalating antisemitic restrictions barred the children from school, while additional measures forced Helen's father and brother into manual labour to support the family.

In October 1941, Nazi authorities initiated the mass deportation of the Jewish population and Helen's extended family was sent to various camps and ghettos. In

November 1942, after surrendering nearly all their possessions, the Rind family was deported to Theresienstadt.

In the crowded and unsanitary ghetto conditions, disease and death was rife and carts loaded with corpses daily carried the dead for burial. Luckily, through connections to the Judenrat, her father obtained work as a ghetto policeman whilst Helen's mother worked as a housekeeper to an important Judenrat member. Helen and her cousin, Milena, also secured life-saving work as agricultural labourers in the nearby fields.

With insufficient food and provisions, Helen sustained the family by smuggling food from the fields into the ghetto. In the winter of 1943, she fell severely ill with jaundice and hepatitis, but survived due to the devoted care of her mother who spoon fed her from her own meagre rations. After six weeks, though barely able to walk, Helen returned to work.

From the summer of 1942 transports to Auschwitz increased. Although the Rind family was temporarily spared due to their employment and connections, by 1944 nearly all their extended family had been deported and Helen was twice pulled from a transport. In late September 1944, Helen's father and brother were sent on a men's transport to Auschwitz. A few weeks later, Helen's ailing mother and her aunt were selected for a women's transport. Although Helen and Milena were spared as valuable workers, they volunteered to accompany their mothers, hoping to protect them.

Their hopes were shattered upon arrival when the girls were separated from their mothers. A few days later, they learnt from *Kapos* in their barracks that their mothers had been murdered in the gas chambers. In November 1944, Helen and Milena were transported to Merzdorf, a subcamp of Gross-Rosen, where they laboured in a linen factory loading coal. Despite the gruelling work, food rations were better than in Auschwitz and their health improved.

On 9 May 1945, two months before Helen's twentieth birthday, the camp was liberated by the Russian army. After receiving aid from Russian soldiers and sympathetic locals, Helen and Milena embarked on the perilous journey home with a small group of Czech survivors. Enroute, they witnessed brutal acts of retribution by Soviet soldiers, including the killing of SS women and widespread sexual violence against civilians.

After days of travel on foot (and with assistance from Russian-Jewish soldiers and local civilians) they reached Prague and sheltered in Milena's former apartment. As more survivors returned, Helen reunited with her father and brother. In July 1945, the family returned to Sudoměřice.

An avid writer, Helen kept a diary during her time in Theresienstadt, although it was lost in Auschwitz. Upon her return, she began again documenting her wartime experiences. In September 1945, Helen and her father moved to Prague, where she enrolled in a dental nursing school. Although she had not completed high school and the course was overbooked, a professor – himself a former concentration camp prisoner – heard

of her ordeal and personally ensured her enrolment. Helen graduated the following year and began working at a dental clinic.

In late 1945, Helen's father fell in love with fellow survivor Herminka. As life under communism became increasingly difficult, Herminka's son, Joe, emigrated to Australia in 1948. Helen, too, sought emigration. With assistance from the Jewish Welfare Society she obtained landing permits and departed via Vienna and Rome for Genoa, where she boarded a ship to Australia, arriving in Sydney in March 1949.

Meanwhile, her family in Prague faced worsening communist restrictions, prompting Helen to secure landing permits for them. They arrived in Australia in November 1949, but tragically, her father succumbed to an undiagnosed illness five months later. In 1959, aged 34, Helen married Harry Staub, a Polish immigrant who had survived the Holocaust in Russia. Together they had three sons, Joe, David, and Phillip.

Helen Staub presents a deeply personal and unflinching account of wartime experiences. Drawing heavily on diary entries composed shortly after the war, the memoir vividly conveys the emotional and physical hardships endured. The narrative is interwoven with extensive diary excerpts (translated into English) as well as letters from friends and family. It documents violence endured post-liberation with stark honesty, including references to sexual assault. The memoir stands as a poignant testament to the love and family bonds that sustained the author through unimaginable adversity.