

Edith Preston

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

Genre: Memoirs

Key events/experiences: concentration camp

How I climbed back to life



The story of a Hungarian Holocaust survivor
by Edith Preston

How I climbed back into life is the 50-page memoir of Hungarian survivor, Edith Preston who survived Ravensbrück concentration camp with her sister.

Pages 1-13 briefly recount the author's family history and childhood. Pages 14-20 describe the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944, her deportation to Ravensbrück and recovery in Sweden after liberation. Pages 24-35 describe her emigration to and life in Israel, including her experiences as a nurse during the Israel War of Independence. Pages 36-50 recount her emigration to Australia.

Edith Preston was born 18 September 1929 in Budapest to parents Irena Hausman and Benjamin William Schimmel. She had an older sister Magda, born in 1922. In 1933, when Edith was just three-years-old, her father left for British Mandate Palestine. Through him, the girls obtained Palestinian citizenship, becoming British-protected citizens – a move that would be instrumental to their survival. Their plans to reunite in Palestine were interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War. Despite the war, life in Hungary was peaceful from 1939-1943.

In March 1944, Nazi Germany occupied Hungary and German soldiers arrived in Budapest. Soon after, the antisemitic measures already in place were extended, the Jewish population was forced to wear the yellow star, Jewish schools were closed, their property confiscated, and a curfew established. During this time, a terrified Edith rarely left the house.

By October, fierce fighting raged and the family often hid in the basement cellar. The three women lived at home until November when they moved to one of the safe houses established by Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg. For reasons that are not explained, after a few days they left, only to be captured by Hungarian police and

forced to join a death march. Three weeks later they arrived in Dunaszerdahely, in present-day southern Slovakia, where they were loaded onto cattle wagons and deported to Ravensbrück concentration camp, arriving in December.

In the camp the women were stripped of their clothing, given rough sack-like dresses, and crammed into freezing, overcrowded barracks without blankets or pillows. There they endured harsh and unhygienic conditions, subsisting on meagre food rations of black bread. They also suffered beatings by a whip-wielding *Kapo* and were forced to stand at Appell (the twice daily roll calls) for hours in the freezing cold. During a dysentery outbreak, Edith fell severely ill but recovered with the aid of her family. Her mother was often subjected to severe beatings. One morning, too frail to get out of bed, she was taken to hospital where she died. Her body was taken away before her daughters could say their final farewell.

Not long after their mother's death, Madga and Edith were selected for a transport to Bergen-Belsen but were convinced at the loading ramp by a fellow inmate to declare their status as British-protected citizens to camp authorities. While they were gone, the transport departed for Bergen-Belsen, where most deportees died of typhus. In early 1945, Edith and Magda learned that British and Dutch inmates were eligible to receive parcels from the Red Cross. They, too, began receiving these crucial food provisions, exchanging chocolate for warmer clothing to withstand the harsh winter conditions.

After Ravensbrück was liberated in April 1945, the sisters were placed on a Red Cross transport to Copenhagen, Denmark. Treated with cakes and biscuits by the medical staff, the sick, malnourished and lice-infected prisoners were astonished by the kindness they received. The following day, they were placed on a passenger ship to Malmö, Sweden, and admitted to a makeshift hospital in the city museum. Edith, suffering from a partial lung collapse, was transferred to a hospital in Lund, where she underwent painful treatment, spending eight months in recovery.

Once the sisters regained their health, they sought assistance from the British consul in Stockholm, who provided them with financial aid. They were enabled to secure passage to Israel on a British cargo ship in the summer of 1946, when Edith was sixteen years old. Their father, emotionally scarred from his four-year internment in a British POW camp in Greece, struggled to reintegrate and connect with his daughters.

Magda married several months later to Imre, a Slovakian-born British soldier. The couple had two sons and settled in Netanya. Edith attended a boarding school in Afula for a year, where she met her future husband, Istvan Yari. They married three months later and moved to a kibbutz near Tel Aviv. When the War of Independence began Edith enrolled in a three-month nursing course and was stationed at a military base in the Negev. She was later transferred to an army depot in Beersheba, where she gave birth to her daughter, Rina. In 1954, Magda and her family emigrated to Australia. Edith joined them in 1969. In 1989 she remarried to her beloved husband, Dennis Preston.

How I Climbed Back into Life is a candid account of the author's wartime experiences. Although concise, the manuscript provides significant insights into life in the

Ravensbrück concentration camp. The author acknowledges that due to illness, malnourishment, and trauma, her recollections of this period are fragmented. The memoir was written and published as part of the Makor Jewish Community's "Write Your Story" program and is available in the library as a spiral-bound manuscript.