

An Unexpected, Wonderful Journey

For Edith Hurwitz

By Rayleen Hu

Every morning, we wake up, energized and ready for what the rest of the day may hold. We might follow a usual, daily routine, or we might do the unexpected and step outside our comfort zone. No matter what, each decision we make has a ripple effect in the future, as actions we take today always affect us later, whether it be days, weeks, or even years later. Although it's impossible to know exactly what the future holds, everyone has the ability to reach out and take what it may offer. At any crossroad in life, everyone can make the choice to seek happiness. Edith took and continues to take everything life has to offer, never letting anything stop her along the way.

Edith was born on April 7th, 1941, a day which marks the start of a wonderful life. As a child, three aspects of her childhood had the most impact on her: her religion, her independent nature, and the piano. First, she was raised in a religious environment at home because of the influence of her family. Both her parents were Jewish immigrants from Poland, teaching Edith their religious beliefs and views at an early age. They celebrated holidays such as Passover Seder. Seder is a meal where family members come together to eat dishes such as chamin, chicken soup, and matzah and to give blessings. It is a tradition Edith continues to practice and recognize as she believes "Judaism survived on the dining room table", and the traditions were held together and continued because of the bonds between family members and different generations. During her childhood, WWII was just breaking out, as it was the early 1940s, with the tensions between foreign nations escalating. She was constantly surrounded by news and conversation dominated by the conflicts occurring overseas. Her memories of wartime continue to have a lasting impression, as she recalls the news reels detailing the battles and horrors of war and the anxiety within her family during that time. Although she was extremely young, not yet five-years-old, the war stories caused her to begin creating internal questions and opinions revolving around issues such as humanity and empathy. Such internal dilemma was always a reminder that would later play a large role in her career as a writer and historian.

Meanwhile, as WWII ended and foreign conflicts settled down, her life in Brooklyn continued. Her childhood was both similar to and different from any other childhood, shaping her into the unique character she is today. On one hand, Edith felt the carefree joy of a child during summer vacations, able to spend time with her family swimming at the country club or walking along the boardwalk at Coney Island. On the other hand, during the school year, she was often left to her own devices. Both her parents were worked together as storeowners, often busy taking care of the store and providing for the family, while her sister was 9 years older and passed through the haughty stage all teenagers go

through where she couldn't be seen with a younger sibling. Independence was a characteristic Edith became familiar to early on in life.

However, despite her self-reliant nature, music is a companion she has always depended upon. When Edith was 7-years-old, she had problems focusing in school and interacting with other students. As these difficulties affected her performance in the classroom, her teacher suggested piano lessons as an outlet for her pent-up energy and imagination. Such a solution made sense, as her mother was an excellent musician and supported the development of Edith's music ability with teachers such as Mr. Gould and the 3rd Street Music Settlement in New York City. The wonder in Edith's voice shines through her descriptions of playing the piano, as she remembers the joy at learning each new note, each new scale, and each new song. Music, especially classical, has always and will forever be a source of happiness and beauty for Edith, as she remembers the delicate notes of Schumann's piece "Kinderszenen".

College was the stepping stone in Edith's life that allowed her to truly expand her horizons, discovering her identity and what she is passionate about. In the 1950s, a college education was still relatively rare and exclusive, an achievement most could not obtain. Because she never excelled during high school, Edith never expected to go to college. However, much to her relief, her scores on College Board tests allowed her to enter the freshman class of Brooklyn College. There, she could explore academic interests she actually wanted to learn more about. She not only developed her love for history but also her relationship with her future husband Sam, whom she married in January of 1962.

Together, they lived in both Hawaii and Jamaica because of Sam's position as a visiting professor in colleges located there. During their time on the islands, they gave birth to two children, Arthur and Sheila, who were born 15 months apart. They fell into a routine: while Sam was teaching at the college, Edith would take care of the children in the morning before going to the university library to research, leaving Arthur and Sheila in the care of an au pair. While they lived in Jamaica, Edith began to research and write about Jamaican history and its relationship to the abolition movement. Her dedication to the topic resulted in the publication of the book *Jamaica: A historical portrait*, detailing her research on abolition. Her research on Jamaica sparked her curiosity about the abolition movement, especially because of the ongoing civil rights movement at the time. She continued to examine abolition and its impact around the world, eventually culminating in the publication of a second book called *Politics and the Public Conscience: Slave Emancipation and the Abolitionist Movement in Britain*.

Unfortunately, Sam passed away in 1970, after only eight years of marriage, leaving Edith as well as Arthur and Sheila, who were only 5- and 3-years old at the time. During that time period, most women either worked or stayed at home, usually never attempting both. Edith broke the mold, and devoted her time and energy into her career and her family. She fell into the routine of taking care of her kids throughout the day, before

finally sitting down at her desk at the end of the day to write. Despite the difficulty of balancing both work and family, writing was an outlet for her. Ironically, Edith admits that much of her best writing came when she felt the worst. It was her sadness which allowed her to express her emotions within her writing. At the same time, books and writing helped her cope with the loss of her husband. Her resourceful and independent character, developed during her childhood, allowed her to continue on after his death and continue ahead with her life.

Her dedication to her family and career never wavered. Through two chance meetings, Edith further jumpstarted her research and the opportunities for her to write. First, she wrote to the writer Paula Marshall, expressing her interest on Marshall's books about Caribbean history. When Marshall later wrote back, they scheduled to have lunch together, where Edith learned that Marshall was a visiting lecturer at Yale University, which was giving out research grants to young, aspiring historians. Next, at a historical convention, Edith met John Blassingama, a young PhD researcher who happened to be the chairman of African-American Studies at Yale. During the convention, Edith told Dr. Blassingama about her current proposal to write a biography on the author Zora Neale Hurston, whose books focused on topics such as abolition and life in the South. At the time, Zora Neale Hurston was a relatively unknown author. However, today her books receive widespread attention, with her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* read in high school classrooms across the country, as it provides insight into Southern life and treatment of African-Americans during that time period. Edith's ability to recognize important topics of both the current time period and the future excited Dr. Blassingama, who pushed to get her into the Yale research grant program even though she didn't have a PhD. Because someone happened to drop out of the program at that time, Edith was able to secure a grant from Yale through the help of Paula Marshall and John Blassingama.

While at the university, she also researched the feminist movement, as it was just beginning to gain momentum at the time. Her interest in the topic first started because of the Women's History Conference at the Douglass Rutgers College for women. At the conference, various women historians gathered to discuss and write the "International Sisterhood". In Edith's chapter, she wrote about abolition and feminism together, becoming the first historian to make the connection between figures active within the abolition and feminist movement, and the two movements' almost inherent similarities to each other. Her writing was later published in the novel *Women in the antislavery movement: Anglo-American comparison*. Today, most US high school teach students extensively about the similarities between abolition and feminism, as the idea now seems almost self-evident due to extensive research currently available on the topic. However, when Edith wrote her article, this connection had not yet been made, revealing her insight into ideas ahead of her time. Her conclusions are commemorated in Leila J Rupp's novel *World of Women: The Making of an Interational Women's Movement*, through the quote "Hungry for information, I learned for the first time [from]...Edith Hurwitz's pioneering

article in the first edition of *Becoming Visible*" (Rupp 4). Edith is one of the figures at the forefront of change during that time period. She had the ability to support and advocate social reform that allows modern day citizens to enjoy more freedom and autonomy. Her actions along with those of her peers ultimately had a large impact in the lives of others later on.

Now, Edith is here at the Morris Hills Center, surrounded by the wonderful, caring workers. Her daughter Sheila and two granddaughters are only a thirty minute drive away. She has achieved almost everything she felt passionate about, with chance meetings providing her with opportunities she never dreamed of. She can now live without regrets, feeling only pride over her past accomplishments, as well as joy over the achievements of her children and grandchildren and the wonderful impact she has made on the world. Edith not only took what was offered to her but also worked to gain what was not. She created a wonderful life in the process, where she was at the forefront of social change writing about topics others had not yet thought of.

It is simply chance that I have had the opportunity to meet a wonderful woman like Edith. In history class, we learn about the courageous acts of people in the past, the actions they have taken that ultimately allow us to have the lives we currently lead. We learn about them to the point where they take on a fictitious aura, becoming seemingly perfect, unrealistic figures. Edith is one of these people, yet I realize that she had to work for everything she achieved. Through her stories, I now realize that everything we aspire to be is within our grasp. Edith had the determination to pave her own path through the world. She had the ability to leave her mark on everything that she set her mind to. And she can now enjoy the happiness and satisfaction from her achievements and hard work.

Dear Edith: Thank you so much for sharing your stories with me. They have made a lasting impact on me, and I will always treasure everything you have shared. I know I have found a lifelong friend in you. Thank you so much.