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'The last goodbye'

Docent meets Prince Charles at 75th anniversary of life-saving program for Jewish children

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Edith Maniker, a docent at the Holocaust Memorial Center, stands in front of a quilt at the museum.

In 1939, Edith Maniker's parents made a life-changing decision that saved her and her older sister from certain death in the Nazi concentration camps.

Through a lifetime of history and events, that long-ago decision led this year to Maniker meeting Prince Charles as he commemorated the 75th anniversary of the Kindertransport rescue program that saved her life and gave her a future in England and the United States.

"I am extremely blessed. My parents were brave enough to let me go. I have had a good life," said the Southfield resident and 20-year docent at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills.

Maniker, 82, and her sister, as well as four cousins, all German natives, were among the 10,000 children and infants whose lives were saved when their parents sent them to other countries as part of the Kindertransport rescue program.

In mid-1939 — before World War II started — Maniker, then 8, her sister and cousins were sent to England, where the oldest daughter of one of her mother's cousins lived. But the cousins did not travel together.

"It was the only time I saw my father cry," Maniker said as she described her sister saying goodbye and boarding a train a few weeks before she left. "My parents made it very easy for me. They told me, 'You are going on a wonderful vacation. We will see you in a couple of weeks.'"

Maniker and her sister never again saw their parents and are unsure how, when or where they died. "I know they got as far as Hungary," she said. "The end of 1940 was the last time we heard from them."



This is the invitation Edith Maniker received from Prince Charles.



Edith Maniker's treasured papers include a letter from the Queen of England's Lady in Waiting and an invitation from Prince Charles. / All Photos by Joanne Maliszewski

Kristallnacht

The events that led to Maniker leaving her hometown of Leipzig, Germany, which is south of Berlin, began with the Kristallnacht ("Night of Broken Glass") Nov. 9, 1938. Nazi stormtroopers and German civilians orchestrated and implemented a series of attacks on Jewish synagogues, businesses and institutions and ransacked the homes of Jewish residents.

Maniker and her family, including her grandmother, lived across the street from their synagogue, which was not burned because it was next to homes owned by non-Jewish residents. But Maniker watched as items were removed from the synagogue, piled up and burned in a bonfire.

"We watched it as it burned," she said. "I was so scared. I saw people laughing and dancing around it and singing. You knew who it was aimed at."

Maniker's family home was not ransacked because the building landlord told stormtroopers that there were no Jewish tenants in his apartments. "My father turned out the lights so no one could see our silhouettes," she said.

After that incident, Maniker's uncle got the six grandchildren into the Kindertransport program to save their lives. But it was

also the start of some six years during which Maniker was moved around England, staying with a number of different families and, eventually as she got older, sharing an apartment with her sister.

Maniker arrived by boat in the United States in July 1947. She and her sister made their way to Detroit, where they had family. "Why did we come to America? You look for family," she said.

Maniker journeyed back to England earlier this year for the 75th anniversary of the Kindertransport that brought Jewish children to cities and villages throughout Britain.

A reunion was planned and she was among 400 who attended, followed by a reception hosted by Prince Charles at St. James's Palace. "We were in a semi-circle and Prince Charles shook everyone's hand," she said. "He spoke to each person. He made everyone feel like they were important.

"Everyone at the reunion was thrilled the prince was there. He was so gracious."

A letter

The reception and meeting with Prince Charles wasn't just a stop on the itinerary planned by a reunion committee. Maniker received an official invitation from the heir to the British throne to attend the reception.

Maniker's correspondence with the Royal Family actually began with a letter one of her daughters wrote to the Queen of England. In that letter, her daughter thanked the queen for saving her mother's life decades ago. Unexpectedly, her daughter received a letter in return from Buckingham Palace and the queen.

Written by the Queen's Lady in Waiting, the letter said in part: "The Queen was touched to hear of the tragic fate suffered by your mother's family during the Second World War, and to know of Mrs. Maniker's enduring gratitude for the welcome offered to her in this country when she arrived here as a young refugee."

That letter, Prince Charles' invitation and another letter from an official of the British government are items she never plans to toss. Maniker has them well-cared for in a large envelope and gently removes each from their envelopes to show others.

Despite being moved from one family or refugee center and hostel to another during her years in England, Maniker fondly remembers the people who helped her during the war. "I found that most people I met were very kind," she said. "I was never hungry."