

# **The Nazi Officer's Wife Study Guide**

**The Nazi Officer's Wife by Edith H. Beer**

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# Contents

<u>The Nazi Officer's Wife Study Guide.....</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Contents.....</u>	<u>2</u>
<u>Summary.....</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>Chapters 1 - 3.....</u>	<u>4</u>
<u>Chapters 4 - 6.....</u>	<u>7</u>
<u>Chapters 7 - 9.....</u>	<u>10</u>
<u>Chapters 10 - 11.....</u>	<u>12</u>
<u>Chapters 12 - 14.....</u>	<u>14</u>
<u>Important People.....</u>	<u>16</u>
<u>Objects/Places.....</u>	<u>19</u>
<u>Themes.....</u>	<u>21</u>
<u>Styles.....</u>	<u>24</u>
<u>Quotes.....</u>	<u>26</u>
<u>Topics for Discussion.....</u>	<u>29</u>



## Summary

“The Nazi Officer’s Wife” by Edith H. Beer and Susan Dworkin is the true story of Edith Hahn Beer who was a young Jewish woman in Vienna, Austria, during the German invasion of World War II. Edith was a brilliant student who loved school and learning. She read voraciously and did so well in elementary school that her teachers recommended to her father that she go on to high school – something that was rare in Austria in the 1920s. Edith was an outstanding student and went on to university and law school which, for an Austrian girl during the time, was virtually unheard of.

But there were ominous signs of change in Vienna that free-spirits like Edith didn’t readily see. It began with Austrian authorities requiring all Jews to register with the government. This requirement was a precursor of worse things to come. Edith faced the reality of what she and other Jews were facing when she appeared at her university for her final exam that would earn her a law degree. She was bluntly told that she was no longer welcome at the university. When the Nazis invaded, things went from bad to worse.

The city that Edith had loved and lived in all her life with the family she adored had become occupied with strident and unrelenting forces that were tasked with hunting down Jews. Jews were made to wear yellow cloth patches sewn onto their outer clothes to identify them as Jews. This public humiliation escalated to fear of incarceration and ultimately to real life and death peril. Before the invasion, Edith had fallen in love with a young man named Pepi. He had “Aryan” papers that kept him safe. After the Nazis took over the city, Edith’s family was separated and Edith found herself alone and in great jeopardy. Pepi would not leave the city with her, so Edith left on her own. She eventually wound up in a farm camp where she toiled from sunrise to sunset without hope and little to eat.

Eventually, Edith made contact with an influential woman who literally saved her life. The woman, Maria Niederall, was a Nazi, but a Nazi with a kind heart. She arranged for Edith to be given false documentation that identified her as an Aryan Christian named Grete. She used that identity during the remainder of the war, living among Nazis and even marrying one. She nearly lost herself in that identity but when the war ended, the real Edith was able to re-emerge. Her false identity allowed her to avoid incarceration and certain death at a concentration camp and finally live proudly as the brilliant and educated Jewish woman she really was.



# Chapters 1 - 3

## Summary

### Chapter One: The Small Voice from Then

Edith Hahn, a young Austrian girl, worked as a nurse's aide with the Red Cross at the Stadtische Krankenhaus in Brandenburg in the ward for foreign workers and prisoners of war. Edith estimated that there were more than ten thousand foreign prisoners in Brandenburg. They worked in the factories and were sent to the hospital when they were injured or fell ill. "They were a slave population, conquered and helpless."

Economic conditions were in a downward spiral in Germany. Some of the nurses stole food for their starving patients but most stole food for themselves and their families. Edith, who was known as Grete during that time, was engaged to a German man named Werner who had joined the Nazi Party. On one occasion, Grete was assigned to take care of a stroke victim, a very high-ranking and influential Nazi. She did not tell the very ambitious Werner how important the man was for fear that Werner would want to try to use him to gain advancement. The man liked Grete and asked that she be sent back to Berlin with him as his private nurse.

Grete silently prayed for German defeat and an end to the war. Many years later, as an old woman, living in England and the widow of Fred Beer, she was often asked about her experience during the war when she portrayed herself to be a Christian. People asked how it had been to live with a high-ranking Nazi while pretending to be an Aryan. It was a stressful and frightening experience. Edith lived in constant fear of being exposed as the twenty-nine-year old Jewish law student she was instead of the twenty-one-year old nurse's aide she pretended to be. If her real identity were to be discovered the Nazis would quickly learn that she was on the Gestapo's "Wanted list."

### Chapter Two: The Hahns of Vienna

Edith Hahn grew up in Vienna where her father, Leopold, owned and operated a restaurant. Her mother, Klothilde, was a seamstress. Edith had two younger sisters. Mimi was just one year younger than Edith. The two sisters were close in age but they had little in common. Edith adored Johanna, nicknamed Hansi, who was seven years younger than Edith. She recalled how amazed she was when she heard a radio for the first time. She loved school and even at a young age eagerly read the law columns and reports in the newspapers.

Edith's Jewish upbringing was secular rather than orthodox and she attended synagogue only infrequently. There were ominous signs that the high-spirited and fun-loving Edith and her friends failed to take note of. Long before the Nazi invasion and the war, Austrian authorities began requiring Jews to register. They wanted to know who



among their populace was Jewish. There was a long-standing prejudice against Jews in Vienna; it was not until her parents were adults that Jews were allowed to live in Vienna.

Edith excelled in school and her professors recommended to her father that she go on to high school and eventually even university. At that time, it was highly unusual for an Austrian girl to attend high school and it was unheard of for a girl to go on to university let alone law school. Most girls began working as seamstresses or taking on other domestic tasks. In 1928, with inflation so high Edith's father closed the restaurant. He became the manager of the restaurant of a resort hotel in Badgastein. It was ironic that the family was Jewish but was not strongly connected to the Hebrew community and, therefore, did not benefit from its strength.

### Chapter Three: Pepi Rosenfeld's Good Little Girl

Edith was bright and loved math, French and philosophy. School was easy for Edith; she had an eidetic memory. Edith was pretty and popular with the boys and was clueless as far as politics were concerned. Josef "Pepi" Rosenfeld was her boyfriend in high school. His mother, Anna, had converted to Judaism in order to marry but in her heart remained a Catholic. In Edith's last year of school in 1933 she read Mein Kampf and thought Hitler was an idiot. Leopold was at first reluctant to approve his daughter's continued education but he eventually did. After high school, Edith's father gave in and sent her to the university to study law. She had socialist leanings during college.

Political turmoil was increasing during her college years, 1933 to 1937. There was internal turmoil within Austria where one-third of the work force was unemployed by 1934. Nazi students started fights and riots to disrupt life on campus. The family was devastated when Edith's father dropped dead in the restaurant one day. Edith helped with family finances by taking on tutoring work. The Nazis began to threaten the invasion of Austria. On March 11, 1938, the Austrian chancellor resigned. Edith wanted to leave the country at once but her boyfriend, Pepi Rosenfeld, wanted to stay. His mother "bought" him the paperwork to prove he was Aryan. The next day, the Germans marched into Austria. Edith wanted to join the underground against the Nazis but Pepi was against it.

## Analysis

The fear of exposure for being Jewish in wartime Austria led Edith to pose as an Aryan to escape imprisonment in a concentration camp. She had been a brilliant young woman who lived a happy life with her family in Vienna. She was close to earning her law degree and had a bright future when the Nazis invaded Vienna and her life was turned upside down. After the invasion, the Nazis took the family's home and all their wealth and possessions. Edith wanted to leave Vienna but her boyfriend, Pepi, wanted to stay. His mother who had converted from Catholicism to Judaism had "bought" him papers that proved he was a Christian.



## Vocabulary

rigorously, orthopedic, typhus, coagulating, assuage, flaccid, persona, archenemies, beggared, coquettish, self-indulgent, commuted, zatic, ideological, lugubrious, lithe, florid, indolent, gregarious, exorbitant, adolescent, tumultuous



# Chapters 4 - 6

## Summary

### Chapter Four: The Trap Set by Love

The Nazis redistributed 100,000 radios to Austrian Christians that they had confiscated from Jewish families. Adolf Eichmann was the Nazi assigned to cleanse Austria of all Jews. The Nazis stole from the Jews and encouraged Christian Austrians to steal from their Jewish neighbors as well. In order to escape, wealthy Jews had to sign over everything they owned to the Nazis. The less wealthy Jews had to pay outrageous amounts for tickets out. Sadly, they were often forced to choose which children should go with them and which should stay.

The Jews were restricted in their movements and activities. The chaos did not keep Edith from her studies. Just before the final exam for her doctorate she was told that she was no longer welcome at the university. Eichmann offered up Austrian Jews for \$400 a head. Gangs of thugs called “brown shirts” roamed the streets flashing their guns to terrorize the people and flirt with pretty girls. They randomly chose people to beat without fear of punishment.

The Nazis began dragging away every Jewish man they could find. Edith and her mother were evicted and moved to the ghetto. Their friends and family members were fleeing. Edith was terrified but she stayed in Vienna because she couldn't imagine life without Pepi. Edith and her mother had to register with the SS and were selected to work on a farm. Edith convinced the SS that her old mother wouldn't be an asset on the farm. Edith was sent away on a train to work on a farm for six weeks after which she would return.

### Chapter Five: The Asparagus Plantation at Osterburg

Edith traveled with several other women to Stendahl where the women were chosen by various farmers and split up. She stayed in a barracks at a large farm and worked long hours – up to 80 hours a week -- in the vegetable fields. It was immediately obvious that she would be staying more than six weeks. The women were nearly starved despite their hard labor.

The mail was Edith's salvation. Edith was suffering from chronic bronchitis but she didn't want to worry her mother and always wrote that she was fine. Edith's letters to Pepi were more truthful about her situation. Edith soon learned that all the letters the girls wrote and all the letters they received were opened and read. Edith made sure she didn't write anything that could cause her or her family problems. She warned those who sent her letters to write with caution.

The girls were routinely molested but there was no one in authority to defend them or even care. The long hours on the farm were taking their toll on Edith. She grew



extremely thin and weak. A sign that her health was failing was evidenced when her periods stopped. She thought of marrying Pepi or converting to Christianity – anything to get away from the prison farm. Although she was terrified, she agreed to pass off a package to some French prisoners from one of the girls who had been allowed to leave. She knew that had she been caught, her action would have been an act of sabotage and she would have been sent to a concentration camp. Fortunately, she was not found out. Edith was led to believe that she was returning to Vienna but instead was sent to Aschersleben to work in a paper factory.

#### Chapter Six: The Slave Girls of Aschersleben

Edith and the other women farm workers in the work camp at Aschersleben wore yellow stars identifying them as Jews. The other girls who greeted them were dressed in frilly dresses with hairdos elegantly coiffed. Each of these girls hoped to impress one of the Germans to like them enough to keep them around. There were worse fates waiting for them beyond the paper factory.

Edith was tasked with making cardboard boxes using the stamping machines. She had to work as long as it took to make her quota each day. When Edith first arrived, she was given a quota to make 20,000 cardboard boxes a day. At first she thought it was an impossible number. But she got fast at running her box cutting machine and her quota was ultimately upped to 44,000 per day. Edith and the other girls had to work as long as necessary to make their quotas. The fear that was held over her head was that if she failed, her mother would be sent to Poland and an uncertain fate.

Edith and the other girls began hearing rumors that war prisoners were being tortured and gassed. Word came that the Americans had entered the war in December 1941 after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Edith begged Pepi to marry her. He told her it was impossible and that she should forget him. In January 1942, the Nazis resolved to murder all remaining Jews in Europe. Edith learned about the execution and deportation to concentration camp of friends and acquaintances. Edith would not be allowed to return to Vienna in time to travel with her mother to Poland. Edith was terrified of what lay ahead for her.

## Analysis

The cruel and unrelenting abuse of the Jews was escalated. Albert Eichmann was officially in charge of cleansing Austria of all Jews. After moving to the Viennese ghetto, Edith was sent to work on a German farm where her health and well-being was greatly compromised. Instead of leaving the farm and going home as promised, Edith was shipped to a paper company in Germany for more hard labor. She was desperate to escape her fate considering marriage to her boyfriend and even conversion to Christianity. Edith was spent physically, emotionally and spiritually. How could she continue to survive? Work at the paper company was no relief from the work on the farm. She was given impossible production quotas and was required to work as long as it took to achieve them. Rumors were rife about the torture and gassing of prisoners.





While working at the paper factory in Aschersleben, Edith heard rumors that Hitler was determined to kill all the Jews in Europe and word that her mother was sent to a camp in Poland, compelled Edith to return to Vienna.

## Vocabulary

swastika, impunity, euphemism, veneer, kibbutz, urbane, tumultuous, palatial, largesse, dogma, sophomoric, emaciated, subjugate, compulsory, equidistant, ramrod, recompense, contrition, propaganda, menorah, bereft, liturgy, assimilated, promulgated



# Chapters 7 - 9

## Summary

### Chapter Seven: Transformation in Vienna

When Edith exited the train at Vienna she wasn't wearing her yellow star. She wanted to be free to find out about her mother and wanted to spend time with Pepi and her friend, Christl. She was taking quite a risk. If a Jew was caught without a star it could be a death sentence. At the station, she looked all about and saw no one she knew. Pepi came out of nowhere and kissed and embraced her. She was lost in his love and felt certain that he would save her.

By June 1942, the Germans were expected to conquer all of Europe. She learned that her mother was in the Vartegau in Poland. She asked Pepi to go to Poland with her. But he refused. Edith didn't have a permanent place to stay in Vienna. Some nights she stayed with her cousin and other nights at friends' houses. Everyone, including Pepi, was afraid to be seen with her.

Edith was told by another girl to see Maria Niederall when she returned to Vienna. Maria was a member of the Nazi party. She had a kind heart and a lot of connections. Through a phone call and some machinations, arrangements were made for Edith to secure travel papers that identified her as Christina Margarethe Denner, a twenty-year-old Aryan Christian. The agent who provided the papers to her told her to apply for work at the Red Cross because they didn't require registration. She hid her true identity papers deep inside a book of poems by Goethe for her journey to Munich. Pepi walked her to the train station. There were no goodbye kisses. That was over. There was hope in Edith's heart again when she arrived in Munich. Everything and everyone looked lovely in Munich.

### Chapter Eight: The White Knight of Munich

Arrangements were made for Edith, posing as Grete, to stay with Frau and Herr Gerl in a little town outside Munich. Frau Gerl was a charming and kind woman who immediately ordered the weak and fragile-looking Edith – now Grete – to bed for rest and recovery. Frau Gerl entertained Edith with many interesting and funny stories. She told Edith about the government arranging for SS officers to impregnate young girls from the Hitler Youth to repopulate Germany with Aryans.

The Red Cross hired Edith as a nurse's aide. One afternoon at the Maximilianaum Art Gallery, Edith met Werner Vetter a young man who told her about the Germans' love of paintings and how the Fuhrer bought several hundred paintings each year. Edith began seeing Werner who was a member of the Nazi Party and openly disparaged the Jews. Edith was aware of the risk she was taking but she liked Werner and felt safe with him.



The Red Cross' mission was to boost the morale of the wounded and spread German propaganda. She had to swear an oath to Hitler. Edith lost herself in the imitation that she was living. Werner proposed to Edith, revealing that he was married and in the midst of a divorce. Edith confessed that she was Jewish. Werner didn't care; he wanted to marry her even though they could both be in danger. Werner arranged for a place for Edith to stay in Brandenburg until his divorce was final. Edith began to weaken – Werner was offering her love and safety. She accepted his proposal.

### Chapter Nine: A Quiet Life on Immelmanstrasse

Edith lived a lie, the life of the common hausfrau. She pretended she was happy and worry-free although worry consumed her. Werner was a supervisor in the paint department of the Arado Aircraft Company which made German war planes. The company supplied meager living quarters for its employees. Werner's apartment consisted of one large room and one small room. Werner was fortunate to have a bathroom in his apartment which many of the living quarters did not. He loved to paint and worked every night on painting a mural on the walls of their apartment. He used paint he stole from the aircraft plant. Werner's prized radio was their only source of news. They heard that Stalingrad was lost, but the German news boasted that Hitler would soon conquer England and then the world.

Edith sensed that they weren't getting the whole story on German news and dared to move the radio dial to the forbidden BBC. Edith and Werner were then able to learn just how devastating the Battle of Stalingrad had been for the Germans. Edith was deeply resentful that she was made to wear a swastika pin over her heart and was urged to join the party. She made a concerted effort to avoid shops whose proprietors greeted her with "Heil Hitler," something she did not want to have to respond to in kind. Edith wanted a child. She felt that by having her own child she would never feel lonely again. But Werner was not in favor of having a child. He believed the Nazi propaganda that Jewish blood was overly dominant. Edith was persistent, used her wiles and was pregnant by September 1943.

## Analysis

Edith returned to Vienna where she was able to secure false documents that identified her as an Aryan Christian. She traveled to Munich where she was hired as a nurse's aide for the Red Cross. She met Werner Vetter, a Nazi party member, who later became her husband. Edith lived the life of a German hausfrau, burying her past and herself. Despite German propaganda, there was evidence that the Germans were losing the war. Edith wanted to have a baby but Werner was not in favor of it because the child would have "Jewish blood."

## Vocabulary

embankment, alliance, kilos, nostalgia, lineage, epiphany, timorous, emaciated, volubility, hausfrau, prosaic, frieze, docile, exemplary, trepidation



# Chapters 10 - 11

## Summary

### Chapter Ten: A Respectable Aryan Household

Edith was happy to be pregnant but did not want to get married – there would be too much scrutiny and too many registrations - any of which could expose her. But Werner stressed that he was a real citizen of the Reich and had his reputation to uphold. He would not have an illegitimate child and insisted that they had to marry. Edith had to go through dreaded registrations and undergo stressful interviews during which she was grilled about her “Aryan” relatives and ancestors. But she maintained her calm, lied to the officials and was able to get her marriage license.

Edith and Werner were married on October 16, 1943. Due to a severe heart murmur, the doctor advised Edith to quit her job and stay at home until the baby was born. Since she would no longer have Red Cross rations, she duped the clerk at the registry office into creating a replacement card for her so she could eat. Although it was difficult to spend so much time with those who were followers of Hitler, Edith had no choice. It was a matter of survival.

Edith had new hope seeing the American bombers heading for Berlin each day. The hope made her recall her family and their traditions. It was Rosh Hashanah 1943. She longed to be among her loved ones and other Jews. Werner was certain that their child would be a boy but on April 9, 1944, Edith had a daughter, Angela Maria. Her birth was on the same day that American planes were poised to bomb Brandenburg. Werner was furious that the baby was a girl and said many angry, hurtful things to Edith. Later, after he composed himself, he apologized for his outburst. A neighbor noticed that Edith didn't have a photo of Adolph Hitler in her apartment – another requirement by the Nazis. Since she would be visited by government officials for an inspection after having a baby, Edith borrowed a photo of Hitler just in the nick of time. She hung the photo of Hitler for the benefit of the government inspectors who came shortly after the baby's birth. Edith passed inspection. Within one year, Edith had gone from a hunted Jew to one of the Nazi's most prized citizens – a breeding Aryan.

### Chapter Eleven: The Fall of Brandenburg

If Edith had allowed herself to think about her mother or sisters, she would have lost her mind. Things were beyond desperate. People were trading their possessions for food and rations. The Nazis became more dangerous with every defeat. They hunted for deserters, ransacked huts and executed people for petty crimes and adultery. Supply lines were being bombed which slowed production at the factory. In addition to his job, Werner was required to devote time to civil defense due to the seemingly endless bombings. Edith had only one concern during the bombings. Protecting Angela from harm was her top priority.



Werner was drafted on September 1, 1944, even though he was blind in one eye. Eventually they would call on old men and little boys to fight the battle. Germany was falling apart from desertions and sabotage. Werner was made an officer and Edith became a Nazi officer's wife. At first he was stationed at a nearby barracks but eventually was sent to the front. Edith was horrified when she heard about the death camps in Poland, how the Germans were gassing men, women and children. The news was that nearly two million Jews had been exterminated. At first, Edith refused to believe it. But when she thought of her mother, she collapsed into sobs.

Werner became a Russian prisoner of war and was sent to a camp in Siberia. Brandenburg fell and everyone was told to evacuate. Edith always felt that she would have a better chance if she were outside during a bombing raid as opposed to inside the building. Upon the evacuation notice Edith, carrying Angela, ran outside and found a barn to hide in. Soon, the radio was announcing that Germany had lost the war. The houses were all draped with white sheets or towels of surrender.

With the all clear, Edith and Angela returned to Brandenburg. Their building was on fire and they didn't have a place to stay. They found refuge in an abandoned apartment. When the owners of the apartment returned, they were glad that Edith had used their home to survive and invited them to stay longer. It was a desperate time. People were stealing food and eating dogs and cats to survive. Food rations were not resumed until six months later. Ultimately, Edith got over her fears of telling people she was a Jew and retrieved her authentic identity papers in the Goethe poetry book. Edith was finally able to register with her real name. She began a search for her mother. She could not entertain the thought that her mother had perished at a death camp.

## Analysis

Edith was happy to be pregnant but did not want to get married because of the probing of her background by officials. But Werner did not want to have an illegitimate child and he insisted that they marry. Edith and Werner had a daughter, Angela. Werner was upset that the baby was a girl and that the baby had "Jewish blood." Despite his disability, Werner was drafted into the army and ultimately was captured by the Russians and imprisoned in Siberia. The Germans were defeated but conditions were horrendous in Germany. Edith was finally able to re-emerge as herself.

## Vocabulary

nondescript, innocuous, exhorted, conscription, phobic, subverting, acquiesced, sadistic



# Chapters 12 - 14

## Summary

### Chapter Twelve: Surfacing

The Russians had fairly accurate records of those who were Nazi loyalists. There was a labor crunch so those individuals who could prove they were not members of the Nazi party or had no allegiance to them were needed in the job market. In September 1945, because of her education, Edith went to work as an attorney for the district court. She was given old cases to study so she could reacquaint herself with legal practices. She worked for Herr Ulrich who had lost his position because he refused to join the Nazi Party.

Eventually, she became a judge in the family court. Edith joined an organization called Victims of Fascism. The membership consisted of communists and Jews who had survived by staying undercover and using false identification during the war years. Although their origins were varied and their stories unique, Edith immediately knew that she had a special affinity for them. In her official capacity, Edith filed petitions for Werner's release. Brought before Edith's court were orphaned German children who were destitute, homeless and starving. She sentenced them to clean up the streets in exchange for shelter and food. Edith loved her job. She was now in a position to help people and there were so many who needed help. The real Edith Hahn was returning. She dreamed of the return of her mother and Werner.

In advance of Werner's possible homecoming, Edith had Angela baptized Christian hoping that Werner would accept her as his daughter. In a summer evening in 1947, Werner came home. Even though Angela was baptized, Werner referred to her "Jewish blood." He envied Edith's high ranking position; there were no opportunities for him other than cleaning streets. Werner expected Edith to care for him and the baby and clean and cook like before. She told him that Grete was dead and that Edith was alive. He slapped Edith and flung her across the room. Werner began seeing Elisabeth again and eventually told Edith that he wanted a divorce. He was going to reconcile with Elisabeth. Edith used her influence to make the divorce a speedy one.

### Chapter Thirteen: I Heard the Field Goebbels, Laughing

When the Nuremberg trials were near conclusion, the trials of lower ranking Nazis were on the docket. Edith was chosen by the Russians to be a judge on these panels. Edith had no interest in becoming involved because no one would believe that she could be impartial. The Russian commandants would not excuse her so she appealed to the Department of Justice in Potsdam who agreed with her opinion. She was able to recuse herself from the hearings based on her impartiality. As a result, she was demoted from judge to public prosecutor. Russian secret police asked her to spy on her colleagues for them. Edith was traumatized by the mere suggestion that she work undercover. She



knew that she could not bear to live under suspicion and terror again. The time had come for Edith to get out. She applied for papers to travel to England on the guise of visiting her sister. The documentation and approval process took months. She hated leaving her job but on in November 1948, her papers were finally in order and she closed the door on Brandenburg forever. She and Angela traveled to England and had a joyous reunion with her favorite sister, Hansi. She learned the devastating news that her mother had been murdered after being deported to Minsk in the summer of 1942.

#### Chapter Fourteen: Pepi's Last Package

In Brandenburg, Edith had enjoyed the life of a respected judge and had earned a good living which enabled her to have a nice home for herself and Angela. In England, she was initially a refugee with no money, no work permit and only a sixty-day visa. She worked as a domestic and a seamstress and never worked as an attorney again. She sent Angela to a Jewish school and raised her as a Jew. In 1957, she married Fred Beer, a Viennese Jew, whose mother had also been murdered during the war. They told each other their stories of survival only once and never spoke of them again. They decided that the past was the past and deserved to be forgotten.

Fred died in 1984 and Edith moved to Israel in 1987 to live among Jewish people. She felt an immediate kinship with the people of Israel despite their varied backgrounds and experiences. She made an attempt to stay in touch with the people who she'd been close to and who'd helped her. When Maria Niederall fell ill, she sent her a pretty bed jacket. The woman who was instrumental in saving Edith's life, died too young. Edith tried to keep the memory of her mother, Werner and other relatives in Angela's thoughts. Shortly before Pepi died in 1977, he sent Edith a package of all the letters she had sent him. Angela, wanting to know the truth, read all of them.

## Analysis

Edith was able to secure a position with the district court. Later, she became a family court judge. She joined Victims of Fascism and found an immediate affinity with other members who survived Nazi oppression. Edith had Angela baptized Christian in hopes that Werner would more readily accept her, but he remained distant from the child because she had "Jewish blood." Werner wanted a divorce because he had reconciled with Elisabeth. Edith used her legal influence to make it a speedy one. Edith and Angela left Germany behind and moved to England where they reunited with Edith's sister. She married Fred Beer. When she became a widow in later years, she moved to Israel where she lived among Jews with whom she felt a strong bond.

## Vocabulary

circumnavigate, infinitesimal, shrapnel, virtuosity, virulent, contravened, commandant, clandestine, restive, assimilation



# Important People

## Edith Hahn

Edith Hahn Beer was a young Jewish woman who lived happily with her family in Vienna, Austria, in the 1920s. Edith was a brilliant student who loved school and could never get enough to read. She excelled in elementary school compelling her professor to recommend that she go on to high school – a rare happening in 1920s Vienna. But Edith was not through with education after high school. She attended university and eventually law school. Edith was a free-spirit who no one could stop – or so she thought.

The ominous signs of changed eluded the young carefree woman who had the world by a string. She didn't take seriously the dubious requirement that the Vienna authorities established – all Jews had to register with the government so they could be easily identified. But that was only the start of bad things to come. The Germans invaded and occupied Austria and the Nazis hunted down Jews like prey. Edith, like all Jews, had to wear yellow stars sewn on their outer clothing identifying them as Jews. After the invasion the family was separated and Edith found herself frightened and alone. Her boyfriend refused to leave the city with her and Edith had to go it alone.

After working on a prison farm and in a paper factory under horrendous conditions, Edith was able to make contact with Maria Niederall, who was a Nazi with a kind and understanding heart. She arranged for Edith to be given false documentation that identified her as an Aryan Christian named Grete. She used that identity during the remainder of the war, living among Nazis and even marrying one. Her one joy during the time was the birth of her beloved daughter, Angela. Edith nearly lost herself in her assumed identity but when the war ended, the real Edith was able to re-emerge. Her false identity allowed her to avoid incarceration and certain death at a concentration camp and finally live proudly as the brilliant and educated Jewish woman she really was.

## Werner Vetter

Edith met Werner Vetter at the Maximillianaum, a famous art gallery in Munich. Edith was already posing as Grete, the Aryan Christian woman, when she first encountered him. He was friendly and bold and immediately was taken with the pretty young woman. Edith, of course, was reluctant to get involved with Werner. He was a member of the Nazi party and she was, in reality, a Jew. Even at their first time together he made disparaging remarks about Jews. Werner was persistent and pursued Edith relentlessly. Unfortunately, Edith liked the tall handsome blonde German and she began to weaken to his charms.





Edith and Werner became a couple, a truly odd couple, but no one knew just how odd they were. Werner was a member of the Nazi party and was a supervisor at the Arado Aircraft company which main product was German bombers. After a short time together, Werner proposed to Edith, telling her he was madly in love with her and wanted to make his future with her. At first she said no. He was tenacious and did not give up. Finally, she told him the truth. She was a Jew portraying herself to be a Christian. Surprisingly, Werner was not shocked or dismayed. He didn't care; he wanted to marry her. They had one child together, Angela, who he looked down upon because of her "Jewish blood."

Werner had some lies of his own. He was already married with a child and was in the midst of a divorce. His wife, Elisabeth, still had a hold on him as witnessed by his angry tirades to an invisible Elizabeth that Werner was unable to control. As it was becoming obvious that the Germans were losing, Werner was inducted into the army during the last German conscription despite the fact that he was blind in one eye. He was captured and spent time as a POW in Siberia. He was released and made it home after the war ended. He soon took up with Elisabeth again and asked Edith for a divorce so he could reconcile with his first wife.

## **Pepi Rosenfeld**

Josef "Pepi" Rosenfeld was Edith's first love. They were young and in love in Vienna but their relationship was interrupted by the Nazi invasion. Pepi was a Jew but his mother secured documentation that he was a Christian to save him from incarceration. Edith fled Vienna to save her life. She begged Pepi to marry her so that she could be safe but he refused.

## **Leopold and Klothilde Hahn**

Leopold and Klothilde Hahn were Edith's parents. Leopold owned and operated a restaurant in Vienna. Klothilde was a housewife and seamstress. Leopold died before the war and oppression of the Jews escalated. Klothilde was sent to a prison camp in Poland and died there years before Edith learned of her fate.

## **Mimi and Hansi**

Mimi and Hansi were Edith's younger sisters. She and Mimi had nothing in common and were not close. However, Edith was extremely close to the youngest sister, Hansi, who became a British soldier during the war. Edith and Hansi reunited after Germany's defeat.



## **Maria Niederall**

Maria Niederall was a member of the Nazi party but had a kind heart and was largely responsible for Edith's survival. Maria made arrangements for Edith to be given the false identity – that of a Christian Aryan – that she used throughout the war years.

## **Elisabeth**

Elisabeth was Werner's first wife. They had a daughter, Barbl, together. Elisabeth was very tall and beautiful. Edith found her intimidating. Edith's marriage to Werner ended when he reconciled with Elisabeth and wanted to return to her.

## **Angela**

Edith wanted to have a child more than she wanted to get married. After losing her family, she felt that having a child would be someone who she could always call her own. Edith's only child was Angela who she had near the end of the war.

## **Jultschi**

Edith was very close to her cousin, Jultschi. She was a needy woman whose mother had dropped Jultschi off at her grandmother's then went home and killed herself. When Edith found herself alone and homeless in Vienna she spent many nights with Jultschi.

## **Christl Denner**

Christl Denner, a Viennese friend of Edith's, was instrumental in saving her life. Edith needed to use registration papers of someone who resembled her in order to secure the false documentation that allowed Edith to leave Vienna. When Edith asked Christl to allow her to use her holiday registration card, Christl did not hesitate.



# Objects/Places

## Concentration Camp

Prior to the 1940s, concentration camps were prisons from which most of those incarcerated were eventually freed. By the 1940s, the phrase “concentration camp” came to mean certain death for those sent to them.

## The Anschluss

The Anschluss was the annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany that occurred in March 1938 when the Austrian chancellor resigned and the country was invaded and occupied by the Germans.

## Yellow Star

The Nazis required the Jews to sew a cloth five-point yellow star on their outer clothing so that they could immediately be identified as Jewish. Being caught without it would lead to arrest and incarceration. On several occasions, Edith ran the risk of such a fate when she refused to wear it.

## St. Anthony’s Medal

When Edith returned to Vienna she was virtually homeless. She encountered a young man who insisted on buying her a cold drink. She was reluctant not knowing whether or not he was a Nazi but after he gave her a St. Anthony’s medal she felt hope. She kept the Catholic medal the rest of her life.

## Lebensborn

The German government persuaded girls from the Hitler Youth to sleep with SS officers so they could have “racially perfect babies who are raised in government nurseries like pine trees.” It was called the Lebensborn program; there was a Lebensborn office in Munich.

## Victims of Fascism

After the war, Edith joined an organization called Victims of Fascism. The membership consisted of communists and Jews who had existed throughout the war with false identities.



## Aryan

Adolph Hitler and his obedient followers ascribed to the notion that Germany and even all of Europe could become an Aryan society. The Aryan race was purported to be a race of pure white people who comprised the master race. Jews were the darkest stain on such an ideal society which is why Hitler wanted them all exterminated.

## The Nuremberg Laws

Jews were denied citizenship under the Nuremberg Laws. The Laws were retroactive and applied to people who were Jewish before the Laws were enacted in 1936. Therefore, if a Jewish person converted to Christianity, they could not be citizens because they once were Jewish.

## The Red Cross

When Edith was given false documentation that made her an Aryan Christian, she was advised to apply for work at the Red Cross because they didn't require registration making the chance of exposure less likely. Edith was hired as a nurse's aide for the Red Cross and was first assigned to tend to foreign soldiers who were sick and wounded.

## Aschersleben

Edith was sent with a group of other women to Aschersleben where she would be working in a paper factory. She was first required to produce 20,000 boxes a day; eventually her quota was more than doubled. She had to keep working at her box making machine no matter how long into the night it took her to make her quota.



# Themes

## Survival

One of the main themes that emerges from “The Nazi Officer’s Wife,” is one of fundamental survival. Edith began life as a happy, brilliant youngster who loved her family, her school, her religion and her life in Vienna. Edith’s teachers recommended that she go on to high school – unusual for a girl in Vienna during the 1920s. But Edith even topped that when she went onto university and law school. The élan of youth kept Edith from noticing the growing and ominous signs that life for Jews in Austria would soon change and that her future would be drastically altered and her life turned upside down.

With the Nazi invasion of Austria, Jews were hunted down and made to register and required to wear yellow Stars of David to identify them. But things escalated from mere registration and public humiliation to real life or death peril. Edith had a strong belief in herself and her worth and a fundamental survival instinct that led her through the years of oppression and war.

Edith hated the Germans and their cruel treatment of Jews and the Nazi’s tenet to cleanse Europe of Jews and thus create an Aryan society. Edith knew that she had to repress the anger and rage that welled within. Separated from her family after the invasion, Edith contacted the well-connected Maria Niederall who was a Nazi Party member with a kind and understanding heart. She was able to arrange for false documentation that identified Edith Hahn, a twenty-eight year-old Jewish Austrian, as Christina Maria Margarethe Denner, a twenty-year-old Aryan Christian woman.

Edith had to bury herself within that identity. It meant her life. She spent literally years trembling at the sight of every SS officer or German police officer fearing that she had been found out. She married a German Nazi who was surprisingly unconcerned that she was a Jew although he still held his prejudices. But he was the only person in Brandenburg who knew who Grete really was.

Edith almost lost herself in those years. She felt the real Edith Hahn slipping away as she assumed the life of an uneducated, docile hausfrau who was married to a Nazi officer. But when her prayers were answered with Germany’s defeat, the real Edith Hahn re-emerged. The persona of Grete got Edith through the life and death struggle that she faced so that she could live the rest of her life as a proud Jewish woman who was brilliant, educated and able to make a difference in the world.

## Deception

Deception surfaces as a main theme in, “The Nazi Officer’s Wife.” Without deception, ordinary people like Edith would not have survived the Nazi oppression inflicted upon her as a Jew leading up to and during World War II. Although initially Jews were only



required to register so that the Austrian government was aware of their Jewish population. It may have been surprising or annoying to the Jews of Vienna where Edith and her family lived but they didn't feel threatened or in peril. But attention focused on the Jews soon escalated when the Austrian chancellor resigned and the Germans invaded and occupied Austria.

After the invasion, Jews were hunted by Nazis and SS officers like they were prey. They were forced to sew yellow stars on their outer garments so that they were easily identifiable as Jews. Edith found herself alone and terrified after the invasion. She served on a farm camp and at a paper factory but rumors of incarceration and death camps compelled Edith to find a way out. She knew it didn't matter where she was, she was still a Jew and would be hunted down wherever she went. But an acquaintance, a Nazi with a kind heart, was able to secure false documentation for Edith that instantly made her an Aryan Christian. She was able to maintain that false identity throughout the entire war. She not only successfully deceived the Nazis she survived them.

It was well-known that the Germans had a superior military. They had another weapon that was just as successfully as their armies at least initially. Germans were excellent propagandists. They issued reports and press releases that only lauded their great successes. When they lost Stalingrad, they boasted that they were poised to conquer Europe and indeed the world. Without this form of deceit, there probably would have been many more deserters and saboteurs than there were had the truth been broadcast. The Germans not only issued false reports, they disallowed any German citizen to listen to any other station than the German news. Only when a few brave souls began to turn the dial to learn that the Germans were heading for defeat did the real story begin to emerge.

## Bias

It's difficult to describe the exact nature of the bias that the Nazis had for Jewish people. Their prejudice against the Jews was not fundamentally about religion or ethnicity or national origin. The Germans despised the Jews for just being, just existing. In modern times, nothing has rivaled the complete repulsion that one people had for another when it came to the Nazi's abhorrence of the Jews. It was not just German Jews that they detested, it was all Jews. The Nuremberg Laws established in 1938 held that a Jew could not be a citizen. Even if a Jewish person converted to Christianity, it was still a fact that the person was a Jew at one point and, therefore, would be denied citizenship.

When Werner was expected home after the war, Edith wanted to ensure that he would receive his baby daughter with parental love and devotion. So that Werner would have nothing to hold against his half-Jewish daughter, Edith had her baptized a Christian before his return. But Werner was not impressed and not moved. Despite the fact that his daughter was officially a Christian, he referred to her "Jewish blood" something that didn't change with a baptism.



Hitler's dream was to have an Aryan nation. The Fuehrer's fantasy was to exterminate all the Jews in Europe so that the entire continent could become a pure and Aryan state. Unfortunately, he was able to fulfill at least a part of his dream as literally millions of Jews were imprisoned in concentration camps, tortured and killed in mass gassings that still haunt the world.

The hate of the Jews by the Nazis went far beyond a resentment for religion, color or nationality. It was a hate for the very flesh and blood of a people who, during the 1920s and 1930s, were just trying to make it through the Depression and the economic downturn like everyone else. That the hatred somehow catapulted the leader of the malevolent movement to a position of such power and authority is something that the world should not soon forget.



# Styles

## Structure

“The Nazi Officer’s Wife” by Edith H. Beer and Susan Dworkin is told in fourteen chapters which cover her life leading up to the Nazi invasion and occupation of Vienna, her disguise as an Aryan Christian, the defeat of the Germans in World War II and Edith’s liberation to be herself again. Edith begins her story as Grete, the Aryan Christian she was posing as, who was a nurse’s aide for the Red Cross in war torn Brandenburg. The story then flashes back to Edith’s family pre-war life and education in Vienna. The remainder of the story is told in a mainly chronological order. The story is filled with intrigue and trepidation as Edith, a Jew, portrays herself to be a Christian as she lives and works among the Nazis.

In the Preface, Edith and her co-author Susan Dworkin explain that Edith’s story had been buried for many years and why in more recent years she decided to tell her story. One of the main reasons Edith felt compelled to tell her story is that her only child, daughter Angela, wanted to know her mother’s story. Following the last chapter are photos and photocopies of letters and documentation from Edith’s ordeal. The happy family photos that first appear soon give way to family letters during worrisome separations and the false documentation that caused the fear of exposure that became part of Edith’s every waking hour until the war ended and she could finally reclaim her true identity.

## Perspective

“The Nazi Officer’s Wife” by Edith H. Beer and Susan Dworkin is written in the first-person from the point of view of Edith Hahn Beer who lived the story. No one could have captured the fear, heartache and human tragedy that Edith lived through other than the woman herself. She describes her life in Vienna in the 1920s leading up to the Great Depression and ultimately World War II.

In the 1920s, Edith Hahn was a brilliant and carefree young woman who loved her family and her life. She excelled at school and went on to high school, unusual for an Austrian girl in those days and ultimately onto college and law school – unheard of for an Austrian girl in those days! But there were ominous signs that the happy young woman failed to take seriously. The Austrians wanted to identify the Jews among them and began requiring them to register. It was a precursor of the later attempts by another Austrian, Adolph Hitler, to create a pure Aryan Society which was cleansed of Jews.

But reality caught up with the young college graduate when she was unable to complete the last step in obtaining her doctorate of law. She was told that she was no longer welcome at the university. Only Edith herself could convey the total devastation that she had to feel. That was just the beginning of Edith’s struggles and challenges through





Nazi invasion and World War II devastation. Posing as an Aryan Christian, Edith became Grete, another person who was acceptable to the Germans. The fear of exposure followed her throughout the years. She almost lost herself but in the end, when her prayers came true and the Germans were defeated, the real Edith Hahn was able to emerge and live her life openly as a proud Jew and educated woman.

## Tone

“The Nazi Officer’s Wife” by Edith H. Beer and Susan Dworkin takes place in 1920s and 1930s Austria and Germany. Both are German-speaking countries and therefore there are many German phrases interspersed throughout the English version of the book. Therefore, the story has the touch and feel of a tale of a foreign land from long ago. Edith is reconciled to the hard fact that she had become a German hausfrau (housewife) after she assumed the identity of an Aryan (a pure white member of the master race as defined by Nazi dogma).

Edith’s story harkens back to the devastating oppression that the Jews were forced to bear. The Nazis were members of the political party of the Fuhrer (leader) Adolph Hitler. The account is filled with intrigue and terror – the SS was a dreaded force of brutal, merciless Nazi officers who hunted down Jews and rounded up felons. The SS ordered executions for minor felonies and for adultery. One of the worst crimes that could be perpetrated against the Third Reich was for an Aryan Nazi to be involved with a Jew which describes to a tee her relationship with Werner. The Third Reich was Hitler’s fantasy of German domination of the world. Hitler incorporated his madness in his manifesto which was called, Mein Kampf. When German planes blanketed a target area with bombs and mortars it was called a blitzkrieg.

The terror and tragedy of the story goes far beyond the day-to-day fears that Edith faced. Prisoners of war and Jews were taken to concentration camps that later became known as death camps from the poison gas they used to snuff out the life of the incarcerated. In March of 1938, the Austrian chancellor resigned his post allowing the Germans to invade and take over the country. The annexation was known as the Anschluss which is the moment that Edith’s nightmare began.

There is also a sprinkling of the difficult to pronounce - at least for non-German speaking readers, cities - streets and locations. There are familiar names like Vienna and Berlin; however, unfamiliar names such as Stendahl, Aschersleben, Vartegau, Immelmannstrasse and the Maximilianaem Art Gallery were some of the tongue-twisting locations referred to in the book.



## Quotes

I did not dare to look into their faces for fear of seeing myself – my own terror, my own loneliness.

-- Edith (Chapter 1 paragraph 6)

**Importance:** Edith worked in a Red Cross ward for foreign patients. She knew firsthand the fear and loneliness the men felt. She restrained herself from thinking about her own situation but they were a constant reminder.

I didn't think about it at the time, but of course now I realize that my father's insistence that we Jews must be better was based on our country's firm belief that we were not as good.

-- Edith (Chapter 2 paragraph 26)

**Importance:** Even in the 1920s, the Jews were discriminated against in Vienna. Edith's father felt the pressure that his family must outperform others who were considered by the government to be superior to them.

You see in those days, boys were simply better educated than girls. They read more, traveled more, thought more.

-- Edith (Chapter 3 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Edith was explaining why it was so monumental for her father to agree to send her to high school. Most girls did not go on to higher education in Vienna during the time.

The rich had to sign over everything they owned; the less rich had to pay such exorbitant amounts for tickets out that families were often forced to choose which of their children should go and which should stay.

-- Edith (Chapter 4 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** When Austria was first invaded by the Germans the Nazis' goal was to remove all Jews from Austria. Edith points out that there were different outcomes for families depending on their wealth.

How can I describe to you our confusion and terror when the Nazis took over? We had lived until yesterday in a rational world. Now everyone around us – our schoolmates, neighbors, and teachers; our tradesmen, policemen, and bureaucrats – had all gone mad.

-- Edith (Chapter 4 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** This passage captures the chaos that the people of Vienna experienced when the Nazis invaded and took over the Austrian government.



Frau Fleschner smoked constantly. She loved her authority. She lined us up outside and read aloud the 'Rules for Jewesses Who Are Coming to Work at the Asparagus Plantation. 'All inmates must adhere to the rules and be responsible to Frau Fleschner – that is me,' she said.

-- Edith/Frau Fleschner (Chapter 5 paragraph 17)

**Importance:** Edith did hard labor at an asparagus farm near Osterburg. The overseer was a German woman named Frau Fleschner who enjoyed her authority.

Not enough potatoes to feed the Germans. The Jews will have to eat the rain.

-- German Postmistress (Chapter 5 paragraph 100)

**Importance:** Edith tried to send potatoes home to her mother but was stopped because Germany was running out of food as they grew closer to defeat.

The skin on my fingertips wore through, rubbed to a bloody mess by the cardboard. I would have been happy to use gloves, but you couldn't run the machine wearing gloves; they slowed you down and increased the likelihood that your fingers would be chopped off. So I just bled.

-- Edith (Chapter 6 paragraph 57)

**Importance:** Edith described life at the German paper factory where Edith had a quota of making 20,000-44,000 boxes each day. She had to stay as long as it took to meet her quota.

In my isolation, I had not yet learned that they [the Germans] had been winning victory after victory and, in June 1942, fully expected to conquer all of Europe.

-- Edith (Chapter 7 paragraph 6)

**Importance:** Jewish workers were not allowed to read newspapers or listen to the radio. Edith was crushed when she learned of German victories. She had been silently praying that the Americans would swiftly defeat the Germans.

The SS men are often quite attractive – racially they are just perfect, you know – but everybody is afraid of them, so nobody wanted to be their friend and they are very lonely.... So the government has taken pity on them and persuaded the girls from the Hitler Youth to sleep with them and have racially perfect babies who are raised in government nurseries like pine trees.

-- Frau Gerl (Chapter 8 paragraph 15)

**Importance:** Frau Gerl described to Edith how the Reich planned on populating Germany and all of Europe with Aryan people.

... on the outside I seemed like a clam, silent sea and inside I was stormy – tense, turbulent, stressed, sleepless, worrying constantly because I must always appear to be worried about nothing.

-- Edith (Chapter 9 paragraph 2)



**Importance:** When Edith lived in Brandenburg she experienced the stress of repressing who she really was. She had to appear happy and worry-free to ward off suspicious eyes. She was living a lie and it was taking its silent toll on her.

The earth beneath her shook and trembled – and Angela kicked her legs and laughed. She kept me sane. She made me smile in the presence of death. She was my miracle. As long as I had her, I felt that any miracle could happen, that all the world could be saved.

-- Edith (Chapter 11 paragraph 23)

**Importance:** This passage captures how much hope Edith placed in her child. The baby represented the future; a time when there would be no more bombings and the Nazis would be defeated.



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

Describe the stress that Edith, a Jewish girl in Nazi Germany posing as an “Aryan,” must have been under. Why did she venture down such a risky pathway?

## Topic 2

Why did Edith Hahn’s family fail to reap the benefits of the tight Jewish community in Vienna? Describe pre-World War II life for a Jew in Austria.

## Topic 3

How different would life have been for Edith had it not been disrupted by the Nazi invasion and the war? Describe the disappointment she had to feel when she was not able to take her final exam for her doctorate of law.

## Topic 4

Describe the relationship between Edith and Pepi. How did he show support and love for her, and how did he let her down?

## Topic 5

What characteristics of Werner were contradictory in nature? What were some signs that he may have been experiencing either some mental or emotional problems?

## Topic 6

Why did Angela agree to have a drink with the young man who gave her the St. Anthony’s Medal? How did she feel about him at first? What did she ultimately do with the metal, and why?

## Topic 7

Why was the German populace so uninformed about what was really going on in the war? How did Edith and many other German residents learn the truth?



## Topic 8

Why did Edith keep herself from thinking about the fate of her mother and sisters? How was she still able to keep the spirit of her mother as part of her life even though they were apart?

## Topic 9

What lengths did Edith go to ensure that Werner treated Angela as a loving father? How did her attempts backfire on her? What were his real feelings about the child?

## Topic 10

What was the importance of the Victims of Fascism group to Edith? Who comprised the membership of the group, and why did the members feel a connection to each other despite their varied backgrounds?