

Dita Kraus: The Librarian of Auschwitz

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Historical Paper

2,342 Words

From the late 1930s to the early 1940s, the Holocaust began as the second World War was being fought. The Holocaust started after Adolf Hitler swiftly rose to power within his political organization, the Nazi Party. He soon became 'fuhrer' after the President of Germany's death and could finally take action on his plan to exterminate the Jewish race on his way to creating his 'perfect society'. One determined Jew imprisoned in the infamous death camp Auschwitz-Birkenau, Dita Kraus, kept a secret library of forbidden books for her fellow prisoners in Block 31 despite the fact that it could lead to severe punishment. Even under the tragic conditions of risk and deception, Kraus triumphed by standing up to the Nazis, bringing hope to prisoners, and defying the dehumanization goal of the Nazis.

Edita Kraus, nee: Polach was born on July 12, 1929 and grew up in Prague, Czechoslovakia to a Jewish family. Polach's mother, Elizabeth, was orphaned at birth and Dita grew up without knowing much about her heritage. Her grandparents (adoptive) were atheists. Without a religious identity, Dita was unaware that her family was Jewish. One day, in the third grade, little Dita found a note on her desk bearing the words, "You are a Jew." She was obviously confused and went to her mother for an explanation. Her mother replied simply with, "We are Jews."¹

Her mother had a high school education which was uncommon during this time period. This reasonably influenced Dita to strive to become educated as well. Her love of books also came from her mother. When the war was only brewing, young Dita(12) asked her mother privately that now that she *was* twelve, she wanted to read some adult books. Later that night, her

¹ *Time-Coded Notes from Oral history interview with Dita Kraus*

mother slipped a book called *The Citadel* by A.J. Cronin under the door of Dita's room. Dita fell in love with this book and read it nonstop until she finished.²

Her family lived in Prague for several years until they were evicted and forced to move out of their hometown. One day, Dita was sad to find a note on their small table that said all Jews were being forced to another 'safe' location. Soon after that, the family was sent to the Theresienstadt Ghetto (a placement for Jews in Terezin, Czechoslovakia) as a result of Poland's loss of the Battle of Poland in 1939. The country had lost most of their land to the German army and the Germans forced Jews to relocate to the Terezin Ghetto.³

Polach and her family lived in Terezin for about two years before they were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau (a death camp for Jews in Poland). The Polach family was in the second import to Auschwitz. Most Jews who weren't killed in Terezin were in this same import. All of the prisoners were degraded when they entered the camp. During processing, they were given a blanket, a spoon and bowl for the daily soup, one change of clothes, and the day that they would die.⁴ Dita was so miserable after a few weeks that she even had thoughts about suicide. But, there was no way for prisoners to kill themselves in this camp. Jews that were in the camp-some would have called it a death factory-were treated like scum. They were given a number (instead of a name), they were stripped naked at random times, they had their heads shaved for punishment, and they were sometimes starved for days at a time-which led to food theft and many suffered from diarrhea due to the effects of malnutrition and mild poisons in their food.

² Iturbe, Antonio. *The Librarian of Auschwitz: The True Story of Auschwitz Prisoner Dita Kraus*. New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2017.

³ "World War II." *Britannica School, Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2 Dec. 2018. school-preview.eb.com/levels/middle/article/World-War-II/277798#210437.toc. Accessed 13 Jan. 2019.

⁴ Kraus, Dita. *Interview*. By Connor Wayne McRae. 17 Jan. 2019.

Dita especially remembered that she couldn't cry after receiving the tattooed number on her wrist because she would be scolded and embarrassed. The prisoners were left to fend for themselves like animals and every day, there were hundreds of people sent to the gas chambers. Lots of prisoners, (most of them were newcomers) were devastated and, at times, didn't believe it when they heard that other prisoners were being gassed to death. They learned that they would be gassed also in a few months.⁵ Near the end of their time in the camp, most people were too weak to even try to stop their death from swooping down upon them.⁶

The Nazis used Auschwitz to implement their goal to dehumanize the Jewish race. The Nazis believed in the "perfect human race", which they referred to as the Aryans. Many Germans did not believe that Jews were part of this race; Jews were not human.⁷ Truly believing that Jews weren't human, Hitler even blamed them for the war, saying:

But nor have I left any doubt that if the nations of Europe are once more to be treated only as collections of stocks and shares of these international conspirators in money and finance, then those who carry the real guilt for the murderous struggle, this people will also be held responsible: the Jews!⁸

To make Jews feel like they weren't human, Nazis slowly banned everything for the Jews, including books. Because of this lack of books, prisoners began to secretly use and hide

⁵ Levy, Jeanne. *From the Testimony of Jeanne Levy About the First Time She Heard that People are Being Gassed in Auschwitz-Birkenau*. Shoah resource Center. Yadvashem, www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%20204174.pdf. Accessed 8 Feb. 2019.

⁶ *Time-Coded Notes from Oral history interview with Dita Kraus*

⁷ Iturbe, Antonio. *The Librarian of Auschwitz: The True Story of Auschwitz Prisoner Dita Kraus*. New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2017.

⁸ Hitler, Adolf. *From Hitler's Testament*. Yad Vashem, 2016, www.yadvashem.org/docs/hitler-testament.html. Accessed 8 Feb. 2019

them by doing anything they possibly could to keep them hidden. Most prisoners didn't realize how much they had loved books until they were gone.

Dita Polach was part of the family block in Auschwitz. Within this block, they made a makeshift school approved by the Nazis, though they could only practice German games and activities⁹. This is where all of the books were kept that were given by fellow prisoners who had been hiding them in secret in their barracks. The Blockalester (leader of the block), Fredy Hirsch (Jew), had noticed something different about Dita and wanted to assign her a job in the school. One day, he pulled her aside and asked her to be the librarian or caretaker of the books that had been hidden. Skeptically, she said yes. She was skeptical because she knew that it was risky business to hide books from the formidable Nazis.

In the novel *The Librarian of Auschwitz: The True Story of Auschwitz Prisoner Dita Kraus*, author Antonio Iturbe summarized Dita's thoughts:

The first one was an unbound atlas, with a few pages missing...*The Basic Treatise on Geometry* was somewhat better preserved...*A Short History of the World* by H.G.

Wells...*A Russian Grammar*. She didn't understand a thing, but she liked those enigmatic letters...There was also a French novel in bad condition and a treatise with the title *New Paths to Psychoanalytic Therapy* by a professor named Freud. There was another novel in Russian with no cover. And the eighth book was Czech, only a handful of sheets held together by a few threads along the spine.

These books were not all five star, but, they were loved and cherished because of how uncommon they were in this camp.

⁹ Iturbe, Antonio. *The Librarian of Auschwitz: The True Story of Auschwitz Prisoner Dita Kraus*. New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2017.

Dita Polach was a proud and brave caretaker of these precious books. She always loved when the children looked up to her with such admiration. She felt like it was her duty specifically to keep the books safe.¹⁰ She was also a very sharp steward for the block's safety. She had several ideas to keep the books hidden if there was a surprise inspection from the Nazis in Block 31. At first, these books were just hidden under a floorboard in Hirsch's office. Polach had the plan to create secret pockets in her smock to hide the books furtively from the SS guards and chiefs. However, Polach was uncomfortable when going into Fredy's office and putting books in her smock so she decided to hide the books in the small chimney where there was a secret wall.¹¹

Although keeping the books safe was dangerous enough, Dita was also hiding from one of the most feared Nazi authorities in Auschwitz, Doctor Josef Mengele. Mengele's main study was the study of twins.¹² He was a surgeon and people feared him mainly because of rumors about his daily life; there was one rumor that he worshipped the devil with black candles in the forest!¹³

On one occasion before a surprise inspection on the children's block, two teachers were still holding books tight in their arms. Young Polach noticed this and sprinted straight across the room to snatch the books from the teachers hands. The teachers were relieved but, at the same time, guards were only a few feet from the block and Dita had no time to put the books away.

¹⁰ Iturbe, Antonio. *The Librarian of Auschwitz: The True Story of Auschwitz Prisoner Dita Kraus*. New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2017.

¹¹ Iturbe, Antonio. *The Librarian of Auschwitz: The True Story of Auschwitz Prisoner Dita Kraus*. New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2017.

¹² "Josef Mengele." *Britannica School, Encyclopædia Britannica*, 12 Dec. 2008. school-preview.eb.com/levels/middle/article/Josef-Mengele/312464. Accessed 10 Jan. 2019.

¹³ Iturbe, Antonio. *The Librarian of Auschwitz: The True Story of Auschwitz Prisoner Dita Kraus*. New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2017.

She had to hope and pray that their books would not be discovered. To her astonishment, before the guards got to her section, clumsy Professor Morgenstern, a Jewish prisoner/educator of Block 31-Auschwitz-Birkenau, kept dropping his glasses which distracted Mengele. This distraction caused Mengele to forget which sections he had already searched. He soon left and Dita and the rest of her block were safe and their muttered prayers were answered. Despite their great efforts, Mengele had a feeling that there was something up with Polach. He warned her one day that he would be keeping an eye on her or else she would find herself cut open on his live-autopsy lab table.

Polach experienced many triumphant moments in her pursuit to share these books. Although many of her daily interactions were not recorded, Polach helped many of the young students enjoy some small part of their time in Auschwitz. She lent these books to children and teachers to ease their minds and help them forget the grim circumstances which they were facing. Also, Polach was able to be strong and defiant before the Nazis, including Doctor Mengele. She decided to keep her job as the librarian even after her threat from Mengele. She was showing the prisoners that she wasn't afraid and that she would do anything to keep those books safe. Polach and her fellow prisoners did not let the Nazis take their humanity. All of the volunteer workers in the block were prepared, by Fredy Hirsch, to hide the books in their specially made pockets in their smocks. Over time, Polach was assured that she was welcomed in the block in her position as librarian through the support and understanding from her fellow prisoners.

Before Dita had come to Block 31(children's block), she had applied for the position of adult volunteer. They said that there was no help needed.

“I speak fluent German and Czech,” she pleaded. When Fredy Hirsch heard her say this, he immediately let her join.¹⁴

As an authority in her position, Dita was very proud of all of her choices and experiences which helped prisoners hold on to their humanity.

Although there were many victories, there were obvious losses. Polach’s actions led to tragedies for some of the camp members. There were risks taken on many accounts from nearly all of the members of the children’s block. On a few occasions, the books had been poorly hidden by Polach which left the whole block at risk. If the books were discovered, they would all be sent immediately to the gas chambers. Thankfully, they never were caught. Dita said, “The educators in the Kinderblock were the greatest heroes of all. They knew they would die, yet dedicated themselves to the children, to make their last weeks as pleasant as they could.”¹⁵

Along with risk, deception was another hardship that Dita Polach had to face. There were several times when people she loved and trusted would be revealed to be working for the Nazis. For example, when the one person that her father trusted, Mr. Tomasek, was found talking with a Nazi, Dita lost all trust in most people.¹⁶

Dita’s father had been sick after several days of starvation when he stopped breathing one day during roll call. “I woke up in the middle of the night and I knew my father was dead.”¹⁷

Towards the end of the war, about half of the prisoners were forced to work in Germany as laborers. The Allied troops had invaded Germany and Germany was defeated in battle. The

¹⁴ Iturbe, Antonio. *The Librarian of Auschwitz: The True Story of Auschwitz Prisoner Dita Kraus*. New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2017.

¹⁵ Wojakovski, Nadine. "Dita Kraus: The librarian of Auschwitz." *The Jewish Chronicle*. 26 Jan. 2018. 19 Jan. 2019

¹⁶ Iturbe, Antonio. *The Librarian of Auschwitz: The True Story of Auschwitz Prisoner Dita Kraus*. New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2017.

¹⁷ *Holocaust Survivor Testimony: Dita Kraus. Performance by Dita Kraus*, 2014.

Nazis decided to get use out of the remaining living prisoners and replace workers who had been defeated in battle. Fredy Hirsch (Jewish Blockalester) was chosen randomly to be one of the people to stay behind and die. Those who were chosen to work in Germany had to take a treacherous walk to Germany and several people died. They weren't given much food or water and were forced along by the guards and were shunned when they couldn't walk anymore.¹⁸ Polach and her mother were walking and during this strenuous time her mother unfortunately died. Despite the loss of both her parents, Polach continued her forced labor every day.

Finally, during 1945, Dita and all the other prisoners were freed. They brought shocking information of what they had been through to the rest of the world.¹⁹

Dita was an orphan now. Looking back, Dita Kraus said, "I had no home. All I had were a few pieces of clothing tied in a blanket and a few packets of cigarettes."²⁰

After a few years of living alone, Polach met her husband, Otta B. Kraus. They were married in 1947. Dita bore a child in that same year and she and Otta went on to teach English in elementary schools in Israel. Today, she still lives in Israel with her husband, one child, and four grandchildren.

Dita Kraus was a heroic figure whose fight for humanity in the face of ever present mortal dangers reminds us to never give up, no matter how much we want to quit. She experienced tragedies and triumphs and somehow survived the death camp of

¹⁸ "Holocaust." *Britannica School, Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2 Dec. 2018. school-preview.eb.com/levels/middle/article/Holocaust/274919. Accessed 14 Jan. 2019

¹⁹ "Holocaust." *Britannica School, Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2 Dec. 2018. school-preview.eb.com/levels/middle/article/Holocaust/274919. Accessed 14 Jan. 2019

²⁰ *Wojakovski, Nadine. "Dita Kraus: The librarian of Auschwitz." The Jewish Chronicle*. 26 Jan. 2018. 19 Jan. 2019

Auschwitz-Birkenau. Dita brought joy to hopeless prisoners, underwent loss, and experienced other triumphs and unspeakable tragedies. We can all learn from Dita Kraus, survivor of Auschwitz.

“The words of a crazy old man are no interest to them, but if the words come from a book...that's another matter. Within their pages, books contain the wisdom of the people who wrote them. Books never lose their memory.”-Professor Morgenstern.²¹

²¹ *Iturbe, Antonio. The Librarian of Auschwitz: The True Story of Auschwitz Prisoner Dita Kraus. New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2017.*

Works Cited

Primary Sources

Hitler, Adolf. *From Hitler's Testament. Yad Vashem*, 2016,

www.yadvashem.org/docs/hitler-testament.html. Accessed 8 Feb. 2019. I used this to gain some background on Adolf Hitler and to see what his goals were and some of his reasons for doing what he did. I learned that Hitler believed that the Jews were responsible for the war happening.

Holocaust Survivor Testimony: Dita Kraus. Performance by Dita Kraus, 2014. Through this video I learned some simple and personal information about Kraus's life. I learned some of Kraus's hobbies when she was in Terezin and how some tragedies happened like deaths and some of her background. I learned that she always loved to paint.

Kraus, Dita. Interview. By Connor Wayne McRae. 17 Jan. 2019. I found Kraus's email and emailed her some questions. She answered and I got great personal information and feelings. I learned that they learned their death date when they arrived at Auschwitz. I also learned that all they had in the camp was a spoon, a bowl, a blanket, and one outfit. It was so cool emailing her! It was a major primary source for me.

Levy, Jeanne. *From the Testimony of Jeanne Levy About the First Time She Heard that People are Being Gassed in Auschwitz-Birkenau*. Shoah Resource Center. *Yadvashem*, www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%20174.pdf. Accessed 8 Feb.

2019. I used this to learn more about what some other prisoners (Jeanne Levy) thought about some of the daily things that happened in Auschwitz.

Spiegel, Regina. *Regina Spiegel: Separation at Auschwitz*. Ushmm,

www.ushmm.org/information/visit-the-museum/programs-activities/first-person-program/first-person-podcast/regina-spiegel-separation-at-auschwitz. Accessed 8 Feb. 2019. I was able to learn more about feelings and thoughts of other prisoners (Regina Spiegel) about some of the the same things that Kraus went through.

Secondary Sources

"Auschwitz." *Britannica School*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 22 Aug. 2018.

school-preview.eb.com/levels/middle/article/Auschwitz/11296. Accessed 13 Jan. 2019. I used this to find out some information about what happened in Auschwitz regularly and what life was like. I also learned about some of the people and jobs there were. I learned that they tried to trick the prisoners that they were taking a shower even though they were going into the gas chambers. They even told them to tie their shoes together so that one of them didn't get lost.

"Holocaust." *Britannica School*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 2 Dec. 2018.

school-preview.eb.com/levels/middle/article/Holocaust/274919. Accessed 14 Jan. 2019. I used this to learn and research the origins and end of the Holocaust. I learned that when the war ended, the prisoners that were alive were set free.

Iturbe, Antonio. *The Librarian of Auschwitz: The True Story of Auschwitz Prisoner Dita Kraus*.

New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2017. This book taught me the basic story of Dita

Kraus. I was able to learn some basic ideas and some background information about the resistance and other people and characters.

"Josef Mengele." *Britannica School*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 12 Dec. 2008.

school-preview.eb.com/levels/middle/article/Josef-Mengele/312464. Accessed 10 Jan. 2019. Through this article, I learned more about Josef Mengele, a doctor and Nazi. He was one of the feared people and leaders in Auschwitz. He was very strict and threatening. He threatened Dita Kraus that he would watch her and figure out anything that she did that was wrong.

"Prague." *Britannica School*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 2 Dec. 2018.

school-preview.eb.com/levels/middle/article/Prague/276530. Accessed 16 Jan. 2019. Prague is the hometown of Kraus and I learned why there were people leaving and why it was so easily defeated in battle. Dita Kraus and all the other Jews were affected by Poland's defeat because they were sent to the Terezin Ghetto.

"Theresienstadt." Scholastic

GO!, go.scholastic.com/content/schgo/C/article/028/801/0288015-0.html. Accessed 10 Jan. 2019. I learned a lot about what Terezin was and why they had it. It was for promoting anti-semitism and to hold Jews there until they were ready to be shipped to Auschwitz.

Time-Coded Notes from Oral History Interview with Dita Kraus. These notes helped me to understand more of Kraus's background information. I learned a lot about what she liked and about her relatives and life before the war.

Wojakovski, Nadine. "Dita Kraus: The librarian of Auschwitz." The Jewish Chronicle. 26 Jan.

2018. 19 Jan. 2019 . This helped me to learn that Kraus looked up to the teachers in the makeshift school as heroes.

"World War II." *Britannica School*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 2 Dec. 2018.

school-preview.eb.com/levels/middle/article/World-War-II/277798#210437.toc.

Accessed 13 Jan. 2019. I learned so much about how the battle of Poland played out and about Poland's army. This is how all of those Jews even got to Terezin in the first place.

If they won this battle, they would have stopped the German army from collecting another country's worth of Jews.