

El Al in South Bohemia

*personalities of the Zionist scouts
and Jewish youth movements*

Jitka Radkovičová - Tiki

*In memory of Edith Katz-Kočka (Cat in English),
her brother Erna-Píd'a and other members of the
Zionist youth movement El Al in South Bohemia,
former scouts and friends in life and death.*

May God Remember... Jizkor Elohim **יזכור אלוהים**



A group of El Al youth members from South Bohemia, České Budějovice in 1941; From the left: unknown, Eva Poláková, Lilka Hebáková, Dita Mayerová, Zuzana Kulková, Truda Popperová, Irena Stadlerová, Edita Katz-Kočka, unknown, Jirka Meisl-Small, Jirka Meisl-Big, Ruda Stadler-Digger, Zdenko Roubíček, Ruda Böhm with his back to the camera.

[Photo collection of the archive in Beit Terezin; Jiří Meisl's photo album]

Almost a year ago I was putting the final touches to an article about a hachshara on a hill near Teletín, a place nicknamed by the Jewish youth as *Gan Eden* meaning *Garden of Eden*. I had a feeling that the whole thing was not over yet. Something was telling me that there was still more to come. Israel is an inexhaustible pool of stories. However, one must have the right kind of patience because new pieces of information appear only step by step while unexpected twists sometimes occur in abundance. The story of the hachshara in Teletín literally took a whole year to continue. Considered from the very beginning, meaning from the moment I received the first piece of information, the story took more than five years. Moreover, the whole story did not concern Teletín only; it was about a shameful period of Scout history of the late 1938 and early 1939, more exactly about a group of members of the Zionist movement El Al, former scouts then expelled from their scout groups in České Budějovice and Tábor.

During my tenth visit to the Promised Land in November 2018 in Kyriat Gat near Gaza I was talking to a scout friend Hanka Sternlicht while looking at photographs of Teletín (where in 1940 the youth of the El Al movement fortified themselves performing agricultural work. The movement was affiliated with scouting which was the topic of my previous



*El Al members at the hachshara in Teletín. Summer 1940. Edita Katz-Kočka on the left.
[Ruth Bondy's private collection]*

article.) Still reeling from a massive attack by the Hamas terrorist group with hundreds of rockets fired from the Gaza Strip targeting and ravaging Israel there were a lot of things on my mind. I have to admit I found it nearly impossible to focus on all the photographs spread on the table before us. Nevertheless, I managed to collect my thoughts to hear Hanka remark: “Surely, this is *Kočka* here...”

I did not have the slightest idea of who *Kočka* was. The only text available to me about what happened at the hachshara in Teletín came from a book of the Czech-Israeli writer Ruth Bondy entitled *More Luck Than Sense*.¹ It contained some names as well as nicknames but *Kočka* was not among them. Riddled with *Small*, *Big* and *Long Jirka* (George), there also appeared the name of Honza (John) Brammer and also a mention of those who did not survive: Lilka, Truda, Rudla, *Small Jirka* and *Long Jirka* - out of nine of those hachshara members five were to perish in concentration camps. I cannot recall Ruth mentioning any of these names of the “Teletín story” during our discussion. Now I had no one to ask because Ruth had left us to serve the eternal service in November 2017.

Only a couple of months passed before I left for Israel again in March 2019. Thanks to Hanka Sternlicht I met Dorit, *Kočka's* daughter on this adventurous expedition. I also got an

¹ Ruth Bondy: *Víc štěstí než rozumu*. Published by Argo Prague in 2003.



*Jirka Meisl-Small with friends doing farm work. Teletín, 1940.
[Photo collection of the archive in Beit Terezin; Jiří Meisl's photo album]*

invitation from my friend Tereza Maizels from the Beit Terezin archive in Givat Chaim to call in as she definitely wanted me to see a photo album that she had come across. I do not believe in coincidence, I just know in the words of one of Wabi Ryvola's songs that "God has those things in hand". So I can write more about the "cast and characters" as I have collected so many pieces of new or additional information that it would be a shame to let it lie fallow and remain silent. Moreover, I believe it is necessary to write about these things as well as to maintain the memory of those who perished. We must learn a lesson from the past for the future so that the new generation of scouts may not repeat old mistakes: unfortunately, it is prone to make them again.

As mentioned already, the story of the hachshara in Teletín is also the story of two groups of the Zionist movement El Al in South Bohemia, namely those of Tábor and České Budějovice. Branching out into an unusual breadth the story began to touch upon a much larger part of scouting than I had previously thought. In short: young Zionists left for the hachshara after the group leader (in this case Honza Brammer, previously expelled from university by the Nazis) received instructions from the umbrella HeHalutz movement to start agricultural work on a farm in Teletín. It was not all about work for the Zionist youth as the name itself suggests: *Gan Eden*, the *Garden of Eden*. This is what Ruth Bondy described in the book that I have already mentioned but the writing was rather on an academic level. It was Edith Katz – *Kočka* who provided a more detailed, vivid and somewhat practical information such as a description of the daily programme of the hachshara in Teletín. She wrote it in a wartime samizdat magazine called *Klepy* (*Gossip* in English) produced under bare conditions and in a clandestine fashion by the Jewish youth in České Budějovice. The article entitled *A Day at the Hachshara in Teletín* was published in issue 7 of the magazine:

“A day at the hachshara in Teletín began with an alarm clock going off at half past five, immediately silenced by a skilful hand of a cook who was closest to it. Immediately, a tool of modern technology, a Primus stove, was lit. Sometimes this was easy, at other times this meant some difficulty but thanks to it we came to a laid table. A toranut² was woken too. This was a boy whose task it was to bring as much water as possible and to cut wood. The others got up at a quarter to seven. Supplications were heard then according to weather. If the weather was bad the people from the gamekeeper’s lodge would come saying: “favourable weather forecast, it is going to rain any minute but that is bad as I was looking forward to making hay” or “it is going to be hot again, I wish it would rain a bit, I have so many letters to write...” and so on. When the march to work was finally ready to set out, the cooks came and forced Honza to take a milk container, Small a snack, Big to carry a flour sack etc. You see we were paid in kind by the farm. [...] After supper we sang, played games and, weather permitting, we would walk to a place called Skalka (Little Rock) high above the Vltava River and devote ourselves to romantic moments. Especially when guitar was at hand we would sit late into the night. That is how our day ended.”³

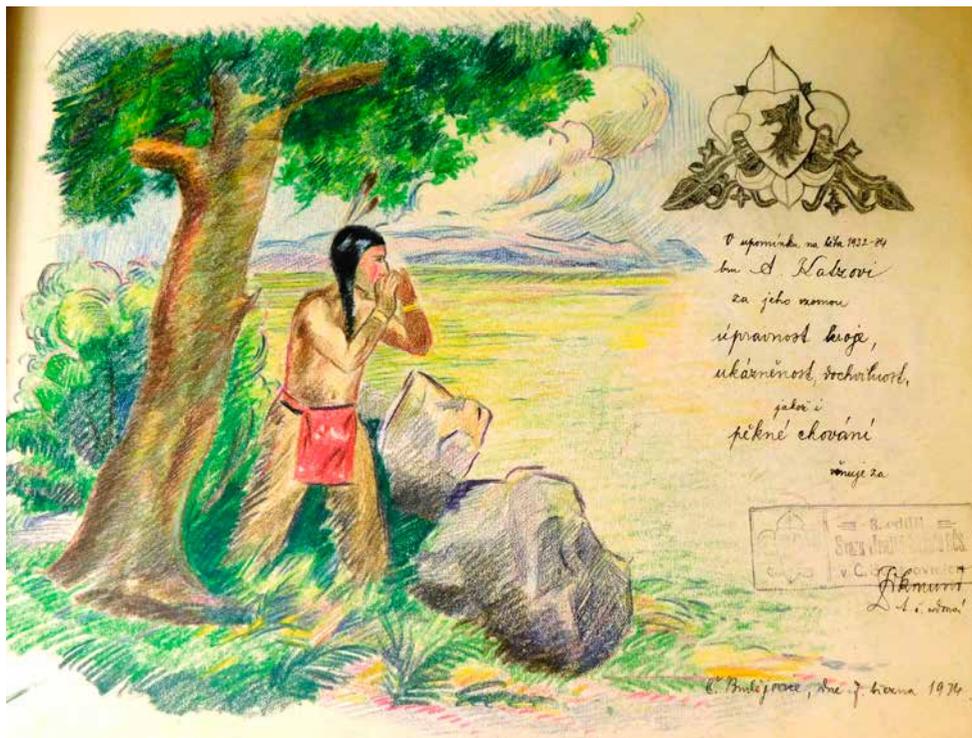
One can see from the passages above that those young people enjoyed their time as much as they could without having the slightest idea of what a dreadful future their fate had in store for them.

The membership of these young people in the Zionist youth organization El Al and their departure for the hachshara were, unfortunately, preceded by events that the scout movement can hardly be proud of. Not one bit. Let me explain why: A debate was underway among the scouts in the late 1938 and early 1939 about how to proceed in the new situation. A decision was reached that it would be best to face the Germans by “closing its ranks” as a union. There was also pressure by Czech political representatives to adopt this solution. It may be more accurate to say that this position was literally forced upon the Czech scouts. Yet, can this be an apology? I am afraid I view it more as an excuse. So when the unifying congress took place in 1939 the Jewish scout organizations were not invited into these ranks. Until then those organizations were incorporated members of the Association of Scouts of the Czechoslovak Republic or the Federation of the Czechoslovak Scouting. It does not matter at all what that debate resulted from. Individual members of Jewish origin also began to feel uneasy in the Association of Scouts. In my opinion, we should have “packed it in” together with the Jews because the situation was not headed towards anything else as an attentive observer could see then. We could have maintained a clean slate.

Let us now return to my trips to Israel: the trip in March of this year (2019) was preceded, among other things, by an email correspondence with *Kočka’s* daughter Dorit who I had been put in touch with by Hanka Sternlicht, as already mentioned. Among the things we touched

² *Toranut*, service or person on standby from Hebrew.

³ *Klepy* (Gossip), no 7, 29 December 1940, pp 10 and 12. Kept at the Jewish Museum in Prague.



An award certificate presented to Erna Katz (nicknamed Píďa) for being an exemplary scout in 1934.
 [Dorit Vidar's private collection]

upon in our conversation was scouting and the reason I gave her for my coming to Israel. I received a surprising reply which I give below in full:

“Anyhow I must tell you that my mother, Edita Katz and her elder brother Erna were devoted scouts, even before the Jewish youth movements, they participated in, and they were thrown out of the scouts, when Hitler took over, a fact which was a very very big disappointment to both of them... ‘We really believed that scout is a brother to a scout’ and they just couldn’t believe that their scout brothers would throw them out of the movement because they’re Jewish...”⁴

Totally shaken, I read the words of betrayal of ideals, words describing the feelings of those affected and I felt ashamed to the very depths of my scout soul. Those words were not uttered into the wind nor were they dry statistical data which I sometimes come across. These were the feelings of particular people in a particular situation and that situation was not, if we use contemporary language here, at all favourable in assessing the outcomes which the then scout movement had reached.

⁴ Dorit's email.

Škvránek) a Školický přestoupili do roduho oddílu. Na základě názoru
 o nezřícných byli vyhlášeni br. Kote, Arnstein, Popper, Reals, Na konci
 roku existoval tedy v oddíle 29 členů.

Lubomír Kote
 1939

1939, decree concerning non-Aryans: an entry in the scout chronicle on the expulsion of members from the 3rd Scout Group in České Budějovice due to their Jewish origin.

[An entry in the chronicle of the 3rd Scout Group in České Budějovice]

Meeting Dorit later we were looking at the photo albums of her mother, Edita Katz and her uncle Arnošt, called Erna which were hidden at their neighbours” during the war and later taken to Israel. The albums were full of photographs of scout activities and I could see ever more clearly that these two young people had fully identified with and lived for scouting. The blow of 1939 must have been all the worse for them.

I also found “muster” photograph after heeding Tereza Maizels’s advice and setting out a couple of days later to Beit Terezin in the kibbutz Givat Haim Ihud to explore another photo album bearing a title half in Czech, half in Hebrew: *Jirka Meisl (Small), Summer Camp, El Al*. The puzzle pieces fell in place as the descriptions of individuals in the photographs also included first names and surnames. Remembering the relevant passage from Ruth Bondy’s book it all made sense at once because the names were identical in all the cases. It turned out that the majority of the hachshara participants in Teletín were from South Bohemia. I had no idea until then. There are no coincidences. Then it was all very quick. It was not just *Kočka* and her brother Erna to be sacked from scout groups. Trying to trace all the people from among Edita Katz’s friends affected by the sack I remembered the very “muster” photo in Jirka Meisl’s photo album. It all suddenly rang a bell for me there. There was something strangely similar in the posture of those people in the photograph and only then did I see the light: surely I know this from the



The photo album of Jiří Meisl-Small, whose contents helped me to decode and describe “the cast and all the characters” in the story.
 [Photo collection of the archive in Beit Terezin; Jiří Meisl’s photo album]

scout muster! When the “at ease” command is given, we stand in a relaxed posture with legs slightly apart and our hands behind our backs in the same way as the people in the picture do... Only scout shirts were missing in the photo.

So it was clear that some of the Teletín's hachshara participants and their friends used to be scouts and were excommunicated later. What remained was to find out about their destinies or the destinies of those not ranking in the Scout Association but who still “had a taste” of scouting through El Al because it had scouting in the statutes. I was helped in uncovering their scout history by brother Radim Znachor, nicknamed Fedor, a fellow scout historian from České Budějovice.

Edita Katz's brother **Arnošt**, known as Erna, *Pída* by scout nickname, was a member of the 3rd Boy Scouts' Group in České Budějovice where he was assistant scout leader. As we already know he was expelled from the group. He was taken to Terezín in transport Akb with number 216 in April 1942, two years later to Auschwitz in autumn of 1944 and from there to Fürstenberg where he died.



Assistant leader of the 3rd Scout Group in České Budějovice Arnošt (Erna) Katz, also known as *Pída* by his scout nickname at a summer camp in 1937.

[Dorit Vidar's private collection]

In the late 1930 s, **Irena Stadlerová** was the leader of the 1st Girl Scouts' Group which Edita Katzová – *Kočka* and her friends attended. Due to her Jewish origin she had to resign from the leader position and was expelled from the group.⁵ She was to use her leadership skills in Terezín as she became one of the *madrichot*⁶ in home L 410; still in the Terezín ghetto she married Viktor Kende, member of the group that had published the aforementioned illegal magazine *Klepy* (Gossip) for the Jewish youth in České Budějovice during the occupation⁷. Both of them survived and emigrated to the United States after the war.

The brother of the former leader of the 1st group **Rudolf Stadler**, nicknamed Digger, belonged among the publishers of the illegal magazine *Klepy* (Gossip)⁸. We can say he was the main figure

5 Website of the 1st Girl Scouts' Group in České Budějovice: <https://jednicka.skauting.cz/historie-oddilu/>

6 *Madrichot* (sing. *madricha*) leader, warden from Hebrew

7 In: Kathy Kacer: *Underground Reporters*. Evan Brothers 2007, pp 155–157.

8 In: Jewish Museum in Prague: http://collections.jewishmuseum.cz/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/3421



Leader of the First Girl Group in České Budějovice Irena Stadlerová (on the left) with Truda Popperová.
[Alena Popperová's private collection]

a year later. In June 1944 he was moved to Schwarzheide to work in the Brabag factory which produced fuel for the German army. Two death marches were organized from that concentration camp and Rudolf was in the latter one. However, his weakened body would not obey him. As most prisoners found themselves in a similar situation, Rudolf did not want his fellows to have to support him. Unable to walk any more he just sat down on the side of the road. The Germans shot him dead. This happened on 22 April 1945, only a couple of days before the end of the war.⁹

Lilka Hebáková, *Kočka's* best friend in the pre-war time, was also member of the 1st Girls' Scout Group in České Budějovice.¹⁰ Having returned from the hachshara in Teletín in the autumn of 1940 she remained for a while in Budějovice only to be sent together with the others to Terezín in the spring of 1942. In less than a week she continued on to Lublin. Lilka did not survive Nazi violence.

among the editors. He came to Terezín together with the others from České Budějovice on 18 April 1942 and was taken later to Auschwitz by the transport Ek in September 1944. Later he was deported to Dachau and there he volunteered for a transfer to Litoměřice to build roads thinking he could be closer to his sister Irene who had remained in Terezín. His hopes remained unfulfilled as he was beaten to death with a pickaxe by a kapo in spring 1945.

Rudolf Böhm was a participant of the hachshara in Teletín from Tábor. He did not finish his studies at the Tábor grammar school due to his Jewish origin and was also forced to leave his scout group. He became active in the Zionist movement El Al finding it equally satisfying and made new friends there. Rudolf was deported to Terezín on 16 November 1942 with the transport Cb only to leave with others for Auschwitz



Rudolf Böhm on the left under the window with Lilka Hebáková in the window. Teletín, summer of 1940.

[Photo collection of the archive in Beit Terezin; Jiří Meisl's photo album]

⁹ See <https://www.centropa.org/biography/eva-meislova>

¹⁰ Website of the 1st Girl Scouts' Group in České Budějovice: <https://jednicka.skauting.cz/historie-oddilu/>

Neither did other friends from the same group of Jewish youth from České Budějovice, **Edita Mayerová**, **Eva Poláková** and **Helena Schwarzová**. On the way to Terezín a feeling of solidarity still may have given them some strength after all of them met at the assembly point of the transport Akb which left České Budějovice on 18 April 1942. Together with Lilka Hebáková they literary continued straight on to the east in the direction of Lublin with the transport Al on 23 April 1942. I cannot imagine what was happening there. Nevertheless the sheer horror is documented by the number of those who survived the transport. One thousand people were transported out of which one person only survived. **One only**.



*Truda Popperová on Skalka (today the look-out point called Máj). Teletín, summer of 1940.
[Ruth Bondy's private collection]*

Another scout expelled from the 1st Girls' Scout Group in České Budějovice for racial reasons was **Truda Popperová**¹¹. In one of Ruth Bondy's photo album which I saw a long time ago and from which I copied some photographs in regard to the El Al movement we can see Truda sitting in a very romantic photograph on the little rock called *Skalka* (today the look-out point *Máj*) deep in thought, looking into the distance. This photograph is in sharp contrast with a snap taken in the square in České Budějovice some two years before. I do not know what was going on in her mind, maybe she thought of all the injustice befalling the Jews, of the persecution that the people of her nation including herself were subjected to without any cause. We will never know. Truda had no way of knowing what the future held for her and her friends. Nobody had any idea then. In the same transport with other Jews from České Budějovice Truda left for the Terezín ghetto in April 1942 only to continue from there on 27 April to the concentration camp in Izbica where she died.

The same fate awaited **Zuzana Kulková** who was also killed in Izbica. From the transport Ag departing 999 people from Terezín to Izbica **two people** survived only.

¹¹ Website of the 1st Girl Scouts' Group in České Budějovice: <https://jednicka.skauting.cz/historie-oddilu/>

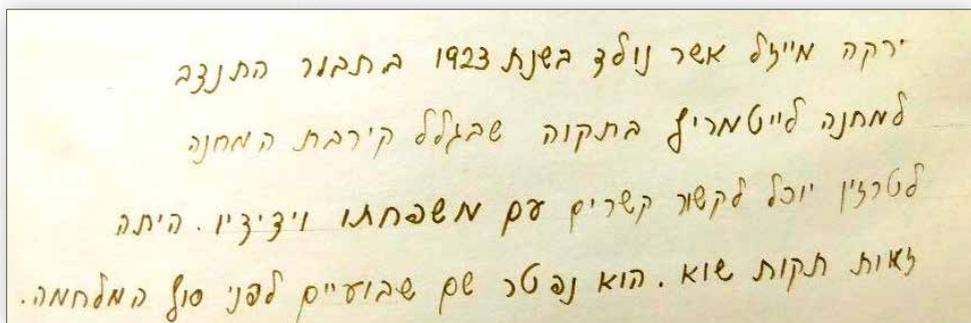


*Jiří Meisl-Small in happier times. Teletín, summer of 1940.
[Ruth Bondy's private collection]*

Jiří (Jirka) **Meisl** also known as *Small*, another brother from Tábor, also a participant of the hachshara in Teletín, was transported from Tábor to the Terezín ghetto in November 1942. In September 1944 he was deported to Auschwitz and Kaufering. He also registered as a volunteer to the labour camp Richard in Litoměřice. There were more people following this route, for example Petr Land, formerly from Jihlava, nowadays living in kibbutz Givat Haim Ihud. Talking to Petr some time ago I realized he had witnessed Jiří's Meisl last days: Jiří shared with him food supplies from parcels sent to him by his best friend from Planá nad Lužnicí.

As already mentioned, I found Jiří's photo album in the archive of Beit Terezin thanks to the local archivist Tereza Maizels. I have no idea how it had found its way to Israel. There is an additional entry made by an unknown person stating the following: *"Jiří Meisl, born in Tábor in 1923, perished in Litoměřice, in a labour camp into which he enrolled*

voluntarily thinking that being close to Terezín he would be able to establish contacts with his family or friends, which was a mistake. He died two weeks before the end of the war."¹²



*An additional entry made by an unknown hand about Jiří Meisl's death.
[Photo collection of the archive in Beit Terezin; Jiří Meisl's photo album]*

¹² Jiří Meisl's photo album kept at the archive Beit Terezin, Givat Haim Ihud, Israel.



*Jiří Meisl-Big and Eva Böhmová (married as Meisl) on Skalka. Edita Katz-Kočka is second from the left. Teletín, summer of 1940.
[Photo collection of the archive in Beit Terezin; Jiří Meisl's photo album]*

Neither **Zdenko Roubíček** from the South Bohemian El Al group came back. He left in the transport Cv from Prague to Terezín in March 1943 and on to Auschwitz one year and a half later. He was transferred to Kaufering later and the food brought from a local blacksmith where was working helped to save the life of his younger brother Karel. Unfortunately, Zdenko died in that extermination camp himself.

Rudolf Böhm's sister **Eva Böhmová**, later married as **Meisl**, was a scout too (she married **Jiří Meisl**, nicknamed *Big*). She rather left the scout group voluntarily on her own before being expelled. This girl survived the war and returned home to Tábor.

Edita Katz – Kočka survived too: having been expelled from the scout group she became a member of El Al taking part in the founding of its group in České Budějovice. She was involved with the group since its very beginning, from March 1940. The people involved in the setting up of the group were those excommunicated and excluded from the scout movement for their origins, that is people sharing a similar destiny with hers, all those I have mentioned



Hardly any words are needed here. Still with the scout lily in 1939 but without it in 1940. The El Al groups from České Budějovice and Tábor at joint events.

[Dorit Vidar's private collection]



in my article and many others. The group from České Budějovice took part in most events together with their friends from Tábor where Zionist youth gathered around Rabbi Otta Pressl. I do not know whether Pressl had initiated the setting up of the El Al cell in South Bohemia, the fact remains that the cell was active in Tábor under Rudolf Böhms's leadership. Among regular activities of the groups from České Budějovice and Tábor was the so-called *sichot*, a weekly meeting and discussion instead of standard scout meetings, and expeditions and trips in the surrounding countryside already called *tijulim* in Hebrew.¹³ At this stage Zionism was already present in the minds of young people as a very realistic solution to a difficult situation in which the Jewish population found itself. The Zionist movement El Al intentionally addressed young Jews from Czech assimilated families that had not thought of leaving for Palestine up to that moment as they regarded themselves as Czechs without the slightest reason to leave their homeland. Nevertheless, with the circumstances changing very quickly and radically the idea of departure ceased to be something incomprehensible as it had been up to then. The El Al leadership knew that departure was the only way to save human lives. To be more exact: the way to save Jewish lives.

The gradual tightening of the situation can be read between the lines of *Kočka's* diary which I had an opportunity to look into: despite the fact that her language is very economical with the words, the minimalism cannot hide terrible facts faced by *Kočka* and her family in the same way the entire Jewish community in Czech Lands had to cope with the new conditions.

Kočka also worked shoulder to shoulder with the editorial team of the aforementioned illegal magazine of the Jewish youth called *Klepy* (Gossip), as can be seen from her article

¹³ *Tijul* – trip, expedition; plural *tijulim*.

A Day on the Hachshara. Having returned from the hachshara in Teletín her group left to do some more farm work, this time at a small South Bohemian village of Ortvinovice not far from České Budějovice. This group continued trying to live normal lives in an abnormal time no matter how difficult it increasingly was. Then the blow came. She arrived in Terezín with the main transport Akb from České Budějovice on 18 April 1942. As an El Al member she became part of the local community of Zionist-minded young people. She worked in Terezín gardens and was among a fine number of prisoners not to be sent to extermination camps.



A gift from friends to Edita Katz – Kočka on her twentieth birthday. Still in Terezín in 1943 hope was maintained of leaving for Palestine. [Dorit Vidar's private collection]

Edita Katz – *Kočka* lived to see liberation in a very poor state of health. Soon after the war ended she left with a couple of friends for treatment at a sanatorium in Davos, Switzerland. There she met Max Vider, a Czechoslovak from Karlovy Vary with whom she joined her future life and left for Israel later. She never forgot her brother Erna who had not survived Shoah.

I never met *Kočka* face to face on my trips to Israel although a lot of witnesses talked about her with many of them remembering her from Terezín. Unfortunately, I failed to connect her name with the El Al movement. Step by step I learnt that *Kočka* was very intelligent, a great person, widely read and that she would quite often travel to the Czech Republic, frequently to the Šumava Mountains. She liked the spa town of Luhačovice and even experienced a 1,000-thousand year flood in Prague in 2002. She died two years ago. It was not until Hanka Sternlicht set everything right. As explained before, she arranged for me to meet *Kočka's* daughter and this time I did not hesitate for a minute. I owe my thanks to Dorit Vidar for providing me with the materials for this article. She is a woman of a rare character who has clearly inherited some traits from her mother, for example her ever present willingness to help. She gave me photo albums and a diary and I could listen in detail to the history of a Czech-Jewish family which had not been spared the worst in human history: a thoroughly



*Edita Katz-Vidar
[Dorit Vidar's private collection]*



*Edita Katz-Vidar with a daughter, grandson and great-granddaughter.
[Dorit Vidar's private collection]*



*Edita Katz-Vidar with daughters and a granddaughter.
[Dorit Vidar's private collection]*



*Edita Katz's daughter Dorit Vidar with Hanka Sternlicht. Kiryat Gat, Israel, March 2019.
[Author's photo archive]*

thought-out genocide, systematic killing of European, which means also Czechoslovak Jews. I could see it for myself that it is sometimes terribly difficult to see all the circumstances. Sometimes, I happen to find myself lost for words in Israel. Here I had no words at all: the cruel, painful and degrading experience which Edita Katz, her brother Erna and a number of other Jewish scouts made with scouting in the moment when they stood against a wall with their world collapsing around them is something that cannot be either excused or explained. It is true that silence in the face of injustice equals consent - and consent means complicity. This is a memento we should never forget.

I owe my thanks to the following friends for helping me with this article: to Hanka Sternlicht (Kiryat Gat) who arranged everything, especially my meeting with Dorit; to Dorit Vidar (Tel Aviv) for lending me family papers – and for friendship; to Tereza Maizels, PhD (Beit Terezin) for excellent archival work; to Jiří Pokorný for Hebrew translations and other versatile help and to Radim Fedor Znachor (České Budějovice) for providing me with relevant information regarding the history of scouting in České Budějovice.

English translation by Vojtěch Pacner

Graphic design by Marek Bárta