

**Erika Tamar**

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### **Abstract**

Erika Tamar was born June 10, 1934 in Vienna, Austria to parents who originated in Poland. Therefore the parents required a visa for America determined by the Polish quota and Erika and her 4 year older brother, Henry, both born in Austria, would require a visa determined by the Austrian quota. Her father was a physician. Erika tells of seeing the broken glass on the streets after Kristallnacht, her fear of seeing SS at the bakery, her desire to join the Nazi Youth Party upon seeing the girls marching down the street and forced to fire the Austrian au pair when Hitler came to power. Her parents tried to get the children prepared for the US by giving them English lessons when they were chosen for the Kinder transport to the US. Erika was five and her brother nine when they waved goodbye from the train to the ship, stopping at Berlin along the way. Her brother had the responsibility of caring for Erika when they went to the camp to obtain foster parents, on the bus ride to Texas and the several months living with the foster parents. The foster parents had no children nor training in caring for children so appeared mean at times. When the parents arrived in NY in June '39, the children took the train to NY and they resided in an apartment in Queens. At first Erika did not recognize her mother but soon after she did. Soon her father obtained his license and set up his practice in Washington Heights. In 2002 Erika was one of 50 who attended a conference of the 1,000 children who came unaccompanied. She has writes teenage novels and some picture books; 22 books in all.

### **Summary**

00:00 Erika Tamar was born June 10, 1934 in Vienna, Austria as Erika Tamar to Julius and Pauline Hutterer Tamar. Her parents were born in Poland where they met. Her father went to Vienna to attend the University of Vienna Medical School so her mother followed him to the University. Since she and her brother were born in Austria, they would go to the US under one quota and her parents under the Polish quota. They left family in Poland. Erika's mother was from Schemas (?) where her parents, two brothers and a sister lived. Her father also had siblings in Poland. Her Cousin George Lutsk (?) Saltzman was at camps from age 12 to 17 and Erika's mother brought him over. He entered his information in the Holocaust Museum. One of her father's brothers survived by going to Russia but his wife and baby probably did not survive. Her Cousin George and his family were very similar to hers and their stories could have been reversed. Erika was four years old when the Nazis entered Vienna.

05:00 Her parents and her 9-year-old brother listened to the radio and Erika heard Hitler shouting so thought of him as a bad man. Soon after Kristallnacht, her father took her for

a walk and she saw the broken glass from the store windows. She felt that Kristallnacht was preplanned as her father got an anonymous call the day before that he and his wife should stay home the next day. They felt the call came from the father's patient who was high in the Nazi party. During Kristallnacht Jews were picked up on the street and some had to clean the sidewalks with a toothbrush. Erika felt fear when her mother sent her to the bakery in their building for bread. She saw a Nazi soldier in big black boots and thought she would be arrested so ran home. They lived in an apartment with a park across the street. Earlier summers they would go on vacation. Erika was five and her brother, Henry (Henzie) was nine when they left for the US.

10:00 The Krauses took her as she was traveling with her older brother. She spoke German and her parents conversed in Polish when they did not want her to understand them. Her parents were assimilated and not religious; were secular. They had a strong sense of being Jewish. Her grandparents might have spoken Yiddish. Her father did not come from a wealthy family as his father was a grocer. Her mother came from a happier and more prominent family as they owned a sawmill. Her mother is a storyteller. Ericka's older son is a historian and tried to tape her stories but she froze at the microphone. The stories made the mother's life in Poland and Vienna vivid. Her mother lived in a small town in Poland so at age 9 and 10 boarded out to obtain a better education. Her father gave her a violin and one day the maid got angry and broke it. Her mother hated being away from home at such a young age but her father was an original. He appreciated Erika's mother's intelligence and furthered her education rather than his son's. This was unusual at the time. Erika never visited her grandparents. Her mother's family suggested they return to Poland rather than send the children to the US as Hitler is only interested in the German children. Erika saw the Hitler youth with blond braids marching with music and she wanted to be like them when a teenager. Her mother said she could not join them but could be a Girl Scout.

15:00 They lived on Goldshlach Strasse in a neighborhood of Vienna, not in the center. Her father was a general practitioner. Her brother attended school until Hitler came. Ericka was too young for school. She was sheltered and protected when young so did not see authorities. Her au pair, Steffi, took care of the children but had to be taken home when Hitler came. The entire family took English lessons before they went to the US. She learned it using "Winnie the Pooh." A British lady taught her. Therefore when she was in foster care in Texas, she used the words, "frock, lift and pram," English words. She learned English quickly once in the US. She does not believe that she had a British accent but rather an Austrian accent. Her parents tried to prepare them for their experience. She knew that she and her brother were leaving but not the reason why and assumed her parents would join them. Her brother knew why they were going and that their parents might not join them. Her parents were easy-going. She was permitted to

pick up peas with her fingers but was taught to eat them with a fork when preparing for the US.

- 20:00 Now she realizes that it must have been unbearable for her parents as when her child was four, she understood. Her mother divided her life by before and after she sent the children away. When Hitler came, all the borders closed so the family was angry when they read that Jews did not want to leave their jobs. The American Consul made it difficult to obtain a visa. Her father applied for a US visa and they requested his elementary school records from Poland. He felt this was to delay or stall the procedure. When he arrived at the Consul, he saws the Consul sitting at his desk with his feet on the desk which is considered very rude by Europeans. Trujillo of the Dominican Republic took as many Jews as he could. Haiti was the only place open and her father hesitated as thought their number was getting close. There was an air raid with sirens and a blackout in Vienna and Erika asked her father if bad men are coming to bomb. He replied that it would be good men which perplexed her. Her father tried to make her understand what freedom meant. He said that she could call President Roosevelt, "Dumb Kuf" (Dumb Head) and nothing would happen to her. Her parents tried to prepare her brother and herself.
- 25:00 There was a possibility that her parents would not be able to get to the US and her brother needed to take responsibility. Her friends were playdates made by her mother and she is still in touch with one of them. She had no friends acquired on her own. She and her brother had a normal brother/sister relationship with no sibling rivalry. The relationship changed once on Kinder transport. Her brother became her mother, father and her hero. The most important thing was that she had her brother, part of the family, so she was not alone. In 2002 there was a conference of the 1,000 children who came unaccompanied. Erika attended and was one of 50 and it was triumphant as they were saved. She met some of the children who were on the ship. Erika remembered Helga Milgram who, with other nine-year-olds, took care of her which helped them work on their own pain. Helga has since passed away. She had remembered that Erika always held her brother's hand. If she did not see her brother, Erika would have a panic attack. As a child, Erika was carsick on trips. Her brother wrote to their mother that he told Erika stories so she would not be carsick.
- 30:00 Ericka does not remember the Krauses. She remembers going on a train and their parents saw them off from the platform. Her mother did not cry. Her mother kept telling her how exciting the trip to the US would be. The older children who cried understood the situation. There was more sadness for her brother as he knew the parents might not come to the US and he would have to care for her. It was hard for the parents to obtain a visa as they did not know anyone in the US to get an affidavit for them. They got the affidavit from a Christian who worked for Sears & Roebuck as the relative did not have sufficient money and went to the boss. The stranger gave them an affidavit. The Krauses had 50

visas for 50 children. Mr. Krause made himself legally financially responsible. The children took the train to Berlin and stayed overnight. They felt they were institutionalized as they stood on a line for a towel. She recalls being on a big ship, the President Harding.

35:00 The ship sounded three tones when each of the three meals were served. Being on the ship was an adventure. There was a young American woman traveling with birds from Berlin to Chicago. On the deck Erika was swamped by the waves and her leggings were soaked. The American lady took her to her stateroom, got her out of her leggings and got her dry. The lady spoke German and had Erika sleep in her stateroom. The lady sent a letter to Erika's mother and told her that after she said, "Sweet dreams," Erika replied that she will dream of her mother. She did not get seasick. They were on deck when they got close to the New York harbor and were taught the words to the Star Spangled Banner" and Erika was mystified by the words, "Oh say can you see." She does not recall seeing the Statue of Liberty. Erika remembers a summer camp outside of Philadelphia. From there they went to foster care. Some of the children were going to relatives; they were the lucky ones and others went to foster care.

40:00 She had an awful feeling when potential foster parents looked them over through a wire fence. Erika was angry at being looked over so would not talk or smile. Her brother realized it was important so he was all smiles and spoke intelligently. The camp was not winterized and could not publicize they brought 50 Jewish children to the US who needed foster care. People chose her brother and it was hard to place the two together. Her brother refused to go alone. He said his parents promised they would not be separated. If they had been separated, they would have been traumatized. They were not separated so her brother carried the burden. They went to a family in Houston, Texas who had looked them over and took them both. Her mother was upset that they were sent to Texas as she thought it would be New York or Philadelphia. They took a bus to Texas and during the ride, her brother told her stories so she would not get car sick. Their foster family was not nice as they were insensitive. They are now dead. They did not know about children. They were cold. They took the children to show their neighbors that they were idealistic and charitable. They had no children of their own. They were originally from Philadelphia so were connected to B'rith Shalom.

45:00 Erika came from a warm, laissez-faire family whereas the foster family believed that a child does not speak unless spoken to. Erika would ask questions and the foster mother told her if she continued, she would wash Ericka's mouth out with soap. The foster parents disparaged their father. They wanted to give Erika medication and her brother said that their father would not give it to her. They were happy that veal was served as it reminded them of Weiner schnitzel. Erika did not like sweet potatoes as it was unfamiliar but the foster mother made her sit until she ate it. Her brother got hit when caught eating them for her. In Austria, the children would be invited to dinner with the

parents' friends and expected to speak to them. When they were with the foster family friends and ice cream was served, her brother said, "Cold as the North Pole" and was hit. The foster parents said they would place the children in an orphanage. Her brother aimed to keep them out of an orphanage. The brother's teacher saw he was upset and he told her they may be sent to an orphanage and she said that she would take care of them. The next time the children were threatened, the brother told the foster parents that the teacher would take them in and they got very upset. The foster parents fed them and gave them a place to sleep.

50:00 Erika had a neighbor friend down the street, "Uncle Irving" who worked at home as an artist and his wife, "Aunt Riva." Uncle Irving wanted to make a portrait of her and she felt comfortable with him. She liked the big dog next door, a collie names "Rex" who stayed in the backyard. Erika loved the dog. Her picture was taken with the dog. It was wrenching to leave the dog. The lady with birds on the ship got their address in Texas and wrote them. The foster mother wrote back that the parents are coming and they will be needy. Erika was 16 when Uncle Irving visited her in New York. She was tall and he was short, shy and had nothing to say. They wore their own clothing in Texas. The foster parents took them to see the Alamo and the "Wizard of Oz" so some things were OK. They went to Philadelphia when the parents arrived. Her parents felt they had to be forever grateful to the foster parents by doing them favors. The two children had been with the foster parents for three or four months.

55:00 Her brother wrote the parents that they must leave soon as war was coming. The brother had a burden. When they returned to New York, her brother acted like a normal nine year old. Their parents called upon arrival and the foster parents said they cannot wake the children. The two were wild and placed on the first train to New York. Ercka had a clear emotional picture of her mother but had lost the physical image. A woman in a black coat ran toward her and Erika got scared. Her brother said, "It's mutte, it's mutte." Her parents arrived in the US in June just before her 5<sup>th</sup> birthday. They left Germany around May '39. Their ship sailed from Antwerp and, probably, stopped at Lisbon. When they arrived at their apartment in Woodside, Queens, Erika recognized her mother. They had their own apartment with their own furniture which they had shopped over.

60:00 Their father took the test to get licensed with other family friends who were taking it. An earlier group who took it failed and explained to the newcomers that the responses were: yes or no or true or false. This was unlike the European style of writing down what you know on the subject. Many women worked as maids but their father wanted their mother to take care of them so he could study. She did piece goods as had fabric and made pin cushions. Their final apartment was at 360 Wadsworth Avenue in Washington Heights. They took this apartment as the landlord did not request an extra payment. It was close to the subway so they could see her father's MD sign. He had a successful practice. The super was an ethnic German, a nice lady, who would stand in front of the building and

announce there was a prominent doctor there. Her father solved Mr. Chemey's problem. He lived on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor and stood out front and announced that Erika's father helped him. It was mostly an Irish-Catholic working class neighborhood. Her father's practice in Vienna was also working class.

65:00 Erika's mother did not let her think she was poor. She would always give Ericka another reason than money for not buying something. The Jewish Aid Agency gave loans but the conditions were difficult so that you had to live in a furnished apartment in Elmira, New York which was upstate. They had furniture and felt they would not fit in Elmira as they were not drinkers so they refused loans. There was an article in the New York Times of the massacre of Jews in her father's town. Her mother hid the article and told her she cut out a picture of a dress. News reports indicated the relatives would not have survived. Her cousin survived and remembered the Tamar family. His mother and Erika's mother were two years apart and looked similar. The last thing his mother told him was to remember the Tamar family who they had lived with. Erika was 13 and the cousin was 17 and told her about the Holocaust. He was in camps from age 12 to 17 and when the children asked, he wrote a book about it. He wrote in great pain with tears streaming down his face. Erika and her parents never returned to Vienna. A close friend celebrated her birthday in Vienna and Erika was going there but at the last moment canceled.

70:00 She went to Europe – to France, Italy and Spain. She does not remember the Krauses. She learned about them at the conference in 2002 where the surviving children put pages together about them. Her parents were in touch with the foster parents who desired this. Erika told her children and wrote for Young Adults about her New York years – being a refugee but a fictionalized version with the truth. She wrote about the orphan trains in the '20s and put in her feelings. She writes teenage novels and some picture books; 22 books in all. She titled her book about being a refugee in New York, "Good-bye Rita Hayworth" who was about to die so changed it to "Good-bye Glamour Girl." It was about the love of acting. She wrote, "Midnight Train Home," an Irish orphan book with much about her.

75:00 She can't write about the Kinder transport as it would be from the view of a four-year-old and she does not want to revisit it. Erika expresses herself through fiction. So many Kinder transport children lost their parents but she had a happy ending.