

**Kitty Weiss Penner**

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### **Abstract**

Kitty Weiss was born August 7, 1933 in Vienna, Austria and had an older sister, Inge Weiss, who was born in 1931. Her father, Layzer Weiss came from Kenetch (?) in Galicia and her mother, Stella from Vienna. Her father's work as a carpenter served him well in the Austrian Army in World War I and later when he came to the US. While her father was away, her mother saw an ad about the Children's Transport to the US run by the Krauses and a Jewish organization and enrolled both daughters. A long-term worker in her father's workshop warned them not to open the door on November 10, 1938, Kristallnacht in Austria. Their apartment had plumbing, running water, a tub, electricity and a phone. After Kristallnacht, Erica, their young maid, had to leave. Kitty's mother was able to secure visas for her and her husband and for the husband's mother, brother and daughter through American relatives. Kitty and Inge went by Kinder transport to America in June '39 with Inge being responsible for Kitty. They went with 50 children by train that stopped at Berlin and took a ship to America where they had fun running around the decks. When they arrived in NY, the children were placed in a summer camp near Philadelphia. When the parents arrived in August '39, they got their first apartment in Brooklyn. When Kitty was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, they moved to the Bronx and her father opened a workshop nearby. Kitty painted and drew since she could hold a pencil and tried out for a special high school of music & art and was accepted. Then she started at Brooklyn College but did not think the art teaches knew how to teach so went to Barnard and graduated. Afterwards she married Eugene and they had two children and subsequently grandchildren. Kitty became a US citizen and became an atheist. Some cousins went by Kinder Transport to England, one was interned in France and other relatives were missing. Later Kitty went to many places in Europe including Warsaw, Sobibor and Auschwitz to learn about missing relatives. Like she was brought up, Kitty meets her friends at restaurants and only invites relatives to her home. She is writing a memoir for her children and grandchildren. After the interview, Kitty shows photos of her and her relatives.

### **Summary**

00:00 Kitty Weiss was born August 7, 1933 in Vienna, Austria as Kitty Miriam Weiss. She was named, "Kitty" as her mother read the name in a book about England. She often gets mail to Catherine or Katherine. Her older sister, Inge Weiss, was born in 1931. Her father, Layzer Weiss came from Kenetch (?) in Galicia. The shtetel changed its borders and rulers. Kenetch was found on the internet with five spellings. Her father was happy to leave the little town and served in the First World War when he saw some of the world. The town is now Ukraine but it was Polish and German. Her passport is Polish as

it is based on her father's citizenship. Her father spoke of Krakow, Poland as a place to seek. He had younger brothers and sisters. His father was a carpenter and brought him into the business.

- 05:00 This skill gave her father a privileged position in the Austrian Army as his officer recognized her father's talent and kept him close as he made things for him. Her father was born in Austria and spoke German. Everybody watched everybody else to be sure you attended Cheder, observed the holidays and had a kosher home. Her father's father suddenly died when her father was 14 and he became head of the household. He never got over his father's death. Kitty thought him a genius. He was stern and he had his mother and siblings to care for. He was born in 1892. Kitty knew of two aunts and uncles but there was a rift and she did not get to know them well. She met her father's sister at the boat when she arrived in the US. Her grandma, her father's mother, was Chaya Rivka Goldberg with a large family. Some immigrated to the US before World War I. They provided visas for the family. The rift was due to a lack of appreciation for what her father did for them.
- 10:00 He turned his back on them so there was no supportive family in the US. In Vienna, his mother had her own apartment as supported by Kitty's father. Kitty remembers that the grandma was tiny and spoke Yiddish, not German, and there was little contact. His father's family was not committed to orthodoxy but they were kosher and observed the major holidays. They were traditional, not intellectual concerning Judaism. Her father left school at age 14. He was frustrated with schooling as they spoke German one day and Polish or Russian the next day. Her mother, Stella Zengut (ten times good) came from Vienna and her parents were Austrian. Her father was a photographer and inventor and invented the washing machine. He was a very kind and generous person. Her mother was the youngest of three sisters. Her maternal grandmother was Ernestine Deutch and had several siblings (who Kitty knew) and was the breadwinner sewing handmade clothes.
- 15:00 On the maternal side, they were struggling to be middle class. They liked opera, dances and beautiful clothes. Paris was high class and they were like Paris. The trappings were still there – art, opera, and music. “Deutch” probably means they are from Germany. Stella Zen Gut was from Eisenstadt, a mining area in the East, in Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Kitty's mother was very proud of her Austrian heritage and lauded over her father, the country bumpkin. There was always tension but her father earned a good living and was reliable and dependable but had rough edges. Her father liked to work and liked his work. He knew he had ability and designed his own furniture. Kitty has some he made in the US.
- 20:00 If he had schooling, he would be advanced. Her mother was very proud and snooty. She liked pretty things and assured the girls had pretty things. Her mother was strong and

signed up the girls for the trip while the father was out-of-town. He came home and went crazy. She was closer to her mother. Her father seemed brusque, was powerfully built and scary. They were both handsome. Her father was tough. Her parents were protective. The sisters were both good girls. They were well-behaved. In Vienna they had an apartment on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor on Rodenstein Strasse (Red Star Alley). Each room had a ceramic heater, a coal stove. Vienna in Central Europe was chilly. Her father made all the furniture in his workshop which was nearby in a Jewish community. It was not fancy as the furniture was plainer than today. They did not entertain. Instead, they met at cafes and only had relatives at home. Kitty's family wonder why she never has company.

25:00 The home is for the family. They sit at the dining room table, not at an easy chair. In Vienna they had bedrooms and a common area. She does not remember the kitchen. They had a maid to help with the coal, laundry and cooking. Everyone had a maid unless they were very poor. Their maid was a young woman from the country looking for an opportunity to meet a young man. They made Christmas for the maid and hung up stockings. They put coal in the toe and oranges. After Kristallnacht in '38, things got bad. Erica, the maid, could not work for a Jewish family. Her boyfriend was a Nazi so she left. They liked Ericka. Then her mother ran the household. She took the two sisters to school and left the girls alone at home to help at the workshop. Kitty painted and drew since she could hold a pencil. She used watercolors at her desk for hours. Their apartment had plumbing, running water, a tub, electricity and a phone. It was a big apartment. Her father would listen to the radio in the evening. He only wanted news, but there was music. Her father was self-employed at the workshop and hired people to work for him. One of the workers warned them of Kristallnacht to stay home and keep the door shut.

30:00 The brown-shirted Stormtroopers knocked and asked for her father. If they opened the door, he would have been sent to Buchenwald. A long-term worker warned them. Her father was short with people. He never kept a worker in the US as he did not have the patience to teach. Kristallnacht was in Germany on November 9, 1938 and the next day in Austria. They all stayed in one bed to stay quiet. The Stormtroopers left and returned and yelled and banged on the door but did not break in. The Jewish area was the target. The next day they saw broken glass from the store fronts. They had broken into synagogues and set fire to them and the fire department did nothing. The following day, old, bearded men had to clean up with bucket and water. Her father went to work.

35:00 The intellectuals had been rounded up as an ongoing process. Her father hired permanent workers. All the work was done by hand. They measured, cut and had an electric saw. Kitty only visited her father's workshop when they lived in the US. She did not start school early. She knew her maternal grandparents but does not recall visiting them. Her father would listen to the radio and her mother read newspapers. Her father said that Hitler was a menace and they should go after England. No one thought the war would

happen. Her mother socialized in cafes where there was an open exchange of information. They talked of the oncoming menace and how to get out of Vienna. Kitty does not know how they got the addresses of the father's relatives but they wrote and asked for visas. The relatives replied that they were not wealthy and would only send one for her father. When he's established in the US, he can bring his family. Immigration was tight. Visas were allocated according to strict quotas. There were visas for her father, brother and mother. The brother lived with the mother. Stateside is when her father was cold to the family. There were no visas for Kitty's mother, sister and herself. Her mother read the paper and talked to people about getting away. She read about the Krauses who brought children to the US below the radar. They did not call attention to themselves in Vienna or in the US.

40:00 Kinder Transports went to England and that is how Kitty's cousins went—Bertha was older and Freddie was the only grandson. Kitty went to the park with them. Aunt Olga, Kitty's mother's oldest sister signed up her children for the Kinder Transport. Herta went to England as an Au Pair and Freddie adjusted into an English home where a boy from Berlin lived and had already adjusted. The cousins left before the sisters. Kitty's mother's father had cancer and stayed home. He died shortly after they left. Hester, the eldest daughter stayed with the grandmother. Olga, and Anny married to Tatcha (?), a Bulgarian also stayed. All the males planned when things got bad. Anny went to France and was interned in a camp in Nice survived. No one knows what happened to Tatcha who returned to Bulgaria and disappeared. Olga was married to Overshan (?), the cousins' father remained as she was the eldest and sent her children. Overshan went to Caracas, South America.

45:00 Kitty went to Auschwitz several times and found no trace of missing relatives. Her mother sent for Anny who came to NY after the war and lived with them. Anny went to cafes and played cards and fell over and had a mass brain hemorrhage and died. When she went to pick up her sister at the end of the day, there was a man outside jeering and yelling that there were Jewish children coming out of school. Since Kitty attended a Jewish school, soon she did not have to attend school. Her sister did not talk about school. She had confidence in her parents and trusted they knew what to do. She felt secure and confident from them. They would figure it out. Her father had property in Kenetch (?) and his siblings remained there and are still there. He went there to see what he could sell or rescue or see what was taken.

50:00 He went to settle things. Meanwhile Kitty's mother saw an ad about transporting children and told them to take her girls to America. When Kitty's father's family saw how desperate the family was, they sent visas. Kitty's sister's job was to make them send a visa for their mother and to look after Kitty. Her sister always felt she had extra responsibility and that Kitty got a free pass which was true. She remembers the fight when the father came home with yelling, screaming and carrying on that the mother was

insane to send the children away. The father already had a visa and the mother was desperate that it was their last chance. Their mother insisted that the girls went and she made arrangements for the father, his mother and his brother to travel to America. Everyone was quiet at the train station as all was said already. The station was patrolled by Brown shirts and Black shirts. The sisters were accompanied by the other children.

55:00 They had all been interviewed with silly questions such as “Is a window made of glass or wood?” Maybe they were given a Rorschach Test and had a physical exam. Kitty thought she was a charming child and just on the border of the right age. She remembers seeing the Krauses and Dr. Schless (?) on the ship. The doctor was their German spokesman from America, the German speaking envoy. The Krauses did not speak German. Dr. Schless was a widower and had several children. Kitty read his book. He wore glasses. He was pleasant, not imposing and easy to talk to. She went to an office to meet him. They left May '39 after discussing at home why they are going and why so quickly. She knew that being Jewish was a burden. When she walked down the street with her father to the bakery, a man in uniform said, “Are you Ceorlish” and she responded, “No, I’m Polish.” Polish was synonymous with being Jewish in Vienna.

60:00 Since her mother married a Polish man, she was also Polish. Her mother kept a kosher home and went to services on Yom Kippur. They put out Christmas stockings for the maid and it was fun for the children. The train stopped in Berlin and they did not know why they stopped there. It was to obtain the last exit visas. If they did not receive them, they would have to return home. They were in a Jewish organization building. She and her sister were in bunk beds and they heard marching and music as there was a parade down the street. Her sister came down from the upper bunk and they peeked out the window and saw uniforms and flags. It was frightening as they thought it was Hitler but it was Ribbentrop celebrating the Reich/Italian agreement with Chiano (?) Mumber’s (?) son-in-law. Steven Pressman’s book contained research of the times and filled in some information as she only had a generalized impression.

65:00 The Krauses, Dr. Shless and two nurses for the children were with them. The nurses were women in white uniforms but they gave little supervision to the 50 children. The children were well-behaved but curious and ran all over the ship. Her mother said she would have a wonderful time and she made sure that she did. She was curious, looked around and with her sister was out for adventure. Kitty does not remember eating or sleeping on the train. The ship was big with a loud horn and went from Hamburg to Southampton, England and then across the ocean. There must have been other passengers. She does not recall if they had a separate dining room. She was not seasick. She ran around the ship, up and down the stairs, and up to the deck and explored. She found a playroom in First Class with a rocking horse from FAO Schwartz. There were no other children in the playroom so they used it. She did not like the food as it was not familiar. They found a barrel of apples and ate them. She does not remember sitting at a table. The nurses were

only seen when they were taking photos. She does not remember a bunk. She just played with her sister. Her sister had a heavy responsibility of taking care of her. They took a bath in salt water which was sourced from the ocean and had a different odor.

70:00 Years later, in Atlantic City, the bath water was salt and had the same particular odor. She did not know what the Krauses had to do with her as they did not speak German. Many years later at a reunion, people talked of their memories. The men had total amnesia of the Transport and only remembered being on land in Philadelphia. Perhaps amnesia is a safety mechanism as it was too traumatic. Kitty remembers being happy, sunshine and freedom. They went to Ellis Island and met Aunt Rychal Weiss. She was young, pretty and wore a fashionable hat and Kitty's sister delivered her note. Rychal gave the note to the relatives in Brooklyn. The group stayed together and probably took a bus to Philadelphia where the Jewish organization had a summer camp or it might have been a motel. It was one floor with separate rooms for the children.

75:00 They tried to teach the children English and baseball. They played hop scotch, games and read comics. They had rally around the flag to pledge allegiance and it was pleasant. Kitty was receptive to it all and had no great expectations. B'nai Shalom members visited them and brought bright hats and cakes. They were business people and befriended them. A ventriloquist threw his voice and they thought he had a great talent. He came regularly and entertained. Inge was more serious and never got out of the clutch of responsibility. She had different interests and Kitty was successful in ways that Inge wasn't. Inge felt she blazed the trail and Kitty had an easy time.

80:00 Both did well in school and skipped as was the custom in New York City. They both pushed ahead and had some of the same teachers. Kitty had music and art and tried out for a special school. Her earliest memory was a curtain in her nursery with casement windows that rolled out. When a breeze came, the airy light-weight curtains and she thought a giant was outside the window as the curtain rose up. They were pale pea green with white ovoid leaves scattered and a heavy thread ran the warp of the fabric. They lived on the second floor (US 3<sup>rd</sup> floor) and there was a courtyard in the center of the house. It was a very old house. The courtyard previously had carriages enter the large gate and there were wide curved stairs. The building was about 5 stories high. Her mother made arrangements for Kitty's father, his mother and his brother to travel to America.

85:00 Letters took weeks and there was no telephone so they did not know what was happening. Her parents arrived the end of August '39. The children had arrived in early June '39. Their parents picked them up and took them to Brooklyn where they had an apartment. It was a railroad flat with all the rooms in line and they settled in before the war broke out August 1<sup>st</sup>. She started school and walked to school weeping as she could not speak English. The teacher spoke Yiddish and soon Kitty spoke English. The people were

friendly, not jeering or throwing things. The sisters fit in. Their parents spoke about what was happening in Europe and letters arrived with part censored or cut out. Her mother thought her father was dying from cancer and soon the letters stopped. At a family gathering, they asked the grandmother about her life and she said, "Terrible, that she never got anything." Kitty's father said, "Who bought you shoes?" He was humiliated in front of strangers.

90:00 The grandmother threw herself on the relatives and Kitty's father was incensed. He took a job in the Bronx and moved there. The family had a house and garden. An elderly uncle had a parrot and cut its toenails. Kitty was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade when they moved to the Bronx. Her father was a carpenter and worked for someone and then set up a workshop next door in the Bronx. They had an apartment and her mother would walk two blocks around the corner to the father's shop. She saw people moving out furniture as an old lady had died so she bought the house for \$5,000 without Kitty's father's knowledge. The father accepted it. It was a brick 3-story house with fabulous ironwork, oak paneling, molding, stairs and a porch. It was special. Her father rented space for a workshop. Originally there was an apartment behind it but her mother did not want to raise her girls there. Her mother only worked in the shop when her father had to go out to do store fronts, mostly for refugees.

95:00 A lawyer's skills don't transfer and a doctor has to return to school to get licensed but her father was able to use his carpentry skills. They spoke German at home. She came home for lunch and spoke German and went to school and spoke English. Her mother was eager to learn English and went to classes to become a citizen. Her father also became a citizen. This was in the '40s. Kitty had her own papers and became a citizen after answering historical questions. Her parents continued to find out what was happening in Europe. Her father gave up being Jewish as no longer kept kosher or went to Temple though her mother attended on Rosh Hashanah. Her father said there is no G-d and turned his back on religion. Her sister felt the Jewish heritage and participated in the Florida Temple. Also, her daughter was connected to the Jewish heritage and to her community though is not kosher. Kitty is an atheist.

100:00 From her reading, she could be a Buddhist. Her parents found out what happened. Some relatives disappeared. Her grandfather passed away and Olga and her mother found an apartment and then another and then were separated. Kitty's former husband's cousin found out recently this information on the internet. She had a fantasy that they hid in the Vienna woods. Kitty enjoyed school and had friends there and applied to the High School of Music and Art. She prepared a portfolio and auditioned and was accepted. It was the biggest learning experience as it had a diverse student body from all over the city. Some were well-healed, some political (Communist), and people of color. She had a Chinese girlfriend, Laurie Wong. The Chinese took over and thought they would be better. There was the Rosenberg trials and she was conflicted. Kitty was happy at that

school. She blossomed and could not wait until summer ended and school started. She still has friends from that time. Then she went to college and was disappointed as it was not as stimulating as high school.

105:00 She started out at Brooklyn College which was free. Kitty met friends on the subway on her way to class. She traveled from the Bronx to Brooklyn as they had a good arts program. She also studied Liberal Arts as had the classics, and language. She had an article from GWPA about Mark Rothko. He was a good artist but not a good teacher. There were other struggling artists there who are famous today but were not good teachers. She wanted to learn art history and applied to Barnard and got accepted and got a degree from that prestigious college. As the years passed, her parents understood more English though could not talk much English. Her father spoke Yiddish. He had a few English phrases such as “Son of a Bitch” that someone taught him who returned to Poland when he was a child. Kitty never felt like an outsider—not in NY, Connecticut or Maine. She wrote her memoirs so that her grandchildren would learn about her as they lived far away and were not close emotionally. It is not chronological but stories of things that happened, things that she thought about. She will put it together in a scrapbook. Her sister returned several times to Vienna and once Kitty went with her daughter, Tina.

110:00 Her sister had money in Vienna as she filed for Social Security. She paid into the system and it accumulated and what she takes out must be spent in Austria. Her sister plans to live to a 100 and get the money back. Kitty never put money into Social Security in Vienna. In 1992, Kitty went to the Prado and Vienna Woods and saw the opera. She went with her partner, Pat, to Vienna, Budapest and Prague and did not like Vienna. It was stuffy, pretentious and false. She went as a tourist, curious and saw a play in Salzburg about an old age home. She did not understand all the nuances of the language but it was interesting. It felt stuffy for tourists. She went to Bratislava when it was liberated from Russian domination and saw the opera and could have been less driven as it had no heart, no emotion, just nothing. She attended the City Center and Metropolitan opera in NY. In '98 she went to Auschwitz on a “March of the Living,” a Jewish organization to educate young people on the Holocaust and their Jewish heritage. The group consisted of young people and survivors. She made friends on the bus with Sophia Farot (?) who spent the war years in Poland and speaks fluent Polish. They went to restaurants together and she could speak Polish

115:00 They went to Warsaw to stations where Jews were assembled in the Ghetto. It was the first time she was with very devout Jews. Then she went to Israel. Seeing Krakow, the city which her father spoke about was a high point. Warsaw was just a gray depressing place. The bus took them from one place to another. They had guards on the bus. They were Polish soldiers on leave earning extra money as there was lots of anti-Semitism. They went to a typical village, a Shtetl where there were no Jews left but a synagogue in



the valley was neatly tended and there was a church on the hill. There was a contingent of Polish soldiers with tanks stationed at the synagogue who were playing cards. The houses were derelict as no one had lived there for many years. The farms were neat and had cranes nesting in the chimney. The people with money and skill did well but the homes of the elderly were rundown. Sophia spoke to the guard so found out they were on furlough. They went to a place in Krakow that had folk art and Kitty wanted to buy something for her grandchild. When she opened it in the hotel, she found it was shattered so returned to the store and showed that it was poorly packed and they would not honor it. Sophia said, "We are Jews" and Kitty felt embarrassed and the clerk said, "Pick out something else." Kitty saw an old Jewish lady walking in the cemetery who had spent the war there and had no prospects of going elsewhere. She lived nearby with her daughter.

120:00 Kitty felt close to her. At Auschwitz there was anti-Semitism graffiti on the outside walls. Guards kept a presence. It was very emotional for her. They went to Sobibor. After graduated from Barnard, Kitty got married. Eugene was a wonderful young man with a supportive family and her family loved him. They had two sons, one in Ann Arbor, Michigan who has two daughters who live on the East Coast, one at Harvard and one in Wooster, Ohio. Kitty has a married son in LA with two children, one at Brown in Providence, RI and a daughter who is a senior in high school and plans to attend musical theatre. She is very talented. Her grandchildren saw the video about the 50 children and she has the book. They have a casual interest. If she remained in Austria and there was no war, she would be a German housewife as it is a patriarchal society. The anti-Semitism keeps people from dreaming. She would not have had the same education.

125:00 Her mother's message is to be open to new experiences which affected her. When her sister became an adolescent, their father was upset as he wanted to impose old type of protection. He did not understand that girls have rights so he constantly picked on her. It was demeaning if she wanted to wear something he did not approve of. He did not accept lipstick as it was for loose women. He made her sister's life miserable. Kitty did not get into him as deeply. She put on lipstick around the corner and went on her way so she was accepted. Her sister was the pioneer and got his ire so to get out, she got married at 17 but it did not work out well. Her parents remained in the home until her sister got divorced and remarried. Tina was eight when the sister moved to Florida. Her parents vacationed in Florida and liked it. Arthur Godfrey was a spokesman for Florida. Her sister asked their father to build a store front and he went to Florida and their mother saw the opportunity to change their routine. They retired to Florida and bought a place in Coral Gables. They liked Miami. There were Jews there and they were happy there. Her father wanted Kitty to go with him and she had children so could not do it. Her parents passed away. Her mother was 59 and died from a heart attack and 12 or 13 years later, her father died at 88.

130:00 When Kitty went to NY, she had an open mind for a new experience. She was going to see it and live it for herself, make a life of her own. (Interview ends and photos are shown.) 1) Kitty shows a photo of Gilbert Krause reading to four children and Kitty is the one next to a doll, Judy, which she had to share with her sister and three children. 2) A photo of the last one of her mother in Vienna before they left for the US. The blond is Kitty and Inger has dark hair, taken in 1939. 3) A photo of Kitty and her sister in spring '38, a happy time before Kristallnacht. Kitty is on the left and Inger on the right. 4) The wedding photo of her maternal grandparents, Ernestina Deutch and Joseph Zengut in 1895 in his photo studio. Ernestina was in a concentration camp with her daughter and Joseph died naturally in '42. 5) The Zengut Studio with Kitty's mother, Stella, in the middle, and her two sisters, Olga on the right and Anny on the left. Olga is six years older and perished in Auschwitz with her mother. Anny is four years older and escaped to France and interned in Nice. After the war, she came to the US.

135:00 6) Photographs in newspapers – in the Sunday Daily News, magazine section of the New York Daily News 6/18/39 documents the 50 children in Collegeville, PA with the Ritz Shalom organization. Kitty's mother found the organization in a newspaper. The brother at the right has a sister. When Kitty's mother died, the documentation went to her sister and when she died, went to a niece and Kitty made this copy. This is all Kitty had about the 50 children until she saw the book and video. 7) Photo of eldest granddaughter's Bat Mitzvah in Ann Arbor. On the left is Tina, (her sister's child) her daughter, Tess, her son Charlie and his wife, Paula, grandson Cooper, now at Brown, Kitty in the middle, granddaughter, Julia, the Bat Mitzvah, Cousin Eva, Cousin Leah and behind is her son, Jonathan with wife, Stacy, and Kitty's partner, Pat. 8) Photo of niece Tina named for Ernestine, Anya, her daughter pregnant with Abe and holding Aria and Kitty's daughter, Tess, is on the right.

140:00