

Biography of Judith Elkan-Hervé

Judith Steinbach-Molnar was born on March 15, 1926, in Oradea, Romania. Her father, Rudolf Molnar, a former officer in the Austro-Hungarian army during World War I, was born in 1888 in Kirchvarda, Hungary. After the war, he became the director of a steel plant and a forestry operator. Her mother, Edith Leimdorffer, born in 1905, instilled in Judith a connection to Jewish traditions while living in an assimilated environment. As an only child, Judith shared a special bond with her aunt Régine, her father's sister.

Judith grew up in a bilingual environment, fluent in Hungarian and Romanian. She attended a coeducational school and later a state high school, where she formed friendships with both Jewish and non-Jewish peers. She also learned French and English, reflecting an open and ambitious education.

In 1944, antisemitic measures upended their lives. Rudolf lost his job, and Hungarian gendarmes raided their home, confiscating their belongings and forcing her parents to remove their wedding rings. Judith earned her baccalaureate on May 1, 1944, but just days later, on May 5, the family was arrested and confined to the Oradea ghetto. They still hoped to be sent to labor camps in Hungary. However, the brutalities began: her aunt Régine, taken from the ghetto with other heads of families, was tortured before taking her own life by ingesting poison.

On May 30, 1944, Judith, her parents, and her grandmother were deported to Auschwitz II-Birkenau. Upon arrival, prisoners advised families to present themselves as fit for work and leave children with the elderly. Judith, her parents, and her grandmother underwent the selection process: Rudolf and Edith were deemed fit for work, but her grandmother and another aunt were murdered upon arrival.

In the camp, Judith and her mother survived thanks to unwavering solidarity. On their first night in the camp's C sector barracks, Judith dreamt of her aunt Régine, who whispered, *"I died so that you could live."* With her mother's constant support, Judith evaded several selections and managed to avoid an external labor kommando by hiding.

In November 1944, they secretly joined a selection of 500 women destined for the Zittau labor camp in Saxony.

In early May 1945, German guards abandoned the camp. Judith and Edith left on foot with a group of 50 women. They were liberated by Soviet forces and eventually made their way to Budapest, from where they returned to Oradea.

After the war, they learned that Rudolf had been transferred to Mauthausen, where he was murdered. Edith worked in a grocery store, and Judith pursued studies in sociology and psychology at the University of Cluj. In 1947, Judith moved to Paris, where her mother later joined her. In 1950, Judith married Lazlo Elkan, known as Lucien Hervé, a photographer. Together, they had one son.