

HESPED (EULOGY) FOR MARGARETA BOETTCHER
6TH SEPTEMBER 1922 – 25TH FEBRUARY 2011

We have gathered here today to accompany Dita on her last journey.

I have to say, it is not easy for me to stand here and conduct this funeral. Dita is being laid to rest in her beloved, Mutti's grave. When I conducted Mutti's funeral in 1990 – a woman who was like a second grandmother to me – I said, very clearly, to Dita, and to my mother – as most of you know, they were the dearest and closest of friends – that I would not be able to conduct their funerals. Sadly, my mother died only the following year – and a close colleague of mine, officiated at her funeral. But Dita was insistent: 'You know, darling', she said to me: I don't belong to a synagogue, and I never will. Lizzy, darling, I'm so proud of you. I want you to conduct my funeral – please do this for me.' What could I say? All I could do was hope that I wouldn't be called upon to undertake that very difficult duty for a very, very long time.

Fortunately, that hope was realised. So, here I am – here we all are: all of us, sharing this very painful moment, and taking comfort and strength from one another. In a few minutes, Dita's beloved grandson, William, will share his tribute to his grandmother with us. Before he does, I want to take you on a journey through Dita's life, and also share some reflections and memories of my own.

Born in Berlin on 6th September 1922, the second daughter of Hildegard and Herbert Rosenstock, Margareta, as her parents named her, lived to be 88 years old. Given what she went through in the past few years: breast cancer, and a mastectomy, a stroke, and steadily progressing emphysema, it is a tribute to her immense courage and determination and sheer will-power that she lived so long with these very difficult physical challenges.

But it is not surprising that Dita managed to cope, and indeed, more than cope, to continue to enjoy her life. Of course, she was fortunate that she had a good son, who was determined to ensure that she lacked nothing, and she was blessed to receive the dedicated care of Krista and the continuous loving care over many years, of the close neighbours, who became part of her family: Bridget and Naty – and their daughter, Sarah.

But it wasn't just having a loving son and the loving ministrations of those around her that enabled Dita to continue to lead such a full and active life: Dita was a survivor, whose capacity to survive began, when Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, and, just eleven years old, Dita fled with her mother and her sister Rosa Lotte, to England.

Margareta, who came to be called Greta, was forced to leave her home, her neighbourhood, her school, her friends – everything she knew. Of course, she and her family were among the lucky ones: her father had had the foresight to see what was coming, and made the only decision that had to be made: to leave. And because he acted so quickly, the family was saved, not only from what would have been their ultimate horrific fate, but also from all the humiliations that preceded the murder of six million of the Jews of Europe; humiliations, which included the Nazis forcing Jews to wear the yellow star, making Jewish children attend separate schools, banishing Jews from all the professions, and banning them from going to restaurants and parks and theatres; in other words, the complete segregation of the Jewish population in preparation for the 'final solution' .

Yes, fortunately, Dita and her immediate family were saved from all that. But then an eleven-year-old, who had lived in Berlin all her life, and spoke only German, had to

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adjust to a totally new environment. One can barely imagine what it was like – and how Dita felt on the first day that she walked into her new school, at Newington Green in the Highbury area of north London, in that strange new land. But then, like a kind of miracle, she was told to sit next to a little girl, who spoke fluent *Yiddish*, which is, essentially a form of mediaeval German. So, Dita found someone she could talk with; and that someone – my late mother, Edie – became her closest friend from that moment, for the rest of her life – even after she died in 1991, Edele occupied a very special and irreplaceable place in Dita's heart.

I wasn't there, of course, but both Dita and my mother shared so many stories with me of their childhood together. There is only time to share a small snippet: when they became teenagers, they loved to go to see foreign films – especially French films – and they would stand in the queue, practising their school girl vocabulary, and pretending to be French – so sophisticated!

Despite the hardships, despite Mutti Rosenstock, separated from her husband, who lived in Manchester, having to work so hard to make a life herself and her girls, Dita thrived. But then war was declared on September 3rd 1939, and, shortly afterwards, Dita, just seventeen, together with her mother and sister, were declared 'enemy aliens' by the British government, because they were Germans, and were carted off to an internment camp on the Isle of Man. Can you fathom it? Labelled 'Jews' in Germany, and then, after losing their German home, labelled 'Germans' in England! And can you imagine what it was like to live for six months behind barbed wire – not knowing, if and when you were going to be released? Fortunately, the government realised their mistake, and the Jews held on the Isle of Man and in other internment camps, were released – but the trauma of it..

Somehow, Dita and Lotte and Mutti managed to cope – and with the war still raging, they found themselves in Loughborough, where they continued, not only to survive, but to make a life for themselves.

After the war the family moved to London, making a home at 102 Greencroft Gardens in West Hampstead. Dita married a very different kind of German – Heinz Boettcher – a man, whose anti-Nazi father had sent him to live in England, so he didn't have to join the Hitler Youth. They had a son – Michael – born on May 11th 1947. And so, just two years after the Second World War ended, and with the Nazi rampage across Europe halted, Dita began to make a new life and create an extension to her family.

But there were upheavals yet to come: Heinz left – and in 1953. Mutti decided to go back to live in Germany, where she still had friends, to try and rebuild her life there. Lotte had already, some time earlier, taken her own path. So there was Dita and Michael. Dita could have felt abandoned – but what she did, was get on with her life, determined to ensure that her son would thrive.

And of course, Dita was a working woman: As manager of HOTAC, the hotel accommodation bureau, established by Peter Hart, she became its life and soul: hard-working, supremely competent and confident and efficient, and a brilliant manager of people. Probably, she should also be credited with being the originator of that now ubiquitous contemporary pastime, 'social networking': she was a fantastic networker, establishing so many connections with people throughout the hotel industry. When I was a child, I remember going with her on a few occasions, when she inspected new hotels.

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I remember, in particular, the weekend she spent in what was then called, the Bedford Hotel, opposite the West Pier, in Brighton, when it was first opened. I recall being very impressed by the suite she was occupying at the Bedford, with its fantastic sea-view!

There are many people here today with their own memories of Dita: Of course, Michael, and her grand-children, Paul, William, Kimberley, Sasha, Eva, and Sophia, her daughter-in-law, Jodie, her nephews, Tony and Nito, and Tony's family, and also, her many friends from so many areas of her life – not least in the Association of Women Travel Executives – and also those friends who became like family: Bridget and Sarah, Hannah-Lore, Vivi – and all the young people, who have got a bit older over the years: Sheila and Keith, and Marguerite, and Edie's children: Geoffrey, Julia and myself – and more recently, Tania.

Yes, each one of us will have our precious storehouse of memories of Dita. I hope you don't mind me taking the liberty of sharing a couple of mine:

I will never forget the day I met Dita. It was my mother's 40th birthday, 3rd August 1963, and I was eight years old. The phone rang and my mother picked up: 'Hello darling'. As soon as she heard her voice, my mother started calling out, 'Greta's on the phone; it's Greta!' They hadn't seen each other for a while: the week that Michael was born, my mother married my father, and promptly went to live in South Africa for two years, before going to Canada for a while, and then returning to England. Greta, who knew a difficult man when she met one, was not keen on my father – and he didn't care much for her either... Not long ago, I asked Dita, what made her make that call: 'I knew it was your mother's 40th birthday, darling, and we had been separated too long.' We lived in Finchley at that time, and I went with my father to fetch her in the car. I remember being so excited to be part of my mum's reunion with her best friend. And Dita reminded me, when we spoke about it recently, that when I met her, I, simply, ran into her arms.

In my experience, that's what it was like with Dita: wonderful hugs and cuddles were always the order of the day – and I'm sure that many of those gathered here today will agree with that. She was such a warm and loving person: such a devoted and loving friend to our mother, so loving to us; an integral part of our weekly lives for so many years – and also, always with us for all our celebrations: birthdays, *Chanukkah* candle-lightings, *Pesach Seders*. Of course, Christmas Eve at 10 Kendal Court was a fixed date for all of Dita's close family and friends in those years. I always marvelled at how many people could cram into Dita's small flat! Most important, like our second mother, Dita always provided a shoulder to cry on, enveloping us and comforting us, and helping us to deal with the challenges of our lives. And still, after I left childhood behind, a constant presence: her home, a familiar refuge. And it was so lovely for me that Brighton was one of Dita's favourite haunts – because that meant that after I moved there in March 2000, I got to see her, not only in London, but in Brighton, too. And it means so much that she was able to be part of key moments in my life since my move: my induction as rabbi of Brighton & Hove Progressive Synagogue in April 2001 and my *chuppah* with Jess in March 2006 – and that last summer, she visited me in my new house, along the coast, near Seaford, together with Bridget, and Naty and Sarah – and, of course, Krista.

So many memories... Hopefully, after the service, and in the weeks and months to come, realising how important it is to nurture our connections with each other, now that Dita is no longer alive, we will create opportunities to meet and share together; to share

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our memories of Dita – and also, to re-forge relationships with one another, in the new post-Dita era.

Because, make no mistake, when Dita died on Friday morning, an era ended, and a new one began. Dita knew how to make new beginnings: she made a new life for herself in England at the age of eleven; she made a new life herself and her son, when her husband left, she made a new life for herself when she retired from HOTAC, becoming Luncheons Secretary for the Association of Women Travel Executives; in which capacity, she organised wonderful gatherings – the most memorable being the annual Christmas lunch, attended by hundreds of AWTE members and friends. And she continued to make new beginnings: after Mutti died; after my mother died; after her mastectomy, and then, her stroke; even after Lotte died – when she was already so unwell. Honouring the past, Dita always looked forward to the future: she delighted in the birth of every grandchild, and in following their progress from year to year; she delighted in her son's success – always looking forward to the next chance to get on a plane, in any direction, and go and to visit him. Just this past week, she was preparing to fly off to stay in Michael's house in St. Maxime on Monday. Already last week, her bags were packed, she had Euros in her purse – and she was eager to embark on another adventure.

Always ready to venture out into the world, Dita, also, like Mutti, when she was alive, maintained a connection with her first home: Berlin – something that very few German Jewish refugees were able to do. There was an important reason for this: Significantly, one of her closest friends, Eveshen, who survived Hitler, by going into hiding, and never left Berlin, remained part of Dita's life – with Dita visiting her annually, right up until last year. And Ingrid was another Berlin friend. It's a paradox: Dita moved to Kendal Court fifty years ago in 1961. She was the stable, fixed point – while Michael went on his global adventures, and almost everyone she knew went on their journeys, here, there and everywhere. At the same time, a secure and confident personality, who knew what it was like to be uprooted, and might have wanted to stay put, she always looked forward to her travels, including her trips to Berlin, and she was also, always, ready to move on in her life, again and again. She is our role model.

Michael, she is your role model: your mother has left you a very important legacy: her strength and willpower and determination and dignity and courage and eternal optimism. I pray that as you come to terms with your mother's passing, and begin to journey forward in your life, without her, these qualities that she has bequeathed to you, will enter your soul, restoring you, and renewing you, and enabling you, over the weeks, months, and years to come. In Jewish tradition we pray that the memory of a righteous person may be for blessing – *zeicher tzadik livrachah*. Dita was a righteous person in the deepest meaning of that term: upright, dignified, gracious, open-minded, generous-hearted, courageous, compassionate, loyal and loving. *Zivchronah livrachah* – may her memory be a source of blessing, as her spirit continues to live on in our hearts and through our lives. And let us say: Amen.

Rabbi Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah

Fortune Green Road Cemetery

2nd March 2011 – 26th Adar I 5771