

Inge Hess: Outdoor Adventurer

By Audrey Brooks

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Inge Hess was born in 1934 in Duisburg, a city on the Rhine River in West Germany, to parents Eva and Walter Hess. Inge was the youngest of four children; she was, she recounts, always treated like the baby by her siblings, and learned to stand up for herself at an early age.

Her earliest memory is of her second birthday when she was given a new rag doll. She remembers pretending to feed the doll, when her mother asked: “Does your dolly like it?” Inge thought: “Does she think that I think that the doll can actually eat?”

Even at age two, she possessed an intellectual awareness that went beyond her years. This power of observation was to be a help in living through a chaotic childhood.

Inge tells stories of her childhood, the years between 1936 and 1948 when her family was caught up in the maelstrom of war in Germany. Her recent memoir “We Were Children” is a fascinating account of those years.

It was a time when her family, like many others during wartime, was challenged to find ways to be safe in a situation that was out of their control. At first, Inge’s older siblings were evacuated to locations away from the bombings. Walter and his schoolmates were sent to Bavaria, Rosel to Saxony and Eva to Thuringia. Inge ended up at her father’s parent’s home in Koenigsberg, but after spending Christmas holidays back at home, Inge was sent to live with her other grandparents on a farm near the small village of Rudau.

Her story tells of working in the fields, taking care of chickens and herding geese. Later, there were times of hunger, where sugar beets and potatoes scrounged from harvested fields fed the family of six for a few days. It is a story of staying ahead of violence; of people trying to survive in a land that was under attack; where children were both terrified and awed by circumstances that dragged them from one place to the other in rain, mud and cold.

After the war, things in Germany improved, and Inge continued her schooling, while developing a keen interest in exploring nature. She was a leader in planning trips and leading many bike trips. At age 14, she and a girl friend went on a trip, and when they couldn’t get an overnight stay at a hostel, they stayed in the bushes. Inge was more concerned about the bikes than



themselves, so she tied the bikes together with steel cables, one bike facing backwards, and one facing forwards. She could patch a tire in 15 minutes, never hesitated to take care of both travelling companions and any mechanical device that needed fixing.

Later, she and her then-husband hitchhiked to Scandinavia where she worked as a dishwasher, fish cleaner and other odd jobs. They enjoyed hiking everywhere, even though they were hauling a heavy tent with them.

It was Inge's adventurous spirit that called her family to Canada in 1959. Because English was not her first language, she took upgrading to get her matriculation, entered the University of Alberta as a mature student. While raising four children she attained a Bachelor of Education with a major in Physical Education. Her career path included teaching, and later, working for the federal government, though she had other interesting jobs, both professionally and as a volunteer, as well as with the German Canadian Association of Alberta.

In 1965 Inge and her family came to the Unitarian Church of Edmonton. She recalls that her youngest son, who was about one year old, screamed his head off when she left him in the nursery. Her then-husband taught in the religious education program. No one approached them about joining the church, and they thought it might be because there was a set fee.

Inge said she was attracted to the church because she had never heard such intelligent and well researched sermons before. Her parents were not religious, but discussions on religion and other thoughtful topics were a regular habit in her family. Once, when she was young, she refused to recite a Bible verse in school, and said she was a "dissident," having heard her father say he was a dissident. The Unitarian Church fit her questioning and sceptical view of traditional religion, and offered a place where her children could receive a broad liberal view of belief systems, so they joined the church.

Since then she has served on many church committees, such as the Friendship Committee, and has been a strong soprano in the church choir.

Inge continues to see the great outdoors as her passion. She spent much of her spare time and vacations rock climbing in the Rockies when she was young, and skiing, hiking, bicycling, wilderness camping and kayaking well into her senior years, in spite of a very busy professional life.

She led groups of singles from the church into the mountains, on trail rides, in camping and skiing for many years, and is remembered for her interesting and adventurous holidays. Read her memoir and look at photos of her life, which speak clearly of Inge's adventurous attitude toward life.