

Helen Farkas

Photographed with her husband Joe Farkas

Wartime Experience: Camp Survivor

Name at birth: Helen Safar

Date and place of birth: 10/18/1920 Satu-Mare, "Szatmar" Romania, but from September 1940 to 1944 it was part of Hungary.

Names and professions of Parents: Chaim Safar, and Frida Safar, shoe business, and my mother was a busy homemaker, a mother of nine children.

Names of siblings: Moise, Mirjam, Eddy, Leuke, Regina, Etel, Me, Notan and Andor.

Name of spouse: Joe Farkas. He was in Hungarian forced labor camp from 1942 until the end of the war.

I was incarcerated from my parent's home from the end of March 1944 in the Ghetto, and from there to Auschwitz, where we arrived in May 24th 1944. From Auschwitz to Silesia Then the death march - 2000 of us between the ages of 17 to 35. Those who could not march were shot to death and left unburied. Less than 100 arrived to Bergen Belsen after over three months of starving and freezing during the winter of 1944 -1945.

Additional Information from an Interview in the Independent Newspaper

Helen Farkas' spacious home in the Burlingame hills overlooks a Jewish temple. This home, where she and her husband have lived since 1962, is far removed from the barracks where she once slept cramped head-to-foot with other Jewish prisoners of the Holocaust.

Farkas has just a few mementos from her life before she went to Auschwitz, including some family photos and a gold engagement ring given her by her then-fiancé Joe. Believing the war would end soon and she'd be free, she gave her favorite items to her non-Jewish friend, Julia.

Fifty years later, as she wears the ring her friend saved for her, Farkas, now 79, said she will never forget how lucky she is.

Her story of how she went from the Romanian suburbs, to the Jewish ghettos, to the concentration camps at Auschwitz and how she ultimately escaped from communist Russia to freedom in the United States is a long story, but one she tells often.

With her daughter's help, she wrote a book "Remember the Holocaust."

She also tells her tale of survival to intermediate and high school students to ensure that children never forget the Holocaust.

She first started speaking to teens when her daughter Amber was a high school student. "In those days, nobody listened. Nobody talked about it in the early 1970s" During a conversation a teacher asked Farkas if she would speak to her class of troubled teens, telling her that "they'll hear your story, they'll see that life is worth living." Now she speaks to crowds of hundreds.

She smiles as she tells what happened after a recent lecture. "There was a girl, she just stood there.... I was wondering - What does she want? She said, "I just want to touch you."

Farkas said she gets emotional reactions from students all the time. She said she is glad to know that her words touch students and that her efforts aren't in vain.

Though some students haven't heard of the Holocaust, she credits the film "Schindler's List" for recently bringing it wider public awareness. But Farkas emphasizes that no two Holocaust survivor's stories are the same.

She tells the children her story. She speaks of her memory of her family – along with other Jewish people-being forced from their homes into crowded ghettos. She tells her story of arriving at Auschwitz as a 23-year old woman in May 1944.

As she jumped off the cattle car carrying dozens of people, she saw a sign "Arbeit Macht Frei." ("Work Makes Freedom"). She saw smoke rising from the factories – where she presumed she'd been brought to work- and it looked so promising. "Little did I know, that those were the gas chambers and the crematoriums."

She tells of how she and her sisters were instantly separated from the rest of their family. The young healthy women like her were sent to work. Her toddler nephew, her parents and many other children and old people went to the gas chambers.

Her speech slowed as she describes seeing those family members for the last time. She saw shame, embarrassment and guilt in her mother's face. "I could read so much in her expression, and immediately, they turned her away."

"To survive, you had to be lucky. Our struggle to survive was not just from day to day, but from hour to hour, minute to minute." Farkas said.

In today's world, when children are bringing guns and knives to school, she urges teens to look for other ways to resolve problems.

Through the years, her messages remained constant.

- Prejudice is sinful. Hatred is destructive
- Uphold human rights, and live by the Ten Commandments.
- Never judge by the clothes, the skin, the hair
- We are all God's children.

Telling her story is painful at times, Farkas acknowledges, yet she never stops. And she doesn't plan to lighten up her schedule of speaking engagements. "I hope to do it for many years because the survivors are dying." Farkas said. When the Holocaust survivors have all died, she hopes the younger people will continue to tell their stories.

When Farkas speaks before crowds of teens, she tells them, "I want to educate you. I want you to know what happened. It depends on you. You're the future now...to see that it never happens again."