

## Lenci Farkas

### Wartime Experience: Camp Survivor

My name is Lenci Farkas. I was born May 18, 1922 in Zisovics in a small village in the former Czechoslovakia, named Kralovov Nad Tisou. My mother Lenke died at the time of my birth. My father Jenö owned a lumber yard. He remarried after the death of my mother and had two more children. In all, I had seven sisters and one brother. Of this group, only I and three of my sisters Elsa, Helen and Blanka survived the war.

Living under democracy, life was peaceful. Going to school, I never experienced hatred or discrimination. Having only a radio with restricted news, we didn't know what was going on in the world. Rumors came from Germany that Hitler came to power and discriminated against Jews. Then in September 1939, Hitler invaded Poland, and Czechoslovakia and our village was given back to the Hungarians.

Slowly, Jewish laws were passed. One couldn't own businesses, employ Christians, and no public schools could be attended by Jewish students. But life was still tolerable until we were occupied by the Germans. We had to wear a yellow star. It was dangerous to travel by train. And by April 1944, all Jews in the village were gathered and put in a ghetto. We had to leave all our possessions behind and take as little as possible. How can you make a decision when one doesn't know what one will need? We were gathered in our synagogue which was small for under 120 families including children, elders, and the sick. The doors closed overnight. In the morning, like animals, we were rushed to the outhouse. It was also very small.

We were taken to the ghetto in a larger town called Sevlus. We were very cramped there, one large room for ten families. Our parents slept in a bed, but the youngsters were on the floor with very limited space. We were in the ghetto for about three weeks. It so happened my birthday was in May. On that time, I had a boyfriend who was taken out of the ghetto to work and brought me back a half loaf of bread for my birthday present. And I have to admit it was the best gift I could receive, and we were that hungry already.

Two days after my birthday we were gathered and taken to the railroad station under heavy guard by our own Hungarian citizens. They were very happy to get rid of us Jews. After a horrifying trip under unbelievable conditions people died in the same wagon, women giving birth, crying children, no food, no toilet, we were relieved when we arrived at Auschwitz, Birkenau.

Of course, we had no clue of where we were. We were separated from the family, men on one side, women on the other. There were older inmates who advised discreetly to young mothers to hand over their young babies, children to the grandmother or any older person. Some did and some, of course, didn't. Little did we know they wanted to save young women's lives. As you know today, mothers with young children were sent to their left, gas chambers.

As we came to the gate Mengele, Angel of Death was separating us to the left and right. My sister Isabel, who was older than I, married and wanted to go with her mother telling Mengele that she is a married woman and she wants to go with her mother. Mengele replied, "Kanst du laufen" in German, meaning run if you can and separated them. Well, Isabel survived and mother was gassed. We were taken to a place where we had to disrobe completely; shaven everywhere. When we looked at each other, we hardly recognized one another. I, myself, became hysterical, laughing and crying. Then we were taken to the shower; no soap, no towel, herded out of there like animals, given some clothes, large or small. It depended how lucky you were. We were taken to a barrack where thousands of us were housed.

The first thing we wanted to know was where our elders and children are. We got a horrific answer. "Do you see those chimneys burning flames coming out? This is where they are." We did not believe it. It took a long time to realize that it was the truth. The days in Auschwitz were miserable. Early morning "appel" standing in rows of five and being counted no matter what the weather, rain, heat, snow, wind. This was done twice daily. Sometimes it took an hour or hours. No matter what the weather, there was no mercy.

Breakfast was served while standing after the appel. We were served so-called coffee, ersatz, "imitation." Noon, empty soup where a little cabbage or whatever was floating in it. Of course, the portions were minimal. For dinner some cheese, not every night, with our daily portion of bread that had more sawdust in it than flour.

Cramped in our bunks, if one person turned, we all had to turn, otherwise there was no room. One day we were lucky enough to work in one of their blocks sorting blankets and quilts which we all brought to the camp. It was never given to us. It was shipped back to Germany. Of course, if we could, we stole pieces, cut up. We called that organizing, never stealing. Sold it to the other prisoners for a portion of bread or their soup, because some shaven women were vain enough to forego food to cover their head.

I had an incident there. I was caught trying to bake a raw potato, made a small fire. Of course, the guard saw the smoke and there was this beautiful German officer; Greta was her name. She took hold of me, dragged me to the block officer's room and who knows what plans she had for me. She told me, "Do you know that it is forbidden?" She was ready to whip me when I said, "You are so beautiful, I don't think you would do this to me." Lo and behold a smile came over her face and she let me go without being whipped. I don't know where I got the idea to say this to her. Anyway, I was saved.

There were lots of selections. Many of the sick were taken out of the group and going to the gas chambers. We were lucky. My two sisters, one niece, and I were eventually taken to a working camp the end of October in an open wagon. Many of us froze and died of hunger. Finally, we came to a camp where we were housed in a half-open barracks in the cold winter. Daytime we were digging tank traps for the advancing Russian army. Rumors came that Germany was losing. We could hear bombing. Of course, we started having hopes to be freed.

By the end of January, we were dragged on a so-called death march, which it literally was. Many of us were shot if we didn't want to continue walking. There was no food for days. One day we came to a field where sugar beets were left in the ground. We ran like wild beasts to grab some of it, and then my sister, Isabel, was hit by a German guard so badly that from then on she could hardly walk. She wanted to stop and said that we should continue our march. I refused because my younger sister, my niece, they both were 17 years old, and I know I can't handle them by myself. They were like zombies, couldn't care less what happened.

So, one day marching through an empty village, the Germans left because they did not want us to be liberated by Russians. They knew what treatment awaited them after what they did to the Russian people in Russia. We escaped when a road curved. Isabel pulled me, I pulled my niece, and younger sister. We escaped in a back yard. No idea of where we were. We ran in a pigsty where there was another woman like us who took a chance. We waited for some time until we couldn't hear the transport. Then we ventured out to see where we were. It was a very cold winter and we knew we can't survive in this pigsty with no food. We decided to cross to the other side of the street, broke into an empty house and so we did. It was already dark when we found the kitchen. Some food -- we ate everything we could find. Of course, we were very sick all night. Our stomachs were not used to food. All night we had diarrhea. It is a wonder we survived.

There were no toilets in the village like that so we used the dishes for relieving ourselves. We all slept on one bed. It had feather pillows and feather covers, and we could not believe that people were sleeping in that when we were in such a miserable condition. We forgot that such luxury existed. When we did not see people outside, we wandered out to see if we could find more food. And then a man spotted us. He was on a bicycle. We started running, of course. He caught up with us and inquired who are we. Of course, we had our story that we are Czech who worked in the factory. It was bombed out and we are wandering around. He asked us if we were hungry (what a question) and he took us to his farmhouse where he told us he is a Ukrainian man with his wife. They were sent to work in Germany because all German men were drafted. If we are willing to come and help on the farm with the cows maybe later the fields, then we will be fed. Of course, we agreed.

But two days later he came to the house we lived in and told us the Russians pulled back and the Germans are coming back to the village. What are we going to do? We begged him to put us up in a hayloft. Maybe the Russians will come soon. This is February, very cold and the loft is open. How are we going to survive here? We told him don't worry, just let us go there. Sure enough he did, and we slept there overnight covering ourselves with hay. But in the morning, we looked out and we see a German SS uniform talking to our guy, pointing toward us and bringing a long ladder. Well, we had to make a decision about what to say. Two girls among us spoke perfect German so they were the ones to talk to the SS. The SS was told our story being Czech, etc. and he asked if we want to continue working on the farm for food, but we have to go to the school building that there are some other women like us there. Well, the offer was God sent. But during the night we heard noises and when we looked out, there they were the Russians, our liberators.

There are no words to describe our feeling to be free, being a human being again. Of course, the Russians didn't care if we were former slave laborers or prisoners by the Germans. If we wanted to eat, we had to work for them. So they placed us in a field hospital where we did washing for them, unbelievably bloody clothes, pots, what have you; all washed by hand. After a while, we were taken to a village where there were more civilians, Germans and we all continued to work for the Russians. This time it was taking care of the herd of cows. Taking them to the pasture, milking them, cleaning up after them. This lasted until the war ended on May 8, 1945.

We did befriend some Russian officers, and we spoke the language so then we were taken by truck to Prague, immediately. We were lodged by the authorities and the American JOINT supplied us with food, and then we met with others like us trying to find out what happened to our families, friends, etc. One day my oldest sister, who I never imagined would survive, let us know that she is in Bratislava with her husband. This was like a dream come true because she was 39 years old and he was 49 and that was a miracle. My niece and I went to visit them by train and that was an experience itself. She talked us into going back home.

My niece and I both met our husbands-to-be later. We had our weddings the same day. Sept 22, 1946. I married Morris Farkas, also a survivor My niece and her husband left earlier the area to come to the USA. In 1949 we left with our son Gabriel, 15 months old. We took the tremendous risk crossing borders from Romania to Hungary and eventually to Austria to a displaced persons (DP) camp. It took us nine months to get the papers, affidavits to come to the USA.

In the beginning, life was very hard not knowing the language and no profession, but with God's help and ambition, we succeeded. After ten years our daughter, Suzanne, was born. It took us that many years to be able to afford another child. Today, I have four grandchildren and we live in a free country that nobody tells me when to get up and do what I don't