

I am Donna Karen Yanowitz. And today, I'm talking with Helen Kormis and her daughter, Lilly Feig, both Holocaust survivors. This project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland section. We were talking about your life in the work camp. Is there anything else you remember about your daily life there or how you felt there?

Well, as I said before, it was a better camp than most of my friends were in, for which we were very grateful. At one-- bombings were very close by. And I remember, we used to have to-- I mean, we were-- I remember my teeth chattering. I can still hear myself. I was so scared.

And there was a time when bombs went off. And the factory where we were working, in the night shift, a lot of girls got killed. That was very, very traumatic also.

You were putting bombs together?

We were filling bombs, yes. We were filling bombs. And mines-- we were-- and a lot of my friends got liver problems from the gas that they were-- or whatever they were using in it. They got jaundice and liver ailments from it.

What year was this?

That was-- we were taken there in 1944, end of November. And we were there from November till '45, I would say, till March or April '45.

And then where did you go?

Then I guess the front was closing in on them, on the Germans. And they were concentrating us in Theresienstadt-- in Terezín or Theresienstadt. I don't know how you would call it.

Theresienstadt.

We were taken there.

How far was that from the labor camp?

It wasn't so far. It wasn't that far because it was-- all of it was in the Sudeten. I believe they took us first from-- I think, in the morning, they started us out.

And it was very interesting. On the next track to us, they were men, also concentration camp people. And since we had a good camp and we were not very hungry-- and I was seldom hungry. I have never been a big eater. Whatever I had was enough for me.

We were throwing bread to them because they were-- they looked like they were really emaciated. They were very, very hungry. So we gave them our bread. I remember, I had a little pink kerchief. And I wrapped my bread into that. And I threw it. And it fell down.

And there was an SS. His name was-- we called him Mumus because he was such a dummy-looking thing. And he saw me throw it down. And he looked around. And he saw no one was looking. He picked it up and he threw it into the other car-- a man with conscience. He did throw it over.

And then they took us into another concentration camp that was called Leitmeritz. And there were an awful lot of people, skinny ones, skin and bone. They were falling down from there. And then there was-- there were two of them with a cart. And they kept on picking up those corpses, and throwing them on that cart, and pushing it. I mean, it was horrible.

Was terrible.

That was Leitmeritz, [NON-ENGLISH].

What did you do in that place?

We were only there overnight. We were sleeping on the floor. We slept over during night there. Somewhere on the floor, we were sleeping. I don't even remember whether it was inside or outside.

Was so dirty.

We came to a point where we could sleep-- I could sleep standing up. I was so exhausted from those standings in lines all the time and being awakened that I guess a young kid needs more sleep than an older person. So we just went to sleep anyhow. And from there, they walked us. It must have been a few kilometers.

And they walked us to Theresienstadt. And we got quarters in a place called the Dresden Kaserne. And what was very interesting that they-- from the work camp, there were a few younger children that were taken away from their parents, from their mothers that were alive. I remember a girl by the name of Rita.

And they were all brought to that Theresienstadt. And when we were marching in, those girls saw their mothers there from our camp. They got united there. They did not kill them, apparently. And they were alive. And they met there. That was such a thrill. And then we were there in Theresienstadt.

How long did you stay there?

I would say a few weeks, a month, or six weeks. I don't--

Six weeks.

--I don't remember exactly.

Six weeks we was in Theresienstadt.

What did you do there, Helen? Do you remember?

My mother didn't do anything.

I don't do nothing. You help children.

Yeah, I went to a children-- I was helping out run a children's home.

For sick children, she take care, mine daughter. And I can't do nothing because I was always weak.

And then my mother got typhoid there. That was when we were liberated already.

Oh. When were you liberated?

My husband was also liberated in Theresienstadt. I say that it was the 9th of May. And he says that it was the 10th or the 8th. He remembers a different date, which really doesn't matter. I remember like it would have been the 9th of May. But my mother got very, very sick. A lot of people died in Theresienstadt from typhoid.

Did you do any work in Theresienstadt?

I did. I did. I went to work in a-- I went to work with children. I worked with children. But then when we were liberated, even then, I kept on working there. And I used to go and see my mother because it was just across the street. I remember

that one of the girls didn't close the window.

One terror went away and the other terror came-- the Russians came. They were very bad, the Russians there. They were really-- I mean, what we went through, and they still were trying to rape the girls and do things like that. Well, I think it was just horrible.

I remember that girl. Her name was Regina. And she must have been some shrewd cookie because she-- the window-- we were on the ground floor. And the window must have been left open. Or somehow, one of those Russians must have pushed the window open. Anyhow, we slept in one room with the kids because we were watching the children. I was 16 years old. And so I wasn't a child anymore.

And I hear her say, in the night time, Lilly, Lilly, I have terrible cramps, she says. Please, she says, can you put the light on?

I walked down from the bed, and I go to the light switch, and I put on the light. And there stands a Russian with a gun in his hands, with a rifle. And he's shaking her.

I was screaming. You wouldn't believe it how I was screaming. And everyone in that building came down because I must have been screaming really loud. They all came down. And they got him out of there. And we locked the window.

But it left so much fear in me. It left so much-- It was such a horrible experience for a 16-year-old one. So that's what happened to me there. That was not very pleasant. Also, my mother got sick there. And we were quarantined in Theresienstadt. Only the people that had a clean bill of health could leave.

This was after liberation?

Yes.

Who liberated you?

The Russians.

The Russians.

I just told you about them, about the nice Russians. And it was funny because my mother-- we just cooked that yesterday-- liked a food that is made out of raw potatoes, and flour, and eggs. And it's cooked like dumplings. And when we were liberated, one of the boys, they went scavenging by the Germans. They were let loose from concentration camp.

They went to the towns around there. And they brought back potatoes, and flour, and whatever they brought back. And my mother made that-- those dumplings.

And the next day, she started to get ill, my mother. And she kept on saying that she got sick from those dumplings. She didn't know she had typhoid. And then finally, I rounded up a doctor. And he said, my mother has typhoid.

I don't know what gave me the wisdom or what led me to the actions that I took. But I really saved my mother's life because I knew, if my mother is going to remain there, she'll never make it.

So I got a lady. And I gave her my bread. And I gave her my shoes. And I gave her whatever, she should come and pose as my mother. So she got a clean bill of health. And I got it too because there was nothing wrong with me.

And everyone that went through that procedure got 1,000 crowns. That was Czechoslovakian money. So my mother got 1,000 crowns. And I got it. That lady gave it back to me.

And we got little pink books. And was written there that we are OK and that we are permitted to leave the camp. My mother was not OK.

And I was standing there on the square until a Russian man-- a Russian came around with a truck. And they-- for money that we used to get there, we gave them the money. And they took us out of there. They drove us to Prague. Anyhow, I hired him. And then a few more people came around.

As a matter of fact, the doctor that saw my mother was on the same truck. Really. And he didn't say anything. And we didn't say anything. He was afraid to say something because the doctors were needed there. He really was abandoning ship, that doctor. So he kept quiet.

And we took in my mother. And they put her into a hospital in Prague. It was called Bulovka. It was one of the best hospitals that they had there.

And my mother remembers a young doctor shaking her and telling her-- he did not let her slip away. He kept on telling her that she has to stay alive because she wants to see her children. And she wants to see her.

And I used to go there every day and carry on like a maniac. And I was on the ninth floor. And I said, if my mother dies, I said, I jump. I didn't want to live. There was nothing to live for.

And my mother made it. My mother made it. And she's right here. Look at her.

The doctor sit with me by bed. And he talk to me, don't sleep. Look of your beautiful daughter. Look, she was always-- Outside the window.

--in the window because she can't come in. And look. And I don't see her. Just I'm like--

She kept on slipping away.

I was like nothing. I don't care, remembered. And I don't care for nothing.

And I found people that were not Jewish, and were great, and were wonderful.

And in the morning, I'm looking where I am.

She woke up. She got better.

And he talked to me all night, the doctor, all night.

And I met there a girl who, when we got off those trucks, they brought her from that truck. And she took me home. And they gave us to eat. And we were going to sleep underneath a gate, like they had entrances, you see, to apartment buildings-- not like here, but it was made like an arch and like a tunnel.

So we were going to sleep in that tunnel. We didn't want to sleep on the street. We tried to go to the Russian embassy or someplace, they should give us some quarters. But nobody bothered, really. It was too soon after the war.

But those Czech people-- and none of them were Jewish-- they got out of their own clean, good-smelling bed that we didn't believe existed anymore. And they knew that we were not clean. There must have been people with lice and with god knows what. And they let us sleep in their clean, clean beds.

Would you believe that? They went out. I don't know where they slept. But four of us, the girls, they let us sleep there. And they gave us breakfast. They were just wonderful. And then we-- and then I spent some times in a nunnery, in a-- where nuns were. They took us in for a while. I had to peel potatoes for my keep.

Where was your mother at that time?

In the hospital.

She was still in the hospital.

Sure. I was at loose ends. I was really. And then I grew up so much that I took over completely. I was the one that looked after my mother. And then, when my mother got better, we got into-- she got into a place where they-- where she could recuperate a little bit. And then someone told us that they heard my brother was alive and that he was in Budapest.

Who? Do you remember who would give you that word, how you would find out?

I don't remember who. But we were always congregating to one place, where people knew some things, like they were saying, I saw this one or I saw that one. And go there. That-- and my mother was still very weak.

And I also discovered the cousin, who was awfully sick. He was in Buchenwald. And his legs-- he was a year younger than I was. His legs were like this. And I also heard that his brother and sisters were in Budapest.

So him, I really smuggled out of the hospital because he was-- they would not leave him. So at 5 o'clock in the morning, I got up. There were no orderlies yet. And I got him out. And I brought him where my mother was.

And there was another lady that was from Buchenwald. And she came along too. So I had all those three sickies.

And she take care of us.

And I took him. I took them, went to the train station. And I don't know where I got food from, but I must have gotten some food for us because we were not hungry. And we had a blanket or whatever and a pillow that we got somewhere. We wrapped it up, and we went. We traveled in style.

We got on the train. There's no room to sit. The Russians were all over. Two Russians were laying down on the benches where people were supposed to sit.

Finally, I convinced one-- my mother is very sick, and my cousin is very sick, that he should let them sit down, those three sick people. I promised him everything. I'll meet him in Budapest at this and this place. He should just let.

So one of them was sitting up. And he let us sit too because there was room for five people. The other one wouldn't budge. That one was just with his hat on his face. He was sleeping the whole day and the whole night. He wouldn't move from the train.

But that one really and truly saved our lives. They would have never made it standing up a day and night trip. So we got there. And there were trucks waiting for us. There was a little bit of a Jewish organization already, a little bit of the HIAS in Budapest. It was a big city. And they took us. And there was a school where they housed--

[NON-ENGLISH] school.

Yes, the refugees, whatever. And they took us there. And as a matter of fact, the brother of my cousin, my cousin's older brother, was on the street. And we started yelling for him. And then the-- and then he stopped the truck and he took his brother off. And then we got there and we found my brother also. But my mother was so weak that we never went back home.

My brother said he went back. Everything was dug up. Everything that we hid was taken away. Nothing was left. My brother came back. And he said that there's no sense in going for us. And I was not going to take any chances either with my mother.

So we got back on a train. And we went back to Czechoslovakia. And we settled on a city. From out of a hat, we picked a name and we went there. Podmokly? Podmokly. What's the difference? We went.

And then they confiscated-- the Germans were all sent out from-- that was-- the Sudeten became Czechoslovakia again. The Germans had to give it back to them. And we could have a little apartment there, furnished and whatever. So we started life there.

Were you getting financial help from any place?

No. I went to work. I was the breadwinner. I went to work. I was in a billing department. They made batteries in a factory. I was working in the billing department. And I was a good girl. And I gave my mother the whole check.

And you were staying home? And my mother--

I managed. I cooked.

--I wouldn't let her work. It was enough whatever I made.

Helen, of all the experiences that you had in those years, what would you say was the worst for you, the most painful for you during those?

[NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

Mine daughter-- I lost my daughter, my mother, three brothers, my sister in-laws, and the children.

Did you think that you would survive this? Did you think that you'd get through it?

[NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

No. No. I never think I came home again. Never.

And I never believed that I will die. I always knew I'll make it. Isn't that funny?

What gave you the strength and the hope, do you think?

I was too dumb to realize what was going.

You think it was just--

No, I never think I'll be alive.

Really, I never thought I will die. I was only scared when they were bombing close by.

I know, I don't have nothing more, not home, nothing, nothing, just like a finger, I came home.

But you knew you were going to survive. You didn't think that you would, though.

That's right.

I guess I'm just a very stubborn person. I wasn't going to give up.

How long did you stay in Budapest then?

For a few weeks. We stayed for a few weeks in Budapest.

I'm sorry, I meant in the town that you decided to live in and you went to work.

Oh, oh. Oh, we stayed there from 1945 till 1948.

Your brother was there too?

No. My brother was there till 1946. And then he decided that he wants to go to Israel. He didn't say anything to anybody. He just disappeared. He left us. Till this day, I can't forgive him that he had-- how could he leave us?

I mean, I love my brother. And we're very, very close. He's in Israel now too. But he just picked himself up. And he went to Marseille. And then he boarded a ship.

He's gone.

And he left us.

Did you know where he went?

No. For a long time, we didn't know what happened to him. We just didn't know where he was.

And you stayed in--

And we stayed in Czechoslovakia.

And where did you go from there and why? When did you decide to leave there?

Well, we left in the beginning of '48. Things were getting bad in Czechoslovakia.

In what way?

Politically. The Russians were having more of a hold of it too. It was getting to be really bad then. They say that the son of Masaryk-- everyone was convinced that they killed him. And Benes-- everyone was convinced that he was killed by the Russians. That was what the people believed. They said that they died.

And with them gone, there was no democracy left in Czechoslovakia, which was a lovely place to live. So there was nothing left for us there. We smuggled ourselves over the border. And we came to Germany. And in '51, we came to America.

Were you married then?

Yes.

When did you get married?

I got married in January 1948.

In Czechoslovakia?

Yes.

Was this somebody you had known from your home?

No. I had a friend. And my husband was her sister's brother-in-law. And for three years, he tried to marry me. And I wouldn't. And then somehow, I gave in, which was a mistake.

And you all came to the United States then?

Yes.

Did anyone help you, the Joint Distribution Committee?

Yes. We came as a DP-- displaced persons. International Refugee Organization brought us out.

And where did you go?

To Cleveland.

You came right to Cleveland. Did you have family here?

My mother was sent to Dallas, Texas because my first husband went to the-- well, he requested my mother should not be sent where we were going. So they sent her to Texas. And he had sisters and brothers here. And that's why I came here.

Did your mother-- did you have anybody you knew in Texas?

No.

No. I cry day and night.

Well, anyhow, I have-- we divorced in 1953 in February, my husband and I. We just couldn't make a go of it. And then in October, the same day, I met my husband now, Lou Feig.

That same day, my mother came in from Texas. And she lives here since then. And then I remarried in 1956 and lived happily ever after.

You told us how many children you have. And you have three.

I have grandchildren, yes.

Did you ever talk to anyone about your experiences before this?

Well, there were children from school, from Heights High that were sent to me last year. And I-- they asked me a few questions. And I answered them because for a long time, I wasn't ready to speak. But then I-- well, I guess I got over things slowly.

My children never even had yellow socks. This is how much I dislike the yellow color-- never anything yellow came into my house because of the yellow star. Never.

And then I got over that phobia, the yellow thing. And then I got over-- like to Israel, I never wanted to go to the Holocaust gathering because I still couldn't go. But to the Washington Holocaust gathering, I said, I can. I feel I can go already. It took a long time to get over things. I must have healed up a lot more now because I--

I don't go. I can't.

You still can't?

No.

Were you ever able to talk to anybody about your experiences before this?

Did you-- do you ever talk about it to anyone?

No. No. I don't want to talk because hurt me.

Did you join a synagogue in Cleveland?

Certainly.

Did you, Helen? Do you belong also?

Yes.

And where do you belong?

Well, we belong to Young Israel, mainly. We also-- my husband belongs to the Shomer Shabbos on the side.

In Green Road.

Green Road. But it's Young Israel that we go to.

How do you feel as a Jew in the United States?

That's a very ticklish question. I am very grateful to be here. I love it here. But I don't feel as secure as I did years ago. I feel that things have changed somehow here. There is more antisemitism than there was when we arrived. I don't know. I don't know. I really-- and I-- still, I wouldn't want to live anywhere else. I just-- I love it here.

I love it too. I love it. I love America.

I'm grateful for everything.

Because I know I had a home. I had free everything. I like it.

I guess we appreciate freedom more than others do. I also wanted to say that I owe my life to being in Cleveland. Because when I came here, I was very ill. I got rheumatic fever in concentration camp at one time. And when I got here, my heart was about the size of a football. I had mitral stenosis.

And I was fortunate enough to come to Cleveland, where Dr. Beck was here. Dr. Linden was my OB gynecologist. And he said that I must have something done with my heart because it's very bad. And through Dr. Brafman-- he should rest in peace-- and Dr. Linden, I got to Dr. Beck-- Claude Beck. And he was the father of heart surgery, I believe.

And he-- I was operated on for free in 1952. I was taken into the hospital. And I was-- he really saved my life because I was so bad that I was told that I couldn't live no longer than another year. That's how bad it was.

And then in 1974, I had a plastic valve put in by Dr. Ankeny. But still, if I wouldn't have had that first operation, I would have never lived to see the other one.

How do you think that your Holocaust experiences affected your health? And do they affect you now, your Holocaust experiences? Do you think about it often?

Well, logically, I try not to. But it just creeps up on you all the time. You have no control over it. You just wake up at night. And it's my sister or it's my father. Or it's the things that you just have no control over-- your dreams. It comes to you whether you want it or not.

It's with you. It's-- you can maybe forgive, but you cannot forget. It's impossible. It's with you all the time.

To what extent do you think that your Holocaust experiences affect your outlook on life? And how would it affect it?

I don't think that personality personalities changed because of the Holocaust. I think people are just people.

Do you think that survivors might be different than other Jews?

I don't think so. I think they are very hurt people. And I think that maybe they might be more cautious, perhaps, about trusting some other people. But basically, people are people.

Could you please try and explain how you managed to get through those years?

Well, if you have hope in your heart, you just keep on always hoping that the next day will be better.

Well, in what ways do you think that you yourself contributed to your own survival? Were there any?

I guess I was just lucky. I was just lucky. I don't think I have done anything.

Do you think it was your stamina or your outlook on life, maybe?

I don't think so. I just believe that I happened to be lucky. I was not one that was killed. I was one that was-- I was just lucky.

What made you decide to share your experiences now with this project?

Well, if it will help others to know what happened and people will not forget so it should not happen again.

In your opinion, what do you think would be an appropriate way to commemorate the memory of those who lost their lives during the Holocaust years?

I would say that we should try to keep Israel alive. We should do our best. Because I believe that it was built on the blood of our loved ones that were killed there. That's about the only good thing that came out of it.

Is there anything else that either one of you would like to share with us?

[NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

What can she say?

[NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]. I can say nothing more because no use to talk.

You still think about it often?

I think lot at night. I cry. And I think about it what was. And no help.

It affects your outlook on life.

Yes. And I am happy because I have two children. That's all. I can say nothing more.

I only want my children should not lose faith in humanity. I actually took my children to Germany. I believe that hate is a very destructive thing. I did not want them to learn how to hate.

I want them to know that there are good people everywhere. There are good Germans too. And because there is a world with not only Jewish people.

And they have to learn to trust and believe. Because if not, there will be very unhappy people. That's about the best thing that I can give my children, to teach them not to hate.

Well, I want to thank both of you very much. This is Donna Karen Yanowitz. And I've been talking to Helen Kormis and her daughter, Lilly Feig, who are both Holocaust survivors. And this project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland section. Thank you both very much.

You're welcome.

You're welcome

Thank you.