

FOLDES, Suzanne
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Three audio tapes
Interviewed on January 25, 1996

Abstract

Suzanne Foldes was born in Miskolc, Hungary on June 23, 1921, an only child. The middle class family kept a kosher home and observed Jewish holidays, but was not very religious otherwise. Although they heard about what was happening to the Jews in Europe, they believed they would be safe because they were Hungarians. Late in 1939, Jews began arriving in their town. The Hungarians soon began expelling those who were not citizens of Hungary. Suzanne's father's business began to be affected in 1940; he could no longer get the merchandise he needed because he was Jewish. In the summer of 1940, her father was taken to Hatvan work camp for six weeks. In 1942, the older men, including her father, were taken away to the Ukraine for about 16 months. In 1944, the family was forced into a ghetto, and then went to be with her father at a brick factory nearby.

Later in 1944, they were forced into cattle cars and taken to Zakopane, Poland, where she was separated from her mother during a selection. She was chosen eventually for a work detail and sent to Birkenau, and then to Buchenwald where they worked with saltpeter. The following March, they were told they would be leaving the camp. When Suzanne saw that the Germans were no longer in uniform, she and a small group of others left, and met some American soldiers and other refugees.

In August, she made her way to Budapest and then went home and was reunited with her father. Remarried, Suzanne moved to the United States and settled in New York.

Oral History

Tape One, Side A

00:00 Suzanne M. Foldes was born in Miskolc, Hungary, on June 23, 1921. She was an only child. Her father fought in World War I, and was a prisoner of war for two years. Her mother was from the other part of Hungary. Her father was a very successful in men's furnishings. They were a middle class family. He was the son of a religious teacher who moved from city to city to find Jewish children to teach. Suzanne's father did not have a chance to get educated, but he made sure that his brothers did. Her mother's parents were the richest wholesalers in Vác. In 1930, her mother's sister married a man who ruined the family to a point where they moved to Budapest to escape embarrassment.

Miskolc was a city of 60,000; Jews accounted for 10,000. It had three synagogues: Ultra Orthodox, a little less religious, and reform. The family was not close. They kept a kosher home, but only so that Suzanne's grandparents could eat with them. The grandparents died when she was 17, and family members were allowed to bring food in from the outside.

00:42 Suzanne's father's store was kept open on Shabbat. They observed Jewish holidays, but Hebrew education was minimal. A teacher came to class two times a week. There was a Jewish lower school that went up to the fourth grade. The high school was a Protestant school, which was the best one in town. The Jewish students had to pay double the tuition, while the Catholic students paid only 1-1/2 times. Classes were small; out of 50 students, 18 were Jewish. She had mostly Jewish friends. The parents of non-Jewish girls did not want their daughters to associate with Jewish girls. They did not live in a Jewish neighborhood. She was a gymnast, but never got to the 1936 Olympics. She belonged to a sports club and to Girl Scouts, but only unofficially because Jews were not allowed to belong. But she was needed, so she was invited to join.

00:83 Suzanne was not very interested in politics, and did not really pay attention to the fact that as a Jew she was not openly welcome. She did not belong to a Zionist organization. In 1933, when her father, sitting on the edge of his bed in his underwear, heard the radio announcement that Hitler had become chancellor of Germany, her father said, "That's the end of us." That was clear in Suzanne's mind. They talked about Hitler and later, listening to his speeches, were sick to their stomachs. But they felt safe because they were "real Hungarians, it will never touch us."

01:11 She spoke German before she spoke Hungarian. Her father felt that a person was as many people as the languages he or she speaks.

01:23 She understood Hungarian well. French, English, Latin and German were also part of her education. She was not aware of too much discrimination. A friend, whose family converted, was at the University of Debrecen. When another converted young man at the university teased her friend about having converted; her friend slapped his face. He was thrown out of school. His father was so upset about him that he died of a heart attack. The older boys from different schools, law school, etc. were already on quotas for jobs, because only a certain percentage of Jews were being hired. Her father's business became affected in 1940-1941. He was not able to get as much merchandise as he needed to run his business because he was Jewish. Kristallnacht was a very distant happening. When Hitler marched into Vienna, things became more worrisome. The Hungarian Jews living in Vienna fled to Hungary, and would not return to their homes.

The community collected money, trying to help them to be able to stay. More and more people arrived, needing help. Also, more people were taken to labor camps for road building and other hard work. Later, these men were taken to Poland and Russia. On September 1, 1939, they listened to the Italian news from Milan, so they were aware of the happenings in other parts of the world. A few days later, Polish Jews arrived in the town. The Foldes family and others housed many of them. They housed a couple with a little boy, whom they picked up on the road because he was alone. The woman wanted to pay them from the little they had.

Their hope was to get to France. At one point, the Hungarians started to check citizenship and get rid of non-citizens. The stories they told were awful, such as “people being put to death in droves.” Her father was convinced that nothing like that could happen to them because they were Hungarians. They had all their documents and were proud of being Hungarians. Her mother wanted to go to the United States just to see the World’s Fair. Her father was very much against it. Suzanne was not allowed to be part of the Olympic team. Jews did not get the medals the non-Jews were given. She was so upset that, for 40 years, she gave up doing all sports.

She started learning a trade in 1940-1941. She learned to sew pajamas, shirts, and underwear, while still living at home. She met her first husband at her coming out ball at age 16. There she also met the man who would become her second husband.

In 1940, her father was taken to a labor camp for the summer. His commanding officer was her Latin and history teacher, who did not like supervising elderly Jews. Their job was to demean these people.

Tape One, Side B

00:01 Suzanne and her mother went with her father to his labor camp every day, so he was not alone. It was 16 miles from home. The business was run by trusted employees. At the camp, they did not do any work; they just sat around. This lasted for only six weeks. The name of the camp was Hatvan.

In 1942, she was married. She and her husband, Paul Berkowitz, lived at her parents’ home. Six weeks after they got married, the older men were taken away to the Ukraine for about 16 months.

00:78 The Hungarian peasants, who were their supervisors, brought letters from the captives when they came home. So the family managed to stay in touch, and send warm clothing. The women managed the business. They had enough food. In 1944, her father returned. Suzanne’s husband worked in his father’s business. They got news from around the world. She got pregnant shortly after her marriage. Her husband insisted that she have an abortion, and she did.

01:50 Italy withdrew from the war on March 19, 1944. Hitler moved into Budapest. Everyone was assured by the Germans (through the Jews they had picked to communicate all information) that everything would be all right. They were told to “just follow orders”. First, the Germans took all the Jews had, and then they were moved out of their apartments to the ghetto. In the ghetto, an army officer pulled out many men to take to a work camp -- hoping to save their lives. He did save them between May and December 1944. The Foldes were “very scared of the Germans, but we still did not believe that they would take Jews out of the

country.” About 60,000 people were taken to a brick factory, and then to Auschwitz. Her family was not affected. Hungarian soldiers were beating and killing Jews, wanting information from them about hiding places. They wanted money and other possessions.

01:93 The first ghetto was in the very religious streets. The Jews took all kinds of things with them. Clothing and other possessions were taken from them with the promise that all would be returned when they returned to their homes. In the meantime, they were bombed by U.S. planes. The train tracks and brick factory were not bombed, but the neighborhoods were.

June 6, 1944, D-Day, was a very hopeful day. People did manage to escape by converting, or so they thought. But most did not survive. Suzanne’s family thought of going to Budapest, but refused to leave without her father. They walked to the brick factory, about eight to ten miles from the ghetto, while people were “watching, some with sadness, and some with glee in their eyes.” The family carried as much as they could to the brick factory. Their valuables were taken from them, so they took a little food.

03:00 The brick factory was dusty, the bricks were drying, and it smelled awful. The man who would become Suzanne’s second husband, his wife, baby and family were there. They all helped each other, although they were very scared. People did escape, with help of the soldiers. June 6-12 soldiers pushed them onto the cattle cars on the tracks of the brick factory. There were 120-130 people in one car. They watched a diabetic family die slowly due to lack of nutrition.

Tape Two, Side A

00:00 The trip took over two days, during which they had no idea where they were heading. When they reached Zakopane, Poland, a ski resort, the train stopped. No one can comprehend the conditions in the cars. There was one pail to be used by everyone. They all suffered quietly not to disturb others. All age groups were in the car. Suzanne stayed close to her mother and did so for the rest of her mother’s life. Her mother was her best friend forever. She had supported Suzanne’s decision to have the abortion. At the time, Suzanne received very good care from a non-Jewish doctor.

00:55 When the Jews got off the cattle car, people screamed for her mother to cover her head. Her hair was graying up front. At the time, they didn’t understand what that meant. Suzanne was the only young woman to be sent to the right. They were taken to a bunk, undressed, and shaved – head and underarms. This was done by Slovak girls, who had survived in Auschwitz for three years. The girls told them that everyone sent to the left was already dead, killed. Suzanne cried for three days. They were told that they were lucky to have come to the camp so late in the season.

- 01:20** Suzanne feels guilty about not telling Mengele not to send her mother to the left, but to let her come with her to the right. Her mother was a most wonderful person. When Suzanne came home, her father wanted to know what she had done with her mother. After leaving the area where they were shaved, they went to a shower area, and then were given a package of clothing. The clothing she received would have probably fit a ten year-old child. The clothes left her body exposed all over. She managed to carry her own shoes, and kept them to the end of her stay.
- 01:30** They were taken to Camp B-3, barrack #5. It had two doors, windows without glass, and nothing in it. They slept on the ground, head to foot. When they needed to go to the latrine, they had to climb over other bodies, stepping on heads or other parts. The way out was through the window opening. If someone couldn't make it out on time and had to go badly, they just relieved themselves as they were rushing out. "It was totally demoralizing."
- 01:66** It rained through the roof. The block Elteste and her two stubendiests (inmates in charge of cleaning the barrack) had blankets which may have been dry. That was their luxury – no one else had any of that.
- All day they were outside, standing in Appel or sitting on the dirt. At one spot there was a water spout, which they used for washing their clothing and drinking even though they were told not to drink it because it was contaminated. Suzanne met two women who worked for her mother-in-law. One of them, Margaret Jacobowich, helped her with everything, even getting food, as she was not able to function. Margaret found two of her sisters in C Lager, in exchange for two women who wanted to come to B Lager.
- 02:20** The Appels took place in the early dark hours and lasted three to four hours. Then came breakfast, back to the barracks, back to Appel, and dinner. If a person went someplace during Appel counting, they all had to stand until she was found. Each barrack had around 1,200 people in it.
- 02:80** They didn't work. This was a Vernichtungslager, meaning, an extermination camp. Sometimes, when workers were needed, some people were taken from this camp. Working men sometimes crossed the camp coming to or going from work. The inmates would scream family names, and if someone was known by the men, they would throw over the fence a piece of paper with a name and that person's location. This is how Suzanne found out that her future second husband was there, as well as the family's store manager.
- 02:75** August 2, 1944 was Suzanne's last day there. The prior week was the week when the gypsies were exterminated. They were told that the gypsies were simply thrown into the fire alive. The screaming they heard was unimaginable. On the next Appel, Suzanne's family members were taken away to work.

03:03 She was not picked; her group was mocked and dehumanized. Knowing what the future held for her, she put on her clothing and went to the next barrack, but again was not picked for work. She ran to the other barrack, tried again to be picked, but her arm didn't feel strong enough for them. She tightened her muscle to make it harder. That helped and she was picked. By then, the people from her barrack were way ahead, and she wanted to join them. She saw a soldier with a machine gun, but decided to take a chance and make a run for it. She made it, running through the gate as her family members were screaming for her to come. They went to Birkenau, to the shower. They were 70 over the count of 1,000, including some pregnant women. Again, there was a selection.

Tape Two, Side B

00:00 The 70 women picked out at the time were gassed immediately. The remaining workers were given uniforms, put into trains, and taken to Buchenwald's outer-commando. There they had "luxurious accommodations" -- eight double-decker beds in each room, blankets, a long table and benches and a small stove to help them stay warm in winter, or warm up some water for washing themselves. The food was also better. They walked around four miles to work. The previous workers died. Their job involved working with saltpeter. The chemical killed the liver. This was used in bombs.

00:65 Suzanne was good at stealing coal. Some people could steal potatoes. She was good also at getting second servings of food. There were 16 people in the group. They helped each other as much as they could.

00:95 One pregnant woman was removed at one point. Suzanne's cousin and aunt wanted to get out of factory work. They managed to get work in a sewing room.

01:00 They didn't have to march back and forth, but there was less food, and there were more air raids. They still had to stand for Appel. They stole pieces of material to make stockings for themselves for the winter. The bags that the saltpeter came in were five-ply. After they were emptied, the women used the bags as raincoats.

01:95 Next spring brought in very little work. The women's health was starting to fail. Their eyes and skin were turning yellowish from the material they were working with. The underground where they worked was made to look like a forest for camouflage. Due to that, it was never bombed. They simply were not discovered. By March, they were cleaning the areas that stored merchandise. It was the German way to keep the prisoners busy when there was nothing else to do. There was no way to escape. They could see people walking above them.

02:35 On a bright morning in March at around 11:00 A.M., they were told to hurry back to camp because they had to get ready to leave. At night, they were gathered and started walking.

- 02:50** There was a Rebbitzin working in the kitchen, and she kept a running Jewish calendar in her head. According to her figures, the day they were to leave was the first day of Pesach. With some stolen flour, she made flat bread, and they all had a bite, to remind them of Pesach. As it was, she was a day too early. They all felt the pain of not being at home for a Seder. "We were also not feeling too friendly toward the One above." They didn't really feel too strongly about the holiday.
- 02:60** However, there were two little girls, 12 or 13 years old, working in the kitchen. They were little redheads, peeling potatoes as their job. They had not eaten meat all year because of kashrut. Most people didn't care anymore. The next night they all planned to celebrate Pesach together. They noticed that the SS were not dressed in uniforms, but in civilian clothing, with bicycles next to them. Then they took off. Suzanne decided to leave also, along with eight others. Suzanne and her cousin were the only German speakers. They found sugar beets or turnips in the fields, and shared them. At the end of the next village, they stopped at the last house. The name of the village was Frielendorf.
- 03:15** They went into a peasants' court. The people of the court couldn't decide whether they should throw them out or let them stay. The peasants knew what they were, and let them rest above the animal sheds. A German escapee from the military wanted to hide there also, but they didn't let him come near the Jews. The next morning, they were informed that they had to leave. They went back to the fields, and started asking the peasants for food. Everyone was cooking, and all were willing to part with some food. It was Good Friday.

All of a sudden, they heard a lot of noise -- motors, trucks. They stopped in front of a peasant house. There were white flags on the trucks; they were G.I.'s. The soldiers shared their breakfast rations with the Jews. The peasants invited the Jews in, and shared food with them as well. Back on the streets, "people were running off the mountain side: Russian girls, POW's, black Africans, French workers (not prisoners), were sharing their food also. It was a glorious day." Suzanne's group wanted to join them as they were leaving. "It was fantastic to feel like humans again." They were invited to stay at a kindergarten.

Tape Three, Side A

- 00:00** The G.I.'s went out to shoot a deer. The guys in the kitchen skinned it, cooked it, and brought it out on a platter. The villagers were ordered to bring cooked food for them. The post office and a hotel across the street from it were cleared for them by the Germans, who were to cook and clean for them. The Germans didn't like that. They stayed there until August.
- 00:18** American soldiers were not allowed to socialize with German women or Russian POWs. They had dances to which only Jewish women were invited. Suzanne's group could also go to the beach with them. There was a fully clothed man sitting at the poolside staring ahead of him all the time. She was encouraged to start

talking to him, and found out that he was Ralph Katz from Cleveland. He owned gas stations. He left his infant son and wife at home before shipping out. They all became friendly. Ralph asked them to make Shabbat dinner, which he supplied fully from the PX. "We enjoyed Shabbat totally." He offered Suzanne and her girlfriends to become his sisters since his mother had never had daughters.

00:56 Suzanne went home and married again. When she became pregnant, she wrote to Ralph and asked him whether he saved the clothing from his baby because she needed them. She and her girlfriend sent him a picture. They knew that he had returned to the States in November. She received a package weighing about 80 pounds. It was full of clothing for her and a Christening outfit for the baby. She and her husband sent him, his wife, and mother a present, but never heard from him again.

00:81 The Hungarian Jews were not asked by Hungary to be returned, so they stayed on until August. Yugoslavia requested that their people be returned. They were supplied buses by the army and a U.S. soldier who wanted to get to Terezin to find someone, let Suzanne and her family get on these buses. They went to Budapest first and visited her aunt who informed her that her father was at home. She went home right away. Her father knew of her survival. Someone had heard her name mentioned over the radio by the Red Cross. She just walked into the family store. After his expression of joy that she was alive, he wanted to know where she had left her mother. Several people lived in her house, given shelter by her father. Her husband didn't come home. Their old maid came to visit, and asked to work for them without pay. That was good because the house really needed cleaning.

Andy, Suzanne's husband's friend, came and asked her father to let him stay there because he didn't like farming. Her father told her that Andy had always loved her. He had lost his wife and child. Andy and Suzanne were married in 1946, and had a baby in 1947. They named him Paul after her first husband. They moved to Budapest. Her father died in 1955. For their tenth anniversary present to each other, they put on their fathers' grave stones the names of members of both of their families who perished. Six weeks later, the revolution started in Hungary. After going to Austria on the way to the U.S., they continued to New York City. A friend tried to keep them in New York, but the Joint Distribution placed them in Arkansas because Andy's diploma, a Doctorate in Animal Husbandry, was more useful in Arkansas. However, they stayed in New York City, where Suzanne did office work. In 1968, she started working for the Ford Foundation. Her husband worked for the Deutsche Bank until 1986. Their son asked them to move to Washington, DC.

02:40 Suzanne found that "it was not very hard to adjust to this new country, especially for me." But her husband had difficulty finding a new profession.

Suzanne reflects on her feelings about Judaism. "I would never have converted to another religion, but I did not have any feelings for my religion. I lost all interest

until my baby started moving in my stomach. I never did become religious.” She “had a lot of knowledge”. She believes we are all, in some way, affected by our past. They did not talk to their son about their past, but he found out. He traveled to Dachau as soon as he went to Europe. He told them in the 1990s that he belonged to the second generation, and they should give him the history of their past.

03:15 “I couldn’t. I still feel that even the Holocaust Museum exists because of guilt. American people do not want, and do not understand, us. Americans do not know, and do not want to know about our terrible experience. It hurts too much.”