

This is tape two. And we were talking about the fact that you were in the infirmary of Budy, the tree branch--

In Auschwitz.

Excuse me. In Auschwitz, the tree branch of Budy had fallen.

Well--

And you said you had gotten good treatment.

I had gotten good treatment. And in fact, I was treated so that I could have even walked. And I was there for about four weeks. January 18th, the Germans had to evacuate Auschwitz because the Russians were-- we could hear, actually. We could hear the shots. Fire, fire. Guns and whatever ammunition they used.

Who were the other patients in the infirmary with you?

They had all kinds of patients. Surgical patients. I mean, they did sophisticated surgery. There was one man, for example, that had ulcers. And he had special food in Budy. And I met him after the war, and he said that they cured him. They operated him, and he survived, and he was fine.

So he came--

So some--

--to the infirmary of Auschwitz and [INAUDIBLE].

Well, he was in Auschwitz, yes. He was in the hospital in Auschwitz and they cured him. I mean, they operated on him, and he survived. But for each one that survived, they had hundreds or thousands that didn't survive.

And so in my case, would have I stayed in Auschwitz longer, even though my leg was cured, they would have killed me after. They wouldn't have never sent me back to work. They would have sent me to gas chamber, probably. Probably. That was the pattern.

So it so happens that by the 18th-- oh, you asked me about the patients. They had all kinds. Somebody had broken legs. They had broken arms, they had broken faces-- I mean, from beatings. I mean, they had all kinds of patients there.

I neglected to say one previously, that once I volunteered to go to the dentist because I didn't want to go to work. And so he was a Jewish dentist. We had a dentist on that farm in Budy.

In Budy.

And so he said, well, there's nothing wrong with your tooth. So I said, well, yes there is. If you make a hole, there will be. So he drilled, he drilled, he drilled into my healthy tooth because I just didn't want to work for an hour. And then he said, well, you'll come back. And I'll put in a temporary filling, and you come back next week. So he did that. He put a temporary filling.

And I did it five times-- temporary fillings-- so that each time I had a day or a half a day off. They allowed you to go to the dentist. They allowed me to go to the dentist. But the sixth time, I couldn't go and he couldn't put in a permanent. And of course, my tooth-- I mean, I had to have it pulled when I came out. But that's what happened.

How did you get that idea to do that?

Well, we always thought of ideas. We always tried ideas. I suppose it was partially the way one survived, though. So

some people never tried and they never survive. Other people tried and they survived. I think that it was partially luck and partially self-made luck when people survive.

But coming back now to the hospital. So the 18th, when the Germans had to evacuate the camp, the hospital stayed. And we all thought that they were going to shoot us. I mean, they're not taking us. They wouldn't leave a camp here with witnesses. So we didn't know what to do. But once they left and then somebody told us that once the SS leaves, then five days later, the Russians will be in. Because they live five or six days ahead of time.

Now, you are 17.

The SS.

You are 17 years old.

I was 17. This was in '45, in '40--

Early '45.

Early. January, 45.

And so we just stayed in camp. We could have left. There were no guards. And we could have gone in to Krakow, which was 60 miles away. We could have gone out of camp and go into hiding, but we didn't. I could have because I was in good condition to go.

So did you consider--

So I stayed.

--yourself free of that?

I considered myself free, just waiting for the Russians to come in.

There was nobody around?

No guards.

No guards. Just the patients and the doctors.

Right. And then, I don't remember exactly, but the SS came back. And they said, everybody out. And we ran out. And we said, oh, that's the end. Now they're going to shoot us. And then two people were hiding. They sort of ran down in the basements, and they shot them and killed them. And so we didn't know what to do at this point.

Was this men and women, or just men?

This was-- you know, that's a good question. I don't remember.

Were there men and women--

I think it was men and women.

--in the infirmary?

I think it was. I think it was only men in my group. I think it was only men in this group. I'm not sure.

But anyway, then something happened. And I don't know exactly what happened that day, but told the Russians are here. They took off and they didn't shoot us. And we went back. And at this point, this was the 25th of January. And at this point, some people have gone. They left. I didn't. And two days later, the Russians did come in.

So you stayed.

And I stayed until the Russians came in. And then, when the Russians came in, then I stayed a day. And I hitchhiked on one of their trucks, and I got into Krakow.

How did you feel about seeing the Russians?

I was happy. [CHUCKLES] And then--

What was your first experience with the Russians?

With the Russians? It was a good one. It was a very good one. First, we didn't know who they were. First, we thought it was Germans. I mean, they were in white snow-- in coats. It was snow. It was in January, so it was a lot of snow. So they had white jackets and white coats. And so they were nice to us, anyway.

How did you communicate to them?

Well, I spoke Czech a little. So sort of a little bit. I mean, we didn't communicate much. They brought us food. And trouble was that people ate a lot and they got sick.

Did you eat any of their food?

I ate some food, but I didn't get sick. So I was just lucky, I guess. So we went to Krakow, and they had an agency there.

How do you get to Krakow? Oh, you said you got on one of their trucks.

I hitchhiked, yes. And then we stayed in Krakow a few days. I was there together--

We meaning who?

I was together with a Polish fellow who was also liberated who was in camp for about seven years. And we stayed together. And then I left Krakow. And in fact, I met one of my cousins there also.

In Krakow?

Accidentally in Krakow, who recognized my voice. He saw me from the back, heard me talking to this Polish fellow, and he was in back of me. And he said, Erwin. I turned around. I said, how you recognize me? He said, I recognize your voice. So anyway--

What was your cousin's name?

Erwin. [LAUGHS]

What was his name?

He's in Australia. He survived.

What was the Polish Jewish man's name?

I can't remember his name. I can't remember his name. But there's a story beyond that with that Polish man. And then,

little by little, it took me about two weeks until I got home with stops. From Krakow, we went to town of Gorlitz, and then way back to Czechoslovakia.

We being you and your cousin?

There was a few people that landed. Maybe three of us. No, not my cousin. No. My cousin-- what happened to him? I don't remember what happened to him. I can't remember what happened to him. I think we separated at that point. We didn't stay together.

I went home to Munkacs-- so-called home. And of course, I couldn't get into my house because a Russian captain was living in it. Another cousin was there, and so I moved in with him. And we stayed together there. But meanwhile, my mother and sister survived, and they were in Krakow. But that's another story. But you don't want to hear their story.

Well--

It's a long story, so I wouldn't. But they survived. And they met this young man from-- this Polish man. And they said-- they described me. And they said, my mother-- we look alike, my mother and I.

She said, did you ever see a young fellow who's-- we had a farm. And she sort of gave him a few ideas as to recognition. And he said, what do you mean, did I see him? He looks just like you. He's home. And then of course, he said that I was alone, so she knew that-- well, she didn't know. But she suspected that my father wasn't with me. And so she--

Now, your mother and sister were together?

They were together all the way.

All the time in Auschwitz.

All the time. That's why they survived. Yeah. I mean, my mother would have never survived. And I came home. And--

So did they come?

Now, they-- what happened to them. My mother had typhus. She had a stomach typhus from-- I guess she was eating the wrong foods. And they came home. They came home to Munkacs. And I didn't know they were alive, but they knew I was alive.

So the way we met. They came to the-- they knew where my cousin lived, which was around the corner where our house was. And I opened the door, there's my mother and sister. That's how we met. So.

Anything more you want to say about that moment?

Well, that moment. I mean, there's nothing to say. It was very sad. [INAUDIBLE]

And then what did you do? What happened then? What did you three do then?

Well, I wanted to reclaim the farm. And of course they said, you can only get land what you can work. Because then the socialists were there, and the Rush Czechs, and the Russians. And I said, what do you mean? They wouldn't give me back only what they wanted to give me.

I said, you mean to say, you'll give me back what you want me to get? Or do I get back my land? They said, no. You can't work all your land, so you get back whatever you can work. I said, you know what? Keep it all. And I left. And that was the end. And I left, and I never went back. [INAUDIBLE]

Where did you go?

And then we went to a city called Debrecen, which was in Hungary. And from there, we went to Budapest, and then we went to Prague.

You, your mother, and your sister?

Yes. Then, we were together.

Now, what did you know about your father at this point?

Well, at this point, we didn't know. We knew that he was evacuated to go home. At some point, we heard that he was together with somebody and he died of hunger. I mean, they had no food there. And then--

At [INAUDIBLE]?

At [INAUDIBLE]. And he saw him, and he died. And at that point-- at some point, there were people that said my uncles-- which we had four. I had four uncles. I mentioned that, didn't I? Four uncles and four aunts. But they all died, except for my mother.

And they're my cousin's children from-- most of them. Most of my cousins survived. Many of them died, but most of them survived. And my grandfather died, and my grandmother died.

And families. Total, complete families of friends too numerous to mention that died that no one will ever know they existed. So very few. I think about 800. I think about 800 Jews lived through in Munkacs. So everybody else died. And this was in a short period of time, actually. Because it was only nine months, really. So that's what happened. That's the story.

And then in Prague, I went to school. I went to a textile engineering school, which they had a program where you worked for two days. They give you credit for two years in one year to make up the lost years. And I was there for a year, so I had two years.

And then I came out to the States where my uncle lived here. On my mother's side, two uncles. And they actually gave us papers-- first papers. And then we came here and started a new life, the three of us.

So you were never in a displaced persons camp.

Never. No.

Never. Yeah. And you were saying you were at school in Prague.

Outside of Prague.

Outside of Prague. And then, when did you say you left?

We left in '46.

To come to the United States?

To come to the United States.

How did you get papers? And how was that arranged?

My uncle sent us the first papers. And he sent us the passage, actually.

This was an uncle in the United States?

The uncle who lived here. He was also-- he was in Belgium. And he left in 1942. And he went to Brazil, and then he came to the States. And he came to the States in 1942. But he was also an escapee from Hitler.

Did you at this point with your mother and sister talk about what you went through? Did they talk about what they went through at that time?

Yes.

At that time?

We often spoke about it. Yes, I told them what happened to us. I told them about my father. And they had a very difficult time because my mother never worked in her life. And she was doing physical work, and she was very sick. She had a gall bladder problem-- an acute gall bladder problem.

And at one time my sister was telling me that they took them out to work on the fields. And the SS saw her and he says, how can they send you out to work in this condition? So he gave her a blanket and she sat down.

This is your mother?

My mother.

So at the end, they really, they survived because my sister helped her. She could not survive.

In what way did she?

In what way? Well, any time. Well, for example, when they were evacuated, they marched. So they were marching into Germany, which she could hardly walk. So then, whoever couldn't make it, they were shot. So she said, well, I just can't make it. And she just went into the ditch. It was a deep ditch.

And that's what the SS used to do. They used to throw them into the ditch and shoot them. So she just voluntarily-- she just fell into the ditch, and my sister went after her. And the SS saw her. And he probably thought that she'd die anyway there, and they just didn't shoot them. And they stayed there.

And when they left-- and she spoke fluently German, my sister, and both of them. They came out and there was a farm nearby. And they went in and they didn't tell them who they were. They didn't have striped clothes. But they had torn clothes, but they didn't have striped.

So they worked for this-- she had a very big farm, this woman-- and she was working there. They were working there until the Russians came. And then they came home. But that's how she escaped.

How did you get to the United States? By boat?

By plane.

By plane.

By plane. We flew from Geneva, from Switzerland. That was two days.

And you land. You land in the United States.

We landed in New York. When? In--

What day?

What day? I can't remember now. I think it was June. In June sometime.

Of '46.

'46.

And what was it like to put your feet down in the United States?

Ah, we always dreamed of coming here. And I guess the dream materialized after. And we were constantly looking for who survived, and friends, and we were always anxious to know. And--

Had you thought of going to Palestine? At that time?

At that time, no. At that time, no. But later on, I did. Once I had children, we thought of doing that. But then we never--

No, but at that point.

At that point, no. And so you landed in New York. And then where did you settle?

And then we settled in Forest Hills.

In Queens.

Queens.

And what did you do?

Well, I took-- I went to City College at night, took English courses and business courses. And I met this man through my uncle who was a jewelry designer, and went into the field of designing jewelry.

Your uncle was a jewelry designer?

No, he was a diamond dealer. But he knew this man who was a jewelry designer, who was Hungarian. And I started with him, and here I am.

And then, just what was the pattern of your life after?

And then, after that, I was designing jewelry. And I worked for several companies. And in 1953, I met my wife on a blind date, and we married. And then I went into-- a year later, I was drafted and I went into the service.

Korean War.

Korean War. But I went to Europe and I was in the intelligence service as an interpreter.

What was it like to go back to Europe?

As a matter of fact, my job was working in Nuremberg in the Palace of Justice.

Oh. Can we talk a little bit about that?

Well, that was a little bit strange. And of course, we lived with the Germans and we lived in a German home. So it was a little difficult. But--

In what sense?

Well, you know, I could never get used to-- today, I feel a little different. But at that point, I was still bitter. And when I saw a little child and I said, well, why should she live? Or why shouldn't-- you know.

But anyway. I lived in this private home. I mean, we had an upstairs in a small house. And--

The German family lived there.

German family. And daily, I went to work in the Palace of Justice upstairs. I didn't have a uniform on because we were-- it was an unassigned group and we didn't want to be recognized. So we dealt with agents. We sent agents to Czechoslovakia since I debrief Czechs and Hungarians. And I was doing that for about a year and a half.

And actually, I only had the uniform on once because it's required to put on a uniform once-- if you're in the Army-- at least once a year, and to shoot a gun. So we went on the firing range. And that's when I put on our fatigues, at the firing range. And when we came home, I changed and took civilian, and we left.

But we had a good time. We traveled to Italy. No one--

Friends. With Ruth Because she was with me.

Oh, your wife came with you.

My wife came with me,

Oh, I see.

My wife was with me.

And--

Any unpleasant--

I lived before--

experiences at that--

At that point? Well, I want to do things that I didn't do [CHUCKLES] with the Germans. I mean, at that point, everything was very fresh still. So--

So what do you mean, you did things that--

I felt that they-- I just felt hatred towards them at the time. But I overcame that. And I couldn't live there. But even today, I speak to them. And I can't blame a young person for his father's crimes.

But any time a person who is my age or over, I would say that he was a potential Nazi. Because they were all-- they were all Nazis, as far as I'm concerned. I mean, there were very few and far in between that were not. And the same thing in Hungary. I think the Hungarians were worse than the Germans, actually.

In what sense?

Well, they didn't have to-- for example, we were in the ghetto. And so they were sort of happy, you see. They saw when we were marching to the-- they were all smiling and happy that they were taking us. I mean, they're very anti-Semitic



there.

Did you go back to--

I never went. I went to Hungary--

You did go back.

--to Budapest. But I never went back to Munkacs. I may go back yet. I don't know. My wife Ruth says not to go. But I still feel that I should, and I may.

Do you still have your number?

I still have my number. I'll show it to you. I mean, you have seen it many times, probably. And I still have it.

So you were in the Army Intelligence.

Right.

In Nuremberg.

Yes. And, well, we had--

Were you involved in any of the trials?

No, because this was after. This was in--

Oh, this was in--

1955.

Oh, this was in '55.

'55.

Right, right.

No, this was after. Way after.

In the '50s, right.

No. The only thing we did was we gathered information from the bridges, and the highways, and the military operations of the Czechs and the Hungarians. And we each were assigned agents that we dealt with. And that was my job. And then I just wrote reports. And I found out that one of my agents that I dealt with was a double agent after. [LAUGHS]

And then you came back to United States.

And then I came back to, yes. And then I open my business, and I've been there since.

And you said you have children?

I have three children.

Did you ever-- did you talk to them about your experience?

I have told them everything that I've told you here. Most of it, I have told them. Most of it. I mean, honest, I forgot something at the time. But they know what happened and they know-- they may even know more because I may not have remembered it now everything. Maybe in an hour I'll remember it. But I told them.

Talk to us a little bit more before we end about your feelings. Are you more religious because of what you went through? Less religious?

I think I'm less religious. I don't think I'm more religious, no. We were never-- We were religious at home, but it was never that religion like the ultra Orthodox So we were never-- I was never like that. But the whole time-- I mean, I wouldn't think of going out without that cap, for example, from my house. But once I was outside, I took it off.

But the feeling was-- I mean, that was just outwardly. Feeling wise, I would say that I think I'm a very good Jew. But I'm not religious. I'm not religious in the sense of the habits. But I would be very deeply-- I would not like my children not to marry Jews, for example. And yeah, I would call myself religious. I mean, that's religious. What is religion?

Even though you went through this because you were Jewish?

Yes. But I think that if there is God, then he should have protected the ones that died. Like my grandmother was a deeply religious person and a very good person. So it's very mixed feelings about that.

Was it hard to adjust to a, quote, normal life when you came to the United States?

No. No, it was easy. For me, it was easy. I really didn't have--

Did you know any English?

Well, the first year, I did. I learned.

You didn't really know anything before?

I didn't know anything before. Actually, I did a few words that maybe we learned in school. But very little. Hardly anything.

But you feel the transition--

Was easy.

Was easy for you.

It was easy.

Does--

I didn't have psychological problems with being in camp. I lived through it. And it was just an incident which I hated the Germans for it. Or the Hungarians. Or, for that matter, the Americans.

At some point when I found out that they could have-- things could have been done. The Hungarian Jews-- it didn't have to happen to the Hungarian Jews. Something could have been done. They could have bombed the trains. They could have done something, it seems to me.

It was the end of the war. And to allow that million-- or, I don't know-- 600,000 Hungarians died. I think they died in-- that wasn't necessary at that point.

When you were-- right before you went to Auschwitz, had you heard of Raoul Wallenberg or not? Heard about him?

I heard about him. Not--

Not then.

No, not before.

Only after.

Only after.

Only after, right.

But it wasn't really publicized at the time because it was kept quiet. It wasn't--

Right. What do you think enabled you to survive?

Will to live. Will to live. And I was very young, and I did everything possible to survive. Well, some people wanted to die-- and some people did die-- where they committed even suicide, where they went against the wires. And they ran, and they touched the electrical wires. But it was the will to live.

Do you think your youth had something to do with it?

I think so. I think so. I think it's personalities, also.

And what's that mean?

Some people had problems after. I like to think I didn't have a problem after. And then I know people that did have problems. And they couldn't-- I have a cousin, for example, that she lives in Brooklyn. And she never-- she still lives there. And she says she feels good. It's like a ghetto, and she feels good here. So she never overcame living that life, where I did and my sister did.

And you think back, but you don't dwell on it. I mean, I didn't dwell on the fact that-- what happened to us. I didn't--

Do you dream about it? Do you have nightmares?

No.

You don't.

No.

Do you think the fact that you were with your father was a help to you?

I think it was a help to both of us. We comforted each other. We had fights because I always told him to work less. And he said, no, we have to work. And I said, you're draining your strength. So we always fought about that. Other than that, we never spoke about escaping.

We spoke about my mother, and my sister, and my brother. I mean, we knew that my brother died. At that point, we knew he was gone. But we hoped that-- we never wanted to see them, though. Because the condition we saw the women, we didn't want to see them that way. So we just hoped that they survived. And that was about it.

Do you receive reparations?

No. No. My sister does. I don't. I should have, but I don't.

Did you apply at all?

I was in the Army at the time when the application took place. And somehow, I was never one for getting. I always felt it was charity, which was wrong because I could have given it to charity. But somehow I never went for those things, and I never applied for it. I should have. And if I had to do it over, I would do it.

Just an ending. Thinking back, does the Holocaust experience still affect your life?

It does not affect my life. I hope that people learn by it. And I hope it will never happen again to Jews or to other people. But as my personal life, it doesn't affect it now. Except I keep on asking, why did it have to happen?

Does looking at your number affect you?

No. No. I would have taken it off if it would.

What do you say when people ask you? Or did anybody ever ask you what that was?

They ask me. They usually act surprised. You were there? They usually act surprised. I mean, they even know that I was there. But if they see the number, then they say, you have a number? So they usually act surprised even though they knew that I went through Germany. But if they see the number, then it sort of makes an impact of some kind.

Is there anything else you wanted to add to your story?

No. The only thing that I would add is that I hope that it never happens again. And if it could benefit anybody, then I certainly would do everything possible in my part to help that effort. That's my story.

Well, thank you very much--

You're welcome.

--for doing the interview.

You're welcome. I didn't even give my father's name, did I? No.

Well, you can tell your father's name--

Anyway.

Pardon?

Oh, no. You did.

In the beginning. Yeah, yeah. And your name at birth was?

Was Forest-- Feuerstein.

OK. And how did you happen to change it to?

[INAUDIBLE]

Yes.

OK, this is what I would like to add. I changed my name because when we came out, my uncle felt that we should change our name. Which I always regretted after. But he insisted on changing it. And we changed it to Forley. My original name was Feuerstein and he thought that that was not a good idea to have that name. And until today, I don't know why.

When you say you came out, came out of--

Came out from Europe. When we came to the States.

Oh, when you came to the United States.

In 1946, I came to the States. He thought that which was have a fresh start. And--

This is the uncle that lived here.

The uncle that live here that sent us the papers. And I looked up-- and I looked up to him. I thought that whatever he said should be. But we always regretted it. We all of us regretted it.

[AUDIO OUT]

When you came to the United States, and that you regretted it.

[INAUDIBLE]

No, that you regret it.

I regret it.

Why did you regret it?

I regret it because the reason. I could never know why or what was his reason for changing it. I would suppose that he just didn't want-- he felt that maybe we would feel-- I really can't even-- I can't even analyze it. I can't think why he did it. But we had decided to do it because he said so. But it was the wrong decision and--

Why was it a wrong decision?

Well, because why not keep their name? I mean, if you change it-- if he wanted to Americanize it, we could have made it Firestone, which is the same thing in English. So what we did was, my sister looked in the phone book. And she went to the Fs, and she picked this name. And coincidentally, we picked Forley.

She picked-- actually, she made a mistake. Because she saw it in the phone book, she saw Farley because there are no Forleys. And that's how she picked the name. But we always regret it, but it was too late. We had our papers, and we just didn't want to change it back.

Was your health-- is your health affected by what you went through? Or was it--

No, it was not. No, no. No.

Because you said you had lost so much weight when--

No, but I gained it back after. My health wasn't affected. Not directly at the time. Not at all. Not physically, not psychologically.

And of course, I didn't speak about my wife, who was-- but she was always very understanding. And she was a very good wife for 42 years. But she was always very supportive and she was always-- we always-- we traveled to Israel. We did that about six or seven times.

And we always wanted to have a base there-- some kind of a base-- but we never did. We never bought anything. But we always liked it there. And eventually, we may spend some time there.

When you meet another survivor by chance or whatever, do you exchange experiences?

Not in detail. Not in detail, no. We usually don't.

Do you feel a connection to them?

There is some kind of a connection, yes. We do feel a connection. But we don't discuss details. In fact, very rarely do I discuss details. I mean, I think this is the first interview that-- this is the first interview I ever gave. But individual situations, I talk about. But very, very rarely do I talk about it. It never comes up, and I never volunteer it. And if somebody would ask me, I would talk about it. I wouldn't hesitate. I mean, I can talk about it.

On a final note, I would just like to add two different situations. One was the one incident that I forgot to mention. We were just walking in the yard. And this man, who was my neighbor in Munkacs, we passed an SS. We were talking, and an SS man passed by. And he told him, said, don't you stand in attention when I pass by? And he said, yes, I do. And then he whacked him and all his teeth fell out.

At which point-- I don't know whether they were false or not, but several of his teeth. I don't know. I didn't count how many. And then he-- the SS guard-- he just stepped on the teeth and broke them. And that was the end of that.

On that note, not all guards were as cruel as that. There was one incident with my mother where she went out to work. And when the SS saw her in her condition-- she had a gall bladder attack-- that he was unable to understand how they sent her out to work in that condition. So he gave her a blanket and sat her down in a corner to sit and wait until the group finished working. And then he sent her back, but he didn't allow her to work.

So there were some SS that were human, and most of them were not. But you do have to recognize that some of them were a little more human than others. And maybe those were the ones that allowed my mother to survive. That one incident could have been-- if she had worked that day, she could have just died that day. Being that he helped her, she may have survived because of that. On that note, thank you.

It seems that this tape cannot be finished. We keep on adding points. I would just like to thank my wife Ruth, and my three children Brian, Glenn, and Diane for helping me through all these years to some of the memories to erase. They help me forget some of the memories. And being such a close family, [CHUCKLES] I would like to thank them. That's it.

That's a beautiful way to end the tape. This concludes the interview of Erwin Forley. It took place on September 19th, 1995 in Chevy Chase, Maryland. It was conducted by Gale Schwartz on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.