

Forley, Erwine
Sept. 19, 1995
Chevy Chase, Maryland
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:26

Erwine Forley was born near Košice Czechoslovakia, Dec. 6, 1927. At age six, family moved to Munkacs.

Erwine's father, Henry, inherited a large family farm. He also had an alcohol refinery. His mother was Elizabeth (Charmin). He had one brother, George, who was four years younger and one sister, Barbara, who was four years older. His mother and sister survived.

Family first lived in an apartment and then moved into a house in upper class, mixed neighborhood. They were not as orthodox as other Jewish families. Munkacs had 7,000-8,000 Jews out of population of 25,000..

Erwine had a large extended family. They all lived in the same town and met often. Most of these relatives perished in the Holocaust

Erwine had Hebrew class once each day. He went to public school but had mostly Jewish friends. "Life was wonderful."

7:08

Erwine played soccer and tennis and went ice-skating and swimming. He belonged to a co-ed Zionist group.

8:43

Erwine was very close to one of his cousins, and they would bike to farm to visit their grandfather.

9:46

"In 1938 when Hungarians came in, we didn't realize anything was happening, or we couldn't believe it. There were no changes in our lives. We were comfortable on the streets."

In 1942 all Polish Jews and non-Hungarian Jews were deported to Russia.

11:54

Father went to temple every Saturday. Mother stayed home. Children played outside temple. Erwine's bar mizvah was a dinner with four friends.

In 1942 Irwin was almost 15. He spoke Hungarian, Czech, and some German. Friends spoke Hungarian. Still not too concerned about what was happening. Youth always talked about going to Palestine.

In 1943 still nothing drastic had happened, but parents were becoming more concerned.

17:24

When Germans came into Hungary in March, 1944, everything happened fast. Everything was taken away. Jews were moved into ghetto end of April. Jews had to wear Jewish stars. "We had no time to even think about it."

Businesses were taken away. Schools were closed, including the gymnasium.

Erwine's family lived for 4-6 weeks in a small apartment with other families. Always had enough food.

Germans told Judenrat what they wanted Jews to know, including assuring them that they were not to worry. They would go to work in camps. Everyone had hidden his or her jewelry.

21:43

People took clothes and food, and they buried valuables (which were never found). Life in the ghetto was not good. People were frightened but never believed stories about what was happening.

24:49

In May 1944 Hungarian police, who were ruthless, woke up all Jews at 4 a.m. and took them out of the ghetto to the brick the factory. Erwine estimated that there were thousands of people.

In brick factory, everyone was divided into groups. Erwine was a leader for one of the groups. Hungarians burned all identification papers. That was when everyone realized that they had serious problems and that there was no escape. Erwine's family was able to stay together.

His 83-year-old grandfather was brought in from family's farm. He was beaten and died in Auschwitz.

32:47

On May 25, 1944, people were divided into groups of 80-100 and put into cattle cars. "We had some water and one pot for a bathroom. It took two days to get there."

35:43

When they arrived at Auschwitz, Mengele divided everyone into groups. Older children were sent to work, but all young children perished. Erwine and father were together; mother and sister were together. Grandmother and younger brother were sent to crematorium.

Each barrack had 1,000 people and three levels of beds.

39:02

We knew from the first day what happened to our families because from the barracks we saw smoke and could smell the burning.

Erwine and father were given tattoo numbers: 88956 (father); 88957 (Erwine).

Father and Erwine assigned to Budy and worked on a farm. The camp had 400-500 people. Not all guards were abusive.

Irwin got diarrhea for thirty days.

45:36

Barracks had individual beds, and everyone had blankets. Inmates had coffee in morning and soup at lunch. Lots of rats.

In August, Erwine and father cut wheat for 16-17 hours. They were always together. Had SS known they were father and son, they would have been separated.

On Sundays Erwine volunteered to clean up SS bunks in exchange for extra food and cigarettes for his father.

Erwine talks about how the Jewish kapos did all the dirty work for the SS, including beatings.

54:39

Dug out trenches. Women brought sod. Worked very hard. No way to escape.

59:50

While cutting trees, a branch fell on Erwine injuring his leg. He went to hospital at Auschwitz and was cared for by Jewish doctors.

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:33

January 18, 1945, Germans evacuated Auschwitz, and patients stayed in hospital. Five days later, Russians arrived. Just patients were left. Hitchhiked into Krakow with a Polish man who had been in a camp for seven years. Met his cousin.

8:07

Left Krakow and in two weeks reached Munkacs. Went to cousin's house. Mother and sister had survived and went to Krakow. Mother had typhus. She and sister learned that Erwine had survived, and they returned to Munkacs where they were reunited with Erwine.

Erwine went to reclaim farm but could only get back what family could work. Decided to leave. They went to Debrecen, then to Budapest, and then to Prague. Learned that father had died of hunger at Buchenwald.

All four aunts and uncles had died. Most cousins had survived. Grandfather and grandmother had died. About 800 Jews had survived in Munkacs.

12:18

Erwine went to textile engineering school outside of Prague.

In June 1946, Erwine, his mother, and sister came to United States sponsored by two uncles. They often talked about their experiences. Mother would never have survived without his sister.

16:11

“Coming to America was a dream come true.”

They were always looking for other survivors.

They settled in Forest Hills, Queens. Erwine went to City College at night where he learned English and took business courses. Also learned to design jewelry.

In 1953 Erwine met his wife, Ruth. He was drafted in 1954 and served in Nuremberg in the intelligence service. He debriefed Czech and Hungarian agents.

He and wife lived in a small German house.

“Could never get used to living in Germany. I just felt hatred at the time.”

He thought that all people in Germany his age had been Nazis. Erwine also speaks about how anti-Semitic Hungarians were.

22:44

He and wife have three children. They all know his story.

“I’m a good Jew, but not religious. I have mixed feelings.”

Angry at Americans for not bombing railroad tracks toward end of war. “They could have done something to help save the Hungarian Jews.”

26:02

Erwine attributes his survival to being young and having strong will to survive.

28:52

Does not feel that Holocaust affects his personal life now. He just wonders “why.”

“I hope it never happens again. “

34:58

Erwine thanks his wife and children for all of their support over the years.