

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

P.O. Box 25506, San Mateo, CA 94402

Name of interviewee: Farkas, Helen

Date of interview: 9/13, 11/14 & 12/20/1990

Summary: (First Video Interview, 9/13/90: Early experiences in Romania, Hungarian ghetto, Auschwitz, and on death march up to escape of Helen's sister and niece from march. Second Video Interview, 11/14/90: Tape One covers experiences on death march, escape of sister and niece, Helen and Ethel's escape, actions of righteous gentile friend Julia, and emotional responses. Tape Two focuses on post-war experiences, fleeing from Stalinist Romania, border crossing, DP camp in Austria, transatlantic voyage and settlement in the United States. Third Video Interview, 12/20/90: Latter part of death march, Nazi refugee camp, homecoming, escape from Stalinist regime, DP camp, transatlantic voyage, settlement in the United States, and intermarriage of Helen's daughter.)

Helen was born Helen Safar on 10/18/1920 in Satu Mare, (Szatmárnémeti), Romania, in the region of Transylvania. Her father owned a shoe store. She attributes her strong character to her early upbringing in a family of 9 children (Siblings: Miriam, Ethel, Ingemare, Lenca, Nathan & Andor). She did not have a formal education, but learned Jewish tradition in the home. She recalls her father teaching them "to live by the Ten Commandments." She had minimal experience with anti-Semitism in the prewar era. The family heard the reports on Voice of America about what the Nazis were doing, and she did not believe them.

In 1944, most of Helen's sisters and brothers were already married with families of their own and Helen was engaged to be married. Shortly after her fiancé was sent to forced labor, Helen, her parents, her two sisters, and her one brother were forced into a ghetto in Hungary. Several weeks later, in May 1944, they were taken to Auschwitz. Mengele himself was making the selection when she arrived at Auschwitz.

After January 1945 she endured the months-long "death march" to the area of Pushkow, Silesia, until first Helen's sister Miriam with her daughter Irene and then Helen herself with her sister Ethel were able to escape and stay alive until the war ended. With great difficulty, they made their way home only to find their houses destroyed and many of their loved ones dead. Their parents had perished along with their brother Moshe and his whole family, sister Regina and her entire family, youngest brother Andor, and Ethel's infant son.

Amazingly, Helen was reunited with her fiancé Joe Farkas and they were married soon after. Helen and her husband escaped from behind closed borders to a DP camp in Linz, Austria in order to escape the Stalinist regime in Romania. They then immigrated to America in 1949 with the help of HIAS, lived in Milwaukee till 1950 when they moved to SF. They worked for years in the retail shoe business

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

P.O. Box 25506, San Mateo, CA 94402

and had a daughter after fourteen years of marriage. Her daughter married and divorced a gentile, and had a daughter Kylie.

Helen is very active and considers Holocaust education to be a central focus of her life. She speaks to schools in the Bay Area as part of the Speaker's Bureau of the Holocaust Center, sometimes as often as 2-3 times a week. She feels she is on a mission and she tells her story because she has the "desire to help humanity."

In 1995, she published her memoirs with the help and encouragement of her only daughter and as a legacy for her granddaughter. Helen writes, "I'm giving you this memoir of my experiences in the Holocaust in the hope that you will preserve it as an heirloom for your children and your children's children -- to know where they came from. They also should know what kind of obstacles we had to overcome to survive. Just to survive. I want you to know and remember how precious life is, even when sometimes hard times mix in with the good times."