

Zoltan David Farkas 1927-2019 From the Holocaust to California

by Suzanne Rocca-Butler

Zoltan David Farkas, a long-time Israeli and international folk dancer, was born December 29, 1927 and died May 10, 2019. He had suffered from Parkinson's Disease for a number of years.

David danced with Marcel Vinokur's group for many years and with the Carriage House Folk Dancers in Atherton. He celebrated his 90th birthday at the Carriage House in December 2017, but was unable to dance after that night. His long-time loving companion, Margaret, would play a CD with all his favorite folk songs for him each night as he went to sleep.

David grew up in one of only three Jewish families in a little village in the Transylvania region of what was then part of Hungary. His family was middle class, better off than peasants, but not as well off as large landowners. They owned a general store and had a cow, some chickens, geese and ducks and a fruit orchard. Having no electricity and no radio, they had to rely on others for news. Because of this, the reality of the war didn't reach his Jewish family until 1943, when David was sixteen.

His brother, Erwin, 18 months younger, is now living near Minneapolis. He made an oral history with MPR in Minnesota and spoke about leaving the village with other Jews as their neighbors watched, silently, "like they were a little baffled and curious." One neighbor was crying. "She was the only one" remembered Erwin.

The family was taken to Birkenau in Poland. Known as Auschwitz II, it served as the extermination camp for about 1 million people. Erwin recalled that it was there, standing in line, that he noticed a pattern: the old men and young boys walked in one direction, while those older than 16 walked in another.

"One way was to the labor camp and the other way probably was the crematorium," he recalled.

David was already 16, but Erwin lied about his age, saying he was 16, rather than 15 years old and that lie saved his life. He and David were assigned to forced labor, which did not mean they were safe, but they escaped the crematorium.

They spent 12 hour a day working in machine shops. Those who were sick were never seen again, and it was hard to stay well when they were fed only a crust of bread and thin soup, hardly enough to keep them alive.

Early in 1945, the Nazis forced David and Erwin and the other prisoners to march deeper into Germany – a death march heading for Dachau – with no food or

water except the snow and roots they could find in the forest. "If you couldn't keep up you were shot," remembered Erwin.

However, on April 23, 1945, before they reached Dachau, the Allies arrived and the prisoners were liberated. Erwin vividly recounted watching the Americans driving out the Nazis and handing the prisoners chocolate and candy. One American soldier, guarding the new German prisoners of war, noticed David had no shoes and the soldier ordered one

of the prisoners, a German officer, to take off his shoes and give them to David.

They eventually found work at a kitchen in an American military base set up in Germany. There they tasted a banana for the first time and learned some English.

They spent time in various Displaced Persons Camps, and eventually made their way to New York City, lived with relatives in the Bronx, and finished high school and college. David graduated with a BS and MS from City College of New York in Electrical Engineering.

Only David and Erwin survived the war. All their other family members were killed. The two brothers returned to Germany in 2008, touring Dachau, the camp they had been marching toward before being liberated. "We finally got to Dachau," David remarked.

David came to SLAC in 1962 working in the Accelerator Physics Department and was one of the originators of the basic SLED scheme. Even after his retirement, SLAC continued to give him his own office.



David Farkas, Christmas, approx. 2007.
Photo by S. Rocca-Butler.