

Interviewee: Harry Fridkin

Interviewer: June Balshaw

Location: University of Greenwich

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JB: Ok are we rolling? I'll just put this in front to say that today we're interviewing Harry Fridkin and today is Saturday the 24th of July 2010 and its Dr June Balshaw from the University of Greenwich interviewing Mr Harry Fridkin about his war experiences. So what I'd like to ask you first, Harry, is if you could tell me where you were when the war started?

HF: Yes, I was at, let me see, I was married. Yes, we were in Eastcote that's in Middlesex and that's where I lived and when the war started in September I thought it was the duty of every young man to enlist so therefore, I was married in 1938 incidentally, so I joined up practically immediately in 1939.

JB: And how did your wife feel about that?

HF: Well, she was quite, well, I wouldn't say happy but she realised what I wanted to do because I was at the time I was twenty five at the time in 1939. I didn't want to be called up. I wanted to join what I wanted to join so therefore I remembered the First World War the infantry had a very bad time and also I was a driver. I was able to drive so I joined the RASC and that's – and very early in the war and then funny enough I was trained by a corporal who was my wife's first cousin and I didn't know at all and then of course this was in the RASC and he didn't come out with us, of course we got shifted elsewhere.

JB: So could you tell me a little bit about the training you received and then where you were sent to?

HF: Yes, the training – we was stationed in a place where the Spencer's grounds, you know, what's her names father –

JB: In Northamptonshire?

HF: Yes, that's right yes. That's where we were stationed and we made a mess of his grounds but we – all the training was – because I was an experienced driver I didn't have to take a test. I took a test and passed it. All we had was marching up and down saluting and all that sort of thing there was no rifle training such as bandits, you know, nothing like that at all and it's just sort of marching up and down.

JB: And so could you tell me a bit about your first experience of being sent abroad?

HF: Yes, we sent abroad – we went abroad very early. I think it was the end – towards the end of January – towards the end of December rather because –. We were taken to – we were going to the Middle East but first of all we had to cross the Atlantic at that time so because there were U-boats

around and we were in a convoy and we went to places like South Africa and also the place, oh, I've forgotten the name. Oh dear, it'll come to me.

JB: Ok and you were travelling by boat?

HF: Yes by boat all the way through and it took quite some time, you know. I can't remember how many weeks it was and we weren't – we didn't come into any trouble at all. The war ship – we had a few warships with us and one of them went away and apparently it was because of a German submarine. But other than that it was and also we crossed the equator and we had the most wonderful time **(Five minutes)** crossing the equator because I can remember that and we doused the officers [laughs]. Yes, it was wonderful. And Sierra Leone was the other place, that's it. Sierra Leone and we went there and we stayed there for a little while and then from there went to out towards Egypt. We went to Alexandria and along the Suez Canal and Port Taufiq and we finished up in the Suez Canal not very far from Cairo. I can think of it – the name, near Cairo.

JB: Port Said?

HF: Port Said. No, no it wasn't that, no. It was – I can't think of it.

JB: Ok.

HF: Heliopolis, near Heliopolis, that's rights. We went into Egypt and we had leave there and we had a nice time in Egypt and from there we went to the – to the desert.

JB: Ok, what I'd like to do now Harry is move on if you don't mind and talk a bit about your experience of being a prisoner of war.

HF: Yes.

JB: Now would you mind telling me the circumstances that led up to it?

HF: Yes, we were in the – in the desert at the time and we had – we cleared – we cleared the Italians out from the desert and then what happened was that we were attacked by the Germans in 1941. I think in '41 and we didn't have any air cover at all because the Air Force was over here in England saving London. And that's what happened so therefore the German Air Force had no opposition and we lost a lot of wagons. My wagon got blown up and also many others and one or two fellows were killed in their wagons because they wouldn't leave it they thought it was and I had a little bit of shrapnel and that was it you know and –

JB: Could you tell me a little bit about when you were actually captured?

HF: Yes, when we were captured we were driven – taken by train in cattle trucks to Austria and we had a few days in the cattle trucks and there were 55 men to a cattle truck. The guard was outside on a platform and we had no facilities for toilets. All we had was a Jerry can, a petrol Jerry can, for us to relieve ourselves. And then we used to stop occasionally with the – it took us about three or four days

and the food that we had given to us was potato skillet, as you might say, but it kept us going. I became an interpreter through this trip because a fellow wanted some water and he banged on this door and he said, 'I want water' so the guard on the platform outside yelled in and said 'Nicht verstehen' which means 'I don't understand'. So I said to this fellow just simply say 'wasser' and that's water in German. So he banged on the – and said 'wasser' and the door opened and water came in. And when we got to the camp the main camp in Wolfsberg they asked for interpreters. Anybody who could speak German and being Jewish I could understand a little bit of Yiddish and Yiddish is somewhat similar to German. **(Ten minutes)** But you had to be careful not to speak the Yiddish term, you see. So I didn't put myself forward but this fellow pushed me forward he says, 'Here' and pushed me, you see, and that's how I became interpreter.

JB: Gosh.

HF: And I managed to get a book explaining English and German and I learnt it fairly quickly because being Jewish sort of thing it helped.

JB: Sure and how many of you were there in the camp you were sent to?

HF: There were ten thousand of us captured and five thousand went to Klagenfurt and five thousand went to my camp which was called Wolfsburg, which is in Austria. That's where – I was there for two years a regimental – and I was interpreter there as well. We had a Regimental Sergeant Major from the third RTRs who was our leader. So I was his interpreter and that's how it happened, you see, so anything the Germans wanted us to do or wanted so they called the interpreter or the leader and I would be there to interpret it.

JB: Ok, so could you just tell me a bit about just day to day life in the camp what sort of thing did you do?

HF: Well, anything up to a corporal, above a corporal, a sergeant was no need to work, you see. But others didn't volunteer for work but what happened was that the Germans would say that we need twelve men or ten men to go to – to a place to work and our daily routine in the camp was nothing very, very exciting. Nothing at all, except of course that we had to get out in the morning to be counted and we had to be counted. You used to get out on the camp every morning somewhere round about 4am. They used to wake us up at four o'clock and march, you know, to march in a square and the Germans used to come around and count you. And this is what used to happen and the meals weren't very good. The meal itself was like a potato skillet and all that sort of thing. But we were fortunate because after a while we had Red Cross parcels every week. In those Red Cross parcels were fifty cigarettes every week plus tea, coffee and Makedoniki, you know, that tinned food and milk. Not ordinary milk, the –

JB: Condensed?

Harry: Sorry?

JB: Condensed milk?

HF: Condensed milk, that's it, yes. And also vitamin tablets and the parcels were quite large and we were fortunate because at one particular time the Germans were – wanted us to do something and they stopped the parcels, you see. I don't know what, I can't remember what it was but what ever happened the German prisoners in England also got parcels, you see, so if they stopped ours so they stopped theirs, you see. How they found out I don't know but we used to get orders from England that we were to keep ourselves clean and tidy because it's good for morale which is true and we were cleaner and tidier than the German guards.

JB: I was going to ask you about the morale side of things?

HF: Oh yes.

JB: What – what sort of things, you know, you've mentioned keeping yourselves clean and tidy, what other sort of things did people do to keep spirits up? **(Fifteen minutes)**

HF: Well, we – we used to have, we had a concert party which I was a member of and you'll see the pictures of it. And we used to, you know, practice that sort of thing and the Germans used to come in to the concerts, naturally, and the guards. But other than that it was nothing really exciting I don't think. People – we were – the mail was very good as well. We used to get – allowed to write a letter every month and receive mail too. I was the sergeant and I used to get mail from my wife 'Driver Harry Fridkin' and the Germans never noticed it, you see. That's it, I was in terror I really was, yes.

JB: Ok, so how long were you actually in –?

HF: The main camp?

JB: Yes.

HF: Two years.

JB: Two years, and what happened after that?

HF: Well, what happened during that two years a Regimental Sergeant Major came into our camp and he came out to me and he said 'Friddy', that was my nickname, he said 'Friddy, we need an interpreter would you come out to it?'. So I said, first of all I said to him, what was the camp like? He said, well, there's only fourteen men and one guard and also all fourteen men are in the – in this –. We worked – we work on a farm, straight away I knew that with a farm working was better food, you see. So I said, 'Yes, I'll come' and it was the finest thing I did because when we got there – when I got there rather I was the interpreter, I didn't work at all. But I just interpreted, you see, and the fellows used to go out and I used to go with them as the interpreter. The food was a lot better although we still got our Red Cross parcels from the main camp, which we used to collect them at the station at this camp which was called Mürzzuschlag. And that's what we did and then eventually we had Australians with us and one fellow was from the Isle of Man and there were about three or four

Australians. They were very, very good because we had the toilet in the barrack and there were bunks you know, tiered bunks, you know. So the guard used to come in every night and these fellows made the two panels in the toilet at the back of the toilet sliding, like sliding doors. And they used to get out at night and visit, one of the fellows used to go out and became engaged to a German girl. Anyway, after the war he married her and also she had a child by him and that was very dangerous. So the – they blamed some, one of the – one of the other fellows in the – not – a German said that he was the father because he was very friendly with this girl and that's how it came about. But I myself used to go out and through barbed wire and there was only one thin strand of barbed wire and I used to go out like that through the barbed wire. But before that the guard used to come in and he would count, this is how he used to go, he could see that we were all in there but he used to go eins, zwei, drei, vier, and count us with his rifle go back into his room and lock himself in, you see. Now I used my – this person that I called on **(Twenty minutes)** she used to be – she was in our, it was a woman an elderly woman, she was well over seventy so it wasn't a sexual thing but I used to give her chocolate, we had chocolate. Or sometimes coffee and something like that and I used to bribe her and then I said to her on occasion I'd like to come and see you in your flat to listen to the radio. So she's because of the bribery, you know, and so she said yes. I used to go out at night to this woman. It was only a short distance away to her house and I used to listen to the British radio and also to the German radio and I was the first man to know when our invasion started because I came in and told the boys you see. It was very good.

JB: That's amazing.

HF: Anyway on one occasion I used to get this news and one occasion a woman upstairs saw me go in, she knew. The next thing we hear was big banging on the door I don't know whether it was Gestapo or the secret police. Anyway, I think it was Gestapo and they came in and this woman, you know, opened the door and when she saw me they said to me, 'What are you doing here?' So I told them that we used to get orders from England to keep ourselves clean and tidy. I have come for the pressing iron. So he said to me, 'Does the guard know you're out?' I said yes, come with take me back to the barrack and the guard came out and he nearly hit himself when he saw me. He said to the guard, 'Did you know this man was out?' and before he could answer I said, 'You know I was out' and I shouted it all in German 'You know I was out because you sent me out to get the pressing iron'. Straight away he said 'Ja', so I saved him rather than myself because he would have been absolutely – probably shot. So yes

JB: That's amazing. So did anyone ever attempt to escape?

HF: From there, no.

JB: And why do you think that was?

HF: I don't know, but not from there. I think that because if they had attempted to escape from a camp like that they would probably get caught anyway and they would be put in to what we used to call a bunker like a jail and then had short rations, you know, not the proper food and that's it.

JB: Ok, so do you think for a lot of men obviously they were following the instructions from England about keeping themselves clean and tidy but do you think they just resigned themselves to the fact that this is where they're going to be for the duration of the war?

HF: Yes, I think so especially in the main camp because in the main camp it was very, very tough but on the working party you – you had a little bit of freedom. For instance there was an occasion when one of these Australians killed a sheep because we were on this farm, killed a sheep and got it and put parts in every part different parts of the country. So when the – when the Germans found out that there was a sheep missing, see they said, 'the Gefängnis did it', that's 'the prisoners did it' you see. So when they came to us and I had to do the talking so I said, 'What sheep?' So they said well we think you people killed the sheep so I said, 'We haven't killed a sheep at all. We think it's the Polish'. **(Twenty-five minutes)** There were Polish people living in the camp, you see, and they were workers, a family of Polish people. We said that we think it's them that they did it. Anyway they refused to say that they did it. They denied it rather. Anyway, so the Germans eventually just left it and we collected the spoils afterwards and cooked it.

JB: Good for you, good for you. Ok, so you were in the main camp for two years?

HF: Two years.

JB: And then you moved to the farm and is that where you stayed for the rest of your war – on the farm?

HF: Well, well not really because what happened was, after shall we say just about 194–, the beginning of 1945 or, no, '44 the Russians were coming in from the east towards Germany and every camp, every prisoner of war camp cleared out, the Germans also came with us and we had walk and marched all that way towards the, Munich and from there that's where two fellows two regimental sergeant majors and myself we slipped off and funny enough we got on a train full of German soldiers and we were wearing our British uniforms I had RASC and they had their regimental third RTR's and there berets and a German soldier came up to us and I said to these fellows keep schtm keep quiet leave it to me because I'm the only one that could speak it, so they said to me what sort of troops are you? And I knew that Heir Goebbels because I heard it on the radio about a week a week or so before that he said that we now have secret troops fighting with us and I knew that they were any British but I knew they were French soldiers because the Germans had over run the French wearing khaki uniforms and I also knew that Yugoslavs wearing khaki uniforms Mongols wearing khaki uniform so when this fellow came up to me and he said what sort of troops are you? So I said didn't you hear Goebbels that you have secret troops fighting with you he said yes, I said I cannot tell you anymore because it's a secret and that how we got away with it. and then we got on this train and we got to a place Markt-Pongau now Markt-Pongau was towards Munich not very far and we got this Markt-Pongau and we decided to carry on to Munich by walking because the train was too dangerous so when we got to Markt- Pongau we got to Munich and Munich was absolutely bombed to hell by, by the British and we got to the American camp and in this American camp the leader of the American

camp the officer said to us where did you come from? So I said Markt- Pongau so he said to me, he said to us rather, he said did you see any German soldiers? We said no because we hadn't, he said you're sure you didn't see any German soldiers? We said yes we did see any and as it happens we crossed the German lines without knowing it, **(Thirty minutes)** had we known we wouldn't have attempted anyway when we got to the camp then they, the Americans, they fed us and clothed us and wonderful, they had wonderful food they really did and eventually they put us on a plane and said that we're sending you to Brussels and when you get to Brussels you report to a British unit because Brussels had already you know become British so we reported to a British unit and then after a day or so they flew us home to England and when we arrived in England the first thing I did was to phone my wife she had the surprise of her life anyway they took us to a, a camp a convalescent type of thing because I was only eight stone myself when I came in so we were there at the convalescent for a about four or five weeks maybe more and then they let us home

JB: Ok, can you remember the date that you arrived back in England?

HF: No I can't remember the date but I know it was in 1945 towards the end of 1945 because my daughter was born in 1946.

JB: Ok, so was it towards the end of '45 or '44 because the war finished in May '45 in Europe.

HF: Yes.

JB: So was it before then? Before war had finished?

HF: Yes, it was just before the war had finished in the early part of 1945 shall we say, yes.

JB: So how did your wife react when you phoned her?

HF: She couldn't believe it. She couldn't believe it, she really couldn't. But after the war I took my family back to the camp, the working camp, you see, and the frau-volter, the manager's wife, the manager had already died. I didn't know this but the manager's wife when she saw me she pointed like this and she said die faulen Harry, the lazy Harry, you ask Lynn she remembers it.

JB: And when did you go back then to the camp?

HF: To the camp, what was it? How old were you Lynn?

L: It was about 1959, about 1959.

HF: Yes, it was something like that because I had two daughters, you see, at the time and Sharon was two years younger than, but unfortunately she passed over as well.

JB: Ok so, so even though you'd been taken prisoner in Germany you were quite happy to go back and meet with those people?

HF: Well, just to – just to show my children where – where it was, you see. I wasn't that – we were on holiday and that part of the country was where we were going to go. I have here which I'm going to show another time all the pictures that you that you wanted to see and also photographs and the account of my escape.

JB: Ok, no that's absolutely fabulous. So to sum up then for just this interview, now, if you had to sum up Harry's war in a sentence or two what do you think you'd say?

HF: I don't know, I can't think, I've never thought of it that way. War is not a good thing and I would say that I was very lucky to be able to do what I did and to have got away with it because there's lots of other things that really happened **(Thirty-five minutes)** which you will know at a later date of how these things came about because I've got it all written down

JB: Sure, sure ok well I'm going to wind things up now so I'd just like to say Harry thank you very much for talking to me today.

HF: Yes.

JB: It's been an absolute pleasure.

End of Interview