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This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Barbara Firestone on February 7, 2019 in Silver Spring, Maryland. Thank you, Mrs. Firestone--

Thank you.

--for coming and agreeing-- for allowing us to come and speak with you today. We just had an interview with your husband. And I will be asking very similar questions of you. We'll start from the very beginning, and then we'll go from there, OK? So the very first question is, can you tell me the date of your birth?

It was February 14, 1939.

And where were you born?

In Krakow, Poland.

And what was your name at birth?

[? Bronislava ?] Spielman.

[? Bronislava ?] Spielman. OK. It's a little different than Barbara Firestone, isn't it? [LAUGHS]

Yes. [LAUGHS]

Did you have brothers and sisters?

I have one brother who's still with me. And I had a sister. My brother is 10 years older than I. And my sister was eight years older than I.

So he was born in 1929 and she was born in 1931?

Correct.

OK. What is your brother's name?

Arthur.

And your sister's?

[? Henia. ?] It was [? Henia, ?] Helen.

Helen. OK. So [? Henia ?] in Poland and Helen here in the United States?

Yes.

OK. And your mother's name and your father's names-- my mother's name was Chana, Chana Steiel, her maiden name. And my father's name is [? Shimon, ?] Simon.

Simon or--

Spielman.

Spielman. And were they from Krakow for many generations? Or had they moved there from someplace else?

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Well, my father is-- was from Slovakia. I thought it was always Czechoslovakia. But it was Slovakia.

OK.

And the family-- we had some family in Germany and mostly in Krakow.

OK. On his side of the family, on your father's.

On both sides.

On both sides. And your mother, was she from Krakow, then?

Yes.

All right. And tell me her maiden name again.

Steiel, S-T-E-I-E-L.

OK. And did she come from a large family herself?

That is so confusing because there was so many marriages with second marriages or third marriages. So there were many sisters and brothers that were--

Half?

Half.

OK.

Yeah.

Do you know, of your mother, whether she was the child of a first wife or a second wife? Or do you know?

I'm not sure about that.

OK. And what about your father?

Regarding--

His brothers and sisters.

Oh, there was a large family. I believe he had nine sisters and brothers. That's quite a lot.

That was quite a lot. Some of them we've met in the states. They had come to the states early in the '30s. And most of the others perished during the Holocaust. And there were many extended cousins, and aunts, and uncles as well, lots of cousins.

That you knew eventually?

I did not know them.

OK. But you knew that--

But I did know the aunts and uncles that were here in the States.

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OK.

I got to meet them when we came to America.

So the question-- I mean, your date of birth kind of gives me already a sense of what we can focus on in this interview. Because you were born in 1939 in February, just before the beginning of World War II.

Correct.

So you're an infant of half a year's old or just over on September 1, 1939. And the overwhelming question I've got for you is, how does a child, how does an infant survive that war? Because truly, you are the most vulnerable. You're in a situation that is the most vulnerable at any time when they would be a war. but particularly within that war, there is a war on Jews.

So all of my questions have to do with things that you may not directly remember but help answer that question of, how does a baby survive this war? So maybe you can tell me what was told to you.

Mm-hmm.

And as I asked your husband-- you see that I try to find as much information as I can about pre-war life. And since you don't have direct memories of pre-war life, whether you can fill that in for us.

Well. I'll do my best.

OK.

I was an infant as the war broke out. And I was a good baby, I was told. [LAUGHS] So I was pretty quiet and well-behaved. But it was luck and perseverance from my parents. My father had Slovakian papers, which made him a Slovakian citizen. And so they were not threatened as much in the beginning. They were the later ones. And so we were able to survive that way.

When we were put in to Ghetto, we were the later ones, not in the beginning as the Jews were rounded up. And again, while we were in the ghetto, we were also the later ones that were being liquidated. And my father had word of that.

And with luck and perseverances, again, we were lucky. That's the only way you can describe those years. You were lucky.

Your father, how did he support the family beforehand?

He was a shoemaker.

OK.

We had an apartment where his shop was at also.

So you lived above the store.

No, there was no store. The shoemaking business was in the apartment.

Oh, OK.

Yeah. We were in a-- and I had just recently found out we had a large apartment with three bedrooms and so on. And so there was space for him to do his--

Workshop.

Yeah. And he had several employees, or people that work for him or with him. And so that's how it was. Was your family well off before the war, or comfortable, or poorly? How would you--

I don't think we were poor, but we weren't really well off. I mean, we lived OK.

OK.

And I wouldn't say that we were well off, no.

And how-- do you know why your father ended up in Krakow, having come from Slovakia?

I think it was the time when he married my mother.

Was it an arranged marriage or--

I'm sure it was.

OK.

I'm sure it was arranged.

OK. Now, you speak--

It was an orthodox family, so--

OK. And when you speak of having Slovakian or Slovak papers, documents as being something that kept the danger at bay at least temporarily--

Yeah.

--was that extended to your mother and your older siblings? Because she was born in Krakow. She is not from Slovakia.

No. But I guess as a family unit, it was protected under those papers.

So you as an infant, you're taken into the ghetto.

Yes.

And this would be the ghetto from Krakow.

Correct. I must have been about three at that time.

OK. And so if you're born in 1939, you only enter the ghetto in 1942?

I think so. I think it was '42 or maybe the end of '41.

OK, so not immediately.

Not immediately, no.

OK. And from what people told you later, how long do you stay in the ghetto?

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I think I was maybe a year and a half or thereabouts. And then when they started liquidating the ghetto, my father was, really, very responsible for getting a lot of people out.

Why and how?

Because of his papers, again, he had contacts, I believe. And he was able to smuggle some people out, including some very prominent people, like the Bobover rebbe And I think he's well-known in the Holocaust archives. And some of his family, including some cousins of ours.

Can you tell me about the rebbe, what his last name was?

Can I ask my husband what his name was?

Of course We can cut for a second.

[LAUGHS]

OK. Your daughter looked up on the internet-- as she says, Google is her friend-- and found out that the rebbe was named who?

Halberstein.

Halbertstein or Halberstam?

Halberstam.

Halberstam.

Oh, OK.

And you said he was the Bobover rebbe?

The Bobover rebbe. Tell me, what is the Bobover rebbe, for those of us who don't know.

It's an area of Poland where that particular sect of orthodox Judaism, that's where he came from, from Bobowa.

Oh, I see. OK. And so your father was helpful in getting him to escape or helping him escape from--

I don't know about him, per se, but the family. He helped a family across the border. And now that family's living in Israel.

I see. Now, was it because your father had Slovak documents? Or was it because your father had access to people who forged documents?

I don't think about forging. But-- he was pretty savvy and very clever. And he managed to get those people across. I don't know how. I really--

You don't know how. That's OK.

I don't know how.

That's OK. What was told to you later about those years in the ghetto, that you were with your parents and siblings in the ghetto? What did they tell you about life for them?

I'm really not sure. Those years in the ghetto, the couple of years in the ghetto is a total blank to me.

Of course they would be.

Yeah.

Because you were a child. I mean, you were an infant. You were a toddler.

I regret many times that I cannot remember those years, whether I was too young or what. But I truly regret that I don't have the memory of it.

Did your older siblings ever tell you stories about what was going on there?

My sister did not remember very much. Or she did not want to talk about it. But my brother, God bless him, he is amazing. He knows every detail of the Holocaust-- the survival, the ghetto, the homes, the streets we walked, and everything. He is just amazing.

And did he tell you about what your family went through, what your parents went through, what kind of experiences they had?

Not really. Because when we first came to America, very little of it was spoken of. And I was about 10 years old when we came to America. So none of it was spoken of. And I'm sorry it wasn't. But later on, I got bits and pieces of what my family went through, but not a full, full story.

What is it that you know? What are some of those bits and pieces?

I remember when we left-- not that I remember, but I recall being told the way we crossed the borders, the difficulty we had crossing the borders, and when my mother got sick, and how she survived all those times crossing the border, and I don't know.

I vaguely remember coming across some border guards. And I must have been four years old. And I remember telling them that my mother was Catholic, my father was Catholic, but I'm Jewish. [LAUGHS]

You told the border guards this?

I wanted to protect my parents. [LAUGHS]

Oh, my goodness. Oh, my goodness. And do you remember what those border guards, how they reacted to this?

Well, they must have had a chuckle because here we are. [LAUGHS]

OK. So this means that your family escaped from the ghetto.

Yes.

OK. Where did they escape to?

Well, we went through Czechoslovakia. And we wound up in Hungary in a town of Miskolc.

OK.

And we lived as gentiles.

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We had a house. We even had a cross on the wall. And so we lived as Christians.

And do you remember this house? And do you remember that cross?

I vaguely remember the cross. But I do remember when the bombing started that our house was the only one standing.

Really?

Really, yeah. Was Miskolc a large town?

I don't recall.

OK. And do you remember hearing bombs?

Yeah, we were in the basement of the house. We were all huddled together. I remember that, yeah.

OK. And this would have been in 1943 or '44, or when?

Well, what year would have been? '44, I believe, when the Russians-- we were also liberated by the Russians.

OK. So this is as the Russians are moving westwards and they're liberating Hungary from Nazi forces.

Correct.

This is at that time. That's when the bombing is happening.

Mm-hmm.

So to bring it back a little bit, when you escaped from the ghetto, did your parents ever tell you what year you had escaped from the ghetto, whether it was '43 or '44?

No.

No, OK.

My mother never spoke of it.

No?

Never, ever spoke of it. And so I know very little of the family, the past family, and her experiences, her fears, her anxiety. I never knew it.

OK. And your father, did he ever speak of this? Not till later on when people started talking and the stories were coming out.

What do you remember him telling you?

It's hard to tell. It's hard to tell.

You said earlier--

It all amazed me. I think my-- we-- a number of years ago, we attended the Holocaust reunion program here in Washington DC. I believe it was in the '80s. And I had gone to a seminar. And I found out then. I never realized it before, but I found then, attending the seminar, that we, as a family unit-- meaning my mother, and father, sister, and

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brother, and myself-- were very unique, extremely unique because we all survived, especially me being a baby, which you mentioned before.

So I held onto that forever. And it was a big lesson.

What do you put that down to? Besides luck, which you mentioned, what forces did you put that down to, that survival?

I think it was most of my father's doing.

You say he was a very clever person.

When it came to save his family, yeah.

Is that something of his personality that you knew of, that was part of him as you were growing up when the family was already safe? Or is that something that you know from stories?

As I knew him, being a young woman, in his later years, he was a gentle, sweet man-- soft-spoken, very gentle, very caring, loved his family. I don't know what he was like as a younger man. I was never told the stories of his younger years. But he must have been amazing.

OK. Because what you suggest is that he probably had a lot of street smarts--

It could be.

--and was savvy. And he was able to tell which way the wind might be blowing.

You're absolutely right.

He was savvy, he really was. He knew how to-- whatever it was.

OK. Let's go back to Miskolc. And you remember hearing the bombs fall? What happened after that? Were you liberated by the Russians soon afterwards?

Yeah, we came up. And it was all in rubbles. Yeah. And as I said, the Russians liberated us. Soon after that, my father was arrested by the Russians because he was selling bootleg whiskey. [LAUGHS]

This sweet, gentle man was selling bootleg whiskey.

He was sweet. Maybe he knew what he was doing because all the Russians got sick.

[LAUGHS] That is, they arrested him, but they drank the whiskey.

They drank whiskey. And so they knew where this liquor came from. So he was arrested.

I see. OK. And what happened? He must have been, at some point, released?

Well, I don't know how long he was in prison or jail. But he was out soon. Because that must have been '45. And there was also a time when we were still in the ghetto, if I may go back.

Absolutely, anywhere.

My father sent out my brother and sister, maybe at different times of each other. And he sent my sister to an orphanage. I'm not sure where. It might have been Hungary. And my brother as well, and they met up at that orphanage.

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I also had a cousin, Miriam, who was also sent there by my father, knowing well that he would never see them again. Yeah. But they couldn't stay in the ghetto. He had to get them out of the ghetto. I was too young.

When we got to Hungary, my father told somebody to go get those children. He was a guide. And luckily, we still had some money left over to drive a lot of people. And this guide went to the orphanage. And he took my sister, he took my brother, and my cousin. And he walked out with them very, very carefully.

Right after that, the Germans came into that orphanage and took all the children.

Oh, my goodness.

And so somehow, we met up with my brother, and sister, and my cousin. I don't know where, but we did. And yeah, that was absolutely amazing to me.

Did your brother have memories of that orphanage?

Oh, yeah. He remembers everything.

OK. And your sister, too?

My sister had a vague memory. I had none. And my brother had everything. [LAUGHS]

OK. Did you meet up with any of the other relatives from your family from Krakow? Did they survive?

We met up with another cousin from my mother's family. Her name is Selena, Selena Steiel. And she's now in Israel. She went on the first leg of the orphans when they all went to Israel. This was very early on, soon after the war. And she's been living in Israel all of these years. She's still alive.

OK. When you were liberated by Russians in Hungary, and after your father was released, did you stay in Miskolc, or did you move around?

Well, we stayed in Budapest.

OK.

We were in Budapest. And my father and brother went back to Krakow to see what was left of our belongings, our home, whatever, to see what was left. And one of the most typical things that was said to him was, I thought you were dead. And so he knew that there was nothing left there for us. And that's when--

OK, let's cut.

I'm sorry.

And they realized that there was nothing left for them in Krakow.

Yeah. That was in 1946, when the programs started in Europe, especially in Poland. I know someone-- I think some Jewish boy killed somebody. And a whole big pogrom started.

Or there was a rumor of that. I don't know what the truth was.

Yeah, right. And so at that time, it was even more dangerous in Poland than in earlier times. And so there was nothing there.

So they came back to Budapest?

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Yeah, they came back. And we applied for a visa. It took about three years for us to get papers. We had family here, but it took three years for them to process all that information. And from Budapest, we went to a DP camp. We didn't know where to go.

And we went to a DP camp-- PD--

DP camp.

D-- thank you. [LAUGHS]

It's OK.

A DP camp in Gabersee, Germany.

Gabersee, Germany.

Have you heard of that camp?

No, I haven't.

Oh.

OK. And do you have memories of that camp? Well, I was about-- when we got there, I was about seven, eight years old, nine years old. And I made friends. And I played as a child. And I don't know if I appreciated my freedom, or being able to run around, or-- yeah.

Well, kids aren't supposed to think about other thing. They're supposed to do those thing, you know?

Yeah. And I think that's what I did.

Do you-- was it from this DP camp that you came to the United States?

We came to the States in 1949.

OK. And were their relatives who had sponsored you?

Yes.

So you didn't-- did you go through a quota system or not?

You know, I don't know about that. There must have been a quota at that time. I know we didn't go through Ellis Island. We came directly to the Port of New York. And--

Did you go by ship?

Yeah, a marine ship.

Do you remember the name?

No.

Do you remember crossing the ocean?

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Oh, we were all sick. [LAUGHS] Yeah, I remember the crossing. And then when we started arriving into New York, I was in awe.

Really?

Oh, my goodness. I couldn't believe it.

Yeah.

It was amazing. It was like a dream.

What language did you speak at home with your parents?

Well, I spoke Polish and Yiddish.

OK. That's also when you were in Hungary, that's the language that you would speak with one another?

Yeah, but I never really learned Hungarian. I don't believe I did. But my brother did. He picked up everything wherever we were.

OK. Were your siblings ever sent to, let's say, a Catholic convent to hide or somewhere in the countryside? Or was it just this Hungarian orphanage?

Just that orphanage for a while because my father thought he would find them there. But he didn't think it a possibility, but he did.

So in other words, when he said goodbye to them from the ghetto, he was not thinking that he will see his children again.

Correct.

And it was it was by a huge-- or, let's say, a very slim margin-- that it actually happened.

Correct. Yeah.

So it would have been a huge miracle.

Absolutely, yeah. God must have been watching over us because-- one miracle after another.

Was your family religious as you were growing up?

Yes, very religious.

Where did you end up settling when you came to the States?

I'm sorry?

Where did you end up settling when you came--

In New York, Brooklyn.

OK. What part of Brooklyn?

Bensonhurst.

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OK.

You know of it?

Yes, of course, I do, Bensonhurst. And were you part, then, of a community, a new community of other survivors from Poland, or--

Oh, sure. My family-- my parents were. They were in touch with-- but it was mostly family gatherings. Yeah. But they knew people from their synagogue.

My father belonged to a little shtiebel. I heard my husband mention that to you. So there were a great many survivors.

What is a shtiebel, for those of us who don't know?

A shtiebel is a little house of worship where many Jews come. And they have a rebbe that is the leader of that group.

OK. And was this a shtiebel in Brooklyn? Or was this a shtiebel from back in Krakow that he was a member of?

No, this was a shtiebel in Brooklyn. But many-- most of them were European.

OK. And the talk around the dinner table in your home in Brooklyn, did it often reference the war?

No.

It didn't.

I regret that very much as I got older and had my own children because they were always interested in our history. And so growing up as a teenager, there was no talk about it.

Was there ever talk of relatives who didn't live anymore, relatives who had to--

If there was, it wasn't in front of me.

OK. And what do you put that down to? They didn't want me to know the horrors of life, I guess. If somebody would get sick-- very, very sick-- it was never told. It was like keeping bad things away from you.

OK. Did it work?

I have many regrets now. I don't think it works. I think you should be told.

Was it difficult for your parents to adjust to the United States or relatively easy?

It had to be. My mother had more comforts. But it had to be difficult. The language, number one, and keeping their faith-- which they did without any problem, of course. But just the difficulty of living the life that they had so many years ago, and the memories they must have had.

And your father, did he-- what kind of work did he find?

We arrived on a Saturday morning. And my father had a job on Monday.

That's amazing. That's amazing.

We came to America knowing that there were no handouts for us, that we had to take care of ourselves. And my father

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provided for us.

OK. What was his job?

Shoemaking.

So it was same?

He continued. He continued with his--

With making shoes.

Yeah.

So while that doesn't sound so unusual in Europe, here, it sounds very unusual that you would have a person making custom shoes, you know?

Well, I don't know. They must have been custom shoes. But when he started working as a shoemaker in the states, he did piecework, meaning that he worked on a certain part of a shoe, not a whole shoe.

Ah, OK.

There were different people working different-- like the sole or whatever.

What year is it that you came to the United States?

What year?

'49, 1949.

And you were then 10 years old.

10 years old.

Wow, what a first 10 years.

Yeah.

What a first 10 years it was.

Yeah.

When did-- did you know of the term Holocaust as you were growing up? Not really, not till later years when it became well-known-- or, let's say, when the Holocaust Museum first started to become active. Before it was built, there was a lot of publicity. And so people started talking, maybe even before then. So it was never brought up, or--

Did you ever feel like it was-- you were connected to it in any way?

I realized. As my years came up, as I was growing up, I realized that. I felt myself very unique in certain ways-- not happily, of course.

Yeah. Do you think it transmitted to you?

It would had to have some effect.

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But do you have a feeling-- do you have an idea of how?

I deeply, deeply regret that I don't have the memory that I would like to have about the Holocaust years.

For your family.

For my family.

OK. You'd like to know what they went through.

Yes. I can hear what my husband had said and what he went through. We're going to be married 60 years. And even though he told you his whole life story, he never fully came out with very much. So I accepted him as he was. And the same with my family. My--

You said he didn't--

Yeah.

--that you didn't hear their life story in that way.

Not really, not one-to-one, sitting across the table. No, my mother never spoke of it. My brother is very informative. He's really amazing. But it's not something we talk about every day. And-- well, maybe now I can ask him more questions.

Yeah. Has he ever had his story told?

Yes, to the Shoah Foundation.

OK.

I don't think he has one with the Holocaust Museum.

OK. But he has it there. That's the most [INAUDIBLE]

Yeah, with the Shoah Foundation.

OK.

Yeah.

When did questions first arise for you, when you had your own children or before then?

I think when I started having children, I was-- I became more alert to what had happened. And as they grew up, they were asking questions. They started asking questions. And again, my husband, in his old-fashioned way, would not talk about it. And I urged him for many years.

I couldn't because I didn't-- I wanted to remember on my own, not from what somebody told me. So I couldn't.

Yeah.

Yeah.

That sounds so frustrating.

It was very frustrating. I have to admit, he was very frustrating.

Oh, you're talking about your husband. [LAUGHS]

Yep.

I was thinking--

No, it's for my-- I have deep frustration, needless to say, yeah.

Can we cut the camera for just a second? OK. So your daughter just said that you had some experiences in a convent. Tell me about the circumstances. And what were those experiences?

Well, I was a baby. And I was placed in a convent for a short period of time. And--

This is after escaping the ghetto?

Yes.

OK.

And it was not a good experience. It was, really, a dreadful experience. I was sick, and they were, really, very mean. And I was sick. And I was throwing up, whatever I had. And they kept feeding it back to me.

Oh. Oh, how cruel.

Mm-hmm.

And you have memories of this?

Yeah. That, I have a memory of-- just bits and pieces of it, not a full thing. But I do remember that. Because I remember crying and-- yeah.

Was this convent in Poland or in Hungary?

I believe it was in Hungary. It wasn't in Poland. It must have been after we left the ghetto.

So it could be that somewhere along the way, your parents left you there for some safekeeping.

Mm-hmm. Correct, yeah.

And then was there an uncle who helped get some relatives back from someplace, an Uncle Arthur?

That's my brother.

Oh, that's your brother.

That's my brother, her uncle. [LAUGHS]

Her uncle, your daughter's uncle. OK. And what was his role about getting these relatives back? Oh, this was when we were still in Krakow.

That is, when you were still a baby.

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Yes.

All right.

This was in Krakow. And about 10 miles away from Krakow, there's a town of Wieliczka.

Wieliczka, OK.

And we had family there. And my father sent my brother to take out some of our cousins, to bring this cousin back, this cousin Miriam I've mentioned. And so he trekked 10 miles to Wieliczka and 10 miles back, bringing her to us.

And then the next day, or maybe a day or so later, my father sent him out again to bring a baby and somebody else back to Krakow. At that point, they were already gone.

Oh.

So Miriam survived because of my father, my brother. Yeah.

Wow. Wow. They're fragments, but they're very poignant fragments that you've got.

Yeah. That's a good way of putting it. I never thought about using that word. Yeah.

But they are. They're quite meaningful. Have you been back to Krakow?

Yes. We were back twice, as a matter of fact. The first time-- excuse me. The first time, we were in Russia for a while. And we were-- oh, we were in Belarus. And we took a trip to Krakow. And we spent a week there. It was amazing. It was absolutely amazing. And then we took the whole family with us about three years ago or four years ago.

When you say the first time, that was with your husband.

Just my husband, yeah.

OK. And since you don't have memories of Krakow, did you know where you lived? OK. Can we cut for a second.

Oh, I'm sorry.

So you weren't able to really recognize any place that you would have lived in or your family would have lived in.

We went to visit the house we lived in with-- the house where I was born. I was born in the apartment. But they would not let us in.

Oh.

And what it looks like now, it's lovely. And the area looked very, very nice. And the city of Krakow is beautiful.

Yes, it is.

And it was an experience going back, especially for my children, seeing the place where I was born. It was wonderful having them with me.

I can believe that. Is there anything else you'd like to add to what we've talked about right now?

Nothing specifically that I can think of. But I think you're wonderful with your questions.

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Oh, good. [LAUGHS]

And thank you for letting me speak my few words.

Oh, well, thank you. As I said with your husband, it's an honor, it really is.

Thank you so much.

OK. So I will say this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Barbara Firestone nee [? Bronislava ?] Spielman on February 7, 2019 in Silver Spring, Maryland.

[APPLAUSE]

[LAUGHS]

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