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Good afternoon and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson and I am the host of the museum's public program, First Person. This is our third season of First Person. Today's first person is Mrs. Helen Goldkind, who is seated in the front row and whom we shall meet shortly. First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who are sharing with us their firsthand accounts of their experiences associated with the Holocaust. Each First Person guest presently serves as a volunteer here in the museum.

Each Wednesday through August 28th, we will have a First Person guest at the museum's website, www.ushmm.org, that's www.ushmm.org. It provides a preview of upcoming First Person guests. This 2002 season of First Person is made possible through the generosity of the Helena Rubinstein Foundation, to whom we are grateful for making this year's program possible.

I'd like to introduce several individuals who are important to the First Person series-- Jill Greenstein, who is the director of survivor, volunteer, and intern services. Right here, Jill. Behind her, Warren Marcus from the education department, and then the others who greeted you-- Harold, and Dora, and many others who make this program possible throughout the weeks. I point them out not only because they're part of this program, but also if any of you have any comments, questions, thoughts, suggestions you'd like to share with us after the program, please, see any of us, and we'd be welcome to-- grateful to hear whatever it is you would like to share with us.

We will listen to Helen Goldkind as she shares her first-person account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 40 minutes. We will follow with an opportunity for you to ask Mrs. Goldkind some questions. Before you are introduced to her, I have a couple of requests of you. First, we'd like you to, if possible, stay in your seats throughout the program just to minimize any disruption for Mrs. Goldkind while she speaks. And second, should you have questions-- and we sure hope you do-- please make them as brief as you can. And I will repeat the question as best I can so that everyone hears it, including Mrs. Goldkind, before she responds.

I also want to let any of those among who may have passes for the 1:30 or 1:45 permanent exhibition, please know, they're good for the balance of the afternoon. So you won't miss the permanent exhibition if you stay with us until 2 o'clock.

Helen and her family of seven children, her parents, grandparents, uncles, and aunts lived in the small town of Volosianka, Czechoslovakia. In 1939, Hungary occupied the part of Czechoslovakia where Helen and her family lived. They lived under Hungarian rule until the German Army occupied Hungary and the lands that it had occupied in response to Hungary starting to negotiate an armistice with the Allies.

Life under the Hungarians was bad, but it turned even worse under the Nazis. Helen and her family were forced into a ghetto and then deported to concentration camps. She and other members of her family were sent to Auschwitz. Helen and her sisters were selected for slave labor, while several members of her family were immediately killed. From slave labor, Helen was moved to Bergen-Belsen, as the Germans retreated from advancing Allied armies. It was at Bergen-Belsen that Helen, who was barely alive, was liberated by the British in 1945. In 1946, Helen Goldkind came to the United States.

We'd like to show you a brief slideshow with images that will be important to our discussion today. Our first slide is of a map of Europe, Germany, and of course, to the lower southeast side of Germany, you see the country of Czechoslovakia. And this next dot shows where Volosianka is, the city that Helen was born in.

Here, we have a picture of a shoe store. Helen's father owned his own shoe store. And this was his business with his family prior to the war. This is a picture of damaged Torah scrolls. This is important to Helen's story because when the Hungarians closed the family's synagogue, her grandfather, fearing for the safety of the synagogue's Torah scroll, secretly brought it home.

In 1944, Germans occupied the family's town. Jews were ordered to wear the Jewish star, rounded up, and sent to the Uzhhorod ghetto. And this arrow shows you where Uzhhorod is. And that was at the time the capital city of Carpathia. We have here a map of the major Nazi camps throughout Europe. And this arrow points to Auschwitz, where Helen

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would end up. She and the others there with her were forced to do very heavy labor.

This is a file photo of forced labor. And Helen will talk about what she was forced to do during that time. Again, another map of the major Nazi camps with an arrow showing Bergen-Belsen, where we will also hear about Helen going to Bergen-Belsen. This is an aerial shot of Bergen-Belsen. And then finally, this is a picture from the files of people who were liberated from Bergen-Belsen. And again, this is something that Helen will speak a little bit more to us about today.

Helen is the mother of three children. Her husband passed away several years ago. Just yesterday, Helen attended Yom Hashoah celebration, or Day of Remembrance celebration, in the rotunda of the United States Capitol. We're about to learn a great deal more from Helen about her experience during the Holocaust. And with that, I'd like you to join me in welcoming our first person, Mrs. Helen Goldkind. Helen, will you please join us?

Helen, thank you for joining us and for your willingness to serve as our first person today. When Czechoslovakia was partitioned and then occupied by Hungary, you were living in the town of Volosianka. Your family had lived there for several generations. Perhaps we could begin today with you telling us about your life in Volosianka, your family, your community prior to the war.

OK. Well, when I was born and where I was born, we were Czechs. And I remember, I was very, very good because I was surrounded with family. And all the citizens would just do whatever they wanted to do. The reason why I want to bring this out because I also lived in a democracy first. And then as life progressed, I unfortunately encountered different things. So I had a happy childhood.

But it didn't last long because the Hungarians occupied Czechoslovakia in 1939. And in 1939, they allowed us to go to school. But we had to sit in the back. And the Jewish kids had to sit in the back. And the teachers really weren't calling on us. They closed our synagogues. So as you heard before, my grandfather was lucky to save one Torah scroll in one piece. I saw this one was a little bit torn.

Actually, what happened, the long run, we came home and we were telling our parents that we really are just going there. And we're being humiliated. We have to sit in the back. And our friends shied away from us. So my father decided that he would get a teacher, and we would be educated in the house. And that's exactly what happened. But as time progressed, most of the kids, the Jewish children came to our house. And our house became like a school. And my grandfather had this Torah scroll. So the people that did want to worship secretly. They went to his house. So this house became a house of worship. And our place became a school, actually.

Things weren't so bad because I was still with my parents. And you must understand, when a person is with their parents, they always feel protected. They tried their best. But we felt terrible because I remember, at one time-- I have to bring this out because I remember it so vividly-- I was a kid, and money wasn't that available to us.

And my uncle gave me some money to go and buy ice cream. And I ran to get ice cream. And when I got to the store, the ice cream was rationed at that time. Anyway, but when I came to the store, they told me, I can't even have ice cream because I was this Jewish kid walking in there. So it's a terrible feeling when you go into a store, and an adult tells you, you're a Jewish child. And you have the money, you can't get the ice cream.

Helen, that was while you were still under the Hungarians?

Under the Hungarian. And I'm here telling you, it wasn't so bad.

Compared to what was yet to come.

Right.

When you and I met, I was really struck by how beautiful the synagogue was to you. I mean, it was an important-- not just a place of worship, it was a place of beauty for you. Do you recall when it was closed and what that meant to the

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family, aside from your grandfather bringing the Torah scrolls home?

Well, in our synagogue, all the good things that happened-- people were getting married, there were parties, and holidays in the synagogues. So when you think of our synagogue, at least, you don't just think of worshipping there, but you also think of having a good time. And all this was closed for us when the Hungarians came in.

As we saw earlier in the slides, the photo of the shoe store, which is what your father had, it was under the Hungarians, though, that he lost his shoe business?

Well, the Czechs would allow everybody to have. It was a franchise. It was a factory. They manufactured shoes. And then they had stores all over Europe. And my father had one of those stores. And he really made a good living at it. I remember, we had everything that a child in Europe had. Of course, kids here have more things than we ever had. But then being that my father was a Jew, they took it away from him. And for a long time, really, we were lucky because my grandmother was living not far from us, I mean, real close. So she had a farm. We used to get milk, and cheese, and bread from her. And my father did different things to keep us going.

So once he lost the business, he tried to manage. But the fact that your grandmother had a small farm is really what kept you in food.

In a way.

Yeah. Just kind of an aside, but you also had an uncle who was very prominent in the Czech Army.

I wish I had the picture here because you would see that my uncle was a Czech officer. And to be a Czech officer, you had to be a college graduate. I think this is what I really want to bring out. Even though he was Jewish, he still-- he had this prestige in the Czech Army. Next time, if you remind me, I'm going to bring that.

Bring the photograph. Yeah, that would be terrific to have.

Yeah. The thing is that when the Hungarians came in-- so my uncle was very unhappy because he knew that life is different, what is there. So he ran away. I have to come back. Shall I tell the story about my uncle?

Sure, absolutely.

So he saw what was going on. Here, he's a free man. He is an officer. And the Hungarians closed the door for him. So he ran away to the Russian. When he went away to the Russians, he didn't have they called it a red book that he was a communist.

A red book.

A red book. He wasn't a communist. When he got to-- the Russians captured him. They sent him to the gulag. And then he survived.

Out in Siberia?

Yes, he survived. But it's just what happened to this uncle that you know him.

You lived under, of course, Hungarian rule for several years. And then finally, the Germans come in and occupy all the land that had been Czechoslovakia and Hungary, including, of course, Volosianka. At that time, you were an early teenager. Tell us what happened, you and your community, once Nazis came in, and things really changed.

Right. Well, when the Nazis came in, they didn't take much time. They immediately right rounded us up. And they took us to a ghetto in Uzhhorod. That's the capital city of Carpathia. When we got to this place, we really didn't know what they're going to do with us. They told us that we're going to be relocated because Germany at that time occupied most of

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Europe. So we figured, well, we'll just go to work there.

But they told us, we cannot take more than one suitcase. My grandfather felt, well, we have to take the Ten Commandments because how can you have a society without the Ten Commandments? And he did take it with him. And he had it there. And he was happy that he had the-- he was a religious man. And he has the Ten Commandments. He had something to hold on to.

But the ghetto wasn't so kind. I mean, the place wasn't so kind to him. He had a beard. And the Germans ordered all the people to get to a square. And my mother went with him. And the Germans-- it's just that I just want to bring out how sadistic everything was-- my grandfather was 86 years old. And they went and cut his beard. And I'm going to take a little bit of water. I'm sorry. They cut his beard. They beat him up.

He was 86 years of age.

He was 86 years of age. But he was like a healthy person. He was very tall. And finally, after they beat him up, my mother couldn't interfere because they probably would have killed them both. And she brought him home. And she washed him around from the blood. And we all cried around him. We sat on the floor and cried around him. And we tried talking to him. And he just wouldn't talk. He just wouldn't talk. And I think he was in shock.

And after a few days, he did talk to us. He probably heard what we were saying because we asked him. He's hurting everywhere. And he said, I know you all worried that I was in pain. But he says, no, I was so humiliated that I can't tell you. So I think the humiliation was worse for him than the pain itself. They knew what's waiting for my grandfather. I know they knew because they got us together to the ghetto. And they knew where we going to be going in a week or two. So finally, they got enough people together for a transport.

Helen, before you tell us about that, you've mentioned, of course, that you went to Uzhhorod to the ghetto. Describe the ghetto for us. What was the ghetto that you were in?

Well, the ghetto was a brick factory.

Right.

And it didn't have walls. It only had, I remember, a roof. And we were laying there on the floor. The children were crying because there was nothing to do for them. We were getting-- I remember, in the morning, there was coffee. And at night, there was soup. The worst thing about it was that we really didn't know how long they're going to stay there, what's going to happen to us. So it wasn't a good place. I mean, I could say it was a wonderful place.

Right. We have many different images of the ghetto. But in this case, it was where? As you say, a brick factory, just a brick factory without walls on the side. And they enclosed it so that you were all pressed into this one place.

Right. Because, you see, they wanted to get us to Auschwitz. Well, I'll tell them about Auschwitz. Then they took us to the station from the ghetto. And they gave us one bucket of water. And the cattle car was completely full with people. So after a while, the sick ones needed to sit down, lay down. And the healthy ones were getting sick. Kids were crying. It was really chaotic in this cattle car. But we had no choice. We had to be there. And then the water-- we didn't have any water left because we only had one bucket of water. Then people also needed it for other things. So it was a terrible sight.

Matter of fact, after a while, when we finally-- we get to Auschwitz. And we got to Auschwitz, it was daylight. And they didn't let us out from the cattle cars. They didn't open the doors. We were there. To tell you the truth, we couldn't wait, that fast enough, they should open up these cattle cars and let us out of the cattle cars so that we free a little bit from this bird that was in there. And some people were dead already. Sick ones died.

And but I need to take a minute time to describe what we were hoping to get out of this cattle car, that things are better. It came at night. And they had-- describing you what I saw in Auschwitz as soon as I got out of the cattle car, first of all,

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you had the floodlight on us. Then there were the SS with dogs and with hoses, rubber hoses. And they were screaming, raus, heraus. And everybody was trying to run out.

And then first off, the smell hit me. It was such a terrible odor that we kept on saying, now, what kind of place is this with such a bad odor? And there was a fire, like a big fire in the back. And then there was a big chimney with the fire coming out. We kept on asking, what is this? I remember, my sister went over to a man that worked there. These men that worked there were Jews. They were taking care of the luggage and all that. He says, you see this chimney? That's where you're going to get out. So we thought he was out of his mind. How do you get out of this chimney? It has fire in it. We should have suspected something.

But you didn't at all, did you?

We didn't because this has never happened before. I mean, we know history. I mean, it wasn't the best. But a situation like this never happened. So sometimes, when you have history, it repeats itself, so we already know it can happen. But this didn't. So then, of course, we came to Auschwitz. We were seven children. But two of my brothers went away to work camp. They took them away. They didn't come to Auschwitz.

So then I had a sister, my mother gave us always-- we had you take care of grandma, you take care of this, you take care. So I had one sister that was older than I, I was the sixth one down from the seventh, from the seven children. So one of my sisters-- my grandmother was already older. She was maybe 80-82 years old. So she was holding on to her. So she went to the left, a healthy, young girl. They could have gotten plenty work out of her.

But because she was holding on to your grandmother.

So my sister, they immediately let her go to the left. There was also Mengele. I wonder how many people heard about-- you heard about Mengele? Well, I saw him. So let me describe him to you. He wore black clothes, but he didn't wear a hat, a security hat with the dead head on the front. And he wore a black cape.

And he had a little-- it looked like somebody, a orchestra leader. He had the baton. So he just walked around. And he was telling, to the right, to the left, to the right, and to the left. So they took me, my sister, one of my sisters, and my mother. She looked fairly young. And they pushed us to the right. But I also had a little brother. He was six years younger than I am. And they ran and pulled him away from my mother. But I need to say something to get back.

So he was six or seven years of age.

He was. But I want to tell you the difficulties we had before I go. My little brother had a book with him, had a little book with him that he carried. Here, the United States, kids have lots of toys not. But in Europe, money was scarce. And I suppose 50 or 60 years ago, here, people didn't have that much either. So he had a special book that he loved. And my mother persuaded him to throw this book away because he wasn't allowed to have anything. So he didn't want to do it at one time. He says, he wants that book. He wants that book. So finally, she made him throw this book away. And he already cried.

My grandfather came down. I came down with a little suitcase. But my grandfather came down with his Torah scrolls. He says, we need something to hold on to so we're human. When you don't have a religion or whatever, you-- so of course, they wouldn't let him have the Torah scrolls.

And all of a sudden, we looked back. And we saw he was getting beaten up because he didn't want to throw the Torah scrolls into the ditch. So my mother ran to him. She begged them and she begged them to throw that Torah scrolls. Because he was an old man. He was getting beaten up. And it was a terrible sight. But he wouldn't let it go. So the last thing I remember, I swung for a bit of Torah scroll. And that was the end. I'm sorry.

You saw that. You were right there.

Anyway, I want to leave it at that now before I continue with my grandfather. And then, of course, we were selected, my

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mother, and my sister, and me. She had her little boy with her. And they pulled him away. So he already cried because he didn't have his book. So he kept on really screaming and running after my mother. And my mother heard him. So she was running. She was running to him so he doesn't get beaten up. And as she was running, they started beating on her because you couldn't make a commotion. Everything had to go quietly. So they beat her up. And they kicked her around.

And finally, finally, they let her go to the left with my brother. After the liberation, there were so many times that crossed my mind which he had not went to the left, being that she was lucky to be pushed to the right, would she have survived? But to tell you the truth, I don't know if she would have survived what we had to go through. And then I say to myself, at least my little brother went to his death in peace because he right away with the left side was gassed immediately.

Well, Helen, your whole family's there. And now, it's you and your sister.

Right.

You and your sister.

Me and my sister was left from this big, big family. Take another drink of water, excuse me.

Absolutely. I know it's just so hard to tell these unimaginably painful stories. And thank you for doing it. When you and I talked, you told me about so many things that were just beyond belief. And one of them was that soon, you saw that there were bodies hanging on the fences. If you can, tell us a little bit about that.

But first, they gave us showers. Will I have enough time for it?

Yes, of course. Being that we were to the right, they took us showers. But I just want to point something out how this was planned. As we were going to the showers, we heard also-- we had this horrible smell. And we also heard music playing. And then we saw flower beds. It was so confusing. And you always choose to think for the best.

And white picket fences too, right?

Sort of, yes. They got the whole situation. They're so confused. And a human being will always seek out the better part of it. You forget about the terrible human smell, the human bodies were burning. But you pick the flowers. So we got there to the showers, finally. They told us to get undressed. We were about 2,000 girls there. They told us to get undressed. And they shaved our heads. But it took some time until they shaved our heads. And then they gave us a one-size dress and wooden clogs.

Well, it was still dark. And they took us to a barrack. We got into the barrack. And they had these bunk beds, three. And at least, I couldn't sleep. My sister couldn't sleep. It was a tough night anyway. But we just couldn't sleep because we didn't know what's going on. And there was a crack. I'll never forget this crack. So I took a look out when it was--

A crack in the wall?

In that barrack.

The barrack, OK.

And I said to my sister, look what's going on here. So there were bodies hanging from these electric wires. I didn't know there were electric wires. So in the morning, when we went out to the Zahlappell, they were counting us because we didn't have a name anymore. And we saw, there were lots of bodies on these wires.

What happened was they left these bodies on that electric fence so that people shouldn't try to run away. They were telling you, don't run because you don't have a chance. And the smell that we had there is because when we got there, at

that time, they gas already 10,000 people in a day. And they didn't have the capacity in the crematoriums to burn up these bodies.

So they had this big pit. And the fire was burning the bodies. So this is what the smell was about. So anyway, we were there for some time. And only at night, they would take us to the outhouse. Nothing was happening during the day. In the morning, we got some coffee and a slice of bread. And at night, they gave us some soup. Sometimes, there was a potato. Most of the time, there wasn't a potato. They just called it a soup. And we were there for some time.

And then eventually, though, you got selected to then go and do slave labor.

Right. So what happened was they were still weeding us out while we were in Auschwitz, just in case if Mengele made a mistake, there was a thick one, a not so young. So after they have us already completely early, that they have the strong ones and the best ones, they took us to the railroad station. And when they took us to the railroad station, I said to my sister, there's a miracle going on because you're going through the same gate we came in. And they put us in these cattle cars again.

And took you out to the same gates that you came in.

The same gate. I shall never forget. That's why I said, look, we're getting out of here. Something has changed. I don't believe so much in miracles. But at that time, I thought that this was a miracle, they're letting us go through there. And we got there. And they put us in these cattle cars. And we're sitting there quietly, thank god, we're getting out of Auschwitz. Because they say, nobody gets out of Auschwitz.

And all of a sudden, we hear this bombs falling. The bombs were falling. What happened was the bombs were coming down near us. We still had some family left in the ghetto. We said, well, now they won't come to Auschwitz. They won't get gas. But after a while, the bombing stopped. And the train took off. And that's because we really didn't think we're going to survive. So if they would have bombed us, it would've done us a favor because then they couldn't gas 10,000 people in one day.

Tell us where the train took you, the work you had to then do.

Then the train got off. And we wound up in Germany in ammunition factory. They took us to our barracks. It was exactly the same. The barracks looked like in Auschwitz. But there was no barbed wire. But it was funny. When we got there, we were looking for the barbed wire. But there wasn't. But there was just a pole. It looked like if you hang someone. I think it was right near the gate. Don't try anything, we are going to get rid of you.

Like a gallows, right at the gate.

Like an gallows, yeah. Yeah, like a gallows. Right. Anyway, you used to look at it. But we figured, look, they can shoot us. They don't need to hang us. But anyway, when we got to the factory, to the munition factory, they assigned us to different places. And they assigned me to fill these bombs. Well, you see, I don't think any of you was in a place where they make bombs.

So let me describe. It was a yellow liquid. And it was very hot. They called it springstof. But I think they would call it here gunpowder. You just want to know, I just all want you to know that I know how it looks like. And you probably-- nobody knows how it looks like. A girl would bring these bombs. They were like that. And I would have to lift them up, put them on that machine. And they had two handles. And that liquid would go into the bomb. And then I had to lift that heavy thing up.

After you filled it with the powder--

With the liquid.

--liquid powder.

And put on another wagon, where somebody else came to pick that up. Well, it was very, very difficult because it was heavy. And I was already-- they didn't give us enough to eat. It was cold.

And you told me before that they were moving at a very fast clip on the rack. So you had to keep up with this. There was no way that I could say, OK, I'm going to take a little rest. It was no way. I don't know why they-- well, all the jobs were difficult, to tell you the truth. Anyway, we had a night shift and we had a day shift. So the night shift, they closed the doors and the windows. And the circulation was awful. So we got-- our eyes were yellow. And our hair, the little bit of hair-- at that time, we already had a little bit of hair-- it was reddish. And our bodies were completely yellow. And after a while, the girls started fainting.

Plus, you said, it actually burned you when that--

Absolutely. --would spill on your hands and your arms.

Yeah, yes. Because how can you avoid not being burned by it? Oh, yeah, I had blisters all over the place. Well, it wasn't blisters. They became sores. And after a while working there--

Just one other comment-- you'd mentioned the night shift, they closed the doors and the windows. You'd said to me, it was far better to be in the day shift because at least there was ventilation. And why did they shut everything down at night like that?

Because the bombs were coming. At that time, they were bombing Germany, I think.

So no light would get out.

No, no. So anyway, the women-- but you see, we had to work one night and one day shift. It wasn't that one group only worked during the day. Let's say if I worked during the day, the next week, I worked at night.

Weren't eight-hour shifts, either.

Oh, my god. No. No, forever.

Forever.

Forever. Anyway, they did let us go to the barracks at night. I don't know. It was dark when we left and it was dark when we were coming. I'm talking about after a while, believe me, after a while, I was so tired, and I was so hungry, and I was so everything, I couldn't-- imagine if you have to walk in these wooden shoes through snow. And they're falling off your feet. If somebody was lucky, if they found a piece of rope, they would tie these shoes to their feet so they don't fall off. Because they wouldn't even let you pick them up sometimes-- march, march, go, go, go.

And I said to my sister-- no, I didn't say anything to my sister. But I figured out, the girls that could no longer get up, they stayed there in these barracks. And by the time we came back, they weren't there anymore. They just weren't there anymore. I said to myself, I'm going to do this. You see, it's a matter of the mind too. I just gave up in my mind. My body was giving up. My mind was giving up. I said, it would be a good way to get rid of me.

So just stay in the barracks and not go out to the work.

Yeah. I had my sister there. But my sister noticed. Everybody got out. And she was looking for me. So she saw that I wasn't out there. So she came back. And she saw me on that bunk bed. She lifted me up and she shook me so hard, I don't know where she got the strength to shake me like that. And I thought she went mad. She got mad.

She says, you're not going to leave me here alone. And then we both sort of fell down. And we both cried. She was pulling me out. And she was trying to tell me that she's going to give me a piece of bread. She'll share the bread with me

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so that I can be stronger. I should survive. She was trying to brainwash me to make me feel to survive because once you give up, you find a way out. And she did. She was sharing the bread with me. Sometimes, she would get a [BACKGROUND NOISES]

But after a while, I was afraid to take it from her because I didn't want to be left alone either. So it was going back and forth, back and forth. And then sometimes, she would sneak away from her work and come to see if I didn't collapse at my work because she would help me out.

And finally, this munition factory did get bombed. And then they made us work to make a road. That was a little bit better, although we weren't that strong anymore. We were very thin and overworked. But it was better because at least we had fresh air. So we would march to go and make this road.

Didn't matter how hot or cold it was. At least you had fresh air.

At least we had fresh air, right.

And after going through all you've told us, we're going to send you now to Bergen-Belsen. Helen, if you don't mind, tell us about us about that.

OK. So one day, remember, we were always closed from the outside. We took a look and was already daylight. They would come and chase us out to the Zahlappell. Nobody's coming. We thought that they're going to throw a match to the barrack and we'll just go up in flames.

But at around noontime, some civilians came. And they opened the doors. And they told us, they no longer need us there. We don't have any more work, although the road wasn't finished, I remember. The road wasn't finished. And they took us away. And they said, they're going to take us to another camp. And they don't tell you the name of the camp. So we finally got to the camp. It came with a truck, like a pickup truck. For all the 2,000 girls we were there, I don't know.

Piled you onto trucks and took you.

It was a pickup truck. I don't know if there was maybe 500 girls left. I'm not sure. It wasn't that big. They got us to Bergen-Belsen. We didn't know about Bergen-Belsen. We didn't know what was going on there. And it's so hard for me to describe what I saw there because the people from this barrack weren't let out anymore. It wasn't a work camp. And it was like almost the end of the war.

And so people were in there-- some people were very sick because there were so many lice there. And of course, everything that needed to be done was done in that barrack. And some people were dead. They were never taken out. And some people were delirious.

And then all of a sudden, we were sort of yet half normal getting through. We were weak, and we were skinny, and you name it. But we more or less were-- we were like people. So they sticked us in this barrack. And after a while, being that these people had typhus and all kinds of diseases, my sister got infected. And I said to her-- then the English came in. The English came in--

Before you mention that, you said to me that you cannot imagine that hell is worse than Bergen-Belsen.

Well, I'm going to tell you something. If I ever go up there, and god want to send me to hell, I'll tell him I was there already. So he better not send me there anymore.

In fact, the photograph that we showed in a slide show, which is kind of an aerial view, Helen, give me your reaction to that.

Well, first of all, when they let us out, when the English came, there was so many bodies there that they weren't buried or they weren't put on a mountain to be burned, they were scattered all over the place. So I don't know how-- when they

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shot this picture, maybe before people were getting there, how clean it looked. You should find another picture. Because when I got--

Yeah, Helen did really react, said, that's not what it was like for me.

I mean, it's not what I saw there. Matter of fact, when my sister, my strong sister that had a will to live, she got sick before me. So after a few days, she didn't come back. I figured, I'll go look for her. And as I was walking to look for her, there was a mountain that looked like a mountain was moving. And I knew a mountain doesn't move. So I went a little closer. So when I got a little bit closer, I saw lice and insects. It was so heavy with it that it looked like the mountain was moving. But actually, the lice was running around. And the insects were running around. And that's why the mountain looked like it was moving. But then let's talk about Freddie because--

Yes, you have to--

Do I have enough?

No, you have to tell about Freddie. And this is--

Do I have enough time?

Please, yes. And this is after the British have liberated you at Bergen-Belsen.

Yes. As I'm running around, walking around to look for my sister, all of a sudden, the German, the German SS that remained in the camp, they were cleaning the corpses. I remember, a lot of them were hanging them on the shoulder. I saw it. They were carrying them on the shoulder and a lot of them. Maybe they didn't want to get dirty or something. But they had strings. And they were dragging them by their ankles.

Dragging the corpses?

Yes, because they don't want to get dirty. The corpses, sometimes, liquid would come out of them. So as I'm going to look for my sister, I took a look on the floor-- there are so many corpses around us, but I saw the Germans dragging this corpse by the ankles. And he looked like my cousin. And I screamed, Freddie, Freddie. And he opened his eyes. I don't know if the German got scared because he opened his eyes. The German thought that he was already dead. And then he left him. And he ran to pick up another corpse that was close by.

But I want to say this, I must have collapsed someplace not far from the situation or whatever. That was the last thing I remember happened. And they evidently picked me up. And they took me to a makeshift hospital. I don't remember where exactly they picked me up, how I got to the hospital, either. I just don't remember that. And after a while, when I already felt better-- I'm talking after a while, I had a high fever. And I already knew I'm OK. I was still sick, but my mind was working.

And I cried. I was so upset because here I came with my sister to Bergen-Belsen. And losing her there was, to me, the tragedy right at that moment. But these people saw how upset I was. I didn't want to eat, even though they were trying to feed us because I was so-- I was like a corpse with a heartbeat. They are trying to get me to survive.

And they right away got busy. They asked me what her name was. And I told them. They got busy to look for her. They thought, well, maybe they'll find her dead or alive. At least I would know where she's buried. So they looked around and looked around. And they found her. They found her. She survived. And after a few days, it took some time, and they brought her to be in my makeshift hospital.

And to kill time-- not to kill time, we were talking to each other. We were telling each other, how did you get here? When did you get here? I said, Silvie, you're not going to believe this. I saw a man was dragged by his ankles. And I screamed, Freddie, and he opened his eyes. She says to me, oh, you saw a lot of things. I mean, you must have been so sick, you think it was Freddie.

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She thought you were hallucinating or something?

Yes. She thought-- and I thought also, to tell you the truth, that I didn't. Well, after we got in this hospital and Freddie showed up. Freddie was alive. He was on the list as a live person. But then I talk about Sweden now.

We'll talk about Sweden. And then we'll get a few questions from the audience. But one way or the other, we have to talk about that.

I just want to tell you something. The reason why I really want to talk about Sweden is because you must understand, that these people that handled me, they really-- they looked like human, but for me, they looked like monsters. And then the Swedish Red Cross took in the very, very sick ones to Sweden.

And so I need to tell you that the Swedish people looked like people. And they were people. They were just-- they were people like I knew people from before. So I just want to say this. I see here a few young people. God told us, he didn't create us-- he created us and gave us a choice. You can pick evil or you can pick goodness. And what happened was the Swedes probably picked the goodness. And these people picked evil. And that's what I want to say is that the Swedish people now, if I see a Swedish person, I always think of him like the best kind.

Of course, I was quick to tell him that I've got Swedish heritage,

So he became special.

Well, Helen, of course, you and your sister did go to Sweden because you were in such horrible shape, and recuperated in 1946. You came to the United States. And of course, that is just a remarkable story from there in its own light, which we won't have time to talk about today. But we do have a little time for some questions from you. And I will repeat the question and Helen will answer. Yes, sir.

It's been a controversy, even today, whether we should've bombed Auschwitz. If we did bomb Auschwitz, [INAUDIBLE]. The naysayers say, well, then it would've tallied even more. It sounds to me like that would've been impossible, and we really should've bombed.

Definite.

The question was on the controversy of whether or not the Allies should have bombed Auschwitz and asked Helen what you think about that in light of your story.

You've got to understand, they were gassing 10,000 people a day. I mean, if they would have bombed Auschwitz, they would have saved tens of thousands of people, even as late as it was when we were there. So they made a big mistake for not bombing the tracks. I mean, we heard these bombs falling like they would fall near us. We were sure they bombed the track.

Even if some of you were killed, right?

That's OK. Absolutely. Let's say I would have gotten killed right there, as I was in-- but look how many cousins. You know, my mother had eight brothers and two sisters. And look at all these cousins. I mean, I can't stop telling you how many people they would have saved if they would have bombed. So Auschwitz would have been terrific. Just the railroad stations, so they being held up, they would have fixed the railroad tracks. But at least the gassing would have stopped a little bit for a few days. They definitely should have bombed Auschwitz. They definitely should have bombed Auschwitz.

Do we have another question? Yes, sir.

Were you aware of the progression of the war [INAUDIBLE]?

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The question is were you aware of the progression of the war and that when the end of it was coming, when the Allies began closing in, were you aware of what was going on in the war around you?

No. But one SS guy-- the SS wouldn't talk to us. We were just like cattle there. But one SS guy, he must have been someplace in an accident. So his face was shut up. When you looked at him, he was really scary-looking. But he was there, the SS taking care of us. He mentioned that the Americans crossed the channel. But to us, we didn't--

You didn't know what that meant.

Not at all. But it probably meant a lot to them because they didn't think that the Americans across the channel.

D-Day, right.

D-Day, yes. It didn't register with us. We thought, for us, it's too late anyway. We didn't have long plans from our lives.

OK, you, sir?

[INAUDIBLE]

The question is from what you've said, Helen, Bergen-Belsen sounds worse than Auschwitz, which is not what people think of. They think of Auschwitz as so awful. Would you explain why Bergen-Belsen was worse than Auschwitz in your point of view?

That was a very good question because people get-- you see, Auschwitz was a Vernichtungslager. I mean, whoever came there, unless the very strong ones, they took them to Germany to work. But the other ones were gassed. I mean, most of all, the kids never got a chance. You must understand, the people, they were taken right away to the gas chamber.

I just want to say this. I'm going to tell you, I had a young lady-- and I was talking to children because I always felt that I was like a child too, even though I was a little bit bigger. But I love to talk to children. And I was telling them about my little brother, how he loved this book, and how he was-- really, nothing terrible because I don't want to scare the little ones.

Matter of fact, after I was finished talking to them, for 10 minutes, a little boy came over to ask me if I ever got reunited with my little brother. He didn't know where my brother went. And I didn't want to let them in on it, either. So a lady was in the audience just like you are. And she walked over to me. She was told, the people, the adult people, they were told that if they have any questions, they could come and talk to me.

I was glad she walked over, and she says to me like this, you know, my father was an SS man. And he never said it was that bad. Well, you know, I had such a dilemma because I knew these people are walking out. And I have another group coming in. And I didn't want to talk in front of these kids. She had their two children, two little girls. They were beautiful.

I pulled her an aside because I didn't want her own children to hear that. So I said to her, well, did you-- I say to her, I was in Auschwitz. And these SS had their families there with their children. After they were done with their job, they ran home. I says, did you ever ask your father? And I says-- they went home. But do you know what their job was there in Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz?

And I pointed to her, yes, I says, the SS took children like yours to the gas chamber. And that was their job. Now, you figure out how good and how bad is. I don't know what her father did. I don't know if her father was-- where he was. But the SS were selected to do these dirty jobs.

She got a little emotional because I pointed my finger to her children. So she says to me, I'll never forget you. I says,

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please, as long as you never forget me, make sure, if you're going to see any child on earth, their life is going to be threatened, please, speak up. Because your father didn't. He helped the destructive machinery there.

Helen, I think we probably wrap it up now. I'd like to-- before I turn back to Helen, as I'm going to do, just to wrap up the program, I'd like to thank all of you for being here with us today for First Person, and to remind you that we do this each Wednesday until August 28. And therefore, we'll have a First Person next Wednesday, April 15, at 1:00 PM. And our guest next week will be Mrs. Erika Eckstut, who is also from Czechoslovakia and survived the Holocaust by posing as a Christian with false identity papers. So we urge you to come back. If you live in the area or if you're visiting, please come back any time between now and the 28th of August.

It is our tradition that our first person has the last word. And with that, I'd like to turn back to Helen to share with us any last thoughts she'd like to leave with us and perhaps to just say a bit about why, having been through all she described, that she volunteers here at the Holocaust Memorial Museum.

You gave me a good job.

You've done the good job here.

First of all, I really think that we need more tolerance. We shouldn't judge people. We should deal with people more, and get to know them, and then judge them. We also have a tendency of lumping people together. So I think just because he's Jewish or just because he's this color, or that color, or whatever he is, or a Protestant, we should just judge each other individually and be tolerant. I don't know what else I can say.

Thank you, Helen. Thank you for doing this.

Thank you too. Thanks for coming. And you know what makes me very happy? Can I say something to these kids? I'm glad that you kids are here because that makes me feel that you're going to make a better world. And you can have a better society because if you're going to see something's going on wrong that you think is wrong, speak up. I mean, just speak up, and tell whatever, whoever, you know what? I don't agree with you.

Goebbels, I saw some pictures of him. Well, he was the propaganda minister. He sold the world so many lies that if you think this is mad what this guy is saying, don't believe him. You know better. I wish you all good luck. And I want to thank you for coming, all of you.

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