

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, and today's "first person" is Mrs. Erika Eckstut, whom we shall meet shortly.

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who are sharing with us firsthand their own personal accounts of their experiences during the Holocaust and during World War II. Each First Person guest presently serves as a volunteer here at the museum. Each Wednesday, through August 28, we will present a new First Person program. The museum's website, [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)-- that's [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)-- 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 program possible.

I'd like to introduce several individuals who are here at the museum, and who have been instrumental in making this program a success. I saw Jill Greenstein back there who is the director of Survivor and Intern-- Volunteer and Intern Services. Wave again, Jill, so people see you.

You were greeted by Harold and Dora as you came in, and Jaime, back in the back row. And unfortunately-- Warren Marcus from the education department. And because of my eyesight, I'm having trouble seeing the back row. So I don't know who else is with us.

But I want you to know that these folks are important to this program. But I also mention them for another reason, and that is, if you should have any comments, suggestions, thoughts about this program that you'd like to share with any of us afterwards, please do not hesitate to do so. We welcome any comments that you have.

We will listen to Erika Eckstut as she shares her first person account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 40 minutes. We will follow that with an opportunity for you to ask Mrs. Eckstut some questions.

Before you are introduced to her, I have a couple of requests of you. First, if possible, please stay in your seats during the program. That will minimize any disruptions, especially while Mrs. Eckstut is speaking.

And secondly, please, if you have a question during our question and answer period-- and we surely hope you do-- please make your question as brief as possible. I will repeat the question so that everyone hears it before Mrs. Eckstut answers the question.

I'd also like to let those of you who may be holding passes for the permanent exhibition at either 1:30 or 1:45 know that they're good for the balance of the afternoon. So please don't fret out of fear that you might miss the permanent exhibition today.

Erika was just 13 years old when the Germans occupied Romania in 1941. After being forced into a ghetto by the Germans, Erika's family made the painful decision to save Erika and her sister by giving them false identities as Christians, and sending them out of the ghetto. From then, until the end of the war, the two sisters struggled to survive, and found themselves on the run to avoid being betrayed for being Jewish.

In 1960, Erika made it to the United States. Today, Erika lives here in the Washington, DD area with her husband, Donnie, who is with us in the front row.

While Erika was not able to resume her medical studies that she had begun in Prague, Czechoslovakia after the war, she started a career as a medical technician after arriving in the United States. Erika has a son and a daughter, five grandchildren, and, as a result of an explosion this past year in family members, they went from three to six great-grandchildren, with another on the way in this last year. Erika volunteers here at the museum's Donor and Membership desk, where you will find her on Thursdays.

Before we introduce Erika to you in person, we'd like to share with you a few photographs as part of our introduction.

Here we have Erika, who is the youngest of the two children, with her sister Beatrice and her parents Dolly and Ephram, a photograph that was taken between 1933 and 1934. And Erika is the younger of the two daughters. Her maiden name was Neuman-- Erika Neuman.

Our next shot is a picture or a map of Europe. And the arrow points to Czechoslovakia, where Erika was born, in Znojmo.

Our second arrow points to Romania, where the Neuman family moved in 1930. They moved to the city of Stanesti, where Erika's father became mayor.

Erika's father, Ephram Neuman poses, with the students of the Stanesti Hebrew School, which he founded. Erika, Beatrice, and Ephram are in the photograph. And you certainly can pick out her father at the top. But I also-- and Erika's sister, Beatrice, I believe, is directly below him. And then I'd like to point out Erika to you, if I could. And hard to see up close like this to the screen, but I believe we have Erika right there.

We have now a group photograph of Erika's parents and grandparents sitting in a garden. Seated from left to right, we have Erika's grandmother, Feige Pesie, in the middle, her great-grandmother, and to the right, her grandfather, Abraham Neuman. And then standing, from left to right, are Erika's uncle Max Neuman, who was living in the United States and had come back for a visit. Her mother Dolly Neuman and Ephram Neuman on the far right, of course.

This is the official identification card bearing a large yellow star issued by the county office of the Jews of Czernowitz to Erika Neuman, authorizing her to remain in Czernowitz rather than be deported. This is from 1942.

In this photograph, Erika reads a magazine while in the Czernowitz Ghetto, sometime between 1942 and 1943.

And here we have a wedding portrait of Erika Neuman and her first husband, Robert Kauder, on their wedding, August 28, 1945. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person guest, Erika Eckstut.

[APPLAUSE]

[INAUDIBLE]

Just give me your hand, I will--

I try. Should I try? It's-- oh, OK.

Thank you for joining us, Erika, and for your willingness to serve as our First Person guest. You were born in a small town in Czechoslovakia, and then your family moved to a small town in Romania when you were very young. In 1940, Romania was occupied by the Russians, and then, in 1941, when you were just 13, the Germans entered Romania, forever changing your family's life and your community's life.

Before we turn to those terrible years, perhaps you could tell us a little bit, Erika, about your family, yourself, your community before those awful years.

Well, first of all, I would like to greet you all. It's a pleasure to be here between you. And now I'm going to start my story.

We, like you heard, we left Czechoslovakia when I was very little. And I really don't remember much about Czechoslovakia at the time. I remember it later on, when I came back. But I don't remember when we left.

We went to Romania because my father was worried that Hitler came to power, and he was the only living son, the only relative, really close, as he was, to his parents, and he wanted to take his parents and go to Israel. He also was a big

Zionist, and he wanted to go to Palestine.

And so when we came-- when we came to Romania, my grandfather had a small farm. He had a horse, and a cow, and some chickens. And when my father explained to him that he wants to go to Palestine, he said, if I could take my horse, my cow, and the chickens, I may consider going. But otherwise, I am not going anywhere from my horse, and cows, and chickens.

And so we couldn't go anywhere. And my father became, like, the mayor of the town. He was, by profession, a lawyer, but he didn't open an office. But everything which had to be done there, he actually did.

And I had a very good life. My grandparents absolutely adored us. They didn't have any other grandchildren in Europe. They had some they never saw in America, but never in Europe.

And my sister was really a perfect-- a perfect lady. When she was born, I think she was born as a lady.

But you see, when I came around, I was not a lady. I just loved life too much, and I wasn't very quiet. And I just wasn't like my sister. I was more to do things.

And my grandfather loved that. He really did. He loved me, and he helped me so well in my-- and, well, whatever I wanted to do, he always helped me.

The other problem was with my grandfather. He always said, if somebody hits you once, you give back twice. But my father didn't agree with that. And so I would get a lot of lectures. My father would explain me how it's wrong and so on.

But my grandfather said, it's right. You have to give back. And so we had a little problem with that. And otherwise, I had, really, a great life.

Erika, you described yourself to me as a wild duck.

Yeah, that's what I was told. I was like a wild duck. I was. I really, when I think about it, how slow I am now, I have a new knee, and I can hardly walk, it's really the truth. I am not like I used to be. But I was like a wild duck.

And we lived a very nice life. I really and truly don't remember ever having any-- to say that we had anything happening between the people who lived with us. They were all very nice neighbors. And I can't remember anything at all that happened to me or to my sister. I don't remember that.

And so, when I was already old enough, I started school. I started regular school. And I started also Hebrew school, which my father started.

With the Hebrew school, it wasn't so easy for me. It was a lot of studying to do. And studying wasn't really my very strong subject either. I didn't care for it so much. So that wasn't so good.

But then my grandfather got me a pony, a little horse. And I used to ride around on that little horse all around. And I really had a good time.

And in 1940, the Russians occupied--

Erika, before you tell us about that, you had said to me once that the only shadow on your early years at all was your father, and his approach to having you learn to read.

That's-- yeah. I am very ashamed of it, but that's the truth. I finished the first grade, and my father was in his office. And our girl we had for us says to me, you know who is here from the school? The director of the school. And I was very worried.

And anyway, I wasn't to be had. But when it was dinnertime, you had to be home. There was no two ways about it. And so when it was after dinner, my father said to me, would you please bring your book from the school? We didn't have the second grade. We still had the first grade. And I brought my book.

My father opens. He says, read. I read it beautiful. No problem. He closed, opened the book. I read beautiful.

And then he got the idea, and he closed it, opened, and he put the hand where was a picture, and I was dead. I couldn't read a word.

[LAUGHTER]

And so he found out I couldn't read. And then I had to learn to read.

But I have learned to read. I like to read a lot now. But--

He was also-- it was really important to him that you could tell him the moral of any stories.

Yeah, that, really, that was also another thing. When we went to a movie or I had to read the book, ach, that was such a problem for me. But anyway, I finally finished the book. I thought, that's it, now.

My father would sit me down and say, now, what was the moral of the story? It took me an hour to figure out what was the moral of the story. I didn't know what was the moral of the story.

You went to a movie. What was the moral of the story? How should I know what was the moral of the story?

It was really very, very hard I never did that to my children, and I never--

[LAUGHTER]

I never bothered anybody with that. I didn't

But I had a few problems. But they were actually good problems. I never thought they were bad.

And now, in 1940, when the Russians came, all we had to do is learn Russian. And we went to school. By that time I didn't have a problem to learn the Russian language at all. And I actually went to a higher grade, and I did very, very well.

Before I did well, they left. And the problem was that the Germans came. But not to us.

When we were having dinner one night, a man came into our house. And they said, we have to go with them. And you see, my father was a veteran from the First World War, and he walked with a cane. He had, like, 80 operations on both of his legs, and he walked with a cane.

And the men were not very nice to him, and wouldn't really answer him very nice. They just shoved us, and we went with them.

We came to a meadow outside the town. When we got there, there were all the Jews standing there. There were 500 Jews in Stanesti, and they were all there.

In the middle of it stood our rabbi and his two sons. And there were men with guns. And the first thing they did is they shot the rabbi and his two sons.

And then they just took other men. They didn't take any women or children. They just took the men.

And I remember, I asked my father, why do I have to die? I really didn't live yet. And my father, who I always knew he was so smart and so kind. And he really didn't have an answer for me. All he said, he said, please don't cry. And I don't think I really cried out loud, but the tears just came down.

And we stood there until, all of a sudden, it was my uncle who they shot. But they didn't have any more ammunition, and they did not kill him. And so they just beat him to death. And they stood there.

And then they took us to the courtroom, to the courthouse, and they said we have to wait there until the morning.

So they had run out of ammunition.

Ammunition, yes.

So they stopped shooting for that reason.

He stopped shooting. He didn't have-- they didn't have with what.

And we stood there. The most men they took were the ones which were young. There were also two cousins, the sons from my mother's sister.

Anyway, they put us in their courtroom. And as we stood there, my father used to smoke. And he had a cigarette on him. He smoked.

And the guy said, I'll take you home. My father said, I'm not going anywhere without my family. He said, I'll take your whole family and your parents too.

And so we went home. When we came home, the whole house wasn't the same. My father had a beautiful library. All his books were in leather. It was really beautiful.

It was all over the floor. It was terrible. You couldn't believe that that could happen to a house.

And so my grandmother and I started to cry something terrible. I don't know why we started to cry, but we cried.

And then, in the morning, they came for my father. They didn't want any of us, or my grandfather. Just my father. And my sister wouldn't let him go by herself-- by himself.

And so it was-- a while went by, because they said, no, she said, she's going anyway. And finally they said, let her go, and they took her. And my father still kept talking to her, and telling her to go back.

And when she realized that they are going exactly where they were the day before, she didn't feel so good. And my father saw it. And she was almost ready to go home. And they said, no, now she's not going home.

But before they reach that place where they went, a man in a gray suit-- my father only knew; he did not remember his name-- came over. And he said, not him. He goes back. And he went back.

That same night, the chief of police came, and he helped us to get away from Stanesti and go to Czernowitz. See, Stanesti to Czernowitz was only 30 kilometers. It wasn't that far. But to go with my grandmother, who couldn't really walk-- my grandfather was fine-- my father, who couldn't really walk, it wasn't really very easy. And we all had a little bundle with us.

And all of a sudden, my mother said she's going to get some water, and we should wait and rest. And so we rested. And as we started to rest, my father just keeled over. And I got so scared. And I started to beat him, and I said, Daddy, Daddy, please talk to me. Talk to me.

And he did come to, and he did talk. He didn't really talk. He just made it. And my mother came, and we somehow made it to Czernowitz. And when we got there, there was a ghetto.

Erika, before you go to what happened when you got to the ghetto, that what you observed, especially on the first day when you went to the meadow, and so many people were killed, you were just 13 years of age. Sometime later, your father wrote a letter describing that. What did he say in that letter?

He wrote to his brother in the United States. He also sent him a letter with his handwriting. And he wrote about all the Jews who were killed, who were not, that. And then he also wrote about me, that I had told him that I really didn't want to die, that I am only 13 years old. And he really didn't have an answer for me.

And he described literally in his letter, I think you said, that he actually said they were slaughtered like dogs.

Yes. He said exactly that. He said. And he-- I actually gave the letter here at the museum. Yeah, I gave. Everything I had, I gave to the museum.

The man in the gray suit who interceded, did you ever learn who he was?

No, never. My father couldn't remember. My sister, of course, wouldn't. And my father couldn't remember who he was. He was only in a gray suit. That's all we knew. He was in a gray suit.

But you see, we never went back there, my sister and I. We never ever went back there. We went back to Czechoslovakia, but never there.

So now you've been forced to Czernowitz into the ghetto.

And now we came in the ghetto. There were a lot of people. Every ghetto, wherever you went, was different. Ours was full of police and soldiers.

But there it was not with-- encircled. It was a part of the town they gave for the ghetto. And that's where we were.

The problem was that there was no food. And we kids were very hungry too. But they had a better idea for us, that we are going to learn something. Between the Jews who were in the ghetto, there were professors. There were teachers. There were students from the university.

And parents who could also teach them something. Like, my father didn't go anywhere. He couldn't really. And so my father taught us history.

But he taught us, I remember well, not that I remember what he taught us, but about what he taught. It was the French Revolution, about Napoleon and Josephine, and St. Helena. I remember just a little. I didn't really pay too much attention.

And one time, my father asked me something, and I couldn't answer, because I never really paid attention to be able to answer anything. And so he took me aside, and he says, you really shamed me in front of the whole class. I said, I know.

He said, why don't you listen? I said, I am very hungry. He said, so are the rest of the kids. If you could stop thinking about food and just listen, then you could answer me too.

And I was a tomboy and all. But I absolutely adored my parents and my sister. And I knew that I heard him, and I knew I was wrong.

I did the next best thing. You saw my ID. The star, which you saw there, we had to wear that star on our coat. I took the star, and I took the little ID. It was little, not as big as you saw it here. And I left it under my mattress, and I walked out.

What I knew was--

Walked out of the ghetto.

Of the ghetto. Yeah, because nobody stopped me. You see, I had a good thing going for me. I was blond, blue-eyed, no problem. That's not like that. That [INAUDIBLE].

[LAUGHTER]

But I was blond. I really was blonde. And nobody stopped me.

And I walked to the store where they sold only for clergymen. And I went there, and I bought whatever I could. And when it came to pay, I gave the name. My father had a friend from-- when they grew up together, whatever. And he was in that town. And I knew his name. I don't know his name today, but I knew it then.

And I gave his name, and they gave me the food. And I left.

And he was a member of the clergy?

Oh, he was a member. He was a member in good standing of the clergy. But I knew his name, so I gave it. And it was fine.

And when I came home, nobody stopped me either. But I came with a package. Now I had food. I never took anything from the food. And I was so hungry, but somehow I didn't.

And I walked in, and they saw me. Everybody was happy to see me. My mother fainted. She didn't believe she'll ever see me again. And by the way, the adults never took anything from the food. They gave it all to us-- well, whatever already there was.

And my father took me aside, and he says, now, I want to tell you something. Don't you ever do that again. He said, but just in case you should think of going again, you are going to go to the priest, and you are going to tell him what you did.

Needless to tell you, I had the urge, and I had to go again. And I went again. And the first thing I did, I went to the father, and I told him what I did.

You see, he was a good man. So was also the policeman who helped us from Stanesti to Czernowitz. And my father used to say, in a bad time, you always have to look for something good.

And it was a terrible time, to go through the Holocaust. It really doesn't matter how you went through. If you were in a concentration camp, in the ghetto, you were running, you were hiding, it was terrible.

But in that terrible time there were also good people, good Christians who did everything they could for people like us.

And this priest was a very good man too. He says, you do whatever you can. You go as much as you want. Just be very careful, and don't get caught.

And so I took his word, and I went as often as I could. And I felt a little secure. That's what youth is. I didn't think anything could happen to me, after months went by, and I went back and forth. No problem.

Except one time when I went, I saw a German soldier on crutches. He stood on one. Here on his chest, he had more metals than I could count. And he was beating the man on the ground.

And I went. It was on the way to the store, not with the food. I had nothing in my arms.

And I said to him, how can you beat a man who doesn't defend himself? He says, it's nothing but a dirty Jew. I said, who cares? And I gave him a lecture. I remembered all the lectures. I never use the lectures on anybody, but now I have such a chance. And I just gave him a lecture. My father would give me so many of them.

[LAUGHTER]

And he listened to me very attentive. He didn't interrupt me. And then the one person, who I guess I didn't even realize how I dread it, I felt, when he said, come on, little girl, let's go home. And I looked. It was a policeman.

Now I did know that I could not possibly go home. There was no way. Because I knew that if I go home, it's not only that they'll take me and my family, but you never knew. For good-- for good, whatever, they took 10 more, 20 more. You never knew what will happen.

So if he realized that you were--

Oh, I--

--out of the ghetto without your--

Oh, I would not-- I could never go home. But I did know that whoever were Christian, they were living outside. Was no problem.

And I knew that there was an opera singer I never met who was living there in a very nice house. So I went there. I rang the bell, and out came a beautiful lady. And I just said, Mama.

And the policeman said, is that your daughter, Madame? She didn't pay attention to him. She just to me, and with a finger, I told you how many times, home and homework.

But the policeman said, is that your daughter, Madame? She didn't pay attention. Only to me. And her voice got louder. And he still is asking, is that your daughter?

So she did the next best thing, which was very little, and no problem. And she started to hit me right and left. And her--

[LAUGHTER]

Really, she had a beautiful voice, but her arm was like a hammer.

[LAUGHTER]

I really, I felt that any minute my head must fall down. It can't happen, anything else.

And so I really, like in a dream, I heard the policemen say, please stop it. Just keep her and stop hitting her. And so she did stop. He left, and she took me in.

And she says, are you from the ghetto? I said, yes. I don't remember. She said, I am sorry that I hit you.

But my sister and my friends asked me, did she give you anything to eat? I don't remember. I don't remember. My cheeks were red and burning. I couldn't remember nothing. I just went home, and I was happy I was home. I never went to get any food that day. I just went home.

When I came home, it was about the next day or a day after, we were taken to go to the concentration camp, because the ghetto was actually only a place where you stayed until they had room for you, and then they took you to concentration camp. And where they took you is to a place in the town which was big enough. And that was usually a place that they



did a lot of soccer, and whatever they played there.

And as we stood there, they told you, if you have any jewelry, you have to leave here. Because where you're going, you don't need anything. You'll find everything there.

And my father thought he saw somebody, and he started to wave. And the soldier just went over and started to hurt him. And my--

He hit your father when he waved?

Yeah, yeah. And my father fell. And that was all so fast. So I just went over to my father, and the soldier hurt me. I was on top of my father, and he hit me. And my father fainted. I was dead weight on him. And I fainted too.

And the next thing I remember, that I was back in the ghetto. You see, the cattle cars were all full, and they couldn't take all the people from the ghetto anyway. So we stayed that time.

And after that time--

You escaped deportation because they just ran out of room.

Yes. We escaped it, I think, mainly because my father fainted and I fainted, and they wouldn't carry us to the wagons. And they didn't have enough room for everybody anyway. So we didn't--

So back to the ghetto.

Back to the ghetto. Yeah.

And I remember in the ghetto that I thought that 10 men were on top of me. That wasn't true. It was about, my mother said, two men.

But they gave me a piece of rag or whatever in my mouth, I shouldn't scream. Because they-- my one shoulder was completely out, and they were trying to put it back. But I would have screamed. And so anyway, that was what happened in the ghetto.

And then from that point, that's when your parents decided it was time to get you out of there.

Yes, yes. Yeah. And then my mother must have gotten out, because my mother was also blond and blue eyed. And she must have gotten out in the evening or something. I don't know.

But my father one day had papers for my sister and me-- not for him or for her, or for my mother. Just for the two of us. And he was trying to tell us that he raised us we should be good human beings, we should be respectful to our elders and all.

And we have to be especially respectful to every religion we come across, since we are taking a religion which is not ours, and we hope to survive. And if we survive, when the time comes, we take back our-- but we respect every religion as much as we can.

And so we took off, and we went.

Just the two of you.

Just the two of us. And where we ended up was in Kyiv. Today is the Ukraine. When we came there, it was Russia.

And my sister was looking where we are going to stay. And she came to a room where-- it was funny. There was no

bathrooms in there. It was not an apartment like you see here. It was just a room.

And she said, I have one corner which you can have. He said, the other corner is taken in the front, is my daughters and us. So it wasn't a bed there or anything. It was just a corner.

He's renting out just a corner--

A corner, yeah. Yeah. So we took the corner. And the other lady on the other corner was also a Czech lady. She lost her husband. And she had two sons. And she was hoping that they joined the Czech army. Because in 1942-- and that was about '43, '44, because we left end of '43. So that was-- what was what she was there for.

We didn't get her name. We called her "the old lady." She was about 34 or 35 years old. Now I think she was young, but then I thought she was very old.

You were still just a teenager.

Yeah, but for us she was an old lady.

And so we lived there. When the time allowed, we used to go, and we used to pick up potatoes. And I remember, I didn't really like raw potatoes.

And my sister would say, but this is an apple. I said, but it doesn't taste like an apple. She says, you're not eating it right. You have to chew it, and you'll find it. I could never find an apple in the potato. But anyway, I ate it anyway, because I didn't have anything else.

My sister went right away to work, and I went to school. And I went to work too.

And then, I don't know if we were there three weeks or how long. I don't remember. And the lady said she needs both corners. So the old lady and us were out.

We couldn't find the place in Kyiv, so we went in the suburbs. It was Katerynivka. And there we found the lady who was actually also a Czech, but she was from the First World War there. She married a Russian. And he wasn't alive. And I guess I don't even know if she had or didn't have children.

But she was alone. And she had a barrel of sauerkraut, and she shared it with us, which was very, very good. It wasn't enough, but it was very good.

And I made a friend in school, a Russian girl who was not far from where I lived, she lived. And I would always go to her. I would never invite her to my house. I never, ever talked about who the ladies are, if they are-- if it's my sister or what. I never said anything.

You see, my sister was very blond. I was blond too, but I had a color. It was a little reddish in it. It was really very nice color.

My sister was blond like an albino, just blond. So blond. It was really ridiculously blonde.

And so the girl would ask me always, would you like to go to Khreshchatyk. There is where the girls would go. You can meet some boys.

And you see, in this time, I was already 14, 15. I thought it was a great idea. But I knew that my sister would never let me go anywhere. So I would say, when I come home, I have so many chores they give me to do, that I really don't have the time.

And then, in 1944, on Christmas Day, I went to her house. And she said to me, you don't have to worry anymore. You'll

be able to go with me anywhere. He says, because right after the holidays, they are going to come and pick the ladies up. We're staying with you-- especially the German spy who is with you. It was my sister.

And I didn't--

She just thought she was somebody who was [CROSS TALK].

Oh, absolutely. She thought she was a German spy. That's all.

And I didn't say anything. I just took it the way she gave it to me. I stayed there like I always did, the same amount of time. And when the time came that I went home, I went home. And I told the old lady and my sister what happened. She says, we have to run right now. And so we ran.

And we ran towards the forest, because Katerynivka was really not far from the forest. And as we ran, all of a sudden, we heard the immense voice ask, what is the word-- password. What is the password? And the lady says, three women running. And at that moment--

It was a guess, right.

Yeah, the guy took out a flashlight and put it on us. And when he saw who it was, he almost fainted, and so did the old lady. It was her son. The one was her son.

She wasn't even sure they'd been in the army. She just hoped they got into the--

She hoped that he got in the army. Just the one son, not the other. Just the one.

And it was a wonderful and a terrible reunion when we met. And we said that we have to get out of Russia. And he went and asked the officers if he could take us along. And he came back, and he said, no, we can't go, because that's against the law. You can't take-- it were a tank only. You can't take your woman in the tank and go fighting. It doesn't work.

So we stayed there, and stayed. And then the son came back, and he said, I will take your mother, and two soldiers will take-- each one will take a girl. And so that's how we left. And they also told us that they will let us out before it gets light enough, so nobody should see us, especially not the officers.

And he made up with his mother that when we get out, we will run straight forwards. And the first house we come across, we'll go in, and we'll stay there until he will come for us. So that's what we did. We ran, and we--

You were in tanks?

We were in tanks.

They took you in tanks.

In tanks. And the last tank who came was my sister. I was afraid her tank is not coming. Another-- I was worried.

But anyway, we got out, and we ran straight forwards, like you said. And we came to a house, and there was a lady. And the lady asked her if she could stay there. She said, she is with two daughters here, and her husband is going come to pick her up.

We didn't look like her daughters. It was pitch dark, and we were both blond. But anyway, we could have looked like father. You never knew.

And so, when we came in, she said I have a room upstairs, and you can go there and rest. So we went up the stairs. We came in.

And before I even took my coat off, my sister says, we have to run. The old lady says, what do you mean we have to run? She says, we are not running anywhere, she said. I can't run anymore. You can run, but I can't.

And so she didn't even pay attention to her. She just said-- she opened the window. She says, I'll go. And if you put her out the window, and then you jump.

And so I asked her to the window. She didn't want to go. And I pushed her slightly, and I threw her out. And I looked out, and my sister stood there with her hands out.

She was half her size, but she broke her fall. She didn't really fall, because she fell in her arms.

And this was from a couple of stories high.

Yeah, I think it was, like, two stories. And then I jumped, but she didn't hold the arm out for me. [LAUGHTER] That was not in her book.

So after that, we still were looking and we couldn't find her son. And we found, from military, they gave us a ride. Once we were just holding on the lady, who was sitting, and my sister and I. It was just terrible.

Anyway, we made it, finally, to Czechoslovakia. And the first town in Slovakia was in-- now I forgot the first town. What was the name? Was Humenná was the second one. And I forgot the first one.

The first town you came to--

The first town I came in Slovakia.

And when we came there, there was a brigade from-- a Czech brigade. So they were very happy to see us, and we were very happy to see them. And then they took the old lady right away in the army.

My sister could have gone too. She was old enough. But I wasn't old enough. And my sister wouldn't leave me.

So we stayed there. And the soldiers used to come where we stayed with the peasant. And they used to look at us.

Once only came an officer in, a beautiful, really, officer, and he took one look at my sister, and he says, you are so beautiful, he says. I'm going to marry you. And you'll never have to worry about food anymore. And I'm going to take your sister too.

And my sister says, I really don't know you. I can't cook, and I don't want to get married.

So he left. We never saw. We didn't see him. And then the officers told us that they are leaving too. And so they left too the next day or so.

And I had it in my mouth. I said, you want mine? She says, no, no. It's fine.

These were charms.

Charms like this, but not so big. It was very little.

Very [CROSS TALK]

Yeah, in my mouth.

This whole time.

The whole time. And I couldn't get-- if I took it out, it was gone. Because you see, we had our experience. We had a bundle when we started out when we came.

And once we came on a train, and my sister said, I can't trust you. I'll put it on my head, and I will sleep on it. I said, OK. So I gave her mine and hers, and she had it under her head.

She woke up in the morning, and there was no-- nothing left. So we didn't have any more anything. So we never took that out of our mouth.

And so that same night, the peasant we stayed with, he took us to the next town. And it was Humenná was the next town we went to in Slovakia. And there he took us to a place, and he said, here is a young lady. You go and tell her you can do something. Maybe she will keep you.

And so we went. She came out. And she had a little baby on her arm. I don't know how old the baby was. Maybe 14 month, 15. I don't know.

And she said she could use somebody, because she has to go to the village, to her mother or grandmother. And she has only a few noodles for her son. And when she comes back, she'll bring us food, if somebody would wash the floor and take care of the baby.

And so we did that. We took care of the baby. And Beatrice didn't want to take care of the baby. She says, you take care of the baby. I will wash the floor.

And so she did. And I was cooking the noodles wrong because I didn't wait until the water boiled. I just let it go like that. I put it in the water. I didn't mix it. And when I thought it should be ready, it was a whole clump. And I couldn't put that in the baby's mouth.

So I took it, I chewed it, and I spit it in the baby's mouth. And I was very busy chewing and spitting.

And in that, I heard guns going.

While you're doing that--

While I am doing that, I hear guns. And I opened the door with a baby in my arms. And here are three Russian officers standing with their guns pointed at my sister. My sister was pale right next to her. And he said, I'm going to shoot that spy.

I said, she's not a spy. She didn't even talk. She was so scared. And I said to her in a different language, I said, would you please disappear? And she did.

And they said, where is she? I said, don't worry. She didn't go anywhere. She doesn't have anything. I'll tell you where she is. Just let her go.

And they were still standing with these guns. I says, you can put the guns away. She's a Jewish girl. She's married to a Czech officer. And he doesn't know that she's crazy, but I do. So I always give her something to do, and then she doesn't know who we were.

He said, she didn't even know that we're her brothers. I says, I know, because she's crazy.

And so I was making the story as best as I could. And all of a sudden, I see that there is a Czech soldier is there. What is a Czech soldier doing here?

And what happened was that in that town where we were before, there were 16 Jews there, and they were all killed that

night when we left. And the officers--

And this was under the Russian occupation.

No, it was already they were going forward.

The Russians had already come through.

Yeah, they were going forward. And that what happened.

And the guy, they asked, what happened to the girls? He said they are there where we were. And so he came. He came to see we are there.

So I didn't know what went on with him. I didn't know all that. So I said, they found out that Beatrice is crazy. He didn't know what I was talking about, but I told him that anyway, just so he knows what was going on here.

And he started to-- I guess he liked the story, was being crazy. And he made it even better. And finally, they left.

And after they left, my sister desperately was looking for the officer who wanted to marry her. [LAUGHTER] And unfortunately, he was fighting. I mean, he was going forwards, and she couldn't find him.

In the meantime, it was already February. It was March. Finally, she found him. And the last day in March, they got married.

The last day of day March [CROSS TALK].

Yeah, not on April 1, but on the last day in March they got married.

Erika, when-- this is the end of March 1945. For you, when did the war end?

You see, it ended in a way when we went over with the army. We were with the army when the army went forward, because for us, the war ended on May 9, 1945. That's when the war really ended legally.

But we were, in the meantime, going forward.

Yet you stayed in peril and danger during that time.

Yeah, we stayed. We stayed. When we were with him, we were also in danger.

Matter of fact, once I went on a-- I own a motorcycle. And I almost killed myself on that too. When my brother-in-law came back, and his officers asked him, so how are the girls, he said one is beautiful. The other one is not worth mentioning. That was me.

[LAUGHTER]

So.

Erika, we probably should turn to our audience to ask if they have a few questions. But one thing I would like you to mention before we turn to the audience, tell us about being reunited with your parents.

That I don't think I can really tell what it meant. We didn't know where our parents are, and then we found out. And our husbands went to get them.

And we used to live on a hill. And the house had a flat. On top was the terrace. And we stayed on the terrace. And when

we saw the car coming, I jumped down like crazy. And I was, that time, really very fast. And my sister went like a lady, very closely behind me. She wasn't even close when I already had my father in my arms.

And I remember my mother then den Stock and den Stock, the cane. My father didn't take the cane. Before you knew what happened, he was in my arms.

And it was the nicest time we could possibly imagine, what when we saw it. Because that's what made us very, very unhappy.

And then we had, with my father, a problem. My father realized that we are not talking-- by the way we talked at home in German because my mother was from Vienna. And we talked always German. And we didn't talk to my mother in German. My mother talked German, and we talked Czech. My mother didn't speak very well Czech.

But anyway, we didn't talk to her. And my father sat us down, and he said, I heard you don't talk to Mother. I said, what do you mean, we don't talk? We love Mother. Of course, we talk to Mother. But you don't talk German.

I says, do you want me to talk German. And he said, absolutely. I said, I will not talk German.

He said, if you hate, he said, then Hitler won the war, because how can you, from all the people who suffered so much for being Jewish, and you don't speak German because of the Germans? He says, you don't have to love them, but you can't hate them either.

And my father talked and talked. And when I didn't understand very well, my father said, if you don't understand, then you are not better than they are. And that really hurt. And I just got up and went out.

And my mother says to me, are you going to go back and apologize? I said, no. It took me about five minutes before I went back and I apologized to my father. And it took me a while before I understood what he wanted. And thank god that I did understand what he wanted.

And I learned that I didn't hate anybody. I still don't. I never hated anybody and I never will. And that was the nicest thing my father left me, because he died right after.

[APPLAUSE]

Erika, let's turn to our audience now. We have time for just a few questions. But let's get a few questions, if we can. Anybody have a question they would like to ask Erika? Don't be bashful. Yes, ma'am. Right here in the front.

The man you married, [INAUDIBLE].

The question is, the man you married, is this the man that you had talked about marrying during the war-- right after the war?

No, my late husband-- you saw the picture when I got married. That's my second husband. I lost my husband in 1957. And then it took me three years to get here. And in 1963, I married my husband. He's an American, and he's a wonderful man.

[APPLAUSE]

Yes, sir.

After you went on to Kyiv, what happened to your parents?

The question is-- oop, excuse me, Erika, just for a moment. After you went on to Kyiv with your sister, what happened to your parents then?

We left them there. And I assume that eventually they took out the ghetto or whatever. Because you see, we never talked about how we survived. We never told our parents what we-- how we survived. They never asked us, and we never told them. We never talked to anybody about it. We wanted to be like everybody else.

And s matter of fact, I started to talk about it in 1988, when I met a friend here who is a teacher. And she actually got me to talk-- the first time in the Children's Museum. And I remember, I didn't talk much, but I cried a lot. And then I just do better every time.

Erika, you had-- I'm going to take the prerogative of bringing up one thing, if I can, for just a moment. You talked about your father and the importance of his asking you the moral of the story. Tell us what you did with that later, about 101 Dalmatians.

Yeah, that was-- really I forgot about the 101-- 101 Dalmatians.

I really and truly can't remember the moment what I did with them. What was it?

You encountered some people, as I recall, the Children's Museum--

Yes.

--and raised these--

Yes.

--decided to teach them the moral of the story.

Yes. Yes. Yes, I remember. I did that. And I got so many compliments about it. And I got calls from all over.

I was at the Children's Museum, and when I was talking about my father, and about telling him the moral of the story of all. So I was talking. And there were 30 little children there. And I was talking to them. God bless you. And I wanted to give them an example.

And I said, you remember the 101 Dalmatians? And then I asked them, what is the moral of the story?

They groaned.

They really didn't like what I asked. And then I said, they were saved. And I said, do you know how they were saved? And they really didn't. And I told them. I said, let's go together, and we'll find out how they were saved.

I said there was a mama dog and a papa dog. And there were little puppies. And then I said, somebody was a mean lady who wanted to kill all the Dalmatians, because she wanted a coat.

I said, what happened? I said, everybody ran to help mama dog and papa dog. There were big dogs and small dogs. Everybody ran to help mama dog and papa dog.

And what happened? I said, they were all safe. I said, you see, when my mother and father ran, and he wanted to save my sister and me, nobody ran with him. And that's why we couldn't have been saved any other way than we were. And they understood.

Sure.

Is her sister and her husband still alive?



The question is, is your sister and her husband still alive?

My sister is alive. My brother-in-law was 15 years older than my sister. And he passed away, unfortunately. He was a wonderful man. And my sister loved him with all her heart.

We are just about out of time, and so we're going to wrap up. And I want to, before I turn back to Erika, say just a couple of things. Erika, first of all, "wild duck" just seems, I think, to everybody here, so fitting in light of-- in light of what you've shared with us today.

Erika described herself to me as a professional survivor. And what she meant by that is not only did she survive Hitler and the Nazis, but she was in Czechoslovakia, and fell under the Russian domination of Czechoslovakia for many years. More recently, she has survived cancer and a stroke. And that's just what I know about--

What Erika could share with us about her post-war years, under the domination of the Russians and Czechoslovakia, getting to the United States, a remarkable story about Khrushchev, and I believe, if I remember correctly, being the first person to be legally allowed out of Czechoslovakia to come to the United States. So thank you for just this just glimpse into all that you have to share with us.

Before I turn back to Erika, I'd like to remind everybody that we do First Person every Wednesday at 1 o'clock until 28th of August. I'd like to invite you to return next week and every week that you can until then.

Our first person next week will be Mrs. Ruth Greifer, who is from Germany, and spent the war in hiding in the Netherlands. So please join us if you can, or any other Wednesday.

It's our tradition that the "first person" has the last word. And with that-- and with that, I'd like to turn back to Erika for a closing thought for us, including, perhaps, Erika, just a word about after all you've been through, and all those memories, what brings you to volunteer your time and self here at the museum?

That was about the best thing which ever happened to me. And I will never forget it, my friend, who made me come here.

You see, you saw the picture of the Hebrew school. I don't have anybody from there. I really don't have any friends [SOB] from my youth.

And when I come here, I see a lot of kids. And I always think, this one looks like that one. This one looks like that one. It gives me a big joy to see, and then, really, when I can come and talk.

But the main reason that I come to the Holocaust Museum is that I, no matter how bad I feel, I love to come here. It just gives me such a pleasure to come here. I feel like I am with my friends.

It's a childish way, but that's the way I feel, and the reason I like, I'm here.

Thank you. Thank you everybody very much.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you very-- thank you very much. Thank you. Thanks.

[APPLAUSE]