

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, The First Person. This is our third season of the First Person program. And today's First Person guest, whom you shall meet in a few moments, is Mrs. Elizabeth Strassburger, who is in our front row right here.

The First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust, who are sharing with us their firsthand accounts of their own experience during the Holocaust and during World War II. Each First Person guest currently serves as a volunteer here in the museum. And each Wednesday, until August 28, we will have a new First Person program.

The museum's website at www.ushmm.org-- that's www.ushmm.org provides a list of those who will be "The First Person" guests each week until the 28th of August. 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 season possible.

I'd like to introduce several individuals who are very important to this program's success each and every week. Some of them greeted you as you came through the front door. Laura Yochelson, if you could raise your hand. Phyllis Conyers, Andrea Lewis, Martin Goldman, who's Director of Survivor Affairs, John Minek, Director of the Speaker's Bureau-- John is right here-- and Betsy Anthony from Survivor Affairs as well.

I introduce these folks not just to introduce them, but also to suggest that if you have any comments or suggestions about this program, or any other matter for that matter, please feel free to talk with any of these folks or me after the program. We would welcome anything that you have to say.

We will listen to Elizabeth Strassburger as she shares her "First Person" account of her time during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 40 minutes. We will follow that with an opportunity for you to ask Ms. Strassburger some questions. Before you are introduced to her, I have two requests of you. First, if possible, please stay seated in your seats during hour program. That way, we minimize any disruptions with people having to get up and move over each other.

And second, please make your questions brief if you have one during our question and answer period. And we hope that you do. Make it brief. And I will repeat the question before Liz answers it. That way we ensure that everybody, including Liz, has the opportunity to hear your question.

I also would like those of you who are holding passes for the 1:30 or 1:45, for the permanent exhibition, we'd like you to know that they're good for the rest of the afternoon. So if you sit tight till 2:00, you won't miss anything. And with that, I would like to welcome "The First Person" guest Liz Strassburger.

As you will hear today, Liz and her mother were able to survive the Holocaust in Poland by hiding with a family under false identities as Christians until they were liberated by the Russians in 1945. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with the introduction of Liz Strassburger.

Our first slide is a photo of Liz as a young child that was taken while Liz was in the Tarnów ghetto, something that we will hear about in a short while. Our next photograph is a map of Europe, of course, and more specifically, Poland, with the arrow pointing to the community of Iwonicz, which is the hometown of Ms. Strassburger. It's a resort town in southwestern Poland noted for its healing waters.

When German troops invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, Liz's father was drafted into the Polish army. Our next photo that we have here is a photo of an identity card issued to Liz's father, Dr. Edmund Lusthaus, by the Polish army. 17 days after the German invasion, the Soviet army attacked from the East, following the terms of the Nazi-Soviet pact, and Edmund was captured. Our next photo is of Edmund when he was in Siberia as a prisoner in the gulag.

In 1941, Liz and her mother went to the Tarnów ghetto. Our arrow here points to the map of Poland, and points to the location of Tarnów. Liz's mother, Helena Lusthaus, in our next picture, holds Liz, who's age three, just before they were forced into the Tarnów ghetto. And then finally, the last picture in this sequence

is of Liz playing with a ball while she was in the Tarnów ghetto.

Realizing the danger they faced, Liz's mother purchased Aryan papers for Liz and herself and escaped to Milanówek, a town near Warsaw. There, they lived with a Polish family. Liz was given the name Barbara Stachura and raised as a Catholic. This report card issued to Barbara Stachura states that she successfully completed first grade. And for all of us in this room who can't read Polish, it doesn't just say she completed first grade. It said that she did it in the most excellent way.

After the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto in April of 1943, German authorities intensified their efforts to find Jews in the surrounding area who were in hiding. Fearing they would be discovered, Liz's mother sometimes kept Liz from school or hid her in the basement. In January 1945, Soviet troops liberated Milanówek. In May-- and I think our arrow needs to point to the path that Liz and her mother took when they escaped from the Russian-- the area that was controlled by the Russians.

In May, Liz's mother bribed a Russian soldier, who smuggled them in shipping crates across the border to Czechoslovakia. And then from Czechoslovakia, they went to Austria. And then, finally, into Germany, before being fully liberated and ready for their new lives that will follow in both England and the United States in 1951. With that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our "First Person" guests, Liz Strassburger.

[APPLAUSE]

Liz, before we have our discussion today about your experience, I'd like to just say a few more words about you, if I might. And that is to let you know that, as I mentioned, Liz moved to the United States in 1951, at the age of 13. She later would enjoy a very successful career as a psychiatric social worker, working with emotionally disturbed children in Montgomery County, Maryland, which is adjacent to Washington, DC.

Today, Liz serves as a volunteer at the museum, translating important historical documents that are written in Polish. Liz and her husband live here in the Washington area. They have two children a daughter, who is a physician, and a son, who is an artist. They have two grandchildren, one of whom just celebrated his first birthday.

I'm pleased to let that Liz's husband John-- John, you might wave your hand-- is here with us today. And I believe that your daughter, Terri, is with us as well.

No.

No, she's not, OK.

My sister-in-law, Zelda, and she's very flattered. Aren't you?

Zelda-- we're glad you're here, Zelda. And so with that, again, thank you for welcoming Liz Strassburger. And Liz, thank you for being our "First Person" guest.

And I'd like to acknowledge my dear friend, Janet. We've been friends for 30 years. And I'd like to acknowledge some of the survivors that I see. I see Erica, Nesse, Esther. And I think you've all had the pleasure of doing this. No, Esther hasn't, OK.

Nesse was the "First Person" guest just this past week, as a matter of fact. Liz, you were born in Poland, and you were living your parents in the small town of Iwonicz-Zdroj, when the Germans invaded Poland in September 1939. You were a very young child at that time, about 15 months. What I'd like you to do, if you don't mind, is perhaps tell us what you know about your community, about your family, and your family's life at that time, before the Germans actually arrived.

My parents somehow knew each other. I think all the Jews in the same area knew each other. And we were living in a specific area on the West by Southwest Poland. My father was a physician. And my mother was 12 years older than he. And apparently, she had been engaged to someone else. But then when she met my father as an adult, she decided that was the man for her.

So they were married in 1936. And I was born in 1938. And I was born in Krakow, because there wasn't a Jewish midwife in Iwonicz. And my father, being a physician, felt that we needed a Jewish midwife. And then as soon as I was two or three days old, or whatever, I went back to Iwonicz.

And there, we had a big, beautiful house. We had servants. My mother didn't work. We had grandparents who were very loving. And my parents-- my mother used to tell me that it was the most wonderful time of her life.

In fact, you had described it to me at another time as an idyllic life.

Exactly, exactly. My mother would have liked to have had a son first. And, unfortunately, I came. But later in life, she told me that she wouldn't have been able to save a boy child. Because he would have been circumcised, and they would have killed him immediately.

In 1939, as you said, on September 1st, the Germans came from the west. And 16 or 17 days later, the Russians came from the east. And Poland was squished, and my father disappeared. He had been visiting his parents, who lived in the Russian sector of Poland. And we had-- no, excuse me-- who lived in the German sector. We had lived in the Russian sector. And when he tried to get back to us, he couldn't, and he was taken to Siberia.

He'd actually been conscripted.

He had been conscripted in the army because he was a physician.

A physicians, so they--

He had to go.

And so once he was conscripted, that's when he decided to go-- say goodbye to his parents.

Yes, exactly, exactly. And my mother, when he didn't show up, then my mother wrote letters and sent pictures. And there was-- everything came back. So I would assume that my grandparents were gone. So my mother decided--

Did your mother know that he had been taken--

I think somehow she must have found out.

She must have known that he'd been taken.

There was sort of an underground kind of a message.

So it's just and your mom.

Just my mother and I, that's right. And she decided that-- she was 28 years old. And she had a small child. And she, for all intents and purposes, didn't have a husband. So she went to where every young girl goes, her mother. And my grandmother lived in Tarnów, which was east. And we lived with her approximately for two years.

In March of '41, Tarnów ghetto came into being.

I have a question for you, before you start talking about the Tarnów ghetto, Liz. So for the better part of two years, though, you were living with your grandmother.

Yes.

How did your family make ends meet during that time?

My grandmother was very, very wealthy.

What I remember most were the carpets, which were very, very thick, because I would play on them. And she sold things, and she got food.

So really selling off possessions was the way to do it. I know that you also had a grandfather who was living in the Netherlands.

Yes.

He helped play a role too.

Yes, well my grandmother and my grandfather had been divorced. And my grandfather had gone to the Netherlands, and remarried, and had another daughter. And my grandmother also remarried. And I would assume that my step-grandfather was there, but I don't remember him. I remember my grandmother, but I don't remember very much from that time.

And when we went to the ghetto, we took all of the-- you were told to bring your possessions, and you brought what you could. And in the ghetto, they didn't check what you had. And you just sold it off to people, or gave it to people, and people gave you stuff.

What do you know-- again, recognizing that you were very young, what do you know about the ghetto? Was it a small area?

Well, I was a little kid, so everything was large.

That's true.

I remember that-- probably one of my real definite memories was in 1942, when they took my grandmother. And I remember when I was a child, my mother went to work. She worked for the Germans outside of the camp. And they would line up in rows. And then they would march out of the camp. And they would-- she worked in the tailor shop. And then after-- they would come back. They would line up in rows, and they would come back to the ghetto.

This probably doesn't need saying, but you said she worked for the Germans. What she-- a slave laborer.

She was slave labor, of course-- of course.

I'm not sure everybody realizes the extent of how the population--

There was no money.

That's right.

There was no money.

That's right.

There was a small kind of a building. And I don't know how to-- like a pergola, or a gazebo, or whatever. And it was a small hut, and it had benches. And I had been told that if I ever got scared or if I ever was upset about something that I was to go into this little building and hide under the little-- whatever those things were-- benches, I guess, but they were stone.

And my grandmother was out there with me. And suddenly, the Germans came. And she said to me, hide. And so I ran and I hid. I remember that very clearly. And I remember my grandmother-- and I always

thought she was a very big woman, but here she was dwarfed by these two huge-- huge soldiers, with these hats on. And they took her away. And that was the last I saw of her.

And then, of course, my mother couldn't find me.

I have a question for you, Liz.

Yes.

When you say they took your grandmother away--

This was the second Aktion in that particular ghetto.

An Aktion is German for an action.

Yeah, it just means that a law has been passed that we're going to exterminate 15,000 Jews. And take some from here and some from here.

So they swept into the ghetto, and--

Right, and they just took whoever. In Western Europe, they had books, and they had all kinds of documents that showed. Because when I first came to volunteer in this hospital-- in this hospital-- in this museum, I looked up my grandfather, and he wasn't in the book.

Because all the places, like Holland, and Denmark, and so on, they all had yahrzeit books, which are memorial books. And it showed my step-grandfather, my grandfather's second wife, her name, her date of birth, and where she lived, and her daughter, my mother's sister. And they had gone to Sobibor. And Sobibor was a killing camp. So hopefully, they died quickly.

Where was your grandmother?

My mother was taken to-- my grandmother was taken to Belzec, which was a camp-- an extermination camp, which came into being in November of '41. And approximately 600,000 Jews died and some gypsies-- mainly Jews.

It was a killing camp.

It was a killing camp. And it was on the border of the Ukraine.

Sole purpose was just to exterminate people.

Whole purpose was just extermination, yeah. Then towards the end, when they were closing it down, 60,000 more Jews were killed. And what's interesting about Belzec is that people that lived around were told that there were valuables that were buried. And so they would go at night, and they would dig up the earth. And what they were digging up was dead bodies and bones. And eventually, they put people around to make sure that these were not disturbed.

So many of us grow up only really knowing about a few places, like say, Auschwitz. But Sobibor, you've mentioned, Belzec--

Right.

--other places that--

Majdanek.

Majdanek, places that many of us have never heard of, that were just extraordinarily awful places in every

way imaginable. And your grandmother was part of a group of 3,500 that were taken on that very same day.

Yes.

At that point, that's when your mother really took action, isn't it?

Yeah, my mother at that point had friends-- she had lived with my grandmother in Tarnów before she was married. And she decided that she was going to buy Christian papers. And she found papers. And whether she bought them or whether they were given to her by friends--

But all black market--

Yes.

--arrangements.

Of course. My name was Barbara. And I was a year older than I actually was. So that was kind of tricky.

On your papers?

My papers, I was supposed to be a year older. And we went to this town called Milanówek. And Milanówek is just outside of Warsaw, a very small village. And it's famous for its silk making. And it's still famous for its silk making.

And in 1990, when my husband and I went back to Poland, and we drove there, and we found the house. And I said, that's not the house. It looked very, very small. Because I remember this huge house. And he said, but it's the address. And I just wasn't convinced. But I'll tell you more about that later.

Anyway, I lived there for approximately-- from '42 till '45, for about three years. And part of the time I went to school with the Sisters of Saint Ursula-- the great Ursulans, a very strict order. And if sister said, get down on your face, that's what you did. You can say why or do I have to? You just did whatever the sister said. I was a good little kid.

And you were being raised really as a Catholic.

Absolutely. I went to church every Sunday. My mother had knee trouble every Sunday. But I didn't realize that for some reason, that was-- And at times, we lived upstairs with the family. And at times, I was in the basement. My mother had been a pharmacist. She still had some drugs. And I was sedated so I wouldn't cry.

Other times, she would put me to bed upstairs, and she would put a schmatta around my neck. And she would put carbolic acid around. And the Germans would come, and they'd say, krank. And she would say, krank, which means sick. And they would sniff and they would leave.

Tell us about the carbolic acid. What was the point of that?

It's a smell that they used in-- it's something that they used in hospitals.

So it has a hospital smell hospital smell.

A hospital smell. And they never asked what I was crank with, but I was, I looked very sick. And I-- I really didn't like to be in bed with a thing around my neck, and I really didn't like the smell, so I looked sick.

But these were the things your mother had to do.

Yes, exactly.

You also told me about incidents where you were outside, and you would actually be covered with mud,

deliberately.

Yes.

Tell us about that.

I found about that later, when we went to visit Wisia, who is the daughter of the woman that hid me. And she told us that it was her job-- and she was nine years older than I-- to take care of me. And when she took me outside, and we all played with other children, because I was dark with Semitic features and dark eyes, that the Germans would notice that I was different.

But if I was mud covered, then I looked maybe like a blonde. Now I'm a blonde. It wouldn't have mattered anymore. But I was covered with mud. And she knew I was Jewish, and I did not, obviously.

Right.

You don't say to a four-year-old child, now we're going to pretend that you're Christian. I was Christian. I went to church. I believed in everything they said. I went to mass. I learned the Latin part of the mass. I was very devoted, very devout.

Who knew the truth, beside your mother?

My mother, and Mrs. Bandyrowa, who was the lady who owned the house, and her two daughters, Wisia and Hanka. And when I called Wisia, because I was being interviewed for Shoah, and I wanted to say something about Wisia's father, and I said, forgive me, but I can't remember him. And she said, well, of course not. He was in a German prison. But he came back towards the end. What was interesting is--

Oh, her father was in the German prison.

Right. What was interesting was that when we were asked by the Germans, where is-- where's your husband, sometimes they would ask me, where is your father? And I would say, he's in Siberia.

That was something they could understand.

Yeah. And once they thought, well, if he's in Siberia, then obviously he's pro us, because the Russians took him. Because the Russians and the Germans had split up, and the Russians decided to go with the Allies and not be with the Germans.

Do you know if the parish priest or any of the nuns, did they know?

No, absolutely not.

They did not. So as far as they knew, you were just another little Catholic kid.

And, of course, in Poland, everybody was moving from place to place.

Right.

The houses were being bombed. Their families were killed. So you went where you could to find a home. And that's what we did. And we grew vegetables, and we ate that. And we had-- someone else had cows, and they would bring us milk. And they would take some of our vegetables. And people baked bread. You did what you could. It was occupation.

At one point I think you told me, later in life, you found some writings that your mother had done during that time.

Yes.

Tell us a little bit about that.

Well, I never knew I was in a ghetto.

Until you read that?

Until I read my mother's-- my mother's things.

Really?

And when I was donating all the pictures, and everything, and all the documents that I found. I had no idea all of this had happened to me. I sometimes get a glimpse of what it was, but some of these things, I really didn't remember. Anyway, the Germans were there.

And we heard-- when the ghetto, the Warsaw ghetto-- we heard about the uprising. We heard when-- we could see the flames. That, I remember. We saw bombs that fell.

Years afterwards, I bit my nails. And whenever a plane came over, I would crouch or try to get to under things when I was little. It was tough. It was tough.

The family that you were in hiding with, do you do you have any knowledge how your mother actually hooked up with this family? How did she find them?

My mother had a friend who had a friend who knew them. And when we were in Poland, and we asked Wisia, how could your mother do this? Because it was such a terrible risk.

Oh, a tremendous risk.

And in fact, we learned that there was another family on the same street, sheltering Jews. And they were found out and shot. So this woman took an incredible risk. And no amount of money or no amount of anything is-- she already had a husband in prison. And she was raising two daughters. So it was an incredible thing that she did.

And because of this, we sent packages to her for years. And then when she died, and then we decided that they'd have to manage on their own. And then now, we send money. And when people go there from the museum, we send money.

And it's not even that big of a sum, but it's an incredible amount to her. Because how do you pay someone for saving your life? And people said, oh, put them on the wall in Yad Vashem. And I think that would be very nice, but I think they need the money. And I think they use the money.

The house was more than just a place that you were hiding too, wasn't it?

Yes.

Tell us about that.

The house was one of the centers for the Polish underground. And they had little eagles on the Windows. And if they turned one way, one color, it was OK to come. And the Polish colors are red and white. And I can't remember which-- what the red was. I guess red was danger and white was OK, I would assume. And people would come and go in this house.

Based on the eagles.

Based on the eagles.

Based on the eagles.

And there was a cupboard with a false back that led into a room. And one time, we had two women that came. They were at the train station, ready to be sent somewhere. And somehow, they escaped. And they came here. And the underground didn't know that we were Jews either, because they wouldn't have liked that at all. They would have been very upset about it.

So this family, and Wisia's mother, really--

And there were a lot of people that were there. The place was partitioned into rooms. And there were a lot of people living there, a lot of people.

And you said, you've been back there. You've been to the house.

Right. And didn't go into the house.

You did not go into the house?

No, we just stopped at the gate, because I was fully convinced it wasn't the house. And Wisia said, yes, that's the house, would you like a picture? And I said no, but subsequently I changed my mind. And she sent us some pictures of her mother at the time. And they've been donated to the museum with a picture of the mother on the balcony of the home.

Weren't you at some point-- you and your mother were robbed at gunpoint.

Yes, well we weren't--

What do you know about that?

We were in a house that was being robbed. And we had to lie down on the floor. And they had these big, huge, huge dogs. And I had been bitten by a dog at one point, so I was very scared. Because these dogs were patrolling. And I was five or six.

And I was lying on the floor. And I had to go to the bathroom. And they escorted me to the bathroom. And the dog stood outside the door. And then we had to report this to the police.

And so we reported that-- where the robbery had taken place, but when they asked us where we lived, I gave them a false address. So I guess I was--

Alert enough to do that.

Alert enough that I didn't want them to go to the house. My was amazed. And I named a different street. And my mother said to me later, that's a vacant feel that was bombed. And I said, I know. I walked there to go to school, and I thought it would be a good place. I was aware of--

Very much so.

Very aware, and you'll see that with people in crises, when there's a war, that people seem to have a second sight and kind of a different feeling.

And at some point-- I'm not sure where, but at some point you were actually spending a little bit of time hiding in a convent.

Yes, but that was-- what happened was the Russians came in, I think, January '45. And they liberated us. So we could all go out, and things were good in that respect. But then they decided this was such a nice house, they would make it their headquarters. So they were there all the time.

This house with secret compartments?

Yeah.

And lots of rooms.

Lots of rooms.

They took it over.

They took it over. And my mother decided that she was exchanging really one prison for another, and we'd have to leave. So she-- oh, and the milk woman came. And she came with these big canisters of milk. And once you came into the house, you couldn't leave. And she had a family to take care of. So she tied a whole bunch of sheets together and lowered herself through the bathroom window.

And this is when the Russians were in charge?

Yes, but, of course, then we didn't get any milk because she wasn't going to come and see us.

A movie could be made about the house.

Exactly.

Really, very interesting.

And I told Wisia, and she couldn't quite remember it. But she thought, well maybe, whatever.

So your mother basically concludes that it's one prison for another, as you said. So she--

So we're going to leave.

Time to leave.

So the first thing she did was she went to the Krakow area, which is where her family had been, in that general area, and couldn't find anybody at all. And by this time, Wisia's father had been released from prison. So he drove her there. And she looked around, then she came back, and there was nobody there.

And she said to me, we're going to leave, and I need to tell you something. I need to tell you that you're not Catholic, you're Jewish.

And how old were you at that point?

That's seven.

Seven.

1945, so I was seven-- give or take-- seven.

So she's telling you for the-- as far as you're concerned--

Telling me the first time that--

--the first time.

--I'm Jewish. And I'm looking at her and saying, I can't be. I'm not like those ugly people, have stars. I believe in Jesus. I believe in this. I'm not Jewish. I refuse to be Jewish. I'm Catholic. I don't want to hear it. And she says, I'm sorry. This was the only way I could save your life. You are Jewish. And I thought, I'm

going to go talk to the priest.

So I ran off to the church. And I said, Father, I have a terrible thing that just happened to me, and I need your help. And he said, my child, there's nothing that God can't help you with, et cetera, et cetera. And I said, I'm Jewish. Will I still go to Heaven? And he said, no, get out of here.

And that was really my first time that I heard prejudice. Because I had never been exposed to it, that I remembered. Yes, I was in a ghetto, but everybody else was-- in the ghetto was Jewish.

And so my mother-- we went towards the border. And she had to arrange for transportation and whatnot. So she left me in a convent. And she said, now we're going to pretend that you're Catholic again. And I said, fine. And one of the questions was--

You're practiced at it at this point.

And people always ask, how come you did what your mother said? Because kids in those days did. If your mother said you are Jewish, you were Jewish. If your mother said, you're Catholic, you were Catholic. It didn't matter. Whatever my mother wanted was fine. Because I was one of the few children that didn't have a father.

And other kids had fathers, kids I went to school with and some of the other people. I didn't have a father. And people had brothers and sisters. I didn't have-- all I had was my mother. And I didn't want to lose my mother. And if being whatever she wanted me to be was it, that was fine. That was fine, no problem.

I was there for about three days, maybe four days. And then she came. And she said, now we're going to get into these crates. And they were crates of china. So there was straw, and then I was in there. And then more straw, and then a partition, and then China. And we went across the border into Czechoslovakia.

And you do remember that, don't you.

I remember that because it tickled my nose. And I was given medication.

And you're seven years of age.

I'm seven years of age. I'm in a box with the china. And this is what my mother wants, fine. But I remember the tickling and the smell of the straw. And we got out on the other side. And they gave us some bread. And there were potato fields. We ate in the fields. We ate potatoes. I'm looking at my friend, Erica, who comes from-- well, Czech Republic now.

And we went to Austria. And we went to the Rothschild's hospital, which was the first DP camp I was in. And everybody was Jewish. And none of them had horns. None of them had stars. They all talked different languages, but somehow they connected. And they were kids. And we had baths. And we ate.

And all the women and children slept in one room. And all the men slept in another room. And we were there for, I think, six weeks, more or less. And then we were sent to another camp, to a camp in Germany. And I think it was in Funk Caserne. And it was near Munich or München. And we were there for a period of time.

And it was a camp for malnourished children. Anybody that had malnourished children could stay there. And after that, we went to another camp. And it was in Ansbach. And there, there were orphans, Jewish orphans. And we were all going to Israel. And my mother worked as a pharmacist. And I tried to learn Hebrew and couldn't. But I remember that as a very happy experience. That was fun.

Surrounded by all these children.

Surround by children.

With similar circumstances.

Yeah, and I felt lucky. Because some of them had no parents at all, and I at least had a mother. And my mother said, well, we don't have any family, but we'll go to Israel. And everybody there is Jewish. And there, we'll be happy and whatnot. And then a medical commission came through the camp. And my mother recognized one of the men.

And he was amazed that she was alive. And she said, yes, I survived, but my husband didn't. And he said, no, no, no, he's in Italy. And what had happened was there was an amnesty in Siberia. And General Anders, who was a Polish general, decided he wanted to make a battalion of Polish soldiers to fight against Rommel in North Africa. And he really didn't like Jews, but he had to take some Jews, especially--

Your dad's a physician-- yes, right.

My father was a physician so he needed him. And there's another woman who works here. Her name is Helena. And her father was a dentist. And he was in the same army.

Anders Army.

General Anders. And they went to North Africa, and they fought against Rommel. And then they went to Italy. And they fought in Monte Cassino against Mr. Mussolini. And the day after my mother had met this gentleman, an ambulance arrived. And if you're a physician, that's your mode of transportation. So the ambulance came. I got in the ambulance. And I met my father, essentially for the first time. I was eight years old. And there he was.

But he was a very smart man. Because he had this big doll waiting for me. It was probably almost the size that I was. And it was really my first doll that I remember. And the army stayed in Italy for six months. And then we went to England, because the army went to England. And after two years, it was demobilized.

And we continued in England. And then my mother discovered she had an aunt in the United States. And so we came to the United States. And I was 13.

In 1951.

In 1951.

Tell us some-- and it's remarkable. Your mother sees somebody she knows. And that person says your father is still alive. And word gets back to your father, and an ambulance is dispatched.

Well, he sent a telegram.

A telegram.

We all-- and Nesse will bear me out-- we all talk about miracles. We survived because of miracles. Whatever it was, whether it was our strength, or somebody else, or just a happenstance, it's a miracle. Because not many of us survived.

Did you learn from your father later about what life was like for him once he was captured and sent to Siberia?

Oh, sure. I remember the only thing my parents ever really quarreled about was which was worse, the Germans or the Russians. My father went to Siberia. He didn't have to do the hard labor because he was a physician. And he got more potatoes and more soup. And he had to take care of the prisoners. He lost, I think, three toes due to frostbite. He thought he'd lost his wife and child.

Of course.

He was depressed. And he was thinking of going to Australia eventually, because he had a cousin there.

And yet, still found himself in combat as a physician.

Oh, yes. Oh, yes, and taking care of whoever was hurt and injured.

Right. And so he spent a couple of years in England.

Five.

Five years in England.

Five years in England.

Do you recall-- you were probably around eight years of age when you went to England-- coming out of the displaced persons camp and all that you had experienced, going to England, what was the adjustment like for you doing that? Do you recall?

Well, we had a really good life in Italy. We had a wonderful life in Italy. We lived near the Adriatic. My father was an officer. There weren't that many people that were sick. So we traveled all over Italy. We toured Rome, and Florence, and Venice, and whatever. I would have liked to have stayed there. It was warm, and the food was good. The people we were friendly.

And in England, the first two years we lived in barracks.

Because he was still in the army.

He was still in the army. And even after the barracks, we were allowed to stay after they were demobilized until we decided what we wanted to do with ourselves. In England-- in England, we came, and we lived with my great aunt, all three of us in one room. And we got a little apartment. And my mother went to work.

And my father had to go back to school to learn about medicine in English. And then he had to do an internship for a year. And I was in high school. And everybody had a job. And it was my job to cook, and clean, and shop for food, because my mother worked eight hours in a bakery.

And eventually, he got his license. He couldn't get it in New York or New Jersey, because you had to be a citizen. So we went to Maryland. And we lived in a psychiatric hospital. And he studied psychiatry. And he died. He died in 1960. We never really had a chance to enjoy life. And luckily, he met John. He liked John. But never knew my children, never knew my grandchildren. It was sad.

What was the main reason the family decided to move from England to the United States? Because originally, your mother thought you would go to Israel.

Well, once we were together, we were talking about Australia, and we were talking about the United States. And my great aunt sponsored us. And President Truman enacted a law that said any Polish nationals that had fought with the British army against the Germans and Mussolini would come into the country. Because they had quotas. And so we came. And they thought they'd have more opportunity here.

Tell me-- and I think you've already told us this, but did anybody else in your family survive?

Some Cousins.

Some Cousins.

Some cousins. My mother's cousins, nobody that I really knew. But we used to go and visit them in Washington-- in New York. And some of my mother's friends survived, several of her friends, very close friends.

The vast majority of your family were--

Yeah, my grandmother was one of nine children. And if you extrapolate that, each having two or three children, that's a lot of people. We talk about 6 million people, and that's a very big number. And it's kind of glib. But when it's your family that dies, it's sad. And I think-- Eleanor, are you here? Yeah. And that's the grandmother-- the other grandmother of my grandchildren is back there.

And I remember when my daughter married her wonderful son, I didn't have a single family member at the wedding.

And so you said--

And she has a wonderful family. That's right, I'm part of the family. And I'm part of Janet's family.

I was really struck when you told me another time that when you realized you had no family members at the wedding was probably one of the most poignant reminders of the losses that you had incurred.

Yeah.

Tell us a little bit more about your return to Poland, when you did that, and went back to the house you didn't go in. And encountered Wisia again.

Well, it was interesting because I had been communicating with her. So I knew her address. And we looked in the telephone books, and of course, we couldn't find her. And we had gone to Krakow and to-- we had gone to Auschwitz. And we met an English professor of-- I guess history-- was he history? Yeah, Jewish studies, whatever.

And he was working with the museum. Because when you went to Auschwitz then, it was very washed Jews. It's like Jews didn't die there. They just had one little building about them. The pictures that were on the walls were of Polish prisoners. So it was kind of sanitized. And he was working with them, that it was really important. Because three or four million Jews had died there.

And then he was interviewing families who had sheltered Jews in Southern Poland. And, of course, I had been in Northern Poland. And I told him the story. Because they asked us for a ride. And he had a girlfriend, who spoke English. Yes, and she asked me-- no, I guess he thought that-- they thought we were Polish. And she talked to us in Polish. And then eventually we found out that he was English.

And he said, you must go and find her. And we said, there's not a telephone book that has her name. And he said, no, no, no, go anywhere. If you know the address, go anyway. So we went, and we rang the doorbell. And she said, yes. And I said, I'm looking for Mrs. Krzymowska. And she said, that's me. And I said, may I come up and talk to you? And she said, yes.

So I came back, went up the stairs. And this is 1990. I left in '45. So it's 45 years.

45 years later, wow.

And I look at this old woman, and she looks at this old woman. And I say to her, Wisia, do you remember me? And she says, no. And I'm so disappointed in a way, but then I say, I'm Basia. And she says, oh, my gosh. And we start hugging, and kissing, and crying, and talking. And her husband is standing there, and my husband is standing there.

And they invited us for lunch. And she showed me pictures of her family. And I didn't have any American money, so I gave her all the Polish money. Because we were leaving. I gave her all the Polish money. And then I decided I wanted to send her money. So I said, how can I send you money? Do you have an account somewhere and my bank can send it? No, no, didn't want anybody to know.

I had no way of doing this, because you can't just put money into an envelope and send it because somebody will steal it. So then I came to this wonderful museum. And there's always somebody going to

Poland. And it's kind of a thrill--

And they'll go and visit her?

Yes, and Yatzik went and Anne went. And Milan-- is that her name? Milan-- Anne Milan? And Susie, my boss, and then Teresa. And if they don't know how to speak English, then they get an interpreter. And they have coffee with her. And it's nice.

You had said to me that she really has had a very difficult life.

She had a very hard life. She was a very bright young woman and wanted to be a teacher. But the Russians occupied Poland. And now she's sick. And so I think we feel that we do good by sending her money.

Why don't we, Liz, turn to our audience and see if they have any questions. And I see my hands are going up already. So I'm going to start with you, if I can.

The questions were, one, Liz, why did-- why was it 1990 when you saw her for the first time? And then secondly, if she explained to you the reasons that her family risked their lives to hide you?

I guess I wasn't ready to go until a certain point in my life. I had very bad feelings. And as for why she did it, I asked her. And she said, my mother felt that everybody deserved a chance. That is a remarkable mother, a remarkable lady.

And as you said earlier, another family down the street had done the same--

Yes, had been shot.

And were all found out. Young man, right here.

Well, I used to speak Italian until I learned English. I spoke Polish. I have some Spanish. I have a good ear, so I pick up languages. But if you don't use it, it's kind of not too good.

The young man asked the question, how many languages did Liz pick up? And I think the lesson in that, it's really easy to pick them up when you're younger. So you've got a few maybe to go, but here's your role model. Yes, sir.

[INAUDIBLE]

OK.

[INAUDIBLE]

Mr. Price made the comment that there is no single story about survivors, that every one is unique unto itself. And asked then about how Liz is today. How you are emotionally, I think, is really the question, and having weathered and dealt with all that you dealt with.

I think I'm in good shape. I have a good husband. I have great children, wonderful grandchildren, terrific friends. What more could you ask for? I'm healthy. I have a great dog. I walk five or six miles every day. I keep in shape. [LAUGHS]

[INAUDIBLE]

Absolutely-- of course, as her friend. And Janet, her friend, said that she still has survivor instincts.

[INAUDIBLE]

Right. Janet was saying, for those of you who couldn't hear, that Liz just knows what to do, and, I guess, in

any set of circumstances. I skipped over-- somebody had a hand up. Yes, ma'am, right there.

[INAUDIBLE]

Well, I'm sorry.

That's OK.

That's long.

No problem. That's your take-charge personality-- is exactly what you're talking about. I recognize it, and I'm learning to accommodate it. No, the comment was, you started to talk about the day in the Aktion, when your mother was-- your grandmother was taken, and that you were hiding, and your mother couldn't find you. And wanted you just to complete what you recall about that.

I think I was there for quite a long time. And, of course, a child doesn't really have a sense of time. But I know it was dark when my mother came, because after grieving over her own mother, who had gone, she became hysterical because I wasn't around. But then she remembered that if I were anywhere, that's where I would be.

And so she came, and she took me back. And we never talked about my grandmother again, except that my mother mourned her, mourned for her from 1942 until she died in '87. She never forgot her mother.

45 years, yeah. Yes, ma'am, the young lady there.

[INAUDIBLE]

Yeah.

The question is that you were in this house with an identity of a Catholic, but yet, obviously, going out to school. So a little confused about whether it was hiding or not. Is that what you're asking? And then also, for your mother, what were her circumstances in that regard?

My mother very seldom went out. My mother hid. She helped around the house. From time to time, someone would come and take her away when it got to be too dangerous. And then I would assume that I would have been introduced as the family's niece, or grandchild, or whatever.

And I never asked where she went because even as a child, I knew the Germans were there, the Germans were bad, and it was dangerous, and my mother had to hide. And my mother explained to me later, she was very dark She had black hair and dark eyes. And she would have been picked up in a minute.

So she hid pretty much. But I hid in the cellar part of the time. Sometimes I was in the bed, and sometimes I went to school. It wasn't that I was out all the time. But it was much easier to hide a child.

But always hidden with a false identity. That's very much a form of hiding, in that you are having to pose as somebody else. And fortunately, Liz, you were so young that you didn't know otherwise in that regard. Yes, sir.

[INAUDIBLE]

The question was that, obviously this Polish family that took you in and hid you was very sympathetic. And your thoughts about how representative that was of the rest of the Polish population.

I think they were very unique. I think a lot of Poles were very antisemitic, and still are. Because, in fact, when we were in Poland, Wisia said to us, now, you're not Jewish, you're American, and that's all. And my husband was surprised. It's been so many years. And they said, no, no, you pretend you're just Americans, nothing else. And that's what we did. But you've heard of Jedwabne. And you've heard of other places, and

Kielce, and lots of places.

You might say something about that.

Well, in the Jedwabne, it just came out that the Poles were the ones that put all these Jews into this barn and burnt them, and turned them in, and helped shoot them. And they're denying it. They're saying, no, we didn't do it. The Russians did it, the Germans did it, whoever did it. And in Kielce, there was a big thing. It was after the war, and some of the Jews had come back, and there was a child that disappeared. And the Jews were blamed for his disappearance. And they were killed-- after--

It was really a-- it was really--

It was after the war. And these people had been through camps, and hiding, and whatever. And they were murdered by their neighbors. So it never ends. It never ends. Look what's happening in Israel. We're the chosen people, but I wish someone would be chosen-- I wish God would choose somebody else. Because I think it's time somebody else were chosen.

We have some other questions? Yes, sir. Right here, young man.

[INAUDIBLE]

Right.

[INAUDIBLE]

The question is, if I could paraphrase it for you, she's asking, with all that loss, how do you hang on to your family? How do you how do you hang on to the concept of family and move on from there? Is that a fair translation of it? OK.

I think you feel so grateful for what you have that you try to cherish what you do have. And if you don't have family, you have friends. I've passed as Janet's sister many times. She has three others, so one more or less, doesn't matter. But I think you cherish-- you cherish what you have. And if I could leave one message, it is cherish your family. Because it's a fleeting thing.

Liz, I have a final question, myself, for you. And that is, particularly pertinent, some of the questions about how your own personal adjustment has been after all of that, you chose to go into a helping profession in every way-- psychiatric social work and working with emotionally disturbed children. Do you think your choice of career was driven in part, at least, by what you experienced? And what difference did it make in terms of your own approach to social work with children?

I think-- I think you do go into something-- I've not only worked with children, I've worked with alcoholics, and psychiatric patients, lots of different. But I think when something good happens to you, and I survived, and my parents survived, and I have a good life now, you want to give back. That's one of the reasons many of us volunteer in this museum, because it's such a marvelous way to give back, be here, and just see what's going on here, and your people.

And I spoke to a group of young people from New Jersey a couple of months ago. And about a week later, I got 40 letters, each one saying how important it was and how good it was that they had been able to hear me and really see a live person that had survived. I think it certainly makes you appreciate what you have.

Yes, sir.

[INAUDIBLE]

The question-- the question is-- one more time-- the question is, if Jews had brought Christians more into your religion, would that have made a difference? That's the question you're asking.

Liz, can you--

I don't think so. That's a very personal kind of a thing. I see Nesse shaking her head too. I can't imagine. Because people who were married to Jews were killed anyway, even if they were Christians. The German Jews were treated a little better, but not much. Eventually, they wound up in concentration camps.

But we have a volunteer here whose mother was Christian and whose father was Jewish, and she saved both of them. But I can't imagine that. It's antisemitic-- if you had two grandparents that were Jewish, you were Jewish.

One more question, and then we're going to wrap it up. Yes, ma'am, here.

[INAUDIBLE]

If I could paraphrase your comment, it was that many Christians-- and as a Christian, I can attest to this-- you get very little education sometimes in the Old Testament, particularly among Catholics. And so the question is-- the comment is if people were to understand the Old Testament better, maybe that would help educate people to be more sensitive, more understanding. Is that what you're suggesting?

I will tell you, we've got somebody right up here, Liz, who really has had experience in two very different worlds. And so you've lived-- you've lived both lives in that sense.

We all believe in the same God. We believe in the same God. The Egyptians believe in the same God. It's the same God, but how we worship him is different. And if you've been brought up in one religion, and you've been brought up to hate another, that's what's going to happen.

I don't like people coming to my door and telling me their religion. And I don't-- I can't imagine going out and telling people that my religion is better. I don't know. I think somebody else can speak to that.

Well, I think that's for another time at this point. I think it's time for us to wrap up today's program. I'd like to remind you that we have a new "First Person" program every Wednesday, until August 28.

And so, again, next week, on the 24th of July, we will present another "First Person." And next week, it will be Mrs. Helen Luxembourg, who was born in Poland, and survived the Gleiwitz and Ravensbrück concentration camps. So I invite you back next Wednesday, or any other Wednesday that you can come back before August 28.

If you can hold your seats for one moment, our tradition is that the "First Person" has the last word. And with that, I would like to ask Liz if she would like to just close us with a final thought.

I think I sort of said it. I think cherish your families, one another, and just be happy. And be nice to somebody, and I think it'll come back to you.

Liz. Thank you, everybody.

[APPLAUSE]