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 our first person today is Mrs. Helen Luksenburg, whom we shall meet shortly. First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who are sharing with us their firsthand accounts of their time during the Holocaust and during World War II. Each First Person guest presently serves as a volunteer here in the museum.

Each Wednesday until August 28, we will have another First Person program. If you go to the museum's website at www.ushmm.org-- that's www.ushmm.org-- you can find a listing of those who will be the First Person guests in the coming weeks. This 2002 season of First Person is made possible by the Helena Rubinstein Foundation, whose generosity makes this year's program possible.

I'd like to introduce to you several individuals associated with the museum who help make this program possible. I see standing in the back Mr. Martin Goldman, who's director of survivor affairs. And then you had a number of people who helped greet you as you came through the door. We have Harold right here. Dora, if you wave your hand in the back. And Phyllis next to Dora. I point these folks out to you not just so you know that they are important to this program, but also, should you have any comments, or suggestions, or thoughts that you have about the First Person program, please, do not hesitate to share them with any of us after the program.

We will listen to Helen Luksenburg as she shares a first-person account of her experience from the Holocaust for about 40 minutes. We will follow that with an opportunity for you to ask some questions of Helen before you are introduced to her-- so you'll have that opportunity to both hear from her and asked her questions-- I have a couple of requests of you. If possible, please stay seated throughout the entire hour program. That minimizes any disruptions, particularly for Helen as she's speaking.

And second, if you have questions during our question and answer period, please, make them as brief as you can. And I will repeat the question so that everyone hears it, including Helen, before Helen responds to your question. For those of you who may be holding passes for the permanent exhibition at either 145 or 130, please, know that they are good for the balance of the afternoon. So that means you don't have to jump up and run to the permanent exhibition out of fear that you might not be able to get in.

And with that, I'd like to welcome First Person's guest, Helen Luksenburg. As you will hear today, after the German invasion of Poland, Helen was eventually forced into slave labor and ended up at the RavensbrÃ¼ck camp before liberation. She came to the United States in 1949. We prepared a brief slide presentation to help with the introduction of Helen.

And our very first portrait, fittingly, is of Helen Luksenburg, who was the eldest of three children from a comfortable middle class family, with her birth name of Hinda Chilewicz So we have here Helen, who we will meet again shortly. I might mention, that photograph was taken in 1941, when the Nazis forced the Jews in Poland to start being fingerprinted and identification cards being issued.

Our next picture is a map of Poland, picture of Europe, the arrow pointing to Poland, enlarged version of Poland with a map follow, with an arrow that points to Sosnowiec, the city where Helen was born April 4, 1926. In our next picture, we have Helen, who is in the middle, with two of her cousins, Edzia and Hadasa Cudrzynowski, who pose with a bear in their hometown of Sosnowiec. This picture was taken right before the German invasion of Poland.

Helen was just 13 when the German Army invaded Poland September 1, 1939. By the end of the year, Jews were subject to a host of discriminatory laws. Helen's father had to close his textile business. And our photo here shows the German Army as it enters Poland in September 1939. In 1943, the Jews of Sosnowiec were forced to move into a ghetto.

Here, we have a sewing workshop-- and Helen may speak about this-- in which her mother, knowing that it was clear that very, very difficult times were ahead, felt that she should have a trade that might serve her well in the future. So for those in the Sosnowiec ghetto, this was a workshop on sewing. And Helen is in almost the very center of the photograph

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with her head bowed forward, illuminated by the light in white, as you can see there.

Our next photos, we have on your left-- we have a photo of four girls who were members of a Zionist youth movement in the Sosnowiec ghetto. And again, Helen is on the front row, person to your right. And you might be able to notice that each of them are wearing the Star of David on an armband. The photo to the far right is a photo of young Jewish women members of the Hanoar Hatzioni youth movement, picking vegetables on the Farma, as they called it.

And here, we have Helen kneeling on the far right in this photograph. Our next picture is a map showing-- the dots showing all the major Nazi camps, the major ones. Helen was deported to Gleiwitz after being selected for forced labor. Gleiwitz became part-- and I think we have an arrow that shows us the location of Gleiwitz. Gleiwitz became part of the vast Auschwitz concentration camp network. There, Helen formed a close friendship with Welek Luksenburg, a fellow inmate.

As the Soviet Army approached in January 1945, prisoners from Gleiwitz were evacuated. Helen survived a death march to the RavensbrÃ¼ck concentration camp. And our arrows show the march that they were forced to take before they got to RavensbrÃ¼ck. Finally, Helen was liberated by Soviet troops in May 1945. And before our battery goes-- did our battery go-- we may get one more picture. And I'm hoping we do.

This is a photograph on the wedding date of Helen and Welek at a displaced persons camp in the American-occupied zone of Germany. They were married March 2, 1947, which means that they celebrated their 55th wedding anniversary just a few months ago.

Helen now lives in Silver Spring, Maryland with her husband, Welek, who now, most of us know him as Willy. They have three children, two are doctors, and one is an attorney. I'm pleased to say that Willy is with us in the audience today. Willy, if you wouldn't mind, just a little wave of the hand so people know you're here. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our first person Helen Luksenburg.

Helen, thank you very much for joining us and being willing to be our first person today. In the late summer of 1939, you were just 13 years old and living with your parents and two younger brothers in Sosnowiec, a heavily industrialized area of Poland close to the German border. Perhaps we could start today with you telling us a little bit about your life before the German invasion, your community, and your family in those years before the Germans came.

Before the war, I was a young child. I went to a private school. I was the oldest of three children. And I went in a comfortable middle class house, didn't know what means poverty at all. But September 1, 1939, the Germans invaded Poland.

And our life completely changed immediately. Because right away, we were not allowed-- school was obsolete for Jewish children. I was the oldest of three children. My sister was nine years old when the war broke out. She didn't even know how to properly read yet. But we didn't have schools anymore for Jewish children.

Immediately, martial law was applied. We're not allowed to be out after 7 o'clock in the evening. We had to wear armbands with a Star of David. Certain streets were-- was like an open ghetto immediately. And every day, they were different orders. The Germans didn't want to dirty their hands. So immediately, they made a Jewish government. And they elected the president of the government. Even this week, Monday, his daughter, who survived, I brought her to the museum to see it because his name is upstairs on the wall.

Helen, I mean, just a question for you before you move on. It's important, in terms of what happened so quickly for you in Sosnowiec, because you were so close to the German border, so you-- as quick as the German invasion was all over Poland and the Russians coming from the other side, you were run over immediately. And you were right there. Do you remember that?

Oh, yes, I distinctly remember. It was on Friday night. We stood outside because the Polish Army was defeated immediately. It was pitiful to watch the Polish Army coming back. The Polish Army didn't have any communication. Everything the soldier was carrying on his back, they were worn out. We stood outside and gave them coffee. And we

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were the first day, was right the invasion.

Was right on the first day.

That's right because we were right on the border.

So the Germans were in control on day 1.

Immediately.

Immediately. And that's when these--

The war lasted, the whole program, by the time they got to Warsaw, one month. The whole army was defeated.

But for you, one day.

One day. So my father heard the rumors. My mother living through already the First World War, she was very nervous. She was born in a small town further in Poland. My father came home and said, I heard a train is going. So we didn't take anything with us. We took not even food sandwiches, nothing.

He took us to the train. He said, I will join you later because it was after the 1st and he had to take care of some business. He put us on the train, but we didn't go too far. The Germans from both sides attacked. And we could see we were between two forests. And in between, fire was going up. And we got off the train. And my mother remembered.

So the Poles are on one side, the Polish Army, and the Germans--

And the Germans were on the-- and we were in the train--

You're in the middle.

--on the tracks. We walked to the nearest town because my mother remembered that was a neighbor's parents lived there. I don't know how she remembered. We found a house. We knocked at the door. There were two old people. Maybe they were not older than what I am today.

To a 15-year-old. I think--

Well, at that time, they were old people.

Younger than I am.

And they let us in. Next morning, the Germans knock at the door. And they said, [GERMAN]. Are they men? My mother spoke good German.

Are they men?

Men. Manner is men. And she said, yes, a old man, maybe he was 70 years old at that time, and my brother, who was 11 years old. So we had to leave the place. And all the people gather in the marketplace. And it was from all over people. I didn't-- everybody was running. You can't imagine what was going on. Finally was no communication. We got by a horse and buggy to the place where my mother was born because was a house there what belonged to my grandfather. And her sister lived there-- a building, rather.

And when we got there, it was unbelievable. The whole family was there already. My mother came from-- there were 11 brothers and sisters-- six brothers and five sisters. Some remained. And some were there. You can imagine-- I remember, I had younger cousins. Everybody, they were very spoiled. They didn't want-- used to go behind them and

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say, swallow, swallow.

So two days in the war, three days in the war, everybody was crying hungry. You had to get up at 3 o'clock in the morning to stay in line in the bakery to get a piece of bread. And the bread wasn't like real bread. I don't know what they put into it. But after two months, I couldn't take it because I miss my father. And I said, finally, through connections, I got back home.

Back to Sosnowiec?

Back to Sosnowiec. My mother still remained with my brother and my sister. When I got home, I didn't recognize my father. Any of you seen a picture of Gandhi when he was released from prison? That's how my father looked. He was bald always. And I didn't recognize him.

I opened the credenza-- because in Europe, we didn't have building in the kitchen, it was like a credenza, but it was painted yellow or white. I opened it. And I didn't believe my eyes. Was a pile of bread. And I said to my father, for whom did you save the bread? He said, for you, kids, for my children. Every day, he used to get up in the morning, stay 3 o'clock in the morning, stay in line to get some bread. Penicillin was growing on that bread.

So it was all covered in mold. He'd been--

Full of mold. We couldn't even eat. I couldn't even eat it.

He didn't eat any of it, just stored away.

Yeah. He was saving. And also, one of my aunt and uncle remained. And they had three children. So he used to bring for them the bread. And a few weeks later, my mother arrived. And life was getting every day was another order came out. We had to give up electrical appliances. We had to give up silver, gold, everything, jewelry, furs. Everything went for the German Army.

And we had to be employed. At 14, you had to have a ID with a picture. That picture what you saw here on the screen, that was the picture taken for that ID card with my fingerprints, like criminals. We had to work at 14. And it was getting worse by the day. Was not enough food.

And the rumors-- during the war, there are a lot of rumors. You don't know what to believe. And we started to hear, 1941, '42-- because Auschwitz was just one hour away from us-- that there are people who are working in the fields with shaven heads. And there were rumors. We didn't know what to believe.

1942, came a order that we have to gather in a sports stadium. The population of Sosnowiec was 120,000 people. And we were 10% of it-- 30,000 people, Jewish people. But during the war, they liquidated people who were right on the border. Or they liquidated towns and places. And they sent the people to us. We had to share our living quarters with people, with refugees. I also remember 1938, when the German Jews, who lived in Germany, and they were born in Poland, even if they were children, they send them right on the border. And we had to share the housing with them.

And they were literally dropped at the border.

That's right.

Dropped in.

On the Polish-German border. We had to share the housing with them, so was for a long time. I also want to go back, that antisemitism in Poland was rampant. Because I never had non-Jewish friends. I went to Jewish schools. And I never-- I was always afraid of somebody. And before the war, was even worse than anything. Till 1935, I go back a little bit in Polish history. Till 1935, we had a Marshal Pilsudski, who was very kind and nice to the Jewish people. But he died in 1935. We all in school had to wear black bands--

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When he died.

--in his memory. But after that, it got much worse. Antisemitism was rampant, like I said before. Anyhow, going back to the war.

Helen, before you were forced to gather, before you were taken into the ghetto, you mentioned that there's a lot of rumors in wartime. You played an important role in the family for trying to get information about what was going on in the war. Tell us about that. Yes, yes.

My father was very scared to go out because when the Germans marched in the first day, he went with-- every man had to register, go to city hall and register. He went every day and turn around. That was before I came back home. And finally, one day, after about a month, he got to the city hall, what was a long walk. We didn't have cars. And they called it off.

So he's walking with a friend. And he had a beer with him in there someplace. And that was actually the day when the Germans marched in. So he's walking. And the Germans on motorcycles marched in. We were on the main track. he said, halt. And my father knew people in the next building. They opened the door and let him in. The man was shot on the spot.

My father never recovered after that. He was afraid of his own shadow. At 13-14 years old, a relative of ours had a restaurant. And people used to gather there. I used to go and listen to news because we didn't have radios. We didn't have. Four men, three or four men gathered together. Somebody had to stay outside because a policeman, a German policeman, [NON-ENGLISH], could come in and blame you that you are a spy. You will be shot on the spot. So I used to bring news to my father.

You would hear what the men were saying and--

That's right. I listened to the men and what was going on. Was no newspapers for us, no radio, no communication at all.

Wow.

So 1942, came out a order that all the Jews have to gather in the stadium. So we were about 30-40,000 Jews, set up tables alphabetically. Everybody got dressed to impress the Germans, to look good in the best you had. My father said, let's wait. Let's wait. Let's wait. Maybe they will get tired and they will send us home. The whole day was spent there without food, without anything. Finally, we approach a table. That was 10 o'clock at night already.

You've been there all day long without food?

All day long. We approached a table. He retained my parents and my sister. And my brother and I, he said, go home. I started to cry. And I remember my father's words. He said, somebody has to survive. And you are the one who will survive. He always used to tell me. I guess, I always felt very secure because my father always used to tell me, you are smart, you are pretty, you will survive.

And I didn't need too much food. Really, I was satisfied with anything. Because my brother was growing at the time. I don't know how many of you know what is a bar mitzvah. During the war, he had his bar mitzvah. He was 13 years old. We didn't have much to eat, but if a crumb was left on the table, he picked it up. His most growth was during the war. And he was always hungry. And I was satisfied with anything. That's why my father said it, comparing with my brother.

Anyhow, they retained my parents in a building. The next day, I tried to help and think connection to help. And was pouring rain, I remember like today. And I said, God was crying with us. Finally, I remember, we had velour covers for this winter. And I took them and gave it to a militiaman that my parents could cover themselves at least.

So a velour blanket, you took down to give to your parents.

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Velour covers for the beds. We had two kinds-- very light one, like lacey for the summer, and wintertime, we had green velour covers. And finally, through connections, because my uncle, my mother's brother, worked in the Central Committee. Somehow, a cousin who had the same name got dressed as a nurse. And one by one, they put on the uniform, and then we got them out.

Oh, so you sneaked them out of there.

Yes, of the building. My parents dugged out a hole maybe other people too. Because the building was a corner building. And to get out on another street and through there, because their name-- my parent's name was different, not Cudrzynowska. So they got out. But it didn't last long. A year later was the liquidation of the ghetto. And everybody was sent. They put us in the ghetto. And they divided because there were too many. It wasn't enough room. Was A and B. We got the B.

A and B were two different sections of the ghetto?

That's right. At the one end of the city and another end of the city.

OK. And you were in B?

Yeah, we were in B. We were there. And one room, we got the kitchen. Whatever you worked for all your life, you left behind. Life was important. They took two beds, a table and chairs, some pots and pans, and some clothes. Whatever my father worked for was left. But this wasn't important, so long we were together. But I wasn't satisfied with the conditions.

But you were in one room.

One kitchen and the two other rooms were two other families.

Other family. So you had one room for your--

That's right.

--entire family.

And everybody was going to our place. That's why I knew somebody in the family was in the Wohnungsamt-- that's in the housing department. So I went to talk to him. And it was set up another committee, a Jewish committee. We had our own militia. And then this militia man comes over to me, who knew me, he was a friend of my cousin. He said, what are you doing here? I said, I want to talk to Mr. So-and-so. Maybe we'll get better conditions. He said, do you know, you are on the list? And he points out to me, I'm on the wall with my name on it. Then I run home. I run home.

You personally were on the list?

Yes. And my brother was on the list too.

And your brother. OK.

I ran home. And the militia was right behind me. And they took me away. I was 16 years old when I last saw my parents. My brother wasn't home. So they took my mother because he went with my father to a bathhouse because we didn't have any facilities at all. Because he wasn't home, they took my mother as a hostage. Still today, I don't know if they kept my mother or they let her out. That's the last time I saw my parents.

They sent me out. I was the first time away from home. I was like a lost soul. But I attached myself for my cousin who was a few-- three years older than I, to her friends, because they were on the same transport. We went to Gogolin.

Gogolin was a temporary camp. And I remember the man with the cane. He was limping. We were lined up. And he was picking his merchandise. And they send us to Gleiwitz.

Picked the merchandise, meaning picking you.

Us, the human merchandise. They send us to Gleiwitz. Gleiwitz was now belongs to Poland, but shifting the borders, because Russia took part of the Poland to the west. And I was in the east. No, the east was Russia. And we were in the west.

The west was Germany, right.

Gleiwitz was built just-- I have to tell you a little bit about Gleiwitz too. Because I found out recently, here, after the war that Gleiwitz was built in 1941, that was Deutsche Gasrusswerke, the biggest factory. It was a chemical factory, what we were producing soot. This was a black substance from fine coal and oil. And that was mostly went for tires. Now, they make it for printing. The factory still exists. I was there about 12 years ago. Still exists. And it's shoe paste, printing, and I guess for tires.

But still all produced from soot?

Yes. Black soot. We were all black.

Right. We were wearing uniform and a triangle that we got for our hair. They didn't shave our heads. But it was cut very, very short. I was operating twelve machines. Every machine was as long as this.

Me to the wall.

Yes, with 12 burners. And on the hour, you had to clean with a poker. The heat, it worked at 120 degrees temperature. And we had to clean the pilots. There were 12 windows with pilots in it. And on the hour, by the time you end at the 12 machine, at the end, you had to come back. And on the one machine was a deck, a cement deck, where we had to weight the production. And what more you were cleaning the pilots, more production. And on the hour, we used to go in the front and weight it for production.

And these were bags of soot?

Of soot, black stuff, yes.

And very heavy bags of soot.

They called in the front girls who were working and weighing it, [GERMAN]. How would you translate [GERMAN]?

Pack room. Pack room.

Pack room? No, pack room was when they were packing it, not when we were weighing it. It's not important. So we were working. The conditions were very bad. We were 30 girls on the barrack.

And weren't there-- here you are, a slave labor. But in the same factory, weren't there people, non-Jews who paid wages?

Yes. Non-Jews, there were working Poles and Frenchmen. They were free. They live on the outside. They were free to move around. And even some Poles made a business out of it because that was-- again, I was just one hour away from my hometown because I was on the other side of the border, one. They used to make a business out of it. But we wrote letters because we didn't have any communication with our parents.

Once, in the beginning, in 1943, in the beginning, they allowed us to send a note once a month. And we could receive,

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without value, a package, one pound. So I knew it was before Passover. And usually, we eat matzah. But whoever you send me that little package was cake. Because with matzah, you don't feel-- it doesn't fill you up. And I recognize in that bake, in that cake, what I got, that piece of cake that that wasn't my mother's making. Somebody, one of my aunts sent it to me.

And said it was from your mother.

So the Poles would-- the non-Jewish Poles would--

They were coming to the ghetto--

--bring you packages.

--illegally exchanging. And once, I got a note from my father, please, we can't afford it. You were selling. How did you sustain yourself? You were selling everything you could. But in our case, my mother had some jewelry. But it was buried in that small town. We never could even sell it to buy bread for it. The rations were very meager. Anyhow, we got to the Gleiwitz. And I work at the factory.

Helen, you've already told us how hard that work was. You also were-- you had essentially one day off a month. Is that right?

Yes. Well, every third Sunday every month.

Every third Sunday, you had off.

Because in order to have-- there were three shifts. In order to have one Sunday, we had to work Saturday and Sunday for two weeks, 12 hours. That was 12 and 12 is two days, that one shift will be off. And on that Sunday, we used to wash our what did we have-- they issue the uniform. We wore the stripes. They took away all our-- in the beginning, it was a labor camp. So we still could keep our civilian clothes.

But when the SS took over, they took away all our civilian clothes. And they issue us the stripes. So we had wooden shoes. You were not allowed-- if you put in wintertime-- we had every morning, we had a roll-call. Sometimes, you stood there for two hours on the roll-call. God forbid if one person was missing. You had to stay there 6 o'clock in the morning and in the cold. And sometimes, we used to wrap our feet with paper. They beat you and sometimes could kill you because you tried to protect your feet.

For putting some paper.

Before we got to the camp, we used to take off the paper from our feet. Or we put even some-- the cement sacks, we take under our dress. Was a dress and a jacket. That's all what we had, no underwear, nothing. I guess, they issue some underwear for the women. Also, the women didn't get their periods. They used to put something in the-- because that was too much trouble to issue napkins and so on. So they used to put something in the food. And what happened that I broke out with boils all over because some place, it has to go.

And I remember the Dr. Simon. And he wanted so bad to help me. And I was full of the boils. And he suggested to the Germans that to take the pus from the boils and to make into a shot to give you. That was a cure for it. They refused to handle Jewish blood. He almost cried when he was telling me that they refused to do it.

Once, I was in the sanitary room. And I stood up. And he said, did you sleep well? I said, yes. He gave me a half of aspirin-- even aspirins we didn't have. And it was just a lot of work to do psychologically. And I slept through the night because I was itching, and it was painful. So he tried to help me. That was still during the labor camp, not SS. He tried to help me.

And every time you came to the doctor, the German woman in charge was there. So he tried to explain that why he's

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giving me. And he ask her, if I couldn't wet myself because every day, we had to take a shower because we were black from the soot. And he ask her if I could stay on the camp grounds.

And I remember, I used to put on the ground the gravel. But I still had-- I was 16, 17 years old. I was wearing a pair shorts. I still had the clothes from home at that time in a hotel. After two days, she took me off. And she said that I enticed the men. The men were in another camp. It was on our thing. But whatever they could to take away from you, they tried very hard.

So not just, as you've said to me, it wasn't just unbelievably brutal working conditions, but on top of that, everything to humiliate you--

That's right.

--in every way possible. And then it got worse, as you said, when the SS--

After the SS men came.

1942.

When the SS men came, took over, immediately, they took away all our clothes, like I said before. Also, we had to be tattooed. So in order to be tattooed, we had to stay three SS men sitting at the table. And we had to stay in front of them like that, created that, completely naked. They tattoo on the left arm, they tattoo your number.

It wasn't a physical pain. It was just a moral pain. They took away all your pride, all your dignity. You became branded like an animal. And that hurt the most. It didn't hurt. My number was 79139.

I removed it. I don't have it anymore. My husband, if you want to see later, he has his still. Because the men always, most of the time-- because this was very difficult. When I came to America, people were asking me if it's my-- people are ignorant. And they were-- you can't open up your heart to everybody. They thought it's my-- ask me if it was my [NON-ENGLISH] number, my laundry number, my Social Security number. I used to put a Band-Aid somewhere trying to cover it.

People would actually ask you here if it was your Social Security number?

Yes, yes, yes, yes, they did. So Gleiwitz, it wasn't the worst one. But then they have what to eat. They issue just two thin slices of bread, every other day, a little pad of margarine or a teaspoon of sugar. The soup contained mostly spinach with sand. My husband, who's right here, still today refuses to eat spinach because each time, you can taste the sand. It wasn't washed. Was a very watery thing. And you tried to get to the bottom, maybe a potato will be there.

Helen, before you leave Gleiwitz, I want you to talk about the one very positive thing that happened, and Willy. And tell us about how you met Welek.

How I met Welek? I met him because our washroom was being fixed. And we couldn't get any water. So in the back from our barracks was the entrance, another back door to the men's wash barrack. So I went in for water. And he stood there and was washing his clothes. And a friend of his was nearby. And he introduced us.

So the next day, he came to the fence. And we used to talk to each other through the fence. But he didn't know that I had my eye on him before in the ghetto. That was that time, teenage puppy love. And because I knew-- his cousin was my friend. And I said to her once, introduce me to him. She never did.

So one guy, who worked with us-- because I worked in the ghetto too. We had to work to get that. Otherwise, you didn't get rations if you didn't go to work. They had to have the ID card that you are employed. So a man who went to work in a different shop, so I told him to bring him because he was working there, to bring him to introduce me to him.

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So one day, I was sitting at my machine. And my cousin was sitting right across because the factory once belonged to my uncle. But the German took it over. So and we started to giggle because we knew why he brought him. He bringed him over to the machine. And he looks at the machine. He always was very mechanical-inclined. It didn't matter to him who I am. It just-- the machine was important. So he looks at the machine. And we started to giggle. Now, if you ask him, he remembers two young girls giggling. That's all what he remember.

When I was introduced to him, so he came to the fence. And we were talking. Once, we were caught, talking just through the fence. And a SS man was up the hill. And he saw us. And I was right the first barrack by the fence. So he comes into the barrack. And he said, I counted five people at the fence. And who doesn't come forward to admit it will be shaved their heads.

Every fifth woman-- there were some women consider old already because most were teenagers and early 20s. A woman 30 or 35, you can't imagine how a woman looks-- undernourished, the breast hanging. We call them Muselmanns, that they looked awful. And some women never talked to a man. So I came forward. I was the brave one. I came forward and admitted that I spoke by the fence.

He took me by the neck and threw me out because I was so brave, a brave Jew. So I went into the next barrack. And somebody was sleeping there. And cry my eyes out, why should innocent people suffer because I was talking to a man? She said, you can't help it. You admitted it, that's all what you can do.

But the next day, the solidarity in the comradeship, it was so great, you can't imagine. We are all going to work. It's early morning. And we had, like I mentioned, before the triangles. Everybody made a turban and put out a little luck, even the girls who had the head shaven-- made from the hair a little lock. And the men were watching us. Everybody was watching. They couldn't tell whose head was shaven because we all looked the same, black turban with a lock of hair sticking out.

Until today, the comradeship, we are to each-- every one of us lost our families. None of us have family. Maybe, if was a very large family, some two will survive-- two brothers, two sisters in that place where they were. And most of us don't have any family. So we are still very close to each other. We consider each other like family. Our children call them aunts and uncles because they don't have any.

So from Auschwitz, that's where I work in Gleiwitz, till 1945, we didn't know what was going on, at what point the war is going on. Because if you found a piece of newspaper, German newspaper-- because the Germans used to wrap the lunch in newspapers-- and you tried to read, they were always victorious. And they were Deutschland, Deutschland Ã¼ber Alles-- the Germans all over the world.

We had a victorious, glorious retreat.

That's right.

So because January 1945, there came a order that we had to be evacuated. If we would know what situation it was that time, we would maybe try to hide out. Because in my hometown, the Russians were already there in January 1945. They liberated Auschwitz. And to take a chance and to hide out for one night. But we didn't have any communication. We didn't know what's going on.

Here, after the war, when I started to read, and I realize that in July, August the 1st, 1943, they lost the battle already under St. Petersburg and they were defeated in Russia, a broken-down German Army, but we didn't know about that. In Europe, France, Belgium, Holland was liberated in June 1944. And we still suffered for 10 longer months. And during when they started to evacuate with the death march, half of the people died from starvation, from diseases.

So we walked for three days. And they didn't know what to do with us. Finally, they put us on trains. The trains, they brought us back to Gleiwitz. And they put us on old cattle train. That was to our benefit, open cattle train. Otherwise, we would suffocate. We were two weeks on open cattle trains. And they would-- brought us back.

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And there were-- the men were in one. He was on the end of the train. And I jumped on the next one for women that we could see each other at least. There were 200 people in one wagon. It wasn't longer than this stage here. After a week, was more room because people were dying and we were throwing them overboard. Once, we were talking, going through Czechoslovakia.

In Czechoslovakia, some people stood on bridges. And they were throwing bread. So he caught a bread. Somebody was holding his legs. And he bent over and caught in the air a bread. You know what it meant bread that time? For two weeks, we were eating snow. Because everybody had a blanket. And when it was snowing, we gathered the snow from each other's blanket.

I can't understand till this day, today, 50-some years later, how we survive under these conditions. But my father, he told me, you will be the only one who survive. He was watching over me. So he caught the bread. You don't say to somebody-- he broke the bread in half. And he said to me, stretch out your arms.

From one wagon to the next.

To other. So I stretch out my arm, but it fell between the two trains. You know that that piece of bread meant more than today $1,000,000. And I don't exaggerate when I say it. He never forgave me still for it. Do you know what it means, some of you, a schlemiel? That's what I was. Somebody-- Charlie Rose interviewed us. It was on CBS. And he said to her, why? Wasn't she athletic? He said, no, she was a schlemiel.

You dropped the bread.

So we were on the trains. And finally, they unloaded us. People were dying like flies. They unloaded us. And they sent us to-- first, they unloaded the men in Sachsenhausen and Oranienburg. And I see him eating dirty snow. And I went over to him and slapped him over the head, you will get sick. And he looked at me like he's-- his look was lost already. I don't think he was all there. Put us on another train. And they sent us to RavensbrÃ¼ck.

You were separated?

Yes, we were separated at that point. RavensbrÃ¼ck, at the time, there were 32,000 prisoners. The furnaces didn't work anymore. And I found out because there were people on the same trains with people from Auschwitz, some people from my hometown, who knew my parents. And I knew that time already where my parents were.

But I thought maybe my brother survived because he was sent to a camp. I found out later, when I came back to Poland, that he died two weeks before liberation from starvation. So we were liberated. I was liberated by the Russian. I went back to Poland with the four girls together. And when they were-- [AUDIO OUT].

Essentially, the Soviets said, you're free to go.

Yes, but of course, the war was almost over. So I see from my-- the stories what my mother used to tell me, that the child could disarm a soldier during the First World War. And I see soldiers going-- the guard, I said, we'll catch up with you. And four of us were walking. We stopped by the road to rest. And one soldier comes by. And he starts to flirt with us. I guess we didn't look halfway decent yet. I was the youngest one of the four.

And I said to him-- what I notice, I wasn't afraid. He didn't have a belt and he didn't have a gun. So I started. I said to him, do you know who we are in German? He said, yes, Maedchen, girls. So I said to him-- and where I got the courage, I don't know. I don't understand till today. And I told him that we are Jews, Jewish girls. He just-- his eyes bulged out. I cursed him out in German. And I wasn't afraid anymore. And that I am free, I am liberated, I don't have to be afraid because I am a Jew. He walked away. His eyes bulged out.

After we bumped in, somebody heard us speaking Polish. So they took us, the farmers, because the Poles were working on the farms, the men. And they took us in when they saw us heard us speaking Polish, oh, now, they kissed us, they hugged us. Now, we know where all the nice Polish girls were. They took us to the farm. And they went to sleep in the

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barn.

The German women prepared-- the farmer's wife-- the supper. And when I showed that combination, the rendered pork, and the milk, and the mashed potato, I couldn't tolerate any more food. I threw up and I wound up in the hospital. I don't know how long I was there. I had very high temperature. I had typhoid. And by the time I got out, was already the Russians were there. That part of Germany was taken over by the Soviet. Two of us were sick. And two of us were well.

But the Russian didn't allowed any Polish girl go home. Was no communication. And so they told us to-- they dismantled everything possible in Germany. And they were sending it to Russia-- machineries, cattle, anything. They wanted that we go with the cattle, to bring them to Russia-- to Poland, at least, and from there, they take over. So as I was ended, they put us, my friend and me, into a recuperating room in a villa. And once I am at the villa, and I see two soldiers, and they stopped by the-- I was in the window. We stopped would put on the door, front door, quarantine because we were afraid that they can come, the soldiers, and rape us.

You put a sign saying quarantine people.

Quarantine on the front door. You had to protect yourself. So I see two soldiers. And they stopped at the window to talk to me. And I said to one, are you a Jew? He didn't answer me. Later that night, there's a knock on the window. And he said, I am the comrade who was here before. But I didn't want to admit in front of my comrades that I'm a Jew. He was a captain.

In the Soviet Army.

The Soviet Army. He said, we help us to get out from here. So he arranged-- he had a friend, a general, a Jewish general who was dismantling the machinery. They came and took us to Stettin, what is now in Poland too. That was Germany. From there, we got home to our hometown. We were always from the same town.

People were hanging outside holding out. You can't imagine that mess after the war what was going on-- and with hope that maybe my brother survived. Unfortunately, he didn't survive. And I found out from somebody who was with him in the same camp. And I found three cousins. And I stayed there two months. But it was too painful to remain there any longer. I have to finish.

Before you do, Helen-- and we have some time for some questions with our audience-- I'm sure it's on most people's minds, how did you reconnect with Welek? And so you should tell us that before we turn to our audience. You were obviously reunited. So how did that happen?

When I was in Sosnowiec, I met-- saw somebody who I remember him from the mens camp. And he worked with him. He lives now in Richmond, Virginia. And I said, did you see him as you traveled? He said, yes, in April, I saw him. He was lined up to go to a transport in FlossenbÃ¼rg. And so I had assigned-- I tried, just to myself, logic and common sense. I said, if he was alive in April, maybe is a chance that he survived because officially, the liberation was May the 8th. So that's all what I knew.

I come to Prague because I had to leave Poland. It was too painful. With my cousin, there were five of us. And my cousin's fiancee. They arrest us on the Czechoslovakian border, retained us in a school because we didn't have money. We didn't have tickets. We didn't have visas. We didn't have passport, nothing. They retained us. He sneaked out, went to Prague, made arrangement to go back to Germany under the American zone.

So as I'm getting, he came back. And we're going to the train in Prague. We took the train to Prague, in Prague on the streetcar. I get on the streetcar. And somebody calls me, Hinda. And she was the girl who was my supervisor in camp. She was from Prague originally.

So she said, do you know that Willy is alive? I said, what? And she said, where did you see him? In Joint Distribution, a Jewish organization in Prague. So I thought, he's working there. I started to cry. I cry very easy anyhow. I started to cry. And we had to go. At 6 o'clock, we had appointment on the border. And each one of us had a bottle of vodka because

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the Russians were at that time occupying Czechoslovakia.

That was for barter with the Russians, yeah.

Yes. No, just to bribe them.

No, no, I know.

To bribe them. And I got to Germany. We stayed. My cousin had a cousin in a small town. Can you imagine seven people in one room? We all slept on the floor. That's all what they had, one room. And he went back. But he went to that place. He just visited somebody there. I lost track again.

I am in Germany already, don't have what to wear. Once, I went out and I was ashamed. A German woman gave me a pair shoes, what first rain, I lost them. They didn't fit right. And my cousin still had her clothes from home. So she shared it with me. I am walking, going, coming back. And it's in that one room that I-- finally, this town assigned us to a-- took over a hotel. And we could move into the hotel. I was waiting till I can move.

And somebody came to visit the cousins, two girls. People were traveling, they didn't have any-- that's how people found each other. In each town was a committee set up. And people were signing in. And that's how people found each other. But there was no communication. To go from one place to the other, you had to hitchhike. So two girls come in. And they started in the UNRRA-- United International, I think, Relief for Refugees.

Yeah, UNRRA.

And they gave us cigarettes. I didn't smoke at that time. And we used to barter for the cigarettes to buy something else. So these two girls say that they had-- I don't have much time-- they had, for a tailor and a shoemaker, for two packs of cigarettes, made him a coat and thing. And they mentioned a name, somebody.

This man, I heard in RavensbrÃ¼ck, somebody introduced me to his cousins. And they were in Bayreuth. And I said, I didn't know how he feels. Once they opened the gates and they let us mingle, this SS was watching us. And he said to me, you see, I will survive. And I will marry you. And my reaction was that time that I touch his forehead. I thought that he's not conscious anymore. He has a high temperature, doesn't know what he's talking.

So they introduce me. And they said-- so I wrote a little note. I didn't know how he feels about me. And they finally-- they said, he in Prague again because he had a permit to bring people over. So finally, he comes. And I think that somebody said guess who's here? I was by myself in the room. And I couldn't find the key. In Germany, every house is under lock.

And finally, he comes, guess who's here? I almost fell out from the third floor. And he comes in, was dressed, I remember, brown suit. He looked very good already. And his hair was just starting to grow in. And he said-- gave me a watch, a men's watch. And he said, we'll get married. But with what? His uncle left for America, left him an old Ford. So he sold the Ford.

And we made the wedding. I cooked the food. And you know, the Jewish wedding ceremony is under a canopy that I almost fainted before. Because I prepared the wedding and everything. I didn't have any parents, nobody to do it.

So we are here. After, we came-- registered to go to America. And two months later, they called us. We came under the President Truman's special 100,000 displaced person. We came under that quota. And we were assigned in every city except a certain amount of refugees. And ours was Washington, DC. And we are very lucky that we didn't wind in New York or anyplace else. And I'm very-- we are very grateful to the American, to the government for possibility to raised-- give them a good education and to be useful citizen. Now, I want to finish to reduce.

Helen, I'm going to interrupt just for a moment. I think we're going to forego the questions, if you don't mind. There's just so much for Helen to share with us. And there's a couple of things that she would like to close the program with

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before doing that. Before Helen closes our program, I'd like to remind you that we will have a First Person every Wednesday between now and the 28th of August. And we sure hope that you'll be able to come back and join us for another program before this season is over.

Next week, on the 31st, our first person will be Mr. Gerald Schwab. Mr. Schwab, who is from Germany, was sent to Switzerland on a children's transport in 1939, and from there, was able to immigrate to the United States. So if you can, please join us then or any other Wednesday. It is our tradition at First Person that our first person has the last word.

I don't know how many of you heard or read-- because here in the museum it's also-- Martin Niemoller, who was a Protestant--

Minister.

--minister. In Germany, they first came for the communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me. And by that time, no one was left to speak up.

And to you, young people, I want to-- you have to realize what a wonderful country you live, in what you can-- this is the best place in the world to be. Why do we get always so many immigrants? Everybody wants to come to America. When you are young, be involved. Have your ears and eyes open to know what you are. Don't be a follower. Be a leader. And vote and participate in your country.

I also want to read to you a short thing, not the whole thing, because this was written just this month, a cousin's son went with his family to Auschwitz. And that's his personal feeling. A critical component of Nazi genocide was hate. But what empowered this component was technology-- to make mass murder feasible-- in the silence of thoughtful people who know better. It is latter what worries me. That is why the story must be told and retold. Critical to this is our younger generation, those who will have the opportunity to make the world a better place as they assume family and community leadership responsibilities.

The visit of Benjamin and Gisele to Auschwitz on the heels of her earlier trip to Israel gives me some assurance that they now better understand just how bad things can get and just how real this can be. With this now firmly etched in their minds, the world might be a little better off in the future, particularly if they tell the story to their peers in their language. [NON-ENGLISH], from generation to generation, a trip to Auschwitz has enabled us to connect in a profoundly gripping way to our humanity, to our--

Next word.

--of humanity of our family. I'm grateful for the opportunity to have made the trip. I want to apologize to all for not having gotten there sooner. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

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